

Australian government's "internship" program: An attack on young people

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A so-called youth "internship" scheme was a centrepiece of the Liberal-National Coalition government's May 3 budget. Under the pretence of providing training for non-existent jobs, thousands of unemployed young people will be pushed into menial labour for private employers. For this, they will be paid the equivalent of just \$4 an hour on top of their poverty-level unemployment benefits.

Young people are among the chief targets of the austerity agenda demanded by the corporate elite, regardless of which parties form government after the July 2 elections. Working-class youth already confront dire conditions. Even on understated official figures, youth unemployment is around 12 percent. In working-class areas, it has reached depression-era levels of over 40 percent. Casualised, low-wage work without any rights or security, has become the norm for an entire generation.

The government's cynically titled PaTH (Prepare, Trial, Hire) scheme seeks to use this social crisis as a battering ram to drive down the wages and conditions of all workers by exploiting young people as a mass pool of cheap labour.

PaTH will force young people under the age of 25 who have been unemployed for five months or more into compulsory six-week "pre-employment" training courses, then offer them to employers as low-cost interns.

Employers will receive \$1,000 government subsidies to hire "interns" for up to 12 weeks. If they ultimately offer interns full-time work, businesses will be eligible for government bonuses of between \$6,500 and \$10,000.

In return for working 25 hours a week, interns will be paid \$200 a fortnight or \$4 an hour on top of their Newstart dole payments, which for a single

unemployed person is \$527 a fortnight. This translates into a weekly payment of just \$364 or \$68 less than the minimum wage. By comparison, the average apartment rent in Sydney is \$467 a week.

Businesses on the other hand receive up to 12 weeks of work for nothing or next to nothing.

Over the next four years, 100,000 unemployed young people will be forced into the PaTH program. According to the budget estimates, they may not be covered by workers' compensation and thus they will have no recourse if injured during the program.

PaTH essentially extends the two-decades-long "work for the dole" program to enable businesses to make use of its victims. Until now, the long-term unemployed had to work for charities, councils and other not-for-profit organisations in order to receive their Newstart benefits. First imposed by the Howard government in 1998, the scheme was maintained by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments from 2007 to 2013.

In 2015, the Coalition government, with the Labor Party's support, moved to force into the scheme everyone under the age of 50 who had been unemployed for more than six months. Unemployment "services" were also contracted out to corporate "jobactive" providers, at a cost of \$6.8 billion.

Work for the dole is a punitive regime of harassment and persecution, with the participants under constant threat of being cut off their welfare payments. The often substandard and dangerous conditions were underscored by the tragic death of Josh Park-Fing, 18, who was killed in an accident while working on the scheme last month.

Last year, Tony Abbott—then the prime minister—declared that the Coalition government would expand work for the dole to give businesses an

opportunity to “try before you buy.” This is the reality of PaTH. It will allow businesses to churn through an endless stream of interns, without providing any real employment. Studies have shown that similar schemes have led to jobs for only 19 percent of interns, leaving more than 80 percent on the scrap heap.

All the parties of the political establishment are responsible for depriving an entire generation of a future. Successive Labor governments have gutted apprenticeship programs and technical colleges. Billions of dollars have been handed to private colleges, which prey on working-class youth, signing them up for substandard courses and burdening them with tens of thousands of dollars of debt.

In line with its record, the Labor Party welcomed PaTH, repeating the lie that it will help young people find work. Following a widespread public backlash, Labor leaders have since called for more details of the program.

For their part, the trade unions have run a cynical media campaign against PaTH. Their claims to be concerned about the exploitation of vulnerable young people were exposed last week by revelations that the country’s largest union, the Shop Distributive and Allied Workers (SDA), which covers retail and service workers, colluded with major fast-food and supermarket chains to deprive employees of weekend and after-hours penalty rates.

The unions have long played the central role in enforcing the dictates of big business for the erosion of wages and working conditions. Today, many young people have never been paid penalty rates, or held a job with elementary rights such as sick leave and holiday pay.

While the ruling establishment insists there is “no money” to meet the needs of young people, all the major parties support spending billions of dollars on the military. In the May 3 budget, the government, with Labor’s support, earmarked \$195 billion for new warships, aircraft and military infrastructure, all in preparation for a conflict with China. Young people, with no other prospects, are being bombarded with advertisements touting military careers.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that all young people have basic social rights. They have the right to a decent job with a living wage, to free education and access to culture and leisure facilities. These are

necessities of life in a complex, modern society.

Securing these rights requires a political struggle against the capitalist system, which subordinates every aspect of social and economic life to the profit demands of the billionaires, and all the parties that defend it. We call on students and young people to study our program, support our campaign and to take up the fight for socialism—a society organised on the basis of social need, not private profit.

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