

Australian government launches crusade to slash disability services

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National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Minister Bill Shorten joined hands with far-right One Nation leader Senator Pauline Hanson last week to launch an aggressive campaign to push through deep cuts to the scheme. The aim is to deny access to services for thousands of children and other people living with disabilities.

Shorten and Hanson held a joint media conference in parliament house to denounce the Liberal-National Coalition and Greens for referring the government's NDIS "reform" bill to a Senate committee inquiry over the winter parliamentary break. It is a revealing political alliance.

Demagogically, the pair accused the Coalition and the Greens of costing taxpayers \$1.1 billion by delaying the cuts to disability services by two months. Standing alongside Shorten, Hanson declared: "Changes [are] needed to be done and it needs to be cleaned up. And that's why I'm here talking today and I'm supporting Mr Shorten on this legislation that's been put forward."

The Labor government's partnership with One Nation, which has a long record of demonising welfare recipients and railing against social services, demonstrates the depths to which the Labor Party will go to try to impose the austerity demands of the financial markets.

With Shorten's support, Hanson issued a diatribe against people on the NDIS, spewing false allegations against NDIS participants, as she has done to social security recipients throughout her entire time in parliament. She claimed that "if you're on NDIS, you can get your groceries paid, for your gambling, you can get your alcohol... It's just unbelievable."

No evidence has been produced to support such accusations.

Shorten was equally belligerent. He particularly targeted children diagnosed with autism or other disabilities. "The nation cannot afford \$1 billion," he declared. "But what's more is there's 60,000 kids on the scheme whose packages are equal to \$1 billion... This is 54,000 people's annual tax. We shouldn't be wasting this money."

As parliamentarians left Canberra on Thursday night for their winter break, Shorten sought to confront them with an election campaign-style truck emblazoned with "Save the NDIS: Put participants first, senators."

Shorten's remarks at his appearance with Hanson, however, lay bare the true agenda behind his claims, and those of the entire government, to be undertaking this offensive in order to "save the NDIS" by making it "sustainable."

As well as seeking to disqualify 60,000 children, Labor's bill contains an array of measures to slash services. These include using "assessors" to deny access to many adult applicants as well. Having denounced the previous Liberal-National government for such moves, the Labor government is now proceeding with them.

People with psychosocial disabilities have been earmarked for removal. To accomplish this and more, the review recommends removing medical diagnoses, including Level 2 autism, as the central basis for entry to the NDIS, to be replaced by assessments of "significant functional impairment and need."

The legislation seeks to cement a deal that Prime Minister Anthony Albanese struck with the state and territory leaders last December—all from the Labor Party, except one—to push disabled people onto non-existent "foundational supports" to be provided by their governments.

These educational, health and transport services for

most people with disabilities and children with developmental delays will supposedly be provided by state-based institutions such as schools, early childhood and healthcare facilities.

All these services are chronically underfunded and under-staffed, and are being cut further by the Labor governments which face mounting budget deficits.

The state and territory leaders, fearing a public outcry, are currently backing the delay to the bill, saying they lack the information and resources to fill the gap. As intended when the Gillard and Rudd Labor governments created the NDIS in 2013, the states scrapped most of their disability services.

That accelerated the disintegration of special needs programs at schools. Carers and advocacy programs were eviscerated and the remaining large residential facilities, supporting individuals with complex needs, were shut down, resulting in several deaths.

Today, the vast majority of the estimated 4.4 million Australian residents with a disability are not on the NDIS. The scheme has some 649,000 participants, according to the most recent quarterly report. According to the ruling class and the Labor government, however, that is too many.

Labor's NDIS "reforms" are just the start. The bill would give the federal NDIS minister and the National Disability Insurance Agency, which runs the NDIS, power to change the scheme's eligibility rules and regulations to cut access further.

In this year's May annual budget, the government vowed to slice \$14.4 billion off predicted NDIS spending over the next four years, bringing the projected annual growth down from 20 percent to around 9 percent. That was the spearhead of a wider drive to cut social spending while pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into military spending and slightly revamped income tax cuts that still overwhelmingly benefit wealthy households.

The corporate elite has welcomed the NDIS offensive but is demanding much more. A July 7 *Australian Financial Review* editorial described Labor's bill as "a worthwhile but modest start." It insisted that Shorten had to "fix the design flaws" that produced "a monster and unsustainable entitlement program that is now politically very difficult to wind back."

When the previous Morrison Coalition government flagged forecast blowouts in the cost of the NDIS,

Shorten likened this to false "weapons of mass destruction" intelligence in Iraq and campaigned against the proposed "independent reassessments" of NDIS participants.

Since Labor scraped into office in 2022, Shorten has been in charge of accomplishing what the widely reviled Coalition government could not. On this front, as on every other, including the cost-of-living crisis and the US-led war drive against Russia and China, the Albanese government is intensifying the program of war and austerity.

As for the Coalition and the Greens, their stances of feigned concern are no less cynical. The NDIS itself was developed by the Rudd-Gillard governments, backed fully by the Coalition and the Greens, to cut costs by ending direct governmental support for those with a disability and pushing all services into a profit-driven system.

As warned by the Socialist Equality Party from the outset, this disability "market" has produced a predictable disaster by privatising services, leading to sub-standard programs and profiteering at the expense of clients.

For all people, including those with disabilities, high quality and freely accessible care and services must be a basic social right, along with the right to public education and healthcare. The bitter experiences with the NDIS show that these rights have become fundamentally incompatible with the continued existence of the capitalist profit system, which is instead generating ever-more staggering levels of social inequality and a plunge toward another world war.



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