

A WSWS investigation into the social crisis in Australia's Mount Druitt

Workers and young people speak out against growing poverty

Our reporters
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On Wednesday, WSWS reporters spoke to workers, young people, pensioners and other people in Mount Druitt's main pedestrian mall about the impact of the working-class suburb's deepening social crisis on their lives.

Decades of job cuts and the dismantling of essential social services have produced rising homelessness, drug abuse and other indicators of social distress. One of the more frequented shops in the mall is a payday loan office, offering small loans at exorbitant interest rates.

Some residents were hesitant to give on-the-record comments, citing their experiences with the corporate media, which routinely vilifies the area.

A group of young mothers who spend time together in the mall said they were featured in the documentary, *Struggle Street*, produced by the government-owned Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). They said their comments were taken out of context, in an attempt to present them as "dole-bludgers."

One noted that after the show aired, they were subjected to abuse online, and disparagingly referred to as "The Real Housewives of Mount Druitt" on a corporate network's television panel show—a cynical play on a popular reality TV program.

Many others were enthusiastic to speak out, commenting that workers and young people from the area generally have no voice.

Aaron, 23, previously worked as a metal machinist but is about to begin an IT course. "People are looked down on if they're from Mount Druitt," he said. "If you put your address on a job application, then employers will grade you down. It lowers your chances of getting a job."

The problem in Mount Druitt, Aaron continued, "is the same as in every other working-class area, and it's the lack of jobs. Life throws a lot of stuff at you and there are ups and down, but I believe you have to keep on pushing. The fact is, though, there's not enough work.

"I'll have to work all my life and that's fine with me, but it

doesn't look like I'll ever be able to buy a house. How can I get \$50,000 for a house deposit? Even if I do, I'll spend the rest of my life trying to pay it off."

Asked about the cuts to welfare, education and health, Aaron said: "When the government cuts jobs, it destroys people's lives. I don't know whether they realise this, but that's what happens and we suffer for it."

Referring to the *Struggle Street* documentary, he said: "To tell you the truth I thought it was political slander. All it showed was the bad side of life here and the drugs but what about the people with jobs who go off to work every day and are devoted to their families and keeping a roof over their heads? They were ignored. *Struggle Street* didn't have any of that. It was only interested in creating an image about this area."

Stan, a pensioner who was an interstate truck driver before retiring last year, has lived in a public housing unit in Mount Druitt for the past six years. He moved into the area from Victoria after his wife passed away.

Stan said public housing was being increasingly sold off by New South Wales state governments. "I know at least eight houses near me, where they moved the people out, and sold them off," he said. "There are people out there with nowhere to live, and yet the public housing's being sold off. Why is it being done? They say it's to build more, but you never see more public housing being built.

"We've been trying to get maintenance done at the block of 50 units where I live for six years. The Department of Housing always says, 'we've got no money,' 'that can wait' or 'we'll do that'—and in six years, nothing's been done."

On the rising cost of living, Stan commented: "You don't see the CEOs going without a meal. No one's worth the money they earn. I'm on the age pension, and I've got no money. I've got no savings because we really didn't have anything before. When my wife died I used everything I had to pay for the funeral. That left me about three dollars in the bank. I live day-by-day, or fortnight-to-fortnight. I don't go out. I just buy a

little bit of food. You've got your electricity and gas bills and you just can't do it.

"It's wrong that they're now talking about cutting the pension. The poor bloke works all his life, then he gets a pittance when he's retired. Politicians can earn what they like when they retire. They still get free travel, their pension and all the perks. A pensioner earns a bit of money and he gets penalised.

"I was an interstate truck driver. When I finished last year, we were getting paid less, and made to work more...We were getting more money ten years ago than when I retired."

Ty, 26, is currently unemployed. Since losing his job following a personal crisis, he has been "couch-surfing" with friends. He used to work with an organisation that assists the homeless.

Speaking about the growing youth unemployment, Ty said: "One of the issues for young people in this area is that there are now middle-aged workers with a lot of experience who are willing to accept entry-level jobs at supermarkets and fast-food chains—anything they can get.

"Young people don't have jobs. The ones who are actively looking become disillusioned after a year of applying without finding anything. It's a spiralling cycle that's very hard to get off. There are a lot of drug issues around here, so it's easy to go down that road. If you've got your basic needs sorted, then you're less likely to have everything come crashing down."

Ty commented on the housing crisis. "At the moment, I'm staying with a friend," he said. "Losing your job means you can't afford your rent. Homelessness around here is huge. I used to help house the homeless, and now I'm homeless myself. When I was working, we never had enough beds for everybody. With the government's budget cuts, it's a lot tougher for people to go about finding their own place on the private rental market.

"Even around here it's expensive. For any place near Mount Druitt station, you're going to be looking at over \$400-500 for a week's rent for a small house. That can be a huge chunk of your income taken away, then and there, before you've paid electricity, food.

"I've seen people from all backgrounds who don't have anywhere to live. Young people who are nice, and are trying their best, but through circumstances outside their control, they've become homeless. All walks of life are being affected by the housing crisis."

Speaking about the way Mount Druitt is depicted, Ty commented: "There's that stigma attached to everybody around here. If everybody here had their choice, they'd be working their dream job every day, and paying their taxes and supporting themselves, but the jobs aren't there for them, and a lot of people have given up."

Wael, 56, from Lethbridge Park, a Mount Druitt suburb, came to Australia from Jordan 27 years ago. He worked as a taxi driver for over 10 years before becoming an owner-driver

courier but was involved in a serious car accident. A few months later he had a major heart attack and his business collapsed.

"I get about \$800 a week, but this is not enough to live on. If you have a family you need at least \$1,600 a week to live in Sydney," Wael explained. "I've never been able to pay my electricity bill in one payment; they are always part payments.

"I came to Australia because there was no work in Jordan and got a job as soon as I arrived here. I've always lived in Lethbridge Park and although I didn't make much money life was good. I never earned enough from taxi driving—but it was much cheaper to live. It is very difficult for workers today and especially for young people. Their future is black, it's dark black."

Chris, a truck driver, said young people were not given decent job training. "The railway workshops have been shut down and there are hardly any apprenticeships," he said.

"What I want to know is why the politicians get life-time pensions? What do they do to deserve this? They have no compassion whatsoever. Labor and Liberal are no different. They're all full of doublespeak."

Michael, 42, originally from South Australia, had worked in a variety of jobs, including in factories, on a prawn trawler, a scallop boat and as a circus tent-hand. In 1996 he was injured in a motor cycle accident and is currently on a disability support pension.

"I get about \$800 per fortnight and have to pay \$500 rent, which leaves me about \$300 to live on for two weeks," Michael explained. "You can't do much with that. I struggle a lot with electricity bills and having enough to eat. I go without meals a lot and sometimes I don't eat for a couple of days, but you get used it.

"I personally don't see any differences between Labor and Liberal. They offer various promises during elections but then they do backflips and renege. Whoever gets in, turns nasty and cuts back on basic things that people need.

"If governments are really concerned about welfare expenditure, then why don't they create jobs or make sure there is enough work for everyone to access? If governments are going to cut people's basic rights and welfare funds, then they should know what it's like to live here. They want to tax workers but lower the taxes for the rich."



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