

Senate Inquiry into ParentsNext, including its trial and subsequent broader rollout

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Who are we

The Australian Unemployed Workers Union (AUWU) is the only national, volunteer organisation dedicated to advocating for and protecting the rights of unemployed, underemployed, un-waged workers', and all recipients of Social Security payments. The AUWU currently has over 14,000 members across every state, and has no political affiliations. The AUWU is run entirely by volunteers and is funded by donations.

The AUWU has extensive experience assisting – not only unemployed workers within the *jobactive* system – but all of the various recipients of Social Security System. Since November 2015, the AUWU has been running its national advocacy service providing free advice to all recipients of social security payments, informing them of their rights both at Centrelink and at their Provider. These services include:

- A free 5-day per week helpline, providing free on-the-spot advice to social security recipients about their rights at their Provider and at Centrelink.
- Email Advocacy Service.
- In-person Advocacy support with our AUWU trained advocates.
- A regularly update Unemployed Workers' Rights Guide booklet, available for free in hardcopy and online.

In December 2018, the AUWU launched a campaign to facilitate workshops across Australia to assist single parents - affected by ParentsNext - to write a submission. Since then, the AUWU has been providing single parents rights and advocacy advice via its 1800-hotline and in-person advocacy support at their ParentsNext Provider.

Summary

'Being a single parent is stressful enough without the added stress of ParentsNext. It is not helping, it is making things worse!' - ParentsNext Participant¹

Access to the Single Parenting Payment should be a *right* under social security, free of compulsory activities and mutual obligations (as stated in the Human Rights (Parliamentary Scrutiny) Act 2011)². Single mothers are already *very vulnerable socioeconomically*³, and to insinuate that women must start “thinking of work” while raising infants is insulting, sexist,

¹ Name withheld. Please note, that for the interests of protecting the identities of ParentsNext Participants that have contacted the AUWU, throughout this submission participants names (and any sensitive information) has been withheld.

² All citizens have a right to access social society and social insurance, as stated in the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* done at New York on 16 December 1966; ratified by the Australian Government in 1980. See also: 'Human rights implications of the ParentsNext program'. Marque Lawyers (October, 2018). § 2.3.

³ See: 'Poverty in Australia', Australian Council of Social Services (2018).

and is an attack of mothers' already struggling with the low rate of Centrelink payments⁴. **Raising young children is one of the most physically and emotionally demanding times in a woman's life.** *Let alone the fact that the threat of payments being cut puts children at risk too.*

1. Implicit in the reasoning behind ParentsNext is the *sexist and backwards idea that raising children is not work*. The reasoning for this program is based on the faulty assumption that single parents are not thinking of their future, must be threatened with payment suspension to be productive, and cannot raise their children properly without instruction.
2. The entire referral process of ParentsNext is a distressing, confusing, and intimidating process. A common thread among participants that have approached the AUWU, is the "abruptness" of the entire process, and the lack of consideration for single parents' time. Valid exemptions for serious issues, e.g. domestic violence, are *not applied in practice* and *exiting* the system is in practice impossible.
3. The Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF) is not an appropriate application for recipients of the single parenting payment. The threat of suspension of payments and being cut off abruptly, causes *severe financial stress* for parents and their children, increasing the conditions for further levels of poverty such as food insecurity and threat of homelessness.
4. The 'eligibility' criteria for determining who gets put onto ParentsNext is arbitrary and discriminatory against those who are from low socio-economic background. The assumption that these parents' pasts are the *reason* they are on the single parent payment is an incredibly flawed reasoning model.
5. Capability assessments should not be performed by ParentsNext providers; the required training and expertise needed to decide capability should not rest with unaccountable private organisations, and these assessments should rest with the Department of Human Services.
6. The inappropriate interaction of ParentsNext providers with community and health organisations is gravely concerning. Privacy of participants is being breached, and the misuse of community spaces - like libraries - for compliance activities *should not* be occurring. Multiple reports of this happening demonstrates that providers *are not* respecting legislation and over-reaching their authority.
7. Private ParentsNext providers are not social workers or violence counsellors; they are not equipped to deal with the incredibly complex issues surrounding family

