

Australia: Workers and students express anger over Labor government's budget

Our reporters
22 May 2023

The federal Labor government's second budget, handed down earlier this month, deepens the greatest attack on working class living standards since World War II, while setting aside vast sums for war preparations and tax cuts for the rich.

In an attempt to cover up major cuts to social spending and divert growing anger over the unbearable living conditions confronting workers and young people, the government added token "cost-of-living relief" measures to the budget. These include a meagre \$40 a fortnight increase to Australia's below poverty level welfare payment.

This last-minute gesture did nothing to address the concerns of the workers and students who spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, voicing their anger over the budget and the Labor government.

Jack, a cybersecurity student at Western Sydney University, said, "There was zero mention of any kind of support for mental health. You already see rising suicide rates; people struggle and there is no extra support for an already failing system. They're also cutting public hospitals after COVID showed how underfunded and atrocious the health system is.

"This year they reduced the number of sessions with a psychologist from 20 to 10 per year. I know it was put up during COVID, but it was a long time needed. We see so many mental health issues in our society and people say 'oh, well they need to get therapy.' People want that help, but they either can't afford it, or they can't find it."

Speaking on the welfare payment rise, Jack added, "\$40 a fortnight is a slap in the face for a lot of people. That is sometimes the cost of laundry detergent, it is not even a week of fuel for me. For my girlfriend, who is a full-time student, it is not enough for her to pay for

public transport.

"I was previously on youth allowance for a year and a bit. It was just not enough. I tried to subsidise it with working a casual role, but that wasn't enough either. I am currently not on any welfare; I study and work at the same time. I have my parents helping out."

Jack spoke on the role of the media, which he said "like to divide people into race, country, gender, religion, into anything that divides the working class over small issues instead of focusing on the real threat, which is the people in power, the ultra-rich. They're the people that are starting the wars."

Sharon, a molecular science student at Macquarie University, said, "A lot of young people are living paycheque to paycheque. There is increased rent, increased grocery prices. What I hear all the time is that students can't do everything at once. They go to class and then they immediately have to go to work.

"\$2.80 a day in increased welfare payments is insulting. It's just not enough to help out. I was shocked at the cutting of the budget for hospitals at a time where they say COVID is not a problem anymore, but there is no more PCR testing, so we don't really know what is going on. On top of that, most GPs are no longer bulk billing. They cut in a lot of areas, except the military."

"Labor, which presents itself as being in line with working-class people, is exactly the same as all the other political parties. They support war and the upper-class people that have power and money.

"This is capitalism. These imperialist powers will inevitably go to war to gain more and more for themselves. The working class must fight against that. If we put our faith in the government and corporations, they will never help us, because they benefit from exploiting workers. It has to be the working class that

unite against war and the exploitation of workers.”

Ashlee, a 23-year-old La Trobe University student and retail worker in Melbourne, said that rising interest rates mean her family will have to sell the house where she, her sister and her parents live.

“We can barely afford it at the moment. But once interest rates rise again, we won’t be able to afford it,” she said.

While Ashlee’s parents plan to move to the country, she and her sister have to stay in Melbourne for their university classes and work. But Ashlee is concerned about skyrocketing rental prices: “I can’t afford to move out on my own. My friend was talking about trying to share a house with me, but I just don’t earn enough a week.”

In response to the “cost-of-living relief” in the budget, Ashlee said “it’s not enough. My other sister goes to university full-time and works part-time. She shares a house with three other people. Does the government really think \$20 a week is going to help? She can pay her bills, a quarter of the rent, and that’s basically it. Even people who do work full-time are just scraping by.”

Ashlee said the pittance given to workers in Australia is “because the war drive of America against China apparently beats the needs for survival for people around the globe. They’ve invested billions on the war and new military bases.

“I’ve had a feeling for years that governments, regardless of who they are, don’t care about us. They care about making money for the capitalists. At the end of the day, they don’t go hungry. Their families are fed, and their children go to private schools. It’s the people that aren’t wealthy that are not doing well.”

Andre, a food worker in Melbourne, said “It is a slash and burn austerity budget. It is anti-poor and anti-working class. A real increase in social welfare is sorely needed. \$40 a fortnight is an insult. It doesn’t address the structural cause of inflation.

“The tax cuts are social welfare for the rich. I’ve heard it described as socialism for the rich and Darwinian capitalism for the rest. It is to make the rich richer.

“I pay nearly \$300-a-week rent. How can you do that when you are jobless? For someone below the poverty line, you couldn’t buy groceries with what is left over. Many people will be skipping meals.

“This is part of a global effort against the working class. Governments are trying to implement these measures and they’re trying to restrain the working class. Money is going to the military. I just saw that France and Germany have agreed to major transfers of dozens of vehicles and tanks. There is \$368 billion here for attack submarines. Britain has agreed to hundreds of attack drones.

“Workers need to realise why this is happening. This budget is not helping anyone. The next step is for workers to realise they are trying to fool us and to form rank-and-file committees as this is the only way to a revolution.”

Bailey, an Open Foundation student at the University of Newcastle, said, “The budget doesn’t properly address the inflation crisis which has affected the majority of the population. The cost of living does not match the pay that we are given. Poor working people are told to fend for themselves, sometimes being thrown onto the street as well.

“It is us, the working class, who put the work in, stay back to take longer shifts just so we can use the little pay we are given to survive another week. At the same time, interest rates have gone up. The financial pressure is huge.”

Eric, an IT worker in Newcastle, said: “The latest budget is still ignoring the urgency of the current housing crisis and the ever-growing number of homeless people.

“I can hardly find a suburb now that doesn’t have homeless people camping in parks, alleys and abandoned houses. The slums that we see in America are now starting to surface here, in what we used to call the lucky country.

“Welfare services are stretched to the limit with priority having to go to single parents and their children. Many people are forced to live in their cars. The longer this government puts off addressing this most urgent problem, the more impossible it will be to fix.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact