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# **Righting Welfare Wrongs**

Dispatches and Analysis from the Front Line of the Fight  
against Austerity

*Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network*





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The book has been edited by Sarah Glynn, who also drew the pictures (which have illustrated various SUWN newsletters and leaflets). All unattributed photographs were taken by Sarah Glynn or Tony Cox



## Forward

*Paul Lavery*

When I was researching the script that eventually became *I, Daniel Blake*, I had the good fortune to cross paths with Tony Cox and several of his comrades from the Scottish Unemployed Workers Network. They had set up an improvised post outside Dundee Jobcentre. Much of that day will live with me for a very long time, and some of it directly fed into what became our film.

I will never forget the anger, stress, and frustration of one young single mum in particular. Several weeks before, she had gone into the jobcentre with a piece of paper to inform them she was going back to live with her mum. 'And here is my new address' she informed them as she handed it over. But no, they couldn't take note of her new address. She had to phone another number to pass on the information. She tried phoning this number on several occasions and was charged a fortune while kept waiting. After finishing the credit on her mobile phone she used her mum's home phone. There she spent one and half hours waiting to pass on her new address, which she eventually did after speaking to a human being. Several weeks later her benefit mysteriously stopped. She went into see the jobcentre and was informed that she had failed to turn up for an interview. They didn't believe her when she told them she had not received any letter. After more delays it was found out the letter had gone to her old address. Here she was, her life and that of her family thrown into turmoil, trying to hand over a piece of paper with her current address once again. Welcome to the 'numptyland' of bureaucracy, as one of the authors of this book perfectly nails it.

Throughout the rest of that morning I saw the volunteers from the network offer support to claimants who were confused, angry, and sometimes desperate. It brought to mind horror stories Ken Loach and myself had come across in previous research, via food banks and even whistle-blowers inside the Department of Work and Pensions. I was reminded of the fury of a young doctor who told me the story of one of

his patients who was dying of cancer and had other health complications too. Despite his detailed letters, his patient had been deemed 'fit for work' and forced to go through the painful farce of pretending to find work. One day he fell, cut his head, and an ambulance was called. He refused to get in as he was signing on the next day and was terrified of a sanction and losing his benefit. His patient didn't live much longer and spent his last months in terror of penury.

Several things struck me about the volunteers that day in Dundee. First of all, their kindness to our most vulnerable. They refused to swallow the grand narrative of waster versus striver. (Isn't it fascinating that in some polls the average person thought that up to 27% of the welfare budget was claimed fraudulently? The truth is that it is less than 1 per cent. Where else is propaganda so successful in distortion?)

Secondly, the competence of the volunteers. Practical advice gleaned from experience, lending an immediate helping hand about appeals, procedures and basic information. These were all self-taught citizens who had studied the complex legislation but also combined it with detailed local knowledge.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, these were volunteers who were not scared and would not be intimidated. Given that many claimants are now humiliated and cowed by the threats of hunger (that is what a sanction is after all), the importance of spirit and resistance cannot be underestimated. I was told of many attempts by DWP staff to intimidate volunteers who were accompanying vulnerable claimants to meetings. Needless to say, there was no surrender, even when police were called and in one memorable case a volunteer was brought to court; in my view a total waste of the public purse, and an attempt by the authorities to intimidate those who are in fact doing a grand service to their communities.

I am convinced that the network must have saved many vulnerable people from going over the edge, as has tragically happened in many parts of the country.

I am not surprised now that this same group has written this marvellous book.

First of all, it gives voice to the many people who have been lied about in a systematic manner; the abuse is in the detail of lived experience. As I found out from interviews, it is almost impossible to imagine the

grinding misery of listening to Vivaldi on an answering machine while the call to the DWP eats up the precious funds for your family on a mobile.

Secondly, this book provides historical context of the long struggle to achieve dignity for those in need. I was struck by the following quote from Arthur Woodburn, Secretary of State for Scotland, in his parliamentary speech in support of the 1947 National Assistance Bill:

We establish in this Bill one of the great slogans or ambitions of the early days of our movement—the establishment of work or maintenance in this country as the moral principle governing the treatment of people who are in need. Under this Measure, those who get assistance get it without humiliation or abuse. Perhaps the greatest thing about the Bill is that it removes from the treatment of people who are hard hit in life the humiliation which accompanied a great deal of charity in the past. I think that the greatest injury done to the poor in the past was not the fact that they were deprived of food or nourishment, but that they were deprived of their self-respect.

How ironic. Today we have a system designed to humiliate and intimidate. Where once again hunger is used as a weapon. I spoke to whistle-blowers inside the DWP who were ashamed by what they had been pushed to do by their managers, both in relation to interviews and the numbers of sanctions dispensed.

Thirdly, the book analyses how power works in several sharp chapters. There is little point in an endless catalogue of abuse unless it is understood in context. The 'why of it' is always the most important question. The intimidation has a point inside the framework of the neoliberal model of our country.

Fourthly, and in the grand tradition of resisting power effectively, there is an obligation to suggest alternatives. There is an excellent chapter on Universal Basic Income, which is bound to gain traction as time goes on. It offers no easy solutions, but raises the possibility of how we might build a more humane country outside the poisonous paradigm of punishment and control.

To witness solidarity, wit, reflection, self-organisation, and resistance from critical citizens in the Network reminds me of the words of Woody Guthrie, who talked about people being 'great big hoping machines'.

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In the midst of this great vicious monolithic bureaucracy, which at times seems all powerful, it does raise the spirits to see David with the sling.

Paul Lavery

13th September 2016

## Introducing the SUWN and This Book

*Sarah Glynn*

If you can judge a society by how it treats its most vulnerable members, then the twenty-first century UK will be found badly wanting. After more than three decades of attack by governments wedded to free-market ideology, or neoliberalism, the welfare state is barely holding together. But it won't be destroyed without resistance. The fight for welfare is at the centre of the fight for a fairer society, and defence of the right to a decent existence can galvanise resistance to the onward march of neoliberalism. This has been especially true in Scotland, where protection of the welfare state has become associated with the demand for independence and the freedom to institute a better system. But if welfare is at the centre of progressive politics, we need to understand what this means and how to organise effectively. This book has been conceived to help contribute to effective organisation and to the bigger fight. It brings together our experiences as grassroots activists with wider discussion to set that in context. Our aim is to show, through numerous case histories, what life is like on austerity's front line; to make sense of this through political analysis; and to share our experiences of organising resistance.

The initial inspiration for founding the SUWN, in 2011, was the need to counter the stigmatisation of the unemployed that was being sown by the UK government and fertilised by the media. We recognised a need for an organisation run by and run for unemployed people, and we looked back to the time before the foundation of the welfare state, which gave birth to the mass National Unemployed Workers' Movement of the 1930s. While we could never claim to be a mass movement, the NUWM has provided important organisational inspiration in its combination of practical grassroots work, campaigns for immediate improvements, and drive for fundamental political change.

What we are now facing is a permanent counter-revolution. Because it is happening in stages, individuals become accustomed to each increase

in deprivation and it is difficult to predict when people en masse will recognise the need to resist.



Fig 1. Outside the Tory Conference, Troon, March 2012 (photo by Robert Stewart)



Fig 2. Mayday, Glasgow 2012 (Sarah G, photo by Ian Goudie)





*Fig 3. Outside Partick Buroo, August 2013  
(Sarah G, Sean and a young helper, photo by Mick Quinn)*

We are also kept busy ensuring we are up to date with the most recent rules. This does, of course, mean that some of the detail described here will soon be history. However, apart from some encouraging signs for the small portion of welfare about to be devolved, the direction of change has been constant, and our methods of resistance always have to be flexible enough to respond to the latest line of attack.



*Figs 4 and 5. Leafleting at the SUWN stall in Sauchiehall Street, with friends from Glasgow Anarchist Collective, October 2013 (photos by Mick Quinn)*

Our first years concentrated on raising awareness and understanding of the issues and politics around unemployment and informing people who were signing on of the existence of our network. We managed to get an Awards for All lottery grant to help us get established, and were doing

all the things that campaigning organisations do: producing leaflets and newsletters, running street stalls, taking part in and organising meetings and protests, keeping up a Facebook blog, and pushing to get issues into the mainstream media. We had also built up support among other activists in different groups, several of whom would help out on our stalls, but there were only a few people for whom the SUWN was the focus of their campaigning activity. Our more immediately practical involvement was limited to putting out various pieces of material from Boycott Workfare on our stalls, and including small bits of basic advice on our leaflets. Then, in 2014, our campaigning moved onto a new level.

An active group began to evolve in Dundee, coordinated by Tony Cox, who is an experienced political organiser, and coalescing around our first tentative ventures into more hands-on assistance. We were still taking part in protests, often alongside other groups such as Dundee Against Welfare Sanctions or Glasgow Against Atos, but our work in Dundee was putting down new roots that gave it greater relevance and strength. In our conversations with people going into Dundee Buroo<sup>1</sup> we were as much researching what was going on as providing help and advice. But with the aid of advice leaflets from Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty (ECAP), and lots of phone calls to more experienced advisors in ECAP and the Child Poverty Action Group, we began to build up our knowledge and usefulness. From providing help outside the buroo, we moved on to accompanying people in and helping them negotiate their case. We were learning as we went along, but were conscious that even our limited knowledge and help was more than many people had been able to expect before. Our first proper 'client' was actually someone who had initially contacted ECAP but lived near Dundee. That was at the end of 2013, but our advice work really began to evolve in the spring of 2014. By July we were producing our own advice leaflets.

Our work outside Dundee Buroo expanded in parallel with the Independence campaign, and a growing group of people got involved in both. There was a shared feeling among everyone who was active with our network that Independence could provide the opportunity for a better society. Not only could it save the welfare state in Scotland and offer the best hope for a healthier fairer economy, it could also provide the inspiration for progressive change south of the border. We declared our decision to campaign for YES in April. The campaign accelerated into a peak of activity around the voter registration drive, when our stall outside Dundee Buroo registered hundreds of men and women who had never voted before and wanted the opportunity to have a say on

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<sup>1</sup> This Scots term for the jobcentre is a shortening of Labour Exchange Bureau

Scotland's future. A hand-written sign taped to the lamppost and a pile of registration forms – and folk started to queue.



*Registering to vote outside Dundee Buroo, 29 August 2014 (with Jenny S and Ruth)*

The referendum introduced a new layer of people to street campaigning, and they didn't want to go back to their homes. Scottish civil society had never looked so alive, and community organisations were springing up everywhere. While much of that momentum has dissipated – and a treatise could be written on how and why a disunited left failed to capitalise on it further – for us, it provided the opportunity to consolidate an active base in Dundee, from which we have attempted to spread our organising method further afield. Our main concern is not so much the expansion of the SUWN as an organisation, but the growth of practical grassroots campaigning that combines mutual self-help and advocacy with political analysis and action.

Our jobcentre stalls have become our bread and butter work upon which everything else is based. We act as welfare workers sans frontiers, reaching people who wouldn't approach office-based organisations. Everyone who enters is given one of our Know Your Rights leaflets, and everyone coming out is asked if they've had any problems. We also accompany people going to potentially tricky interviews - in either the jobcentre or its private subcontractors, or with the assessors who act as gate-keepers to benefits for the sick and disabled.

Most of our activists are themselves unemployed or on Employment and Support Allowance (the benefit for those unable to work), or have been

unemployed in the recent past. We encourage people we help to join our activities, so we also function as a self-help group. We publicise what we have learnt through our activism using social and mainstream media. We also lobby our MPs and MSPs, in writing and face to face; and we use protests and demonstrations to draw attention to the issues we campaign on.



*Fit to work? Dundee Buroo, summer 2014 (photo Mike Taylor)*

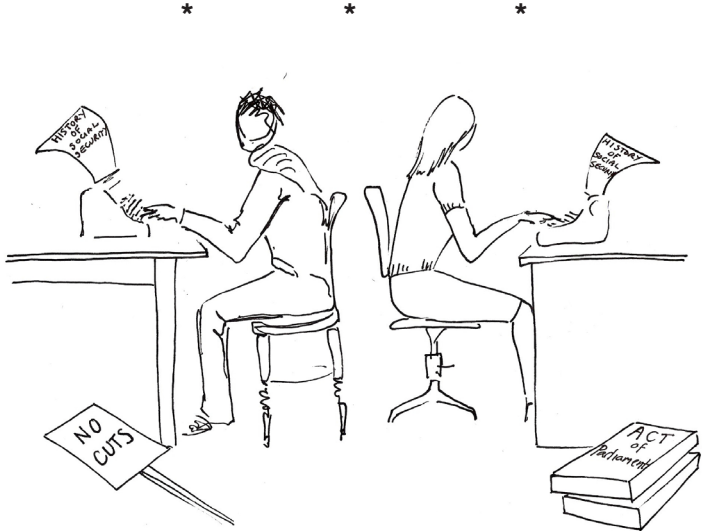


*Outside Dundee Buroo, December 2014 (Shauna, Grant, John and Ruth)*

We have organised some protests ourselves – including an anti-austerity rally to coincide with the December 2014 budget, and occupations of Work-Programme providers in Dundee – and we have spoken at national events. We work closely with other groups doing similar activism to ourselves.

Unemployment is integral to a capitalist economy. And any system of means-tested benefits for those unable to find work will involve some

sort of surveillance and sanctions. To avoid this requires a rethink of how society approaches work. Our analysis takes on these issues, including putting the case for a basic income. At the same time, we recognise the need to push for reform within the current system to counter the punitive approach to the unemployed that is propagated by neoliberalism.



In the pages that follow we have tried to provide both examples and analysis. While we would like to imagine people reading the book from cover to cover, we recognise that this rarely happens, and we have tried to make sure that each part is still useful and easily read on its own.

We begin with the vital heart of the book: the accounts of people battling for survival on Austerity's front line, and of the activists working alongside them. Later chapters provide supportive context and analysis, but this would have limited impact without the human experience and solidarity. An edited SUWN diary, based largely on our Facebook blogs, demonstrates the multiple personal nightmares that we come across and the everyday realities of an increasingly punitive state. It also shows how we have intervened, how our organisation has developed, and the pitfalls and camaraderie along the way. (If this is too much detail you can always browse a selection of posts, which should make sense on their own, or just go straight on to the next section.)

Our more analytical pieces that follow begin with a short illustrated history. This looks at the development of welfare (or social security) for the unemployed, concentrating on the part played by unemployed

activism in pushing changes forward. Then, we discuss the role of unemployment in a capitalist economy, and attempts to mitigate its worst consequences. The following two chapters look at changes in the treatment of the unemployed since the reintroduction of an aggressive free-market 'neoliberal' economics in the 1980s. First, we look at how attitudes have been changed, returning to old ideas of a stigmatised 'undeserving poor'; then at the evolution of increasingly punitive administrative systems - including making people work without pay or face destitution - and how these serve to control both the unemployed and the wider workforce. After examining the nightmare of 'welfare' today, our final chapter in this section makes the case for a completely different system: a basic income that not only rejects the contortions imposed by neoliberalism, but also avoids the underlying problems of means testing and other tests of eligibility, and opens up the possibility of a fairer society, where paid work is no longer our reason for existence, and people have freedom to develop other interests.

This contextual section is followed by further reports from the mad world of unemployment, written by people we have come across in our campaigning: people who have been active in our organisation, people we've helped, and people who have contacted us with their experiences. A Glasgow comrade, who was involved in the SUWN from its early beginnings, provides a selection of musings and personal encounters. A long account, from a friend we are now helping with advice, exposes the cruel absurdity that results when DWP rules meet real life problems – and why doing what they ask is not enough to save you from disaster. A selection of shorter contributions demonstrates a range of different experiences and responses – including experiences from the other side of the DWP desk.

While it is important to show that a better system is possible and to help get serious discussion of a basic income onto the agenda, we also need to address the problems facing us in the here and now. We need to build up a grassroots support network so that no-one has to negotiate this punitive welfare system on their own; we need to fight to retain the gains won by earlier generations; and we need to open up possibilities for more progressive change. We end the book with a strategy of resistance to the control and surveillance state.

Altogether, this should result in a uniquely detailed account; but if reading it doesn't make folk angry and ready for action, then it will have failed.



*Dundee, October 2014 (Karen, Ailsa, Scott, Mike, Benny, William, Grant and Ruth)*



## Notes Fae Ooutside the Buroo, with occasional forays into assessment centres and courtrooms: the diary of an activist organisation

Written by Tony Cox, Sarah Glynn, Jenny Kermally, Ailsa Weir and Ruth Forbes

*This diary is largely compiled from edited extracts from our Facebook blog. Despite its length, it is far from comprehensive – we haven't been able to record all that we have done, and even so there was far more detail than anyone could want to read at a sitting – but we have tried to show how our organisation has developed, and to choose examples that demonstrate both the everyday realities of the system that we are up against, and what we have tried to do to address them. We have focused on our advocacy work, which has become the foundation for our other activities. Like any organisation, we also have meetings - speaker meetings and planning meetings - although a lot of our everyday planning takes place over a hot cup of coffee in the pub after the stalls. And our blog posts have also included discussion on wider politics, which is covered elsewhere in this book. (Names have been changed.)*

*We begin, here, in the summer of 2014 when we were taking our first stumbling steps towards becoming street-based welfare-rights pioneers. Our first detailed Know Your Rights leaflet (written for giving to people going into Dundee Buroo) - is dated 9 July 2014, and began:*

Campaigning outside the Wellgate Jobcentre, we have been shocked and angered by the high number of benefit claimants that we have encountered who have been sanctioned<sup>2</sup>. We have also learnt that this Jobcentre has the highest number of sanctions in Scotland – 4843 since October 2012 – and, judging by the conversations that we have

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<sup>2</sup> i.e. had their benefits stopped as punishment for a failure to comply with DWP rules – often for something very minor or non-existent



had with many claimants, this punitive regime shows little sign of ending. We believe that the high number of sanctions is not justifiable, that many have only been able to be implemented because they have went unchallenged, and that local DWP managers rely on Dundee claimants being unaware of their rights.

Below we seek to give general advice to benefit claimants.  
(The other side of this leaflet includes links to further advice and to sources of direct personal help here in Dundee.)

*Our post of two days later shows us involved in a mixture of advice giving, political engagement, and fact finding:*

### **11 July 2014, Dundee, SG**

Outside the buroo in Dundee this morning, meeting and trying to help more people hit by sanctions. Last week we had SNP MP Stewart Hosie join us outside the jobcentre, and today was the turn of Jim McGovern for Labour. He was able to hear directly from the woman whose 'advisor' had decided to disallow half her job-search records for such spurious reasons as the business being small, and from the young man who had been sanctioned for not searching for jobs after he had already accepted work, and so was without the money to see his bairn.

*This was the summer of Indy and most of our waking hours and energy were spent campaigning for Independence. Our Facebook posts were sparse, but we still found time to talk to people outside the buroo, to jot down notes on what was happening, and to give practical help and support, including accompanying people in if necessary. While our interventions were making a difference, the jobcentre staff were not ready to accept this new situation.*

### **19 August, Dundee, TC**

I was in the Dundee buroo yesterday (Monday), representing a benefit claimant who had been sanctioned for the crime of not having a clue about how to use a computer. Bill is a fifty-six-year-old cockney and ex-merchant seaman who lives on his own in a damp-ridden flat with a cooker on which only the hobs work and a microwave that packed up a few days ago. Since being sanctioned last Thursday, he had received a parcel of food from a local food bank that was meant to last three days. He was left with one tin of soup and with seventeen pence in his pocket to see him through a week and a half until he received a Hardship Payment of around £45. When we were walking to the buroo, he had to stop repeatedly and lean against a wall or hedge in order to support himself because he was on the point of collapsing from lack of decent food. He was nearly a broken man. He told me of his pride in having served his country in the Falklands, and that he now felt betrayed and increasingly worthless: of no value to a society that

seemed to have no use for him anymore.

Over the last few months I have met and represented many others in a similar, or even worse, position, but this time the reception we were given was so hostile that we were forced to write the following letter of complaint to the jobcentre manager:

Dear Mr Kelly

Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network would like to make an official complaint about a serious incident that occurred in Wellgate Jobcentre during the afternoon of Tuesday 19th August.

I had been asked to accompany a claimant, Bill Smith, to a meeting with his advisor, A, in order to discuss his Job Seeker's Agreement. Mr Smith had been sanctioned but not informed why. When I asked about the reason for the sanction, the advisor offered no explanation and objected to my asking questions. He then informed us that he would hand over the case to his line manager.

We were then handed over to the line manager, B. Initially, the discussion seemed to be going quite well, with progress being made with regards to Mr Smith's urgent need for financial help through the medium of the Hardship Allowance. B informed Mr Smith that she would leave us for a few minutes in order to investigate the possibility of fast-tracking his Hardship Allowance claim. However, when she returned, her attitude towards Mr Smith's situation, and towards me in particular, seemed to have undergone a dramatic transformation. She informed me that I had no right to ask questions on Mr Smith's behalf or to contribute in any manner whatsoever towards the discussion. I protested that I had been asked by Mr Smith to act as his representative in the meeting. At a certain point, B objected to my speaking at all.

I realise that it is not the role of the representative to put words into the claimant's mouth, however, I was merely asking points of clarification regarding B's continuing refusal to confirm in writing why Mr Smith had actually been sanctioned...

The meeting began to take an even more serious turn when I noticed that I had been approached by a security guard who was staring fixedly at me, and when I turned round I realised that there was another security guard standing directly behind me. When I objected

to the totally needless presence of these two security guards, B informed me that the police would be called to remove me. When I again attempted to ask a question of B, she threatened to have the security guards forcefully remove me from the premises. At this point, an outraged benefit claimant, who was accompanied by her small child, intervened by complaining loudly about the manner in which Mr Smith and I were being treated by the line manager, B. Following this interjection, the threat to eject me evaporated and was replaced by a more reasonable approach towards Mr Smith's predicament - which, however, fell short of resolving the situation with his sanction (see accompanying copy of Mr Smith's 'application for revision of an outcome decision').

At all times, I conducted myself in a polite but firm manner, and the only reason given by B for threatening to have me removed was my attempts to ask questions of her on behalf of Mr Smith. Our organisation is very disturbed by this development, which, we feel, shows a lack of respect for claimants and their essential right to be accompanied into meetings with the authorities by a representative of their own choosing...

The Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network request a full apology for this outrageous treatment, along with a written assurance that, in future, claimants' rights to a representative will be duly recognised and that such incidents as this will not be repeated...

And here is Bill's *[successful]* appeal letter

I would like to appeal against the decision that was made to sanction me on Friday 15th August. I was informed by B, the advisor who I spoke with on Tuesday 19th August, that the reason for my being sanctioned was that I had not logged in to my Universal Job Match account, and that I had therefore failed to adhere to my 'claimant commitment agreement'.<sup>3</sup> I have made it clear, repeatedly, to my advisors that I am virtually computer illiterate, nor do I have access to a computer at home or through friends and family. I am, therefore, forced to use the computer terminals in my local library, where I have, on occasion, been able to call on the help of other library users, although I often have problems getting access to a computer and when I do I am not always able to get someone to help me. I feel strongly, that my present 'claimant commitment agreement' does not take into due account the acute problems that I face with regards to computer

<sup>3</sup> Universal Jobmatch is the DWP's computerised job-search.

literacy, and the difficulties I sometimes experience in getting others to help me. This was known by my advisor at the time that I was urged to sign up to the Universal Job Match system, but I was not made aware that this system entailed a level of computer literacy that I do not possess. I was told, some weeks ago, by C, my advisor at that time, that he would sign me up for a course in basic computer literacy, but the issue was not raised with me again. I would, however, be quite prepared to take part in any course which might help me understand the use of computers. I might add that my problem with using computers has been aggravated by my very poor eyesight, which has become a particular problem following the loss of my prescription glasses two weeks ago.

*When Tony posted up this report of the DWP's resistance to him giving help, he received an account of a similar experience -*

#### **22 August, Dundee, TC**

Below is a copy of a text and email that I received from a benefit claimant the other day. I post it because everyone, and not just benefit claimants, should be aware of what is happening inside these factories of fear:

'I was threatened to be evicted from the dole office for giving advice to a guy whose dole was being stopped... due to me telling the claimant to get the woman to write it down that he was being sanctioned because he did not state the dates he had applied for work. This could be used as evidence of illegal sanctions and inconsistencies. I have never put dates of when I did anything and my book has been signed and approved by the bastards. The claimant, and no disrespect whatsoever, had a limited understanding and knowledge of what was going on. I had listened to [the advisor] for fifteen to twenty minutes when she said she was sending the file to the judgement team to sanction his funds because she did not know when he had done the work search - even though on the top of each page it has the week dates for the search. Does it matter if it's a Wednesday or Friday he applied? A DWP worker with a security guard came up to me and said not to get involved. I stated he needed advice. Then they told me to move seats - even though the woman had told me to sit where I was sitting when I arrived! I refused and stated I had a meeting with Keith. The guard said that did not matter and move or you will be evicted. On what grounds? Since when was it an evicting issue to give advice to a guy who was in need of help and was speaking to me?'

*At the end of August we responded to a call from the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) for leafleting and voter registration outside the jobcentres.*

#### **26 August, Dundee, TC**

Today's voter registration stall outside the Dundee Jobcentre was a roaring

success. A total of 101 registration forms were completed during the five hour event. The RIC leaflet went down very well with the crowds that thronged the stall.

*With results surpassing all expectations, we continued with our registration stalls (under the joint banner of SUWN, Dundee Against Welfare Sanctions and our local Indy group Stobbie4Aye)<sup>4</sup> right up to the deadline.*

### **1 September, Dundee, SG and TC**

Stalls in lots of parts of Dundee today. Over a hundred and thirty registered to vote outside the buroo and eighty registered in Strathmartine Road. We put up a sign and they come!

We were stunned and delighted that Alex Salmond paid an impromptu visit to our voter registration stall at the Wellgate buroo today. We applaud his promise to end benefit sanctions in an independent Scotland, whilst his willingness to show solidarity with the plight of the unemployed is in stark contrast to the official stance of the Westminster parties.



*Alex Salmond visits our stall outside Dundee Buroo, and tells us 'Jobs and full employment are the heart of this campaign... we will get rid of sanctions', 1 September (With Sarah G, Tony, and Albert Mitchell, photo by Karen Brownlee)*

<sup>4</sup> Stobswell – 'the Stobbie' - is an old, predominantly working-class area of Dundee. Tony Cox's flat became Stobbie4Aye's centre of operations.

Tomorrow is the last day for registration and there will be stalls at the buroo (10-3), Albert Street outside TSB (12-2), Fintry Road outside Costcutter (2.30-4), and Lochee Stack outside Home Bargains 10-4. We would also like to have more stalls if we get enough people. Please ring or text, or come to the stall outside the buroo by 11 am so we can sort out people and stuff!

#### **4 September, Dundee, TC**

**Campaign report.** The last eight days have witnessed a step change in the scope and scale of the YES campaign, and we have attempted to do our bit to ensure that no potential vote was left untouched. In the week from 26th August to 2nd September, we gathered in around 850 registration forms, with well over ninety per cent being definite YES supporters. Well over half came from our stall at the Wellgate Jobcentre. In addition, we have registered around 120 new voters during the course of our canvassing activity in the Stobswell area, meaning that we may well have broken the 1000 mark.

*SUWN activists shed our fair share of tears on 19th September when we lost the referendum, but that same day we put out a call in the name of Stobbie4Aye for a public meeting for progressive YES campaigners in Dundee to plan 'what next'. We held the meeting the following Sunday, packing out the Bonar Hall, which seats 350. We had brought the fight against welfare cuts and benefit sanctions into the centre of discussion and had generated a dedicated group of welfare activists: but creating a broad left organising committee for Dundee eventually proved more difficult.*

*Meanwhile, cross-country links with other welfare activists grew stronger:*

#### **3 October, Dundee, TC**

**End sanctions now street protest.** Despite the very dreich conditions, today's Stobbie4Aye/DAWS/SUWN 'End Sanctions' street protest went off very well, with around eighty in attendance. We were joined by anti-sanctions activists from Aberdeen, Arbroath, Perth, Crieff and Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty (ECAP). Speakers included Jimmy Black, a Dundee SNP councillor, who spoke out strongly in favour of the campaign against sanctions.

#### **9 October, Edinburgh, TC**

The ECAP demo against workfare, which took place today outside the Learn Direct offices in Edinburgh, was a roaring success. [Learn Direct is one of the private companies subcontracted by the DWP to deliver its Work Programme, which includes forcing people onto workfare, or work for your benefits, schemes.] Around sixty to seventy campaigners were joined by members of the public and curious office workers, many of whom took leaflets and engaged in discussion about workfare, and the wider attacks on benefit claimants and the welfare state. The crowd, which swelled in size as the event progressed, was addressed by,

amongst others, Mike from ECAP, Andy Duncan from Class War, Tony Cox from Stobbie4AYE/SUWN, and spokespeople from the Glasgow Anarchist Collective, and we were later joined by the Rhythms of Resistance drummers, who created a righteous cacophony. The biggest cheer of the day came when Mike announced that all Learn Direct programmes for the day had had to be postponed as a direct result of the protest, which was lively and determined in tone, but always good natured. The message that came from the demo was loud and clear, 'If you exploit us, we will shut you down.'



*Tony Cox speaking at the Edinburgh blockade of Learndirect (photo Mick Quinn)*

*The Edinburgh protest was part of a Britain-wide week of action against workfare.*

*The loss of the Referendum produced a widespread urge to do something practical for those most in need by collecting for foodbanks. In Dundee, we were determined that this should be combined with benefit advice and political analysis:*

### **11 October, Dundee, TC**

The inaugural Dundee food collection and welfare rights drive took place today. Queues of Dundonians responded to the call to come to the aid of the homeless, the sanctioned, and the working poor who are caught in the maws of the ConDem assault on non-working and working people. Our hearts swelled with pride at the extent of the response from those many Dundonians who contributed, including some who, we know, have recently suffered from their benefits being sanctioned. We think that the mood of the event was summed up by the touching rendition of 'The Dundee Swing' by the oary city's own Sheena Wellington. We would like to thank Deb and the rest of the 'YES, We Care' team for their drive and determination in making this event possible.

*By now we had a growing collection of accounts from people who had been sanctioned, and we planned to collect more so as to be able to publicise what was happening with a weight of supporting evidence. We put out a call for volunteers*



*to help gather* 'more information on what is going on in probably the worst jobcentre in Scotland'.

#### **14 October, Dundee, TC**

**Knowledge is power.** The first of four claimant surveys scheduled for this week took place today in bitterly cold weather. Despite the conditions we got off to a very promising start in the process of collecting testimonies from those at the sharp end of the sanctions regime. Around a dozen testimonies were collected, and they will be added to our growing database. This work is absolutely crucial in allowing us to understand what the, quickly-changing, state of play is with the sanctions policy emanating from the Dundee 'Fear Factory', otherwise known as the Wellgate Jobcentre. We want to amass a statistically significant amount of evidence that we can use to call the sanctioners to account.

#### **24 October, Dundee, TC**

**SUN statement drive.** It was a cauld day ootside the Wellgate buroo the day agin, but despite the rawness of the weather we did some sterling work, with twelve to thirteen further statements collected. Some of the stories we are hearing would curl your hair, and jist when you think you've heard the worst case o' DWP abuse o' the maist vulnerable, another person tells you of experiences that jist plain maks yir blood bile. We know, however, that our campaigning work is having an impact, and each statement we collect is another silver bullet in our growing armoury against the deid fae the neck up who are foisting sanctions on our most vulnerable - the disabled, those with mental health problems and learning difficulties. Our message is becoming clearer with every statement we collect. The sanctions regime must stop, or there will be **hell to pay**.

#### **25 October, Dundee, TC**

**Welfare rights and food drive.** Yesterday's food collection and welfare rights drive was again very successful. The glorious sunshine was spoiled a wee bit by the strong wind that kept threatening to overturn the stalls at regular intervals. Despite the gusty conditions, a regular stream of passers-by came to make donations and to seek advice on welfare issues, including Jimmy, who was spotted standing some way back from the donations stall and was approached just as he was moving away. It turned out that he was in the middle of shifting from Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA, the benefit for those unable to work), but had experienced a serious delay in receiving his payments. He had not had a proper meal for five days, and had no electricity or gas in his flat. He was provided with a small food parcel to see him through the day, as well as details of food kitchens in the city centre and Hilltoon where he would be able to get a main meal on Saturday evening and Sunday. His case is only too typical, and demonstrates forcibly that it is not only sanctioned benefit claimants who suffer at the hands of DWP heartlessness and incompetence.



**29 October, Dundee, TC**

We had another successful event on another cold raw day, which was made a little more bearable by the sunshine making a welcome appearance. Around ten statements were collected, with one case involving a young, pregnant mother of two, who had been sanctioned two weeks ago for failing to check her Universal Jobmatch account. She admitted to not being computer literate; she does not have a computer and relies on accessing her account through her local library. Her failure to access her account was due to the fact that there was no one around who could help her. In addition, she was also suffering from severe morning sickness and depression, after coming off Citalopram, a powerful anti-depressant, due to being pregnant. The sanction, depriving her of all benefits for the last two weeks, has led to a spiralling problem with stress and depression and feelings of worthlessness as a result of the suffering caused to her children, aged eight and nine. She is also, with some cause, concerned at the effect that this situation is having on her unborn child. This is all too typical of the kind of cases we are coming across on a daily basis.

**31 October, Dundee TC**

**Expectant mother left with no food after receiving further two week sanction.**

The case of Angela, the expectant mother of two whose sanction case we highlighted earlier this week, has taken a further unexpected and horrifying twist. Her JSA benefit was due to be paid today, as her sanction had come to an end, but there was no money in her account. When we met her outside the bureau, she was visibly upset and one of our advocates accompanied her inside to find out what the problem was. Following a heated confrontation with the front of house staff, who objected to our advocate's presence, Angela was eventually informed that she had received a further two-week sanction. A letter of appeal, relating to her first sanction, was handed in, and she was forced to go through the rigmarole of asking – again – for a Hardship Payment, only to be informed that an interview to begin the application process could not be arranged until Monday, which means that she may not receive help for many days. She was simply given a Hardship Payment form and sent on her way.

We sent her along to the Welfare Rights office at Dundee Council, accompanied by an experienced activist. They informed her that she had exceeded her stipulated share of help, but that, due to her situation, they would arrange for further help to be given to her, though this couldn't be done before Monday as it was now Friday afternoon. Angela had no money and no food to see her, her unborn child, and her two young children through the weekend – although she was due to go round to her mother, who is also in straitened circumstances, for an evening meal. A hurried phone call to Rizzy Rafiq ensured that the Taught by Muhammad food delivery team will bring a food parcel to her home tomorrow afternoon, which will see her through until more substantial help can be

arranged. A case such as this raises many questions, not least of which is, for how much longer will we tolerate this systematic degradation and starving of some of the most vulnerable in our society, before we say - **enough is enough**.

### **6 November, Dundee, TC**

**Update on case of pregnant mother of two sanctioned by DWP.** Further to Friday's report, which had over 750 shares on Facebook, we are pleased to announce that Angela and her children are now doing fine. On Monday afternoon she eventually received a Hardship Payment after visiting the Jobcentre with an SUWN activist. The demeanour of the DWP staff during Monday's visit was a stark contrast to the hostile and unhelpful attitude we had encountered on Friday afternoon, which suggests that the DWP follow the SUWN Facebook page. The Dundee City Council Connect Team are now in contact with Angela and her family, and the Social Services Department are pursuing the DWP for an explanation of the treatment that Angela received at their hands, and an assurance that it will not be repeated in future. The case has also prompted press interest, with the Courier taking up Angela's story, as well as the wider problem of being a benefit claimant in Sanctions City.

The SUWN in Dundee will continue to intervene in order to attempt to reach others, who, like Angela, are being targeted by the DWP policy of state-sponsored starvation. There are literally hundreds of other Angela Foleys out there, and we will not rest until we bring their cases to public attention, and get them resolved. To that end, we are in the process of producing a report of the 'Statement Drive' we have been conducting among people who have been sanctioned in Dundee. We are also aware, however, that the sanctions regime can only be defeated through direct political action - so we have organised a major demo, under the slogan 'NO to Austerity, YES to Home Rule', which will take place in 'Sanctions City' on December 6th, three days after the Autumn Budget Statement, and six or seven days after the publication of the Smith Commission Report.<sup>5</sup> We urge you to join us for this demo, so that we can send a clear message to the Westminster elites: **enough is enough, end state sponsored starvation now!**

*The march and rally was under the joint banner of Stobbie4Aye, the SUWN and Dundee SNP*

### **8 November, Dundee, SG**

The Scottish Unemployed Workers Network and Stobbie4AYE handed out one and a half thousand leaflets for our 6 December March and Rally before Nicola Sturgeon's speech at the Caird Hall - and YES We Care and Taught by

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<sup>5</sup> The Smith Commission was convened following the Referendum - and the 'Vow' made by the Unionist leaders - to make recommendations for further devolution of powers to the Scottish Government.

Mohammad collected forty bags of food and £520 for foodbanks.

### ***13 November, Perth***

Through to Perth to support the first stall held by Perth Against Welfare Sanctions



*Perth High Street (Ailsa, Ronnie S, PAWS founder Jen Spark, and Ruth, photo by Glen Millar)*

### ***15 November, Dundee, TC***

SUWN supporters were out and about in the Murraygate today, lending support to the latest 'YES, We Care' foodbank collection. The weather was relatively kind to us, and the Dundee public yet again did not stint in their generosity. We helped out by drumming up support on the megaphone, which really seems to make a difference. Ailsa and Grant are developing their street oratory skills and we would also like to thank John, William and Henryk for their help on the stall, and in getting word out about our march and rally.

We have learned, from confidential sources, that thirty people were sanctioned last Monday alone.

### ***27 November, Dundee, TC***

The SUWN advice stall was suspiciously quiet yesterday, with only a few approaches to us from unemployed people seeking advice. The constant drizzle and biting cold didn't help, as folk are more reluctant to stop and speak when the weather is as dreich as it was. However, when we were packing up, we were approached by a very angry woman (aged sixty-one, with multiple health problems and due to retire in nine months) who had just stormed out of the jobcentre, and who felt she was about to be sanctioned. An SUWN volunteer

offered to accompany her inside to try and sort out the problem, and when we went into the main reception area, we were met by another angry man who was being 'accompanied off the premises' by the G4S security guards.<sup>6</sup> He had requested permission to record his interview and been refused, and when he attempted to argue the toss he was asked to leave. We managed to intervene and calm the situation down, and also gave him our phone number. We hope he gets in contact and we can take up his case.

The situation regarding the woman was sorted out, and she was grateful for our assistance, but she was also informed that she will be required to sign up to the new 'Claimant Commitment', which replaces the Job Seekers Agreement, the next time she signs on. This is a much more punitive agreement than the JSA, requiring the unemployed to demonstrate that they are looking for work for thirty-five hours per week, and any - even minute - deviation from the Commitment can trigger a sanction. The introduction of the Claimant Commitment is undoubtedly driving up the sanction rate.

We have learned that the Smith Commission Report will include some proposals for the devolution of welfare provision, but the poorest and most vulnerable citizens will still remain within the maws of the Westminster-sponsored starvation scheme that is the sanctions regime. Whilst the SNP government have cut across some of the worst impact of sanctions, the suffering and injustice goes on. The fight also goes on, and will intensify, for the wiping away of the sanctions regime, and its replacement with a decent welfare system that does not demonise the most vulnerable.

(Thanks to Sarah S, Ailsa, William, Ruth, Benny and Grant for helping out on a cauld, smir-ridden day. The Wellgate Jobcentre know that, whatever the weather, and however devilish their constant changing of systems, we will continue to hold them to account.)

