

Workers in Sydney's west speak out against Australian budget

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* is continuing its discussions with workers and youth about the impact of the Abbott government's May 13 austerity budget. While the government claims that the budget involves "equality of sacrifice," its measures are targeted against the most vulnerable sections of society—low-paid workers, aged pensioners, unemployed, the disabled and youth.

According to post-budget analysis by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, a single income family receiving \$65,000 and with two children aged 8 and 14 will lose more than \$6,000 per year because of the changes to the family tax benefits scheme and other cuts.

Budget measures include wide-ranging cuts to education and health, including an upfront \$7 co-payment to see a doctor; lifting the pension age to 70; deregulation of university fees; and forcing thousands of unemployed youth under 30 years off welfare for at least six months at a time and the expansion of work-for-the-dole schemes.

Last weekend WSWs reporters spoke with Mount Druitt and Bidwill residents in Sydney's western suburbs. Bidwill is one of Sydney's most socially disadvantaged areas with official unemployment currently at 20.3 percent. More than half of its 4,500 residents live in public housing and rely on social welfare payments. Statistics for Mount Druitt are only marginally better, with an official unemployment rate of 10.3 percent and the youth jobless rate at 24.1 percent.

Christopher, 24, who is about to undertake TAFE studies, said he could not afford the hundreds of dollars in education costs and had to apply for a student credit card to pay the fees.

Prime Minister Abbott, he said, "expects us to learn,

but doesn't make it affordable. It is hard to get a job without qualifications so you have to study whether you like it or not. I'll live at home while I am studying because I can't afford not to. I can barely afford to eat."

Commenting on the government cuts to youth welfare, he added, "If you can't get an income, you'll become homeless. Abbott says he wants to cut homelessness, but the budget is going to increase it. How can you trust him, when he's broken the promises he made. He's making big mistakes and will run the country into the ground. I didn't much like [Labor prime minister] Gillard either, but things are worse now."

Christopher also raised concerns about the pension age increase and said it should remain at 65, "How can you work when you are 70? It's physically impossible... The government has policies for the rich but they're leaving the poor out. They should be taxing the richer families more," he added.

Lynn, a childcare worker from Bidwill, said the budget would have a major impact on local residents and raised her concerns about cuts in health spending. "Mount Druitt has a fantastic hospital—the staff are brilliant—but the government keeps taking away from the hospitals," she said, explaining that previous government cuts led to the closure of the Mt Druitt hospital's coronary care unit.

"I was quite disgusted with that because my husband suffers from heart problems," she said, "and was in and out of there quite a lot but they shut it down and we were forced to go to either Blacktown, Westmead or Nepean. They keep saying that they're going to make hospitals better places but they just keep taking all the time."

Lynn also opposed the increase in the pension age,

“The poor tradespeople are full of arthritis by the time they’re 65. They can’t keep working until they are 70 and have quality of life when they retire. That’s so wrong.”

Greg, a warehouse security officer, denounced the budget, explaining that hard hit low-income workers and families. “There are extra costs—especially for education—and taxes are going up. This will hit affect single parents. Wages aren’t rising, and as for the increase in the aged pension, I reckon in 20 years’ time there’ll be no pension. These changes are just a start,” he said.

“I’m living fortnight to fortnight on my wages. If I have to renew my security license, which is \$580, I can’t pay it from my wages or savings and have to go to these ‘pay-advance’ outfits,” he explained. “This happens two or three times a year. I’ve had to do it for car registration and last year had a car accident last year, which cost me \$800 in excess fees. I didn’t have the money and so was forced to go to Cash Converters and pay high interest. It’s taken me seven or eight months to pay them back at \$141.89 a fortnight...”

“We’ll become like America with these budget cuts,” he continued, “and the people on the streets will rise and people without homes will rise up because there’ll be more of them.”

Sharon, a hospital worker, was concerned about the \$7 medical co-payment. “I just don’t think it’s fair for people to have to pay to see a doctor. My parents are old and they’re always at the doctor’s, and now they have to fork out \$7 every time they see one,” she said.

“There’s expected to be 160,000 jobs going in the public health system and the government want us to work till we are 70. That’s unfair. There’s not going to be any pension for us when I retire.”

Kurt, a 55-year-old Mt Druitt factory worker, said the budget was “utterly deplorable.” The government, he continued, “insists on a privatised system for the rich. Even Menzies [Liberal prime minister 1949-66] was better than this guy [Abbott]...”

“The budget affects me personally of course, because everything is going up except the wages... I can tell you people are getting really upset and haven’t seen anything like this before. We’ve had enough, we need to protest. Capitalism is telling the prime minister what to do?”



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