

# Australian government to expand “work for the dole”

Mark Church  
11 February 2014

With mounting unemployment making it increasingly difficult for jobless workers, especially youth, to find work, the Abbott government is moving to escalate the punitive “work for the dole” scheme. By forcing the unemployed to perform demoralising work, such as rubbish collection in public parks, the program seeks to humiliate, harass and coerce them into low-paid and insecure jobs.

Jobless workers—whose numbers have swelled to more than 720,000, even according to the understated official unemployment figures—are among the first targets of the government’s drive to dismantle welfare rights, following its declaration, repeated by Treasurer Joe Hockey last week, that the “age of entitlement” is over.

Originally introduced by the Howard government in 1998, and maintained by the Labor government after 2007, “work for the dole” ties the receipt of unemployment benefits to performing unpaid work, often for municipal councils and charities. Currently, all job seekers aged 18 to 49 who have been unemployed for more than 12 months must undertake a “work experience activity” that can include working for the dole.

Assistant Employment Minister Luke Hartsuyker in late January flagged the extension of the scheme to cover working for volunteer agencies, public schools and aged care homes. The work would involve mostly unskilled duties such as maintenance, gardening, labouring and kitchen work.

Hartsuyker claimed that the government would restrict each working period to three months, to prevent employers exploiting the program to eliminate full-time employment. Yet the scheme will inevitably result in the destruction of jobs and conditions as “work for the dole” conscripts are used to replace paid workers,

including in chronically underfunded social services, such as aged care.

Aged care industry representatives have raised concerns about the types of tasks that unemployed workers will be required to undertake, given that their facilities are short of properly trained and skilled workers. Aged and Community Services Australia spokesperson Heather Witham said: “You have to remember that nursing homes are more than just facilities, they are the homes of our aged community and we have to have the proper police checks and training in place to maintain them.”

Hartsuyker contemptuously insisted that the program would help the unemployed find work by teaching them “soft skills” in a “team environment.” He claimed that getting a job was “as simple as turning up to work every day and being appropriately presented.”

The reality could not be more different. Thousands of jobs are being destroyed, especially in manufacturing and mining, spearheaded by major corporations such as Qantas, General Motors, Ford and now Toyota. The number of full-time jobs actually fell by 67,500 during 2013, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, while the numbers working part-time rose by 122,100, much less than the number needed to stop the unemployment rate climbing.

The Ray Morgan polling company estimates that the national unemployment rate is now 11.2 percent, with at least 2.5 million people looking for a job or wanting to work more hours. In some working class areas, the jobless rate is around 20 percent.

Almost 1 in 4 of the long-term unemployed are under 24 years of age. A quarter of this age bracket is not in full-time work or full-time study. Already thousands of young workers are being required to do unpaid work via “internships” or “trials” in the hope of securing a

job with a company. (See: “Australian youth pushed into unpaid work”)

During last year’s election campaign, Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s Liberal-National Coalition said it would “restore work for the dole” for those under 50 who have been on benefits for six months or more. The proposed scheme may go even further. Hartsuyker said the government’s plan was still “very much a work in progress” but said the Coalition hoped it would be “operational in the next financial year.”

One thing is clear: the government intends to ruthlessly drive the unemployed into work with poor pay and conditions. Hartsuyker stated: “We will be looking very sternly upon anybody who refuses a job.... We expect people, when a job opportunity is presented, to take that opportunity.” Social Services Minister Kevin Andrews last month announced that unemployed workers would no longer be able to decline a job if it was more than 90 minutes from their home.

Like the Labor government before it, the government is also keeping the Newstart unemployment benefit at just \$35 a day, well below the poverty line, and will maintain Labor’s policy of shifting all sole parents off the higher parenting payment onto Newstart once their youngest child turns 8. These impoverished parents could now also be compelled into work for nothing.

Australian Council of Trade Unions president Ged Kearney accused the government of punishing the jobless, but the unions did nothing to oppose “work for the dole” under Labor. Former Labor minister Brendan O’Connor, now the shadow employment minister, defended Labor’s regime. “People on Newstart and other income support payments already have strict requirements to make sure they are looking for work or studying, and there are penalties for failing to meet those requirements,” he told Fairfax Media.

Shadow assistant treasurer Andrew Leigh criticised an extension to the program on the basis that it would “end up diverting people from job search activities into work for the dole activities.” In other words, it would not serve business interests.

The work for the dole program targets the unemployed as part of a drive against the most vulnerable layers in Australian society. This includes a review into the welfare system—particularly focusing on unemployment and disability payments—and an audit commission that is laying the basis for further deep cuts

to social spending in the May budget.

Minister Hartsuyker’s comments are typical of the government’s efforts to condition public opinion for a far-reaching assault on the working class. Aspects of its plans are being laid out piecemeal through media interviews rather than official announcements, amid a growing clamour from big business and the corporate media for a wholesale dismantling of the welfare system.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**