### ***29 November, Edinburgh***

Oor very ane Tony Cox made an impassioned appeal to fellow Indy Campaigners at the 45+ rally<sup>7</sup> to come to 'Sanctions City' next Saturday and support our march and rally. Great to see so many working-class people getting up on their hind-legs, having their say, and sending such powerful messages to all of our fellow citizens in Scotland, and especially to the corrupt and defunct excuse of a government we have in Westminster. (Thanks to Karen and Susan for helping wi' the leafleting.)

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<sup>6</sup> G4S is a vast multinational security company.

<sup>7</sup> The name refers to the 45% (and growing) support for YES.

### ***3 December, Dundee, TC***

It was another far too busy - and bitterly cold - day. It appears there is no let-up in the escalating state-sponsored starvation that is being spewed out from the Wellgate Buroo.

We came across and represented a case that is all too typical of the class war being waged by the Westminster elites. John came out of prison on the 17th of October, but his JSA claim took time to be accepted, and he was then informed that he had been sanctioned from the 20th November because he had missed an appointment with Triage (service providers who are meant to 'enable' people into work, but who actually sanction far more people than they find work for). John had informed Triage that he was not able to make the appointment because he was signing a tenancy agreement, which he has written proof of. This should have been accepted as a 'reasonable' excuse by his Triage 'coach', but was totally disregarded, and he was sanctioned for four weeks.<sup>8</sup>

When we met him this morning, John had no money and no food, and was using the emergency supply on his meter. He had been reduced to begging in the streets for support, which produced a few coppers, and had also received some help from family members who are themselves struggling. We accompanied him into a meeting, helped him put in an appeal against the sanction - which he had not been informed he had a right to do - and arranged for a 'same day' Hardship Payment to be made to him. This should give him the princely sum of £87 to last him a fortnight with which to embark on his new life on the outside.

If this is as much as ex-offenders can expect when they hit Civvy Street, does society have the right to make moral judgements against them if they turn to crime in order to survive?

*On 4 December we shared a video made by Dundee SNP, which they had titled 'This is what benefit sanctions mean to a Dundee family, which is why we are marching against austerity on Saturday...' It showed Tony from the SUWN interviewing Charmaine outside the buroo. Here is a transcript of the video:*

**Tony:** How many times have you been sanctioned?

**Charmaine:** Three

**T:** Three times - and what kind of time period?

**C:** It's been about four months, five months. They says I didna turn up at a Triage appointment - I didna get the letter - that was four weeks...

**T:** And did you get any money during that period of time?

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<sup>8</sup> Triage like to insist that it is the DWP not themselves who impose sanctions however they make recommendations that the DWP acts on.

C: I got Hardship

T: Did they tell you about Hardship allowance and your right to appeal? Have you appealed?

C: No, I found that out mysel

T: And have you got bairns?

C: I've got two, eight and ten. They're bigger than me, solid. And they expect you to go to foodbanks, and that means you cannae buy your fruit and veg. I tend to, when they come haem, to gi them the best tea that they could get, the best nutritious tea and that, try and encourage them to eat fruit and veg. We can't even afford fruit and veg, but I skin mysel just to buy them.

T: So how were you actually surviving then?

C: Surviving? I wasn't surviving. I wasn't surviving. The bairns were. I was obviously going back on mysel. I was going without mysel, cos that's what you do when you've bairns, you go without.

*We had now finished pulling together our case notes on sanctions into a report, which we titled 'Sanctioned Voices'. We emailed copies to all Scottish MPs and MSPs and all Dundee councillors. We also sent a copy to the House of Commons Select Committee Enquiry into Benefit Sanctions. On 5 December the National covered our report with a double page spread and further discussion in the editorial. (You can find a copy of the report on our website: [https://suwn.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/sanctioned\\_voices.pdf](https://suwn.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/sanctioned_voices.pdf). The statements in the report were collected by: Karen Brownlee, Grant Campbell, Tony Cox (who co-ordinated it), Zoe Dingwall, Ruth Forbes, Sarah Glynn (who edited it), John MacGregor, Fuzzie McLeod, Mark Scott, Susan Van Sas, and Ailsa Weir. Bennie Gauntlett and William Meek helped run the stall.)*

*On 6 December we held our 'NO to Austerity YES to Home Rule' march and rally. Speakers included Stewart Hosie MP and Charmaine, whose interview is reproduced above. Our leaflets explained:*

Westminster austerity cuts are asset-stripping our communities, holding back our economy, and driving our most vulnerable into destitution. We are facing an unprecedented attack on our welfare state, and the poorest and most vulnerable are at the brunt of it. This is not what we voted for. Scotland should decide on its own economic priorities and its own welfare system.

### **8 December, Dundee, TC**

Here's a short video of Saturday's 'No to Austerity' march and rally. More great filming and editing fae Glenn and Ailsa. The film, however, canna show jist how cauld it wis. The pipers, Iain and Andy, had trouble keepin their paws warm, and we should've geen gloves to abody that was carrying the banners.

*The march was broadcast UK-wide on RT, along with an interview with Tony, and*

*also shown on STV and covered in the Dundee Courier.*



*Hazel with home-sewn banner (photo Grant Campbell)*

*On 9 December the Courier ran an article on our Sanctioned Voices report. It was headlined with the story of the man who had his benefits docked by £100 for doing a day's unpaid work as an extra in the BBC drama Bob Servant.*

*All the while we were continuing our stalls outside the buroo.*

### **12 December, Dundee, TC**

The stall yesterday was strangely quiet (not that we are complaining) with our volunteers only coming across one sanction case - which was already under appeal. We were beginning to feel today's would be the same, but near the end



of our shift we came across a number of people whose cases had to be taken up, including three ex-prisoners, who generally seem to be the worst treated of all benefit claimants we come across. The worst case we encountered was that of J, a thirty-seven-year-old man who had been released from prison last December. On the first occasion he had signed on he had been sanctioned for four months, and it was eight to nine months since he had received any money at all. When we met him he had no money and no food, and was reduced to sofa surfing at family and friends. He is a recovering addict who suffers from drug induced psychosis, and his dire situation had also worsened his on-going problem with depression. We accompanied him along to the Welfare Rights office at Dundee House, where Harvey and the Welfare Rights team helped him with his application for a Crisis Grant, and he was also referred to the Dundee Foodbank.

This is all too typical of the situation facing ex-prisoners, many of whom have been jailed for petty crimes. It appears that their punishment does not stop when they emerge from prison. Indeed, for far too many, their release is the beginning of an ordeal that is worse than stir - at least in prison they are assured of three meals a day, a bed and heating and lighting.

We were joined outside the buroo by our friend and comrade, Rizzy, of Taught by Muhammad Foodbank. As we were chatting about how unusually quiet it was - and were suddenly faced with a flurry of cases - Rizzy was able to intervene to ensure that another person without any means whatsoever would at least have some food over the weekend, through arranging for the delivery of a food parcel.

(A special thank-you to Diana, a passer-by who insisted that we accept her donation of £20, which will pay for our latest order of 'Know Your Rights' leaflets. And thanks to John, Benny, Ailsa, Ruth, Shauna, Grant and Susan for helping out on the stalls over the last two days - the weather was absolutely **Baltic**, but we all, I believe, understand the importance of being outside the buroo as much as we possibly can. Finally a shout out to William, one of our most stalwart volunteers, who has not been well.)

*Besides accompanying people into the buroo, we are often called upon to go with them into assessments for Employment and Support Allowance (the benefit for people unable to work) or Personal Independence Payment (the benefit that is supposed to cover the extra costs associated with being ill or disabled). It is important to have a witness at these assessments as the official reports can stray quite far from what actually happened - but the people running them have been as welcoming as the people working in the jobcentre.*

### **16 December, Dundee, TC**

Calling oot Scrooge - Tales fae Atos (part 1). Cameron is forty-one years old and



suffers from severe dyslexia, a condition that he was first diagnosed with at the age of sixteen or seventeen, as well as other problems. He has been unemployed on and off since he was a teenager, and has always had his conditions accepted as fact, substantiated by his GP and other medical specialists. He was, therefore, taken aback when he was asked to attend an Atos medical examination [*a Work Capability Assessment to judge eligibility for ESA, then run by the multinational company, Atos, now by Maximus*]. This was scheduled for today, and, with his anxiety levels rising, he asked the SUWN to send someone along with him to act as a witness and a representative. We duly turned up ten minutes before the appointed time, as requested, only to be kept waiting for half an hour before the exam actually took place.

The medical assessor asked Cameron who I was, and when told that I was there as a witness, duly informed me of a witness's role - as she interpreted it. I was then told that the notes I take could only be used for my own reference, and could not be used as evidence within any appeal process that might arise from the medical exam. I begged to differ with this very limited interpretation of my rights as a witness/rep and duly asked her to provide me with written confirmation from DWP regulations that this was the case, otherwise I would use the notes I take in any way I saw fit. Her initial response was to state that she was not able to do this. We had reached an impasse, and she asked us to return to the waiting room until she had spoken to her manager.

After a further wait of around ten to fifteen minutes, the assessor again ushered us into the examination room, clutching a bound volume. When we had taken our seats, she began to read from the DWP regulations governing the conduct of medical examinations. The key sentence read that - and I paraphrase - in any appeal, the assessor reserves the right to challenge the subject's version of events relating to a medical examination. I asked the assessor why she had given us wrong and misleading guidance, as there was no reference within the regulations to any witness notes being debarred from evidence in any subsequent appeal. Her immediate response was to ask me to leave, and when I asked 'on what grounds?' she replied, 'because I won't be spoken to like that.' I countered that I had not spoken to her in a manner that would justify such a response, at which point she left the room, saying that she was going to call the police.

I turned to Cameron, and asked him to stay firm while we waited this out. After a couple of minutes, the manager appeared and informed us that the medical examination had been terminated and would be re-convened after Xmas. She apologised to Cameron for any inconvenience caused, but not to me, and then informed him that he did have the option of having his examination recorded and transcribed, which, in her opinion, was a much better option than having a witness take notes. Cameron responded that he would discuss this with me

and get back to her on that one. I then informed the manager that I would like to make a complaint regarding the manner in which we had both been treated, and we were asked to wait outside the reception office, the interior of which was swathed in Xmas bunting, if not Xmas spirit.

Just as the complaint form was being handed to us and we were preparing to leave, two policemen appeared. They informed us that they had been requested to attend following a report, made by an Atos employee, of 'threatening behaviour'. They asked to take my details, which I refused to comply with on the basis that there was no question of my acting in a threatening manner, and that, on the contrary, a counter complaint could reasonably be made that the Atos assessor was wasting police time. I pointed out that there was another witness there and Cameron then confirmed that I had simply asked her a question. The policemen eventually realised they were going to get nowhere, and we were allowed to leave - which we did gladly. We realise this is only round one of a possible fifteen rounder, but the very fact that the whole of today's incident kicked off barely seconds after we had taken our seats in the exam room with the Atos assessor pronouncing, wrongly, as to our rights - or lack of them - within a subsequent appeal tribunal, indicates that Cameron was right to call on us for support. Don't give a feckin inch to the Atos bullies and they will be revealed for the lickspittles of power that they really are.

To be continued.

*[You can find the current version of DWP rules on note taking in Work Capability Assessments in appendix C – clearly updated in response to this and similar incidents.]*

### **18 December, Dundee, TC**

**Tales fae the Wellgate Buroo.** The SUWN stall was a bitty too busy fir oor liking the day. Our volunteers were kept active throughout our two and a half hour stint, to the extent that there wis nae time to sample Grant's homemade soup until right at the end o' the shift. Among the dozen or so problems we dealt with was the shocking case of two teenage lassies who were threatened with sanctions because they were not keeping their job book up to date - only problem wis that they were on work placement at the time, and working twelve hour shifts (fir nae pay whatsoever) at the Range store. This is slave labour and we are not going to tolerate it.

And we met William, who was sanctioned around a month ago for failing to attend a Triage appointment that he never received a letter for. Despite the fact that he subsequently won his Mandatory Reconsideration, he is now expected to sign on daily for a month.

We have also come across a number of cases of delayed payments, and we would like to draw the attention of activists and the unemployed to the right of claimants to apply for a Short Term Benefit Advance. These have been around for some time, but the DWP have basically kept their existence secret. Remember that you dinna get nothing if you dinna ask, and if the jobcentre staff dinna give you the info you need in order to apply, then contact as and we will raise **hell!**

Our stall was visited by a BBC cameraman and reporter who are filming a documentary on foodbanks that will appear in the spring.

(Thanks to Grant, Ailsa, Benny, Charmaine, Mandy and Shauna for helpin oot the day, along with those friends, comrades and supporters who stopped by for a crack - and a special thanks to Grant fir the soup.)

### ***21 December, Dundee, TC***

**More tales fae the Wellgate.** The last SUWN stall before the seasonal break was remarkably quiet, to the extent that we contemplated challenging the DWP staff to a Xmas truce fitba match. Many thanks to the SUWN volunteers and our friends and comrades who came along to help and to show support. In keeping with the festive buzz, Hazel provided supporters and claimants with her home-made, and delicious, soup, which was much appreciated by abody.

We also set up our first SUWN advice stall ootside the Arbroath Jobcentre on Tuesday, and, although Friday's Dundee advice stall was quiet, there was still a lot of work to do, with SUWN volunteers being called upon to accompany claimants into the buroo and along to the Welfare Rights office. Below are reports from Ailsa Weir and Ruth Forbes that underline the bureaucratic maze that some of our most vulnerable citizens find themselves in when they enter the doors of the Wellgate Fear Factory.

### ***AW***

John is in his early sixties and has been claiming ESA (or equivalent sickness benefit) for around ten years. Although he is an intelligent and articulate man, he suffers from alcohol-related neuropathy, which causes problems with memory and everyday functioning. He also suffers from a number of other medical problems including tremors and insomnia.

John had recently visited his doctor and obtained a note stating that he was unfit for work due to alcohol-related problems. When we initially spoke to him today, he was confused as the doctor's line he had sent to the Jobcentre had been returned to him, along with a note stating that his claim for ESA had been closed. Due to his medical conditions and memory issues, John is often unable to understand and follow the Kafkaesque bureaucratic processes that go along with

his claim for benefits.

Upon arriving at the Jobcentre, we spoke to an advisor who informed us that John's claim had been closed because he had missed an appointment for a medical assessment, although John was unaware of having received any letter of appointment. There seemed to be little doubt in the mind of the advisor that he would in fact have 'passed' his assessment and qualified for ESA – if he had been aware that he was to be tested. We were told that it was impossible to schedule a medical reassessment within the next few weeks, if at all. A closed claim is apparently a reasonably impenetrable thing.

We then had the somewhat uncanny experience of the advisor briefly teaming up with us to figure out the best way round this trouble – her solution was as bizarre as it was well-intentioned. As his ESA claim for alcohol-related problems had been closed, she thought that the best way to get John some money to live on was to open a new claim; the only problem being that he couldn't put the same medical condition on the new claim as on the old one, as he'd already missed an appointment for that, and it'd been closed. To recap: John had a condition. He missed a medical. His claim was closed. Therefore, the only way to receive ESA was, essentially, **to invent a new condition** and claim ESA based on that. Furthermore, if John wanted to claim a Crisis Grant from the Scottish Welfare Fund for food/gas/electricity, he would **have** to take this course of action – if he applied for a Crisis Grant now, they'd just refuse as he didn't have an active claim. She helpfully suggested he try to claim based on 'depression...or something...'

John was understandably dismayed at the prospect of going back to his doctor and requesting a new sick line with a different condition. He was rightly concerned at the possible future repercussions of such actions, not to mention that he is a very honest man and the thought of pretending that what was wrong with him was something different was distressing to him. He was in fact finding the whole process very difficult. The jobcentre advisor suggested we head along to Welfare Rights for further support. It must be said that she also volunteered the information that there was a Short Term Benefit Advance system in place for people whose claims were being processed, but we should first speak to the Welfare Rights team. Off to Dundee House...

When we eventually spoke to a welfare rights officer, he agreed that it seemed backwards to begin a new claim based on a new condition which was not the main reason that John was unable to work. He pointed out that 'alcohol-related problems', the reason for his first claim, is a wide and encompassing term, and any other condition he used for a new claim might be seen to be related to the first, meaning that his new claim would be denied. Also, if the symptoms caused by John's alcohol-related neuropathy were to change in any way, this would

complicate his claim if he wasn't telling them that he suffers from this in the first place!

After forty minutes, in which the welfare rights officer negotiated on our behalf with the jobcentre on the telephone, we had a resolution of sorts. (Another reason John finds it difficult to complete his own claims is that he does not have a landline, Freephone numbers are not free from his mobile, and the jobcentre itself no longer has telephones for the public to use.) An email was sent from the officer to the jobcentre explaining the situation in what I can only assume was a more official capacity, and stating that John's claim was not to be stopped and that a reassessment should be scheduled due to the specific circumstances involved. He seemed confident that there was a high likelihood of this being successful. Meanwhile we applied for a Crisis Grant, as this was now OK since there was an active claim again. None of these services can phone John back as his mobile phone has now stopped working, so he is scheduled to go down to meet with Welfare Rights on Monday afternoon to learn the outcome of his Crisis Grant application and claim continuation, and get help to apply for and receive the benefits he is entitled to. One can only hope he is granted a crisis payment, as he estimates he has only enough food and electricity to last this weekend.

Although every individual person we met today was trying to help John, he is still left without money this weekend and without the guarantee that he will even be awarded ESA after the hoops we jumped through. This is despite the fact that his GP, jobcentre advisor, and welfare rights officer all agree that he is unfit to be looking for work. The most simple and obvious way that this situation could be avoided is surely to accept the word of a client's GP in the first instance, when they declare as unfit for work.

John was exhausted by the time we left Dundee House, and visibly shaking after two plus hours of appointments, discussion and, for him, confusion. Although not relevant to his benefit claim, he mentioned to me in conversation that today is his birthday.

## **RF**

Allan has been sanctioned until 1 March. Two to three months ago he started work as a kitchen porter at the Apex Hotel. He told us that he was not issued with proper shoes for the job, nor was he given a meal break for five days while the other staff were. This seemed unfair so he left. The manager of the Apex claimed he left voluntarily, and, although Allan explained his understanding of the circumstances in a phone conversation with a DWP decision maker, the manager's story was believed and Allan was sanctioned. We accompanied Allan into the jobcentre to request a Mandatory Reconsideration of his sanction (and to get assurance that his account of what happened will be given proper

consideration), and to submit an application for Hardship Payments. Allan has around £50 (wages from Apex just in), which makes him ineligible for a Crisis Grant. As his circumstances will undoubtedly change, we offered to accompany him along to Welfare Rights to flag this up, but he was short of time. He will go himself on Monday, and also has our contact information.

### ***30 December, Dundee***

In memory of our friend and comrade Albert Mitchell  
 Stalwart fighter for Independence and a better world  
 Veteran of the campaigns against the Bedroom Tax and against welfare sanctions  
 Hero of the Peoples' Republic of Stobbie  
 and prize supplier of laughs and banter  
 Campaigning won't be so much fun without you.

A sad, sad day. First we heard of the death of Albert, and then of Jen Spark – founder and organiser of Perth Against Welfare Sanctions: so full of energy and plans, so full of fun – why did you have to leave us?

### ***2015***

#### ***16 January, Dundee, TC***

SUWN Dundee organised stalls in Perth and Arbroath this week, as well as our regular stints outside the Wellgate Fun Factory.

A group of us from SUWN joined our friends and comrades from DAWS in Perth for a commemorative protest in honour of Jen Spark. Jen's passing has left a dark hole in the Perth work that will not easily be filled. The heavy snow limited our effectiveness in giving advice, but Andy's hot tomato soup was very welcome.

On Friday afternoon we were back on home turf, and very quiet it was too. We were able to hae a crack wi' quite a few fowk, including an apoplectic mother of an eighteen-year-old who complained that her daughter had been sanctioned before Xmas. Despite this, the daughter is currently working at The Range in Lochee, where she is often starting at 9am in the morning and not getting home until around 8pm, all for the square root of zero by way of payment in return. Welcome to the new slavery.

(Thanks to Grant, Ailsa, Gordon, William and Jim.)

#### ***24 January, Dundee and Angus, TC***

Another busy week. On Monday, at the Wellgate Buroo, we came across an elderly guy, in his early sixties, who told us that, despite being diagnosed with a terminal condition and given around two years to live, he had been placed in the

Work Related Activity Group, which means that he must complete tasks such as how to apply for jobs that will get him ready for the world of work. William accompanied him to Welfare Rights, who are now taking up his case. (I met this guy a few days later, when he was much cheerier and confident that he will get things sorted.)

On Wednesday, a couple of us from SUWN went through to a bitterly cold Blairgowrie to attend the stall/protest outside the local burrow. The traffic in and out of the burrow was minimal, but we did deal with one case, of a young woman who lives up the glens and faces a thirty mile round trip into Blair to sign on, and who was being ordered to sign on on a daily basis. Without transport of her own, she was having to catch the school bus into Blair at around 8am and wait around the town until the school bus returned in the evening. How this was expected to help her in her job-searching activities is a bit of a mystery, which the DWP seem unable to clear up. The woman was clearly upset by her predicament and declared that she was going to sign off. We urged her to challenge the decision, and gave her details of how to access welfare rights advice, as well as offering our own services.

On Thursday we were in Arbroath, and took up our first case there. This involves a middle-aged woman with severe dyslexia and acute arthritis. Lynne had been sanctioned before Xmas for not applying for enough jobs, and when we inquired as to her Claimant Commitment we found that her advisor was expecting her to complete five job search activities per day, or twenty-five per week. She was also expected to conduct her job search through the Universal Jobmatch (UJM) computerised system, which was virtually unusable by her due to her severe dyslexia, and so almost guaranteed to lead to further sanctions. The pressure of all this had led to her having several panic attacks.

Our final stall of the week saw us return to our home pitch.

(Thanks to Grant, Ailsa, William, John, Gordon, Susan, Sarah S and Shauna.)

*Arbroath Jobcentre were not receptive to our suggestions of how to improve their service to take account of their clients' needs:*

### **30 January, Arbroath**

#### **SUWN activist arrested in Arbroath Jobcentre whilst representing a benefit claimant. SUWN Defence Campaign Meeting Wednesday.**

Tony Cox, an experienced activist with SUWN in Dundee, was arrested in Arbroath yesterday whilst representing a highly vulnerable female benefit claimant. On Monday we had accompanied Lynne into a meeting with her jobcentre advisor, where we asked for a further meeting to re-negotiate her

Claimant Commitment. This was agreed to and arranged for Thursday at 10.40am. Tony travelled through to Arbroath confident that the meeting would go smoothly as it was pretty much an open and shut case. However, a few minutes into the meeting it became apparent that the advisor did not want to address the two major issues of concern to Lynne: UJM and her onerous Claimant Commitment. Tony intervened at this point to underline what had already been addressed in a written statement that was handed over at the beginning of the meeting, that Lynne wished to withdraw from UJM and to decrease substantially the number of job-search activities she was required to undertake. The response of the advisor was that it was a requirement of all claimants to sign up to UJM, which is not true, and that this was therefore not open for discussion. Tony then asked the advisor to produce the DWP regulation where signing up to UJM was a requirement. The advisor replied that she could not produce the regulation, and when Tony continued to ask that the issue of UJM be discussed, the advisor suggested that he take the issue up with the manager of the jobcentre whilst she continued the meeting with Lynne. Tony reminded the advisor that Lynne had asked him to represent her, and he advised Lynne to accompany him to meet with the manager.

This meeting was even more frustrating, with the manager again insisting that UJM was not up for negotiation; and Tony again asked her to provide confirmation within the DWP regulations that this was the case. The manager took grave exception to Tony's repeated attempts to discuss the two major issues that Lynne wanted addressed, and also suggested to Lynne that she should arrange another meeting without Tony or any other witness or rep being present. Despite the pressure Lynne was being put under, she replied to the manager by saying that she would not attend another meeting without Tony. At this point the attitude of the manager turned even frostier and she finally demanded that Tony leave the building or the police would be called. Tony refused to leave, but the meeting was brought to an end when it was agreed that another meeting be arranged to discuss the issue further.

Tony was arrested after he left the jobcentre. He has been charged with threatening behaviour, refusing to give his name and address, and resisting arrest. His bail conditions forbid him having any contact with Lynne, who is a witness, and he is also forbidden from going into or making contact with Arbroath Jobcentre until the case comes to trial, which has been set for the 25th February at Forfar Sheriff Court. This is a serious case for Tony personally, but it also has massive repercussions for welfare rights activists and groups throughout the country. The fundamental right of benefit claimants to representation is being challenged, along with the right of welfare groups to conduct their work. This case should be taken up by the wider progressive movement, and we urge all readers to show their support. The SUWN will be organising a defence campaign



meeting this Wednesday and protest demo outside Arbroath Jobcentre this coming Thursday. We urge you to show your solidarity and to fight back against this clear attempt to intimidate anti-sanctions campaigners and groups.

*Meanwhile, the wider campaign must go on. Next day saw us picketing the Salvation Army shop in Broughty Ferry.*



*Picketing the Salvation Army, Broughty Ferry (John, Andrea, Gordon and Tony,  
photos by Karen Brownlee)*

*The charity is a notorious user of work-for-your-benefits slave labour, and our picket was timed to coincide with the protest by Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty outside the Salvation Army shop in Tollcross, where benefit claimants have been sent to work for no wages by workfare contractor Learndirect. Leaflets were handed out to all who passed, and we finished with a noisy impromptu march down Brook Street - to Wetherspoons. As the leaflet explained:*

'The Salvation Army claims: "When people are desolate and desperate – we're here. When people are crying out for justice – we're here". Well, Sally Army, we can see that – so stop making people desolate and desperate and stop being unjust! And remember, "the labourer is worthy of his reward" 1 Timothy 5:18.'

(Thanks to 2 Johns, 2 Susans, Hazel, Norma, Grant, Karen, Sarah G and Tony)

### **3 February, Dundee**

Article in today's *Courier* reporting the arrest of Tony Cox whilst representing a vulnerable benefit claimant. He informs us that he was visited by two police officers yesterday evening to warn him that if he attended the scheduled protest meeting at Arbroath Jobcentre this Thursday from 1pm he would be risking arrest for breaching his bail conditions. However, as there is nothing in the bail conditions that forbids him from being in the vicinity of Arbroath Jobcentre, he says that he will look forward to meeting other protestors on Thursday.

*We also set up an online petition calling on the DWP to acknowledge people's right to have someone help them, and to have a Claimant Commitment that takes account of their circumstances. This was quickly shared and soon reached hundreds of signatures. In our insistence on people's right to be accompanied we are simply calling on the DWP to keep to their own rules – see appendix C*

### **5 February, Dundee, TC**

Good report from the *Tully [Evening Telegraph]* on today's protest at Arbroath Jobcentre. They are, however, a little conservative on the turnout, with between forty and fifty being present by our reckoning. The tone of the protest was one of reasonable cussedness, and when it ended a spontaneous march took place from the jobcentre into the centre of Arbroath and up the High Street, where a short street meeting was staged in order to explain the purpose of the protest and march to local passers-by and shoppers, and to let them know about our forthcoming public meeting.



*Protesting the arrest of Tony Cox (left), Arbroath (Hazel and William are holding our SUNN banner, photo by Ailsa Weir)*

### ***20 February, Dundee***

The work in Dundee has intensified since Tony's arrest. In the last two weeks alone, we have organised eight advice and activity stalls in Dundee and Arbroath, participated in the Perth Against Welfare Sanctions (PAWS) protest in Perth, organised a public meeting in Arbroath, and held two SUWN meetings in Dundee. In addition, the advocacy work has increased and more volunteers have stepped forward to take this up.

Being arrested has not stopped Tony from being fully involved in advocacy work, but he has reported that he has faced major problems at Atos in Dundee whilst representing a benefit claimant at a Work Capability Assessment:

During the course of last Thursday afternoon, 12th February, I attended a Work Capability Assessment at the Atos offices in the Greenmarket in Dundee, as a witness and rep. I was approached by the nurse who had called the police on me on the 16th December. She informed the benefit claimant that she was not prepared to have me in the assessment, and that if he insisted on having me with him he might have to wait for a further hour until another assessor was available, and that they, too, might refuse to see him with myself present. Atos further informed him that if the assessment did not go ahead they could not guarantee that he would not be sanctioned. The benefit claimant was in a deal of pain and told me that he would prefer to go ahead with the assessment rather than have to go through the pain and effort of attending again. Despite not having a witness, his assessment went well, as I suspected it might. However, during the course of the exchanges with the nurse, I was subjected to a fair amount of goading that was meant to elicit a reaction, and was told that the police had, again, been called, and that they were taking advice from the DWP on whether I was even allowed in the building.

'I had previously handed in a letter of complaint regarding my treatment back in December, and my treatment on this occasion underlines that I have been targeted in what amounts to a determined effort to exclude me from further involvement as a rep and witness at Atos Work Capability Assessments. This issue - the attempt to exclude me from acting as a rep - is one that I believe I will continue to be affected by. The following day, during the course of a successful meeting at Dundee Jobcentre when I represented a benefit claimant, he was informed by the advisor that of course he had the right to be represented, but perhaps next time he attended he could do so with someone other than the gentleman he had brought along.

Tony is currently preparing yet another letter of complaint regarding his treatment, and has raised the issue with his constituency MP, Stewart Hosie. He is not in the least fazed by this treatment, and is rather pleased that his mere presence as a rep for benefit claimants is pretty much guaranteed to get a result, whether he is in the meeting or not.

*The last week in February saw our first sheriff court protest, buoyed up with solidarity and support from across the UK and beyond:*

### **25 February, Forfar, SG**

**Advocacy on trial.** The pompous Victorian buildings of Forfar Sheriff Court were considerably enlivened today by the banners and speeches of protestors come to support SUWN activist, Tony Cox, who was arrested while helping a vulnerable claimant at Arbroath Buroo last month. Folk had come from across Angus and as far as Edinburgh, where there were also protestors outside local jobcentres, and we read out a list of support that included messages from Greece, France and Australia, as well as groups across the UK.

This was just the initial hearing, so quite brief. Tony will have to appear in court again in June. But we can report that the sheriff saw no need for the extra bail condition requested by the procurator fiscal, so he is free to go into Arbroath Buroo.

Of course courts are inherently full of rules and controls, but the case took place amid tight security, there was a heavy police presence outside, and we were taken aback to be told that only three members of the public would be allowed in. When it was pointed out that courts are meant to be publicly accessible, they soon gave that one up.

We are looking forward to reports from the protests in support that are going on across the UK – London, Cardiff, Birmingham, Liverpool, Nottingham, Dorset, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Meanwhile, if you're fond of a joke, you might like this description of the SUWN from Tony's charge sheet. Apparently we 'solicit' outside jobcentres and attempt to 'coerce' benefit claimants to get them to have us accompany them!



*Solidarity protest in Kilburn, 25 February*

*Meanwhile – more everyday advocacy work, as reported by one of our activists who attended a work capability assessment as a witness and rep.*

### ***Dundee, Ailsa***

On Wednesday 25th February I accompanied a friend to an Atos medical assessment for Employment and Support Allowance. He suffers from depression and anxiety and has barely left the house for the past six months. We took a taxi. On arriving we found the receptionist to be snappy and rude, not just with us, but with others who arrived as well. Welcome to the machine, interpersonal skills at a minimum. I made sure the appointments were on time, as being able to sit and wait for any length of time can be counted against you in the assessment. I had no problem getting into the interview room with my friend, but the trick questions began straight away. How did you get here? How long were you in the taxi? In other words, can you get to and from somewhere using public transport? When do you go to bed? When do you get up? In other words, can you establish routines? Do you make a cup of tea when you get up? I resisted the temptation to ask the 'healthcare professional' if she was taking the piss, but did ask the relevance of a cup of tea to the examination. She was trying to establish what my friend was capable of doing. Presumably making a cup of tea means you are fit for work?! Do you go shopping? How often do friends visit? Do you watch telly, or read, or listen to music?

The line of questioning reflects the DWP clutching at straws to disallow people from ESA by giving them **zero** points in their points-based assessment. The questions are designed to exploit a person's natural inclination to present themselves in a positive light, even though this does not give a true reflection of

how their illness affects them, or how they actually feel. It is important to tell how things are when they are at their worst!

My friend pointed out that he had been diagnosed with depression and anxiety by his doctor and asked why he was not being examined by a doctor for a second opinion. The nurse assured him that she was a healthcare professional, took the huff, and asked him if he wanted to continue with the assessment. In actual fact, she did a bit more typing on her computer then said that was the end of the assessment and a decision-maker would decide his fate.

On leaving, I pointed out that my friend had met the requirements on several of the DWP's own descriptors to score enough points to receive ESA, and that I hoped her assessment reflected this. It is important that anyone attending an Atos assessment is aware of the DWP's descriptors relevant to them. It is also important to be aware of the line of trick questioning, and what it is designed to achieve, before any assessment. I would recommend anyone supporting or representing someone at a medical assessment to discuss all this before the day of the assessment. **Be aware!**

*When the contract for these assessments was handed over from Atos to Maximus – another multinational, whose dubious record went before it – the new regime was welcomed with protests across the UK:*

### **3 March, Dundee, TC**

SUWN joined the national day of protest. Nine of us were out in Dundee city centre yesterday lunchtime and shifted upwards of eight to nine hundred leaflets, in the process coming across two cases that we will need to address.

### **13 March, Dundee, TC**

The last two to three weeks have been increasingly hectic for the SUWN in Dundee, with little let up in the day to day work. We have seen a considerable increase in our case load, and new citizen advocates have emerged and are taking up cases involving Work Capability Assessments, and representing claimants in meetings at Dundee and Arbroath Jobcentres.

In Dundee, we have noticed a distinct drop-off in the number of sanctions, and inquiries made to the foodbanks have confirmed that referrals as a result of sanctions started dropping off before Xmas. We have also had a heads up from reliable sources that there has been a temporary change of strategy at the Dundee jobcentre, with direct sanctions taking a back seat. We believe that this drop-off in sanctions is down to the ceaseless work we have conducted here. Over the last few months we've been all over Dundee Jobcentre like a rash, and we are proud that over the Xmas and New Year break there were many people who might have

been sanctioned, but who weren't, due to the pressure we have exerted.

Whilst sanctions cases are not so common, we have been kept very busy (indeed as busy as we have ever been) in direct advocacy work, and in referring many cases on to Welfare Rights. The work in Arbroath also continues to develop, with three stalls in the last two weeks and new cases coming up all the time. Word has reached us that a delegation comprising full time welfare officers recently approached the Arbroath Jobcentre manager (who was responsible for calling the police on SUWN activist, Tony Cox) to complain regarding the poor treatment meted out to claimants at the hands of staff. Our source believed that this initiative was encouraged by the willingness of our volunteers to face down any threats of arrest and prosecution for the crime of representing benefit claimants - and who are we to disagree with this?

(Thanks to Ailsa, John, Jane, Grant, Susan, Gordon, Jonathan, Gary, Dave, William, Sarah S, Ronnie, Bennie, Hazel, Donna and Maria.)

*We do not have the space nor time to go into the many cases we have covered, but we give details (below) of an all-too-typical case that was taken up by one of our newest volunteers.*



*Leafleting in Arbroath, 13 March (Ailsa, Grant, Susan and Gordon)*

**JK**

Anna is fifty-three and has learning disabilities, osteoporosis and severe asthma. She finds reading and writing difficult and finds it hard to take in information over the phone. Anna's benefits had been stopped and she wasn't sure why. We arrived early for Anna's eleven-thirty appointment, which was to start a new



claim, but the advisor said the appointment had been at eleven and she would need to make another one, causing a delay in Anna receiving the money she is entitled to. The appointment hadn't been given in writing to Anna because, according to the advisor, this would have meant that Anna's claim would have been delayed. When I pointed out that her claim had been delayed even further because the information was given over the phone while Anna was outside, and that Anna needed appointments in writing, I was told off for being 'very rude!' The computers were down, so the advisor couldn't check whether Anna's claim had been stopped because she had been late for a previous appointment (her bus had broken down), or whether it was because she had been in hospital for two days, which put her over the limit for the number of times that she was 'allowed' to be sick while on JSA. Anna was unaware of this limit and was having difficulty understanding the procedures. After this, the advisor was much more helpful, maybe because it was blatantly obvious that the buroo had failed in the requirement they have to identify people with additional needs, and that Anna had suffered greatly as a result (she was crying by this time because she didn't understand the procedures and was worrying about money). The advisor asked if I would be able to go to a doctor's appointment with Anna because even she recognized that it might be hard for Anna to explain to her doctor what her problems were.

We went to Anna's doctor and she wasn't treated with any more dignity there than she had been in the buroo. The doctor told her off and hectored her for being ill; but she did give her a sick line, albeit with conditions attached that Anna had no choice but to agree to (she didn't want to). We then went to Welfare Rights where – finally – Anna was spoken to with respect and the worker actually listened to what she had to say. It turned out that the buroo had given Anna incorrect information; she had been declared fit for work by Atos and the buroo had said that it was too late to appeal. Not so, according to Welfare Rights, and they have taken up her case and pulled out all the stops.

### ***20 March, Dundee and Arbroath, TC***

It was another busy week, with two advice stalls in Dundee and a third organised in Arbroath. We were also approached by ESA claimants regarding Work Capability Assessments that were scheduled for this week: however, all three appointments were cancelled at the last moment. It appears from this evidence that the handover from Atos to Maximus has been anything but smooth.

Whilst at Arbroath Jobcentre, we were approached by a well-known local welfare officer (who shall remain nameless) who greeted us with the words, 'you guys don't give up, do you?' and who then proceeded to tell us that, during the course of representing a benefit claimant in the jobcentre, he had been accused of adopting a 'hostile attitude' by the advisor he dealt with. They really do



seem to be very sensitive souls at Arbroath Jobcentre - it's just a pity that their sensitivity does not extend to benefit claimants, who they often treat as children or criminals.

At today's advice stall we were joined by the SNP candidate for Dundee West, Chris Law, who used the opportunity to discuss with a number of benefit claimants who were facing difficulties. It was evident that Chris was shocked by some of the stories he heard. An ex-building worker, sixty-two years of age, actually broke down in tears at the prospect of going into the buroo for the first time as an ESA claimant in the Work Related Activity Group, which means he can be forced to undertake 're-training' and other compulsory activities. However, he re-emerged from the buroo clearly relieved and happy with the advice we had given him. Another man reported that he had been sanctioned: he explained that his brother had died and, because of grief and dealing with the practical consequences of his death, he had missed an appointment with his advisor. We come across cases such as this all the time, which demonstrates that the jobcentre is systematically ignoring 'reasonable cause' when claimants miss appointments. They are unlawfully sanctioning people, many in a distressed state of mind or ill, and are relying on the fact that people are ignorant of their rights, and will not challenge them. This graphically illustrates that, whilst we have had successes at Dundee Jobcentre, there is still a lot of work to do.



*Outside Dundee Buroo, 20 March, with Andrew and Jenny and Chris Law (with pony tail)*

On a more celebratory note: we would like to congratulate Bennie and Shauna on their engagement. The SUWN can claim the role of cupid in their romance, as the pair met at our December 6th anti-austerity demo in Dundee. We wish them all the best, and are all looking forit to the engagement party.

(With thanks to John, Andrew, Ryan, Jane, Ailsa, Ronnie, Hazel, Bennie and Susan)

### **20 March, Dundee, JK**

Punished for being disabled. David is twenty-four and is diagnosed with severe dyspraxia. This means that it is very hard for him to take in information and to remember it. Planning and doing everyday tasks is also very hard, especially if they involve getting anywhere on time. David knows that other people might put this down to him being lazy or young, and had taken care to explain to his advisor that his problems are caused by the different way that his brain processes information. Despite this, his payments were stopped for four weeks because he was ten minutes late for an appointment (which is actually pretty good for someone with severe dyspraxia!). Before this sanction had run out, he was sanctioned again for being late.

