



16 June 2021

Alan Raine
Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Raine,

This letter provides input on the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Streamlined Participation Requirements and Other Measures) Bill 2021. The Australian Unemployed Workers Union requests that the committee considers this letter in lieu of complete submissions as there was insufficient time to prepare a detailed response. The Australian Unemployed Workers Union is run by unpaid volunteers for the purpose of representing the rights of unemployed workers in Australia.

Overview

The Australian Unemployed Workers Union has grave concerns about the provision of the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Streamlined Requirements and Other Measures) Bill 2021. This bill is simply another attempt to push harsh and unyielding punishment on unemployed and underemployed Australians who have the temerity to be poor. This bill reveals the true intentions of the Government: to suck the life out of the poorest elements of the working class for the sake of a rotten neoliberal and conservative agenda which seeks to enrich the lackeys of the political class.

To be clear, the implementation of this bill will not result in unemployed and underemployed entering work faster. Research has already demonstrated that jobseekers subject to obligations take longer to find employment. Why then does the Government seek to extend and expand the mutual obligations system? Because the system brings in profits for the job agency lackeys and punishes underemployed and unemployed Australians for events outside of their control: two cornerstones of liberal policy. Underemployment and unemployment is not the fault of individuals within the social security system. Economics factors which occur on a macro level and are influenced by our political elite are the primary cause of unemployment in Australia. Pushing the blame onto unemployed workers tricks Australians into thinking that the Government is not to blame for our economic troubles.

The Australian Unemployed Workers Union rejects all forms of forced and coercive labour in the strongest possible terms and is prepared to fight against the expansion of such programs across any and all required fronts.

Lack of implementation of expert advice

The AUWU is concerned that this bill has not implemented any of the recommendations of the Employment Services Expert Panel. The Government has ignored the panel's recommendations, in particular the recommendation to end excessive compliance and penalties for people who are unemployed.

Codification of Abuse

The bill continues the policy of allowing private providers to issue rigid and unyielding penalties to jobseekers, including payment suspensions and cancellations, without review. Where abuses of power occur, and they do occur, there is no recourse available to jobseekers. Mistakes in this system are common, and abuse rife: more than 120,000 people who have had their payments suspended were ultimately found not to be at fault. There is widespread evidence from community organisations, experts and government panels that penalising jobseekers is not the solution. The Australian Unemployed Workers Union calls on the Government to end all contracts with payment service providers and return to a nationalised system which works in the interests of unemployed and underemployed Australians.



Inequity of Backdating payments

The proposed changes to payment backdating exist only as a financial penalty. By backdating payments to when a job plan is signed, jobseekers have questions, wish to adjust their plan or simply have issues accessing online services are forced to suffer financially. These proposed changes are a scam designed to steal from those trying to access the social security system.

Income support must always be backdated to the date of application, without exception. The parliament must take steps to ensure that backdating payments is an equitable process without financial penalty.

Exploitation of Workers Labour

The Government claims that coercive labour programs such as Work for the Dole and PaTH increase the “employability” of participants. This is in fact a bold-faced lie to exploit the labour of those in these programs for the benefit of organisations which have no intention of taking on staff at real, living wages. The Government must immediately end all forms of coercive and forced labour.

Recommendations

The Australian Unemployed Workers Union makes the following recommendations to the committee:

- 1: The committee must provide additional time for in-depth consultation that genuinely considers the needs and rights of underemployed and unemployed Australians. Attempting to rush through legislative amendments without genuine consultation will result in significant harm being done to vulnerable Australians.

More broadly, the Australian Unemployed Workers Union has consistently highlighted that meaningful change must occur in the social security system. The Australian unemployed workers union recommends:

- 1: Immediately raising all Centrelink benefits to the Henderson Poverty Line (\$517.00 per week)
- 2: Abolishing work for the dole and all other forced and coercive labour programs.
- 3: Ending discrimination against Centrelink recipients (including income management).
- 4: Removing punitive eligibility for Centrelink payments.
- 5: Abolishing the use of privately owned employment services.

The changes are preliminary, and a complete redesign of the social security system is necessary and said changes must be community-designed and -led, responding to local needs and not the interests of the neoliberal political class.

Noting the tight time frame on this Inquiry, we invite members of the Committee to contact the Australian Unemployed Workers Union if they have any questions on media@auwu.org.au.

Regards

Peter Littlejohn
National Operations Co-Coordinator