

Unemployed workers denounce Labor's poverty-line benefits

Our reporters
14 January 2012

There were some revealing responses when WSWs reporters asked unemployed workers in Sydney and Melbourne to comment on Employment and Workplace Minister Bill Shorten's rejection of any increase in dole payments (see: "Australian government rejects any dole increase").

Many had not heard of Shorten's remarks, but there was an instinctive reaction of disgust when we reported his declaration that benefits had to be kept low to give the unemployed an incentive to look for work.

Outside the government's Centrelink office in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown, **Ahmed**, a 28-year-old sole parent and former construction and mine worker, described Shorten's comments as "very offensive," adding: "Let him live on the dole for a year!"

Nadine, 23, an unemployed retail worker who had been looking for an office job for four months, asked: "How are we meant to survive? Do they want people to work for 50 cents an hour? Live on the streets? It's disgusting."

In Melbourne, at the Broadmeadows Centrelink office, **Anita**, 22, an unemployed hairdresser, said Shorten's comments were "enraging," because no decent jobs were available. She explained: "I think the job situation has a lot to do with the economy. The government says it is improving, but people keep losing their jobs."

Elizabeth, a qualified childcare worker, unemployed for two years, accused Shorten of blaming the victims. "He is saying, 'it's your fault if you're unemployed.' But there's nothing available except temporary work. I worked in the kitchen at a shop in St. Kilda last year. The work only lasts a summer, and I was paid \$11 an hour for 10-hour days in a kitchen."

Discussing the reasons for Shorten's announcement, most agreed that the Labor government was deliberately trying to

push the unemployed into sub-standard jobs. Elizabeth commented: "It makes sense that they want to keep people unemployed and make sure you can't live on unemployment benefits, because then you'll accept any job."

In Sydney, **Jimmy**, 29, who had worked in many semi-skilled jobs in factories and construction, characterised Labor's policy as: "When you are living on the dole, beggars can't be choosers." He had experienced this process first-hand: "I've been forced by Centrelink into working jobs where they paid way under the award wages. One job was in a car wrecking yard, which paid only \$12.50 an hour, when the award was \$15. After I refused two jobs, the Job Network agency refused to help me anymore."

It was more difficult to elicit comments on the wider role of the Labor government, but some responses revealed a growth of disillusionment. **Anita** said: "At first, I agreed with the Gillard government. I thought she could improve the situation. If anything, she's made the situation worse."

Mark, a forklift operator who had been unemployed since 2004, with several part-time jobs in the meantime, said: "I don't think much about the Labor government—they are doing stupid things. I don't think they are for the working person. I don't think this government is very different to the Liberals."

Ahmed, who came from Jordan 13 years ago, said: "This government is not for the working class. Look at the big picture. They are following America in everything, like keeping troops in Afghanistan." He made a cutting remark about the backroom coup that had installed Julie Gillard as prime minister in June 2010. "It was the kind of thing you don't even see in the third world."

After it was pointed out that Shorten, who was instrumental in Gillard's coup, was a trade union leader before entering parliament, Ahmed retorted: "What a

hypocrite! He's not working for the people." Then he observed: "But all the unions do these days is get paid by the companies. Who works for the people? No-one!"

Some shocking stories emerged about the conditions being imposed by employers and the government.

At Bankstown, **Eirene** had a casual job, working at a Pets Paradise outlet, but had not received a shift for three weeks. "All I get is \$195 a fortnight, and it's not easy," she said. "The government is trying to force us into whatever conditions the employers want." She had been subjected to Labor's policy of suspending dole payments for missing Centrelink interviews. "I have to come here three days a week. I got suspended once, and it was not right. I got cut by \$20 because they said I missed an appointment, but I did not."

Gerramy, 20, who is studying to be an animal attendant, said he was forced to look for full-time work in order to qualify for dole payments. Centrelink had told him he was not doing enough hours in his course at Technical and Further Education (TAFE). "All up, I'm doing 19 hours a week at TAFE and I'm doing volunteer work at Featherdale Wild Life Park for about 18 hours a week. I don't have much time to look for a job."

Yusuf, 19, had been in Australia for five years, trying to send money back to his family in Sierra Leone. "I'm one of the victims of Youth Allowance," he said. "After I pay my rent and books and other needs, before I realise it, I don't have enough money to transfer overseas, or for a bus or train. Sometimes I have to do without food."

Last year, Yusuf was able to complete a TAFE course in social work because a social worker paid his tuition fees from her own purse. Once TAFE ended in December, he had to start looking for work.

Everyone said it was virtually impossible to survive on the dole. At Broadmeadows, **Joseph**, 23, said he been unemployed for four months despite completing a TAFE course in multimedia. "I worked at Telstra as a case manager, for a year and a half," he said. "Almost all of the positions were made redundant when the call centre closed. Now I get about \$480 a fortnight. It's hard to survive. My rent is \$200 more than that, so I had to get two housemates in."

Joseph was one of several interviewees who made more far-reaching observations. He drew a parallel with the 1789

French Revolution. "In my history class we studied the French Revolution, and history seems to be close to repeating itself. There is a lot of social unrest, social discomfort, going on underneath the surface. And like in Shorten's comments, as before the French Revolution, the rich won't give up any of their wealth."

Anita opposed the bailouts of the financial elite. "All the governments shouldn't have given money to the banks in 2008," she said. "There are more important things than that. What about health and education?" She also commented on the latest figures showing that about a quarter of the people in Europe were now poor or socially deprived. "It's clear it's not just an accident, it is something that is happening everywhere," she noted. "The working class is the working class for a reason. They go out and they do what they can. But there's nothing they can do now."

Asked about the possibility of a socialist perspective, with the working class taking power, Anita replied: "I agree with that. Because the working class knows what they need." She remarked: "Social inequality in today's society is repulsive."

At Bankstown, **Ahmed** pointed to connections between what was happening in Australia, Europe and America. "It's all a behind-the-scenes show," he said. "When you talk about banks, you talk about governments, because the banks run the governments." Asked if he thought these processes would lead to uprisings, as seen in Tunisia and Egypt, he replied: "It's going to happen, sooner or later, whether you or I like it or not. That's what happens when the banks make record profits, while people can't afford to buy houses anymore."



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