⁴ Previous studies have shown that Government recent changes in the social security payments for single parents have only lead to greater hardship and precarity for single parents. See: Mckenzie, Hayley & McHugh, Clare & McKay, Fiona. (2016). Life on newstart allowance: a new reality for low-income single mothers. *Journal of Family Studies*. Pp. 1-16. Summerfield, Tracey & Young, Lisa & Harman, Jade & Flatau, Paul. (2010). Child support and Welfare to Work reforms the economic consequences for single-parent families. *Family matters* (Melbourne, Vic.). 84. Pp. 68-78.

violence. ParentsNext providers are not appropriately placed or trained to engage with women fleeing violence, and compliance activities can create more danger for participants and their families.

8. The AUWU does not believe that ParentsNext is an appropriate program of support for single parents and their young children. We recommend that if any pre-employment program is offered to single parents and their children, the nature of that program should be completely *voluntary* and *without risk of payment penalties*; and funds should be made readily available to the participants themselves.
9. The oversight for the ParentsNext program does not take into consideration the intimidation and vulnerability of single parents. Many are frightened of repercussions of officially complaining to the same department that organises the providers. An independent body, separate from the Department of Jobs and Small Business, should monitor ParentsNext providers and ensure they are respecting the rights of participants. If providers are not, their tenders should be dropped and severe sanctions should be enforced. Participants should be actively informed of their right to lodge complaints and appeal decisions, and also of their right to refuse unsuitable activities.

AUWU Responses to Terms of Reference

1. The Aims of ParentsNext

The “proclaimed” aims of ParentsNext are twofold:

1. To provide early intervention assistance to prepare parents for work, with the aim to increase single parents with young children(s) participation in the workforce;
2. To reduce the risk of long-term welfare dependency by early intervention.

The AUWU expresses concern that these aims contain implicit ideological and value assumptions:

- That parenting is not considered “work” *because it is unwaged labour*.
- That single parents’ receiving sole parenting payment *are not already doing what is best for themselves and their children*.
- That, without early intervention, single parents are on the path to “long-term welfare dependency”.
- The pernicious ideology that the idea of “long-term welfare dependency” is a personal moral failing, rather than a combination of social and economic factors.
- That assumption that single parents are *not already* considering their relationship with paid employment for the future.
- That the aims of ParentsNext *implicitly* buys into the dubious Fairfax media myth of the “single mother dole bludger”: that single parents accessing social security are “gaming” the system to fund their lifestyle choice.

- That single parents, who choose to do *daily* unpaid work raising their children because *they want to raise their children*, have an obligation to return to the workforce.
- The “economic” ideological concept of the “disutility of labour”: that a person needs a threat of punishment to be productive.

Implicit in the reasoning behind ParentsNext is the *sexist and backwards idea that raising children is not work*. The Australian Institute of Family Studies found (using 14 years of HILDA data) that:

‘New mothers go from spending a weekly average of 2 hours caring for others to a whopping 51 hours⁵’

That is a total of 17 hours more than full-time work, and yet one of the most important social labours a person can do for their society – raising the next generation – is not considered work, *because it is not waged and traditionally considered ‘women’s work’*.

Additionally, *Good Shepherd* points out that

‘There is no evidence to suggest that sending a parent back to work or engaging them in work training or preparation when their youngest is under the age of 5 will improve their ability to enter paid employment when they are ready to do so’⁶.

Recommendation:

That the unpaid work of child rearing not be dismissed in government policy and the right of every parent to make decisions for their family be respected. ParentsNext is built on faulty assumptions and stereotypes; these should not underpin social security policy and create poverty for parents or children. This program is not evidence based and should be scrapped.

2. Exemptions & Referrals

ParentsNext provider employees are not public servants or social workers. The AUWU strongly recommends that any capability interview should be carried out by a qualified person, and furthermore, by an independent entity (whose KPI’s are not tied to the outcomes of the ParentsNext program). This has been a significant point for people contacting the AUWU, as they have felt pressured to recount traumatic episodes and extremely personal details of them (and their children) to their provider.

