Australian Labor Party's national conference hails savage assault on disability services as a "reform"

Owen Howell
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Last week's Labor Party National Conference, held in Adelaide, was an event that revealed a party in a developing crisis. While Labor conferences have always been tightly managed affairs, this year's was choreographed by the party's bureaucratic apparatus to go off without a hitch and without any semblance of debate on the floor.

The unreal character of the conference consisted of a total disconnect between what was said on the floor and the actual policies that federal and state Labor governments are enacting.

Nowhere was that unreality more striking than in the discussion surrounding the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), the state-funded program that provides basic necessities for over 770,000 people. In May, the Anthony Albanese Labor government announced in its budget a sweeping attack on the NDIS, which will slash $38 billion from the scheme and cut off access for over 350,000 disabled people, largely children, according to the government's own modelling.

The cuts have been denounced by all disability rights' organisations, which have correctly warned that they will result in mass hardship, isolation and death.

The truly Orwellian depiction of the cuts began before the conference itself. In its anodyne draft platform for the conference, Labor included no less than 84 references to the disabled, all of them in the manner of supposedly defending their rights.

The section on the NDIS itself began with a declaration that "Labor is committed to putting people with disability at the centre of disability policy and the design and delivery of disability services. Labor believes that Australians with disability, as well as their families and carers, deserve the chance to reach their full potential and Labor will give them that opportunity."

The platform framed the discussion at the conference. Health Minister Mark Butler, the government figure most directly involved in assaulting the rights of disabled people, was warmly applauded including when he hailed the NDIS as a "great Labor legacy."

He only obliquely referenced the cannibalisation of disability services that is actually underway, describing it as Labor "taking on the really hard but necessary task to get the NDIS back on track, and to secure this extraordinary reform, which has transformed the lives of hundreds and hundreds of thousands of Australians, not just for the next few years but for decades and decades to come."

In this demonstration of doublespeak, getting the NDIS "back on track" means stripping it to the bone. Labor's official pretext for the sweeping cuts is the totally unsubstantiated claim that the NDIS is overrun with corruption.

This line was taken up by Jenny McAllister, minister for disability and the NDIS, after Butler's remarks. McAllister raised that the NDIS cuts, which she only referenced euphemistically, were about keeping it "sustainable" and free of criminal elements who were "rorting" the scheme. The fact that hundreds of thousands would be denied any access to disability services, McAllister did not mention, as she too declared that Labor's "reforms" were aimed at supporting "the rights, the dignity… of people with a disability."

She then began shouting. "[T]his is not a scheme for the grifters, for the fraudsters, for the shonks and for the crooks who think that they can drain the plans of people with disability for their own profit. And we will put a stop to these behaviours in the scheme."

Such claims, of an NDIS overrun by corruption among private providers, have been promoted by Labor to try to publicly justify its cuts.

But Butler and the government themselves have admitted that "compliance" measures constitute a tiny proportion of the "savings," which will overwhelmingly be derived from the mass removal of disabled people from the NDIS altogether, the severe limiting of essential services to those

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that remain and the evisceration of programs that enable social and community participation, i.e., precisely those areas that enable the "dignity" and "choice" that the Laborites uphold rhetorically but attack in practice.

With a bluntness with few precedents, the Labor government is savagely assaulting the most vulnerable segments of the population, in an explicit austerity measure. The attack on the NDIS is one component of $63.8 billion cut from social spending in the May budget, also targeting education, health and other vital services.

At the same time, Labor is protecting the wealth of the corporate elite and pouring vast sums into militarism, for which the working class must pay.

Military expenditure has been increased to record levels of $60 billion a year, with far more to come, including via the commitment of $368 billion over decades to acquire nuclear-powered submarines for war with China under the AUKUS pact with the US and the UK.

Meanwhile, the wealth of Australia's richest 200 individuals has climbed to $707 billion, an increase of $39.45 billion in the past year alone, almost exactly the sum being gouged from the NDIS.

Like the cuts to the NDIS themselves, none of these realities were stated openly at the conference.

Instead, during the conference discussion on the NDIS, Labor put on a surreal spectacle in which several disabled delegates spoke in favour of the cuts to disability support, turning reality on its head.

One delegate thanked Butler and McAllister for their work. "This is about saving the NDIS," she said, praising Labor as the party of "equity, inclusion, and access for all."

Another said, "There must and there will be safeguards, there are reviews, there will be oversight, there will not be changes to NDIS access until states and territories have rolled out Foundational Supports."

The so-called "Foundation Supports" into which disabled children removed from the NDIS will be forced, do not yet exist, and if they ever do the government has already made clear they will be barebones. Alternative supports for adults kicked off the NDIS are not even in the conceptual phase. NDIS participants, moreover, are already being removed from access before any replacements have even been established, with 29,000 people reporting they have lost access, including 12,000 children.

Labor cannot openly discuss the agenda it is carrying out because it is massively unpopular. The Senate inquiry into the NDIS Amendment Bill received more than 4,000 submissions, overwhelmingly hostile and detailing the devastating consequences of the cuts.

Any honest admission of Labor's social austerity would expose the party for what it is: a key instrument of big business, the banks and the military-intelligence apparatus, which is presiding over the transfer of billions from disabled children and the most vulnerable into the hands of the financial elite and militarism.

The trade unions, meanwhile, whose officials sat back on the conference floor and applauded the dismantling of the NDIS, are fully on board with this agenda. Since its May announcement, the health unions have uttered not a single word of opposition to the cuts, with the Health Services Union lauding them as "an important step in the right direction."

No fight to defend disability support, public health, or social welfare in general will come from within the Labor Party or their partners in the union bureaucracy. A struggle against the NDIS cuts must be waged against the Labor government and the capitalist system it defends, independent of the entire political establishment and based in the working class.

The only political tendency taking up that fight is the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). It is putting forward demands to withdraw the NDIS Amendment Bill, reinstate every participant removed, restore every funding cut, and redirect the billions squandered on war to disability care, health and education.

Far from being a great "reform" as proclaimed at its inception, the NDIS, while temporarily expanding access to disability services, created a publicly subsidised but privately operated market. The Laborites falsely denouncing "rorts" and "shonks" deliberately baked the profit motive into the NDIS and are maintaining it there, while extracting "savings" at the expense of the disabled themselves.

Disability and health services must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control, organised according to social need, not private profit.

On August 16, the SEP, together with the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee and the Committee for Public Education, will hold an online public meeting to discuss the socialist perspective needed to oppose Labor's assault on the NDIS and the broader offensive against the working class. We urge workers, young people, NDIS participants and their families to register and join this critical discussion.

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