

Migrants in Australia hit by longer welfare wait

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Workers and young people in the Sydney suburb of Auburn are among tens of thousands of migrants who will now face a wait of four years before they can receive welfare payments.

New measures that came into effect on January 1 doubled the previous waiting period for access to basic support payments including Newstart, Youth Allowance, Mobility Allowance, Sickness Allowance, and the Low Income Health Care Card.

Depriving immigrants of access to social services is a blatant attack on an already vulnerable layer, and will expose them to even greater exploitation in the workforce.

The western Sydney suburb of Auburn is the first port of call for many new arrivals to Australia. Some 70 percent of Auburn's 37,366 residents were born overseas, and over 90 percent have at least one parent who was born overseas.

Auburn has the lowest median taxable income of any suburb in Sydney. Essential social services such as health and education have been run down and do not meet the needs of a population that has increased by more than 40 percent since 2001.

Speaking about the longer wait for welfare, Ken, a 17-year-old Auburn resident, told our reporters: "It's not fair really. They come here to seek better conditions and they're just kicked down more. There's too much government support for the middle class and not enough for the working class.

"You have things like negative gearing to help with paying off investment properties; that's just giving money to people who already have money. That could be spent on improving public services—the buses are awful, and schools could do better."

Although the suburb is home to approximately 3,000 young people aged between 12 and 17, there is just one

public high school in Auburn, and it is only for girls. Ken explained that he had a 20-minute commute each way to go to his high school in Parramatta, which was "not productive" and was taking away from his education.

"Particularly in my neighbourhood, there's a few disadvantaged families. The parents don't speak a word of English, and what you see is then the children suffer. I had this with some classmates of mine coming to school not really caring, because at home they're struggling.

"What I personally believe is it's because they don't speak the language, they're not getting the support they need from the government, they're being exploited by unsympathetic bosses and potentially not getting the best possible conditions of work."

At the time of the 2016 census, 12.7 percent of Auburn residents were unemployed, more than twice the figure for the state of New South Wales as a whole. Furthermore, only 49.1 percent of those with jobs were working full-time, compared to 59.2 percent for the state.

Auburn worker Ben came to Australia from India five years ago, initially to study, but subsequently applied for permanent residency. "Even though I'm well qualified—I've done my Bachelor's and my Master's—I'm still finding difficulty finding a job. I have experience from back home, but I'm still doing retail jobs, part-time, casual."

As a recent migrant, Ben is not eligible to receive welfare payments. "It's quite difficult for people who have not got it yet, it's going to be very difficult [when the waiting period is increased]. They've spent a lot of money, they've paid a lot of taxes, but they can't get the welfare. It's unfair," he said.

Ben said many migrants he knew were forced into

poorly-paid casual or part-time employment. “Most of them, if they have found jobs, they’re reluctant to find something better, because, what they’ve got, they just want to stay put no matter what the work conditions are. No one complains after you get a job, whatever the conditions.”

Auburn Diversity Services Incorporated (ADSi) is a non-profit organisation funded by grants from the Department of Social Services, and tasked with helping refugees and other vulnerable migrants settle in Australia.

Almost half of ADSi’s clients are from Afghanistan, and are fleeing brutal conditions created by years of imperialist war and occupation, led by the US, and fully supported by successive Australian governments.

Aynalem Tessema, ADSi’s assistant manager of settlement and engagement, told the WSWS that the increased waiting period for welfare would make it “very hard for many people, especially when they come across financial crisis.”

While refugees are exempt from the increase, like many Australians they find the welfare payments to be woefully lacking. “\$600 [per week] cannot pay for the rent. How can they afford rent and buy food?” he said.

Pointing to the difficulties facing refugees, Tessema commented: “Migrants have to escape for various reasons—war, political reasons, and oppression. Most of them come from a low education background.”

With minimal English skills, and little education, many migrants encounter difficulty finding employment. “To find a job is very difficult. When many people come to this country, they need a licence to begin some jobs for which they may already be qualified. Recognition of previous qualifications is something we’ve raised with governments,” he said.

Migrants arriving in Auburn confront an acute crisis of housing affordability and availability. The median weekly rent in the suburb is \$530 for a house, or \$445 for a unit. In the last three years the average rent for a unit in Auburn has increased by 13.9 percent (compared to only 3.6 percent across Sydney), and the vacancy rate is just 2.1 percent (3.2 percent in Sydney as a whole).

Agencies like ADSi rely on short term government funding. ADSi’s manager of capacity building, Justin Han explained: “There are fluctuations; we got 28 percent less funding than last year. There is always a

lack of money to meet all the needs of new arrivals. Still there are service gaps for asylum seekers. We cannot provide services to them.”

Last November Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced a further reduction in the number of migrants who would be granted permanent residency, claiming voters were “concerned about population.” Blaming immigrants for failing infrastructure, he said “the roads are clogged, the buses and trains are full. The schools are taking no more enrolments.”

In reality, it is not “migrants” and “population” but capitalism that is responsible for the lack of social and physical infrastructure. Urban expansion driven by profit has placed a crippling burden on education, health, and transport facilities. Privatisation of utilities, public transport, roads, and airports has contributed to the sky-rocketing cost of living. Rampant property speculation has put housing prices out of reach of workers, forcing them to move to cheaper suburbs without adequate schools, hospitals, public transport, and employment opportunities.

All of this is very evident in suburbs like Auburn, where many new migrants are forced because they cannot afford to live elsewhere.



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