One participant we advocated for, told us of their experience in the “bureaucratic mess” in trying (and failing) to not be referred to ParentsNext. During their referral call, they tried to

⁵ <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/mothers-still-do-lions-share-housework> [my emphasis]

⁶ <https://www.goodshep.org.au/media/1929/g sanz-submission-response-to-parents-next-discussion-paper-final.pdf>

explain to the Department that they were planning to return to work (through part-time study) and that they had accessed the single parenting payment (and left work) in order to escape their abuser.

'I had to recount the whole emotional trauma of my experience as a DV [domestic violence] survivor and my ongoing battle with PTSD...I could tell they were totally unqualified to deal with this sort of thing, as they didn't know what to say to me over the phone, but said I'd likely qualify for an exemption but they would need "to check with someone" and get back to me...I received a call later that day from the same person who told me they were "very sorry" but I "did meet the criteria for ParentsNext". How can a DV survivor...and someone still fearing for their and their children's life, not qualify for an exemption?' - ParentsNext Participant.

Later this same participant, during their JSCI assessment, tried to explain the above barriers they had to work, and requested they be considered for an exemption. They were told by the provider that since that experience "occurred in the past" there is no reason why they should qualify for an exemption for it now.

This entire referral process is a distressing, confusing, and intimidating process. A common thread among participants that have approached the AUWU, is the "abruptness" of the entire process, and the lack of consideration for single parents' time.

"I was forced into the program without warning. I am a single parent, who was diagnosed with PTSD. I go to therapy and we had a plan to get me back into study in my own time, taking into account my mental health and my children. But I feel as though ParentsNext forced my hand, making me feel as though I had no choice but to start ASAP or lose my payments and become homeless. They also don't seem to care about how my mental health and how it can randomly spike, I already dropped out of study once because of mental health, I missed a whole semester and couldn't start again until two years later because of my parent commitments and focusing on my mental health. I fear that if I have to take a gap again, we will become homeless.

Being a single parent is stressful enough without the added stress of ParentsNext. It is not helping, it is making things worse!" - ParentsNext Participant

The AUWU expresses deep concern regarding the lack of discretion being used in referrals to the ParentsNext program. We have heard from participants that they are being

incorrectly referred to the program and then are finding themselves *unable* to exit the program.

We spoke to one Parent's Next client who was clearly entitled to an exemption from the program under the "large family" clause. This client came to us distraught; all her children had special needs and one required upcoming weekly specialist appointments, which she informed the provider about as her capacity for activities would be severely reduced. She signed her participation plan as required. However, a few days later she received a letter from her provider, informing her that her "activities had changed" without her knowledge or consent. Completely overwhelmed and frightened of losing her payments as these "required activities" were impossible for her to fulfil, she asked for advice. It was clear how powerless this participant felt to complain. She was terrified of being breached and the repercussions of filing a formal complaint, even though her rights had been seriously breached by a change to her plan she had not authorised.

This Participant's story is not alone, the AUWU has received many participants stories - via email and our hotline - referring to these issues: (a) *inappropriate and unclear grounds for referral* and (b) *the lack of initiative of Providers to grant exemptions and the virtual impossibility of achieving an exit from the program (once referred)*.

Recommendation:

The refusal of ParentsNext providers and also the Department of Human Services to apply valid exemptions and exits is disturbing to the AUWU. A bureaucratic wasteland awaits those who try to exit the system. This is unacceptable and if per our recommendations the program is not scrapped, then exits and exemptions should be easy to access and timely.

3. The Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF)

The AUWU has also received anonymous tip-offs into the experiences of ParentsNext provider workers. One ParentsNext provider worker told us the immense psychological and emotional stress the TCF had placed on her. She felt like a "parole officer" (her words) having to spend most of her time on compliance activities, which parallels the experiences of front-line staff in *jobactive*⁷, and she expressed great reluctance to issue suspension notices that she knew would cause enormous stress to her clients and their children. Additionally, she spoke of the fact that the KPI's imposed on her by the provider, had unrealistic targets and that the information/training regarding exemptions was inadequate. She admitted that provider workers were pressured to "read-between-the-lines" and to use their discretionary powers of exemption extremely sparingly, in favour of keeping participants 'on the books' and in the program.

