

Australia: Labor imposes sweeping disability cuts, forcing hundreds of thousands off essential supports

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The federal Labor government has unveiled a savage assault on disabled people as the centrepiece of an austerity budget next month that will slash essential social spending, while increasing funding to the military and boosting corporate profits.

Speaking at the National Press Club on Wednesday, Health Minister Mark Butler outlined a plan to force at least 160,000 people off the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) over the next four years. Adding to the projected number of people blocked from entering the scheme over that period, the actual figure is over 300,000.

That is the spearhead of a broader gutting of the NDIS, which Butler said will “save” the federal budget \$35 billion over the four-year forward estimates. That is the largest single cut to an Australian government program this century, and likely the largest ever.

Labor had previously signalled that it would reduce the annual growth rate of the NDIS from the current level of around 10 percent to 5-6 percent. But Butler said its new target is to bring growth down to 2 percent per annum over the next four years.

The 2 percent growth figure is scarcely above the annual population increase, and is far below the current inflation rate of 3.7 percent, which is widely predicted to skyrocket. That is, the NDIS will be subjected to continuous cutbacks.

This is a program of social misery for some of the most vulnerable members of the population. The 760,000 people on the NDIS depend on it to meet their daily necessities, from personal care and in-home assistance to therapy, mobility aids and support workers that make basic participation in society possible.

The reality, of which the government is fully aware, is that its cuts will claim lives, both directly through the withdrawal of essential supports and indirectly by driving disabled people and their families into impossible situations.

The claims of the Labor government that those kicked off the scheme will be provided with other supports are a lie. There simply are no such supports. When the NDIS was established in 2012, state-based disability programs were largely wound

down, and there are no plans for their revival.

In January, Labor signed an “in-principle” agreement with the states to establish “foundational supports” for tens of thousands of autistic children, who are the first to be thrown off the scheme. But aside from a cynical title, “Thriving Kids,” the program does not exist.

And that agreement, rammed through by the federal government through a threat to withdraw funding to public hospitals, was made under conditions where the projected cuts to the NDIS were far lower than what Butler outlined Wednesday.

The state administrations, presiding over their own austerity offensive, have declared that they will not pick up the slack. New South Wales Labor Premier Chris Minns bluntly stated, “If they’re not going to be provided with NDIS support, we can’t provide equivalent care in the state system.”

In other words, it will be up to parents and families, as well as the already crisis-ridden public schools and hospitals, to try and cope with the fallout.

NDIS participants and their family members have spoken out, warning that the cuts could literally ruin their lives.

Hollie-Ann Newman, whose four-year-old son has autism and requires substantial support for basic daily needs, told the *Guardian* newspaper that if he were removed from the scheme, “we’d be on our own. We have no informal supports.” She estimated that the family would have to pay something in the order of “\$30–40,000” a year out of pocket for the boy’s care and support, something they simply could not afford.

The removal of participants is the sharpest expression of a complete overhaul of access to the scheme, aimed at reducing services. The previous basis for accessing the scheme, a medical diagnosis of a physical or psychosocial disability, is effectively being abolished.

Instead, participants and prospective participants will be subjected to “functional capacity” assessments for each element of support provided through the NDIS, a regime that will be progressively rolled out and fully operational at the beginning of 2028.

Butler gave hardly any details. The “functional assessment”

regime, however it is set up, will demand that vulnerable disabled people “prove” that they are “entitled” to assistance they would have previously received by virtue of their diagnosis.

As part of its earlier cuts to the NDIS, the government has already introduced a system of “independent assessors,” effectively tasked with removing people from the scheme or reducing the assistance they receive. Initially targeting those with developmental delays and autism, this framework of the disabled being scrutinised by hostile government bureaucrats will be made universal.

The abolition of a diagnostically based criteria for the scheme is an attack on medicine and science. So too is Labor’s line that they are seeking to remove those with “mild” and “moderate” disabilities.

Those are not medical categories but government spin, aimed at demonising those with disabilities and inciting popular opinion against them. As many parents of autistic children have noted, a condition that might be waved away by the government as “mild” can require vast amounts of care and assistance.

The brutality of the cuts is indicated by the fact that one of the first programs on the chopping block, for those who are not kicked off all together, is social and community participation. This broad category includes a raft of activities, whereby support workers assist people to leave their homes, attend appointments, take part in work, education, social and cultural life.

Butler declared that from October, funding for such activities would be slashed by 16 percent.

Jeremy Hope, president of People with Disability Australia, warned that participants are already fearful of losing the support they rely on “to get out of bed, to eat, to leave the house, and to be part of their families and communities.” For many, these services are the only link to the outside world. Their removal will leave people isolated, confined to their homes and cut off from even the most basic forms of social life.

The government is seeking to justify the cuts by pointing to the “cost blowout” of the NDIS, i.e., its actual cost and the projected increases prior to Butler’s announcement.

In the first instance, such references never refer to the origins of the scheme or its pro-business character, which was always going to result in the diversion of public funds into the coffers of private businesses. Established by a previous Labor government in 2012, the NDIS is effectively a public-private partnership.

The federal and state governments provide funding which is then used for services and supports that are wholly in the hands of private businesses. In other words, turning the disabled over to companies, whose inherent motive is to make a profit, was the very purpose of the scheme.

Labor is not reversing that privatisation even slightly. Instead, it is slashing government funding by withdrawing support from

the disabled themselves.

The references to the costs, moreover, are freighted with unstated assumptions and insinuations. The thinly veiled line is that society simply can’t afford to provide disabled people with the support they require, which can be expensive and complex, or with a decent quality of life.

While references are often made to the NDIS “costing” more than \$50 billion, the reality is that with the contribution of states and territories, the Commonwealth has spent roughly \$38 billion on the scheme this financial year.

That is more than \$20 billion less than military spending over the year, which increased to a record of almost \$60 billion. Just days before Labor unveiled its assault on the disabled, it pledged an additional \$53 billion for the military over the next decade, as Australia not only participates in criminal US-led wars in the Middle East, such as the assault on Iran, but prepares to play a frontline role in American imperialism’s preparations for a catastrophic conflict with China.

In other words, there are ample funds for war, not for the needs of the disabled. The country’s billionaires, meanwhile, are wealthier than they have ever been, and the government has pledged that the budget will aid “productivity” and eliminate “red tape,” code words for boosting corporate profits. The cuts to the NDIS, which will only be extended, are also a signal that major reductions to health, education and welfare are being prepared.

The assault Labor has unveiled is not only a declaration of war on people with disabilities, but on the working class. It proves again that this government is the ruthless instrument of the banks and the corporations, hostile to all of the fundamental interests of working people.

A political struggle must be developed, against the assault on the rights of the disabled and on all social rights. The attack on such a vulnerable cohort underscores the fundamental reality of capitalism, the subordination of all social needs to the profits of the ruling elite, enforced by governments that represent it.



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