

Rallies oppose Australian Labor government's massive cut to disability funding

Our reporters
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Protests were held in several Australian cities on Saturday, against the Labor government's onslaught on disability funding. Around 500 people participated in Melbourne and several hundred in Sydney, with a smaller rally in Brisbane.

Labor is slashing funding to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) by more than \$35 billion over the next four years, in the largest single cut to a government program in history. Up to 300,000 disabled people are to be kicked off the NDIS, under conditions where there is no alternative to it.

At the rallies, people with disabilities spoke about the dire consequences. They noted that the targeting of tens of thousands of autistic children would have dire consequences. Families would simply be unable to cope, raising the prospect of tragic circumstances, including death. Other speakers noted the degrading character of a new "functional assessments" regime, under which government bureaucrats will scrutinise the disabled with a view to limiting the assistance they receive or kicking them off the NDIS altogether.

The cut to the NDIS is the centrepiece of a broader austerity budget that Labor is bringing down tonight that will also target other essential services such as health, education and public sector jobs. Labor is forcing the working class to pay for a deepening crisis of capitalism and for record military spending, as it supports US-led wars globally, including the criminal assault on Iran and prepares for new catastrophes, above all plans for an offensive against China.

This basic reality was covered up by Greens representatives, who were the featured speakers at the protests. They presented the cuts as an unfortunate "choice" by Labor, that could be reversed through

moral appeals and petitions. For their part, pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alternative simply called for more protests, with the same bankrupt perspective of pressuring the Labor government.

In opposition to that line, Socialist Equality Party campaigners raised the need for the most determined political struggle against the Labor government. They insisted that the attacks on the disabled were a brutal expression of a wholesale offensive against the working class. What was required in response was the development of a socialist movement, directed against the subordination of essential needs to private profit.

Kirsten, a therapist, said: "I work with a variety of families, mostly with kids, doing early intervention. But a lot of the kids I'm working with, they're having their funding cut, so I'm getting my income cut.

"I've worked in disability for nearly 30 years. Five years in NDIS. I used to work for the education department and, when I was finishing working there, I got all the kids in the school who were in year 12 and on the NDIS. Now I'm scared for all of them, because they're all going to lose their funding and especially social and community participation, that's what they need more than anything.

"The kids I currently work with are all on the autism spectrum and they're categorised as level two. Whether that's going to be included in this new 'moderate' thing with the cuts, we don't know, because there's no such thing as 'mild' and 'moderate.' They should be considered to be significantly disabled. If these kids, these young adults, can't get out into the community, how are they ever going to get a job? And participate? It's important for them to be able to be part of their own community."

On Labor's announcement of a \$53 billion rise to the military budget, just days after the NDIS cuts were announced, Kirsten said: "There's clearly money for the military and for war, but there's never enough money for people and their basic needs."

Anjali, who attended the rally with the help of a support worker, said "what the government is doing is taking away our quality of life. It's frightening me."

She wasn't sure if she was going to be affected by the cuts, but said if they cut funding for support workers it would have a large impact: "I am confident going out by myself, but it is just for safety. What would happened to me if I was out on a road and my wheel got stuck on the tram tracks?"

Mary, who has worked as an occupational therapist for the past ten years, said it was important "to support people with a disability to have the same rights as non-disabled people, to have access to living a normal life and to not be financially or socially penalised. There will be deaths out of this Without a shadow of a doubt. It is horrifying."

Mary rejected the claims, promoted by the Labor government and media, that slashing NDIS funding was necessary because of supposedly widespread fraud: "I think it's duplicitous, they're presenting this 'rorting' message, but the story's grossly inflated. They are calling it reform, but it's not reform."

Having been a "life-long Labor voter," she said she doesn't see much difference between Labor and Liberal anymore.

Jackie, who has a child with a severe disability who is on the NDIS, said, "the cuts are disgusting because the government's using disabled people as a pawn in their budget."

She said her daughter, requires carers for all of her needs and, "if she gets her NDIS cut, she won't be able to live the life that she deserves to live. She just wants an ordinary life, the same as you and me and everybody else."

Asked about growing military spending, she said "I think it's absolutely disgusting that we prioritise money for war ahead of any person, let alone people with disabilities, or people in low-income housing, anything. I feel disappointed, because I have been a Labor voter all my life."

Jen said: "I'm here for my son, who is 19 years old. He has level three autism and intellectual disability.

He's currently funded by the NDIS and needs 24-hour care. He can't afford to have his current plan cut, because without those supports, the great team around him, he will be not be able to function. He has very high support needs.

"He would be probably forced to move back home with me and I work full time. The reason he moved out of home is because it was unsustainable with informal support. And he's an adult.

"An adult deserves to have the same quality of life, even if neurodivergent, as any typical person. He has that currently, but without the current level of funding, he won't have that any longer and he, like many others in this situation, will not be able to leave the house and have those opportunities. To have that stripped away denies him his basic human rights.

"He can't be here today because he has sensory issues and behavioural issues that would cause this to be distressing for him. So I'm here on his behalf, speaking for him when he can't.

"It just doesn't make sense. Tossing people off the NDIS is not the way to go. [Governments closed] all the programs available to people that were there prior to the NDIS coming into existence, so where are people supposed to go?

"The health department's not interested in looking after them. The education department isn't interested, if they're in school. They all just want to force them onto the NDIS. So where else are they supposed to go?

"With the creation of the NDIS and the way it was rolled out, it allowed for all these gaps in the system and that is [the government's] job to monitor that and maintain and fix that. It shouldn't be at the cost of the people on the scheme."



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