⁷ 'From Entitlement to Experiment: *The new governance of welfare to work.*' Australian Report back to Industry Partners. J. Lewis, et. al. University of Melbourne. (2016) pp. 18

We were contacted by another Parents Next worker who felt compelled to speak to us regarding the suspension of parent's payments. She confided in us that performing these breaches left her feeling guilty and conflicted, and wherever possible, she would use her discretion to avoid doing so. Her workplace noticed her reluctance to breach clients, and within a few days a new security camera was installed above her desk. She interpreted this as a clear message from her employer to stop being lenient with clients and to not hesitate suspending parenting payments.

Recommendation:

The AUWU continues to express its ongoing concerns regarding the TCF, and recommends that the TCF be abolished, especially regarding the psychological, financial, and emotional distress payment suspensions put on single parents (and their children).

If a parent is cut off from their payment, their child suffers the consequences too. The risk of poverty is highest for children in sole parent families and is highest for single mothers on social security payment. This means precarity – the state of having insecure income. The *2018 Foodbank report*, found that *'Two in five single parent households (39%) have experienced food insecurity in the last year'*. Couple this with the fact that *'females are 31% MORE LIKELY than men to experience food insecurity as a result of living on a low income or pension'*, we can see just how much potential there is for ParentsNext to increase precarity for women and their children.

4. The appropriateness of eligibility for compulsory and voluntary participation:

The Parents Next program is morally, ethically and practically a program that should not have the power to determine eligibility for participants. First, the 'eligibility' criteria is arbitrary and discriminatory against those who are from low socio-economic backgrounds; assuming that these parents pasts are the reason they are on the single parent payment is an incredibly flawed reasoning model. Early school leavers may have left school early for a number of factors: caring responsibilities for a sick parent, commencement of an apprenticeship, domestic violence hindering studies, and personal physical and mental health illness. None of these are taken into consideration when deciding criteria. It is insulting, discriminatory and paternalistic to assume all early school leavers need 'extra help' becoming job ready, and punishes people for their past which in most cases they have no control over.

Furthermore, deciding that a parent must engage in Parent's Next through living in a certain geographic area is disturbing in the extreme. By sheer practicality, many single parents are forced to reside in low socio-economic areas due to the low rate of the single parent payment. Rent is naturally cheaper in the areas targeted, and thus single parents may be forced to reside in a less 'desirable' area to live within their means. This means the Parents Next program is assuming women in these areas are less 'job capable.' This kind of suburb discrimination is grossly inappropriate from a government department; to assume someone from a certain suburb is less capable of managing their parenting and personal education is

disgusting and rests on the false premise that the poor are, just by being poor, less capable as they live in a poorer suburb. This circular reasoning to decide that single parents in these suburbs need compliance activities and the threat of cancelled payments to become job ready is a gross misuse of taxpayer money and very weak reasons to experiment on the poor.

The use of 'voluntary' participation also concerns the AUWU, as in many cases things that are deemed 'voluntary' by legislation are forced onto participants in the ParentsNext provider office. The AUWU has heard of cases where women have been bullied into signing up for courses they must pay for; this may be recorded by the provider as 'voluntary' but in actual reality this is presented to the woman as a necessary activity. The scope for abuse in voluntary activities is something the AUWU has great concerns about.

The *ParentsNext Evaluation Report* found that voluntary participation in the program was 'much lower than expected'⁸ and that the program had difficulty attracting voluntary participants⁹, but the AUWU argues that this suggests the lack of "attractiveness" of the program lays with poor quality of the services offered and the focus on compliance.

