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How the WorkChoices and Welfare to Work reforms are affecting people in one region of New South Wales: Preliminary findings

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Abstract: This paper reports preliminary findings from the first phase of a longitudinal qualitative study investigating the impacts of WorkChoices and Welfare to Work reform on the lived experiences of residents in regional New South Wales. Data collected in the Northern Rivers region has been analysed using a grounded theory approach. The findings suggest that the reforms have not only impacted materially on participants, but that they have generated a high degree of fear and confusion. In addition, both pieces of legislation have expanded the means by which this population is disciplined, leading to various negative effects for income support recipients, workers and their families.

Introduction

In 2005, WorkChoices became law and the most recent round of welfare reforms was also announced. At the time, this triggered heated debate about the probable effects of each piece of legislation in its own right. Few, however, clearly saw the nexus between them and in any case, this kind of discussion was necessarily hampered by a lack of empirical evidence as to the possible impacts of the reforms. Now, enough time has elapsed to be able to gather evidence for an initial examination of how Australians are experiencing these changes. This paper reports preliminary findings from the first phase of a longitudinal, qualitative study investigating the impacts of WorkChoices and Welfare to Work reform on the lived experiences of residents in regional New South Wales.

We have chosen to narrow the scope of our study to two regions of New South Wales, firstly, in order to make the task manageable. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, we believe a regional focus is a necessary addition to the studies already executed which tend to concentrate on urban settings for their data. Regional areas contain pockets of poverty and disadvantage which do not often come to public notice and are therefore largely invisible. Yet, their residents are the very people who, lacking any serious bargaining power, may well be adversely affected by the two sets of reforms. The regions we have chosen for our study complement each other, one being an area that has suffered consistently high rates of poverty and dependence upon income support, whilst the other traditionally contains many working-class residents and rates of unemployment higher than the state average (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006a, ABS 2006b, ABS 2006c).

We have argued elsewhere (Hartman & Darab 2007) that although each piece of legislation in its own right constitutes an assault upon the vulnerable, together they form an even more virulent policy suite. This is because a job seeker cannot choose to reject an AWA and expect to receive income support from the government. This may be of little consequence to those with skills in demand or resources to fall back upon; but it is of no comfort at all to the young, the unskilled and the poor, particularly in regional areas with high concentrations of
joblessness. As we pointed out, “it is now legally and theoretically possible to have, in time, a very large slice of the nation’s labour force working for $12.75 [since increased to $13.47] per hour on pain of no income at all” (Hartman & Darab, 2007, p. 11). And for those forced to rely upon income support, the newly expanded population of persons in receipt of Newstart can find themselves performing Work for the Dole, voluntary work or a range of other compulsory activities in return for even less income.

It is within this context that we have begun to explore how the changes are impacting on the lives of residents of the Northern Rivers and Hunter regions of New South Wales. We begin by reviewing the evaluations that have already been carried out before going on to explain our methodology and discussing our results. We found impacts fell into four broad categories; material or physical impacts, social and emotional impacts, disciplinary effects and work/care clash. In addition, we consider whether there is evidence of the operation of the legislative nexus as suggested above.

The State of Play

WorkChoices

According to the government (Australian Government 2005, p. 1) The Workplace Relations Amendment (WorkChoices) Act 2005 (Cwlth) is aimed at growing the economy by implementing ‘fair, practical and sensible changes to our workplaces’. Here we will summarise the key characteristics of WorkChoices which is estimated to directly affect around 85 per cent of Australian workers (see Hartman & Darab 2007 for a detailed discussion). Included among the changes are: the removal of unfair dismissal laws in businesses that employ 100 or less employees; unfair dismissal is also redundant in larger businesses if employers can provide a genuine operational reason such as financial, technological, structural or similar difficulties; the restriction of union rights; the scrapping of the no-disadvantage test; and a minimalist safety net. Australian workers are guaranteed only five standard entitlements: basic rate of pay at $13.47 per hour; hours of work (maximum 38 hours per week, plus reasonable additional hours; four weeks annual leave, two of which can be cashed out); personal leave (10 days sick leave and carer’s leave per annum); and unpaid parental leave (52 weeks) (Hartman & Darab 2007; Australian Government 2007a).

