

ISSUE #2  
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P2 TURNBULL'S  
POVERTY TRAP  
- A SENATE  
SUBMISSION

P3 HOW ABS  
STATISTICS  
FOOL THE  
'EXPERTS'

P5 #CALLOUTCASH -  
YOUR RESPONSES TO  
THE EMPLOYMENT  
MINISTER'S SLANDER

# Fightback!

Voice of the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union



## TURNBULL'S POVERTY TRAP

Cover article by Kate Zizys

I AM ALARMED by the ongoing, multifaceted attacks by the current government on welfare recipients. Considering the climbing cost of housing, utilities and essential services - as well as a lack of stable, well paid jobs - the so-called 'reforms' to welfare are having a

visibly negative impact on a broadening section of society. People from professional and skilled backgrounds with perfectly sound employment capacities are contacting the AUWU expressing despair at their decline into destitution.

There's already a lack of adequate protection to prevent a decline in living standards. Rather than remedying this problem, this proposed Bill adds further barriers to health and well-being, financial stability, social participation, *Continued on page 2...*

The Australian Unemployed Workers' Union is a national volunteer organisation dedicated to protecting the rights and dignity of unemployed workers and pensioners. Membership is free & open to all!

AUWU

# Editorial

As a budget containing vicious attacks aimed at unemployed workers and pensioners enters the Senate, it's a crucial time for us to stand up and be counted. Mandatory drug testing for the unemployed, increased penalising powers for job agencies, increased mutual obligation requirements, the completely unjustified expansion of cashless welfare, and increased waiting periods for the dole are all in the pipeline.

With the ALP and a number of politicians on the cross bench failing to commit to voting one way or the other on a number of issues, it's up to us to let them know why they should oppose these punitive measures. The AUWU have released a guide on its website about how to send a submission to the Senate inquiry (regarding cashless welfare) as well as writing to politicians to urge these bills be blocked.

Lobbying politicians, however, is only a part of the struggle. Our main struggle is to build long-term power and involve more unemployed and pensioners in the fight for humane social security and employment systems. While we have seen our numbers grow significantly over the past three months, there is still much work to be done.

The government arrogantly thinks it can keep on bashing those on social security. The AUWU believes that you can only push people so far before they fight back. This has to begin right now. If you want to fight back, the first step is to join the AUWU (free and open to all) and unite with your fellow unemployed and pensioners. Before you ask 'what's the point?' remember this: there are millions of us. If we stick together, we gain the power to resist effectively. Visit our website to see where your local branch is or call your local state branch coordinator (see the Fightback Report on page 6) for more information on how to get involved.

If you have something to contribute to this newsletter, we would love to hear from you. Please contact us or visit our website for more information.

**P1 EDITORIAL**

**P2 TURNBULL'S POVERTY TRAP -  
KATE ZIZYS' SENATE SUBMISSION**

**P3 HOW ABS STATISTICS FOOL BOTH  
CONSERVATIVES & PROGRESSIVES**

**P4 IN THE NEWS**

**P5 CALL OUT CASH!**

**P6 FIGHTBACK REPORTS**

**P7 WHAT'S ON**

**P7 OUR DEMANDS**

*Fightback!* is a quarterly newsletter published by the Melbourne Branch of the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union (AUWU).

The AUWU has been in operation since 2014 and is dedicated to fighting for the rights and dignity of unemployed and pensioners. We are a volunteer group with no funding or affiliations.

We have over 40 branches across Australia - to find your local one please contact us or visit our website. Membership is free and open to everyone!

**Email:** [contact@unemployedworkersunion.com](mailto:contact@unemployedworkersunion.com)

**Phone:** (03) 8394 5266 (National Advocacy Hotline)

**Website:** [unemployedworkersunion.com](http://unemployedworkersunion.com)

## Donate!

As a volunteer organisation with no funding, the AUWU relies on your donations to survive.

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# Turnbull's poverty trap

## *Continued from front page:*

future planning, and stable living for many millions of Australians.

Generous social protections should be a priority of any government. This 'safety net' should also be simple to access - allowing for rent and utilities at market prices - as well as providing enough liquid capital to ensure a secure, stable life. Instead, the government's punitive segregation of welfare recipients further stigmatises and excludes them from mainstream society.