Recommendation:

If our recommendation to scrap the program is not enacted, then the program should be made completely voluntary with no attachment to the Targeted Compliance Framework. Financial incentives to bring in clients should be completely removed and KPIs involving breaching clients should be scrapped. ParentsNext providers should NOT have the power to perform capacity assessment tests, due to the conflict of interest and the financial incentive to keep women on the books.

5. The protocol for providers' conduct of Capability Interviews with participants:

The AUWU does not believe that ParentsNext providers are the best people to conduct capability interviews with participants. First, these are private organisations with no guarantee of proper training to deal with vulnerable participants, who may be suffering mental health related issues or problems with family violence. The union has heard reports of women being forced to recount traumatic events in offices in front of their children. This is further confirmed in recent investigative journalism by *The Guardian*¹⁰.

ParentsNext providers, unlike Commonwealth Public servants, do not need to adhere to a code of conduct. A Commonwealth public Department of Human Services (DHS) worker must respect privacy and receive necessary training to work with vulnerable people. None of these conditions are guaranteed to be upheld in a private organisation. Furthermore, the provider has a perverse financial incentive to keep participants on the books, even if that client should not be on the ParentsNext program. It is a gross conflict of interest for a ParentsNext provider to determine if the client in front of them should be signed up on their

⁸ *ParentsNext Evaluation Report*, pp. 32

⁹ *ParentsNext Evaluation Report*, pp. 35

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/dec/04/senate-launches-inquiry-into-program-forcing-single-parents-to-attend-story-time>

system, especially if it is financially advantageous for them to do so. This can lead to taking advantage of vulnerable clients who may be unaware of their rights, who have no business being on the ParentsNext program but are signed up anyway.

The Community and Public Sector Union concurs with this position, stating in their ParentsNext submission their grave concerns about private organisations conducting capability assessments. Deputy Secretary Melissa Donnelly notes:

“The administration of social security payments and the power to impose penalties must return to DHS. Any suspension of payments should be handled by trained Department of Human Services employees rather than private providers and DHS should be properly resourced to oversee the administration of compliance. Only the public service, which is accountable to Parliament, should have the ability to suspend social security payments.”
(Melissa Donnelly, CPSU)

Recommendation:

If the Program of ParentsNext is to continue, the AUWU recommends that the responsibility of capability assessments lie solely with the Department of Human Services, and that a participant’s personal circumstances are sensitively dealt with. The AUWU also recommend the right to appeal capability assessments, and for participants to be informed of that right.

6. The interaction between ParentsNext, business, education and training providers, and health, community and social services:

The AUWU has grave concerns about the interactions between ParentsNext providers interacting with community and health providers. We have seen in New South Wales that the Libraries Act has been breached by ParentsNext providers through demanding librarians sign ParentsNext compliance forms for attendance to “story time.” The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) has been vocal in its opposition regarding the use of libraries for the purposes of suspending parents’ payments:

“Libraries are safe, neutral spaces where everyone is welcome and people are free to study, read, take part in events – all without needing to sign a form stating that they have done so. ParentsNext providers have nominated library storytimes as eligible activities for single parents, without any consultation with the libraries themselves. And they have assumed that library staff will sign a record of attendance. It goes against the very ethos of libraries to use non-attendance at storytimes to threaten cuts to single parents’ payments. At our request, the Department of Jobs and Small Business has written to the CEOs of all ParentsNext providers to stop this practice.” (Sue McKerracher, ALIA)

The AUWU finds this misuse of community public space incredibly disturbing and is concerned that librarians have been put into this position of being ‘policemen’ for single mums and their children. Although the Australian Library and Information Association has received assurances from the Department that this practice is inappropriate and should not happen, the AUWU has personally heard of a very recent instance where a ParentsNext provider drove to a library to “check on their clients for story time.” This led to other mothers asking who the clients were, and what the program was. This is a massive, serious breach of privacy to the participants and a gross over-reach of the compliance measure being implemented by the ParentsNext provider, as well as contravening Clause 14 of the NSW Library Act 2018.