In contrast to the Australian Government’s (2005) claim that WorkChoices would provide a fairer, simpler system which would encourage co-operative relations between employees and employers, many employees have reported increasing disadvantage in the workplace. Job insecurity, more unfairness at work, employees working extended unpaid hours and unpredictable hours which clashed with caring responsibilities were key findings in small scale qualitative studies conducted in South Australia and New South Wales (Baird, Cooper & Oliver 2007; Elton & Pocock 2007). The increased risk of dismissal and matters of procedural unfairness in terms of how employers treated them and decided on work conditions were major concerns that 1367 Victorian workers reported to the Workplace Rights Information Line (WRIL) (Gahan 2006). In the ‘Australia@Work: The Benchmark Report’, it was found that of the 8,343 Australian workers surveyed: around a third reported they were unhappy with their hours of work; more than half claimed an increased workload; 40 percent of those in full-time jobs reported working unpaid hours; and only one third described themselves as ‘living comfortably’ (van Wanrooy, Oxenbridge, Buchanan & Jakubauskas 2007, viii).
The ‘Australia@Work’ report revealed that primarily workplace benefits accrued to high-skilled workers, while low-skilled workers faced additional hardship (van Wanrooy et al. 2007). Low-skilled workers were shown to be almost $100 a week worse off under Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) than their counterparts on collective agreements. In terms of workplace negotiations, unions were found to be successful in securing higher wage outcomes for members. However, at the individual level, there was a decided lack of negotiation in almost half (46%) the cases in which employees were covered by an AWA. Higher-skilled and higher-paid employers showed no movement onto AWAs. In contrast, the lower-skilled employees group with the least bargaining power comprised the bulk of the 1.7 per cent increase in AWAs (van Wanrooy et al. 2007).

In guaranteeing only the minimum standard, we can see that WorkChoices creates a climate in which the conditions arise for the exploitation of workers and there is substantial evidence that many employers are quick to take advantage and reduce wages and conditions (Gahan 2006; Peetz 2007a; Carney 2007; Baird, Cooper & Oliver 2007; Elton & Pocock 2007). To quote the ‘Australia@Work’ report, ‘it appears that AWAs are being used as a tool for reducing employees’ conditions to the statutory minima’ (van Wanrooy et al. 2007, vii). The ‘Lowering the standards’ report corroborates this decline in standards in relation to particular groups of workers in particular industries (Eveson, Buchanan, Bamberry, Frino & Oliver 2007, pp. iv-vii). It shows that between March and December 2006, only a minority (25-35%) of all collective agreements (339) lodged in retail and hospitality exceeded the statutory standard in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. Moreover, it confirms that all agreements negotiated by unions (10%) were located in this ‘above-standards’ group. The loss of protected award conditions was described as overwhelming and applied to annual leave loading (80%); Saturday penalty rates (76%); Sunday penalty rates (71%); overtime rates (68%); public holiday penalty rates (60%); laundry allowance (79%) and paid breaks (55%). Retail and hospitality workers’ loss of income was significant, ranging from 10 per cent to 30 per cent and those most affected were working part-time, casual, on weekends and non-standard hours. In contrast, benefits were modest and included two extra days of sick leave per annum in 71 per cent of agreements (Eveson et al. 2007, pp. iv-vii).

The government has reacted to public concern about the stripping of entitlements by introducing a ‘fairness’ clause which prevents workers earning less than $75,000 per annum from having protected award conditions taken away without receiving anything in return (Cookey 2007). Critics argue this is still problematic (Australian Council of Trade Unions 2007) and to date approximately 25,000 agreements have not passed the new test (Australian Government Workplace Authority 2007).

Welfare-to-Work
In explaining the welfare legislation, the government states, ‘the Employer Demand and Workplace Flexibility Strategy aims to increase workforce participation for priority groups’ which include ‘people with disabilities, parents, mature age job seekers and very long term unemployed’ (Australian Government 2007b online). In a previous paper we have outlined the government’s five chief components of reform which are briefly as follow: the extension of the mutual obligation principle to sole parents whose youngest child is six years of age and those with disabilities who apply after 1 July 2006; the creation of new categories of payment Newstart Primary and Newstart Incapacitated; the compliance regime which replaces the term ‘breaching’ with ‘suspension’ for a period up to an eight weeks; increased services in relation to Job Network, vocational education and training places, and child care places; and helping employers to consider hiring people with caring responsibilities and disabilities
(Hartman & Darab 2007).