I went with David to Welfare Rights, who explained two options, neither of them ideal. One: he can continue to fight each sanction and remain locked in a perpetual fight with a system that is set up to punish him simply because he has a disability. Two: he can ask his doctor for a sick line for the depression that is a consequence of being unsupported with his disability. In conversation, David mentioned that court proceedings were underway to decide whether he should be evicted from his council house. Each time he'd been sanctioned, his rent payments stopped – he didn't know the outcome of the court proceedings because he'd stopped opening letters. He just couldn't cope with it all. Welfare Rights are now organising appropriate support for David for this and for other day-to-day things that he needs a hand with.

David had explained to his advisor that poor time-keeping is a direct result of his disability. The advisor had stated that she would not count it as an illness because it would put him over the limit for the number of times he was allowed to be sick. But this is irrelevant: David is not sick – dyspraxia is a condition covered by the Equality Act 2010, and the buroo has a legal duty to take reasonable steps to prevent David from losing his money as a direct result of his disability.

*With our activists so, well, active in Dundee, we wanted to establish this pattern of front line advocacy in Glasgow too. Govan seemed a good place to start: a place with a proud history of activism, a prominent jobcentre, and a record of a high number of sanctions. Without the close activist group that we were able to build from after our involvement in the referendum campaign in Dundee, the Glasgow work has proved harder, but we were able to pull together a small group of people – some who we had known for years, and others newly attracted by what we were doing. (A special thanks for the Govan stalls to Conor, Jim, Ann, Darren and Jen, and also to John, Peter and Dominic, and to everyone at Sunny Govan Radio)*

### **23 March, Govan, SG**

**Notes from Sunny Govan.** We held our first stall outside Govan Jobcentre this

afternoon. It was a sunny day and there was plenty of opportunity to talk to folk going in and out as well as people visiting the shopping centre. Soon after we arrived, people came out having attended a session warning them of the need to comply with all the rules so as to avoid getting sanctioned: 'It's not us who make the rules, but we have to administer them...'

One of our activists went in with a young man to arrange for an emergency Hardship Payment. The man had been sanctioned for failing to keep an appointment. He had missed it due to being in hospital following a suicide attempt. The Hardship Payment should come through today. (The Jobcentre advisor asked for our advocate's ID, but was told firmly that this was not needed.)

Sunny Govan Radio came and interviewed us and we plan to be back in Govan next week.

### ***25 March, Dundee, AW***

**The importance of being insistent!** A drizzly Tuesday outside Dundee Jobcentre, with the usual reports of rudeness and belligerence from jobcentre staff...

We also had the pleasure of speaking to a young man named Alex (not his real name). Alex is in his late teens/early twenties and as well as currently fighting a sanction he had recently managed to renegotiate his Claimant Commitment. The Claimant Commitment was brought in to replace the Jobseeker's Agreement, and is basically a signed agreement between the jobseeker and the jobcentre stating what steps the claimant is supposed to take each week to find work. Once a claimant has signed the Commitment, they must follow the agreed steps or risk a sanction.

Alex's Claimant Commitment was up for review, and so he went along to a jobcentre interview to get it sorted. The advisor wrote on Alex's Commitment form (without consulting him) that he must sign into Universal Jobmatch (UJM), the government's pet job-search website, every day. Alex pointed out that this didn't make sense – the website isn't updated often enough, and he could easily see every job available by searching just twice a week. He also pointed out that he searches on several other job websites and does other things such as sending off CVs and contacting employers. He didn't want to be mandated to search on UJM every day as he then ran the risk of sanctioning if he missed a day even if there were no new jobs available. He was worried that he would not be able to get to a computer every day as he did not always have internet access at home. We have come across many cases of sanctions imposed because the claimant missed a single day of job-search activity.

It is important to note here that the Claimant Commitment is not an order or a decree, and it is clearly stated on the form itself that the Commitment must be

discussed, negotiated, and 'agreed between claimant and advisor'. The guidelines for DWP staff say the same thing:

It is important that the Claimant Commitment is completed at the end of the discussion and not during the discussion itself. In this way, it demonstrates to the claimant that:

- the coach has actively listened to the claimant;
- the coach has given the claimant full attention;
- all the claimant's circumstances have been taken into account when developing the Claimant Commitment, so it is personal to them; and
- the Claimant Commitment is reasonable and achievable.

Reasonable and achievable – i.e. taking into account the claimant's ability to get to a computer every day. Unfortunately these guidelines are not being followed by all advisors. Alex's objections were roundly dismissed, and the advisor said she'd just 'put every day on it anyway'. She printed out the form and presented it to Alex to sign. Alex read the form again and stated that he would not sign it as he had not agreed to the terms and the 'coach' had not given him any attention, never mind full! A great example of a claimant standing their ground in the face of jobcentre bullying.

The advisor – or 'coach' – humphed and hawed a bit, before grudgingly printing out another form, this time with the desired two UJM searches per week. She wasn't finished though, asking snippily 'well what are you going to do if you search twice and don't find anything? Will you do no more searches that week, and get money for it?' Alex pointed to the paragraph about 'reasonable expectations' for the claimant. He stated that of course if there were no jobs he would keep looking – he would do whatever is reasonable (and keep a record for his advisor). Defeated, the coach handed Alex the new form. He read it, signed it, and the coach slunk away to the next client.

Alex was eventually victorious in his battle with the jobcentre – but it was all so unnecessary! Why does what should have been a pleasant and constructive discussion about job seeking turn into a battle of wills, with the jobcentre staff actively working against the best interests of the client? Alex told us that he was physically shaking after the meeting. He also said that he has recently been doing some work on self-improvement and assertiveness, and that a year ago he would not have been able or confident enough to stand up for his rights like that. We are obviously very pleased that he got a good outcome, but we meet many claimants every day who are not able to argue their case effectively as Alex did. With staff ignoring guidelines and working to confuse claimants, the importance of advocacy becomes ever clearer.

*And another example of resistance:*

### ***2 April, Dundee, TC***

Today we met a young woman who had been told that she had to attend the Claverhouse work experience centre - a modern day workhouse where many claimants are forced to remove nails from planks all day for up to thirty weeks at a time – but, being a young mother, she had child-care issues. After considering telling them where they could stuff Claverhouse, she decided on a different strategy. She told them that she was more than happy to go to Claverhouse but asked how they proposed to sort her child-care. As a result, jobcentre and Claverhouse staff members were reduced to arguing with, and blaming, each other over the phone as the young mother, barely able to contain her mirth, watched on. She emerged from the jobcentre beaming, as well she might – she is still waiting for their solution to the problem.

(Thanks for this week's stalls to Jane, Andrew, Ryan, Ailsa, Ronnie, John and Grant - and a special thank you to the SUWN soup dragon, Hazel.)

### ***2 April, Glasgow, SG***

**Universal chaos.** Just been chatting with a friend who works in the Universal Credit office in Glasgow – and yes, it is every bit as chaotic as depicted in the media. The system keeps going down so that claimants get told to ring back (at their own expense), the data coming through from the jobcentres is full of errors made by the advisors, and delays in the system of scanning and processing can have profound consequences – he'd just had to speed up a case where a woman with a child had been kept waiting over a week despite letters showing her landlord was threatening to evict her for being unable to pay the rent. Unsurprisingly, staff in the office are not happy and some have left.

### ***3 April, Dundee, TC***

**Pushed to the edge and beyond.** The depths to which the DWP will go to hit their sanctions quotas/expectations/targets never ceases to amaze - and to appal. The following case, however, 'takes the biscuit' when it comes to inhumanity.

On Thursday, we were approached at the stall by Steve who was clearly distraught and angry. He told us that he had returned to the family home at the weekend to find his brother, Colin, in the middle of a suicide attempt, swallowing large numbers of paracetamol tablets. Colin had recently been informed that his claim for ESA had been turned down and his Mandatory Reconsideration rejected. The decision was, however, very hurriedly reversed when it was revealed that Darren, another brother, had committed suicide two years ago. Darren had suffered from schizophrenia, but was re-diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, a lesser condition. His money was cut, his condition worsened, and shortly afterwards he took his own life. The decision to reverse Colin's ESA rejection was taken, according to Steve, because the DWP 'didn't want two people in the same family

having committed suicide for the same reason.’

The official reason given for the change was different, but no less damning. Colin had had a heart attack five years ago and he also suffers from angina and sleep apnoea, but the stress of dealing with the mounting pressure the DWP had heaped on him led to a further diagnosis of severe depression, and he was finally granted ESA on the basis that he now suffered from a new condition. Colin’s case has come to the attention of the social work department, and he is also being treated by a psychiatrist.

Steve himself has recently been sanctioned by the DWP for failing to log into his computerised Universal Jobmatch (UJM) account. Not only was Steve unfamiliar with the computerised system, which he did not like and only used because he had been told (wrongly) that it was mandatory, he was also distracted and made increasingly anxious by Colin’s deteriorating physical and mental health. Steve now has a job and expressed his joy at being clear of a so-called welfare system that he himself described as ‘sinister’.

Both brothers are trying to re-build their lives following the trauma of their trials at the hands of the DWP, but this family’s experience illustrates that we are dealing with a government department that is following an inhuman policy that is leading to widespread misery, stress, ill health and even death for some of the most vulnerable who are caught within its web.

### ***9 April, Govan, SG***

After the previous week’s sleet, we were happy to find the streets of Govan bathed in sunshine. Our stall was well received by claimants and passers-by alike, many of whom stopped to chat, express support, and ask questions.

One person asked us whether it was true that they were allowed to take a friend along to their appointments for support and advocacy. After reading our leaflet they had asked the Jobcentre staff whether they could bring someone along, and been told that they could not - that the information on the leaflet was a lie. We reassured them that it was in fact their right to be accompanied by a friend or advocate, and they told us that they would be sure to do this in future, having had a number of problems with their claim and having received very little hearing or assistance from rude and belligerent staff.

We spoke to a woman who told us that she was suffering from mental health problems and was homeless, sleeping on a friend’s sofa. As a result, both her and her friend had been threatened with having their benefits stopped for cohabiting. We referred her to the Westgap drop-in, a local welfare rights centre.

We met several people whose children had recently turned five and who were now exposed to the full DWP disciplinary regime. One woman told us that she was being made to do voluntary work despite difficulties organising childcare. She told us that when her children were ill with chickenpox jobcentre staff refused to accept her word for it, and she was made to bring them both down to the jobcentre to prove she was not lying.

Several passers-by stopped by the stall to take a leaflet and ask us for more information for friends or family members. Another woman told us her son had been sanctioned. A diabetic, he had gone without money or food for a week, and was now in hospital as a result. His rent had been stopped and she was now worried that on discharge he would be facing eviction. Despite his diabetes and medical problems he still had not received a Hardship Payment. This woman was being supported with her son's appeal by Money Matters, a local organisation with whom we have established links and whose leaflets we have on hand.

***12 April, Dundee, JK***

'Now of course, if you have a serious disability – physical or mental – and you really cannot work, then the welfare system must be there for you' – David Cameron, 17th Feb 2015.

Cheryl is a young woman with serious kidney and lung problems. She was sanctioned for missing a Triage appointment that she didn't get the letter for. Because of her health condition, the jobcentre advisor said that they couldn't stop all of her money - so they 'gave' her £28 per week to live on. £28 per week; a 'welfare' system? Really?

As is common, the jobcentre staff did not tell Cheryl that she could get a Hardship Payment and didn't tell her where she could get help to challenge the sanction.

Sick of having to ask people if she could sleep on their sofas and not having money for food, Cheryl decided to look for a job, despite her doctor's strong advice that she should not work. The doctor tried to persuade her to submit a sick line, but Cheryl found a job while her sanction was still in place – good news, huh?

Sadly not. Her employer paid her off in a matter of weeks. On returning to the jobcentre, she was told by her advisor that her sanction would have to continue until the time was up. On April 2nd, Cheryl's benefits began again.

On April 9th, just one week later, her advisor told Cheryl that she had missed another appointment with Triage and that she might be sanctioned again – if so, this will be the second time that Cheryl is held responsible for Triage's failure to

send any letter.

We helped Cheryl to get in touch with Welfare Rights.

A young feisty woman, punished for the failures of Triage - trying to work against her doctor's wishes so that she could avoid the pressures of the jobcentre, and breaking down in tears at the thought of sleeping on sofas and not having food. The welfare system certainly isn't there for her.

### **20 April, Govan, SG**

**When is public space not public space?** Thursday was our fourth stall outside Govan Jobcentre. It's a nice place for a stall: a small public square framed by the 'L' of the Govan Cross Shopping Centre. At least that's what it appears to be, but this time we were approached by a woman in pink who announced that this area belonged to the shopping centre, of which she was manager, and we couldn't be there without permission that had to be arranged a week in advance. Rather than move our stall away from the jobcentre and the people we were there to help, we asked her for the details of the owners of the shopping centre. She mentioned a property trust, and, after we'd asked her several times, reluctantly gave us their phone number.

When we eventually got through, one of our activists, C, spoke to a gentleman who wouldn't give his name but said that the manager was correct in insisting on our instant departure. C asked him for the Trust address so we could apply for weekly bookings. However, he declined and repeated the same statement given by the manager, that we had no permission to be there 'canvassing or marketing'. C replied that we were neither canvassing nor marketing, but were giving advice to benefit claimants. He then agreed to send details over to us, but only on the condition of us leaving the square. We didn't agree to leave, but at this point the pink woman reappeared, and when we still declined to move she invited C into her office

She then proceeded to tell C that only one company per-week could book the outside space and both marketing agencies and charities had to pay a fee to use it. Suspecting that something underhand was going on, C phoned the number of the Trust we had been given previously, and the phone on the desk rang. The woman chose to ignore the phone until C made it clear that it was him that was calling, and accused her of misleading our network and himself. She then left the room for a few minutes, leaving C with a member of the security team. When she reappeared she phoned the police control room at Helen Street. During the conversation she was having with the police, C interrupted to get the attention of the officer, who allowed him to tell our side of the story. The policeman agreed with C that this was a civil matter with no criminal aspects, and so something for



us to agree between ourselves and the shopping centre. C repeated that we did not intend to move and we now have an understanding that we will have a regular stall outside the jobcentre!

### ***21 April, Dundee, TC***

In addition to sanction cases, we are coming across increasing numbers of people falling foul of the Universal Jobmatch (UJM) computerised job-search system. On Friday alone, we came across three people facing sanctions because they had, for one reason or another, failed to use or to log into their UJM accounts. In one case, the benefit claimant had applied for more than the number of jobs required in his Claimant Commitment. However, when he informed his advisor that he had not used UJM to access any of the vacancies he was curtly told that he should expect to be sanctioned, handed a Hardship Payment form, and advised to ask for a Mandatory Reconsideration of the sanction decision. Despite being asked to jump through these hoops, he was also told that he would not definitely know he was sanctioned until Wednesday, when his JSA is due to be paid into his account. If you are applying for the number of jobs detailed in your Claimant Commitment the DWP has no right to sanction you, and you should always remember that you have the right to re-negotiate your Claimant Commitment at any time if you feel it is not appropriate to your circumstances. Cases such as this also demonstrate the dangers of signing up to UJM.

(Thanks for the last two weeks to Jane, John, Ronnie, Andrew, Ailsa, Susan, William, Ryan and Gary)

### ***22 April, Dundee, JK***

**Newsflash - Thank you to jobcentre advisor.** Paul has mental health problems and is unable to do all the weekly tasks on his Claimant Commitment. In fact, he had to pull out of a job-related course just so he had time to fill out the paperwork he needed to do to stop himself from getting sanctioned! He asked if one of us from the SUWN would go along with him to make an appointment to change his Claimant Commitment, and was ten minutes late. Being late often means a straight sanction and it seemed like a dead cert because his advisor has a reputation for being crabbit, unhelpful, and talking down to people.

Paul's apology for being a bit late was accepted, there was no threat of a sanction, and his request to make an appointment to re-negotiate his Claimant Commitment was agreed to easily and sympathetically.

It's pretty sad that we thought a wee report was in order exactly because it's so unusual for people to be treated with common courtesy when going into the jobcentre. But it made a welcome change, so along with a 'thank you', I'd like to ask any advisors reading this - we know that many of you are miserable in your

jobs, and that you're probably being forced to meet sanctions targets, but the situation is way harder on the other side of the counter, so please treat us with the respect that we are entitled to. It might even help to make a depraved system a bit more humane.

### **23 April, Govan, SG**

**See that private property thing.** We're getting to be well kent faces in Govan now – especially with jobcentre regulars. And that means quite a lot of people as we keep coming across folk who are having to sign on every week or even every day.

One of our new friends told us about the problems she was having with her landlord. Gemma lives with her two children, age ten and five, in a privately rented flat. Like many private lets, it is in poor condition but still costs more in rent than is covered by housing benefit. The Local Housing Allowance – brought in by the Labour Government – is the Bedroom Tax for private renting.



*Outside Govan Buroo (with Conor and Dominic (from Fight Racism Fight Imperialism))*

It limits the amount of money that you can get in Housing Benefit according to where you live and your household composition. Gemma has arranged to have her Housing Benefit paid directly to her landlord. Since her daughter turned ten she has been entitled to and receiving a higher rate of Housing Benefit. But, since this was going directly to the landlord, she wasn't aware of it and so has been paying too much rent. This has mounted up, so the landlord owes her around £900. That may not seem a big sum to the landlord, who rents out multiple properties, but it is a huge amount to Gemma, and to her dad who she has had to borrow from. The landlord has admitted he owes the money, but is delaying

repaying it. He even seems to be enjoying his sense of control - an imbalance of power that will only have been enhanced by the Housing Benefit office having kindly supplied him with all Gemma's private benefit details. No wonder she was angry, but she felt unable to name and shame the landlord as she was worried about being made homeless. It was good to be able to reassure her that perhaps the best legal advice for housing problems was just around the corner. We hope that Govan Law Centre can put the fear of God into that landlord.

We may have won a small victory over Govan Cross Shopping Centre, but there are still serious problems with this privatised public space. This week there was a charity stall set up across the way from us, and they had had to pay the shopping centre for the privilege.

### **Dundee, 27 April, TC**

**Do you have to be here? – Maximus answer their own question.** Despite changing from Atos to Maximus, there has been no improvement in the quality of 'customer care' experienced by claimants and advocates at Work Capability Assessments, as my recent experience demonstrates.

Julie is thirty years old and has been on ESA for just less than a year, her third time on this benefit. As well as being diagnosed with dyslexia, depression, panic attacks and anxiety, she has a trapped nerve in her right shoulder, a broken pinky, and recurring arthritis that particularly affects her spine and hip following an operation in 2013. Julie has good days and bad days, and, despite the day of her Work Capability Assessment being a good one, it was still a struggle for her to walk the short distance from the city centre to the Maximus-run assessment centre in the Greenmarket, meaning that we had to stop every so often. She told me more than once that she just wanted to turn tail and run home. I repeatedly reassured her, but, having - like her - experienced other Work Capability Assessments, I knew how traumatic and difficult they could be.

When we arrived at the Greenmarket we were informed that as no admin staff were on duty there would be a delay while the medical assessor looked for Julie's file. After a short wait, we were ushered into an assessment room, and - in an echo of a previous encounter in this place - when I pulled out my notebook I was informed by the assessor that any notes that I took would not be admissible in any subsequent court case, before she added quickly that she 'was not suggesting for a moment that this might happen'. When I challenged her rather quixotic view of my legal rights, the assessor bridled more than a little, and explained that, whilst she did not want to get into an argument, she was duty bound to make this statement. Being as keen as Julie to get the assessment underway without further delay, I ignored the temptation to continue this interesting foray into jurisprudence.

After about ten minutes of questioning, the tone of the assessor turned sour again when Julie complained that her seat was causing her pain due to her problems with her hip. The assessor, in a pretty put out tone, replied, 'I have to sit on it all day'. I pointed out that it was not her that was undergoing a Work Capability Assessment and she instantly retorted by asking, 'do you have to be here?' I replied, 'it appears so'. I was then asked my name and fixed with a very cold look.

The rest of the assessment, which lasted around forty to forty-five minutes, was incident free but when it ended the assessor turned to me and asked if I had ever been on television? I must admit to being a little startled by this question, and when I replied that I had been on television, her eyes lit up and she triumphantly exclaimed, 'yes, you're the guy who was making trouble, or rather talking about Atos, aren't you?' Despite my assurances that I had never been on television regarding Atos, she did not seem convinced. She then started quizzing Julie on the nature of our relationship - were we friends and how long had we known one another? We were eventually able to extricate ourselves, but when we were making our way towards the exit, the assessor emerged from her office and shouted down the corridor, 'You are THAT guy that was on TV about Atos. We've been told to keep an eye out for you, and you'll be in my report.' I retorted, yet again, that I had never been on television regarding Atos, and we left the building.

It is evident from this rather unpleasant experience that little has changed with the switch over to Maximus. Whilst there are assessors who are diligent and respectful of claimants and advocates, there are still far too many who respond to questions or queries in a hostile and even intimidatory fashion. If an independent private business was run in this manner it would quickly lose its customer base, but because Maximus works on behalf of Iain Duncan Smith and the ConDem coalition of the heartless they seem to believe that they can treat claimants and advocates with arrogant rudeness as a matter of course. This authoritarian attitude should be challenged at every opportunity, and we aim to ensure that this is the case.

*Back in Glasgow, when we joined local activists for a well-advertised protest in Drumchapel the jobcentre seemed to be running scared:*

### **30 April 2015, Drumchapel, SG**

A strange afternoon outside Drumchapel Jobcentre. We leafleted everyone going to the local shops, but in the two and a half hours we were there, there can only have been around thirty people actually going into the jobcentre. Had they deliberately avoided scheduling appointments for the time they knew we would be there?

We had a long discussion about the problems of proving you weren't cohabiting

when you are sofa surfing with a young lad who turned out to be the local BNP and demonstrated his machismo by bursting one of the SNP's balloons.

*On 1 May Tony started part time work as a welfare rights/money advisor at a local community centre in Dundee. This is a job-share with Sarah (G), who started in June after serving notice at her previous work as a lecturer in Paisley. We hope that all agree that this relationship between formal work and voluntary activity is proving to be symbiotic! The SUWN can refer difficult cases to the centre, and the centre can ask SUWN activists to accompany clients to assessments. And of course it's upped our knowledge base too!... Just a week after these last sentences were written, Tony and Sarah were both dismissed from the job; and as they had been there for only a year, Tory employment legislation ensured that there was little they could do. We can only assume that someone was not happy with their activist links, though of course that was never said in so many words. The sense of betrayal has been almost as hurtful as the loss of income.*

### **3 May, Dundee, TC**

The SUWN/DAWS radical bloc noised up Dundee city centre mair than a wee bit during yesterday's May Day march, and Ailsa, speaking for the SUWN, gave an impassioned call to socialists and progressives, of whatever stripe, to lend their votes to the SNP. We commend Ailsa for standing firm in the face o' unexpected Red Tory jeering.



*Ailsa Weir speaking at the Dundee Mayday rally*

*The SUWN put out an election leaflet that argued:*

In this first-past-the-post election our only realistic hope for an end to cuts and a return to real social security is that a phalanx of SNP MPs will be able to awaken a minority Labour government from under its Tory spell, and guide them and us out of the nightmare of austerity. The working class across the UK depends on our Scottish votes!

*Like most others, we had underestimated the extent to which Labour's move to the right had haemorrhaged their vote base.*

*The day after the Dundee march we took part in a very wet Mayday march in Glasgow.*

*In May we put up our first stall outside Paisley Buroo. As in Govan, it has been difficult organising without an initial core of local activists, but this is a busy jobcentre in an area of high unemployment with the worst sanction record in the west of Scotland. It is also on the High Street, so we have been able to engage with many more people than those going through the door. (Special thanks for the Paisley stall to Gail and Chris.)*

### **6 May, Paisley, SG**

**Feathers ruffled in Paisley Jobcentre.** I owe Conor £2. He bet me that the police walking down Paisley High Street were coming for us, and I honestly thought that the jobcentre would not be so ignorant as to think that a stall handing out rights leaflets was doing anything illegal. I was wrong. They were that ignorant, and the police had to tell them we were quite within **our** rights. Poor DWP, they had even chosen today to do a 'customer' survey. We were informed that they decided to abandon that one. However, they did take care to tell people to ignore our advice, suggesting we could be putting their claims at risk and that it was the claimants who would lose money not us.

Paisley Jobcentre is a very busy place and issues a lot of sanctions, but today 'customers' were emerging pleasantly surprised by their treatment when we were outside the door. Just as we were packing up though, we met a woman who had been sanctioned a few weeks back and been left with absolutely no money and no indication when anything might be coming through. There was just time to escort her round to Citizens' Advice to get a referral for a food parcel and an appointment to get her benefit situation sorted.

### **10th May, Dundee, JK**

Ged has just moved into a flat after crashing on sofas for months on end, and had a worrying event to report. He'd been waiting for a delivery from the Furniture Project and realised that it might not arrive before he was due at the jobcentre (his appointment was a few hours away). He phoned and spoke to his advisor, who told him to wait for his furniture and to phone just before 5pm if it hadn't arrived by then. So, Ged phoned repeatedly at the time he had been told to, but his advisor's phone was engaged. A few days later when Ged went to get his money out of the bank, he realised it wasn't there. He phoned the jobcentre and was told to come in. We met Ged outside, and went in with him.

Turns out that the same advisor who had told Ged to wait for his furniture had sanctioned him on the grounds of 'failing to attend'. We asked a different advisor (conveniently, the sleekit one wasn't there) how he could be sanctioned, and on

these grounds when Ged's phone call had been recorded on the system. This advisor was, at least, very pleasant – it stands out when you're spoken to like, you know, an actual person. But she wasn't able to do anything because Ged's sanction had gone to a decision-maker who would get back to him in... about ten days! We put in an application for a Hardship Payment and went along to Welfare Rights, who are going to call Ged in a couple of days. Thankfully, we were able to arrange a food parcel for Ged and his young child to see him over the weekend from the fantastic Taught by Mohammed crew. With a Tory majority government, the fight goes on and will have to intensify – join us.

### ***13 May, Paisley, SG***

Yesterday we came across someone who is expected to do fifty job-searches a week. Is this a record? He had just been sanctioned for 'only' completing forty-eight. We persuaded him to apply for a Mandatory Reconsideration. Anyone who has an unreasonable Claimant Commitment of this kind (and it needn't be as extreme as this) should ask to have it changed.

We also found a woman in tears after being told that the extra money she had earned from a fifteen hour stint working in the polling station would all be taken away from her, bar five pounds. In fact, although the situation is cruel and absurd, it is not quite that bad. After the first five pounds you earn they reduce your JSA that week pound for pound (a couple on income-based JSA can keep ten pounds, and it's fifteen pounds for some lone parents etc.). So for example, if you work for eight hours on a minimum wage of six pounds fifty and earn fifty-two pounds, they will subtract forty-seven pounds from your JSA. Your net gain is a measly five pounds and the remaining forty-seven pounds benefit the government. It is really only worth taking a part time job if you can earn substantially more than you get in JSA. This lady had earned one hundred and seventy pounds, so was relieved to learn that she would be left with nearly a hundred pounds and it wasn't quite as bad as she had been led to believe. Whether she was given wrong information or this was yet another case of the DWP being incapable of explaining things properly, we don't know. What we do know though, is that they hadn't warned her she would lose benefit money when she told then she was going to do the work. This is widely recognised as a daft system and is one of the reasons being put forward for bringing in Universal Credit, but this replacement system only makes a small improvement to this particular problem and brings a very large number of problems of its own.

Paisley Jobcentre seems to have a very high number of people forced to sign on often and we met several this Tuesday who we had also met last Wednesday. We also met a young man who had been sent at his very first interview to the Work Programme [*a two-year stint of training courses, work experience, and other activities run by a private subcontractor*].



**14 May, Govan, SG**

We came across a woman whose boyfriend had been sanctioned for the maximum three years: and the reason for that final sanction? His aunt had died, he had told the Work Programme provider he couldn't make his meeting and they had acknowledged this, but they then sanctioned him anyway. It had only happened recently so we advised her to get him to appeal.

We also noticed that Govan Jobcentre has been awarded a 'Customer Service Charter' - I wonder what the criteria are...

**16 May, Glasgow, TC**

Two SUWN volunteers attended a meeting in Glasgow with a fact-finding delegation of around a hundred employees of the Icelandic DWP. They were keen to hear the views, of an independent claimants' organisation with regards to how the British welfare system operates. Following the meeting, we were told by a number of the delegates that it was a pity they had not discussed with us before they had visited eight jobcentres in the Glasgow area the previous day. Needless to say, during their visits to these jobcentres they were presented with a rose-tinted version of how the DWP operates. During the meeting, one of our reps was asked to explain why there was such a mismatch between what we were saying and what the DWP claimed. He replied, 'because what you were told by the DWP is simply propaganda and lies'. We were stunned when many within the audience responded with laughter and clapping.

**21 May, Paisley, SG**

This week we were kept busy providing help and advice from even before we had put up the stall.

Daily signing seems to be common practice both here and in Govan. Once someone has been put through two years of Work Programme activities they can be rewarded with having to come to the jobcentre daily for three months. For one young man we met this was despite the fact that for most of the time he was on the Work Programme he was actually doing paid work. He is walking to the jobcentre, a couple of miles each way every day. One of our activists went into the jobcentre to find out how he can get funding for bus fares – but the reference they gave us doesn't seem to work!

Even telephone numbers seem to be too complicated for the DWP. One woman had had her benefits suspended because although she had given them her new address, it hadn't been recorded. The jobcentre had then given her a number to ring to get this sorted. Luckily we were there to give her the correct number instead.



*27 May, Arbroath, AW*

**Can't read? Can't help you!** Arbroath Jobcentre seems to have fewer benefit sanctions than Dundee. One could be forgiven therefore for imagining that they are somehow... nicer? Sadly no, they are not. For a start, the number of sanctions in Dundee is the highest in Scotland - better than the worst is still not good! Arbroath Jobcentre also has its own ways to punish the poor, and seems to show a disturbingly cold-hearted attitude to the claimants it professes to help.

Jason is severely dyslexic, to the point where he cannot read enough to sign on to the Universal Jobmatch site and look for jobs or fill in a benefit claim form without help - he also does not have internet access in his house or know how to use a computer. Until recently he had been receiving Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) as he had suffered a bout of severe depression that left him unable to work. He was still depressed but receiving treatment and, eager to get a job now that he was starting to feel better, he had started claiming Jobseekers Allowance (JSA).

We originally came into contact with Jason as he had been told that his JSA claim had been stopped. Jason usually signs on every two weeks at the jobcentre, but had missed an appointment with his advisor which had been made for the week in-between. He had mixed up his dates and thought the appointment was for a week later, at his usual time - his dyslexia causes him to have problems keeping track of dates and times, and the date of this appointment had been changed more than once. Jason didn't realise his mistake until he went down the next week at his usual time. Because it had been more than five days since his missed appointment, his claim had been automatically closed, and he was told that his only option was to restart it, resulting in a two-week period with no money.

The advisor gave us a phone number to start a new claim, which we rang only to be told that it had to be done online. We went back into the jobcentre, and were told that no, there **was** a telephone service for people who had trouble using the online service. OK - off we went to the phone again, where after a few minutes of tinny Vivaldi we were informed that yes, there was such a service but it was up to the jobcentres to sign up for it individually, and Arbroath hadn't. Back to the jobcentre again, where we eventually got onto a computer and filled in Jason's form for him.

With this done, we went back to speak to the advisor. I had noticed that Jason's Claimant Commitment said that he had to sign into the Universal Jobmatch website a minimum of five times per week and look for jobs. I pointed out to the advisor that Jason doesn't have a computer at home, and that he would have to find one elsewhere, like the library, five times every week. In Jason's case he not only had to find a computer, but also someone to help him through the entire

process every time, and the chances of being able to do this consistently are pretty slim. Once something is in a Claimant Commitment the client is routinely sanctioned if they fail to do it, so it's important to make sure that the Claimant Commitment is always possible. In Jason's case there is little point in him using Universal Jobmatch, as even if he can get help to sign into the service he often can't get someone to sit with him through a job-search, so he was often signing in then just signing out again to fulfil his Commitment.

Jason is currently in a somewhat unstable living situation. He has no family living nearby and has recently been helping to support a homeless friend from his own meagre benefits. We pointed out that he was running a very high risk of sanctioning and possible severe health consequences if he was made to use the online service five times every week. Using Universal Jobmatch is not mandatory unless a Jobseeker's Direction is issued, and for Jason, having to use it was not only unhelpful but potentially damaging.

When we asked for a change to his Claimant Commitment the advisor was clearly not happy, asking Jason if he was really **sure** he couldn't somehow be certain of access to a computer every day. Jason replied that he couldn't. The advisor pressed a bit, emphasising what a useful website it was (it's not) and how much more efficient Jason's job searches would be if he used it (he can't). We persisted, and Jason was asked how often he thought he **would** be able to secure a computer. He said maybe twice a week ('Really? Only twice? Oh well then, OK'). In reality there's little point in anyone using the Universal Jobmatch website as it's notoriously filled with out-of-date jobs, unsuitable matches, and the occasional blatant scam. Jason however, agreed to use the site twice a week and the advisor, after some more humming and huffing, agreed as well.

Throughout the meeting, the advisor seemed to have the attitude that Jason was being an inconvenience, and this isn't an unusual reaction to a request to change a Claimant Commitment, which is supposed to be worked out and discussed between the jobcentre and the client and agreed to by both parties. Far too often we come across people who were essentially bullied into signing Claimant Commitments that they are not happy about or feel they can't adhere to. Claimants are told that they 'must' sign and, with the constant threat of total removal of benefits, it's far too easy for people to be scared into agreeing, especially if they don't have full knowledge of their rights - and we know they're not going to get that knowledge from the jobcentre!

### ***29th May, Dundee, JK***

It shouldn't really come as a surprise because they're many people's favourite target, but people who've been in jail get a hard time, and those we met this week are no different. Andy isn't long out of jail, is a carer for his dad, and is being

threatened with a sanction (he didn't know why), and he and his dad are being diddled out of other benefits that they're entitled to. We referred them to Welfare Rights, where we're sure they'll get the support they need. We also met a twenty-six-year-old woman who'd been in jail, hadn't got her benefits, and had no money or food. We met her at both stalls this week and she was really grateful for the food that Taught by Mohammed delivered, for solid support from Welfare Rights, and for our help.

Back in March, we wrote about a young guy with severe dyspraxia who was really being put through the wringer by the jobcentre. It was good to see him. He's still getting hassle for being a bit late (a characteristic of dyspraxia), but he's fighting back and hasn't been sanctioned again. He's also thinking about writing a letter of complaint about his treatment, which we'd always encourage anyone to do. Some more good news; one of our long-standing activists has got a job. Nice one, Bennie! And to celebrate, there was a bit of dancing in the street...



*A bit of dancing in the street (Benny and Grant)*

*At the end of the month, four of us went down to London to meet up with other welfare activists from across the UK at the Boycott Workfare conference – putting faces to people and organisations we had only known through the internet, and sharing understandings and experience. We completed our activists' tour with a visit to Sweets Way - where former residents and protesters were trying to prevent demolition of these low-cost homes by squatting in some of the buildings - and*

*meeting up with other housing activists from Focus E15, and we finished up on Friday night at the Kurdish Community Centre in Haringey discussing the prospects for Rojava and the HDP in Turkey. While welfare problems are similar across the UK, we in Scotland are relatively lucky when it comes to housing – especially when compared to London. The problems faced by the Kurds are on another scale, as are the social changes they have achieved in Northern Syria.*

### **6 June, Govan, SG**

The picture shows us on yesterday's Govan Fair procession, which had a First World War theme. 'Work or Full Maintenance' was the slogan of the men thrown into destitution by the mass unemployment that followed the war. It is as relevant now as it was then. The dismantling of the Welfare State is taking us back to the hungry Twenties and Thirties.



*Govan Fair (Sarah G, Jim, and Emily)*

### **9 June, Forfar, SG**

**See you all again in two weeks' time.** Great support outside Forfar Sheriff Court today from our comrades from Glasgow and Edinburgh as well as from Dundee and Angus. This was the intermediate diet for the case against our activist Tony Cox, who was arrested when helping a vulnerable client in Arbroath Jobcentre.<sup>9</sup> The performance by the authorities was considerably less impressive. At the initial pleading diet Tony had been told that the Crown had important evidence in the form of CCTV footage. Today we learnt that that footage seems to have disappeared – or perhaps it didn't prove quite so incriminating after all. They also

<sup>9</sup> An intermediate diet is supposed to check that everything is ready for the forthcoming trial.

seem to have problems citing a witness. None of which stopped them referring the case to a full hearing in two weeks' time on the 23rd June. So please come and join us in Forfar again on that day to show your support for Tony and to defend people's right to have someone with them when they go into the jobcentre. Advocacy is not a crime!



*Outside Forfar Sheriff Court, 9 June (Mike from ECAP on the megaphone, with Keri, Sarah S, Caroline, wee Ruby, and James)*

*On 20th June we took our stall to the anti-austerity demo in George Square. We had spoken at the much smaller protest the previous week, but this one was organised by the STUC bureaucracy, and our request to speak was refused:*

### **21 June, Glasgow, SG**

**One demo doesn't make a movement.** Yesterday in George Square the SUWN were out in strength. Unemployed workers are facing the full force of the Tory attacks, but there were no unemployed speakers on the platform. There were almost no speakers from grassroots activist groups at all. You might say that speaking at a demo is not such a big deal, and you'd be right; but if this is an indication of how the fight-back against austerity is being organised, then that is worrying. A demo is not just a performance. It should be part of a process, and for that it needs the widest possible involvement of different groups, not just on the day but in the organisation. That way, when we all go home, we don't just

have a few photos on Facebook, we have the beginnings of a movement. In 2010 the TUC organised a demonstration of half a million in London, and then did nothing. In 2011 we marched again in support of striking public-sector workers, and again the trade union leadership backed off. Fine words are worse than useless if they are not followed by action. And speeches about solidarity ring especially hollow. With one of our activists arrested when helping a vulnerable claimant at Arbroath Jobcentre and about to be up in court, we had hoped to see solidarity put into action. We were disappointed, and we believe that rank and file trade unionists will be as well.

### ***23 June, Forfar and Dundee, TC***

**SUWN case adjourned until 13 October.** We were in and out of court in double quick time today, but will have to return again in three months, for the fourth time, to complete the trial. Rather than ask supporters to travel, yet again, to Forfar we decided, as soon as we heard the case was likely to be adjourned, to organise a protest/advice stall in Dundee. It was a lively wee demo, and in between handing out leaflets and speechifying (including Susan's first public speech), we also carried out a fair bit of advocacy work.

### ***25 June, Paisley, SG***

I'm sick of the smell of damp wool. Last week was 'taps aff' weather (not for me of course), but today was back to winter rain, and I was not amused by the jobcentre security guard who tried to tell me to move out of the shelter of the doorway on the grounds that I was blocking the two-metre-wide entrance. They don't really seem to know what to do about us. As we reported, the first time we were there they called the police (who told them we had every right to be on the pavement). Last week a manager asked me if I'd like to come in and see all the good work they do! To be honest, some people who emerge from the jobcentre tell us their advisor was helpful, but many others get nothing but trouble and harassment. A young man I met today had just been sanctioned for a third time. Last time he had gone to sign on he had had to take his small daughter with him, and after they had waited for an hour he was told that he had missed his call. To make things worse, he doesn't have a bank account so can't prove his need for a Hardship Payment (he is going to see Citizens Advice about this). Another person took a leaflet to give to her friend who is being made to use the computerised Universal Jobmatch despite being unable to use a computer. This man is paying a young relative twenty pounds out of his JSA to do his job-search for him.