Increasingly, the state uses abusive tactics to keep welfare recipients in line. Marginalised individuals are denied adequate finances, and have their private lives heavily monitored, right down to the daily choices they make, what they do to negotiate employment, where - and on what - they spend their money. I believe treating millions of people with such hostility will lead to a hostile future generation.

The government uses a particularly manipulative term to justify its actions: 'mutual obligation'. The concept has no correlation with healthy social interactions, which are based on negotiation, encouragement, kindness, and compassion. 'Mutual obligation' (and the associated checks and balances) is as duplicitous a notion as 'a fair-go': neither have any basis in reality.

## ***The liquid assets waiting period***

In our gig-based labour market, increasing the liquid asset waiting period (from 13 weeks to 26) creates perverse incentives for welfare recipients. It will encourage them to decline work that will push their savings over the \$12,000 limit, and to stay on welfare, because while the payments may be woefully inadequate, at least they are stable.

Speaking from my own experience, I

question the value of taking any gig work for longer than 13 weeks, because of how difficult it is to get back onto unemployment benefits when the gig is over (not to mention the increased risk of a 'robo-debt').

For example, I have been offered a year-long contract for teaching work in the new year. My experience with casual and contract work is that it takes approximately 2.5 years to get another gig significant enough to get off welfare altogether. I'm weighing up whether it's worth taking the job, when I know I'm likely to face a long period of poverty at the close of the contract. Surviving periods of being 'job active' - which are longer than periods of moderately paid work - is financially difficult and requires one to shift from being in a position of agency to one of subordination. Moving back and forth between the two is a difficult mental adjustment.

There are also rising expenses and tough sacrifices associated with gig work. For example, the job I've been offered next year is hundreds of kilometers away, so I will need to relocate for work (for the third time in four years). I will be paying peak rent while also maintaining my primary residence. It's worth noting that there's no big money involved here, and I'll be paying HECS out of this as well. Because I have been trapped in underemployment and low paid employment for about 30 years, my HECS debt is enormous. And it looks like I will never be able to pay it off, since it's indexed and grows faster than I can service it.

Given the circumstances, there's no incentive to put aside any money at all. While the money is coming in, I am better off spending it on preemptive dental work, household maintenance or a new car. During my last gig I spent most of my wages on rent, travel, food, utilities, dental work and health care, because I couldn't be sure when I

would next be able to afford to look after myself properly.

Currently, I'm in the fifth year remission stage of breast cancer and chemo and radiation have destroyed my teeth. I also have chronic fatigue, mental depression and an onset of Fibromyalgia. If I'm to participate positively in society, these conditions must be addressed - a very costly endeavour.

While working a gig all expenses automatically increase due to the loss of concessions. This remains true during the waiting period for welfare once the gig is finished, which further diminishes any savings. If there is a major expense during this time (like a funeral, car accident, rent increase, or medical operation) there is no money in the bank to cover it once you're back on the dole. You go into debt and use your next gig to try to pay it off.

Basically, in this system, it is impossible to get ahead - more likely, you will end up further behind after every period of under- or unemployment. Currently, I have no significant superannuation (and even a pension is not guaranteed); my future looks quite bleak. For my next gig, I intend to buy a vehicle I can sleep in, because I suspect that in my older age I will need it to live in, like so many others.

The fact that millions in our wealthy country are trapped in a cycle of subsistence work and welfare dependence illustrates the meaner side of our culture - the side we hide behind weasel words, platitudes, national rhetoric and media spin.

***This article is an edited version of Kate Zizys' submission to the Senate, in connection with the Payment Integrity Legislation Amendment Bill 2017***