From 1 July 2007, the welfare policy has been extended to sole parents and partnered parents located in the ‘grandfathered’ or preserved category. These parents are now required to undertake 15 hours paid work per week and register with a Job Network provider or undertake approved study from 1 July 2007 or when their youngest child turns seven, whichever happens last (Centrelink 2007a). In terms of their activity requirements, many aspects are left to administrative discretion and parents or partially incapacitated job seekers could be required to seek as many as ten jobs a fortnight, accept a ‘suitable’ job involving 90 minutes travel time each way and queue at Centrelink offices each fortnight to report income (ACOSS 2006).

These legislative changes have been condemned by churches, advocacy groups and peak bodies for incurring lower payments and more obligations on the most vulnerable groups and for creating differential payments for recipients located in the same social situation (Peatling 2006, Falzon 2006, ACOSS 2006). For example, those with a disability who were granted Disability Support Pension between 11 May 2005 and 30 June 2006 and are now assessed fit for work will drop $62.10 in income per fortnight (Centrelink 2007b). In the case of sole parents, the income of those deemed eligible for work who applied after 1 July 2006 is $92.80 less per fortnight than their counterparts who applied before 1 July 2006 and continue to be covered under Parenting Payment Single (Centrelink 2007b).

Some changes to welfare practices between July and September 2007 suggest that penalties have been stringently enforced and that protests may have forced some concessions for recipients. Among these are the introduction of an automatic payment pending review for people appealing an eight week no payment penalty; and a new policy of not imposing a participation penalty for a person aged over 55 years unless that person provides false information (National Welfare Rights 2007). Other changes include an increase in child care tax rebate of up to 30 per cent of child care costs, up to a maximum of $4000 and a rise from 30 to 42 days per year in the number of allowable absences from childcare (National Welfare Rights 2007).

In the 2007 budget, the government stated that a part of its welfare objectives is to help business in the regions overcome labour and skill shortages, meet the challenges associated with an ageing population and increase productivity via flexible work arrangements (Australian Government 2007b). However, we would dispute the government’s claim of a labour shortage in the regions as historically inaccurate. As the ABS (2001) explains, regional unemployment rates exceed city rates because of a combination of factors including differing economic structures, the effects of seasonal employment, and locating industries in particular areas.

Nexus of the Two Reforms
The intersection of WorkChoices and Welfare to Work legislation is argued to be significant in weakening the rights of social security clients (Carney 2007, p. 6). It is the site of ‘collateral damage’ which strips ‘thousands of the lowest income recipients’ of income (Peetz 2007b, p. 74) in what Falzon (2006, p. 1) describes as being ‘bound to wreak havoc on the lives of those who are subjected to them’. Each piece of legislation is a double-edged sword and, in combination, their strategic implementation reinforces and enhances the power to reshape the lives of working Australians and their families. Workchoices thrust creates a climate of normative minimum standards and equips employers with legal recourse to exploit
workers, while Welfare to Work parries by compelling the disabled, parents and long-term unemployed into this climate and then enforcing their workforce compliance with no income penalties for a duration of eight weeks. In an environment designed to disrupt collective organising, individualise workplace negotiations and tilt the capital/labour power relations in favour of business, the current state of play can be understood as an effective capitalist strategy of divide and rule in which employers are the undisputed rulers.

**Methodology**

*Qualitative Research*

The purpose of this research is to recount the stories of people in regional NSW and critically examine their everyday life experiences under the current work and welfare reforms. While we appreciate the merits of statistical data to explain alterations in wages, penalty rates, welfare payments and so forth, it was not our intention to seek precise measurement in target categories. Rather what we sought to do was to describe and interpret the impact of the reforms in terms of the meanings that people gave to them (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). Thus we chose a qualitative research approach (Grounded Theory) which permitted us to view ‘events, actions, norms, values, etc. from the perspective of people being studied’ (Bryman 1988, p. 61). In this way, we were able to explore more fully the impact of these reforms as they are felt by people in the workplace, and beyond in homes, families and regional communities.

We have chosen to define regions in terms of the areas designated by the ABS National Regional Profile series. Whilst regions are characterised by great diversity (Gleeson & Carmichael 2001) one commonality is the theme of ‘rural crisis’ (McManus & Pritchard 2000). This is validated by ABS (2007) findings that average incomes outside capital cities are 16 per cent lower than those in the capitals.

Although the number of participants reported upon in this paper is insufficient for a comprehensive assessment, we would argue that in the absence of a systematic nation-wide study, these findings offer some insights into the reforms’ impact. Most importantly, this study offers some understanding of the effect of changes on regional Australians who are under-represented in current studies.

