

Unemployed Australians to be forced to apply for 40 jobs a month

Mike Head
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The Australian government this week unveiled punitive new requirements for the growing numbers of unemployed workers, designed to cut thousands off welfare benefits, coerce them into low-paid work and satisfy the mounting corporate demands for the government to deliver the austerity program it promised in its May budget.

Under the new rules, slated to commence next year, the unemployed will have to apply for at least 40 jobs a month, or be cut off benefits. In addition, they will have to undertake “work for the dole” for 15 to 25 hours a week, depending on their age, and relocate to other areas of the country to take a job.

Those aged under 30 will also be denied payments for six months of every year, despite being forced to “work for the dole” for 25 hours a week, and apply for 10 jobs a week. Those aged between 30 and 50 will have to do 15 hours of work for the dole every week. Even those aged 50 to 59 will have to perform “appropriate” activities—as yet undefined—for 15 hours a week.

This regime has nothing to do with finding decent work for the unemployed. Even according to the official statistics, there are now almost 730,000 jobless workers, with as many again “underemployed”—that is, looking for more hours of work. The jobless rate jumped from 5.8 to 6 percent last month. By another estimate, produced by the Roy Morgan polling company, the real figures are almost twice as high—2.51 million workers unemployed or underemployed.

Yet the latest survey of employers by the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed there were just 147,100 vacancies to be filled. That works out to about 10 unemployed or underemployed job seekers for each vacancy, even on the basis of the official figures.

This situation is the result of waves of job losses throughout basic industries, including steel, cars,

airlines, postal and telecommunication services, retail, finance and mining, since the 2008 global financial crisis. Further mass layoffs are scheduled over the next two years, with the complete shutdown of the auto industry and 75,000 jobs expected to go because of the end of the mining investment boom.

Young job seekers have little prospect of obtaining secure full-time work, and the same goes for older retrenched workers. Recent figures show that more than 200,000 workers aged over 50 are now receiving unemployment benefits—a 45 percent increase in four years.

To require these workers, young and old, to submit 40 job applications a month, regardless of how pointless they are, is calculated only to harass, demoralise and humiliate them, and ultimately disqualify them from benefits altogether.

Cynical claims by the government’s employment ministers that the new rules would benefit the jobless by motivating and equipping them to get work were soon swept aside by Treasurer Joe Hockey.

Interviewed on Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio yesterday, Hockey declared: “[A]s a former employer myself, I know that sometimes the hungriest people looking for work—that is, hungry for work and hungry to work—are some of the best employees. And in that sense it’ll give business an opportunity.”

Hockey’s comments bluntly spell out the government’s central agenda: to force, and even starve, the jobless into accepting work on whatever terms and conditions that employers dictate.

Expanded “work for the dole” programs are to be rolled out across the country, compelling the jobless to perform unpaid work in a variety of previously paid occupations.

Employment Minister Eric Abetz, interviewed

yesterday by right-wing radio host Alan Jones, declared: “Work for the Dole will be basically limited by the imagination of community organisations, local government, the not-for-profit sector. So we have opportunities in hospitality and food preparation, customer service, some landscaping, maintenance of vehicles.”

Australia will be divided into 51 employment regions. Each will have a “Work for the Dole Coordinator” to find such enterprises and supply them with workers via the government’s job service providers—businesses contracted to administer and enforce the new rules.

Jobless workers in regions of high unemployment—rates exceed 20 percent in some working class suburbs—will have to move home to accept work. “[I]f there is a job opportunity that might be a couple of hours away ... you are required to move to that job,” Abetz said.

There will be tougher rules to penalise those who fail to attend appointments with employment services, building on a draconian regime imposed by the previous Labor government after the 2010 election.

The new arrangements have been set out in tender documents for government contracts with employment service providers, to operate from next July. These tenders also specify that contractors will be paid on the basis of “performance, rather than for process” and “meeting the needs of employers” —that is, for pushing people into jobs, or off benefits, rather than for providing training.

The government may attempt to implement the changes without legislation. This would be a bid to avoid any measures being stalled in the Senate, as is currently the case with legislation to strip the under-30s jobless of benefits for six months each year.

Abetz made it clear that the changes are part of a wider agenda to dismantle welfare entitlements. “The Australian government is committed to helping more Australians move from welfare to work,” he said. Abetz said the new rules reinforced the doctrine of “mutual obligation,” which requires welfare recipients to fulfill “obligations” in return for their poverty-level payments.

The government is under intensifying pressure from the corporate and media elite to find ways to ram through its budget measures to slash welfare, health and education, or impose equivalent social spending cuts.

An editor *Australian* yesterday welcomed the Abbott government’s radical extension of mutual obligation in job services” as a step in the right direction. Citing a call by mining magnate Gina Rinehart for lower labour costs, it backed a drive to push younger workers into becoming a mobile jobless army, to undermine wages and conditions throughout the working class.

“The work culture needs to change; young Australians must become more mobile, to fill the gaps employers have,” the editorial insisted. Murdoch’s newspaper reiterated its demand that politicians overcome the deep popular opposition to the budget’s austerity program. “[P]olitical leaders must not only pursue reform agendas, they need to find their voices again and show courage in outlining to the community why stasis is not an option,” it stated.

The only objection from Labor and the Greens, reflecting concerns expressed by big business, was that forcing people to apply for 40 jobs a month would impose a burden on employers. “Business does not need a deluge of applications just so a young jobseeker can say that he or she has fulfilled their obligations,” Labor’s employment spokesman Brendan O’Connor said, adding: “Of course we want to see a genuine search for work.”

Throughout its six years in office, the Labor government used the same language of “welfare to work” and “mutual obligation” to underscore its commitment to meeting the demands of the corporate elite.

Greens leader Christine Milne, whose party kept Labor in office until last year, echoed a call by the Business Council of Australia for the Newstart unemployment allowance, currently set at just \$35 a day, to be increased by \$50 a week—so the jobless have just enough money to look for work.



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