Last week we met a man who was partially sighted and was being made to sign on for JSA and look for work that he was never realistically going to find. He had been put through two years of useless Work Programme tasks and was now being told to apply for work for which he was completely unsuited, including street sweeping: his comment, 'are they trying to kill me?'



A young woman told us that she had been sent to work without pay at the Linwood recycling plant, and was now going to have to do more unpaid work through a Community Work Placement. She had recently been turned down for a real paid job because she was over twenty-five and they wanted to be able to claim the government premium for employing unemployed youth. Her circumstances are particularly difficult because her partner, who is also unemployed, has been banned from all jobcentres after exclaiming in frustration, after he had been sanctioned by a Glasgow jobcentre, that he would like to burn the place down. Now they are both surviving on her benefits. (The DWP is supposed to make alternative arrangements when people are banned, but this doesn't seem to have happened.)

### **27 June, Dundee, TC**

It has been clear to us that the number of sanctions in Dundee has been steadily falling since around Xmas, and new figures do indeed confirm that there has been a forty per cent reduction over that time. The DWP claim that the reduction is due to 'more claimants fulfill[ing] their commitments to look for work'. But our experience suggests that many unemployed people are now much more aware of their rights and are not so easily pushed around as they once were.

*As well as direct contact, we also get requests for help over the internet. At the end of June we got an email from Jim, a single father concerned about being made to take his young son with him to appointments at Triage (the Dundee Work Programme provider) - especially as on the previous three occasions another person in the group session had been 'heavily drugged up'. After speaking to the One Parent Families Scotland helpline, we advised that he argue that he has good reason not to attend if there is no suitable or affordable childcare. A few days later, Jim emailed back to say he had written to Triage head office and they had agreed to let him have telephone consultations during the school holidays - signed 'Yours Not So Stressed Single Parent'.*

*The first Saturday in July saw SUWN activists at three different gatherings. We said 'Oxi' (No) to Greek austerity outside the European Commission Offices in Edinburgh, where Greek demonstrators were keen to have their photos taken with our placards. Tony spoke at the Hands Off Holyrood demo outside the Scottish Parliament, where we were delighted at the enthusiastic response of the crowd to our call to show solidarity for Greece by joining us on the frontline against austerity in Scotland, and to the news that sanctions in 'Sanctions City' have been reduced by forty per cent over the last few months. And we joined the festivities at the annual Sma Shot Day procession and celebration in Paisley. This day celebrates a successful strike by Paisley weavers in 1856. The 'sma shot' is the crucial thread that holds the others in place, but, because it is invisible, the supervisor who counted the threads in order to pay the weavers refused to count it. The strike won payment for the*

*sma shot, and each year an effigy of the 'cork' or supervisor is ceremonially burnt. We had good discussions with Trades Council members and other local people – including giving advice to a woman whose son had been sanctioned for not turning up to an interview due to being in hospital with an epileptic seizure. No one had passed on her message that he couldn't attend, and no one had told him or her that he could apply for a Mandatory Reconsideration and Hardship Payments. (Thanks to Gordon, Andrea, Mark, Annie, Tony, Jim and Sarah G.)*



*Andrea and Gordon saying OXI to Austerity, 4 July*

*Four days later it was Sarah (G)'s turn behind the megaphone at the protest in George Square in response to George Osborne's 'emergency budget'. We were also asked to provide a response to the budget for the next day's National.*

### **10 July, Paisley, SG**

Yesterday was the day after budget day and it was noticeable how knowledgeable some people have become, not only about the system that they have to navigate, but also the politics behind it. However, we did find one man who was content to reproduce the official narratives about the achievements of the system. This was odd because he went on to describe his experience on work placement, where he would see other workers getting their pay packet while he got nothing. He had asked the company if they ever took on work experience people afterwards and was told that they wouldn't do so because they could get another group of people in to work for nothing. We pointed out to him that this system actually eliminates



potential paid jobs.

Faces are getting very familiar as some people are made to come in every day. No-one is under any illusions that this is useful. It is just another part of the on-going harassment.

### **17 July, Dundee, SG**

Safely back home from 'storming' the Triage office in Dundee's Albert Square (*Courier's* word, I thought we just walked up the stairs and went in): nine activists, including people with experience of the horrors of the full DWP punishment regime. Triage proudly boast that they are the largest Work Programme subcontractor in Scotland, but they didn't seem to be expecting us. It's a big echoing office so no need to use a megaphone to get our voices heard, and we soon had our banner hanging from the window and were able to let people outside hear our opposition to workfare and sanctions. The manager lost no time in calling the police, and Dundee's finest did us proud. Five police cars and two more circling round – almost a car each! One of our activists slipped out to photograph the banner in the window, and took care to flick the lock on the door as he went out. He was then kept amused watching the police try and puzzle out how to get in. Pushing the buzzer would have been too obvious and they ended up having to phone Triage.



*Occupying Triage, Dundee (Sarah S, Will, and Anon)*

We hope that this action will help draw attention to the horrors of the workfare and sanction state, and show those who profit from inflicting distress on others that they can't expect to do this without active and public protest.

Below is the press release we put out from inside the office:

**We are the Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network, and we are occupying Triage.**

Triage is central to the punishment regime faced by unemployed workers in Dundee. It is a private company making hundreds of thousands of pounds by adding to the pressures on people already suffering from stress and poverty. The draconian rules come from Westminster, but it is companies like Triage that put the rules into action. It is companies like Triage that make sure that the unemployed fill their time with generally useless activities. It is companies like Triage that make people work for up to six months without pay. And it is companies like Triage that tell the DWP to stop the benefits of anyone who has not fulfilled every task to the letter, so leaving them destitute. These are the punishments being meted out to people unable to find work or unable to work. And, as if administering these were not bad enough, Triage has repeatedly failed to pass on crucial messages or send notices of compulsory appointments, so ensuring that even more people get sanctioned. A large number of sanctions in Dundee are given because people have failed to come to a meeting at Triage that they were never told about, or only told too late.

This occupation is a protest against sanctions and slave labour and the whole punitive regime of which they are part. It is also a message to Triage and similar companies that if they take part in this brutal exploitation of people's misery they will be named and shamed and disrupted. If you exploit us, we will shut you down.

### ***19 July, Dundee, JK***

As well as 'storming' Triage, SUWN activists have been busy sharing information about what our rights are when dealing with the DWP. Both of our stalls were kept active this week, with the DWP employing a mixture of old tricks and some new ones to deprive people of the money to which we are entitled.

David was sanctioned for not looking for enough jobs, even though he'd already let the jobcentre know that his dad had just got out of hospital and needed 24/7 care. He'd been on ESA because of severe depression, but had eventually come off his medication, moved himself onto JSA, and was enjoying looking for work. He could cope with looking after his dad, but being sanctioned led to him needing to go back onto medication for depression. The advisor said he'd be better on ESA, even though he didn't want to be. It's not right under any circumstances of course, but what argument can possibly be made for sanctioning someone at the very time when they're looking after a person who's severely ill, and who themselves has health problems? David provides yet another example of someone who was able and willing to return to work until bad treatment from the DWP led to his mental health problems being exacerbated.

Isy was sanctioned when she was called into Triage at the same time as her jobcentre signing-on time. She'd phoned the jobcentre in advance and was told by an advisor that she could change her signing time. When she found out she'd been sanctioned she wrote a Mandatory Reconsideration straight away and posted it. With only a couple of days left to go until the fourteen-day deadline was up, she went into the jobcentre to find out what was happening, only to be told that they hadn't got her letter. So, not only do letters get lost when the jobcentre posts them, they don't arrive there either!

We met a few people who had asked their advisors to jot down what they were saying in writing – and the advisors had refused! This isn't OK – for one thing, lots of us need to have things written down, and for another, it's always best to have a written record of meetings.

A woman whose disability makes writing very hard was forced to write her National Insurance number four times, and was then told off by a manager for being rude - 'being rude' was pleading 'can you not read it?' She is going to send a letter of complaint to the jobcentre manager and to her MP.

*On 24 July, Sarah G was taking part in one of the Friday protests outside the Work Capability Assessment Centre in Glasgow's Cadogan Street – along with SUWN placard – when a claimant was arrested. It was all caught on video by Independence Live. We shared the video, with the following comment:*

Maximus refuses to give a claimant his interview after he has spoken at the protest outside - and then calls the police and gets him arrested. It's all on video here. Neil's speech is from 8 -13 minutes. He is locked out from 28 minutes and arrested at 35 minutes. Neil has had no money since April and won't get any until after he does his Work Capability Assessment and is declared not fit to work. But they refused to assess him! Please ring 101 and get put through to the central Glasgow police station and ask if they have released Neil from custody yet.

### **25 July, Glasgow, SG**

Here's the edited version of Neil's arrest. As you can see, after a quick word with the G4S security guys the police turned from being civil to whipping out the handcuffs. I was struck by Neil's calmness through it all, and the care with which he refused to name the guard who had told him he could go out for a smoke, in case he got the man into trouble!

I spoke to Neil this morning. He was released at 5.15 yesterday afternoon and it seems that he may not be charged. If he is, there will be plenty of people ready to stand as witnesses! I hope to see him next week in Paisley to discuss what

happens next with his benefits as he still has nothing to live on!

*(The video was viewed some 18,000 times.)*

*The next day we had some good news to report for a change – courtesy of our comrades in Edinburgh.*

### **26 July – reposted from Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty**

#### **Edinburgh charity shop pulls out of workfare:**

Anti workfare demonstrators have won a victory in Edinburgh as the Hospices of Hope charity shop in Stockbridge has withdrawn from workfare [*i.e. compulsory unpaid work-for-benefits*]. Protestors converged on the shop in Deanhaugh Street on the morning of 29th June, following reports of the charity's involvement in the Community Work Placements scheme. Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty protestors explained to the shop manager how claimants were forced to work for nothing under threat of sanctions, and urged Hospices of Hope to join the near six hundred charities who have signed the Keep Volunteering Voluntary agreement to boycott workfare.

After a short discussion the manager agreed to withdraw from the schemes, and end all placements immediately. She promised to tell workfare provider Learndirect that the shop would take no more placements.

#### **Trussell Trust withdraw from workfare:**

ECAP discovered that the Trussell Trust's North West Edinburgh Foodbank in Broomhouse was using workfare. We raised the issue with the Trussell Trust, who are signed up to Keep Volunteering Voluntary's agreement to boycott workfare. Ewan Gurr, Trussell Trust's Scotland Network Manager, has now written to assure us that the board of Edinburgh Food Project, who are responsible for the Edinburgh North West and Edinburgh Central branches of The Trussell Trust foodbanks in Edinburgh, have decided 'to cease the use of workfare and turn down any further approaches/offers from Learndirect for people on community work placements in Edinburgh.'

Trussell Trust have also contacted all their fifty Foodbanks in Scotland to reaffirm the organisation's stance against workfare, and as a result two Foodbanks who inadvertently participated in Community Work Placements - unaware of their compulsory, exploiting nature - have now withdrawn, Trussell Trust inform us.



*Outside Dundee Buroo, July 2015 (with William, Gary, Susan, Andrew and Will)*

### **28 July, Dundee, TC**

On Wednesday we were joined by a journalist and photographer from the Evening Telegraph, and also by an academic researcher. We encountered a number of cases that are typical of the crises people find themselves in as a result of being caught within the web spun by the DWP, who fail even to follow their own guidelines.

We came across a young woman who was close to tears. She told us that she had just been sanctioned for the third time. This sanction was generated through Triage for not attending an appointment that she says she received no notification of; and she had not been informed of her right to claim a Hardship Payment. We urged her to write a Mandatory Reconsideration letter immediately. She also admitted to feelings of acute depression and we advised her to approach her GP to get a 'fit note' (sic).

We met an older guy on crutches who was on ESA and in the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG), and who told us that he was terminally ill with cancer and also paralysed down one side of his body. He was coming under increasing pressure with regards to job searching and was very down and depressed about his situation. We gave him our telephone contact details and info regarding welfare surgeries in his area and urged him to keep in contact with us.

We also came across a woman on crutches who is in the ESA WRAG group. She was appalled at her situation as she had never been on benefits before but was forced to stop work in a supermarket after smashing her hip. She could see no point in being threatened with a sanction if she did not complete a computer training course to 'make her more employable' – she has a smashed hip, an upcoming operation, and is retiring in September.

Whilst we encounter examples of shocking treatment of the unemployed, we also get many indications that our work is bearing fruit. Last week we met a couple who were going into Dundee Jobcentre to inquire whether DWP Clydebank had received their 'fit note'. We offered to accompany them in, but they declined our offer. When they reappeared some time later we asked them how they got on and they told us that the staff had been very unhelpful until they threatened 'to get the guys outside, up the stairs'. The DWP staff member spluttered more than a little, and quickly reassured them 'that it wouldn't be necessary to get them in, we'll help as much as we can'. We also hear from people all the time that advisors who are usually less than helpful undergo an instant and miraculous transformation in their attitude towards them as 'clients' when they are accompanied into meetings by an SUWN citizen advocate.

(Thanks this week to Will, Jonathan, Ailsa, Susan, William, Ryan, Jenny, Mark, Gary and Andrew.)

### ***30 July, Dundee, TC***

**Not so much a workfare provider, more a gangmaster.** Dundee Triage has launched a surprising, but none too successful, foray into the murky world of the gangmaster. At least this is what seems to be the case if the story told to us by forty-six unemployed people who are on the books of the so-called 'work provider' is to be believed. They were all recruited via Triage by Margaret Hodge, a Glasgow based employment agency, to work at the recent Open golf tournament in St Andrews at an hourly rate of pay of £7.20, rising to £7.70 an hour if they successfully completed the first week of employment. When they received their wage slips, however, serious discrepancies were discovered, with many of the workers claiming they were underpaid by around £1 per hour. Indeed, some have, as yet, received no wages at all, whilst one man complained that he had cleared a miserly £220 after a ninety hour working week.

The Dundee workers are, though, determined to see justice done. Their case has been reported to Chris Law MP to investigate, and they have also been put in contact with the Dundee Evening Telegraph. We wish them well and will give them every aid we possibly can to ensure they are victorious.

### ***31 July, Paisley and Govan, SG***

**Mind the gap.** The welfare safety net is riddled with holes for people to fall through. Yesterday in both Paisley and Govan the SUWN stall was kept busy trying to catch just some of them.

There was Jim, who was on the first (Assessment) phase of ESA and needing regular medical notes from his doctor, only he'd had an argument with his doctor and the surgery had removed him from their list. No medical note, no benefit,

but the surgery said that was not their problem and the jobcentre said it was not their problem. Luckily, it transpired that Jim had given his details to a new doctor, and we managed to get him an appointment for this morning. Meanwhile, we sent him to find a charity lunch at a place recommended by folk in the Citizen's Advice Bureau waiting room, though not appearing on CAB's official list.

Paul is in between college and university and has only been able to find work for limited hours. This doesn't pay enough to cover his rent, so he made the mistake of taking all his paid holiday days to make up the difference. When this money was gone and he went into the Housing Benefit office to claim the miserable benefit allowed to those under thirty-five, he was told that his pay slips – which included the holiday pay – showed too high an income for him to qualify for the benefit. We hope that Advice Works will be able to help him.

Kim, a single mum with two kids, was also having problems getting Housing Benefit due to irregular and unpredictable hours in her cleaning job. As a result, Govan Housing Association was threatening to evict her and had told her that her first priority was not food for the weens but paying the rent.

Derek told us that the sanction he had feared last week had now become a reality. He had applied for Hardship Payments, so we advised him to go to the council and apply for a grant from the Scottish Welfare Fund to tide him over the two weeks until the Hardship Payments come through.

On what should have been a more positive note, we met Rob who is getting help through the DWP's New Enterprise Allowance to set up his own business. The problem is that although he is getting official DWP help with this it won't be regarded as properly under way for two weeks. Meanwhile he has to continue to apply for jobs at the DWP Jobcentre – and is worried he might get offered one!

A common gap to fall through is the one that faces people who have put in for a Mandatory Reconsideration after being found fit for work at a Work Capability Assessment. The only way they can get any money while they wait for the verdict is to apply for JSA. As this involves saying that they are ready to work, they are naturally concerned that it may be both dishonest and affect their chances of ultimately getting ESA. However, crazy as it is, those are the rules. It won't prejudice their Reconsideration, and (which they are generally not told) once signed on they can ask their doctor for a sick note (now absurdly called a fit note) so that they are not forced to do any job-search tasks. We are often called upon to help people in this situation, and yesterday we were pleased to be thanked by Jen who we had successfully advised to get such a sick note a few weeks ago.

As if all these gaps weren't bad enough, we learnt that at least one of the Govan

'advisors' is taking the requirement to 'challenge' claimants to a new low level. One woman told us that she was accused of being too well dressed – and so effectively lying about her need for benefits. She had just been given a designer handbag and jacket for her twenty-first birthday. And a man told us he had been ticked off for being too fat, and – by implication – lazy.

Finally, an update on Neil who was arrested at Cadogan Street on Friday. We have arranged for him to have a new assessment next week. I explained to the woman on the telephone that he had been refused entry after taking part in the protest but that that should not prevent him having his assessment – and she said absolutely not! The reason he has been without money since April is due to another one of those gaps. This gap was created by a new law introduced just before he put in his ESA claim. It states that if you have been passed as fit to work at one Work Capability Assessment you can only get ESA payments on a new claim if it is for a new condition or your previous condition has significantly deteriorated. This should not have been a problem, but it is the DWP who decides if your new claim meets these conditions, and their Decision Maker has decided that until they get proof otherwise (at the Work Capability Assessment) Neil's doesn't. I asked them how, then, he was supposed to survive, and they said that he would have to sign onto JSA and afterwards put in a doctor's line – in the same way as for people who put in for a Mandatory Reconsideration after being knocked back at their Work Capability Assessment. Pity no-one seems to have made this clear earlier!

(Thanks to Gail, Chris, Ann, Alessio and the lads and lasses from Glasgow Anarchist Collective.)

*Neil never got ESA, but he wasn't charged either.*

*On the weekend of the 8-9 August, two of us made the journey from Dundee to Fort William to take part in the Lochaber Against the Cuts rally, and talk with local activists about possibilities for work with the unemployed - as well as enjoying the ceilidh, quiz night and excellent hospitality. (Thank you Marie, Eddie and Ann.)*

### **13 August, Paisley and Govan, SG**

**From the cradle to the grave.** We are meeting more people who are being put on Universal Credit [*the new benefit which is gradually replacing JSA*] and then have to apply for a benefit advance to cover the long delay before payments start. This included one man who had just been released from prison and had already been without any money for over two weeks while they sorted out what he should apply for. Going straight doesn't pay.





*Tony Cox speaks for the SUWN in Fort William, 8 August 2015*

We are also meeting single mothers who are being put under pressure to look for work or carry out ‘work related activities’. Carers can restrict the hours and times they are expected to work, and people with very young children are ‘only’ expected to do limited things, but one young mother in Paisley told us that her advisor was expecting her to put her two-year-old into nursery every day so she could do jobcentre activities. When she protested, the advisor told her that her own children were in childcare. This is a standard pattern; trying to make parallels between the situation of people on benefits and their own very different situation. (I heard of an example yesterday of a PIP assessor trying to silence a man complaining of severe pain by telling him that she was getting pains in her hands from typing.) A grandmother told us that she had been grilled about whether she was paid for minding her grandson. Even after she had said ‘no’ she was asked how much time she spent with him. I’m glad to say she told them it was none of their business.

While parents of young children are supposed to have some leeway, there is no accommodation for older people who know they have almost no hope of finding a job. A man in his late fifties told us that he had just been assigned to a twenty-six week unpaid work placement. He had already done unpaid work street-sweeping in Ferguslie, and in a local charity. A sixty-year-old, who had had a heart attack and walked with a stick, told us he had been turned down for ESA and was now getting a migraine from being made to use the computer for Universal Jobmatch. I encouraged him to get off UJM, but I expect he will be a jobcentre regular for the rest of his ‘working’ life.

*15 August, Govan, SG*

**Are you being forced to train or do other work related activities in substandard conditions?** Recently we were told a horror story of the training conditions being forced on people signing on in Govan. We wrote to the jobcentre manager - with copies to the head of the DWP in Scotland, the local MP and the press. We reproduce our letter below. The next week we got a concerned phone call from the manager, who told us that she was taking our complaint very seriously and was sending someone to inspect the training centre that day. Then she rang us again in the afternoon to say that there **were** tea making facilities and toilets and all was in order. Our information was clearly out of date, but that doesn't alter the fact that they had been prepared to use substandard facilities in the past. We hope the other problems have also been resolved, and we call on everyone to let us know if they have been forced to train or do other 'work-related activities' in substandard conditions here or anywhere else. We will always be happy to put in a complaint on your behalf – and name and shame the jobcentre concerned!

The Manager  
Govan Jobcentre  
3 August 2015

Dear Sir/Madam  
Jobseekers working in substandard conditions

It has come to our attention that people on Jobseekers' Allowance who are signing on at Govan Jobcentre have been made to attend training sessions in conditions that breach health and safety regulations and are potentially dangerous. We understand that these 4 week sessions have been held in the former storerooms at the back of the old Somerfield supermarket (now the St Margaret's Hospice charity shop) in St Enoch's Square. We have been told that the room was so cold that people on the sessions were forced to wear several jumpers, and there was water and broken glass on the floor. There was no-where to boil a kettle and no toilets other than the public toilets in the square. When a complaint was made about non-compliance with health and safety regulations, the only concession was the provision of wellington boots – and these only for the men.

In addition, people looking for work – including people with mental health issues – were mixed with people doing community service after being found guilty of criminal behaviour.

This whole situation is unacceptable. Please can you give us a public

reassurance that you will be holding no further training courses in substandard working conditions?

*Around this time, we received an email from a man on behalf of his girlfriend who was on a work placement. He wrote 'She works 30 hours a week in a horrible pub for no wages and cannot even keep tips, on top of this she's often left working as the only waitress with a manageress who bullies her relentlessly. Understandably my girlfriend is now preparing to leave her placement to return to working in a charity shop which she enjoyed.' We replied with information from Boycott Workfare and advised her to try and negotiate with the Work Programme Provider and not just leave and risk a sanction.*

**16 August, Paisley, SG**

**Universal Jobmatch is not mandatory and you do not have to give the DWP access to your account**, but you wouldn't think as much from the way the jobcentres behave. Last week someone informed us that they had been told to get themselves onto the system even before their first meeting at the jobcentre, and we were recently shown a Universal Jobmatch instruction sheet that was handed to an unemployed worker signing on in Paisley, on which ticking the box to allow the DWP access had been ringed as their most important task.

**18 August, Dundee**

**Dundee Triage underpayment issue – progress report.** Below is a wee report and call out from Marc Mullen to workers underpaid during the recent Open golf tournament, which we covered a couple of weeks ago - all power to their elbows: To all Margaret Hodge employees... I have had a very productive meeting with Chris Law MP and Dundee councillor John Alexander. I also have taken legal advice from Amy Jones from Thorntons... legally this is a binding contract... what I need in order to get your pay amended is your pay slips you were emailed... you are all owed something.

**26 August, Dundee, TC**

**'Sanctions City' TV report.** We congratulate the BBC reporters on a good job well done (never thocht we'd hear oorsels saying that anytime soon, but credit where credit is due). It was particularly pleasing to see Shauna, Kevin and Will telling it how it is. The question now is, what will be done about the sanctions 'postcode lottery', and, even more importantly, how can we rid ourselves of the 'gross testament to man's inhumanity to man' that is the sanctions regime - devolve welfare powers **now**.

**5 September, Dundee**

Congratulations Bennie and Shauna, who met at our anti-austerity demo last December and married this afternoon. Good things happen in the SUWN.

### ***6 September, Govan and Paisley, SG***

Last week we saw the army recruiting in Govan Jobcentre. They were recruiting in Dundee too. And we have seen this economic conscription work. A couple of weeks earlier we were talking to a young man in Govan who told us that he wouldn't have to go back to the jobcentre as he had now joined up. Where will he be sent? What countries will he have to help destroy and barbarise in the name of British security? Will he soon be back at the jobcentre, like another man we met recently who was trying to get ESA because post-traumatic stress made it impossible for him to manage a job?

And there was the single mother on income support with a three-year-old who was under a lot of pressure to attend work-related activities and put her child into childcare. Individual advisors have a lot of discretion over what they demand of people in her position. They are supposed to be flexible and (as always) reasonable, and should not force people to attend programmes if they have no suitable or affordable childcare. BUT, to keep the system in check requires more negotiating skills than most of us possess, even without an impatient child in tow. This woman was also under pressure from a compliance officer who refused to believe that her former partner no longer lived with her, and on top of all this she had just discovered that she had been sanctioned without realising it. A sanction on income support is open ended and will last until the person does whatever was instructed. The benefit is not stopped but is reduced by twenty per cent. Of course the mother we met had been well aware of the drop in her benefit, but she had assumed that the money was being subtracted to pay her outstanding debts.

And at the other end of the age scale there was the sixty-year-old former butcher in Paisley who is fighting a running battle with Working Links, his Work Programme Provider. They are determined to force him onto the computers, which are giving him migraines. He told us that when his advisor tried to claim that these days butchers need advanced IT skills he felt his professional competence was being attacked and he didn't hold back from telling the young man what he thought about him. Police were called and he was given an on the spot fine of forty pounds for breach of the peace. Yet again, the requirement on the authorities to be reasonable was more honoured in the breach than the observance.

We can only end by reminding everyone, as always, to stand up for your rights – and to get help from a friend or from one of us at the SUWN if you need support in your negotiations.



*Discussing tax credits outside Paisley Buroo, 6 September (Gail on the left)*

*Solidarity is always important – but especially when the police start to intervene:*

**10 September, Message from Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty**

10.11: Now at High Riggs Jobcentre Edinburgh. Police called to evict ECAP rep. Please come down if in area.

10.29: Stand-off continues. 3 ECAP reps inside. Mike ordered to leave by DWP and polis and refusing. Claimant, Adam, insisting on right to be accompanied.

Update: Today's demo now over but we are going back to High Riggs Jobcentre this Monday for another solidarity demo, when an ECAP rep will again accompany the claimant to his Jobseeker's Agreement appointment.

Thanks to all who came today and showed solidarity. There was a four hour stand-off as ECAP and the claimant insisted the appointment should go ahead with the rep present, and defied DWP, security guard and police threats. The DWP tried to insist the rep needed to show ID, despite this being nowhere mentioned in any DWP documents, which confirm the right to be accompanied.

As Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network advocate, Tony Cox - arrested at Arbroath jobcentre - goes on trial at Forfar Sheriff Court on 13 Oct, it's vital we all stand together.

Don't let them bully us! Don't be intimidated! Join us on Monday morning at High Riggs Jobcentre

*On Monday, Tony went down to Edinburgh to show support from the SUWN for ECAP:*

### ***14 September, Edinburgh, TC***

**Successful ECAP protest against denial of jobseeker's right to be accompanied.** The attempt by the management of High Riggs Jobcentre to deny jobseekers the right to be accompanied into meetings and appointments has again been foiled following this morning's successful picket and protest. A rep from ECAP accompanied the jobseeker in for an appointment that was scheduled for 9am, but was stopped at the door by a bevvvy of G4S security guards and managers. What followed was an hour long stand-off, which culminated in the police being called but quickly disappearing again, and then a quick volte-face by management. Mike from ECAP can expect another letter of apology from the DWP, to go along with the one he received last year when High Riggs management tried to pull the same trick - and at this rate the toilet of the Autonomous Centre will soon be covered in these worthless scraps.

Events at High Riggs should be a warning to all activists and volunteers on the front line of the war against Austerity to remain ever vigilant. This is also a salutary lesson in the value of militant action and solidarity, as activists from across Edinburgh, and from Stirling, Dundee and Glasgow, heeded the call to stand with their comrades from ECAP.

### ***19 September, SG***

**Big Brother is watching you.** Besides the help and advice we can give at the stalls, we often get contacted by phone, as well as by email. Kirstie rang us a little while ago. We never had to give her practical help because she got a job the next week, but I think she was glad to have a sympathetic ear. Kirstie is thirty-four. She told me that she had been trying hard to do the right thing, but every time she got screwed over. She had gone back to education and gained a degree, but after graduating in 2012, she spent two years failing to get work. When she eventually got a probationary post as an event co-ordinator, she was let go just before the end of the year, before her post was permanent. The jobcentre didn't register this as a break from unemployment so treated her as if she had been unemployed nearly three years. The week before we spoke they had put her on daily signing. And they had made her go to a compliance meeting.

She and a group of friends do cheerleading together, meeting up once a week in a local hall. Someone had reported this to the jobcentre, accusing her of earning money from it. In fact any money collected went to pay the hall and for things like tea bags, but now she had to justify everything to the jobcentre. She had thought it was just a hobby - she simply wanted to do something that was fun – but they were insisting that it counted as voluntary work, so she should have informed them about it, and she was being asked to show them accounts, which didn't exist. She told me that she was terrified all the time that they were checking up on her, even expecting DWP officers to be hiding behind the grave stones next to the hall where they practice. She felt that nothing she did was private – that she was 'totally violated', they 'might as well have gone through my underwear drawer.'

Kirstie described how the jobcentre staff would look at her like she was 'a piece of shit' and claim she had an attitude problem. This, on top of the difficulty getting a job, had made her so depressed that for several weeks she had to have a doctor's line. She had been told she couldn't go on much longer without going on ESA. Despite her best efforts to improve her skills she felt she had achieved nothing and was being forced to accept any unskilled low paid job she could get – as indeed she was.

### ***20 September, Glasgow and Paisley, SG***

**Two days in Glasgow and Paisley.** Sometimes it seems that jobcentres are competing to give the cruellest least deserved sanction. On Friday we learnt about one young man sanctioned while in intensive care and another who was sanctioned for attending his brother's funeral. The second man told me that the DWP knew about the funeral because he had had to get a grant for the funeral costs. He was not told about Hardship Payments or that he could appeal, and so was left with no money for eight weeks.

We are meeting more and more people who are having to sign onto Universal Credit. This has been designed (why?) so that no money comes through for several weeks, and although some people are allowed a benefit advance to help cover the gap, this is by no means guaranteed. A Paisley woman told us that after scouring her bank statements the jobcentre refused to give her any advance on her Universal Credit and she was forced to get an emergency grant from the Scottish Welfare Fund. (Unlike an advance, she won't have to pay this back.)

The arrogance of jobcentre staff seems to have no bounds – but sometimes they meet their match. We heard how they tried to make a young man change the times of his Community Payback Order so as to fit in with their chosen schedule, only to be rung up by the Criminal Justice people and told who was boss. The ironic thing is that work done under a Community Payback Order is very similar



to the unpaid work unemployed folk are made to do under the Community Work Programme – only Payback Orders are much shorter! Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the main Work Programme providers in Scotland, Working Links, also runs ‘rehabilitation and offender management services’ in Wales and the South West of England. A man outside Paisley jobcentre commented that whenever he had to go to Working Links for the Work Programme there were always people in tears.

A Govan man told us how he had nearly lost his house because the large company he worked for had not been paying his National Insurance, so when he was made redundant he didn’t qualify for benefits. And we heard how a young woman on ESA was being called in for a compliance interview because – on the advice of her doctor – she had gone for a rest to stay with family in Ireland. There is a rule that you can go out of the country for more than the minimum four weeks if this is ‘solely in connection with arrangements made to treat your disease or disablement’, so this might help her.

Our friends at Sunny Govan radio came and joined us outside the jobcentre, Common Good Awareness Project set up stall next to us, and we were also able to introduce a vulnerable young girl who was getting little practical help from the jobcentre to the Tea in the Pot women’s group in the Pearce Institute.

Our stall at Hope Over Fear on Saturday got lots of visitors, and we made new links with Peoples Assembly Fife - who are doing similar stalls to us in Kirkcaldy - and with Psychologists Against Austerity, as well as seeing old friends like the folk from Castlemilk Against Austerity. Our fifteen hundred leaflets were gone way before the end of the day – and the generosity of the crowd just about covered their printing costs! Tony gave a powerful speech, and the woman doing the sign language translations claimed that translating him had built up her arm muscles. We also gave out lots of Know Your Rights leaflets and were able to offer some practical advice.

One young couple who came to the stall were both ex-army and destitute. He is going to college because his army qualifications don’t count for jobs in civilian life, and she has had to give up her job, as a spinal injury has made it impossible for her to manage full time work. Due to a mix-up they were getting nothing, not even Housing Benefit. We advised them to get help from Welfare Rights or CAB, and to apply straight away to their local council for a Scottish Welfare Fund emergency grant.

In even worse straights was a young man who had applied for ESA on being released from prison but didn’t seem to be getting anything during the initial ‘Assessment Phase’. (He should be receiving £73.10 a week, the same as for JSA.)



To add to his problems, he was sleeping rough because personal reasons made it dangerous for him to move back to his home town and Glasgow City Council had refused to take responsibility for housing him. He is getting help from the Simon Community, whose lawyer has written to Glasgow City Council to tell them they must fulfil their legal responsibilities to provide housing. He was also getting hot meals at the soup kitchen in Cadogan Street, which he said is full of homeless people discussing how to protest at the lack of help from the Council.

***21 September, Dundee, TC***

**Business as usual at Dundee Jobcentre.** After the colour, noise, excitement and fellowship of the weekend, it was back to business as usual outside Wellgate Buroo. The cases we dealt with are typical of the sort we have been coming across recently - issues with regards to sanctions are much less common than they were a few short months ago, but others are coming to the fore. We are meeting many people who have been refused ESA after attending medical assessments. This happened to Maggie, who suffers from depression, stress and anxiety. Needless to say, the stress of the assessment process, waiting on her result, and finally being told that she was 'fit for work' has led to a downward spiral in her depression. She has been given further medication to help her sleep at nights - which, if there is any justice, will also be a problem for the assessor who turned her down for ESA. She had put in a request for a Mandatory Reconsideration, but had again been rejected. We advised her to appeal the decision and directed her to Welfare Rights at Dundee City Council. She was initially quite anxious about doing this as she was frightened that challenging the DWP would make life difficult for her when signing on. I underlined that it was important that she challenged the decision, as it is only this way that the DWP will stop seeing her as a soft target and actually get off her case. She promised she would do this, and we asked her to keep in contact and let us know how she got on.

We also came across five or six other people who required assistance, including a young guy, Keir, who hung about the stall for a wee while before we approached him to ask if he had any problems. As soon as we talked to him, his story came tumbling out - he suffered from ADHD, Autism, and anger management issues, and had broken his foot. He had previously been homeless, and when he had moved out of a homeless unit some months ago he had found that his ESA claim had been inexplicably shut down. He was now being threatened with a sanction by his advisor for not attending an appointment when he had been in hospital getting his foot treated. We asked him to phone us when and if he needed someone to accompany him into further appointments, and urged him to register with Welfare Rights so that they could take his case up and help him to re-apply for ESA.

(Thanks to Ailsa, Glenn, Will, Jonathan and Sarah S.)

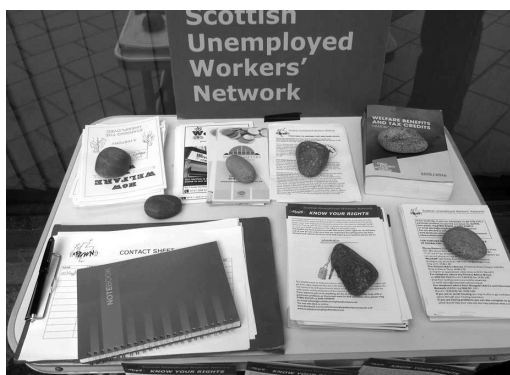
*On the 24th September we were phoned by a man in Paisley who used to be a plasterer, but his legs are now knackered and he finds it difficult to stand or walk. He doesn't have good literacy and the 'computer wasnae me'. Last time he was in a classroom he 'set fire to it'. He'd been accepted as unable to work for fifteen years, but had recently been decreed fit to work after a Work Capability Assessment. His Mandatory Reconsideration had been rejected, and he was signing on, but had a doctor's note. He had very little money because there was a gap between ending ESA and getting JSA, and he owed rent as he had missed getting Housing Benefit. That week he had received £93 to last him a fortnight and it was almost all spent. We gave him contacts for local advice and told him to get them to help him appeal the ESA decision, and to ask them about other benefits and interim help.*

### **27 September, from Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty**

#### **Anti workfare victories**

Two claimants supported by ECAP have recently won victories in stopping the DWP and Learndirect sending them on workfare by refusing to sign any documentation at Learndirect. Signing these documents is not mandatory, and with the backing of ECAP the claimants concerned have not been sanctioned.

*Learning from ECAP and Boycott Workfare, the SUWN was soon helping people use this simple technique to avoid workfare placements. It is important that people do everything asked up to signing the paperwork (they can bring a witness with them to attest to this), but they cannot be made to sign. And without the paperwork the placement can't be processed. They will receive a letter saying that they have not complied, to which they need to respond that they have done everything asked except sign the documents, which they have a right not to do.*



### **29 September, Govan, SG**

The photo shows our very portable stall outside the jobcentre in Govan. Our most important tool is the pile of Know Your Rights leaflets. We hand one of these leaflets to everyone who goes into the jobcentre, and inside it we slip a

photocopied sheet listing local welfare rights offices and phone numbers. Also on the table are leaflets from two local welfare organisations, a contact sheet for people to leave their details, a notebook, general leaflets giving a bit more information about the SUWN, our illustrated history pamphlets, and the CPAG Handbook. This handbook is the welfare workers' bible and enables us to answer some quite difficult questions from the stall. You can order it on line from the Child Poverty Action Group – with a big discount if you are on benefits. We try and have newsletters too, but at the moment we've run out. (The stones probably draw the most comments but we can't give them away or the papers get blown all over the place.)

### ***1 October, Dundee, TC***

We are coming across many instances of people being forced, very much against their will, into Work Placement schemes. People are, though, fighting back, and we are working with a number of - usually older - guys, some of whom have had trade union experience, who have been going toe to toe with the DWP and Work Programme Providers over this issue. We salute their 'indefatigability' - as a certain well known ex-Dundonian said in a different context. Following the wonderful example of ECAP, we have started to get results, and even got someone officially removed from the Work Programme altogether. We are desperate to have the opportunity to move towards direct action on this issue when someone we are working with actually does end up doing workfare, but every case we have taken up has resulted in the person being withdrawn before they were due to start their slave labour placement.

(Thanks this week to Jenny, Ailsa, Ryan and Jonathan)

*On the 4th October, SUWN activists took part in the Indy Rally in Dundee, and on the 5th our banner could be seen among the hundred thousand protestors outside the Tory Party Conference in Manchester.*

### ***6 October, Dundee***

Just received this from one of the Dundee volunteers:

'Overheard a couple of guys on the bus today, one was singing the praises of the SUWN, saying they'd been a lifesaver when he was sanctioned because of the great advice and the food delivery from Taught by Muhammad. He was telling his mate about how it was ordinary people helping each other out. Later, he looked over and shouted on me; turned out he recognised me from the stall, introduced me to his friend and they both went on about how great the work was that the SUWN are doing.'

### ***7 October, Govan, SG***

Last Thursday Swallow Hotels were recruiting in Govan jobcentre: Seven forty-

hour weeks of unpaid labour and a **possibility** of a job at the end – though I don't suppose they will want to take on too many people when they can get more labour for nothing. This was for one of the few work experience schemes that are not mandatory - though if you start, then you are sanctioned if you leave early. Of the fifteen folk who came to hear about this opportunity, only a third wanted to take up the offer.

We had a long chat with John who had recently signed onto Universal Credit and had had a five-week wait before getting paid. He had been allowed a £200 advance but was now having to pay that back off his benefits. These were already reduced by previous loans, so he had been left with just £160 to last four weeks. To make it worse, the DWP actually made his first payment a day later than they had said, so his carefully arranged direct debits went out before the money arrived, leaving him with bank charges. John had just been told by his advisor that she wouldn't be putting him forward for a job. When he asked why, she told him it was because of the way he was dressed. Boiling with rage, he told her that he hadn't come dressed for an interview and he could go away and come back in half an hour and she wouldn't recognise him. This is the same jobcentre that had previously criticised someone for being too well-dressed so, presumably not needy enough.