**Method**

To reduce potential bias and to enhance credibility of this study, we used a triangulation of methods or multiple strategies of data collection (see Burgess 1984). Our methods included in-depth interviews, documentary research and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants in the Northern Rivers region between July and September 2007. The interviews were tape recorded and averaged 40 minutes duration. The data was de-identified to protect participants’ anonymity. Questions focused upon interviewees’ experience of work and/or welfare under the reforms and how they felt about their current situation. Documentary research involved historical studies and qualitative and quantitative studies which focused on the current work and welfare reforms. Participant observation included attending regional forums, seminars, and other community meetings which centred upon the topic of the reforms.

Data collected in the field was analysed by coding it into categories, making connections between them and theorising about the relationships between phenomena, until a ‘story’ emerged which was validated by the data (Glaser & Strauss 1967). At this preliminary stage, we report upon only the Northern Rivers sample. It was necessary to recruit participants who
had been affected by either or both pieces of legislation, because we are interested not only in how each reform affects regional Australians, but also how they interact with each other and how this plays out in lived experience.

Discussion

The results were not always clear cut. We found that the nexus can operate upon participants from either direction. Seven participants - nearly half of our sample of 15 - had been affected by the Welfare reforms. This figure is consistent with the large proportion (nearly 30 per cent) of people reliant on some form of income support in the Northern Rivers region (ABS 2006a). However, being affected by welfare reform means one is obliged to seek work in the post-WorkChoices environment. These participants are thus subject to a dual disciplinary regime (see Hartman & Darab 2007). A further two participants were affected by WorkChoices only, whilst another two cases were directly affected by both reforms. Their trajectory was the reverse of the seven mentioned above: they started out in the labour market, but were obliged to go to Centrelink. There is a grey area for the remaining participants. Two participants had not signed an AWA, but had conditions of employment that were unsatisfactory, whilst the final two were affected by a combination of welfare reform and unsatisfactory employment conditions.

Our investigations to date reveal that amongst our participants, it was not always the actual application of the legislation, but the climate it has generated, that led to harmful effects. In relation to WorkChoices, this is supported by recent research which showed that job insecurity, unfairness at work, long, unpredictable working hours and declining standards are fast becoming the norm for those with limited bargaining power (Gahan 2006; Evesson et al. 2007; Peetz 2007b; van Wanrooy et al. 2007). We now turn to a consideration of the actual impacts upon participants. These fell into four main categories: material effects; social and emotional effects; disciplinary effects; and work/care clash.

Material Effects
Participants affected by the WorkChoices climate suffered a significant reduction in their pay. This occurred mostly in the hospitality and retail industries, validating Evesson et al. (2007) study, which found that even in collectively negotiated agreements only a minority (25-35%) surpassed the statutory standard across three states. For example, in our sample Mel, a 30-year-old hospitality worker, had been earning around $500 weekly pre-WorkChoices, but now takes home between $330 and $350 a week. This has considerably affected his standard of living:

*MEL: *...I've really had to tighten the belt. The little extra things, like I like buying things for my nieces which I used to do all the time, I can't do that anymore. I get bills, it's sort of like I can't knock that bill on the head this week. I'll have to put a little bit aside and tap away at it...the one thing I have tightened up and what I now scrimp on is food shopping.

Mel now has to watch what he eats and pay off his bills incrementally. But more disturbing is the fact that his relationships are also affected. He cannot buy small gifts for his nieces and finds it hard to stay in touch with his family because of the cost:

*MEL: *All my family are in X (another location)...and to get to see them now I have to save up for the bus fare.
Dan had signed an AWA that delivered under $800 a fortnight after tax. When he became seriously ill, he quickly used up all his sick leave, then his annual leave and then resorted to Centrelink. The time delay in payment meant ‘a four week block of no pay’.

_DAN:_ It’s a long time in between payments and the two minute noodles are starting to get pretty low.

Dan, a young, single man, was lucky enough to be able to call upon a relative for financial help in this emergency, but still found it a struggle to feed himself. Further, instead of being placed on a sickness benefit for the duration of his illness, he was placed on Youth Allowance, and could theoretically have breached his mutual obligation. Whilst the time delay in payment is not a direct effect of the _WorkChoices_ climate, if Dan had been better remunerated or enjoyed better leave provisions, he may not have found himself in such dire circumstances.

