

# Australia: Budget to cut youth off welfare

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In a little-publicised speech last Saturday, Social Services Minister Kevin Andrews confirmed that tonight's federal budget will include draconian attacks on young people, especially those who are unemployed or disabled. Andrews announced that the Liberal-National government will enforce a system of "Earn or Learn"—extending measures that were introduced by the previous Labor government.

Jobless workers under the age of 30 will be compelled to enrol in an education or training course, cutting them off unemployment benefits. Alternatively, they will be instructed to move to areas where jobs are supposedly available, or be stripped of benefits.

Youth will be forced to take seasonal agricultural work in rural areas, or relocate to regions where construction projects are underway to provide ports, roads and other infrastructure for mines or other industries. Employers, especially in remote areas, will be provided with a conscripted workforce, courtesy of the social welfare regime, to drive down wages throughout the working class.

Some youth will be forced into expanded "Work for the Dole" schemes, to be exploited as a cheap labour force by local councils and charity organisations. Youth aged 17 to 24 will also be pressured into joining the government's proposed 15,000-strong "Green Army." Paid just half the minimum wage, members of the Green Army will primarily be used to restore damaged agricultural land.

Unemployed youth who face being cut off benefits will be pressured to enter the military, by "volunteering" for a 12-month "Gap Year" enlistment in the armed forces. Labor abolished this program, previously introduced by the earlier Howard Liberal-National government, because it could not attract sufficient numbers. In line with the official celebrations of World War I, and preparations for new wars, the Abbott government has revived the scheme, and will

now hope to have the means to push large numbers of young people into it.

A far harsher regime will also prevail for disabled or injured workers who receive the Disability Support Pension (DSP). All disability pensioners under the age of 35 who are deemed capable of some type of work will have to demonstrate they are actively seeking employment, extending a regime already imposed by Labor. Each week, people will have to prove to the social security authorities that they applied for a certain number of positions, or be penalised or cut off benefits.

The Labor government introduced strict medical eligibility requirements for new DSP recipients in 2013, leading to the first ever decline in the number of people being paid the benefit. The Abbott government will extend the medical examinations to tens of thousands of people who previously qualified for DSP, for the purpose of deeming them fit for work and throwing them off the DSP, which pays slightly more than unemployment benefits.

Andrews declared: "The days of easy welfare for young people is over." He blamed youth for their inability to find work. "We don't think it is fair," he stated, "that young people can just sit on the couch at home and pick up a welfare cheque."

The reality in working class suburbs is that large numbers of youth cannot find full-time jobs because they do not exist. Decades of deindustrialisation have left entire areas mired in endemic unemployment. In northern Adelaide and northern Melbourne, where the car industry has been decimated, youth unemployment ranges from 40 to 50 percent. Overall, unemployment among those aged 18 to 24 is estimated by Roy Morgan Research at over 28 percent.

In an opinion piece in Saturday's *Australian*, Prime Minister Tony Abbott's parliamentary secretary Alan Tudge targeted remote Aboriginal communities where, he claimed, "fewer than one in five 17- to 24-year-olds

are fully engaged in work or training.” Such a situation is the result of decades of the denial of essential education, health and housing facilities, and the refusal of successive governments to commit any resources to developing decent employment opportunities in regional Australia. Now, the victims—young people without jobs—will be dragooned into myriad Work for Dole schemes or ordered to leave their families to take jobs elsewhere.

The pittances paid out for DSP and Newstart unemployment benefits condemn hundreds of thousands of people to living well below the poverty line. The Abbott government’s stepped-up regime of intimidation and harassment, which is aimed at depriving people off income support, will exacerbate the terrible social conditions in working class communities. Youth without jobs who are thrown off welfare will become destitute or forced into complete dependency on their parents, who in most cases are themselves struggling to make ends meet. Already, a quarter of all Australians aged 24 to 35 still live with their parents, due to their lack of financial resources.

Andrews said the measures in tonight’s budget would be only the “first instalment” of an assault on what remains of social welfare entitlements. Patrick McClure, the former head of the Mission Australia charity, is preparing a report to be delivered to the government later in the year. Andrews indicated on Saturday that McClure is reviewing “some 50 payments, allowances and supplements” with the aim of consolidating or eliminating them.



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