We also gravely concerned about the privacy breaches we have personally been made aware of through ParentsNext providers accessing medical records of participants children. The Union has been made personally aware of one mother who was asked for her Medicare card and pension card to be photocopied. Subsequently, she has been sent an updated activity plan through no agreement of her own, noting her child’s medical appointments *even though* she has not been personally informed of them herself. The ParentsNext providers are over reaching their authority by requesting this information, and the breach of participants privacy is illegal.

The AUWU is also concerned to hear of participants being told they cannot study what they want, and being forced to sign up to certain training organisations which participants have no interest or desire to do. “Sister organisations” of ParentsNext provider companies who offer training, create another perverse financial incentive to pressure a client into that specific training.

Recommendation:

We believe that single mothers are best placed to decide what training and activities they should undertake, and the blatant disregard of providers to honour the wishes of clients for their choice in study is not isolated.

7. The measures, if any, in place to avoid causing risk or harm to vulnerable participants and their children, including participants and children who are victims and/or survivors of family violence:

The AUWU does not believe ParentsNext providers are properly placed to deal with family violence. There is real danger in demanding a woman be at a certain activity every week with her child or be cut off her payment, and this danger increases when family violence is involved. The ability of violent ex-partners to track a participant’s whereabouts increases if they are aware that the woman must be at a certain place, or risk being without money. This risk increases in public spaces such as libraries, swimming pools or training organisations, especially if a child is present. The woman may be reluctant to make it known

she is in danger or make a scene; the man may threaten the woman or her child and use the opportunity to intimidate the woman into dropping charges or returning to the relationship.

Being forced to recount traumatic details in front of children at appointments is another way women fleeing violence are disadvantaged, creating further trauma for children and parents. Private ParentsNext providers are not social workers or violence counsellors; they are not equipped to deal with the incredibly complex issues surrounding family violence. Furthermore, domestic violence can interfere with a participant's ability to complete activities, increasing the likelihood that their payment will be suspended. This can result in a woman, who is in dire financial straits, returning to an unsafe relationship.

Recommendation:

The AUWU believes that ParentsNext providers should not be in the position to demand intimate details of violence or impose activities that could endanger a woman or her children. Exemptions and exits for the ParentsNext program should be automatic and uncomplicated for any client who is dealing with family violence, and should be granted by the Department of Human Services. ParentsNext providers should not have the power or control to demand a participants or child's medical information, or the right to demand personal information regarding domestic violence. That role should rest with accountable public servants at the Department of Human Services.

8. Best practice pre-employment programs for parents:

The AUWU does not believe Parents Next is the best way to support parents wishing to return to the workforce.

This program fails to recognise the massive amounts of unpaid labour that women do in child rearing, in fact a woman's unpaid caring labour increases by 49 hours after she has a child¹¹. Many parents want to prioritise child-rearing while their children are young and this should be the right of every Australian: to raise their child as they see fit, without government demands to take their kids to story time or swimming lessons. These activities are great in themselves, but telling parents to do these or risk non-payment of crucial funds is cruel, stress inducing and insulting. Such menial tasks as 'preparing a child's stationary for the school year' (one example we have received of a required activity) assumes that single parents are too incompetent to raise their children as they are on a payment. The AUWU finds this insulting to demand, *as a compliance activity*, that you must prepare your child's school stationary, as if a parent would not do that already without the big stick ready to cut payments if not forced.

May parents already have made plans of their own to study, work or volunteer. The AUWU has heard many stories of women, including those who are doing university study, trying to be bullied by ParentsNext providers into courses they have no interest in, or being forced to drop plans they have already made to be forced into activities the provider wishes them to

¹¹ <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/mothers-still-do-lions-share-housework>

do. This does not support women to gain long term employment, and merely churns them onto pointless busy work that does not enrich their lives or might be suitable for them.

Recommendation:

The AUWU does not believe that ParentsNext is an appropriate program of support for single parents and their young children. We recommend that if any pre-employment program is offered to single parents and their children, the nature of that program should be completely without risk of payment penalties; and funds should be made readily available to the participants themselves.