Alan told us that he was a trained football coach and that in his own time, without pay, he had set up football training for local kids – until the jobcentre had told him he had to stop and could be sanctioned for it. This is not only ridiculous, it is also outwith their own rules, which 'only' require you to look for work and be available to take it up straight away. In fact, if you are doing voluntary work that may help you find a job, then you can also argue that this should be taken into account when they are deciding what other steps you have to take each week.

### **8 October, Govan, SG**

Talked to a woman at the Jobcentre today who told me her son had been refused a place on unpaid work experience because he was missing a front tooth! The justification given was that the placement involved interacting with restaurant customers.

*We also made a submission to the Scottish Government's consultation on what should be done when 'employability support' is devolved (see Appendix B). It was still very unclear how much power they will actually get to do things differently, but we put down some general principles – such as support being voluntary, and no workfare.*

### **13 October, Forfar, SG**

**One up at half time.** A report from Forfar Sheriff Court where SUWN advocate

Tony Cox was on trial for threatening behaviour, refusing to give his name and address, and resisting arrest after police were called when he was representing a vulnerable unemployed woman at Arbroath Jobcentre on 29th January. We believe that this case highlights the climate of fear that is evident within many Jobcentres. Benefit claimants are being treated with contempt, and welfare advisors are being subjected to bullying and intimidation when they are trying to represent often highly vulnerable people.



*Outside Forfar Sheriff Court (photos by Mick Quinn)*

So we're back from a day's entertainment at Forfar Sheriff Court, where we watched Tony's lawyer methodically demolish the DWP's witnesses so that the Procurator Fiscal was forced to drop their charge of threatening behaviour all together. The case isn't finished – we had to spend most of the day waiting around – but when we come back on the 18th November it will only be for the other two charges.

There was a great crowd of folk there to support Tony and the right to have an advocate in the jobcentre, including friends from Glasgow, Edinburgh and

Angus as well as Dundee. But when we were eventually called in from the autumn sunlight things didn't start so well. We were crammed back in the small downstairs court and after the sheriff had finished dishing out punishments for cases that should never have gone to law, he turned to Tony's case and announced that he had something he had to say: he had worked in the past as a lawyer for the DWP, but he could assure us that that wouldn't make a difference. Tony was not so certain and asked for a different sheriff! We had to move court too because there was no working video in the first one. So eventually, about 12.30, we ended up in the main court upstairs with another sheriff.

What with lunch and then a whole lot more cases slipped in afterwards, there was only time for three witnesses, but that was enough. Our defence witness didn't even have to appear. Both main DWP witnesses were forced to admit that Tony's 'aggression' boiled down to using his finger to make a point, and that they had no recollection of what they had both told the police at the time, that the jobcentre had been briefed to be wary of the SUWN. The security guard – who was called as a witness for the crown – simply stated that in his opinion Mr Cox had done nothing wrong in the jobcentre.

The reason Tony was in the jobcentre was to renegotiate a Claimant Commitment so that the claimant, who was badly dyslexic, didn't have to use the computer-based Universal Jobmatch. Using the government's job website - which is notorious for jobs that don't exist or are out of date – is not compulsory (unless the claimant is given a specific Jobseeker's Direction), so it was pretty difficult to sit quiet while the jobcentre manager claimed that all jobseekers had to sign onto it. But when one of us laughed they were sent straight out of court. In fact, by the time we reached the end of the very short session, there were almost as many of us sent out as left in. The sheriff had a zero tolerance attitude to any disorder in his court - including not standing when he came in and out. A few claps earned G a short spell in custody.

A big thank you to everyone all round the UK for your support. Every battle makes us all stronger!

*We had told STV that the main charge was being dropped, and their report was accurate if very brief, but the reports in the Courier and Daily Record, which only presented the allegations, were misleading and far from helpful.*

## **20 October, Dundee**

**SUWN advocate thrown out of Dundee Jobcentre and police called.** Events took a turn towards the sinister earlier today when partially-sighted disability activist and SUWN advocate, Andrew Kirk, was ejected from Dundee Jobcentre by security staff. Andrew had been approached by a jobseeker who was

fearful that he was facing a possible sanction for failing to turn up to a DWP appointment. This is the kind of everyday advocacy work we conduct on a regular basis at Dundee Buroo, but when Andrew accompanied the jobseeker in, he was informed by the 'work coach' (sic) that the jobseeker did not want Andrew to represent him. When he challenged the 'work coach' on this issue, Andrew was quickly surrounded by security staff and was very intimidated by their attitude (we have recently had a number of complaints from angry jobseekers regarding forced ejections from Dundee Jobcentre). He was informed that if he did not comply with their demand that he leave the building, they would call the police. Faced with intimidation and threats, Andrew left and reported back to the SUWN group outside. After discussing the matter, it was decided to wait for the jobseeker to emerge from the building. When we spoke to him he confirmed what we already suspected, that he was quite happy with Andrew representing him.

Andrew and Tony then re-entered the building to lodge a complaint with the manager regarding the manner in which Andrew had been treated. When they arrived at reception they were informed by a DWP advisor that they had no right to be in the building as they had no 'personal business' to conduct. The advisor repeated that Andrew had been asked to leave because the jobseeker did not want to be represented. Andrew and Tony then informed her of the discussion they had had with the jobseeker, but by this time they were surrounded by security and other DWP staff, none of whom could ever be mistaken for a ray of sunshine. Then the accusations started: Tony was told, 'You cause trouble wherever you go', that he was 'looking for a fight', and - repeatedly - that he was 'aggressive' and that the 'best thing to do is to shut up'. It was obvious to Andrew and Tony that the DWP staff were attempting to instigate an incident by needling them, but they kept calm throughout this on-going tirade. Tony was then told that his 'shouting and swearing' was upsetting children that were present in the foyer, but when he approached the mother of the child in question her response was 'I dinna want to get involved'. Tony then pointed out that if the DWP staff were so concerned by his behaviour, then they should produce CCTV footage to support what are in fact little more than slanders. Tony and Andrew's attempts to speak to the manager came to naught, although an advisor claimed to be the manager and repeated the demand that Tony and Andrew leave the building, 'or the police will be called'. Tony responded by telling the DWP staff that he and Andrew were not leaving the building and that they could call the police if they wanted.

After waiting around ten minutes for the police to arrive, and facing constant needling from advisors and other staff, T and A decided to wait for them outside where there would be more witnesses. When the police eventually arrived, they breezed right past T and A into the buroo, and when they re-emerged around fifteen to twenty minutes later, they again attempted to ignore the SUWN group



that had assembled following phone calls to come to T and A's aid. Eventually however, they agreed to speak to T and A, but insisted that it be away from the front of the buroo, which they believed was covered by CCTV cameras. Instead, they insisted that T and A accompany them around a corner away from the increasing crowd that was gathering outside the buroo. One of the policemen, who was particularly stone-faced, asked to look at Tony's moby, and insisted that he would not speak to them if Tony was recording the conversation, to which Tony replied that he had a perfect right to record any conversation with the police, if he felt it necessary, but that he was not recording the conversation.

After a brief discussion with the police officers, we were able to deduce that the DWP had called them out, and that they had accused Tony of 'shouting and swearing', which had 'frightened children', and of generally disrupting the work of the jobcentre. But that this time however, the DWP were not making an official complaint. We pointed out to the police that this was not only wasting their time, but also taxpayers' money, to which they replied that they were bound to act on a complaint. We also pointed out that we were aware of complaints made to the police on a regular basis by jobseekers regarding their treatment at the hands of DWP security staff, but that they were never acted on - by contrast, all that it seems to take is for the DWP to whistle and the polis are doon to the buroo like a shot.

We have been in contact with the jobseeker, and the sanction threat has evaporated. He was thankful for our help, and we urged him to keep in contact. We see this incident as a clear attempt to intimidate SUWN activists, something that we will not tolerate. We are also aware that the DWP staff appeared particularly to target Tony, and believe this is a consequence of the sensationalist and misleading headline in the *Courier* following the first part of his court case. Thanks to the SUWN crew for mobilising at short notice in aid of their comrades; if we didn't know it already, we know now that we are in a fight.

### **27 October, Govan and Paisley, SG**

Last week we met yet another young man who had got sanctioned almost as soon as he was out of prison. And he hadn't been told to make sure he was still getting Housing Benefit, so he had lost his home too. If the system was designed to encourage reoffending, they couldn't do much better. It was too late to help with this sanction, but we did direct him to Money Matters for current problems.

A young Polish guy had been told that he had to search for jobs seven days a week, including Sunday. He showed no intention of letting the jobcentre dictate his weekend, so we asked him to contact us if that caused problems. As we explain in our Rights leaflet, the legal requirement, which should stand at an appeal tribunal, is just to take reasonable steps to secure the best prospects of



employment - but that doesn't mean they won't sanction you for not fulfilling their directions to the letter, especially if you allow them to track your actions through Universal Jobmatch.

*The following case concerns a man who lives in North Ayrshire and rang us up in mid-September after finding us through Google. We seem to have carried out a lot of advice and reassurance by text, so can give an edited extract. Dan was on ESA in the 'Work Related Activity Group', and the advisor at his Work Programme Provider, Ingeus, seemed to be having problems in understanding that 'work related activities' does not include work.*

**SUWN (SG):** 'they cannot and should not make you apply for jobs. They can only give you tasks that are designed to make you job ready. I think you should make an appointment with a welfare rights officer. The number for money matters in ... is ...'

**Dan:** 'That's what that Ingeus advisor kept saying. I'm just getting things in place for when you are ready for work. By applying for jobs? How long does he expect an employer to keep a job open? It was persistent. Every visit is, what about that? And he would show me a job that was on the Universal Jobmatch website. A few times the job didn't even exist or was taken. Thank you for the advice.'

**SUWN:** 'Tell him that work related activity does not include applying for jobs. And let me know how you get on. I'd like to write a letter of complaint to Ingeus if you would be OK with this.'

**Dan:** 'Yes I'm fine with that. Especially after last time I seen him and he told me, we'll just send out a few cover letters, which as I told you, turned out to be fifty-three of them. Really wish I had took a photo. 'One other thing. When I had appointments with him, he told me, you don't need to wait on me, jump on a computer and do a job-search. I just go with the flow. I'm frightened I get sanctioned. Every time I go there I feel really nervous and on edge.'

*We agreed we would write to Ingeus central office, but without naming names or places as Dan was concerned about being victimised for complaining. (Dan was particularly keen for us to do this as he didn't want other, more vulnerable, people being treated as he was.) We asked them to make sure that all their officers understand that people on ESA have been found not fit for work and that they should not be made to apply for jobs; and we requested an apology that we could pass on to Dan. We received a two page response that sidestepped both these points.*

*But a week later, on 29 October, we got a further text from Dan, who seems to have been emboldened by the whole experience:*

'Just to let you know that I went to the job centre today and explained my situation. The chap I got to see was extremely helpful and understanding. He called Ingeus and I have been given a new advisor. He also told me the same thing you did about not having to do job-searches. Very good outcome. Thank You.'

*(Ingeus was founded by the wife of the Australian (Labour) former Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, and their contract with the UK government has brought them around £150 million a year (Financial Times, 1 April 2014).)*

### **31 October, Paisley, SG**

We are always told that you can't miss a session at the Work Programme without 'good cause'. What better cause could there be than going to a funeral? But when the man I met on Thursday gave this reason to his Work Programme Provider, he was sent along to repeat it to the jobcentre – where he was told that they would let him know whether or not he would be getting a sanction. We hope sense prevails in the end, but even if it does, why should he be made to worry about losing his benefits, especially coupled with the emotional stress of a funeral?

Usually we meet older people who are being forced to attend computer training that they don't want and can't cope with. This time we heard how someone had arranged to go on a computing course to update his skills, but not been given the time off from his Community Work Programme chores, where he was acquiring useful grass-cutting experience. There is actually provision in the rules for providers to incorporate a wide range of courses into someone's Work Programme, so anyone else finding themselves in this predicament should argue the point. Our friend only discovered this too late but is keen to let others know their rights.<sup>10</sup>

### **3 November, Dundee, TC**

It was a relatively busy morning for the SUWN volunteers at Wellgate Buroo. We came across a number of people who required assistance, including a young guy who was sanctioned for three months for forgetting his signing on book. When this had been raised as a problem by the 'work coach' (sic), his mother, who had accompanied him into the meeting, offered to return home and bring it down to the buroo, but the 'work coach' (sic) assured her this wasn't necessary; a few days later her son was informed that he would be deprived of all 'benefits' (sic) until after Xmas. We urged them to write a Mandatory Reconsideration letter asap, but, as this will be judged by an internal DWP decision maker, not to hold out too much hope that the sanction would be overturned. If, as is likely, the mandy

<sup>10</sup> See [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/516893/work-programme-provider-guidance-chapter-13.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/516893/work-programme-provider-guidance-chapter-13.pdf), p6; <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/107228/response/263767/attach/html/2/FOI825%20reply%2013.3.12.pdf.html>

recon is rejected, we urged her to pursue it to the appeal tribunal stage (where upwards of 70% of sanctions questioned are overturned), and furnished her with details of where she could get help with the appeal process.

Another young guy approached us on the stall when he had been told to leave the buroo after he accidentally broke a pen whilst signing on; this was interpreted as 'aggressive behaviour' by his 'work coach' (sic), who was new to him as he had complained about the treatment he had received at the hands of his previous 'work coach' (sic). The young guy phoned his father, a well-spoken retired priest, to accompany him back in to challenge what appeared to be an unfolding sanction. When they re-appeared they reported a total change of attitude on the part of his 'work coach', and all problems were resolved. The fact that the DWP responded so positively to a well-spoken priest does, however, raise questions regarding their attitude towards unemployed people who are not so well versed in Received Pronunciation.

SUWN volunteers were also required to accompany some people in. One middle-aged guy who had just been bumped from ESA was being called in to negotiate a Claimant Commitment. This gentleman had serious gastric problems, and was fitted with a colostomy bag. We urged him to challenge the ESA decision, but explained that, in the meantime, he would be required to sign a Claimant Commitment in order to receive his princely JSA allowance. Our volunteer reported that they were able to negotiate a Claimant Commitment comprising two job searches per week, and were also able to argue successfully against him being signed up to UJM, despite the fact that the 'work coach' raised the issue on no fewer than four occasions.

Finally, we were approached by an unemployed man who asked us for a leaflet. He had just emerged from signing on and reported that his 'work coach' (sic) had noticed the 'Know Your Rights' leaflet that he was holding, and had justified taking it from him and depositing it in the bin by explaining that 'those people don't like us'.

And SUWN volunteers are also being kept busy between stalls with accompanying people into ESA Work Capability Assessments and PIP medical assessments. *[Personal Independence Payment, or PIP, is supposed to cover the extra costs associated with being ill or disabled. It is not means tested and is not dependent on whether a person is in work.]*

(Thanks to Will, Gary, Susan, Gordon, Sarah S, and Andrew)

### **6 November, Dundee, TC**

**Dundee's 'Blue Mile'.** Many people will be familiar with the film *The Green Mile*,

the title of which referred to a corridor in a US penal institution that led from the cell block to the execution room. Well, we can reveal that Dundee can now, courtesy of Atos, boast its own **Blue Mile**, a corridor that measures forty metres that is located within Prospect House, the PIP Medical Assessment Centre. We have received numerous complaints from SUWN volunteers and disabled PIP claimants who have had their right to PIP payments affected when they have been tricked into using this corridor. Nothing underlines more the repeated claims of welfare organisations that people are being set up to fail assessments than this blatant piece of wicked trickery. According to the DWP's own guidelines, severely disabled people with mobility problems qualify for the higher rate of mobility allowance if they are unable to walk a distance of twenty metres unaided. Crucially however, the same guidelines also state that a disabled person will only fail this test if they can complete the task without pain or discomfort, in good time, and repeatedly. We have represented and spoken to a number of severely disabled people who have undergone this trial by trickery and who have been left in great pain and discomfort as a result of the effort, only to find that their claim for enhanced mobility has been rejected. For those previously on Disability Living Allowance at the higher rate, this can mean losing their Motability car or scooter. *[As was noted in one of the comments to our Facebook post, Atos appears to be following similar logic to the old witch trials: float and you're guilty, sink and you're innocent, but dead.]*



*Dundee's Blue Mile, Atos assessment centre, Prospect House*

People have complained that their taxis have dropped them off at the original Prospect House (as instructed in their appointment letter) only for them to find

that this is a completely different building from the assessment centre, and that by the time they have made inquiries at the building their taxi has departed. They are left to walk around forty metres to a door at the end of the new building, before facing the Blue Mile - a walk of another forty metres to the assessment rooms at the other end of the building. The effort required is often too much. People end up being exhausted, anxious and in pain even before the assessment has started - and when they mention the walk, this can often be enough to disqualify them from getting the PIP mobility component at the enhanced rate.

There is another entrance with adjacent parking next to the assessment rooms, but this is hard to find and not mentioned in the appointment letter. In any case, the toilets are at the opposite end of the corridor from the assessment rooms and reception area, meaning that those attending medical assessments are forced to complete a return journey of eighty metres just in order to relieve themselves. For many claimants, and particularly those suffering from incontinence, this represents a serious obstacle. The assessment centre does not provide wheelchairs, the corridor wall is not fitted with a handrail and there is nowhere to sit and rest.

Some of our volunteers who have accompanied people into assessments have also reported that they have been told by assessors that they should hand over their notes at the end of the assessment. When this hasn't worked they have been told that any notes they do take cannot be used in any subsequent appeal. This is a very serious issue. Many people who are not familiar with the regulations and have accompanied family members or friends into assessments in order to provide support, may well be intimidated into putting their notebooks away, thus depriving the claimant of invaluable evidence if their claim runs up against problems.

This glorified torture chamber masquerading as a medical assessment centre is a disgraceful example of the way in which the so-called welfare system is actually being transformed into something much more sinister: we now have a government that is waging a dirty war against some of this country's most vulnerable citizens. It is shameful and must be resisted by all the means at our disposal.

### ***9 November, Dundee, SG***

**Triage's latest wheeze.** Our favourite Work Programme Provider has got so fed up with people complaining about being sanctioned for not coming to a meeting that Triage had omitted to tell them about, that they have come up with a cunning plan. They are asking folk to ring them every week to ask if they have an appointment. So now, if you haven't rung, and they tell you you missed an appointment, they can say it is your fault even if you were never told anything about it.

*And just when we thought our relationship with the judicial system might be almost over -*

**10 November, Dundee, SG**

**12.05 pm: SUWN activist arrested - protest outside Bell Street Police Station (Dundee) 1pm...**

**6.50 pm: SUWN activist detained in police station overnight to appear in court tomorrow morning - protest outside Dundee Sheriff Court tomorrow, Wednesday, 9.50am.** Tony was due to accompany a disabled woman into her Work Capability Assessment, but **Maximus refused to let him into the room**, even though she insisted she wanted him with her and refused to go into the assessment without him. Tony questioned their reason and their right to bar him entry, and they claimed that they had been 'advised by the police' - but this is news to us and Tony, and they would give no evidence to back this statement up. SUWN called police 101 to try and get someone to help ensure that the woman retained her right to have an advocate of her choice, but they refused to intervene. However the police seemed to have had no difficulty responding to the DWP request and charging Tony with breach of the peace. Yet again, the police seem only too ready to jump to the bidding of the DWP and their friends while ignoring the plight of those the DWP regularly abuses. (We are making sure that none of this affects the benefits of the disabled woman Tony was due to accompany.)

SUWN activists protested outside Bell Street Police Station this afternoon and we have received messages of support from across Scotland. Please join us outside the court tomorrow if you can. **Advocacy is not a crime!**

**11 November, Dundee**

Tony was released today at about 3.30pm, after spending around twenty-seven hours in police custody. He is due to appear at a pleading diet on the 10th February at Dundee Sheriff Court, with the trial taking place on the 24th February. Tony was shocked and appalled at the experience he went through whilst in custody. The police staff were pleasant and amiable enough, but the food was terrible; microwaved meals that would not satisfy a gnat, with breakfast consisting of one barely buttered roll and a cup of execrable tea. He also reports that it is standard practice for turnkeys to wake up all those in overnight custody on the hour every hour, meaning that it is impossible to get a decent night's sleep. His bail conditions stipulate that he should not enter the ESA assessment centre at Dundee Greenmarket.

The SUWN are confident that the court will find in favour of Tony, and are determined that they will not allow this further court case to interfere with the

day-to-day advocacy work that they are involved in. We believe that this latest arrest, along with Tony's earlier arrest on 29/1/15, and the recent incident when the police were called to Dundee Jobcentre on 20/10/15, demonstrate that Tony and the SUWN are on the receiving end of a vicious campaign to criminalise him and to undermine the work of our organisation.

We are proud that the DWP takes us so seriously that they are out to destroy one of our activists, and we pledge that we will not rest until we get justice for Tony and for all those benefit claimants who are also being treated like criminals and dogs. We have been inundated with messages of support since this case has emerged, and we will use that support in order to highlight the extent to which the DWP have went to war against the very people they are meant to serve.



*Protest outside Dundee Sheriff Court, 11 November*

*In mid-November we started writing to some of the local charities who we had learnt were exploiting workfare. Our letter read:*

We have been shocked to discover that your organisation is using unfree labour through the DWP's work for your benefits scheme. This seems to be so much against the spirit of voluntary work and of a community organisation such as yourselves that we wonder if you can be fully aware of the nature of these schemes. Voluntary organisations rely on the generosity of others in giving their time and skills – but this is freely given. They volunteer. However under the Work Programme and other DWP schemes, people unable to find



paid work are compelled to work for nothing on pain of losing their already minimal benefits and being left destitute. This may be dressed up as 'work experience' but it is still unpaid work under compulsion. This forced labour undermines the idea of a minimum wage and the spirit of volunteering, and is utterly demeaning. In recognition of this, many voluntary organisations have signed up to the pledge to Keep Volunteering Voluntary ([www.keepvolunteeringvoluntary.net](http://www.keepvolunteeringvoluntary.net)). We hope that you will reconsider your involvement with this scheme and join them.

Like other campaigners against this exploitative system across the UK, we believe it is important to name and shame the organisations involved, but we hope that we won't need to do this and that you will be able to reassure us that you will not be taking further part in it.

*We have yet to receive an answer, but we are not letting the matter rest.*

#### **18 November, Forfar, SG**

**Advocacy is officially not a crime.** We can now proclaim loud and clear that the substantial charge against our activist, Tony Cox, for 'threatening behaviour' when helping a vulnerable woman in Arbroath Jobcentre, has been well and truly, publicly and officially dropped, demolished and sent into a little hole to hide. The DWP case fell apart at the first session of the trial, back in October, but because it was not yet official we have had to endure press headlines that stressed what Tony had been accused of, but didn't mention that the charges were to be dropped - and which have made it open season to accuse him of all and sundry.

Today's proceedings were more arcane and legalistic. The law on giving your name and address to the police seems to be a case of damned if you do and damned if you don't. Tony had not wanted to give his name and address because he didn't want to be on police records for a non-event, but this seems to have been a £200 offence. Also, the sheriff didn't accept that the police attempted to handcuff Tony before officially arresting him (preferring to believe the police version of events). So apparently, Tony 'hindered' the police in their attempt to arrest him, for which he has been officially 'admonished'.

Thus, Tony is subsidising the incredibly inefficient and lumbering court system to the tune of £200 - but we mustn't forget that the main charge was knocked into touch. Advocacy is **officially** not a crime!

A big thank you to everyone who has supported Tony and the SUWN through this - and looking forward to seeing youse again in February for the next court case in Dundee. With the DWP and their friends so keen to harass us we must be



doing something right!

*On the 21st November we held an activists' workshop in Govan. Although we were largely disappointed in our aim of attracting new local faces, there was plenty of useful discussion round the tactics for getting people off workfare, and also on the best way to reach people going in to Work Capability Assessments.*

### **23 November, Dundee, TC**

Article in today's *Guardian* on Ken Loach's new film featuring benefit sanctions and foodbanks. Paul Laverty, who is responsible for the script, visited us in Dundee a couple of times just before last Xmas to research this film. We lobbied him strongly to locate the project in Dundee, but he wasn't having it. Despite our obvious disappointment that Dundee was not chosen, we are delighted to have been of assistance to a film project that is guaranteed to tell it how it actually is for those on the sharp end of so-called 'welfare reforms'.

### **24 November, Dundee, TC**

**Drying the well.** We have noticed that things have been a little quieter than usual at Dundee buroo over the last couple of weeks. Well, we now know that for the last two to three weeks welfare rights officers with the Dundee City Council Connect team, have been working from the jobcentre. Apparently, this move was initially connected to the introduction of Universal Credit and the need to advise people affected, but it has been continued. We take it as a compliment that Dundee Jobcentre now have a welfare rights team attached to it - the only one in Scotland as far as we are aware - and we see it as a response to the work that we have been conducting outside the buroo for nearly two years now. There will still be a need, however, for an active SUWN presence as there will be issues that people have that the Connect team will not be able to address, such as being mandated onto the various forced work-for-your benefits schemes.

We met a young guy who, following a missed appointment which he was never notified about, was threatened with a sanction by Triage because he didn't have a phone (which follows on from the news we broke a couple of weeks ago that Triage are now demanding that claimants phone them up regularly to see if they have any up-coming appointments). He scraped together £60 in order to get a phone, and as a result, is now in debt. He also informed us that when he was living in Kirriemuir and signing on in Forfar he had to walk the six miles there and six miles back, due to the fact he had no available money for bus fares.

We also had an email inquiry from a Dundee woman who asked whether the DWP had the right to approach her child's school. She had told her advisor that she would not be able to make a meeting because her son had gotten into trouble at school and she had to attend. She was then asked by her advisor for the phone

number of the school and informed that they would be contacted in order to confirm whether she was telling the truth.

(Thanks to Will, Jonathan, Andrew, Gary, Ailsa, Gordon and Susan, and also to the TV reporter who attended the stall for research purposes.)

*We ended the year with another direct action against workfare – which has become a big issue for many people and a growing focus of our campaigning.*

### **15 December, Dundee, TC**

**Occupation of Dundee Learndirect offices in protest at state sponsored slavery.** Around twenty activists from SUWN, Dundee Against Austerity, and Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty, staged a successful occupation of Learndirect's Dundee office this morning to protest against the increasing use of schemes that force unemployed people to work for their benefits. In a city such as Dundee, with high rates of endemic unemployment, it is especially ridiculous that some paying jobs are being transformed into state-sponsored slave labour schemes. This is a major threat to employed as well as unemployed workers, and we are determined to call out those firms and charities that are taking advantage of unemployed people in such a manner. We also felt that the occupation was necessary to let our adversaries in the DWP, Maximus, Atos, and Police Scotland know that we will not be intimidated into silence.



*Occupation of Learndirect, Dundee*

## **2016**

### **14 January, Dundee, SG**

We have been contacted by someone who is finding that the pressures of being refused ESA and then sent to Triage for Work Related Activity are making his long-term mental health problems seriously worse. His Triage advisor has also been trying to interfere with his relationship with his doctor. She is putting

pressure on him to be more active in getting his Doctor to 'cure' his depression, and telling him that if the depression has been going on for so long, then his doctor must be really bad, and he needs to change to a new one. I arranged for him to get further welfare advice.

### **16 January, Govan, SG**

**Of Cats and Foodbanks.** A quiet afternoon outside the jobcentre in Govan yesterday, but we were able to do our bit for one man and his cat. Jim has recently moved from JSA to ESA. His first two ESA payments were on Thursdays, so he naturally assumed that his next would be as well. But those first ones had been early because of the holidays. He had just been told that his next payment was not till Monday. He faced a week end with nothing – and the jobcentre claimed there was naught they could do. He told us that he wasn't worried for himself, he could always survive on cups of tea, but the cat needed food. We took him round to Money Matters in Orkney Street, and they not only arranged for a food parcel to be delivered, but also got him a £5 advance for his gas so that he could have a bath and some warmth, and sent him away with two tins of tuna in his pocket for the cat. As we were walking to Orkney Street he told me that he had been sent on a four-week unpaid work placement at a local foodbank, which he had actually been unable to do because it involved heavy lifting. It turns out that the same foodbank that was happy to make use of forced labour was the one that was now coming to his aid on a desperate Friday afternoon.

*On 20th January there was a prominent article in the Courier headed 'Dundee Fairness Commission urges employers to shun Workfare'! The Fairness Commission was set up by the Council in partnership with various other respectable organisations in the city (not us) to come up with ways of reducing poverty, and had been meeting regularly for some time. I had attended a meeting a while back on welfare, and raised the idea of making Dundee a No-Workfare City, and found only muted interest. I had also exchanged emails about workfare with Councillor Jimmy Black, the Commission's convenor. However, now our idea had been resurrected, and support was 'unanimous'. Fully aware that there was still a long way to go to translate this into action, we drew up some practical proposals in order to canvas support for a concerted programme of resistance, organised at city level, that could provide a significant contribution to making the system unworkable and highlight what is happening to those not already aware. We called for the City Council to agree that it will not itself be party to any workfare schemes and to make nonparticipation a condition for any organisation in receipt of council funding. And for a system of formal recognition for all businesses and organisations who agreed not to participate - similar to the scheme operated by Keep Volunteering Voluntary, but including commercial organisations – with a well-publicised website and 'no-workfare city' window stickers. We arranged meetings with people in the Chamber of Commerce, the Council and the Trades Council, but any action still seemed a long way off.*

*The next day's paper acknowledged the part played by the SUWN:*

*The work of volunteers offering advice and representation to those facing benefit sanctions has been praised by the city's poverty taskforce... Committee convenor Jimmy Black said the volunteers had done an excellent job engaging with people and set an example for Dundee City Council to follow. Speaking at a meeting about the impact of welfare reform, Mr Black said: 'The activists from the Scottish Unemployed Workers Network have done a fantastic job out there in the freezing cold... but should unemployed activists have to do that? The council has now put Connect workers in the job centres because of the example shown by these activists.'*

*It was nice to be appreciated and good to know that people would be getting more welfare-rights help. However, it seemed a bit surreal to get sanctioned and appeal your sanction within the same office. The welfare officers would have to be careful not just to be independent from the jobcentre, but to be seen to be so. We were aware that this might mean fewer people engaging with the SUWN, but, as we'd noted before, folk would still need our help for all the things that official welfare rights don't do – such as getting off those workfare placements.*

### **5 February, SG**

**Efficiency DWP style.** All those people kept waiting for weeks for their benefits may be surprised to learn that the DWP can get things done even before time if they want to. We have been contacted by Kiera from Glasgow who couldn't understand why she was being called into the jobcentre for an interview. Kiera is a single mum with a baby. She is on ESA and finds it very hard to go out of the house at all. Although the interview letter came out of the blue, it transpired that Kiera had had a Work Capability Assessment recently. When I rang the DWP they told me that they had decided on the basis of this to move her to the Work Related Activity Group, which means that they can call her in for 'work related activities'; but as they had only just made the decision and notification goes out second class, she hadn't been told yet. And what about the baby? Once your youngest child is one you can be called in for a work-related interview, and this is clearly what had happened. But not only had Kiera not received her ESA letter yet, her son was not due to turn one for another fortnight. Clearly the DWP just couldn't wait to smother her with their charm. Kiera was less keen. In fact she was seriously worried and I advised her to get a note from her doctor to say that it would be damaging for her to go, and to appeal the ESA decision.

### **9 February, Dundee, TC**

**Normalising unpaid labour.** Over the last two to three months, the Dundee stalls have been pretty quiet with only a trickle of inquiries, but we have noticed

an upturn in inquiries and live issues in the last couple of weeks. At today's stall we came across a number of people who had major complaints regarding the way they had been treated.

Although sanction issues appear to have largely dried up, we came across one guy who had been sanctioned for thirteen weeks for failing to take part in a Mandatory Work Activity [*a four-week unpaid work placement*]. According to the DWP's own guidelines, this scheme is meant to be of demonstrable benefit to the community, but the guy we spoke to had refused to participate because he was being asked to stack shelves in Poundstretcher. This is not to say that it is OK to make people do 'community' work unpaid – particularly 'environmental' work, which generally means sorting rubbish. [*Another person showed us a film he had made on his mobile of the piles of rubbish that he was expected to sort through in order to receive his meagre benefit.*]

We also came across a woman who is long-term unemployed, and who had been through the two-year Work Programme and had just finished a four-week Mandatory Work Activity. She is on the 'Help to Work' scheme, which is the next stage for people who have completed the Work Programme. Her jobcentre advisor had told her that she would be enrolled on a DWP training course, but when she pointed out that any training would be of limited use to her due to her literacy problems, the advisor reassured her that 'it was not that kind of course' and that she would simply be asked to hang clothes on hangers in a retail outlet. The woman responded by asking 'how is that training?' and also pointed out that any referral to a 'training scheme' would mean that she would miss the voluntary work and courses she is already signed up to on her own account. She is currently enrolled in a job club, volunteers in a nursery, and is on courses for her literacy problems. She reported that the advisor was completely dismissive of her initiative and expected her to drop everything in order to take up the DWP's placements and 'training'. We advised her to contact us so that we can accompany her in to her next meeting in order to help her challenge this high-handed attitude.

The major issue we are being approached about is workfare in its various guises. This is an issue that affects more than the unemployed. If workfare is allowed to bed in, and to spread, it will result in nothing less than the normalisation of 'unfree labour' within British society. How long before any prospective employee is expected to undergo months, or perhaps even years, of working for their 'benefits' before they are actually paid for work? The trade unions need to wake up to the dangers posed by workfare to their members, and, indeed, to the very existence of the trade unions as meaningful organisations able to defend employment rights.

*Despite backing from the Fairness Commission, we weren't hanging around waiting for major changes from above. We were growing and strengthening our grass-roots campaign against workfare and building wider knowledge and support.*

*Our next workfare action related to one of our own activists.*

### **10 February, Dundee, SG**

**£slavestretcher.** There are some businesses that thrive on poverty, and Poundstretcher is one of them. Poor people shop there because it is cheap – and one reason it can be so cheap is that people are forced to work there for free or lose their benefits, under the DWP's Mandatory Work Activity scheme. These are probably some of the same people who they rely on as customers.

Last week one of our SUWN activists was told to report to Poundstretcher in Dundee this morning, along with a group of around eight other people on JSA. He was not happy, and yesterday he delivered a letter to Learndirect who arranged the placement. This made clear that it was not reasonable, even in their own terms, to expect a skilled IT engineer who had been unemployed only nine weeks to do a placement designed to 'develop disciplines associated with employment'. It also pointed out that stacking shelves at Poundstretcher does not comply with the Mandatory Work Activity Provider Guidance requirements that placements are of 'community benefit' and 'not at the expense of employing workers in the open market'. Poundstretcher serves no community function, and their employees have been refused a request for more hours. However it was made clear to him that if he didn't turn up he could be facing a thirteen week benefit sanction. So, this morning, he duly checked in – and we duly set up a protest with banners and chants outside the gates.

It seems that yesterday's letter made them rethink their plans. No other DWP slaves were there, so we can only assume that their start was rescheduled so that they weren't corrupted. As others have done before, our activist refused to sign the documents he was given by Poundstretcher – which they can't make you do. He was then told he should leave. We wait to see what happens next, but he will probably be sent a letter by the DWP and will have to make it clear that he participated fully in all that was asked – he just didn't sign the papers.

Poundstretcher staff called the police, but this time the police seem to have had the sense not to come out to a perfectly legitimate protest. We did have a reporter from the local paper though, so we hope that more people will see how the UK is developing a third-class labour force, paid only on benefits and undercutting even minimum wage jobs. Perhaps the other potential DWP slaves will hear about the protest too.

The one sour note was from an angry member of staff who wasn't interested in why we were there and only wanted to tell us that his poor working conditions were the fault of 'foreigners'. We still have a lot to do to counter the tabloid propaganda.

(No-one puts it better than Kevin Bridges – so for those of you who haven't already seen it, and even if you have, check out Youtube for his take on workfare at Poundstretcher.)



*Jonathan ready to go into Poundstretcher*

### ***11 February, Dundee, SG***

**An office full of nurses and no antiseptic wipe.** Yesterday I accompanied someone to his Work Capability Assessment. Let's call him Jack. Jack had one of those lists of ailments that spill off the form onto further pieces of paper, and quite clearly should never have been called in at all. And he already had serious mobility problems before having a toe amputated four days earlier. He arrived by taxi with his mother and had to walk slowly, leaning on a stick and steadying himself on her arm. Although there is parking in front of the assessment centre, this is only for the people who work in the building and it is protected by a barrier. The taxi had to stop the other side of the barrier, and Jack had to make his way slowly across the parking area. To someone in good health, the distance from barrier to door, across the outer lobby and down the corridor might not seem much, but the people coming to the centre are not in good health. Jack struggled, and half way down the corridor he fell full length on the floor. Slowly, he managed to get up and make it the remaining distance to the waiting room. When he was at last sitting down he rolled up his trouser leg and found he had



a raw red graze on his knee. I asked the receptionist for an antiseptic wipe and he said they didn't have anything. I pointed out that every workplace has a legal requirement to have a first aid box, but he was unmoved. I pointed out that we were in an office full of nurses, but he was equally unimpressed, as was the nurse who had come into the office behind him. If the graze had been worse I would have been more insistent, but I didn't want to antagonise them before the assessment had even begun. I was not optimistic when I found that it was the nurse we had seen earlier who was doing the assessment; but not long after she had started her questions, Jack produced a crumpled sheet of notes from his doctor. She took it away and when she came back she told us she didn't need anything further. They had only called him in because his doctor had not sent them information when they had requested it!

### **18 February, SG**

**How to make a low wage economy.** A friend recently applied for a job as an electrician, but when he was offered the post he was told he would only be paid the minimum wage. He was lucky – he had alternative work – but as he pointed out, someone on the bureau would not have the choice. For the first three months you should be able to insist on looking for the type of job and level of pay you are used to, but after that you are fair game for the exploiters. In fact, as I told my friend, it gets even worse. Not long ago, we were contacted by a sixty-three-year-old electrician from Glasgow with years of experience who had just been told to take a six-month Community Work Placement where he would be working as an electrician for nothing more than his benefits. Someone on standard rate JSA working thirty hours a week is effectively working for £2.44 an hour. Joint Industry Board wage agreements are being tossed to the wind. Unemployment has always been used to drive down wages, but now our bastardised welfare state, rather than cutting across this, is actively encouraging a race to the bottom.

*We had still not heard from the workfare exploiters we wrote to before Christmas, so it was more than time to start letting them know we mean business – both through our public blog and public protest.*

### **28 February, Dundee, SG**

**Exploitation in the community.** When we hear of someone being sent to work for nothing at a small community organisation we always hope that there's been a mistake and that the organisation hasn't been fully aware of the nature of what they have signed up to. And so we write to them and explain and ask them to think again. But we also make it clear that if they don't pull back, we will name and shame them for their exploitation. We recently wrote to three organisations here in Dundee, and not one of them even bothered to answer us. All three provide an important community service, but in each case we have spoken to people who have not only been forced to work there without pay or lose their



benefits, but have also complained about how they were treated when they got there. The three organisations are Mid-Lin Day Care Centre, the Deaf Hub and the Maxwell Centre.

While they are not the worst, I was particularly shocked to find the Maxwell Centre involved because I like the place, and I particularly like the community garden. But it was the garden where our contact was being made to work. Mark has been a landscape gardener in the past, so he was a bit surprised when Learndirect - his Work Programme Provider - sent him to work in the community garden for four weeks to build his experience. He was even more surprised when he found that he was given almost no gardening work. In fact he was treated as a general dogsbody, being expected to tidy up, make tea, and Hoover the floors in the centre. He was also expected to use his own car to move material about.

