

Australian government withholds report on death of unemployed teenager

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The federal Liberal-National government of Malcolm Turnbull continues to block the release of an internal review into the tragic death of Josh Park-Fing in April last year. The 18-year-old was killed in an accident while participating in the punitive Work for the Dole program, which forces the unemployed into unpaid, and often unsafe labour, in order to receive their poverty-level Newstart welfare payments.

The report into Park-Fing's death by Workplace Health and Safety Queensland was given to Australia's employment minister, Michaelia Cash, in September 2016. Since then, the government has refused to release its contents, and other documents, in a bid to cover-up the conditions that led to the accident and those that face about 100,000 other Work for the Dole participants.

Park-Fing's Work for the Dole placement was rubbish collection at the Toowoomba showgrounds in south-east Queensland. He reportedly fell from a flatbed trailer after a tractor towing it slipped a gear and jolted. The teenager suffered critical head injuries and died on the way to hospital.

According to the Australian Unemployed Workers Union (AUWU), one person at the site had expressed concerns to the supervisor about driving a tractor. He was allegedly told that he would be penalised if he did not drive the vehicle.

Park-Fing's placement was overseen by NEATO Employment Services, a private firm contracted by the federal government to manage Work for the Dole. Other contractors include Max Solutions and Mission Providence, which are both subsidiaries of US corporations with annual revenues of over a billion dollars.

The Department of Employment replied last August to an AUWU request for information into Park-Fing's

bluntly declaring that internal reports were being withheld to protect NEATO and the Work for the Dole program. It claimed that disclosure of information on the death "may cause harm to the organisation's commercial interests" and "affect their ability to retain and attract networks of employers."

The government is seeking to cover-up its own culpability. In 2015, the Liberal-National government, then led by Tony Abbott, expanded Work for the Dole to include all unemployed people under the age of 50 who have received welfare payments for six months or more.

The scheme, first introduced in 1998 and maintained by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments, previously targeted the long-term unemployed and was managed by the government welfare bodies.

People aged under 30 must now carry out 25 hours of work a week. Those aged 30 and 49 are compelled to do 15 hours a week. They do not receive any additional payment. Newstart unemployment benefits average just \$38 a day.

Expansion of the program was explicitly aimed at corraling hundreds of thousands of unemployed workers into low-paid labour, in line with the demands of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and other pro-business lobby groups. In May last year, the government also unveiled a youth "internship" program, which would force unemployed young people into 25 hours of work a week for private businesses, with an average wage on top of welfare benefits of just \$4 an hour.

The number of unemployed pushed into Work for the Dole soared from 54,000 to over 100,000 between 2015 and 2016 and has led to a major spike in accidents and injuries.

Last November, the Australian Associated Press

reported that there had been 500 injuries at Work for the Dole sites in the 2015–16 financial year, up from 90 the previous financial year. The majority of these were caused by lifting or carrying heavy objects. Almost a quarter of those on the scheme suffered cuts, lacerations or punctures, others reported fainting, heart attacks, burns or eye injuries. More than five percent were bitten by insects or animals while working, with allegations that in some areas workers were not provided with protective clothing or shoes. An audit of 200 Work for the Dole sites by Ernst and Young last June, released in February this year, found that 36 percent did not meet the average safety benchmark.

Unemployed people impacted by the unsafe practices are denied basic rights. Families of those killed in Work for the Dole accidents are only eligible for payments of \$250,000 compared to up to \$750,000 paid to the families of those who perish in paid work. Work for the Dole participants are also denied workers compensation because they are officially classified as “volunteers.”

The Labor Party and the Greens have sought to head-off mounting anger by posturing as opponents of the assault on the unemployed. Last month, they passed a motion through the Senate demanding the release of the report into Park-Fing’s death. The Australian Unemployed Workers Union is heavily involved in this fraudulent campaign, with the union promoting the lie that the government can be compelled “to create a fair and humane welfare system.”

In reality, the attacks on the unemployed are part of a bipartisan austerity agenda aimed at forcing the working class to pay for the deepening crisis of capitalism. Labor has previously called for the expansion of Work for the Dole. It initially welcomed the government’s youth internship scheme, before announcing its own version of the program last year, also aimed at pushing unemployed youth into ultra-cheap labour.

Moreover, from 2007–2013, the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard maintained Work for the Dole and carried out sweeping attacks on the most vulnerable welfare recipients. The Gillard government, propped up by the Greens, forced 100,000 single parents onto Newstart unemployment payments, stripping many of hundreds of dollars a month.

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