Australia's disability pensioners to be "coerced" to work

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In the lead-up to Christmas, Prime Minister John Howard's government utilised the results of a six-month pilot study to step up its vilification of Australia's 670,000 disability pension recipients and to threaten the use of "coercion" to force them into low-paid work.

The $800,000 project, set up in January 2004, involved 12 job placement agencies being contracted to obtain employment for 1,100 injured or disabled workers, who supposedly volunteered for the scheme. The plan represented another step by the Howard government to push people off the disability pension. It followed defeat of legislation in the Senate in 2003 to restrict disability benefits to those unable to work for 15 hours a week—half the current cut-off point.

The study, released last November, reported that, despite receiving the highest level of "job search support" provided by government-funded Job Network agencies, only 57 percent of the volunteers who commenced the scheme completed it, with less than 10 percent of them obtaining full-time work.

Nevertheless, Employment Services Minister Mal Brough declared that the "success" of the pilot proved that the numbers of Disability Service Pension (DSP) recipients could be "dramatically reduced". Workforce Participation Minister Peter Dutton stated: "What we've shown is [that] for the majority of people there is a willingness to participate and to look for work. For those people that we think aren't there legitimately, then we need to try and adopt some coercion."

These remarks revealed the pilot's real purpose: far from representing a genuine attempt to assist the disabled to find work, it was conceived as a vehicle for scapegoating welfare recipients as "workshy," cutting them off benefits and allowing the government to further cut social spending. Those not "volunteering" to sign up to a battery of intrusive "activity" tests would be branded, by definition, as not "legitimate" pension recipients.

As Dougie Herd, executive officer of the Physical Disability Council of New South Wales, told the WSWS: "The pilot scheme showed that with a considerable additional investment, some people could be assisted into finding employment. However, the government chose to claim that the pilot scheme showed that coercion was valuable in getting rid of rorters."

Those compelled to work will also become a new source of cheap labour for employers, constantly compelled to accept low pay and poor conditions for fear of losing their benefits.

None of the underlying social and economic problems that have led to an increase in the numbers of disability pensioners over the past decade will be addressed. Many are victims of the de-regulated economy, the collapse of full-time work and the growth of insecure contract or casual work.

The government's pilot study itself briefly referred to the existing harsh employment climate, citing "previous negative experiences with employers and perceptions of discrimination by employers" as factors which discouraged DSP recipients seeking work.

According to Bob Gregory, professor of economics at the Australian National University, the labour market has moved against people with disabilities. Jobs that people with mental disorders, for example, could have held down previously, such as stacking shelves in warehouses, were disappearing. The number of full-time jobs for men was still at the level of the 1991-2 recession, with competition from women and university students for part-time work stronger than in the past.

The pilot study report admitted there was no

guarantee of disabled workers returning to the DSP once their employment ceased. Currently the maximum weekly allowance for DSP recipients is just $235, which is below the poverty line, but that is $26 a week more than the amount paid to the unemployed. Disabled pensioners are also entitled to better transport and other benefits than those on unemployment benefits.

Wages for low-paid workers in Australia are so poor that the report's authors observed that many of the DSP recipients they interviewed believed they would be "better off" on the DSP than in work.

Successive Labor and Liberal governments have sought to slash spending on the disabled. In the early 1990s, the Labor government required beneficiaries to regularly prove that they were unable to work at least 30 hours a week, overturning the previous rule that those with a "permanent incapacity to work" were entitled to benefits.

In 2002, the Howard government first sought to restrict entitlement further, by limiting it to those unable to work 15 hours per week. When popular hostility to this frontal attack on the disabled led to its rejection in the Senate, the government eventually introduced a modified proposal, to apply the 15-hour rule to new pension recipients only. However, this was also defeated in the Senate in 2003.

Now that the government knows, following its October 9 election victory, that it will have a majority in the Senate from next July, the groundwork is being laid for a renewed assault, which will not stop with the disabled.

A memo leaked from Centrelink, the government's welfare delivery agency, shows that the government is working behind closed doors to cut all welfare spending. The memo, prepared by a senior bureaucrat, directs Centrelink staff to target both disability support pensioners and single parents to pressure them to pursue employment.

Staff were to avoid informing "disability support customers and parents with children under 13 years" that they were not currently required to be actively seeking work. Instead, the memo said, it was time to move toward "economic participation for all with few exceptions".

According to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "AM" radio program, Centrelink area managers were to be required to sign an undertaking about the speed with which they should refer more sole parents and disability pensioners to the Job Network placement agencies.

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