

Young worker dies on Australian “work for the dole” scheme

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On April 19, Josh Park-Fing, an 18-year-old unemployed youth from the rural town of Meringandan, near Toowoomba, Queensland, died in an accident while being forced to work for the dole.

His death underscores the unsafe conditions imposed on jobless workers via the Australian government's forced work scheme, which compels them to undertake unpaid labour in order to receive poverty-line welfare payments. This amounts to compulsory servitude in sub-standard and potentially dangerous conditions.

The tragedy also highlights the lack of workers' compensation and insurance coverage for Work for the Dole participants.

The teenager was collecting rubbish at the local Toowoomba Showgrounds. It is believed that he was on a trailer being pulled by a tractor when it jolted. The jolt threw the young man from the trailer, and he suffered head injuries. Park-Fing died on the way to the hospital after attempts to revive him failed.

Park-Fing's twin brother Jayden, siblings Matt, Locklyn and Jemma, and mother Jenny Fing were too distraught to speak to the media immediately. A friend and work colleague of Jenny Fing, Christabel Dodds, told reporters: “They don't want this to ever happen to another family again, but at the moment all they're focused on is grieving Josh's loss.”

The local community has raised money to support the family because of the inadequate Work for the Dole insurance coverage. Whereas families of workers killed in the course of paid employment are eligible for up to \$750,000, the families of unemployed workers forced into the Work for the Dole program are paid a maximum of \$250,000.

Participants in the program are also denied workers' compensation if injured. According to the government, they are not workers but volunteers and therefore not

covered by WorkCover, the official agency that regulates occupational health and safety and work-related injury compensation.

There is nothing “voluntary” about Work for the Dole. As of July last year, everyone under the age of 50 who has been on unemployment benefits for more than six months is required to work for the dole for six months every year. People aged under-30 must perform 25 hours' labour per week and those aged between 30 and 49 must do 15 hours. Unemployed workers aged over 50 can “volunteer” to take part.

Work for the Dole, first imposed in 1998 by the Howard Liberal-National Coalition government, was maintained by the Rudd and Gillard Labor Party governments from 2007 to 2013. Initially, it was limited to the long-term unemployed, but it was extended to nearly all unemployed workers last year, when the current Coalition government declared it would place 100,000 people on the scheme during 2015–16.

The Australian Unemployed Workers Union (AUWU), which claims to represent Work for the Dole participants, has reported numerous cases of workers with chronic injuries being forced into strenuous physical labour on the program. If they do not comply, they are threatened with loss of Centrelink (welfare) benefits.

An unemployed worker, Nick Smart, told the media he was expected to dig holes and push heavy wheelbarrows despite chronic back problems. “I fell down a retaining wall and twisted my back pushing a wheelbarrow,” he said. “I've been told I have no access to WorkCover because technically I was not working—I was a Centrelink volunteer.”

In other cases, Work for the Dole workers had been denied toilet breaks. One worker reported being

exposed to 40-degree plus heat and poisonous snakes at a Work for the Dole site.

These conditions highlight the punitive character of the scheme. Far from being intended to help jobless workers gain experience and improve their job prospects—as successive governments have claimed—Work for the Dole is designed to harass and demoralise workers, while using them as a cheap labour force.

A study by the Australian National University Social Research Centre demonstrated that the scheme does little or nothing to improve participants' job prospects. According to the research: "It is estimated that in the short term [work for the dole] resulted in an additional 2 percentage point increase in the probability of job seekers having a job placement (from a low baseline of 14 percent)."

Above all, with almost 750,000 workers officially unemployed, the program is intended to coerce them into seeking low-paid work on inferior conditions to avoid being compelled to work for nothing. By the official statistics, more than one million workers are also under-employed—that is, looking for more work. As of February, however, there were only 166,500 job vacancies. That meant that for every job vacancy there were more than 10 people seeking employment.

Initially, the scheme was limited to working for not-for-profit organisations, including local councils. This led to calls by business groups for private employers to be given access to the program as well. Last year, the scheme was extended to allow aged care providers to exploit participants, as a first step.

Last May, after this expansion was proposed in the 2015 federal budget, the then Prime Minister Tony Abbott told employers they would soon be able to "try-before-you-buy," referring to unemployed workers.

This year's budget, handed down by the Coalition government on May 3, took that expansion to a new level. In his budget speech, Treasurer Scott Morrison unveiled what he called "real work for the dole." Over the next four years, 120,000 unemployed workers aged under-25 will be pushed into a nominally "voluntary" cheap labour scheme that enables businesses to employ them as government-subsidised "interns."

Under Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's new scheme, PaTH—which stands for Prepare Trial Hire—the unemployed will be expected to work up to 25 hours a

week for private employers. For this, to supplement their pitiful unemployment benefits, they will receive \$100 a week, effectively making their hourly rate just \$4 an hour. To further sweeten the deal for business, employers will receive a \$1,000 bonus and a wage subsidy of between \$6,500 and \$10,000 per year.

The Labor opposition has welcomed the new scheme, falsely claiming that it represents an improvement on Work for the Dole. But previous studies have shown that such programs lead to only 19 percent of the participants being offered paid employment. In other words, more than 80 percent of the participants will simply be exploited as low-wage "interns."

The tragic death of Josh Park-Fing highlights the shocking conditions to which unemployed workers will continue to be subjected—conditions that will be increasingly imposed on all workers as the economic situation worsens globally and in Australia.

The author also recommends:

Work for the dole in Australia

[5 February 1998]

Unemployed forced to "work for the dole" in Australia

[6 July 2015]



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