He worked hard for three days hoping that these and other issues would be resolved, but when it was clear that nothing was going to change, he felt he had no option but to leave. We helped him write to Learndirect to explain why he had 'good cause' to do so.

### ***10 March, Dundee, SG and Andrew Kirk***

**It's good to talk.** As we had received no answer to our polite letter to the Maxwell Centre about their use of forced labour, we decided to pay them a visit: so, at 11 o'clock this morning about a dozen of us turned up outside their door, complete with placards and leaflets and the photographer from the Courier. The manager seemed rather stunned to see us – but sat down to discuss with us. She said that they had indeed had two people from the Work Programme, but did not seem aware that they would have been press-ganged into coming under threat of having their benefits sanctioned, and not genuine volunteers. We explained that there is no such thing as nice workfare, and even if the Centre didn't inform the DWP about any failure to participate, people could still be sanctioned. And some time later we were told that the Centre would not be taking any more people from the Work Programme! A few of us are meeting with people from the management board this evening, so we will be trying to formalise this. We are optimistic because we know that this is a community centre that is doing lots of genuinely good work, and exploitation of local people isn't one of their aims. We can also thoroughly recommend their home-made soup – and followers of our blog will know that we are soup connoisseurs.

*We have now had two meetings with board members, and although they are reluctant to commit to anything publically as a response to our action, we would be very surprised if they took on any more workfare forced labour. Mark was not sanctioned, and when we last spoke (April 2016) had not been sent on another*

*placement. It may be that this placement was not in fact strictly mandatory by DWP rules, but as Mark had clearly been given the impression that it was, that amounted to the same thing.*



*Anti-workfare protestors outside the Maxwell Centre (Heather, Neil, Andrew, John, Norma, Caroline, and Grant, photo by Jonathan Byrne)*

*In mid-March the DWP provided an excuse for another day-trip to Edinburgh and the now regular activists gathering at High Riggs:*

### **15 March, Edinburgh, SG**

**The power of solidarity.** High Riggs Jobcentre in Edinburgh was taught another lesson in solidarity yesterday as a crowd of protesters from across Scotland came to support Bob from Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty (ECAP) and Chris, the unemployed man that Bob has been helping. Chris is one of the people that the jobcentre has picked on to give a particularly hard time, so ECAP has stepped in to assist. ECAP and High Riggs have a long history, with the jobcentre repeatedly trying to deny people their right to be accompanied, and then having to back down and apologise when shown to be breaking the DWP's own rules. On previous occasions there have been long stand-offs with the police. Two weeks ago the jobcentre got their own G4S security guards to do the dirty work. As ECAP explains: 'When the claimant and his accompanier attempted to enter, four G4S security guards blocked the way, physically separated the claimant from his accompanier, and asserted that the claimant had no right to be accompanied. The four volunteers leafleting came to the door to insist on the claimants rights and were physically assaulted and menaced by the security guards.'

Yesterday was Chris's next visit to the jobcentre; and this time, with so much support outside, Chris and Bob were able to report a rather different reception. In fact, a noticeably relieved Chris told us that he was no longer going to have to see the 'job coach' who had attempted to change his agreed Claimant Commitment without consulting him, and that he had been assigned to a different person.

Tony from the SUWN shared with everyone the problems he has had with officious officials in Arbroath and Dundee (which have led us to become experts on the comparative practices of Forfar and Dundee Sheriff courts) as well as stressing the need for more of the kind of advocacy work we were all there to defend. And Grant led the chanting – which added to the more tuneful noise from Rhythms of Resistance.

Once again the DWP has provided an opportunity for activists to strengthen the bonds that link our different campaigns. And we were pleased to meet up with old comrades and new from Glasgow, Stirling, Greenock and Angus, as well as from Edinburgh. We look forward to seeing many of them again in Dundee on 9 June for Tony's appearance in court for daring to accompany someone to their Work Capability Assessment.

As we have said many times before, **advocacy is not a crime**. You have a right to be accompanied to your interview, and for the person with you to help you put forward your case. That person does not need to give any ID to the jobcentre (or assessment centre), though the DWP may confirm with you that **you** want them to be there.

(Edinburgh was looking awfy bonnie in the sunshine and we also found time to complete our day in our capital city with a visit to the excellent Celtic exhibition at the National Museum – activism, camaraderie **and** culture!)

### **16 March, Dundee, SG**

The other day I accompanied someone to their PIP assessment. The Atos nurse – who was anxious to stress that she did not work for the DWP – introduced the interview by explaining the difference between PIP and the old Disability Living Allowance (DLA) in a way that made the change of benefit appear all in the interests of the disabled. I have no reason to doubt that she believed what she was saying, but perhaps nobody told her that when PIP was planned in 2012 it was expected to save billions of pounds by ensuring that half a million fewer people received disability benefit by 2015/16 than would have been the case if they had kept DLA.

*Despite her friendly demeanour and professed sympathy, the nurse awarded our severely ill friend no points. She has put in for a Mandatory Reconsideration and*

*will take it to appeal if necessary.*

### **22 March, Dundee, TC**

**Another quiet day at the Wellgate Buroo.** Over the last few weeks we have noticed that it has been very quiet outside Dundee burroo, and we turned up today with no expectation that things would be any different. How wrong can you be? Even before we had set the stall up, we were called upon to intervene when a man on ESA was being physically ejected from the premises. As soon as the G4S security guards spotted us one of them disappeared back into the buroo 'like shite aff a stick', whilst the other guard, who fancies himself as a hard man, told us to go and reproduce ourselves before also disappearing back from whence he came. When we had calmed the guy down, which not surprisingly took a bit of time, we learned that he had been in the buroo for a meeting to discuss a complaint regarding his treatment at the hands of Triage. He was accompanied by his girlfriend, but was told that she could not come with him into the meeting. When he objected to this clear breach of his rights all hell broke loose. He claims that he was then set upon by a number of security guards, and that they forced him into the lift, where he was again assaulted.

When he had calmed down a bit, he phoned the police to make a complaint, but this turned out to be a very convoluted process. A number of unemployed people who had witnessed the assault and who were willing to provide evidence hung around waiting for the polis to arrive. They waited, and waited, and waited some more. Eventually, after around an hour and a half, a solitary policeman turned up, who proceeded conspicuously to ignore the SUWN volunteers around our stall, along with the complainant, before he realised that he had to engage with us. When he did engage, he did so in such an arrogant and high-handed manner that the complainant, quite reasonably, refused to talk to him.

After a discussion, we decided that the best course of action was that the complainant should be accompanied by an SUWN advocate to the Bell Street polis shop to make the complaint there. However, when they arrived, the place was not exactly jumping. Indeed, it appeared more like the Marie Celeste than the crime fighting centre of Dundee, and it was almost an hour before two quite young beat bobbies appeared, having been called by the desk sergeant. The resulting interview did not go well, and the complainant emerged in an agitated state due to the line of questioning.

This case remains very live, and shines a bright light on the reception given to ordinary people at Dundee Buroo when they dare to object to being treated in a high handed, arrogant and violent manner by the DWP, G4S bullies and their little helpers in Police Scotland.

*Sadly that security guard's attitude is far from unique. One of our activists had to go into the buroo himself shortly after this incident and saw other security guards congratulating him on his actions.*

*Our next anti-workfare action was against a large private company that has been in our sights for some time for its use of conscript labour.*

### **28 March, Dundee, TC**

**The Range: exploit us and we will shut you down.** Our latest protest against the use of the DWP-sponsored slave scheme took place today and passed off without any major incidents, although that didn't stop five of Dundee's 'finest' being called by management. We have to say that the polis were a helluva lot quicker to respond to the call out than they were last week, when a man on ESA called them following a claimed assault at the hands of DWP security at Wellgate Buroo.



*Picketing The Range (Benny, Jonathan, John, Tony, Grant, Caroline, Andrew and Susan)*

We received a very good response from the many shoppers that we spoke to, including one woman who informed us that she had went to The Range with her son a couple of weeks ago to inquire as to the availability of jobs, only to be told by the manager, 'why should we employ anyone when we can get labour for nothing from the jobcentre?' Many other shoppers also regaled us with stories involving family members who had direct experience of the DWP's various slave labour schemes. The founder of The Range has boasted that 'his ethos in business is to make as much profit as possible.' This is probably helped by the fact that (as reported to us) the Dundee store has been able to drop the hours of their already poorly paid workers due to the use of DWP conscript labour.

Quite a few shoppers turned on their heels when they heard what The Range management were up to, and many others stopped to talk and offer support

before going in to give the manager a hard time. All in all, it was a very pleasant way to spend a sunny Easter Monday, and we can assure The Range management that if they continue to profit by slave labour we will be back.

Many thanks to the dozen or so volunteers who made the protest so successful, and Alan Cowan, the Labour candidate for the Maryfield Ward by election, who also joined us to show support.

*This action opened a Pandora's box. Our post was shared over six hundred times, and Range workers in Dundee - and also other branches - photocopied and shared our leaflets and set up their own Boycott The Range Facebook page. We received numerous reports – on the public page and by private message – of appalling treatment of both employees and workfare labour. These look as though they had come from a Victorian jute mill rather than a modern store – including weeks of back to back twelve hour shifts and allegations of sexual impropriety.*

*Our next workfare exposé concerned a Paisley care home run by HC-One, a large UK company that has its headquarters in Darlington. David had been given one of our leaflets outside Paisley Buroo some time back and had kept it for emergencies.*

### **30 March, Paisley, SG**

**No way to live, no way to die.** If your gran was ending her days in a care home, would you want her looked after by unpaid forced labour from the buroo, including eighteen-year olds with next to no training? If you were a qualified care worker – already a grossly underpaid profession – would you be happy to be made to do the job you are trained in for £73.10 a week buroo money? And would you want to live in a society where teenagers who have just emerged from the rigors of the care system are sent to look after the dying, and rewarded with a bare £1.60 an hour? The UK is that society.

The SUWN was approached last week by a care worker, David, who has been out of work just over six months. His 'Job Coach' had sent him to a job interview at a home that provides palliative care: a place where patients only leave in a box. But he is familiar with this kind of work and was pleased to be getting the chance of a job. It was only later that he discovered that this was not a job in the normal sense. He was being expected to work three twelve hour shifts a week for six weeks for nothing more than his buroo money. David is experienced enough in the world of work to know that this isn't right – and he had one of our leaflets. He rang us up before going to meet his Job Coach again, and he has refused to sign the papers to enable the placement to go ahead. He wants to do this work – but he rightly expects to get paid for it.

David told us that when he was in the care home for his interview he met two



young people who had already been sent there from the buroo. The young girl had been in care and had been sent on the placement almost as soon as she had signed on for her (under twenty-fives) benefit of £57.90 a week. She had so little money that he bought her a sandwich and a coffee. No food is provided by the 'care' home. But the young man's situation was even starker. His mother was an alcoholic and she is now a patient in the home, dying from alcohol-related brain damage.

*We reported this situation to the Care Inspectorate and also to David's local MP, Mhairi Black. Our blog was spotted by the Sunday Herald who interviewed David themselves and ran a full page article. It emerged, from the response given by the care home, that this particular scheme is theoretically not compulsory, though that makes little difference if people are not told they can say 'no' and the general expectation is that any resistance is rewarded by a sanction. There would still be sanctions for anyone who left early, and there is still no excuse not to pay a wage. People should not be expected to have to work for nothing in order to earn the right to earn a living. And commercial organisations should not effectively be subsidised by the welfare system and the labour of some of our least well off citizens. Frustratingly, but perhaps predictably, there was a letter in the following week's paper by HC-One's managing director, making them out as a kindly firm who were simply supporting people looking for a job. In attempting to portray her company as caring she wrote, 'We joined the Living Wage campaign'. Perhaps head office forgot to mention that to the rest of the company, as a quick Google search revealed them currently advertising minimum wage (£6.75/£7.20 an hour) jobs.*

*HC-One is a big commercial business, but people can be as badly exploited in the community sector – perhaps worse because there is less chance of a paid job at the end. It was time to publicise the activities of the next community organisation that had failed to respond to our letter.*

### **15 April, Dundee, SG**

**Conscript Carers.** On Wednesday, the Dundee Courier published a desperate plea for volunteers from Mid-Lin Day Care Centre, which provides activities for vulnerable elderly people, including those with dementia. The article admitted that the centre is almost entirely run by volunteers. What it omitted to mention is that many of these 'volunteers' are actually unemployed folk, conscripted under various workfare schemes. Some are forced to work there for no pay for six months – two and a half times the length of the maximum community service punishment. If they refuse they can face thirteen weeks with no benefits.

Some old people can be quite uninhibited in letting off their frustrations and making personal comments. For the 'volunteers', being sworn at and receiving criticism is part of the 'job'. And some of the centre's users are incontinent, so

'volunteers' have to clear up the occasional accident. 'Volunteers' also take people to the toilet. And despite the intimacy of such tasks, we have been informed that the centre has told people not to worry about the lack of PVG disclosures. In the *Courier* article the centre manager describes volunteering as 'great work experience', but people we have spoken to complain that nothing was offered by way of training. They were even expected to pay for the lunch that 'volunteers' had helped prepare.

We know that Mid-Lin provides a vital service for its users, but beyond the £18 a day charge - at what cost? Their website states that they aim to promote 'dignity' and 'choice' for their users, but what about the unemployed who have no choice but to suffer the indignity of working for nothing. This is the reality of Cameron's Big Society: a shoestring community service that only survives through a combination of charity and gross exploitation.

We have written three times to Mid-Lin asking them to reconsider their use of forced labour. They have not dignified us with an answer, but we can assure them that so long as they continue with this exploitation we will take every opportunity to let people know what is really going on behind that fence.

*We sent a letter to the Courier pointing out that many Mid-Lin 'volunteers' were not there out of choice, but they cut the section that mentioned the lack of PVG disclosures.*

### **30 April, Dundee, SG**

**Mayday in sunny Dundee.** SUWN activists noised up Dundee City Centre in today's Mayday march, and Tony gave an impassioned call at the rally for folk to come and support next Saturday's SUWN/Dundee Trades Council protest at The Range. He told the assembled trade unionists that since our Easter Monday protest against The Range's use of forced unpaid labour, we had been contacted by numerous Range workers and ex-workers who describe conditions that we had thought were left behind in the nineteenth century – including nine back to back twelve hour shifts, and sexual favours given in the hope of paid employment.

*[We have also heard that they were cutting the hours of paid workers while employing more unpaid labour, and were trying to get rid of workers over twenty-five to avoid paying the higher rate minimum wage.]*

We were pleased to note that Eric Cramb, opening the rally, repeated to wide applause the Fairness Commission's recommendation to make Dundee a No Workfare City. We want to see this put into effective action and soon. You can show your support by signing and sharing our online petition...



### ***5 May, Dundee, SG***

**What early warning system?** In response to the mass of critical evidence submitted to the House of Commons enquiry into sanctions, the government proudly announced - last October - a handful of tinker-round-the-edges changes. Chief among these was a 'yellow card' early warning system for sanctions, which has just begun a trial run in Scotland (everywhere but the north, which is supposed to provide a comparison). The much-heralded concession is meant to give claimants heading for a sanction an additional fourteen days to provide reason and evidence for their alleged misdemeanour - hardly a major improvement as most will probably get sanctioned anyway.

Well, that is what's meant to happen, but this is the DWP. A man we met at our busy stall outside Dundee buroo yesterday had just then been informed that he was going to be sanctioned and had fourteen days to submit reasons for being late to a Work Programme appointment. But he was also told that the fourteen day period had begun two weeks ago, so he needed to get his response in there and then.

And another problem in the DWP 'system'. This is the second time in a row that I have been about to accompany someone into their PIP assessment, only for them to be told on the morning of their appointment - after a sleepless night - that it has been cancelled.

### ***7 May, Dundee, SG***

**Leaflet wars at The Range.** This afternoon around fifty people came to give noisy solidarity to workfare slaves and exploited workers at The Range in Lochee.

In an attempt to salvage their reputation the store had produced their own leaflet for the occasion to give to shoppers who had passed through our picket. This consisted of testimonies from two employees who - unlike many people we have been in touch with - were actually given a paid job after their stint of unpaid labour, and were sickeningly grateful about being rewarded for their slavery with a chance to earn a living with this shockingly exploitative employer. They read like something written by followers of a cult, expressing their devotion to the system that has enslaved them, or by someone with their employer leaning over their shoulder: perfect examples of the cowed yes-men that the DWP would like everyone to become.

A shop such as The Range does not create jobs. Its ruthless employment practices and use of unpaid labour allow it to undercut other businesses that treat their workers decently and pay them properly - as we explained in our own leaflet.

Our fight against exploitation brings together unemployed and employed

workers: those who took up the loud hailer at this joint SUWN/Dundee Trades Council demo included Mike Arnott from the Trades Council, Tony Cox and Sarah Glynn from SUWN, Arthur Nicoll from Unison, Carlo Morelli from UCU, Mike Taylor and Andy Duncan from Dundee Against Austerity, Leah Ganley from TUSC and Gareth Norman from Solidarity; and there were also folk there from USDAW, RIC Angus and Mearns, and – bringing solidarity from the capital city – Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty, as well as several folk who live close by in Lochee.

Police were called to the store, but never spoke to us. They were in there for a long time. Perhaps they were looking at all those bargain things they never knew they wanted – or perhaps they were hoping that we would try and protest inside and they could arrest us for not leaving.

Before we had quite exhausted our own leaflet pile we re-formed the demo into a march down Lochee High Street, with more speeches and leafleting in front of the Mary Brooksbank statue, and several speakers drew parallels with the dreadful employment practices of the mills that once occupied the same area. We won't be dragged back to the Nineteenth Century.



*Impromptu march down Lochee High Street (Photo Ruth Forbes)*

*While, again, these particular placements may have been officially not mandatory, this was not how they were perceived by the people we spoke to, and these practices are still totally unacceptable.*

### ***13 May, Dundee TC***

**Weekly report.** After the excitement of last Saturday's successful demo at the Lochee Range, it was back to the 'bread and butter' of the Wellgate Jobcentre advice stall on Wednesday. We have previously reported that things have been suspiciously quiet at Dundee Jobcentre, but Wednesday's stall turned out to be frantically busy, with volunteers fully occupied fielding questions and queries and dealing with issues.

We dealt with nine cases during the two hour stall, including a young father with two young children who had been sanctioned for failing to attend a Triage appointment, and who was running low on electric and gas due to the fact that he had not been informed about applying for Hardship Payments. We advised him to raise the issue of Hardship Payments with his advisor and provided him with the phone number for Welfare Rights so that they could help him with his Mandatory Reconsideration, and with the problems he is facing as a carer for young children.

A young guy, just out of prison, told us that he had been put on Universal Credit and had been waiting weeks for his money to come through. He had had to apply for a Short Term Benefit Advance, but this had ran out and he was reluctant to apply for it again as he was aware that he would have to pay the money back when his payments started. One of our volunteers accompanied him to Welfare Rights and made sure that he was able to make a claim for a Scottish Welfare Fund grant.

We also dealt with two cases involving the use of the computerised Universal Jobmatch (UJM). A recent university graduate informed us that he was being hassled by his advisor to give them direct access to his UJM account, which they have no right to do, and that he had grave doubts about using UJM at all, as he had had issues with identity theft when using the system in the past. He added that his brother had been forced by his advisor to apply for a job as a mechanic in Spain, and had been told that if he didn't apply for overseas jobs then he could be sanctioned. Needless to say this is nonsense, and another clear case of the DWP relying on people being unaware of their rights in order to put the frighteners on them.

We are coming across many cases of claims to ESA, JSA and UC being shut down, including a young man in his twenties who had went on to UC in March and had gotten ill. He was then forced [*wrongly*] to shut down his claim and re-open it, which led to a further delay on top of the seven week wait that those on UC have to negotiate before they receive any money whatsoever. This had led to a great deal of hardship.

Thanks to Susan, Grant, Sarah S, Gary, Ronnie and Andrew

**22 May, Dundee, SG**

**Sun, Piping and Slavery – a Sunday afternoon in Dundee.** Today Mid-Lin Day Care Centre was holding an open day, providing a perfect setting for a bit of leafleting. The Centre has been a long-term workfare exploiter, and as they have failed to respond to any of our letters and emails, we thought we would ask the people going into the open day to ‘Please tell Mid-Lin Day Care Centre to STOP USING FORCED UNPAID LABOUR’. As the leaflet explained, ‘We told the centre that we will be here today in order to give them time to deny that they are still exploiting people via this system; as we have heard nothing from them we can only assume the worst.’

The sun was shining, the band was playing behind the grim spiked fence, and we were able to explain to some of those going in the difference between genuine volunteering and forced unpaid labour. John was able to tell them directly that not only had it not helped him find a job, but that as someone who had worked in hotel kitchens he hadn’t appreciated being forced to skivvy in the Centre’s kitchen for nothing and did not need the ‘experience’ for his CV. Of course there are always those people who don’t want to know, but we hope we have made some others think – including Shona Robison MSP who we leafleted as she left. As it was a relatively small event, we distributed the rest of our leaflets through the letter boxes of the surrounding houses.



*Outside Mid-Lin Day Care Centre (with Grant, John and Gordon)*

Although the Mandatory Work Activity scheme is now finished and no more people are being made to do Community Work Placements, there is still scope for unemployed people to be forced into mandatory unpaid work through the Work Programme, and organisations such as Mid-Lin make this modern slavery possible. There are plenty of schemes for genuine volunteering, so it is difficult to see why Mid-Lin are so resistant to ending this exploitation, especially as it must be better for everyone to have workers who actually want to be there.

### ***7 June, Dundee***

The SUWN is proud to welcome baby J into the world.

(When you are older, your parents can tell you how they met at the SUWN anti-austerity demo. We hope that by then things will have changed and you will be able to say ‘what’s austerity, Daddy?’)

### ***9 June, Dundee, SG***

#### **The Crown versus Tony Cox – and welfare activists everywhere: Part 2,**

**Round 1.** To start with a bit of background. Last year SUWN activist Tony Cox was dragged through the courts after accompanying a vulnerable woman to the Jobcentre and correcting their interpretation of the rules. As their evidence of ‘threatening behaviour’ fell apart, the charges were dropped – but just before this was confirmed Tony was arrested again, this time attempting to accompany a woman to her Work Capability Assessment with Maximus and insisting on her right to be accompanied by a person of her choice. One might be tempted to think that the DWP and its subcontractors wanted to stymie effective advocacy...

This second court case came to trial today in Dundee.

We have heard evidence so far from three Maximus employees and watched the CCTV tape of the ‘incident’. The tape had no sound, but the Maximus witnesses added metaphorical speech bubbles to tell their story, attributing to Tony a variety of swear words. (Telling a convincing story is Maximus’ bread and butter.)

In his evidence, Tony explained that he had had problems with one of the Maximus assessors on a previous occasion when she claimed that he couldn’t take notes in the assessment, and had then called the police when he protested and proved her wrong. This assessor was one of the three witnesses but was having major problems remembering what happened just seven months ago, giving responses that bore little relationship to her original statement to the police.

The Maximus receptionist (who, of course, was ‘just doing her job’) had given the police a fulsome account of Tony’s aggressive demands for toilet paper, but she failed to make shit stick when this was compared to the CCTV video. However, she then slipped in an addition to the charges, claiming that at just the moment when he was out of the video frame, Tony pushed her. As Tony explained in his own answers, this was the moment when the receptionist was trying to ensure that he was shut out of the building leaving the client who he was trying to help inside to their tender mercies. Far from pushing anyone, he was attempting to keep the door open.

While it was a shock to have an addition to the charge that Tony had not been informed about, we were less concerned about the new CCTV footage that the

Procurator Fiscal produced. After watching nothing happen outside the front door of the Maximus building for ten minutes, the defence lawyer politely asked if we could be talked through what we were looking at, whereupon the Fiscal decided to stop the video.

The Fiscal turned far less amenable when questioning Tony. He did his best to rile Tony with persistent suggestions that he was just out to cause trouble. Tony refused to be riled, maintaining a professional calm as he explained that the SUWN wouldn't do anything that would disrupt the processes people need to go through in order to get much needed benefits.

Although the Maximus evidence was riddled with contradictions, we were very aware that there are three of them, so the evidence from the woman Tony was accompanying was really important. She wasn't called until about 3.30pm after waiting since 9.30 in the morning, and she was clearly completely overwhelmed by the formality of the court. Before Tony's lawyer had asked any substantial questions she had broken down in tears and was unable to recover enough to continue. Rather than go ahead without key evidence, we had to ask for the case to be adjourned. We hope that when it reconvenes on the 23rd June she will feel able to give evidence via video link.

So much for the formal proceedings; but the action outwith the courtroom was equally concerning.

When we arrived, Tony was told by a court official that his lawyer wasn't there and they had been contacted by the firm to find a local stand-in. It was a worrying twenty-five minutes before he found his lawyer and that story was put to bed.

Then a cheery policewoman called Tony aside to ask him about the speech he gave at our anti-workfare demo outside The Range, when he quoted allegations about sexual improprieties by management. A sensitive choice of moment.

When we got into the court, a policewoman stopped me taking notes, claiming I needed permission from the sheriff. Permission was eventually forthcoming, and the policewoman was persuaded to apologise - claiming that she had not known that rules had been changed - but I still have a gap in my notes.

And perhaps most seriously, Tony's lawyer was informed that a court officer had passed the sheriff a note saying that he suspected Tony of operating a recording device in his pocket when on the witness stand. Tony did indeed put his hand in his pocket, but only to pull out a handkerchief with which to mop an understandably sweaty brow.

Our conviction that Tony, and welfare activists generally, are the subject of a major attack by the state is only strengthened by today's proceedings. As ever, we are proud to have comrades who recognise the importance of this case and of solidarity – including our good friends from Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty and the Glasgow Anarchist Collective, who joined us outside the court in Dundee, and the solidarity protestors in Govan, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Doncaster and Kilburn.



Left: Solidarity protest outside Govan Jobcentre organised by Westgap

Right: Tony and Chris outside the court in Dundee

### 18 June

**Message of Support from Paul Laverty.** We have received the following message of support from Paul Laverty, screenwriter of *I Daniel Blake*, directed by Ken Loach, the film that won the Palme D'Or at the Cannes film festival:

When we were researching the material for *I Daniel Blake* we came across overwhelming evidence of vulnerable people subjected to great pressure both by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and indeed the subcontracted companies carrying out the work capability assessments. On a trip to Dundee I personally witnessed Tony Cox and his colleagues at the Scottish Unemployed Workers Network giving solid practical advice to confused and sometimes highly distressed claimants. I have spoken to doctors who have been infuriated by the treatment of some of their patients who have been deemed fit for work despite serious illness. In this context the work of Tony Cox and his colleagues who accompany vulnerable claimants is a great service to the body politic. They are doing this on a voluntary basis, at no charge, because they are principled citizens who refuse to stand idly by while their neighbours are often bullied. Claimants have a right to be accompanied by an advocate of choice and if this right



was respected in full by the DWP citizens like Mr Cox would not be in the dock, and a great deal of public expense would be saved. I have no doubt that the senior management of the DWP are determined to punish anyone who stands up to them; and once again, the vulnerable client, who was so upset that she could not continue to give evidence at the last court hearing, now has to repeat the ordeal once again; one more person to the long list of those who have suffered unnecessary misery at their hands. DWP managers, shame on you.

**23 June, Dundee, SG**

**Class 'Justice'.** We always said it all depends on the sheriff – and we were right. Today SUWN activist, Tony Cox, was found 'guilty' of 'threatening behaviour' towards the lovely folk at the Maximus Work Capability Assessment Centre in Dundee, who were preventing him from accompanying a vulnerable woman to her assessment. As Sheriff Griffiths explained in his verdict, it was a question of whose evidence he preferred – and he preferred the evidence of the crown witnesses. Prefer was his term. Never mind that their evidence was riddled with (unchallenged) contradictions over what happened when, and if the police even came into the building (they didn't). Never mind that the woman Tony was accompanying insisted, despite persistent leading questions from the Procurator Fiscal, that Tony did not 'swear' or 'push' the receptionist at the door.

We have always said that this should never have gone to court. That if the police had only stopped to ask the other side of the story before whisking out the handcuffs, this whole sad spectacle could have been avoided. And now we are facing the consequences of what passes as a justice system but seems as much concerned with searching for truth as the competitors in a debating contest.

The Fiscal's portrayal of Tony as just there to cause trouble could not have been further from the truth. While we have emphasised the wider significance of this case, his reason for being at the Maximus Assessment Centre was simply to accompany a vulnerable woman who had specifically requested that he be there with her at her assessment, as he had done for other people before. On one previous occasion the assessor had asserted he could not take notes, and when he insisted on his right to do this and proved that it was permitted in the regulations, the assessor had called the police on him. On that occasion nothing went further, but that assessor had nursed her grudge against him, and it was her who insisted this time that he leave. This time she had asserted – again without evidence – that he had been banned from the building. Tony had insisted on taking this up with a manager and on his client's right to be accompanied by a person of her choice. What the Sheriff chose to see as the Maximus receptionist being solicitous for the understandably distressed client, was actually her trying to persuade this vulnerable woman to go into the assessment alone, without the person she was



relying on to help her; and – not incidentally – trying to persuade her that Tony was not her friend. Three Maximus employees were trying to prevent Tony from a simple bit of advocacy, while attempting to demolish his character in front of his client. And Tony tried to argue his case. He has a strong voice (after decades of public speaking) and he used it. But speaking loudly, and even raising your voice, is not a crime – yet. There was absolutely nothing on the CCTV footage to suggest behaviour that could be conceived as ‘threatening’: indeed he was mostly seated and generally leaning back in his seat too. He was there to represent and help someone and he was being careful not to compromise her situation or his ability to help others in the future. When he realised that they were getting nowhere and his client was anyway too distressed for an assessment, he left the waiting room, but he then found himself having to put his foot in the door to prevent the Maximus employees from keeping his client inside and continuing their pressure on her to go to the assessment without him. Far from him ‘pushing’ the receptionist, she was trying to kick his foot out of the way. And that charge of ‘pushing’ only got added to the original charge of ‘threatening behaviour’ in the course of the first part of the trial, which meant that there was not time to for us to challenge the lack of CCTV footage for that critical moment.

That this can have developed into a criminal case with a guilty verdict is simply a travesty. Tony was giving his time to help someone through the thicket of a punitive government bureaucracy – and even when he was arrested the SUWN made sure that she got the help she needed to get her ESA – but now another part of that bureaucracy [*albeit Scottish rather than UK*] has determined to punish and criminalise him.

This is part of a pattern. Arbroath Jobcentre had earlier tried to accuse Tony on a similar charge, but their evidence fell apart in court and the charge had to be withdrawn. And we have heard from people going into Dundee Jobcentre how the staff there do their best to tar the reputation of Tony and of the SUWN more generally. In Edinburgh, High Riggs Jobcentre has several times called the police on advocates from Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty.

Anyone who had any illusions in our ‘justice’ system would have had them knocked out by observing this case; but the verdict was just the beginning. As the Sheriff and the lawyer parleyed over issues that might affect the sentencing, Tony felt compelled to protest that the sheriff had misquoted him, and when asked if he was ‘fit for unpaid work’, he replied that he already did community work. For the sheriff, this was tantamount to insurrection. Sentencing has been postponed for four weeks so that they can get a Criminal Justice Social Work Report. And Tony has been told that if he doesn’t grovel and accept his ‘guilt’ and if he doesn’t demonstrate his ‘empathy’ with the Maximus employees who shafted him, he can expect a harsh sentence. Because, in the sheriff’s words, his ‘antipathy to authority

was clear'. We certainly didn't see anything today to persuade us that the authority of our legal system deserves anything other than antipathy.

Just as people on the receiving end of the new punitive 'welfare' regime are expected to take responsibility for not being 'positive', so the criminal justice system is determined to punish people for not being sufficiently servile – and the sheriff made it clear that he was not happy with Tony's body language or facial expression. In our Brave New World you mustn't raise your voice and you must take your punishment with a smile.

Well that's their world, and in the real world where the rest of us live there is more work to do than ever, and Tony and the SUWN have no intention of taking a step backwards in our advocacy and in our campaigning. As if to remind us, within five minutes of sitting down for a drink after we left the court we had two phone calls from people asking for our advice. The DWP and their friends don't like what we do because we are getting results. We are helping individuals to navigate through their traps, and we are drawing attention to what is wrong with the system. (In fact we heard another example of the cruelty of the system as we were protesting outside before the trial began. A man going past told us that he worked in a Universal Credit call centre and that people would ask him how he can sleep at night doing such a job. He told us that he often can't and that he is desperate to find other work.)

Yet again we can take heart from the solidarity shown by our comrades – by our friends in Dundee and our friends in Glasgow Anarchist Collective and Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty who travelled across Scotland to be with us, and by all those who have contacted us from across the UK to show their support for Tony and for the wider fight for real justice. Together we will win!

*We contacted the Courier about the verdict, and the next day's paper included an article entitled, 'Dundee welfare activist Tony Cox vows to 'double efforts' after conviction'. The case was also discussed in the Morning Star and Bella Caledonia.*

### **30 June, Dundee, TC and SG**

**Too busy by half – SUWN weekly report.** 'You should be here every day, that's the most helpful they've been.'

SUWN volunteers were back on duty following last week's terrible guilty verdict against Tony Cox. Our stalls outside the jobcentre have been quite quiet for a while, but we can report that we came across more cases on Monday and today (Thursday) than we have for some time.

On Monday we met Helen, a thirty-seven-week pregnant woman who reported

that her Income Support claim had been shut down, and she was going into the jobcentre to find out why. She was very anxious about the prospect of facing an advisor on her own, and was clearly upset. We managed to calm her down, and a SUWN volunteer accompanied her in. After a fairly lengthy wait the problem was resolved and Helen's claim was re-opened.

Sarah (G) went in with Mark, who had asked for support over a few issues. His 'job coach' was most reluctant to let her in on the interview, protesting that there was nothing on his record to say he needed anyone with him and telling Sarah to wait in the waiting area, but the job coach had to relent when Mark insisted he wanted Sarah there and Sarah pointed out that this was OK by their own guidelines. Sarah was therefore able to reassure Mark that he did not have to submit to their pressure to let them email Universal Jobmatch (UJM) links to him.

The job coach set up a new Claimant Commitment and Mark and Sarah were both surprised that instead of stipulating a set number of job applications each week she insisted that it was the nature of the activities that he did to look for work that was important. While this is a shift in the right direction, the test will be what they consider appropriate activities, and we certainly didn't get the impression that they were trying particularly hard to help make his job search productive (for example they could have volunteered information on updating his qualifications, rather than leaving Sarah to request this).

Mark had also received a letter saying that his benefit was being suspended, which had produced the predictable worries. He was able to confirm that all that had happened was a bureaucratic hiccup in registering his new address, but these letters are indicative of the callous attitude shown by the DWP to those who rely on their meagre dole. We met another person who had gone through similar concerns that same afternoon.

The issue of advisors forcing people onto UJM continues to surface. We were rung up by someone we had given a leaflet to who had just signed on. He informed us that he had been told to sign up to Universal Jobmatch at his initial phone enquiry before he had even come to the jobcentre. It was presented as part of the preparation for his first meeting, along with bringing all relevant documents. And also on UJM, Brian reported that they tried to sell UJM to him by saying he 'might not' have to come into the jobcentre every month as they could check up on him online.

At today's stall we met Joe, a middle-aged man who reported that he had just been sanctioned for three months. He only found out about the sanction when he went to try to get money out, and when he raised the issue with the DWP,

he was told that the sanction dated from three months ago, but there had been a delay in it being processed. Joe reported that he had received no notification of any sanction, and that he doesn't know why he was sanctioned – neither was he informed about his right to apply for a Hardship Payment. We urged him to complete a Mandatory Reconsideration (MR) and to contact a welfare rights organisation to help him with the appeal he will have to go through when his MR is refused by the DWP decision maker. We regularly come across people who give up on the appeal process following the rejection of their MR, as they mistakenly believe that the MR constitutes their appeal; always remember that the MR is only the first part of the appeal process.

We also came across another sanction issue today that further underlines how the introduction of the MR has reduced the number of people taking their case through to a successful appeal. Fiona is in her thirties, a single parent with an eleven-year-old bairn. Just over a month ago, she received a text from Triage saying that an appointment she had had been cancelled, only to be informed today that she had been sanctioned for three months for missing it. She also reported that she had been sanctioned last Xmas and at Easter, for one month on both occasions. Fiona, like many others, was not aware that the MR was not the end of the appeal process, and when she had been told that her MR had failed on the previous two occasions, she had not taken her cases any further. When we met her she was clearly upset and close to tears and declared that 'there's nae point, they always win'. We explained how the appeal process works and urged her to fight the sanction. After a lengthy chat during which we reassured her that it **was** worth her while to fight she agreed to phone in her MR, and to get in contact with a welfare rights organisation when it came time to appeal. She left us much happier than when we had found her, which by itself is justification enough for the work we do.

And there was Alan, another single parent with a bairn of eleven, who, after an extended period of ill health had been told that he should shift from JSA to ESA. He made the application for ESA, but was not informed that he had to close his JSA claim. As a result, he had received no money for three weeks, and when he had made inquiries was told that he had to open another ESA claim, and that he would miss out on the three weeks money he was due. We urged him to complain and to claim JSA money back, and gave him details of welfare organisations that could help him.

We also talked with a number of people who had recently been bumped from ESA to JSA, which was causing no end of anxiety and stress. This issue needs to be addressed as a matter of priority as it benefits no-one to have people who are palpably unfit to work declared as such by jumped up assessors who often flagrantly ignore medical evidence and who misrepresent the words of those they

are assessing.

All in all, this week's stalls were a bit too busy for our liking, which underlines that we must remain vigilant. On a more positive note, we received a visit from Bennie, Shauna and (new) baby J, which gave rise to much oohing and aahing on the part of volunteers and passers-by alike.

Thanks to Sarah S, Chris, Grant, Gordon, John, and Fuzzie for helping with the stalls on Monday and today.

### **7 July, SG**

**They take with one hand and take with the other.** Last week we were contacted by someone who had taken one of our leaflets outside the buroo after newly signing on to Universal Credit. He had just been dismissed from a long-term job and been paid a lump sum in lieu of three month's work. He had paid quite a bit of tax on this, and been reassured that he would be able to claim the tax back, as indeed he will – but in the month he receives the tax rebate it will be 'treated as employed earnings' when they calculate his Universal Credit. The same is true of repayment of National Insurance contributions. Clearly grossly unfair - and clearly laid out in Universal Credit rules.

On a more positive note, we also got a phone call from a man in Ayrshire who had just got back from two years working in another EU country and was having to rely on support from his father, as he had been told by the DWP that since he had been living abroad he couldn't get any benefits for three months. After a long discussion with the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) I was able to inform him that under EU coordination rules he should be able to get Income-based JSA straight away as his time working in the EU counts towards this. (The EU does have some uses.) He will have to put in a Mandatory Reconsideration and get temporary help if necessary from the Scottish Welfare Fund.

### **8 July, Dundee, TC**

**'I don't like this place, Daddy'** Bairns can be very perceptive, as the above comment, fae a wee mite emerging fae the gloom of Dundee Jobcentre and into the summer sunshine, testifies. We weren't able to get to the bottom of his problem with the buroo, but plenty of other people were only too willing to unburden themselves, in no uncertain manner. Traffic was, like last week, worryingly busy, with complaints regarding treatment at the hands of (Work Programme Provider)Triage dominating discussion. We heard from two people who had been sanctioned as a result of missing appointments at Triage – the single biggest reason for sanctioning that we come across.