# How ABS unemployment figures fool conservatives and progressives alike

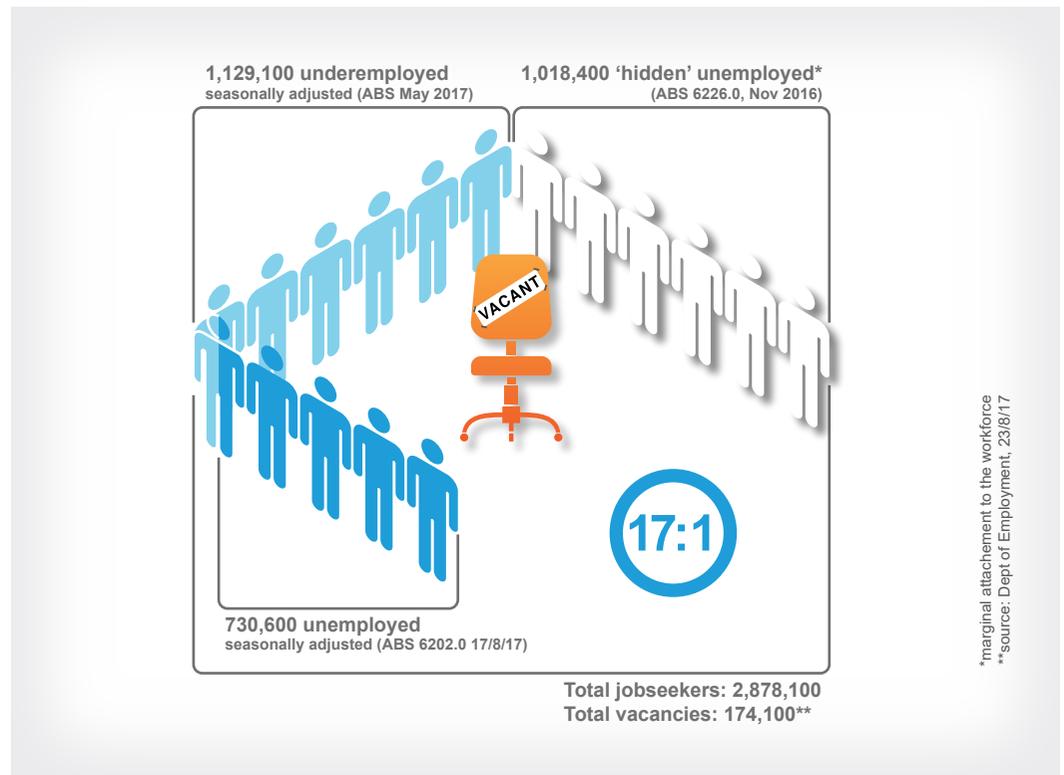
Jeremy Poxon

Like clockwork, each month, packs of journalists, business leaders and politicians deliver their take on what the ABS' official monthly unemployment rate tells us about the health of the labour market and job creation programs, largely from their (self-interested) vantage points.

Taking a cursory look at the latest ABS stats, you'd think our labour market was performing well, with the official unemployment rate dropping down from 5.9% at the start of the year to now around 5.6%. For most polities and pundits, these superficial dents are cause for celebratory back-patting about how well our economy is functioning and how many jobs it's creating. However, for many Australian jobseekers and marginally attached workers, like me, the official monthly unemployment figures feel farcically misleading.

The unemployment rate has failed to catch up to the severe structural changes in our labour market. It was developed in the 1960s, when full-time male breadwinners formed the bulk of the labour market, but over the last few decades, it has radically transformed and casualised: underemployment has ballooned, as has what the ABS calls 'hidden unemployment'.

Dr Victor Quirk, a labour market sociologist, and Research Associate at the Centre of Full Employment and Equity, concurs that the ABS' outdated definitions significantly affects their results: 'the more casualised and precarious a labour market is, the more this measure understates the level of unutilised willing labour in an economy – and Australia has a highly casualised labour market.'



**17 jobseekers for every job vacancy in July 2017**

Yet, proper understanding and recognition of these groups is missing from public debate and policy-making, because it is not explicitly captured by the official (and somewhat anachronistic) unemployment rate. As a general rule, the more you broaden the ABS measures - to include groups of people who just didn't exist in the 'full employment' era - the more disturbing a picture you get of the labour market in Australia.

Recently, The Australian's economics correspondent Adam Creighton came out swinging against the ABS, particularly its 'strict' definition of unemployment, which he says paints a dishonest figure of how many people are seeking work. For example, Creighton points out how ludicrous it is that a person who works for only one hour or more in the survey week (which can be unpaid voluntary work) is still classed as 'employed' by the official measure. It's rare and encouraging to see a

mainstream paper - a Murdoch rag, no less - presenting a broader and more accurate definition, which factors in the underemployed, and those who've given up in despair.

