

Australian government ministers call for protesters to be cut off welfare

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In a dictatorial attack on free speech and essential democratic rights, two Australian government cabinet ministers last week declared that protesters should have their welfare payments stripped away.

Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, who is in charge of the federal police and intelligence agencies, agreed with a radio talkback host that protesters who disrupted traffic should not only lose their welfare entitlements but be subject to mandatory jail sentences.

Dutton is a leader of the Liberal-National Coalition government's most vociferous right-wing faction. While his remarks referred to "Extinction Rebellion" demonstrators who temporarily blocked some traffic in major cities, they have a wider anti-democratic logic.

There is a bipartisan drive to silence dissent, not just the Extinction Rebellion events. There is mounting political and social discontent among working-class people and youth over widening social inequality and deteriorating living conditions, and this has included mass student-led climate change rallies and marches around Australia and throughout the world.

Dutton denounced the Queensland state Labor government for not going far enough to outlaw and punish protests. "Community expectation is these people are heavily fined or jailed and they should be jailed until their behaviour changes because they are putting lives at risk," he insisted. "The premier needs to come out and explain why this is acceptable. If there needs to be mandatory or minimum sentences imposed, that can happen overnight in a Queensland parliament."

The Queensland Labor government itself is rushing through parliament new anti-protest laws, despite being exposed as falsely accusing climate change activists of setting deadly booby traps for police. Labor's legislation already includes jail terms of up to two years for using unspecified "devices" and hands police

powers to search people they "reasonably suspected" possessed such devices, in addition to the wide-ranging search powers the police have already.

The Coalition government, backed by Labor, is pushing through federal parliament a bill that could see people jailed for up to five years for using social media, emails or phone calls to promote, or even advertise, protests against agribusinesses. Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government is simultaneously working with state governments to impose harsher jail terms on people participating in demonstrations, adding to expanded anti-protest laws imposed in recent years.

But Dutton and other government leaders are demanding an even more authoritarian crackdown that would directly attack the right to protest. They are starting by targeting people who depend on welfare payments, who include more than 700,000 jobless workers on Newstart unemployment benefits and 100,000 sole parents, as well as hundreds of thousands of disability and aged pensioners.

Employment Minister Michaelia Cash rushed to agree with Dutton, telling the *Australian*: "Taxpayers should not be expected to subsidise the protests of others. Protesting is not, and never will be, an exemption from a welfare recipient's mutual obligation to look for a job. Those who refuse to look for a job because they are too busy protesting may find they have their payments suspended."

In the same week, Families and Social Services Minister Anne Ruston—the cabinet member in charge of the welfare system—further sought to demonise and stigmatise welfare recipients. She opposed widespread calls for the raising of the level of the sub-poverty line Newstart allowance. She told a single mothers' forum: "Giving [people] more money would do absolutely nothing ... probably all it would do is give drug dealers

more money and give pubs more money.”

Ruston’s comment provoked outrage from welfare recipients, as well as advocacy groups, because they effectively branded them all as drug addicts or alcoholics. One single mother commented online: “All welfare recipients are drug users?! What a disgraceful and IGNORANT thing to say. I suppose they’re all ‘dole bludgers’ and ‘criminals’ too.”

Successive governments, both Coalition and Labor, have refused to lift the Newstart payment in real terms since 1994. They have deliberately subjected jobless workers and youth to impoverishment. This is central to the intensifying corporate offensive against working-class living and social conditions, intended to coerce the unemployed and under-employed, who now total nearly two million, into low-paid and insecure work.

Morrison’s government is ramping up the war on welfare, which is clearly aimed at humiliating, vilifying and punishing the jobless—effectively blaming them for the economic slump and lack of jobs. It is proposing to randomly drug test welfare recipients, who could be forced onto degrading “cashless” welfare cards or cut off payments altogether.

Trials of “cashless” cards, first inflicted on indigenous people, and related “income management schemes”—also dictating what welfare recipients can purchase—are being extended in selected working-class areas. More onerous “work test” or “work for the dole” requirements are being imposed also, ratcheting up the number of often pointless job applications or hours of “community service” that recipients must complete each week.

When the illicit drug testing regime was announced in May, the WSWS asked: “What will be next? Drug-testing for access to the government’s Medicare healthcare system? Or for other fundamental civil and political rights, such as the right to vote?”

The calls by Dutton and Cash take a further step down such a road. Their proposals may even be unlawful or unconstitutional. Any policy ban on welfare for protesters would infringe the government’s own draconian “work test” laws, which require assessment of individuals according to the specific criteria set out in the Social Security Act. By explicitly targeting political activities, it also could violate the implied constitutional freedom of political communication, despite the limited character of that

implied freedom, which the High Court further eviscerated recently by scrapping free speech for workers.

Some Labor Party and Greens politicians have criticised aspects of the anti-welfare measures, mainly on the tactical basis of better facilitating the drive to push jobless workers into whatever employment the corporate ruling class requires. But the last Greens-backed Labor government of 2007 to 2013 spearheaded the assault on welfare by shifting about 100,000 sole parents onto the starvation-level Newstart scheme. And both Labor and Greens support the imposition of “mutual obligations” measures on welfare recipients, the purpose of which is to harass and coerce people into poorly-paid work on substandard conditions.

Welfare itself is a fundamental democratic right, required to protect workers and the most vulnerable members of society from the brutal drive for capitalist profit at any cost. As the calls by Dutton and Cash demonstrate, dismantling welfare entitlements also means overturning basic political rights.



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