9. The oversight of ParentsNext

The AUWU has grave concerns regarding ParentsNext providers following legislation and providing a fair service to single parents. Breaches of legislation and egregiously suspending parents' payments without due cause are common and widespread. We have heard countless stories of women being cut off payments because they "missed" a phone appointment, when in actual fact they never received said phone call. Women have reported changing an appointment time, and still being cut off their payment because they have been breached for "failing to turn up." Others have reported being harassed while in hospital, pregnant and sick, or being told they must immediately sign up after their baby is born. We have heard stories of women being harassed by providers while recovering from birth, while their babies are 3 weeks old. These breaches are common, yet rarely does the provider suffer any consequence for breaching legislation. Many parents of young babies are sleep deprived, exhausted, and focussing on caring for their children, too tired and burnt out to make official complaints when their rights are breached. This allows providers to get away with outrageous behaviour. Mothers of young children are vulnerable to mistreatment in the respect that their main priority will be returning the suspended payments. Too frightened of retribution or being cut off their payments, they hesitate to complain, terrified of having no money to feed their children. The compliance measures are a gross abuse of parent's rights and children's safety; food insecurity and homelessness are real threats when parenting payments are so precarious and conditional.

The Union has not heard of one woman being told of her rights to complain by a provider for mistreatment, or being informed of the avenues she can take if her experience is unsatisfactory. There is a gross power imbalance with the favour weighted in the provider's direction. The financial incentives such as 'outcome payments' and upfront payments to sign mothers up who may not be suitable, all create an environment where the provider doesn't disclose their vested interest. Parents feel trapped in activities they may very well not even be required to do.

Recommendation:

That a complaints system independent of the Department of Jobs and Small Business be used to monitor the behaviour of ParentsNext providers, and that serious sanctions and

dropping of tenders are enacted against companies that do not respect the rights of participants.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the AUWU is of the view that the ParentsNext program should be scrapped entirely. This program is sexist, the government's own report is that 96% of participants are women. It does not recognise the vast amount of unpaid labour women do in child rearing; it assumes single mothers must be told how to raise their children by forcing activities that should be fun and enjoyable, reducing such things as swimming lessons, playgroups and library story times to activities that must be done under threat of destitution. It does not take into account the realities of raising young children who are often sick at a moment's notice, or a woman's own autonomy to raise her own children. ParentsNext is a dangerous social experiment that promotes the idea that any parent on a parenting payment is incompetent and must be forced to look after their own children, and are not capable of deciding what is best for their own family.

Failing the complete dismantling of ParentsNext, the AUWU's next preference would be for the TCF to be completely removed from the system. The system should be completely voluntary in the true sense of the word; with no threat of cancelled payments. There should be oversight from DHS that participants are being *actively* informed of their rights as to possible exemptions and avenues for lodging complaints, and also informed of the amount of money in their personal fund. This personal fund should be available for the participant to spend as they see fit, with no restrictions as to what type of study they want to engage in, or what activity they feel they need to do to help them. It should be made available for anything they want, for instance driving lessons, things for their children or anything else the parent feels necessary for themselves.

The AUWU recommends that any programs that seek to assist parents in going into work, ought to be voluntary and free-to-access. Additionally, it is crucial that single parents have support when attending these activities by having an adequate rate of parenting payment (or more awareness of their ability to access the General Fund) to ensure financial support in engaging with these activities. The TCF and the compliance regime, is failing to assist single mothers and their children and punishes them for the countless hours of *unpaid, unappreciated work* they do *every day* as parents.

The AUWU will leave the last word of our submission to Rozzie Chia, an advocate who has worked with the union, and a ParentsNext participant:

'While the rest of society (including the corporate world) acknowledges the impact of family violence upon Australia's workforce and builds its systems and initiatives accordingly, the Department of Jobs and Smalls Business still lags behind. It's clearly evident in their development of ParentsNext that they simply forgot that they were dealing with a huge proportion of families who are affected by trauma, and have scrambled to address it on an incredibly ad-hoc manner.'

Thank you for your time in reading this submission.