While material hardship is tangible evidence of how these reforms are playing out, there are social and emotional effects that are not so discernable or well publicised. The following participants’ experiences suggest, however, that the emotional repercussions are equally problematic.

_Social and Emotional Effects_

Workers who were not on AWAs nevertheless had poor pay and conditions. In regional areas, this is not new. However, what is new is that these workers now feel either that they have diminished chances of redress in the _WorkChoices_ climate, or they are unclear about their rights; participants expressed not only confusion, but a degree of fear about losing their jobs as well, which is a wide-spread trend post-_WorkChoices_ (Gahan 2006, Baird, Cooper & Oliver 2007; Elton & Pocock 2007). For example Kate, a married clerical worker, did not know whether she had signed an AWA or some other kind of contract, but she felt some pressure to sign:

_Kate:_ You know, sometimes you have got to work to live and when you have children that is foremost. When you are signing it, there is something in the back of your head going, this is so unfair, but you have to sign it.

In Kate’s case, it was the approximately 10 hours of unpaid overtime per week she felt was unfair: though the company paid a yearly bonus and company shares, Kate felt she had little bargaining power. As a lower skilled worker, Kate’s lack of voice in the workplace and the resultant drop in standards is characteristic of the broader situation for this group of employees under _WorkChoices_ (van Wanrooy et al. 2007). Because of her child care responsibilities, she felt she had to make sure she was “doing 150 per cent to keep that job and keep that money coming in”.

Lucy, a single woman in her late twenties, was offered an AWA for a service position, which offered permanent part-time work instead of a casual position, which attracts higher rates of pay. However, technically, it was not an AWA because of various omissions in the contract, where details had not been inserted.

_Lucy:_ And you know I am a sucker because at the moment, I only just want a job for a quick fix, short-term income, so it is not worth my while stuffing around trying to get new
job. So for the last two months without a contract, so I have got nothing to say I am going to be paid leave or anything like that. It’s so dodgy.

Matt, a single man in his twenties, had a job in retail which required him to work 10- to 13-hour shifts without a break.

*And I would get sick all the time from working like that. There was no extra penalty rates. There was no lunch breaks. There was no smoko breaks. There was nothing, you just had to work from start to finish.*

When the company lost some of their staff, he was called upon to work more and more:

...*after they sort of lost a couple of other staff and they needed me to do it and if I didn’t, they would threaten me that they would find someone else who would do it. Always threatened and made to feel like I was just nothing really.*

He left after being being verbally abused and blamed for mistakes which he had not made. He went to Centrelink but he spent the next six weeks without money:

*I lost 5 kilos in that time. Not eating properly, not sleeping properly because of just how I felt.*

Matt subsequently went on the Work for the Dole programme which he found demotivating, as well as having reduced him to poverty:

*I don’t have the money even to go and have a beer with a friend. It’s just rent, food, cigarettes – gone – oh, and petrol. And I am having some troubles with my car but I can’t afford the parts so it is just going to get worse and worse. So what are you supposed to do. Makes you wonder why you keep struggling.*

The social and emotional repercussion of the reforms was particularly severe for Matt. He could not afford a social life – or very much else for that matter. He had a diminished sense of self-worth, few foreseeable job opportunities and a disciplinary welfare regime which regularly reinforced his low social status. Like many other Australians (van Wanrooy et al. 2007), Kate and Lucy were daunted by the confusion surrounding AWAs, the uncertainty associated with their job entitlements and the sense of unfairness they felt in terms of how they were treated as workers.

**Disciplinary Power**

We hasten to point out that not all the employers our participants encountered were exploitative. Rhonda and Louise, parents affected by the welfare reforms by virtue of their children reaching the age of seven and five years, respectively, specifically declared their employers to be fair and reasonable. Shaun, a tradesman employed part-time whilst he studied, pointed out that small business, which plays an important role in the economic activity of regions like the Northern Rivers, was constrained by a range of legislative requirements, like compliance with the GST. He articulated a recognition that, in view of these constraints, keeping employment costs contained was imperative for employer survival in a region where the median income is approximately $10,000 a year lower than the national average (ABS 2006a). However, small business owners can be also be subjected to the disciplinary power of the reforms.
Neville and his wife, both in their 40s with four children, had bought into a small retail business as a way of creating employment for themselves. They got into financial difficulties and thus came to the attention of Centrelink:

_Neville:_ We had a few problems with our business last year...and we ran at a loss. So then Centrelink started getting into us about the parenting payments because we have got four kids. So they called my wife in and said that you know, your business isn't making any money, you've got to go out and get a job. And she said, well you know, it was only one off, we didn't make any money because of the problems. So they said it doesn't matter, you have either got to be employed by your business for a minimum of 15 hours or you've got to go and register with B [a Job Network agency] and all this type of stuff. So basically what has happened, it has forced my wife out to work and now we are both exhausted...it's like a big stick to belt us around the head with.

