

The Australian Unemployed Workers' Union (AUWU) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *Social Services and Other Legislation Amendment (Strengthening the Safety Net) Bill 2023* and register our dismay and disgust at the lack of heart, vision, and government responsibility this Bill represents.

We wish to congratulate the campaigners and activists that fought hard to secure an expansion of the parenting payment. However, we find the government's decision to only extend this change to single principal carers whose child is under 14 years, instead of the age 16, petty and parsimonious. AUWU calls on the government to amend the Bill by lifting the age to 16 and bringing the date the change takes effect forward so as to be immediate. Leaving carers and their children to languish for longer in extreme poverty on the Jobseeker Payment is nothing more than gratuitous cruelty.

AUWU reiterates our long held position that the government has a moral and economic responsibility to lift the rate of all welfare payments above the Henderson Poverty Line of \$88 a day. The proposed increase in this Bill of \$40 per fortnight, or \$2.85 per day, for working age and student payments represents nothing more than a cheap and nasty political measure designed to stifle calls for the significant increase that activists, advocates, peak bodies, the Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee and the government's own backbenchers have expressed.

It is unconscionable that the government would continue to deny the poverty crisis that is affecting so many and resulting in homelessness, malnutrition, physical and mental health problems, isolation, and preventable deaths. There has been much emphasis by this government on their claim of "responsible cost of living relief" but AUWU contends there is nothing responsible about the decision to only offer a token raise to working age and student payments in this Bill. Instead, the government must now claim responsibility for what can only be described as a continuation of a program of state sanctioned immiseration. The government's pre-election promise of "no one left behind" lays broken at the Minister's feet.

Once again, the government has pushed the date that its meagre increase takes effect out until the 20th of September 2023, when the automatic indexation of most welfare payments occurs, betraying its cynical approach to welfare policy. Presumably, this is an attempt to camouflage their Scrooge-like increase under the cover of indexation, believing that the media and the public do not possess the critical faculties to see through their cruelty and preference for lazy political solutions to real-world problems.

The changes to the rate of commonwealth rent assistance, incessantly referred to by the government as the "largest ever increase to commonwealth rent assistance", are so insignificant they barely warrant response. Amounting to less than \$25 per fortnight, they do not come close to offsetting the rental increases people receiving welfare payments have recently seen. They also do nothing for the over 70% of welfare recipients who do not receive commonwealth rent assistance due to the incredibly strict qualifying criteria attached to it. The government has shown it regards the housing crisis engulfing those in poverty as a purely political problem that can be solved with loose change and even looser talking points.

The announcement that the government is sitting on a \$19b surplus while millions of people suffer in poverty reveals a truly incredible detachment from reality. Building a hoard of unspent revenue off the back of a poverty crisis shows the only responsibility the government sees itself as having is to out-of-date economic theories and their own political approval ratings. The Australian Unemployed Workers' Union affirms our stance that an increase to base rates of all welfare payments to above the poverty line is the only responsible action the government can take to ensure the worst of our current poverty crisis is averted and its promise of "no one left behind" is honoured.

In addition to the above, we propose the Bill is amended to include the following:

- a poverty commission tasked with establishing a modern measure of poverty that reflects the real cost of living and wellbeing
- an independent body responsible for setting rates of welfare payments to ensure they cover these costs and are free from the political approach successive governments have taken to welfare policy
- changes to the income free area and taper rates of payments so that no person in work is forced to live below the rate of minimum wage
- an official government apology for the poverty inducing policies and decisions it has inflicted on the Australian people and the establishment of a program of compensation for those who have been affected

The Australian Unemployed Workers' Union has also attached it's prebudget submission for the committee's benefit.