

Australia: Empty launch of Thriving Kids underscores Labor's assault on children with disabilities

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On October 1, the Albanese Labor government officially launched the first phase of Thriving Kids, the program it presents as a replacement for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) support services it is stripping from autistic children and those with developmental delays.

The rollout was accompanied by the usual sham reassurances. Health Minister Mark Butler declared the government “absolutely committed” to ensuring children under nine “don’t fall between two stalls.” The reality, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has documented, is that Thriving Kids is not a support program at all, but part of the largest single cut to a social program in Australian history.

What Labor actually launched on October 1 was a helpline, a website and a promise. The “general supports” now on offer consist of a telephone line operated by the autism organisation Amaze, an online resource hub run by the Raising Children Network, and a Medicare-funded developmental check for three-year-olds, scheduled to begin in November.

There are no therapies, no allied health professionals, no individualised plans. The “targeted supports”—playgroups and some allied health access—are not scheduled to be fully operational until January 2028, more than a year away. In the meantime, the government insists children can still be enrolled in the NDIS “in the same way they have been.” The two systems will “operate in parallel.”

The parallel operation is a fiction designed to obscure the fact that Labor is gutting the NDIS and delivering nothing in its place. Children are the primary targets of this assault. Of the 241,000 participants slated for removal by 2030, 64 percent are aged 18 or under, and 60 percent have autism or developmental delay as their primary disability. A further estimated 105,000 people will be denied access to the scheme, predominantly children. Thriving Kids is the name given to their abandonment.

The cost of Thriving Kids will supposedly be shared equally by the state and federal governments. When the

Albanese government rammed through its “in-principle” agreement with the states in January—using the threat of withdrawing hospital funding as leverage—the projected cuts were far smaller than those Butler subsequently announced.

The state governments, imposing their own austerity programs, have made clear they will not pick up the slack. New South Wales Labor Premier Chris Minns stated bluntly: “If they’re not going to be provided with NDIS support, we can’t provide equivalent care in the state system.”

When the NDIS was established by the Gillard Labor government in 2012, it substantially privatised and outsourced disability services. State-based disability programs were largely wound down, so there are no state systems in place to fall back on. Thriving Kids is not a transfer of responsibility to a functioning alternative. The “foundational supports” Labor promised are, as the WSWs noted, “aside from a cynical title ... a program that does not exist.”

Labor’s removal of children from the NDIS is based on a category that is not clearly defined, that is, participants with “mild to moderate support needs.” A condition waved away as “mild” can require vast amounts of care. Children classified as having “low-to-moderate” needs typically require ongoing speech, occupational and psychological therapy, while struggling with communication, emotional regulation and daily functioning. They depend on structured support at school and at home.

Under the new regime, children aged eight and under with these “mild to moderate” needs will no longer be able to access NDIS funding at all. Even children with Level 2 autism are no longer guaranteed entry by diagnosis alone; families must now present extensive clinical evidence of “profound, lifelong barriers to basic daily tasks.” Children over eight face standardised “functional capacity assessments” that will determine—through the scrutiny of government assessors—whether their disability is “severe” enough to warrant support.

This is an attack on medicine and science itself. Diagnostically-based criteria with clinical judgment are replaced by bureaucratic gatekeeping. The “functional assessment” regime, fully operational by 2028, is a mechanism for denial, not for care.

The cuts are already happening. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation recently reported that between July 2025 and March 2026, funding cuts through “reassessment” totalled \$1.448 billion. In the first three months of this year almost 6,500 participants had their funding revoked.

In a survey conducted by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYPDA) of participants and their carers, 61 percent of reassessment letters were received by parents/caregivers of children with disability nine years and under. Almost one third (32 percent) of children nine years and under were removed from the NDIS, and a further 14 percent had their funding severely reduced.

The human cost of this transfer is being borne, first and foremost, by the families of disabled children, who are being told to cope with no support.

One respondent to the CYPDA survey said: “We were told that most of what we requested were not covered under my child’s impairment even though they had been previously covered. We were told that mainstream supports were better suited even though there was no mainstream service, we were told that because my son was under 18 that everything was deemed parental responsibility. I was told that if I couldn’t fulfill my parental responsibility that I would be reported to the Department of Children Services.”

The consequences for families are devastating. Hollie-Ann Newman, whose four-year-old son has autism and requires substantial support for basic daily needs, told the *Guardian* that if he were removed from the scheme, “We’d be on our own. We have no informal supports.” She estimated the family would face out-of-pocket costs of \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year—sums no working-class family can bear.

The burden is also falling on already crisis-ridden public education and health systems. As the WSWS reported in August, teachers are on the front line of the NDIS cuts. Tens of thousands of children stripped of NDIS supports are arriving in classrooms with heightened needs and no corresponding increase in resources, specialist staff or funding.

A teacher and parent of an autistic child explained on Reddit: “If kids don’t get early intervention they will be coming to school more behind, more dysregulated and find it harder to learn and keep up. If kids can’t talk, sit, hold a pencil BEFORE school they won’t be ready to learn to read and write. Thriving kids is NOT fair on teachers, early childhood educators and schools.”

The NDIS cuts cannot be understood in isolation. They are the spearhead of broader cuts to social programs, including public health and education, to satisfy the demands of the corporate elite, and to pay for accelerating military spending.

The same Albanese government stripping \$38 billion from the NDIS over four years has raised annual military spending to around \$60 billion and committed \$368 billion to the AUKUS nuclear submarine program, integrating Australia directly into US-led war preparations against China. Yet there are no funds for the speech therapy, occupational therapy and classroom support that vulnerable children need to participate in society.

Opposition to these cuts is widespread. Disability advocates, allied health professionals, families and workers have spoken out. A Change.org petition signed by teachers, families, allied health workers and NDIS professionals has called for the Thriving Kids to be immediately halted.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) opposes these cuts. However, we do not promote the NDIS as the means for providing disability care. Labor is not abandoning the profit-driven market model it created, but stripping away its funding with devastating consequences.

The SEP has advanced the demand to redirect the billions squandered on war and the military to disability care, health, education and other essential social services. Place disability and health services under public ownership and democratic workers control, organised according to social need, not private profit.

This fight cannot be won through appeals to Labor, the Coalition, the Greens, or the trade union apparatuses, all of which are complicit in the austerity and war agenda.

Rank-and-file committees, independent of every capitalist party and the union bureaucracies, must be built to unite workers across workplaces and industries, as part of a broader movement to defend all the basic rights of working people and fight for an opposed socialist perspective.



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