

## “You belong to us”: The experience of conditional welfare and its brief suspension

I entered the Centrelink system in 2018, naive and hopeful with no idea of what to expect.

I was granted Youth Allowance payments and was referred to a youth program at a job agency. At first, I was assured that my employment consultant would help me find a job! Every fortnight I would visit the office and be given a laptop and get instructed to browse Indeed and Seek, which I had been doing in my own time. After the sessions were over, I would go home, feeling I hadn't accomplished anything. This went on for many months. I was eventually relieved to land a job (albeit a casual one with fluctuating hours) and my agent told me I had to send her my payslips every week, which I did without questioning. I later found out it was so she could get paid for having found me the job. I liked my agent and felt she had my interests at heart. She told me once that previously she worked for a disability services provider, but she would go home from that job feeling guilty for having to force people who were clearly not fit to work into activities and obligations.

When the time came for me to switch to the adult Jobactive services my agent warned me, “You'd better comply with all their requests because they are ruthless about cutting payments.” Rattled by this warning I always tried my best to juggle my increasing work hours with hurried job searches to upload to MyGov. Around this time, I had connected with the Australian Unemployed Workers Union on social media and learnt more about my rights as a Jobseeker. I was impressed by the Mutual Obligations strike they had organised and feeling quite empowered to negotiate terms with my agency when I felt they weren't being flexible enough regarding my circumstances.

So, for many months the agency told me it was acceptable to hold phone appointments instead of in person visits, due to not only my work schedule but the fact I was not fully licenced to drive, didn't own a car and lived in an area inaccessible by public transport. I was grateful for that consideration but having to call up the agency ahead of my shifts to let them know I will be at work and unable to answer their calls later in the day was very stressful. Sometimes I thought to myself it would be better to skip a shift than face the possibility of the agency marking me “non-compliant” if I were to miss a call.

*Elisha Portelli writes: I live in Melbourne's outer west and I acknowledge the Wurundjeri and Bunurong people as the Traditional Owners of this land. I enjoy bird watching and nature photography in my spare time and I have a pet pigeon whom I adore. I'm passionate about the anti-poverty movement and related social justice causes and I am keenly following the work of the AUWU and The Antipoverty Centre.*

One day out of the blue my agency sent me a letter that I had to come into an in-person appointment again. I tried to explain my difficult circumstances, but they said this was non-negotiable. When I was there, an agent updated some details and seemed sympathetic when I explained my circumstance. He assured me he put it as a note in my file that they will only organise phone appointments from now on. Shortly thereafter I had a scheduled call, but they didn't ring. The day after this I received a message that my Jobseeker payments will be suspended for non-compliance. I was immensely stressed as at this time I was getting very few shifts from work. I called the agency to clear things up, but it ended up being one of the most horrible phone calls in my life. The agent who answered chuckled when I said I'm not lying. According to him they did in fact call me (there were no missed calls in my phone) and that my previous consultant did not add anything to the file. I explained my current situation, but he said I must attend an in-person appointment to clear this issue up and likely from here-on. I got very distressed and said I can't. The agent replied, "you don't have a choice, you belong to us."

“

**I got very distressed and said I can't. The agent replied, "you don't have a choice, you belong to us."**

”



“

**... in the absence of their ever-present shadow I felt a sense of relief I hadn't felt in years**

”

Feeling degraded by this experience I called The National Customer Service Line (the government body that handles complaints about employment services providers) to file a formal complaint and ask to be transferred to a new agency. They told me I would have to stay with my current agency until the outcome of the complaint, so I decided to let the complaint go and cut my losses.

I called up all the agencies in the area and queried if they were able to accommodate phone appointments only. There was only one which was willing, so I transferred to them. With one hassle off my back, I would have to return to continue with my Jobseeker activities of sitting down to sift through the job websites in a frenzy for positions to apply for that didn't require lengthy cover letters, videos, or quizzes as part of the application process. In this time, I didn't have a particular consultant assigned to me, it would be someone new every week, even calling from interstate sometimes!

I felt full of despair as I waded the waters of bureaucracy. Did the agencies think I liked being on casual and part time contracts? I wasn't earning enough to disqualify me from Jobseeker payments but I desperately longed to be out of the system. I felt being required to apply for quotas took time away from me carefully searching for and crafting cover letters for positions I was more suitable for.

During the COVID 19 lockdowns there was a suspension of Mutual Obligations and in the absence of their ever-present shadow I felt a sense of relief I hadn't felt in years. I felt more productive and worked meaningfully towards my employment goals. Without an enforced time limit and set number of searches to complete I actually felt able to compare positions on the basis of what skills they required, areas they were located in and put effort into these applications rather than wasting both my time and that of unsuitable employers. Despite the Mutual Obligation suspension my agency eventually started scheduling appointments again and notifying me via text, voicemail, email, and physical letters on a near daily basis and it made me feel very anxious and harassed. The state government had given me a reprieve, but the agency seemed desperate to contact me. In an email they wanted to know if I had started a new job. I had not. I called the National Customer Service line again and the person on the line said, "while you technically don't have to interact with them at this time, they are allowed to schedule calls with you, and it'll be better off for you if you comply."

The premise of the Mutual Obligations includes the promise the agency will assist you in obtaining employment by subsidising the costs of licences or uniforms oftentimes unaffordable to people on Jobseeker payments. I recently ended up finding new employment outside the Mutual Obligation job application system, through a friend who had referred me to an employer. My agent claimed they would cover part of the costs of my urgently needed uniforms and never followed through. Shortly before this they also ignored my requests for assistance with a Working with Children check I needed. I was hundreds of dollars out of pocket and feeling abandoned by the people who claimed they were here to help me.

I feel I would not have been able to get through this all without friends, family and unemployment activists by my side. The Mutual Obligation system has made me feel like a criminal for needing help in today's Australia. The media demonises Jobseekers as "dole bludgers" and the two major political parties ignore our existence as much as they can. Where is the understanding of socio-economic factors such as the prevalence of casualised jobs? Many Jobseekers are under-employed like I was.

The fear of forgetting to submit my job searches and upload them in time and of missing appointments heightened my anxiety and sense of hopelessness. The whole system felt like it wasn't intended to assist me find gainful employment but rather police me, deter me from receiving payments and make profits for private companies.

What I feel is often not considered by people, and even job agencies themselves, is how many people on Jobseeker payments are not unemployed but rather under-employed such as I was. The under-employment issue is a very real one in this country, with many companies offering only casual contracts with no set or guaranteed ongoing hours. Not all these workers even qualify for Jobseeker payments due to strict and unreasonable means tests and parental/partner income tests but those that are fortunate to be approved then must co-operate with the onerous requirements to continue receiving payments.

I would like to see an Australia where our famed values of egalitarianism and "A Fair Go" were apparent in our welfare system. We should be giving people a hand up rather than kicking them when they're down, even more so in times of a worldwide pandemic that has disrupted many industries. We are being forced to jump through endless hoops for nothing other than payments far below the poverty line. This system is killing people.