Neville's problems were in part due to a range of other laws, taxes and levies emanating from other tiers of government, but they found the Centrelink experience one of the most difficult. As Neville explains, 'it's demeaning how they have treated us since these changes'; 'they treat you like a kid'.

_Neville:_ ...she [his wife] is casual so you never know where you are at. And she has to go to Centrelink every fortnight and report if she is looking for work and they are making us feel like we are on the dole. But it's not the dole, it's just parenting payment. People think it just affects single mothers. It doesn't. If your kids are over the age of seven, it affects you. Oh, they really gave us a hard time and if you question them or say anything, they just say, well, we'll cut you off. That's all they say.

These disciplinary effects were described by one participant as "jumping through hoops", which refers to the range of activities and compliance exercises demanded by Centrelink and the threat of loss of payments. All participants who had dealings with Centrelink expressed similar sentiments.

**Work/Care Clash**

It is ironic that in attempting to assist families, the new welfare reforms are having deleterious effects on families. We saw above that Mel found it hard to stay in touch with his relatives. Neville was quite passionate about this:

_Other places I've noticed where obviously parenting payment have forced these women into sales assistant jobs. And who suffers, the children suffer. Our children are suffering because of what is happening...It's affected the family where before we would all sit down for tea but when she does those shifts we just can't do it. We tried to say okay we will wait but about 7.30 the kids are starving._

Kate, introduced above, who had to work around 10 hours of unpaid overtime per week, could not afford after school care for one of her children, so when she was unable to find a friend to baby-sit, the child came to her workplace in the afternoons.

_Kate:_ She is a very good kid. But you know, I would love to see her in after school care. You know, in a way I feel sad sometimes when I sit there and I am just doing my stuff and she is just sitting there.
Despite the government increasing the child care tax rebate (National Welfare Rights 2007), it appears insufficient to meet the needs of low-paid workers like Kate who have more than one child. Kate could not rely on her partner to provide after-school care because he worked business hours in a full-time job and had a boss who was unsympathetic to family needs. In her partner’s workplace, Kate said, ‘it is with fear that you are requesting some time to be with your children because they are sick’.

The work/family life imbalance is exemplified in both Neville’s and Kate’s case but it is a situation now common to many Australian working families, a population that is much increased under the work and welfare legislation (Baird, Cooper & Oliver 2007; Elton & Pocock 2007; Peetz 2007b). In the current climate, we suggest that, like Neville, many more people will lament the loss of quality family time, because of increased work responsibilities, the precarious nature of work, non-standard hours, and feelings of complete exhaustion.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the strategic deployment of WorkChoices and Welfare to Work legislation as a two pronged attack is effective in creating a climate in which minimum standards are the norm, employers are legally entitled to strip workers of their historic workforce entitlements and employees face the prospect of no income whatsoever for eight weeks if they refuse to accept the statutory minima. The impact of the reforms is harsh in material terms involving lower wages, reduced work conditions and entitlements that directly and negatively affect workers and their families. In addition, the precarious nature of work and the non-standard hours are shown to be disruptive to family life. But this material hardship is only part of the story. We also saw how people are adversely affected socially and emotionally by these reforms. Workers reported stress, uncertainty, depression, lowered self-esteem, a sense of hopelessness and exhaustion which have repercussions beyond the workplace and upon partners and children.

The disciplinary power of these reforms was evident to people in this study who talked about it in such terms as ‘jumping through hoops’, being hit over the head with a big stick and being treated ‘as if you are a kid’. There is little doubt that a compliant workforce and welfare population are major aims of the legislative policy suite. However, it is possible that the compliancy regime may have unintended consequences which are detrimental to the social fabric of Australian life. Our research suggests that in our sample, there are social, emotional and material impacts that tend toward the conclusion that vulnerable Australians in regional communities can look forward to a future of diminished prospects and quality of life, in spite of a booming economy.

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