The Australian election and the fraud of the NDIS

Max Boddy: SEP candidate for Hunter
10 May 2019

In the federal election campaign, Labor Party leader Bill Shorten claims that "only Labor will deliver the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) that Australians desperately need." The Liberal-National Coalition government, he declares, has "short-changed" people with a disability and their families by underspending $1.6 billion as "a direct result of their failure to deliver the NDIS as promised."

In response, the government says Labor had a "dismal track record" of implementing the NDIS and only the Coalition can deliver "one of the biggest social policy reforms in Australia's history" whilst producing a budget surplus at the same time. The Greens also "support a fully-funded and adequately staffed NDIS."

All these parties are propagating the lie that this scheme is a progressive reform that will provide for people with a disability, their carers and families. In truth, the scheme was always designed to privatise disability services, while shutting down essential public facilities and forcing people off welfare benefits.

In the Hunter Region, north of Sydney, one of the pilot areas for the NDIS, the Stockton Centre, a residential facility for people with intellectual disabilities, has begun shutting down. That has already resulted in the deaths of two former residents, from dehydration, and the hospitalisation of a third.

The NDIS uses a voucher-based system. People with a disability have become individual "clients." They must negotiate support plans that have funding caps, delivered by businesses that compete in "the disability service industry," mainly by slashing costs and the training, wages and conditions of disability support workers.

The number of individual support packages is capped at around 475,000 nationally. Many people are locked out the scheme due to strict eligibility criteria, in particular, those with severe mental health issues or psychosocial disabilities.

As part of the NDIS rollout, three more vital programs for people with serious mental health issues are to be closed by 2020: Partners in Recovery, Personal Helpers and Mentors, and Support for Day to Day Living.

A report from Community Mental Health Australia (CMHA) revealed that of those supported by these programs, only 50 percent have applied for the NDIS and only half of those have been deemed eligible. At present only 25 percent of people supported by these services will continue to receive support.

Even those who manage to navigate the NDIS systems are not guaranteed the essential services they require. Numerous stories have surfaced of people with a disability and their carers receiving horribly inadequate support.

A 32-year-old Tasmanian man, Tim Rubenach, died of pneumonia last May. His parents, both in their 70s, said the NDIS hastened his death, describing the scheme as form of "abuse."

Rubenach had severe epilepsy and suffered with bleeding stomach ulcers, which required a tilt bed. The NDIS approved the bed, but it was delayed for months and did not arrive until the day before he was buried. He also required 24-hour care, but only received 70 hours a week.

The bill to establish the NDIS was first introduced in November 2012 by the minority Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard. The scheme, which was also supported by the trade unions and the Coalition, was modelled from a report by the Productivity Commission—a pro-market body that specialises in cutting social spending.

A related Productivity Commission recommendation

© World Socialist Web Site

was to slash the number of people on the Disability Support Pension (DSP) by half, or by some 400,000 people. They are being shunted into highly-exploited labour or onto the poverty-level Newstart joblessness allowance. This can mean a drop of more than 30 percent in benefits. The DSP can pay up to $926.20 a fortnight, whereas Newstart can pay as little as $555.70 without supplements.

This process began under the Gillard government. In 2011, it announced the largest crackdown on DSP eligibility in Australian history by introducing harsher "impairment tables" used to judge those applying. When the Coalition assumed office in 2013, it deepened the attack, extending Labor's precedent.

Today, these changes have resulted in more than 80,000 people being forced off the DSP, down to 750,045 in 2018, from 832,024 in 2013. Successful DSP claims have significantly decreased. In 2010–11, before Gillard's crackdown, the DSP success rate was 69 percent but this dropped to 40.6 percent in 2013–14, and in 2017–18, the last financial year, it sat at just 29.8 percent.

By contrast, the number of sick or disabled workers receiving Newstart payments has reached a record high of 200,000. The Department of Social Services released data showing a 50 percent increase—around 65,000 people— from December 2013 to December 2018 in the number of recipients deemed to have only a "partial capacity to work."

The NDIS underscores the fraud of the "fair go" touted by the Labor party, the trade unions and the Greens in this election campaign. Not one progressive social reform has been implemented in Australia for nearly four decades. Instead, successive governments have overseen a massive redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top, through unending pro-business "reforms."

The SEP fights for free, high-quality health care for all people with a disability and their carers, as a basic social right. This can be achieved only if the major corporations and banks are placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class. Society must be reorganised along socialist lines to meet pressing social needs, including for those with a disability, rather than enriching a tiny super-rich minority.

Authorised by James Cogan for the Socialist Equality Party, Suite 906, 185 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site