Less encouraging is the way it endorses rash Trumpesque rhetoric about how we need to completely bin the official statistics, which (it's claimed) deliberately deceive us.

Altogether, this analysis tends to portray the ABS as some nefarious organisation out to pull the wool over our eyes in service of the government who (under)funds it. While recognising the limitations of its figures, Dr Quirk leaves this conspiratorial thinking aside, and urges better funding for the reliable source, so that "... it can release its data products in a more timely fashion. For example, we wait over a year to find the level of people who narrowly miss out on being counted as unemployed, because either they stopped applying for jobs, or they have applied but they

**Continued on next page...**

### **Continued from previous page:**

can't start within a week.

There are now over a million people in this category - we should get this figure every month alongside the unemployment rate." (Currently, the ABS releases these figures only once per year, and a year late.)

It's true that, when used as the stand-alone measure, the ABS unemployment rate is misleading, but this is more a problem to do with our head-line grabbing, sound-bite delivering media and political institutions than a shady, sneaky statistics bureau. According to Dr. Quirk, the unemployment rate should be viewed in the context of the ABS' other labour force data, pointing out that the ABS also publishes a regular labour underutilisation rate that we rarely hear about.

Indeed, politicians can cherry-pick and spin unemployment figures to tell virtually any story they like. At the same time, the media are generally ill-informed and time-poor,

often reporting on what's put in front of them with little time and/or inclination to dig deeper into the figures.

Creighton and Greg Morgan's crusade against the ABS struck the ire of The Guardian's Greg Jericho, who flew into action to protect the sanctity of the official employment rate, believing that, while it's not perfect, it's all that protects us from right-wing populists making up their own figures. Sadly, Jericho counters right-wing hysteria with his own centre-left hysteria: that having an honest discussion of the limitations of the official figures may lead us all into a fact-less dystopia.

Creighton and Jericho have unwittingly highlighted the flawed ways in which both conservatives and progressives politicise unemployment data: one uses it to make an appeal to destructive right-wing populism, the other to re-enforce a do-nothing status quo complacency. Needless to say,

without accurately presented data on the nature and extent of the problem, meaningful calls for action and policy change are impossible.

Dr Quirk, who has worked as an unemployment counsellor for the last 20 years, believes that through these ideological tactics '... we are conditioned not to see that we have the means at our disposal to redress obvious social need.' He adds: 'every day we waste tens of millions of hours of potential work in this country, work that could be done to improve the living standards of all of us ... We have an abundance of human labour power, the most powerful renewable resource at our disposal, capable of enhancing the quality of millions of lives, yet we ignore it. It is not, however, the fault of the ABS that we are rarely reminded of this reality.'

***NB: This article has been edited by AUWU staff***

## **IN THE NEWS**

### **Cashless Welfare Expanded, Built on Dodgy Figures**

Last month, the government introduced legislation to expand the Indue cashless welfare card. The government wants to not only extend the use of the card at the current sites of Ceduna (SA) and East Kimberly (WA), but also to expand the card to two new regions - The Goldfields (WA) and one yet to be announced. To justify the expansion of this program, the Coalition recently released skewed data from its own study showing that the card reduces alcohol consumption, illegal drug use and gambling – data that the Australian National University criticised as unreliable and misleading. Despite the weakness of this data, it also shows that the card – which quarantines 80% of people's income – made almost half of the participant's lives worse.

The legislation – Cashless Debit Card Bill 2017 will most likely go to the

Senate. Labor and a number of cross bench senators including the Nick Xenophon Team have failed to oppose the bill. The AUWU encourages our members to contact their local Labor or cross bench MP to voice their opposition to this bill. More information can be found on our website.

### **Drug Test Sites Named Despite Legislation Yet to Pass**

Three drug testing trial sites have already been named - Canterbury-Bankstown in New South Wales, Logan in Queensland and Mandurah in Western Australia. The relevant legislation - known as the Welfare Reform Bill - has yet to pass the Senate. The AUWU encourages our members to contact their cross bench Senator to voice their opposition to this bill. More information can be found on our website.