Andy is a middle-aged man with blood clots in his legs, who had recently been

bumped from ESA, and who had went through two previous sanctions. He was distraught at being sanctioned for missing an appointment he had not been given, had missed the deadline for appealing, and saw little point in doing so, anyway. *[Like others,]* he had only went through the Mandatory Reconsideration stage, and, when this was refused, had given up because he thought he had exhausted his options... After further discussion, we urged Andy to consider a claim for PIP *[disability benefit]*, as he complained of constant pain and restricted mobility due to the blood clots in his legs. We provided him with the PIP number and explained the application process to him, and provided him with information on welfare organisations that can help him with filling in the PIP form, which is absolutely essential as these forms are designed to trick and trip up claimants.

On Thursday, we also met a mother who was accompanying her nineteen-year-old son into the buroo. Whilst he was too angry to talk, his mother explained that he had been sanctioned for two weeks for missing a Triage appointment, and had only just been informed that he had received another four week sanction, but with no reason given. Although they had been told about Hardship Payments, they were unaware of how the appeal process worked. We explained the importance of appealing, and the consequences of not doing so: yet further sanctions, as you are marked as sanctionable.

On Monday we had met Steve, in his late twenties, who reported that he had also been threatened with a sanction from Triage. He had phoned to re-arrange an appointment with them as it clashed with a community work appointment, which he was legally obliged to attend. He was informed by his Triage advisor that he was also expected to attend the appointment at the Triage office, and that if he didn't he could expect to be sanctioned. We urged him to provide evidence of his community work appointment to Triage, along with a letter complaining about his treatment, and asked him to keep in contact for advice and to let us know how his case was going.

We also spoke to a couple of people who complained about being made to wait long periods of an hour or more for pre-arranged appointments at Triage - an organisation (sic) that regularly sanctions people for turning up five minutes late to an appointment.

Among other notable cases, we heard from Mandy, a young mother on Income Support, who had had her payments stopped when she was admitted to Carseview Hospital on two separate occasions over a month long period, following mounting mental health problems. She was extremely upset when we met her, but we were able to calm her down, and provided her with advice on the appeal process – she was aware of the Hardship Payment scheme – and details of welfare organisations she could approach for more help, as well as urging her to

raise the issue with her 'key worker' at the social work department. Finding out that her claim had been closed, and worrying that she could not feed her children had hardly helped her depression, but she was in a better place after speaking to us. We could only shake our heads at the heartlessness of a so-called 'welfare' system that could treat vulnerable people in such a cold manner.

And we met Jim, who is on ESA but who had been urged by his social worker to apply for a bit of part-time work. When he had found a job of twelve hours per week, he had been informed by the jobcentre that his ESA claim would be shut down. Jim, who suffers depression, was put into a tailspin by this news. This was despite the fact that these working hours are within the 'permitted range', so there was technically no basis for any sanction. We urged Jim to raise the issue with his social worker and to complain about the incompetence of his so-called 'advisor', and the stress and anxiety that this example of bureaucratic numptydom had caused him.

This by no means exhausts the cases and inquires that we came across at our stalls this week.

Thanks to Susan, Sarah G, William, Chris, Gary, Fuzzie, Jenny, Grant and Gordon

***11 July, London, Dr Bruce Scott – Psychologist and Psychoanalyst***

**Psycho-coercion and unemployment: A marriage made in austerity's hell.** I joined comrades from the Mental Wealth Foundation and other organisations on the 5th July to demonstrate outside the Hallam Conference Centre in London, where the New Savoy group and members of the big five psy organisations were meeting. These five organisations were: the British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, the British Psychoanalytic Council, the British Psychological Society and United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy. We called on them to refuse collaboration with the Department of Work and Pensions and the unethical provision of psychological treatments by its members. We called on them to stop the unethical conflation of unemployment with individuals' 'psychopathologies' needing to be 'cured' to make them fit work. This detracts from peoples real issues of mental distress, and detracts from the political and economic issues of why people become and are distressed.

I agree that work, the right kind of work, being able to work, rewarding work, and non-alienating work can be a good thing. However, work per se is destructive if it is under conditions of poor pay or zero hours contracts, or in conditions where human flourishing cannot occur. But this is the harsh reality of austerity-fuelled Tory Britain today; a reality where unemployment is now deemed to be the remit of 'mental health' services and psychological treatment. The psychological

'treatment' of worklessness is called psycho-coercian.

Worryingly the DWP policy of psycho-coercian appears not to be being criticised by the Scottish government, who dictate that work is a good 'health outcome'. I wrote to the Scottish Government earlier this year to ask what their position was on the pernicious DWP policy of psychological treatment for being unemployed. Their response was simply:

... the Scottish Government recognises that work is an important part of people's lives and can help to enhance health, wellbeing and quality of life, and people should have the opportunity of support to return to and remain in work... we aim to provide targeted support to help long-term unemployed people enter sustained employment.  
(Quote from letter from Scottish Government to Dr Bruce Scott  
-30/06/16)

In London on the 5th July 2016 outside the Hallam Conference Centre, in response to psycho-coercian, where 'service users' and psychological professionals are being corralled into the service of neoliberal and austerity politics, comrades collectively cried: **not in our name!**

#### ***14 July, Dundee, TC***

**National Day of Protest against PIP – Dundee Event.** Rain and windy conditions failed to dampen the enthusiasm of the volunteers and friends of the SUWN who turned up in Dundee city centre yesterday to protest against the replacement of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) with Personal Independence Payments (PIP). This change was designed to claw back billions of pounds by ensuring that half a million fewer people received disability benefit by 2015/16. Barriers have been raised, and assessments are being made harder, with fewer people being awarded the points needed to qualify.

Here in Dundee, we have encountered many people who have either been denied PIP payments or, following re-assessment from DLA to PIP, have had their mobility vehicles and scooters taken from them because they did not qualify for the highest rate of mobility. We have also raised concerns that those applying for higher mobility through assessments at the Atos assessment centre in Dundee's Technology Park have often been tricked into negotiating a forty metre corridor in order to access the assessment rooms. Many people who have been forced to walk the 'Blue Mile' have complained that the effort caused them pain and was only completed after strenuous effort, but that this was enough for their assessors to deem that they did not have significant mobility problems. This is despite the fact that Atos guidance clearly states that those undergoing assessment must be able to complete the task without pain and repeatedly. The stress and anxiety that



the subsequent removal of mobility vehicles causes for unsuccessful claimants is causing further health problems for many people.

We marked out a forty metre corridor in chalk to demonstrate what Atos in Dundee were up to. This, however, was described as ‘an act of vandalism’ by an officious woman who introduced herself as ‘**The** City Centre Manager’. When we pointed out that the Dundee weather would ensure that it wouldn’t be around too long, she shifted her focus to our collecting tin and demanded to see our license. We just stood back, shook our heads and carried on, at which point she informed us that she was phoning the polis and we should expect a £50 on the spot fine when they turned up. They did turn up, had a good look at the chalk marks and then got back in their van and hung around for a bit.

The response we received fae ordinary Dundonians was in stark contrast to that of this pettifogging jobsworth. We were able to distribute around seven hundred leaflets and our use of the megaphone drew a fair amount of interest from passers by. We were also able to dispense a fair bit of general advice to those who approached us with welfare issues, and met three people who said they would like us to keep in contact with them.

*Others learnt of our protest through reports in the local paper and on local radio.*

### **15 July, Manchester, SG**

**Sharing knowledge in the face of further attacks.** Three overwhelming impressions from last weekend’s Boycott Workfare gathering in Manchester:

- what a lot of knowledge and experience was combined in that room
- the size of the task we have taken on as the ‘Welfare Reform’ monster continuously morphs into new shapes
- however dreadful things are in Scotland it is even worse south of the border (without the Scottish Welfare Fund, mitigation of the bedroom tax, funding for welfare rights, a wide political awareness of the horrors of welfare ‘reform’, and the expectation that MPs will be broadly sympathetic).

Five SUWN activists made the long bus journey down to Manchester for an important boost of UK-wide solidarity and a whole lot of useful information. There was general recognition of the need to keep in touch with each other and keep sharing information and tactics. None of us underestimates the scale of what we have taken on – or its potential significance in the bigger political changes we are caught up in.

### **16 July, Dundee, TC**

**Trial by torture at Dundee ESA Assessment Centre.** Linda works as a cleaner

for Angela, who is fifty-eight years old and suffers from a badly damaged back, comprising three fractured vertebrae and five bulging disks. Angela has also been diagnosed with Crohn's disease, a hiatus hernia and depression (these are only her main conditions – she has many more). Back in April, Angela received an ESA form, and she eventually attended a Work Capability Assessment at the Greenmarket Assessment Centre last week. She had been provided with a phone number in order to ensure that taxi travel would be paid for, and, in the course of the phone call to the centre, Linda, who had agreed to help, asked how far Angela would be expected to walk to reach the assessment rooms. She was informed it was no further than 'fifteen steps'. Linda was also informed that a taxi could not be arranged for her and that she would need a code to operate the barrier to the assessment centre car park. Things seemed a little more complicated than they should be, and Linda agreed to accompany Angela to her assessment.

They took a taxi, which managed to sneak under the barrier as a car in front of them entered the car park. When they disembarked from the taxi however, they found, to their horror, that the 'fifteen steps' they had expected to negotiate turned out to be more in the region of twenty-five to thirty metres from the entrance to the reception area. This was a real problem for Angela as, based on the information they had received, she had come with crutches rather than the wheeled buggy she also has, which provides more support. Linda asked staff for a wheelchair so that Angela could negotiate the corridor, but was informed, to her horror, that no wheelchairs were kept on the premises. Having struggled into the reception area, and nearly fallen over, Angela was, mercifully, only kept waiting for ten minutes before she was called into the assessment; but they were again horrified that Angela was expected to walk a frightening distance (for her) to get to the assessment room, which she only managed with extreme effort and no little pain.

The assessment itself, they had been told, could last as little as twenty minutes, but it took more than an hour of questions before the male assessor was ready to conduct a physical examination. Angela was asked to stand up and to hold her arms out in front of her. The effort involved was too much for Angela. She fell over and was left by the assessor to pick herself up. The assessor then left the room in order to let Angela 'compose herself'. By this time Angela was in a highly distressed state, in tears and in a lot of pain. After consulting a doctor, the assessor unbelievably continued with the physical examination. He did, however, allow Angela to be seated, which I am sure readers will agree, was very compassionate of him.

The assessment came to an end shortly afterwards, but the torture did not end there; Angela still had to walk back the length of the corridor. She was absolutely shattered - emotionally and physically - by her experience at the hands of

Maximus. Linda admitted that the experience had also 'shaken' her, and she said this as someone who does not see themselves as a person who is easily upset. The treatment that Angela received is appalling, but all too common. We can assure Maximus that they have not heard the last of this inhuman outrage, and we have advised Linda [*who contacted us by phone*] on the best course of seeking redress. As for Maximus, hell mend them.

### **21 July, Dundee, SG**

**No Justice, No Peace.** On 23rd June, SUWN activist, Tony Cox, was found guilty of 'threatening behaviour' when attempting to insist on accompanying a vulnerable woman to her Work Capability Assessment. Today the court decided his sentence.

I suppose, from our previous acquaintance with Sheriff Griffiths, that we should have expected the worst, but I was still naïve enough to believe that a sympathetic social work report and a dozen supportive personal references (from food bank managers, academics, a retired social work manager, an MP, a priest, an award winning screen writer... ) would make a difference. But I don't think that anything could have pierced that wall of superiority. As it was, the sheriff just scanned a couple of the references, and then pulled out the comment that one 'found it almost inconceivable that [Tony] has in fact threatened anyone' in order to suggest that this was disrespectful of the court. He ignored the social worker's recommendation of a suspended sentence and the defence lawyer's point that it would not be in the public interest to take Tony away from the work that he does with the SUWN, and imposed a Community Payback Order of 150 hours unpaid work.

So, 150 hours 'community work' as punishment for working for the community - because that was what Tony was doing.

Every day, jobcentres and assessment centres deprive thousands of people of their basic subsistence – often twisting and breaking their own rules in the process. These life-destroying acts of cruelty are real crimes, and they are ignored by our 'justice' system. But any time that anyone questions what is happening, the DWP and their subcontractors cry foul and call for the police – and the police hurry to their 'protection'. As we have seen with the Labour party plotters, the easiest way to try and discredit someone who disagrees with you is to accuse them of threatening you.

Of course we do intend to be a threat – but not in that way. We hope that by helping people navigate the system and by exposing its excesses we can prove a threat to its existence. We have no intention of threatening the people who work for the DWP and Maximus, but the punitive edifice constructed by so-called

welfare reform is firmly within our sights.

Yet again we were supported by other welfare activists who realise the significance of this case and how it is being used to try and prevent us from doing our work. The solidarity shown by comrades from Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty, Glasgow Anarchist Collective and Castlemilk Against Austerity as well as local folk is what gives us the strength and determination to go on.

We also bumped into an old friend who had helped out on the stall in Paisley and had himself just been given 90 hours for threatening behaviour. His 'crime'? Driving a car with masked hunt saboteurs. And the reason they were masked? Because they were being personally targeted by the huntsmen. A topsy turvey world indeed.

Because the instigator of this long and destructive saga was the Maximus Assessment Centre, we thought we would complete our protest across the city centre in front of their office. We didn't disrupt access because we wouldn't want to interrupt people getting to their assessments, but that didn't stop a manager coming out and telling us – and especially Tony – that he was calling the police. By the time the police came we had moved to outside the car-park barrier and there was nothing they could reprimand us about. That didn't stop them spending a long time in the office and watching us through the window. In the end they came out without a word and drove off, as we waved them goodbye.



*Outside Maximus*

The battle in the court is important – not least for Tony – but we can't let it distract us from the wider battle against this pernicious and punitive 'welfare' system. We will go on doing what we do and urge anyone who has been angered by this account to come and join us and demonstrate that we won't be

intimidated.

The case received wide-spread publicity and produced a flurry of sympathetic letters in the *National*, including one that began 'We need a whole army of Dr Tony Coxes to ensure the so called "medical assessment" by this private company is fair.'



*This impression of Tony was drawn by our friend John Patterson. It headed many Facebook event pages.*

\* \* \*

### ***19 September, SG***

This is not, of course, the end of our diary – so here is an update at the time of our final edit:

Sanctions are still down, but the fear of sanctions is now integrated into the system so they do not have to be imposed to have an effect. Meanwhile, pressure is being increased on the sick and disabled. Our experience matches the wider statistics that show a clamp down on people applying for ESA and PIP – though we can expect an improvement in the latter when the Scottish Government takes over in April. The replacement for the Work Programme will be on a much smaller scale everywhere, but in Scotland it will be run by the Scottish Government, and they have said that they will not allow it to be used for imposing sanctions. They are currently consulting on the new Scottish PIP and 'employability' schemes, and we will be putting in a full response to the consultations. We have also pulled out five key points in the form of a petition. Yesterday we took part in the YES rally at Glasgow Green on the second

anniversary of the referendum, and the petition was the focus of our leaflet:

### **15% IS NOT ENOUGH**

The Scottish Government is consulting on how to change the 15% of welfare that we are getting control of – and we are hopeful that they are listening to complaints about the DWP's current punitive processes and will try and do things differently. BUT with control over only 15%, and with no powers to change the wider economy, it is limited what they can do. **So long as we are ruled by a Tory government in Westminster, wedded to neoliberalism and determined in its attempt to transform the welfare state into a surveillance and control state, our Scottish Government will not be able to protect the interests of the poorest and most vulnerable within our society.** That is why welfare has always had a central place in the Independence campaign.

**We are fighting not only for an *independent* Scotland but also for a *fairer* Scotland.** This is not just about running things from Holyrood rather than Westminster, and it is not about whether we are part of the bigger neoliberal club of the EU. It is about the opportunity to run our society better.

In fighting for a fairer society we need to be active at all levels. We fight individual instances of injustice, as we try to do through solidarity and practical support outside the jobcentre; we fight for every improvement we can win, as we try to do through lobbying the Scottish Government to make the best use of the limited powers we have; and we fight for the opportunity to make more fundamental change through independence.

15% is not enough, but - used right - it can make a difference to many people, it can demonstrate that another approach is possible, and it can show what could be achieved if we got control of the other 85%.

So please sign our petition to the Scottish Government to begin the process of better welfare for Scotland. Sign online at **[scottishunemployedworkers.net/2016/08/28/a-petition-for-a-fairer-social-security-system-for-scotland](http://scottishunemployedworkers.net/2016/08/28/a-petition-for-a-fairer-social-security-system-for-scotland)**  
Or sign the section below and give it to the SUWN stall

**When more welfare powers come to Scotland, please can you make sure that:**

- No-one can get sanctioned for not attending or complying with any devolved 'employability' scheme, and this is made clear to everyone affected so that these schemes are effectively voluntary.
- Scottish health services and other social and community services are kept completely independent of any DWP schemes that pressure people to apply for jobs. (We especially don't want to see anything like the placing of 'work coaches' in GPs' surgeries recently trialled in Islington).
- The new Scottish PIP assessment process takes full account of evidence from health and other care professionals, and the GPs etc. have to provide this evidence.
- Everyone who has lost benefits as a result of the cut-off for Higher Rate Mobility having been dropped from walking 50m to walking 20m can apply to get them reinstated.
- There is no role for private companies in any devolved service

Meanwhile, Tony's Community Payback Order (payback for what?) involves him doing work for the council that should be the basis for paid jobs, and we are getting ready for yet another solidarity protest against High Riggs Jobcentre's determined flouting of the DWP's own rules.

*On thi buroo in Dundee*

Eh'm on thi buroo thi noo.  
 Thir's nae jobs t' pursue.  
 Eh need tae – eat  
 (expletive delete)  
 Eh need tae live same's you

Wurk fir meh buroo? Hey you?  
 Is that yir point of view?  
 Withoot a fight?  
 Aye, that'll be right!  
 Wha else you gaen t' screw?

Eh'm on the buroo, that's true.  
 But if thir's wurk come through,  
 then pey a wage,  
 Eh'm nae b'dy's slave.  
 Eh wunt a job same's you.

Eh've a right tae the buroo; s'meh due.  
 An it's tight enough, that's true.  
 But U'll hiv a ba,  
 an ciggies an a.  
 U'll no be tellt whut's t'boo

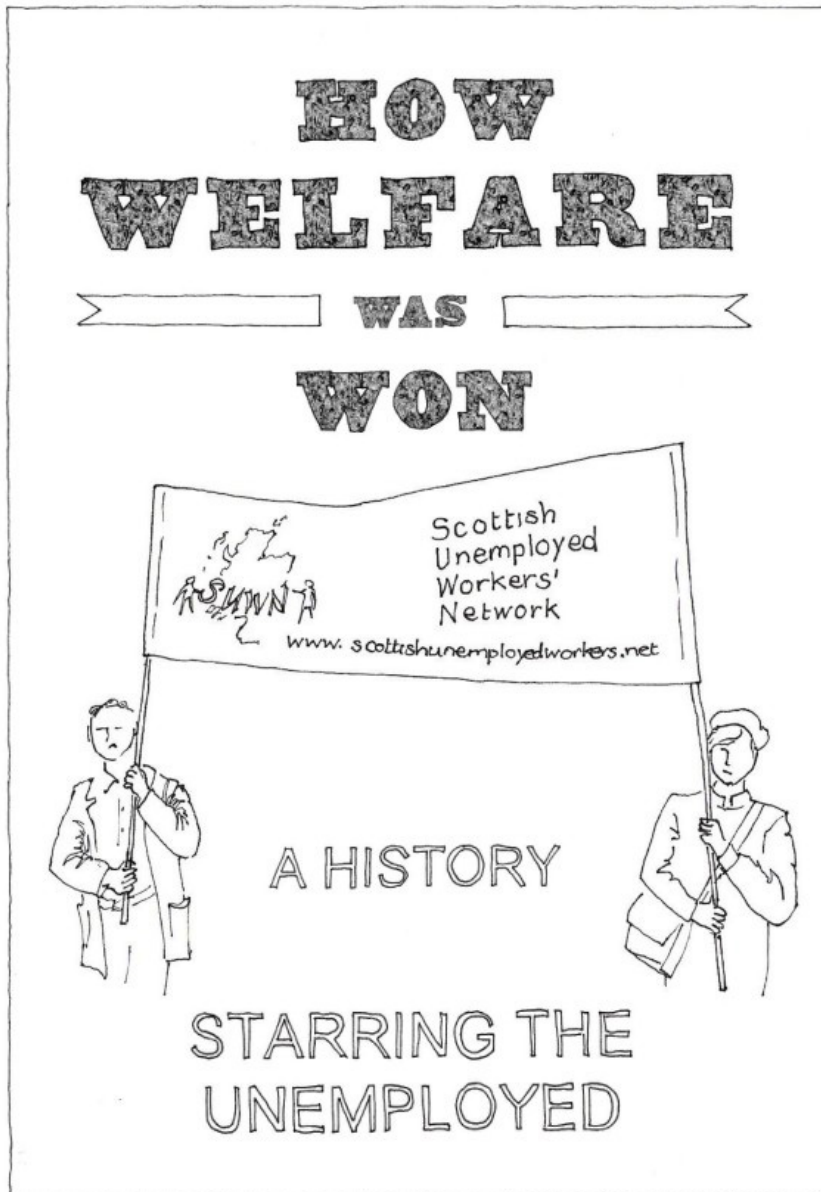
Taste life on the buroo - an chew:  
 when thi benefit cheque's overdue,  
 thi gas bill jist grew,  
 thir's holes in yir shoe  
 Cos the next een oot'll be you!





# How Welfare was Won

*Sarah Glynn*

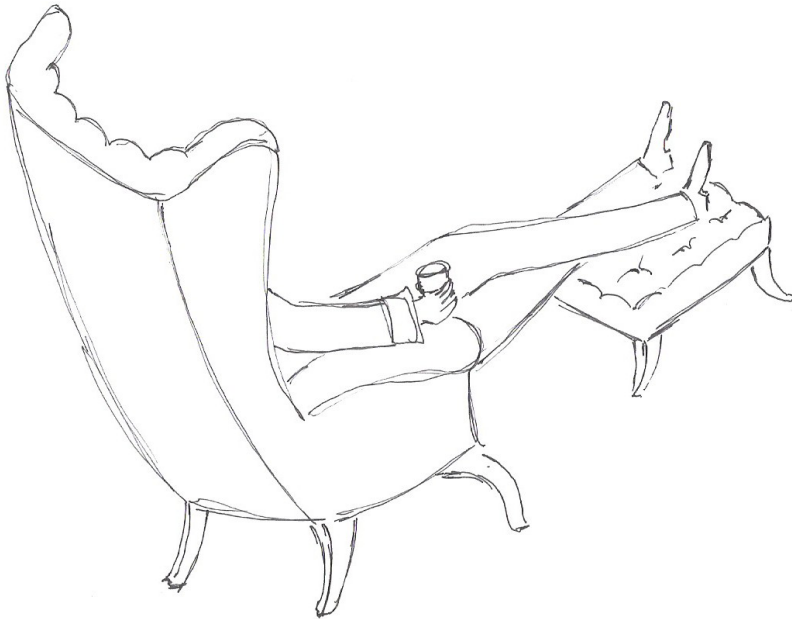


Victorian Scotland was a terrible place to be poor. In good times, most workers barely managed to scrape by. In bad times, there was only the Poor Law. This ruled that there should be no help for people fit enough to work, even when there was no work to be found, though some parishes did do a little. Often people could only get help if they went into the poorhouse. Poorhouse life was hardly better than prison. When very large numbers were out of work, rich and powerful people set up temporary labour schemes to prevent widespread disaster and riot.



*Daily life at the centre of the world's greatest empire*

The working class was getting bigger and stronger. Governments were getting frightened by protests and riots and by the beginnings of labour politics. In 1895, Glasgow's Inspector of Poor said unemployment was the result of bad 'moral character'. But socialists explained that the unemployed were not to blame for being unable to find work. They said that the state had a duty to give financial help. The government needed to show they were doing something - but they didn't do very much.



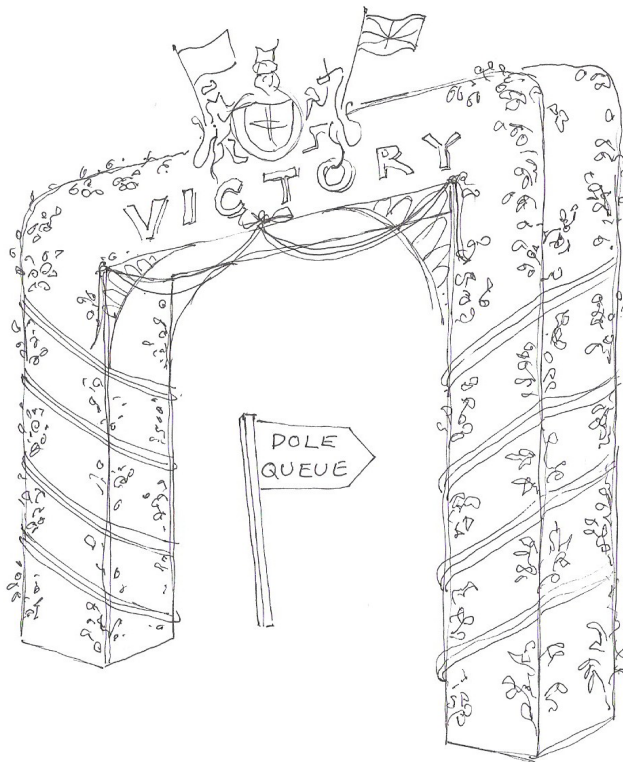
*'They should just get rid of the blighters. This idleness is completely immoral!'*

Unemployment was growing. So were the protests by unemployed workers. In 1911, the Liberal government brought in National Insurance. Workers in a range of jobs had to take out insurance in a government scheme that paid them benefits if they lost their income. More money was put in by the employers and the government. But this scheme only covered a small part of the total workforce. Benefits were only paid to people who had been in the scheme for some time. They were not enough and lasted only a short while.



*'We've given 1 in 8 of them insurance – there's just no gratitude these days!'*

During the First World War, the government became worried about what would happen when the soldiers went home. There were big strikes and protests. They feared Britain might follow Russia into revolution. From 1918 to 1921 they made out-of-work payments that covered basic living costs. These were known as 'dole' because they were doled out. In 1920, many more people were included in the National Insurance scheme, but it didn't cover long-term unemployment. The dole had set an example of government payments for people who had run out of insurance or never qualified for it. Now, the government had to add other extra payments to cover some of the gaps, but more gaps remained. These extra payments were generally means-tested and only given to people shown to have no other source of support.



Unemployment policy wasn't really planned – more a collection of crisis responses. From 1920 to 1930 there were eighteen different Acts of Parliament. The mix of insured and means-tested benefits remained - and still exists today. The Twenties and Thirties was a time of mass unemployment. Governments panicked about economic costs and possible unrest. Politicians had to take notice of huge organised protests. They also listened to businessmen and investors who demanded low wages and low taxes. Wages for many workers were barely enough to survive on, and benefits were kept even lower. They were not enough for basic needs.



1920

*'Of course it's just a temporary  
fix until the economy gets back to  
normal.'*



1921

*'Of course it's just a temporary  
fix until the economy gets back to  
normal.'*



1922

*'Of course it's just a temporary  
fix until the economy gets back to  
normal.'*



1923...

*'Of course it's just a temporary  
fix until the economy gets back to  
normal.'*

Some early unemployed organisations begged for charity. Socialists persuaded people to demand political action. Unemployed workers were angry and desperate. At a Glasgow demonstration in 1921, some men carried hand grenades they had brought back from the war. John MacLean, helped by Harry McShane, started the Glasgow Unemployed Workers' Movement in 1920. Soon they were organising a conference of unemployed committees from across Scotland. They said that the Labour Party and trade unions were not doing enough and that the unemployed needed their own organisation. They kept up a campaign of demonstrations and protests. Sometimes the authorities agreed small compromises. Glasgow City Council let three and a half thousand unemployed people meet twice a week in the City Halls to 'discuss principles and tactics applied to the present situation from a Marxian point of view' (as MacLean told Lenin). But often protesters were met by police truncheons. By the autumn of 1921 MacLean was beginning a year in prison. His crime was telling the unemployed to take food and not die of starvation. Prison destroyed his health and led to his early death.



*'I find you guilty of telling people not to starve.'*

Payments from the government were far from enough, and people looked to their local parish for help through the Poor Law. In 1921, unemployed workers organised large protests against the rules that stopped Scottish parishes from aiding people who were fit to work. Some Labour councillors tried to help, but their rate-payers opposed them. Unemployed protestors persuaded some parishes to flout the rules. The Scottish Poor Law Board agreed that it might be 'less costly' to give some aid before people became sick enough to count. In the autumn of 1921 protestors took over Dundee city centre for three days. The riots swept through Scotland. Parishes were forced to give aid, and a new Act of Parliament allowed the rules to be changed. This help was badly needed. By 1924 almost half of Glasgow's working-class population had been forced to rely on poor relief.



*'Come back when you're too hungry to work.'*



By the end of 1921, the Scottish movements had become part of the National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM). This was led by the Communist Party, but many activists and most members weren't connected to the party. The NUWM demanded that people be given work or full maintenance paid at trade union rates. Members also swore to strive for the abolition of capitalism. They organised protests and demonstrations. They helped people get all the assistance the rules allowed. And they helped destitute families resist eviction. Thousands of unemployed workers became involved with the NUWM. Thousands of other workers supported them. Governments had to take notice. Relations between the Communist-run NUWM and the Labour Party and trade unions were often poor. Unemployed workers voted for Labour politicians, but even when Labour governments were elected in 1923 and 1929 things only got a little better.



The NUWM made sure that everyone knew about the plight of the unemployed. They organised massive marches of unemployed workers from across Britain. The first national hunger march took place in 1922. First to set off were three hundred Scotsmen. They took a month to march from Glasgow to London. Tens of thousands of Londoners came out to support them. But the Prime Minister refused to meet them and the House of Commons refused to hear them. So the marchers stayed in London for five months to make sure the unemployed couldn't be forgotten. There were further national hunger marches in 1929, 1930, 1932, 1934 and 1936. At each place the marchers stopped for the night they held public meetings. The marches and other protests raised support for the unemployed. They made it harder for the government to cut back on benefits. Wal Hannington was the National Organiser of the NUWM. He wrote that the 1922 march made the government abandon plans for further cuts and made more people vote Labour.



*'Shouldn't they be marching?'*

To get uninsured benefits, people had to prove that they were 'genuinely seeking work'. They spent days tramping across the country in search of jobs; but it was still hard to produce evidence. Officials fired questions about what they had done, trying to catch them out over the details. The 'not genuinely seeking work' rule was used to disqualify a great many unemployed workers. By 1930, one third of people in need of benefits were being turned away. This rule was the main target of the hunger marches in 1929 and 1930. The 1930 march was on the road when the second Labour government at last changed the system. Now, the officials had to prove a person wasn't looking for work if they wanted to stop their benefits.



*'And this hole proves I walked 60 miles in search of work.'*

That second Labour government didn't last long. This was the time of the great depression. Unemployment was increasing, and so was the benefits bill. Labour politicians argued with each other whether to cut unemployment benefit. The Labour leader, Ramsay MacDonald, became head of a new coalition called the National Government. Most of the people in this government were Conservatives. The National Government cut insured benefits and introduced a severe new means test for those not insured. Nothing could persuade them not to make these cuts: not even massive protests and 150,000 people marching through Glasgow. The new means test looked at the whole household. If there was any source of income or anything that officials thought could be sold, then benefits were cut. Inspectors looked at every detail of people's lives and homes. If children worked, their unemployed parents were expected to live off their wages. Working children moved out of the family home – or hid with working neighbours – when the Means Test Man came to call. Any savings put aside for a rainy day, or payments for odd jobs, had to be given up. Inspectors asked people to tell on their neighbours if they broke the rules. The NUWM helped families to get the small amount of assistance they were entitled to, and organised more demonstrations and marches. But the hated household means test was not replaced by a personal means test until 1941 – when there was little unemployment anyway.



*Now your mother's died, you'll not be needing this chair.'*

Campaigners always tried to stop unemployed people being made to work for their benefits or for reduced pay. They said no one should have to work for poverty wages. They said that this cheap labour put other jobs at risk. In the late 1920s, many people needed more help than they could get from government benefits. When they asked their local parishes for help they were told to go into the poorhouse or to do relief work. Relief workers were paid less than trade union wages. The NUWM resisted this 'work test'. In the Thirties, growing numbers of unemployed men were sent to government labour camps. They weren't forced, but they were put under pressure to go. If they left early they lost benefits. The labour included forest clearing and road making. It was described as training, but they learnt few skills. When they returned they went back on the buroo (short for the Labour Exchange Bureau). There were protests in the camps against poor living conditions. The NUWM protested against people working without pay.



*'Training' camp: 'Me, I used to be a skilled carpenter' 'And I was a stonemason'*

Sometimes, governments felt that they had to respond to the protestors. But, at other times, they tried to stop protest with force. The National Government knew parliamentary opposition was weak. They thought they didn't have to listen to the unemployed. In 1932, Birkenhead police dragged people from their beds and beat them. In Belfast, police fired on protestors, killing two people. The mass rally following the 1932 hunger march was attacked by the police. The NUWM's offices were raided. Their million-signature petition was confiscated. By the end of that year, four of the NUWM's national officials had been sent to prison. Demonstrations were banned from city centres. The government tried to encourage non-political organisations for the unemployed. They hoped to attract people away from the NUWM and from protest action; but these organisations weren't very successful. The crackdowns made the unemployed more determined and won them more support.



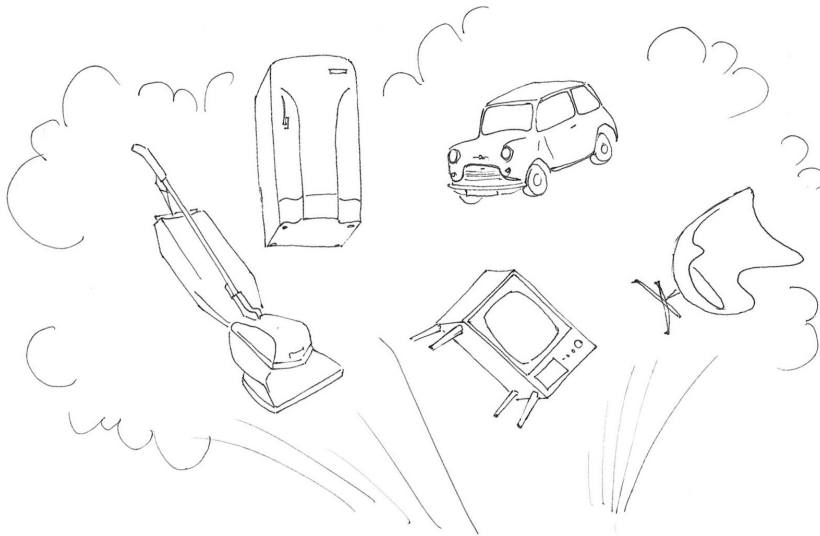
*'And that's for saying the state is brutal!'*

In 1930, the NUWM had twenty thousand members. By 1932 they had fifty thousand. Across the UK, sympathy for the unemployed was growing. The 1934 hunger march was supported by some leading Labour Party and trade union members. In 1935, protests against proposed cuts were supported by shopkeepers, doctors, and teachers, and also by many local authorities. The 1936 hunger march was so big that Scotland sent two contingents. One marched down the east of the UK and one down the west. The Labour Party and trade unions helped with this march, and there was also a separate 'crusade' organised by Jarrow Labour Borough Council. For the first time, marchers were allowed to put their case to the Minister of Labour.



*'Weel tak the east road and youse'll tak the west road, and weel git tae London afore youse.'*

These long years of protest helped people understand that the unemployed weren't to blame for unemployment. There was general sympathy for people who couldn't find work. After the Second World War, people demanded a fairer society. Politicians feared that if the working class wasn't given a greater stake they might be tempted by ideas from the Soviet Union. During the war, the government had had to organise many areas of life. Now the post-war Labour government organised the Welfare State. They said, clearly, that it was the government's duty to help people who couldn't find work or were unable to work. And they said that the unemployed should be given what they needed to lead a decent standard of life without stigma. Benefits became much more generous, and governments tried to make sure there were enough jobs for everyone. Of course, it wasn't as easy as that. At first money was very limited, but so it was for most people. Officials were patronising and intrusive, and old attitudes didn't just disappear. Even so, the pre-war troubles seemed far behind.



*Post-war boom*



For nearly 30 years, the economy boomed. Working-class life got more comfortable, including for the unemployed - and few people were out of work for long. Then, in the late Seventies, unemployment started growing again. In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. Tory election posters had accused Labour of letting unemployment grow; but the Tory government stopped even trying to make jobs for everyone. They made strict rules for trade unions, and closed industries where trade unions were strong. Many more people became unemployed. And old ideas began to be brought back.



Unemployed workers have kept campaigning to try and retain the gains they won through this long hard history. As these gains have been taken away, they have found themselves fighting against all the old injustices:

- against being made to work unpaid
- against cuts that mean benefits don't meet actual needs
- against rules that punish people by taking away vital support
- against intrusive examination of people's private lives
- against a wall of propaganda that, once again, portrays the unemployed as immoral

We believe that, in a civilised society, everyone should be able to lead a decent life, and that our modern world produces more than enough for this to be possible.

We are still campaigning...



***Graaand Britannia! Where the poor get treated with disdain***

There's never been a better time to have it all  
(You can't be workless and you can't migrate)  
Stuff the ninety-nine per cent and have a ball  
Soon be livin' in a fascist State!  
Fascist state – gonna make you hate!

*(any resemblance to Oklahoma! is entirely coincidental)*

## *The economics of unemployment*

*Sarah Glynn*

### **The reserve army of labour**

In a capitalist economy, unemployment – like poverty – will always be with us. Ideally, work would be shared out evenly, but capitalism doesn't work that way. It is a system based on competition rather than sharing. Unemployed people play an important role in a capitalist economy. Marx called them the 'reserve army of labour'.

Although workers under capitalism are referred to as 'free labour' to distinguish them from slaves or serfs, their actual freedoms are restricted by the threat of unemployment. If there were no unemployed people waiting in the wings there would be nothing to stop workers demanding higher wages and better conditions –and capitalists would make smaller profits. But if they start making such demands they risk being replaced by other workers. And if the reserve army shrinks so that the workers do begin to gain bargaining power and win improvements, they can find their jobs replaced by machines; or the capitalists may decide it is not worth investing at all, or relocate their business somewhere where labour is cheaper. In each case unemployment increases again, and workers lose the powers that they had gained. Unemployment plays a vital part in the unequal power relations that underlie capitalism.

The reserve army also provides a supply of workers that allows businesses to expand at times of growing demand while maintaining their profit rates. The main risks associated with economic boom and bust are taken by these marginal workers.

The cycle of boom and bust is itself a result of the inherent contradictions within capitalism. The profit motive ensures that each business produces as much as possible and pays as little in wages as possible.



*a job is for life - not just for Christmas*

This may drive efficient production within the business but can result in over production in the economy as a whole. When businesses produce more than can be profitably sold, they have to reduce output or close down. Retrenchment in one area affects demand, profitability and investor confidence in others too. The resulting crisis and growing unemployment brings down wages, and, after a time, the lower wage bill and diminished competition make it profitable for the remaining businesses to start growing again.

### **Class compromise**

After the mass unemployment and destitution of the 1930s, the post-war years saw a range of attempts to mitigate the worst impacts of capitalism through institutionalising compromises between bosses and workers. The workers' bargaining position had been fundamentally strengthened by the parallel existence of an alternative economic model in the Soviet Union. The Western ruling class had to demonstrate that workers could improve their material conditions within capitalism and had no need to turn to revolutionary socialism. They had to be given a greater share of the wealth they generated – but not so much as to impinge on the profits and profit motive of the business owners. Western political leaders across the political spectrum took up the ideas put forward by John Maynard Keynes in *The General Theory of Employment, Interest*

and Money, which was written in response to the Great Depression.