### **Report Finds Job Agencies Abuse Refugees**

A joint investigation by the Refugee Council of Australia and the Fairfield Multicultural Interagency has found that job agencies treat refugees with hostility and stigma.

One immigrant from Syria was told they had come to Australia for 'easy money'. 'The caseworker when he interviews (sic) me stated that I just arrived in Australia to get easy money from the first interview... upset me a lot. He did not help me with my job plan, he just judged me,' the Syrian refugee was quoted in the report. Another was confronted by a staff member calling her 'dirty' and 'shabby'. 'I felt ashamed and was ... very angry with the provider but I could not do anything due to my dependence on Centrelink payment and my limited English proficiency," the 32-year-old woman was quoted.



**“ Australian taxpayers and indeed those looking for work would be offended by a ‘union’ whose sole purpose appears to be keeping members out of gainful employment and encouraging them to shirk their responsibilities.**

**We asked you to respond to Senator Cash’s accusations by completing a short survey about your experiences with job agencies, the Dept. of Employment, and the AUWU advocacy service. Here are some of your responses:**



“I’m offended by a federal government whose sole purpose appears to be keeping their constituents out of gainful employment by failing to create employment policies that result in the creation of full-time, on-going, well-paid, dignified work.”

- Rozie 29/7/17



“[The AUWU] gave me hope to fight on.”

- Anonymous 28/7/17



“They put me in touch with the CFMEU, which I joined. This enabled me to realise the extent to which I had been underpaid and exploited in the job that my job agency referred me to. The CFMEU is currently helping me pursue my previous employer for unpaid wages and entitlements.”

- Anonymous 31/7/17



“They are doing the job the government should be doing.”

- Anonymous 28/7/17



“It was very helpful. I am setting up a business while being unemployed. The job agency and Centrelink - rather than be helpful with my proactive approach - have made it difficult ... The [AUWU] made my rights clearer when communicating with these agencies. They really don’t know what to do with someone like me ... Being forced to apply for full-time work while I am working part-time [and] ... working on my business full-time is ludicrous.”

- Anonymous 31/7/17



“[Job agencies] are just doing it for the money not to really help. The AUWU is a power that makes people feel like they have a say ... I feel they [offer] true representation to people who are struggling because of corporations and their [political] influence ... I wish that the governments here would stop using the unemployed for their own political gains, and the employment providers would stop sponging off the tax payers’ pockets. There is no such thing as a dole bludgers - most people I’ve met want to work but there is not enough suitable jobs for Australians. Thank you to the AUWU for making me feel like a person and not a low life, giving me and everyone a sense of hope for the future.”

- Anonymous 28/7/17

**To have your say, please visit:  
[unemployedworkersunion.com/senator-cash/](http://unemployedworkersunion.com/senator-cash/)**

# FIGHTBACK REPORT



The AUWU has more than 6,500 members and 40 branches across the country. To keep members informed, each state branch coordinator has provided a brief summary of AUWU actions in their state. If you'd like support in building or starting a branch in your area (obtaining printing and a meeting room etc.) please contact your local state branch coordinator for support. If you would like to communicate with AUWU members in your area and organise actions, please join the AUWU's online activist network available through the volunteer page on the AUWU website.

## VICTORIA

In Victoria the AUWU has 1519 members (previously 1176) and 9 branches. Melbourne, Ballarat and Bendigo are among the branches that have regular meetings. Victorian branches have recently undertaken a number of actions and events, including running the Advocacy course in Melbourne. The Victorian State Branch Coordinator is Richard Foley. Please contact Richard on 0455 946 001, or write to:

[vicbranchcoordinator@unemployedworkersunion.com](mailto:vicbranchcoordinator@unemployedworkersunion.com)

## QUEENSLAND

In Queensland the AUWU has 864 members and 12 branches. Brisbane branch holds regular meetings. The branch has been actively opposing the Indue Cashless card and a number of rallies have been held outside Indue's head office in Brisbane. The state branch coordinator for Queensland is Robert Leech. Please contact Robert on 0404 172 428, or write to:

[qldbranchcoordinator@unemployedworkersunion.com](mailto:qldbranchcoordinator@unemployedworkersunion.com)

## WESTERN AUSTRALIA

In Western Australia, the AUWU has 292 Members and three branches which are consolidating. The Perth branch holds regular meetings. The AUWU recently announced the position of WA State Branch Coordinator was filled by Eleanor. Please contact Elenor on 0455 946 001, or write to:

[wabbranchcoordinator@unemployedworkersunion.com](mailto:wabbranchcoordinator@unemployedworkersunion.com)

## NSW and ACT

In NSW and ACT, the AUWU currently has 1076 members and 17 branches. The Sydney and Newcastle branches hold regular meetings. The Sydney branch is active with campaign activities, including its event protesting Hate Speech against the unemployed. The State Branch Coordinator is Chris Parish. Contact Chris on 0415 073 898, or write to:

[nswbranchcoordinator@unemployedworkersunion.com](mailto:nswbranchcoordinator@unemployedworkersunion.com)

## TASMANIA

In Tasmania, the AUWU has 166 members (previously 125) and three branches which are consolidating. The Tasmanian branch has been doing some extensive work meeting with local members and leafleting. The AUWU recently announced the position of Tasmanian State Branch Coordinator was filled by Russell. To contact Russel, please write to:

[tasbranchcoordinator@unemployedworkersunion.com](mailto:tasbranchcoordinator@unemployedworkersunion.com)

## SOUTH AUSTRALIA

In South Australia, the AUWU has 623 members (previously 448) and two branches and are consolidating. The AUWU is working closely with the Anti-Poverty Network in Adelaide who are doing great work fighting for the rights and dignity of unemployed and pensioners. Currently there is no state branch coordinator for South Australia. If you are interested in this position, please write to:

[nationalbranchcoordinator@unemployedworkersunion.com](mailto:nationalbranchcoordinator@unemployedworkersunion.com)

## NORTHERN TERRITORY

In Northern Territory, the AUWU has 26 members (previously 18) and are in the process of building a branch in Darwin. Currently there is no state branch coordinator for the NT. If you are interested in this position, please write to:

[nationalbranchcoordinator@unemployedworkersunion.com](mailto:nationalbranchcoordinator@unemployedworkersunion.com)

If you'd like support in building or starting a branch in your area (obtaining printing and a meeting room etc.) please contact your local state branch coordinator for support.

# OUR DEMANDS

- **Raise all Centrelink benefits to the Henderson Poverty Line (\$517/week)**
- **Abolish Work for the Dole**
- **Abolish income management and other discriminatory practices**
- **Remove eligibility requirements (means testing) for social security**
- **Reinstate the CES and abolish the privatised employment services industry**
- **Undertake extensive government-run job programs**  
(ie. Job Guarantee Program)
- **Secure employment for all workers**
- **Enforce the minimum wage and Award conditions in every workplace**
- **Reduce the working week to 35 hours**
- **Lower the retirement age to 60**

## Whats On

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| <b>September 13-15</b> | Melbourne 3 Day Advocacy Course - NUW offices, Melbourne  |
| <b>13 September</b>    | Sydney Branch Meeting 3pm-5pm – (ongoing meetings will be held every second Wednesday of the month), Marrickville Town Hall |
| <b>14 September</b>    | Brisbane Picket Against Indue Card – 3/601 Coronation Dr, Toowong   |
| <b>20 September</b>    | Brisbane Branch Meeting – Trades Labour Council, 16 Peel South Brisbane   |
| <b>20th September</b>  | Perth Branch - 11am to 1pm, 82 Beaufort St (ongoing meetings will be held 1st and 3rd Wednesday of each month)              |
| <b>Late September</b>  | Onward Online Advocacy Course will become available   |
| <b>27 September</b>    | Geelong Public Forum – Geelong Trades Hall  |
| <b>28 September</b>    | Frankston Public Forum, 12:30pm at the Frankston Library  |
| <b>13 October</b>      | Melbourne Branch Meeting – Trades Hall (ongoing meetings will be held every second Friday of the month)                     |

If you have any AUWU events you would like to advertise in *Fightback!* please email: [fightback@unemployedworkersunion.com](mailto:fightback@unemployedworkersunion.com)