Keynesian economists argued that governments could boost economic growth and create jobs in lean times by borrowing money to invest in public services and infrastructure. These would be beneficial in themselves, and the investment would serve to prime the economy by boosting demand, both through the direct need for associated supplies and through consumption by the people employed. The 1942 Beveridge Report called for full employment - qualified to mean an unemployment rate of 3% - and through the Fifties and Sixties unemployment never even reached this level. Under the Keynesian compromise, workers were expected to pay for low unemployment through wage restraint; however the post-war boom meant that even within these constraints standards of living could rise while business profits were maintained.

The compromise between bosses and workers was at its strongest and most worked out in Sweden, where it was established in the late Thirties. The Swedish government was actively involved in the labour market through a large public sector and through training programmes, and the generous welfare state was paid for through high levels of taxation. Strong trade unions negotiated national wage levels that promoted greater equality, but also accepted restraint. The result was a high level of income redistribution, but a small business elite was still able to reap some large profits. When, in 1976, the left moved to transfer some of these profits to collective funds as the first step in a staged transfer of ownership from private capital to the trade unions, businesses responded by rejecting the compromise with the workers, and increasingly making investments outwith the country.

The Keynesian compromise was not enough to overcome the contradictions within capitalism pushing it towards crisis. Initially the Western economies grew as they met the demands of rebuilding war-torn Europe and of supplying the needs of former colonies, but by the late Sixties competition was increasing within and outwith Europe and profit rates were falling again. Western economies were already stagnating when the 1973 oil crisis tipped them into full blown recession and Keynesian economics lost its sheen. Business owners had been prepared to overcome their distrust of public sector involvement so long as the economy was thriving, but as profits became constrained they sought to claim back any areas where they might make money.

## Business triumphant

By the late Seventies, governments were becoming disillusioned with Keynesianism. They were ready to turn their back on many of the compromises they had made and to take up neoliberal ideas that had been carefully nurtured by decades of right-wing think tanks and academics. Ideas that had once been regarded as extreme and marginal came to dominate government thinking in the majority of countries. In its essence, neoliberal economics calls for a free market where most workers are compelled to compete for jobs by accepting lower and lower wages. Neoliberals claim that the responsibility for unemployment lies with trade unions, minimum wage legislation and social security. These prevent wages from falling low enough to make unskilled workers more profitably employable, and they ensure people are not forced into accepting the poor pay and conditions that free market mechanisms dictate. Free-market ideas are a recipe for increasing inequality between skilled and unskilled workers, and for a race to the bottom in wages and conditions for the majority. The workforce has become increasingly polarised between a small well-paid elite and the rest, who are largely considered replaceable and can only look forward to insecurity and intense wage competition.

Neoliberal economists dismiss economic crises as the result of events outwith the capitalist economy, such as crop failure or government interference. They believe that order will be restored to 'normal' if only market forces are allowed free play, and that, meanwhile, basic emergency aid can be provided through private charity. They perpetuate the myth that capitalist competition operates as a meritocracy, and so individual misfortune can be blamed on personal failure.

Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States led the liberation of market forces through attacks on working-class organisations and on regulatory safeguards. Rising unemployment and the growing reserve army of labour made it harder for workers to risk their jobs by resisting the changes. New laws restricted trade union activity, and strongly unionised industries were closed down. By the 1990s scope for resistance was severely curtailed and the Soviet model no longer offered an alternative. Capitalism appeared triumphant and employers were confident in their right to manage their workers.

When the Conservatives had come to power in 1979, their election campaign had mocked Labour for presiding over high levels of unemployment – and the Saachis had produced their famous dole

queue poster with the title 'Labour isn't working'. But under the first Thatcher government the unemployment rate soon more than doubled, and the aim of 'full employment' was abandoned. Rates dropped again in the debt-powered boom of the 1990s and then rose following the 2008 crash. This time, though, unemployment has not been as high as most people predicted. Instead, the problems of over production and squeezed profits have been met through big rises in underemployment (including a whole range of part-time and insecure contracts) and in unwilling self-employment, and big falls in real wages. The current Tory government has even been prepared – in its attempt to pose as the workers' friend – to talk about a duplicitous 'full employment'.<sup>11</sup>

### The immigration question

Over the years the size of the workforce has increased - most notably through the inclusion of more women, by the raising of the retirement age (which was clearly not a policy conceived by people doing manual labour or living in areas where life expectancy is less than sixty), and through immigration. In a well-managed system – and within limits - a bigger workforce should simply equate to a bigger economy: more goods and services and more homes and jobs. Under our current system of unbridled capitalism the situation is not so well-balanced, and we often find immigrants being made to take the blame. Of course governments may welcome this distraction from their systemic failures, and the divide and rule of anti-immigrant rhetoric is a well-established method of labour control.

Numerous studies have shown that, overall, immigrants have brought net benefits to the UK; and it is argued that the UK, and Scotland in particular, needs to boost the workforce with younger immigrants to balance our aging population – a situation that is partly the result of so many people previously having left Scotland to find work. However, the benefits from immigration are not evenly spread.

Actual and potential immigration increases the reserve army of labour, and, without balancing investment to create more jobs, this can be used to hold down wages in some low-paid work. Immigrant labour is

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<sup>11</sup> However, as William Keegan explained in the Guardian, 'It turns out that when the chancellor talks about the goal of "full employment" he means that there would be more people in jobs here than in any other G7 country... Also, he appears to be counting the many people who are now in part-time jobs, or defined as "self-employed", in his definition.' 6 April, 2014 'The dream of full employment gets George Osborne's political twist', [www.theguardian.com/business/2014/apr/06/full-employment-george-osborne-political-twist](http://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/apr/06/full-employment-george-osborne-political-twist)



being used to drive further casualisation of the labour force, especially in industries such as construction where there has been a lot of anecdotal evidence of workers being made redundant only to find jobs taken by cheaper immigrant labour, and of the extensive use of agency workers recruited abroad. In agricultural jobs, such as fruit picking, migrant gang labour has become the normal business model, with workers brought across from low-wage countries and jobs not even advertised locally. Pay and conditions that cannot support a family in the UK may still be able to attract short-term migrant workers who are sending money back to a homeland with a much lower cost of living.

Because this labour is cheaper, companies that avoid going down this route and try to maintain good working conditions are put at a disadvantage. The problem here lies not with the migrant workers but with a system that allows unsustainable wages and working conditions in the first place.



From a British perspective, current rates of immigration and migration would be welcomed all round if this was part of a managed development of the economy and services – though this would still be at the expense of the countries immigrants come from, which are being deprived of a young and active workforce that they have educated and trained. It

should not be necessary to add that – contrary to the claims of the tabloid press - only a very small proportion of immigrants rely on our far-from-attractive benefit system, and British citizens also claim benefits in other European countries. Or that asylum for refugees is meant to be guaranteed by the Geneva Convention.

### **A 21st-Century economy**

The structural problems that began to affect the British economy in the 1960s have only grown stronger. International competition has intensified with China's rise as the new workshop of the world, and growing use of cheap labour across the global south. The capitalist system has received a huge boost, but at the expense of workers in countries like the UK. It is cheaper to make things elsewhere where wages are lower and regulations more lax; and businesses move or outsource not because they can't make a profit here, but because they can make a bigger one somewhere else.

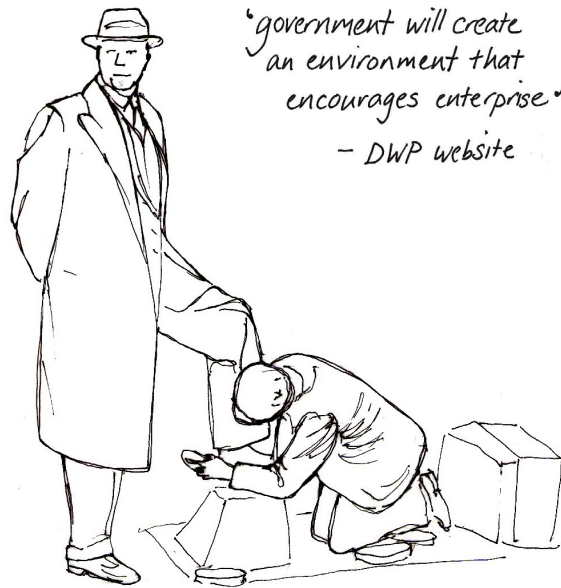
Not everything is moveable, but even in spheres such as retail, monopoly businesses have squeezed out small firms that employ more people. The mainstream media likes to announce the opening of supermarkets as bringing jobs – but they never say how many more jobs will disappear as local businesses lose custom.

And neoliberal economics has encouraged the growth of finance capital – the economy of banks and speculation. A financial system is an essential element in a capitalist economy, but under neoliberalism the financial system has become so bloated and predatory that it threatens to bring down the whole economy. Britain has increasingly come to rely on its role as a leading financial centre that can attract foreign investment. Finance is a sector that creates little of lasting value, generates relatively few jobs, and is catastrophically unstable. A small number of people make large amounts of money, most of which will not be spent locally. And short-term profits for the few are at the expense of wider economic health. Despite the recent crash, most members of our political classes remain willingly blinkered to the dangers and continue to pursue bubble economics from within their own political bubble.

### **Unemployment, stigmatisation and the 99%**

While a small elite are able to command escalating salaries and grow

their fortunes through speculation, the future for most people is to compete in an increasingly low-wage economy. The stigmatisation, humiliation and impoverishment of the unemployed plays a vital role in forcing acceptance of this growing inequality.



Neoliberal economics has endorsed a change in attitude to the unemployed, who are dismissed as too lazy to work, or too greedy or envious of their betters to accept low pay. This implies that there is work available if people are prepared to take the market rate for the job: but often there is no work, or the market rate is below survival level. These ideas were instigated by the Tories, but they were taken on by New Labour. They open the door to a system that makes being unemployed more and more unpleasant – almost a punishable offence – and sets all workers up for exploitation.

The unemployed are increasingly forced to accept any job or starve, and workers find it increasingly difficult to hold their bosses to account. This has been especially true in Britain, where workers have little legal protection and low unemployment benefits. A great many people feel that any form of protest about their pay or conditions or even the way they are treated at work is not worth the risk of losing their job. And employers know this. Workers have to contend with all manner of

new requirements and restrictions, such as irregular and unpredictable work-shifts and limits on time off when ill, in the knowledge that if they don't dance to the employer's tune, this may be used as an excuse for dismissal. The mental stress that this causes can itself end up making people lose their jobs.

The trade unions have not recovered from Thatcher's attacks and have been further enfeebled by Labour's acceptance of many Thatcherite values. In times of recession, when unemployment is high, organised resistance is especially difficult. Employers know they can keep wages low and insist on conditions and practices that would not have been tolerated in other circumstances, and gains made in better times are clawed back. Instead of protecting minimum standards, governments are competing in a race to the bottom, claiming that this is necessary to outbid the most low-paid nations. We have witnessed a huge growth of in-work poverty, and a generation of young workers is growing up to see a lack of rights as normal.

In blaming individuals for their misfortune, governments are able to deflect blame from their own economic failures. They also legitimise the idea that wealth more generally is a reflection of personal merit. And in attempting to incite jealousies between employed and unemployed they seek to divide potential resistance to policies that damage both.

Neoliberalism in practice has not actually meant less government, but rather a change of purpose in government interference and regulation (as demonstrated so spectacularly by the bail-out of the banks). All sorts of structures have been created to contain and control potential revolt, including the punitive regimes of forced labour and sanctions imposed on those unable to find work, and a raft of measures portrayed as necessary to counter terrorism. And, at the same time as the demolition of the welfare state has removed barriers to an increasingly exploitative capitalism, contracted out bureaucracies, such as the Work Programme (which is supposed to provide work experience and training for the long-term unemployed), have provided a mechanism for channelling public money into private profit. This is part of the government's huge scheme of corporate welfare. Taken as a whole, what we are witnessing is a very effective transfer of wealth from the poor to the super-rich. Destroyed lives, broken dreams, even premature deaths, are merely collateral damage.

The 2008 economic crash should have served as a warning. Instead, in a flagrant example of what Naomi Klein has called disaster capitalism,

governments have used the confusion of the crash as cover and excuse for speeding up this wealth transfer and intensifying their attack on workers. The free market medicine had not been strong enough – what was needed now was a dose of austerity.



*There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning.' - Warren Buffett, one of the richest men in the world, quoted in the New York Times, 26 November 2006*

Watching Tory triumphalism, it is tempting to think that austerity politics are purely vindictive; but, although they are damaging for the British economy, they are very profitable for the small ruling elite. The 1% is happy to benefit from a low-waged insecure workforce, and a sure way to make workers reluctant to protest about this is to make the prospect of unemployment very much worse.

### Escaping the capitalist logic

Political debate has gained a new momentum and urgency. If it is to succeed in transforming this into progress, that debate will have to engage with changing realities. These bring new constraints, but also open up new possibilities. Future economic approaches have to take account of the imminent threats of climate change and pollution, and the potential impact of growing technological redundancy. Together these provide an urgent reason to escape from our current model of capitalist growth - and part of the solution to finding an alternative. Without the capitalist imperative, we don't need more and more stuff. Beyond a basic level, more stuff doesn't make people happier and it is destroying our planet. We already have the technology to fulfil everyone's requirements

and more. We need to develop a system that stops measuring economic success by GDP and stops rating waged work above other contributions to society, allowing people time for family and friends, creating things, growing things, doing sport, sharing music, just being. In the past, most people had to work most of their days simply to survive. Capitalism has allowed us to create the means for this to be no longer necessary, but the logic of capitalist growth won't allow us to enjoy this situation. Even in our resistance to our condition, our ideas and hopes are often restricted by capitalist logic. Is full employment the extent of our ambition? What use are all those technological achievements if they can't provide everyone with a basic income so that we can chose to what extent we will top this up with extra paid work or spend time on other activities. This is not exactly a revolution, but it could be a first step to a more humane and environmentally sustainable society.

*Striving*

It disnae mean we dinnae work  
just because we'll no get paid  
As they destroy society  
through folk like us it gets remade

Poverty's nae good for health  
Destitution's purgatory  
Stress destroys relationships  
Depressed – hell yeh! – wha wouldnae be?

But, can we afford to rest?  
Withoot spare cash there's mair to do.  
We have to help each other oot -  
plus pointless tasks set by the buroo

We walk to fetch the messages  
cos we cannae pay the fare  
We toil to make a healthy meal  
even when the cupboard's bare

We try and entertain the bairns,  
wha dinnae get what others get  
Bullied cos they arnae branded  
Worried cos their world's upset

So listen up Jobcentre Plus,  
Killers of humanity,  
Dinnae you look doon on us  
We're striving for the right to be!

## *The 'Undeserving Poor'*

*Sarah Glynn*

The success of the neoliberal project depends to a large extent on propaganda. It is propaganda that has enabled neoliberalism's powerful proponents to present their ideas as natural and normal: the almost unquestioned understanding of the main political parties and the mainstream media. And central to this propaganda is the stigmatisation of the unemployed. Stigmatisation is used to justify cutting social security ('welfare reform' in government Newspeak). It enables the blame for poverty to be diverted from the government and their economic system, and directed at the poor themselves. It allows inequality to be disguised as meritocracy. It drives a wedge between the unemployed and low-paid workers making it harder for them to recognise their joint adversary. And it frightens those in employment from any challenge to authority that might put their job at risk.

### **The politicians**

So-called liberal democracies tend not to have ministries of propaganda, but with the growth of spin-doctors and genial sounding think-tanks such as Iain Duncan Smith's Centre for Social Justice, and with 24-hour news services desperate for every story PR departments send them, the propaganda industry has never been stronger. Governments like to claim they are responding to popular views, but they make sure to influence those views first. Politicians' speeches are carefully constructed, and when it comes to the unemployed and those unable to work, their message could hardly be clearer. In fact the same phrases and images are hammered home again and again in speeches by different politicians. The unemployed are presented as parasitic layabouts for whom 'a life on benefits will no longer be an option' – in the words of



David Cameron/Iain Duncan Smith.<sup>12</sup> (And both echo Bill Clinton's 1991 promise that 'Welfare should be a second chance, not a way of life'.)<sup>13</sup> During the 2010 election campaign, Cameron talked about 'people who get up at six, go to work at seven and walk past rows of houses with the curtains drawn where people choose not to work',<sup>14</sup> and two and a half years later George Osborne rallied the Conservative Conference with the rhetorical question, 'Where is the fairness, we ask, for the shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning, who looks up at the closed blinds of their next door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits?'<sup>15</sup> By that time the conflict between 'strivers' and 'skivers' had become the new catch phrase used to demonise the 'undeserving poor'. Unlike in Victorian times, when the visibly disabled might expect some sympathy, the 'undeserving' now also seems to include many who are physically unable to work.



<sup>12</sup> David Cameron, 9 November 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/8124769/Benefits-shake-up-work-shy-to-lose-benefits-for-three-years.html>, Iain Duncan Smith, 17 February 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/8329968/Benefits-life-style-no-longer-an-option-says-Iain-Duncan-Smith.html>

<sup>13</sup> Clinton, Bill (1991) 'The New Covenant: Responsibility and Rebuilding the American Community

Remarks to Students at Georgetown University', 23 October, <http://www.ibiblio.org/pub/academic/political-science/speeches/clinton.dir/c24.txt>

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Daily Express, 21 April 2010, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/170465/David-Cameron-Workshy-will-lose-benefits>

<sup>15</sup> Speech to Conservative Conference, 8 October 2012, <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/politics/2012/10/george-osbornes-speech-conservative-conference-full-text>

While the recent Prime Minister and Chancellor preferred a hectoring tone, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions from 2010 to March 2016, Iain Duncan Smith (IDS), adopted an air of paternalistic concern, backed up by the 'research' of his think tank. Only, his researchers never actually put their 'conclusions' to the test. The belief that poverty is the result of 'welfare dependency' and 'family breakdown' is hardwired into everything they do, enabling them, as Tom Slater puts it, to create a wilful 'institutional ignorance' of the structural causes of poverty that is similar to the fog that was created by the tobacco industry around the health impacts of smoking.<sup>16</sup> Duncan Smith's mind-boggling claim that 75% of people sanctioned 'all say it helped them suddenly focus and get on' didn't even come with that dubious backing, just a very smug smile.<sup>17</sup>

Continuities of approach between New Labour and the Conservatives are reflected in similar use of stigmatising language so that it can be impossible to guess where an unattributed statement originated. When Liam Byrne told the 2011 Labour Conference 'many people on the doorstep at the last election felt that too often we were for shirkers not workers' and 'we will ban a life on welfare' it sounded as though he had swallowed the Tory manifesto. When Rachel Reeves assured the Guardian before the 2015 election that 'We are not the party of people on benefits. We don't want to be seen, and we're not, the party to represent those who are out of work,' she demonstrated both her party's internalisation of neoliberalism and their acknowledgement that stigmatisation of the unemployed had become a popular mainstream view. When a party abandons principles to follow opinion polls and focus groups it too becomes a victim of propaganda. (At the time of writing there is a major battle for the soul of the Labour Party and we can only wish Jeremy Corbyn well.)

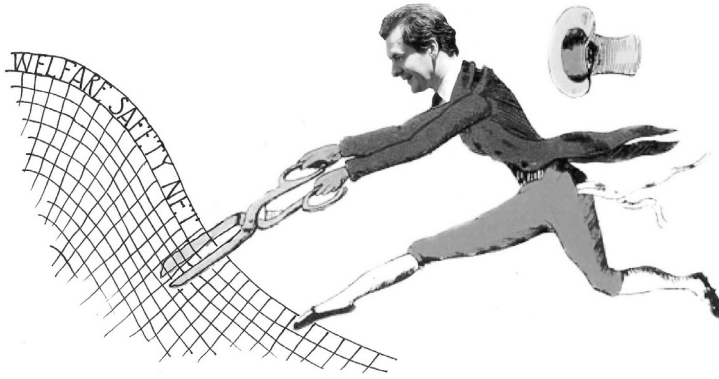
Often, the dismissal of the unemployed is implied rather than stated. The phrase 'hard-working families', with its clear exclusion of those out of work, is so popular with politicians on both sides of the Atlantic that it has its own Wikipedia entry. It has been a favourite of Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Ed Milliband as well as of the Tories.

A common form of government spin – which has only been increased by today's government-imposed austerity – is the claim that benefits are

<sup>16</sup> Slater, Tom (2014) 'The Myth of "Broken Britain": Welfare Reform and the Production of Ignorance', *Antipode* 46:4 pp948-969, [http://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/files/8655762/PDF\\_Slater2013...pdf](http://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/files/8655762/PDF_Slater2013...pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Iain Duncan Smith's discussion with a Conservative local councillor beside a protest against benefit sanctions on 10 March 2016 can be viewed on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjBZqSnkK-0&feature=youtu.be>

over generous. Not only are idle people being paid on the back of your hard work, but they are getting paid more than you are.



*With apologies to Struwwelpeter*

Politicians appeal to our sense of fair play with the argument that benefits for people who are not working should not be more than people earn in work; but rather than do something about our unliveable low wages, they use this as an excuse for cutting our already meagre benefits. When Iain Duncan Smith introduced his benefit cap in April 2013, he boasted that 'the days of outrageous claims giving people incomes far above those of working families are over'.<sup>18</sup> There was no acknowledgement that benefits had been supposed to reflect actual minimal living costs, and that the high benefits received by some families were a consequence of their greater need, due to children, disabilities, and big rent increases that go straight to private landlords. You would never guess from government rhetoric that the European Committee of Social Rights has condemned Jobseekers' Allowance as 'manifestly inadequate',<sup>19</sup> or that the UN's Economic and Social Council has rapped the UK on the knuckles over benefit cuts and the extent of benefit sanctions.<sup>20</sup> Unemployment benefits used to be increased in line with earnings or prices, whichever was higher, but since 1980 have been tied

<sup>18</sup> DWP press release, 15 April 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/benefit-cap-starts-in-london>

<sup>19</sup> European Committee of Social Rights Activity Report 2013, pp 181-2, <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680489115>

<sup>20</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 'Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland', 14 July 2016, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G16/152/41/PDF/G1615241.pdf?OpenElement>

to prices, which have risen more slowly. Average consumption and living standards have risen with earnings, but people on benefits have been left far behind. A single unemployed person only receives about 40% of a popularly agreed income level needed for a minimal acceptable standard of living.<sup>21</sup>



As well as being 'unfair', unemployment benefits are portrayed as encouraging dependency and laziness – despite the fact that studies looking at benefit systems in different European states have found no evidence to support the idea that better welfare payments lead to lower commitment to employment.<sup>22</sup>

These ideas go back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and especially to the hugely influential writings of Jeremy Bentham and Thomas Malthus. In the 1790s Bentham insisted on the importance of the principle that people should never be better off when receiving support than they could be in paid work. Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population*, first published in 1798, argued that population growth always outstrips food production and so leads to poverty, and it is only poverty that keeps the population in check: when, eventually, production increases, so does the population and the cycle repeats. By the second

<sup>21</sup> Kenway, Peter (2009) Should adult benefit for unemployment now be raised? Joseph Rowntree Foundation, pp 11-13, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/should-adult-benefit-unemployment-now-be-raised>

<sup>22</sup> TUC (2010?) Welfare Benefits – A necessity not a lifestyle choice, pp 15-16, [https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/extras/welfare\\_benefits\\_a\\_necessity\\_not\\_a\\_lifestyle\\_choice.pdf](https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/extras/welfare_benefits_a_necessity_not_a_lifestyle_choice.pdf)

edition of 1803 he had developed his ideas into a major attack on the old English Poor Law and its requirement to help the destitute. This, he claimed, wasted food on the 'idle and negligent', who would go on and have more children, and because food was limited, its price would increase for those in work, creating more poverty. Paying people in proportion to the price of corn would ensure that 'the middle classes of society would soon be blended with the poor' and eventually all would starve.<sup>23</sup> Further, poor relief had a 'pernicious tendency' to eradicate the 'spirit of independence' and diminish 'the power and the will to save'.<sup>24</sup> In a passage so stark that it was cut from later editions, he argued that if a man 'cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, [he] has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is.'<sup>25</sup>

Malthus' ideas were ahistorical in their interpretation of past developments - ignoring the impact of social and political forces. He was unwilling and unable to conceive of a future where the right to property and to charge market rates were not sacrosanct and where wealth and health would encourage people to have small families. And he could not predict modern levels of food production.

The first government policy influenced by these ideas was England's New Poor Law of 1834, which ensured that the only source of relief was through a workhouse system designed to put off all but the most desperate. The Royal Commission that preceded the law had stated that 'Every penny bestowed, that tends to render the condition of the pauper more eligible than that of the independent labourer, is a bounty on indolence and vice.'<sup>26</sup> Engels summarised the law's impact and sentiment as, 'Live you shall, but live as an awful warning to all those who might have inducements to become superfluous'.<sup>27</sup> (An even more stringent Scottish version of this law was brought in in 1845.)

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<sup>23</sup> Malthus (1800) quoted in Sen, Amartya (1981) *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford University Press) pp 176-7

<sup>24</sup> Malthus, TR, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1826) book III chapter VI, <http://www.econlib.org/library/Malthus/malPlong7.html#Bk.II,Ch.I>

<sup>25</sup> Malthus, TR, Donald Winch and Patricia Jones (1992) *Malthus: An Essay on the Principle of Population*, p 249 (Cambridge University Press). You can read the paragraph here: <http://monthlyreview.org/1998/12/01/malthus-essay-on-population-at-age-200/>

<sup>26</sup> Poor Law Commissioners' Report of 1834, II.1.8, <http://www.econlib.org/library/YPD-Books/Reports/rptPLC11.html>

<sup>27</sup> Engels, Frederick (1845) *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class/ch13.htm>



This way of thinking and the beliefs behind it have never gone away, and are currently experiencing a revival. Besides the government's insistence on 'making work pay' and the association of unemployment with personal failures (indolence and vice), there is an obsession with the idea that the unemployed should not reproduce. Added to attacks on the long-standing hate-figure of the single mother, we have seen a plethora of stories about extra-large 'benefit families', and recent cuts to in-work benefits are set to penalise families with more than two children. Adam Perkins' recent book, *The Welfare Trait*,<sup>28</sup> claims employment-resistant personality characteristics are passed through genes and bad-parenting to the next generation, and are spreading through the population due to the welfare state encouraging disproportionate breeding; though the initially enthusiastic right-wing press have had to accept that Perkins' use of statistics is worse than shoddy, and even deliberately misleading.<sup>29</sup>

In twenty-first-century Britain, the destructiveness of 'benefit culture' and 'benefit dependency' is often illustrated by the example of intergenerational worklessness, which has become a symbol of all that is wrong with our welfare system. In 2014, academic researchers in Glasgow and Middlesbrough set out to investigate Iain Duncan Smith's much quoted description of estates 'where often three generations of the same family have never worked' – a superficially more precise version of Clinton's description of welfare 'trapping generation after generation

<sup>28</sup> Perkins, Adam (2015) *The Welfare Trait*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

<sup>29</sup> Void, Johnny, 10 March 2016 'What An Embarrassment, Basic Errors Exposed In Adam Perkins' Benefits Bashing Book', <https://johnnyvoid.wordpress.com/2016/03/10/what-an-embarrassment-basic-errors-exposed-in-adam-perkins-benefits-bashing-book>

in dependency'.<sup>30</sup> They wrote:

We used every method available to try to locate families with three generations that had never worked, such as spending days surveying clients of job centres, interviewing dozens of organisations that worked in these neighbourhoods, advertising via posters, newsletters and newspaper stories through leafleting and door-knocking and spending months in these neighbourhoods talking to hundreds of residents. Despite this, we were unable to find any such families. If they exist, they can only account for a miniscule fraction of workless people.<sup>31</sup>

Any opportunity for benefit bashing is seized upon. In April 2013, George Osborne insisted on using the case of arsonist (and already-notorious benefit claimant) Mick Philpott, who had been convicted for the man-slaughter of six children, as support for government attacks on the Welfare State.<sup>32</sup>

## The Department for Work and Pensions

With Iain Duncan Smith until recently at the helm, the DWP has been criticised repeatedly for presenting statistics so as to create a deliberately misleading picture. Even the far-from-Left-wing Economist has pulled them up for 'fixing the figures'.<sup>33</sup> So, for example, when Duncan Smith claimed that the statistics showed that his benefits cap had caused eight thousand people to move into work, he was wrapped on the knuckles by the UK Statistics Authority, who pointed out that the original figures explicitly stated that they could not be interpreted in such a way.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See Clinton's press conference before the vote on the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, 31 July 1996, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6QOuoqeOFQ>

<sup>31</sup> Macdonald, Robert, and Tracy Shildrick (2014) 'Exposed: the myth of a 'culture of worklessness'', Guardian 14 December, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/14/worklessness-culture-myth-exposed>

<sup>32</sup> Watt, Nicholas, (2013) 'George Osborne insists linking Mick Philpott to welfare reform was right', Guardian, 7 April, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/07/osborne-philpott-welfare-benefits-reform>

<sup>33</sup> Economist 25 April 2013, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/blighty/2013/04/government-statistics>

<sup>34</sup> Economist 25 April 2013, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/blighty/2013/04/government-statistics>

TUC press release, 9 May 2013, <http://www.tuc.org.uk/economic-issues/rap-iain-duncan-smith-benefit-cap-figures-stats-watchdog>,

DWP press releases on awards of Employment and Support Allowance (the benefit for those unable to work) have been repeatedly misleading. In January 2011, they announced 'Majority of people found fit for work', and so not eligible for the benefit;<sup>35</sup> but the actual proportion found 'fit for work' was 39% (and many of these decisions will have been dubious, as testified by the high success rate of appeals). To reach a headline 'majority', the DWP conflated this figure with the further 39% of people who stopped their claim before the assessment, which often happens as the wait is long and conditions fluctuate. Even this was not enough for the Daily Mail.

They added on the 16% put into the 'Work Related Activity Group (for those who cannot work now but with the right help could work in the foreseeable future)' to produce the headline '400,000 "were trying it on" to get sickness benefits: 94% of incapacity claimants CAN work'.<sup>36</sup> Three months later, a similar (updated) press release produced the BBC headline 'Benefit applicants – "75% fit to work or drop claims"', and the chief political correspondent for Radio 4 described the figures as 'showing three-quarters of new claims for sickness benefit are rejected'.<sup>37</sup>

DWP press releases listing the worst excuses given by benefit cheats, though amusing, feed into the stigmatising narrative; and in August 2015 the DWP was exposed for going a step further and using fabricated stories from fake benefit claimants in its promotional leaflets for benefit sanctions.<sup>38</sup>

## The media

While these leaflets were widely derided, DWP propaganda as a whole has been a gift for the tabloid press, which thrives on right-wing populism. Different titles compete to find the most extreme example to illustrate the laziness, stupidity, greed, ingratitude, rudeness, cunning, obesity and criminality of people on benefits, and the disgrace of a welfare system that has made them that way. When the Daily Mail discovered that Jihadi John's family had spent twenty years on benefits

<sup>35</sup> DPW Press Release, 25 January 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/majority-of-people-found-fit-for-work-as-government-presses-ahead-with-reforms>

<sup>36</sup> Peev, Gerri (2011) Daily Mail, 26 January, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1350359/400-000-sickness-benefits-cheats-94-incapacity-claimants-CAN-work.html?ito=feeds-newsxml>

<sup>37</sup> Norman Smith in BBC News, 28 April 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-13217824>

<sup>38</sup> Welfare Weekly, 17 August 2015, <http://www.welfareweekly.com/exclusive-comments-used-in-official-benefit-sanctions-leaflet-were-made-up-dwp-admits/>



they must have felt they had hit the jack pot.<sup>39</sup>

Reality TV, with its persistent need to find people that an audience can laugh at, has built on and fed the popular mood with an unrelenting diet of 'poverty porn'. We are invited to pry into the intimate details of the benefit zoo, as we congratulate ourselves on not being like them. Although the format may be that of a documentary, there is no attempt at context or analysis, and the editing is guided by the need to entertain – and provide ever more shocking vignettes – rather than aiming to give a balanced and critical account.

Mainstream media are infected by what have become commonplace understandings, so that the 'need' to cut benefits is very rarely questioned. Nor, generally, is the assertion that the government's 'reforms' do indeed save public money. However, a rare critical glimpse, provided by a report on a study by the National Audit Office, showed that the universally-hated assessments designed to reduce the number of people eligible for Employment and Support Allowance actually cost more to administer than they save through cuts.<sup>40</sup> And that is before taking account of all the knock-on costs associated with leaving people in poverty. The BBC seems anxious not to upset those who hold the key to their funding, and few papers can afford much in the way of investigative journalism. Most tend, instead, to fall back on the press releases that arrive in their inbox, which are accepted at face value.<sup>41</sup> As we have seen, government propaganda becomes news.

### The academics and professionals

Despite some notable exceptions, academic writing has also tended to adopt the prevailing neoliberal mood, or at least to accept neoliberal structures as given and unchallengeable. This has been spurred on by the commercialisation of the universities and the drive to bring in funding. Commissioned research will always tend to shy away from questioning underlying assumptions, and as majority opinion moves rightwards, truly critical research becomes a poor career move. Charities

<sup>39</sup> Slack, James, Paul Bentley and Sam Marsden (2015) 'Jihadi John family's 20 years on benefits: How it's cost taxpayers up to £400k to house fanatic and his relatives in upmarket areas', Daily Mail, 3 March, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2978334/Jihadi-John-family-s-20-years-benefits-s-cost-taxpayers-400k-house-fanatic-relatives-upmarket-areas.html>

<sup>40</sup> Oliver Wright (2016) 'DWP fit-to-work assessments cost more money than they save, report reveals', Independent, 8 January, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/dwp-fit-to-work-assessments-cost-more-than-they-save-report-reveals-a6801636.html>

<sup>41</sup> Davies, Nick (2008) Flat Earth News, London: Chatto and Windus

and voluntary sector organisations have also lost potential for criticism as they have become increasingly commercialised and co-opted into the system. New rules preventing both researchers and charities in receipt of government funding from campaigning for policy change will further stifle potential dissent.

## The public

The impact of all this on public perceptions and understanding is dramatic and, to some extent, measurable. In December 2012, the TUC commissioned a YouGov survey that showed that people pictured a situation very different from the reality. It found that on average people thought that 41% of welfare spending went on unemployed benefits and 27% of the welfare budget was claimed fraudulently; the actual figures (published by the DWP) were 3% and 0.7%.<sup>42</sup>

In 2012 the Guardian reported an increase in hate attacks against the disabled, commenting that disability charities 'have little doubt that the deteriorating situation is being driven by "benefit scrounger" abuse'. Every day the charities were receiving 'a constant flow of reports – accident victims spat on and punched, wheelchair users pushed into oncoming traffic, injured army veterans told they are exaggerating their injuries'.<sup>43</sup>

The British Social Attitudes Survey, started in 1983, includes questions about welfare. Some can be criticised for being leading questions – higher welfare spending is linked to higher taxation – but changes in responses are interesting. If we look at the percentage of respondents who agreed with the proposition that if welfare were less generous people would stand on their own two feet, we see a hardening of attitudes, with the proportion rising from a low of 25% in 1993 to 53% in 2007. Following the economic crash in 2008, the proportion stopped rising but stabilised around that higher level. While attitudes were clearly influenced by changing levels of unemployment, changes of government between the Tories and New Labour don't seem to have been significant.<sup>44</sup> The measured changes in attitude are consistent with a growing acceptance of neoliberal ideas and suggest that – despite

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.tuc.org.uk/social-issues/child-poverty/welfare-and-benefits/tax-credits/support-benefit-cuts-dependent>. You can get the breakdown of welfare spending here: <http://visual.ons.gov.uk/welfare-spending/>

<sup>43</sup> Riley-Smith, Ben (2012) 'Disability hate crime: is 'benefit scrounger' abuse to blame?' Guardian 14 August

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.bsa-data.natcen.ac.uk/>

obvious hardship, as evidenced by the growth and normalisation of food-banks - continued propaganda may have been limiting an increase in sympathy.

The speed of change should act as a reminder that these 'attitudes' may not run very deep and could as easily be put into reverse; but they are used to justify government policy and feed into news production, and so create a self-reinforcing loop that backs up government thinking.

### **The administrators**

These changes in attitude extend to those who administer the system and also to many of those it is administered to. Both groups are also subject to extra layers of propaganda and to discipline if they deviate from accepted behaviours. For the Whitehall bureaucrats who work out rules that dictate whether or not a family will be able to afford to eat, the problem can be reduced to an intellectual exercise; but consigning someone to destitution when they are sitting in front of you, or speaking to you on the phone, is a different matter. Undoubtedly, there are some individuals who enjoy their power to bully, but most people employed by the DWP are just ordinary low-paid workers, so what has happened? Like many changes that should be unacceptable, 'welfare reform' has been brought in in stages, so it becomes harder to notice when a line is crossed; though most lines were crossed long ago. As an unhappy Universal Credit call-centre worker explained to me, this staged approach has meant that workers have lost the ability to be shocked. Trainers normalise the tabloid mentality and attempt to portray the system as fair: 'I foolishly exceeded my overdraft and the bank charged me £30. I had to pay because it was my fault, and it's the same when someone is sanctioned [i.e. had their benefits stopped].' Jobcentre workers are trained to regard the unemployed with suspicion. One told me how they are specifically instructed to 'challenge' claimants. He explained that although managers avoid using the term 'targets', they do have 'expectations' for such things as the number of people sanctioned or otherwise knocked off benefits. Workers who fail to meet these expectations are put through Personal Improvement Plans, the first step in the disciplinary process. Expectations are set at the levels of the most brutal jobcentre, and as no-one wants to be punished there is always pressure to sanction even more and so raise the expectation level higher. When Leith Jobcentre got a new manager in the summer of 2013, we were informed that staff were sent an email telling them to 'aspire' to more sanctions and that failure to achieve these 'aspirations'

could ultimately result in them losing their job.

The new systems are complex, and insufficient training creates errors – particularly when work is focussed on answering computer-generated questions rather than engaging with the real-life issues these obscure. Sanctioning can sometimes be quicker than sorting out problems. The call-centre worker told me that her job involved ringing people up to say they had been sanctioned, without being able to explain properly why. If claimants started to raise difficult questions some of her fellow call handlers would terminate the call and mark the caller as ‘potentially violent’. Another call-centre worker observed that people who are poorly treated themselves are likely to be less critical of the poor treatment of their ‘customers’. DWP employees are told that they are representatives of government, even outside work. A critical comment on Facebook could cost them their job.

All this is happening at a time when working conditions in the jobcentres and call-centres are themselves under attack. Staff numbers are being cut, making people fearful of losing their jobs and ensuring that those who remain have no time to be more than processing machines, focussed on numbers not people. Older workers, who remember less brutal ways and find it harder to accept the new working practices, are leaving or taking early retirement. Levels of worker stress are huge and this is bound to be off-loaded onto claimants, especially when there is little allowance for taking days off sick. And on top of this is the fear that the UK government’s ultimate plan is to privatise the system, and that any resistance to the changes will be used as an excuse to do this immediately. Contracting out has already been extended to include the booking of Universal Credit appointments, despite the need for specialist knowledge about benefit details.

Individual workers may strive to be as fair as they can within an unfair system, and some have risked their jobs by publicising what is going on, but as individuals their powers are limited. And, although DWP workers are highly unionised, even as an organised group they are kept in check by trade union legislation that outlaws industrial action that is not connected to an industrial dispute. The PCS (Public and Commercial Services Union) national conference has passed votes condemning benefit sanctions, but action is a different matter. In 2013, motions for non-co-operation and even for non-co-operation as part of any industrial action campaign were not allowed onto the conference agenda.<sup>45</sup> The

<sup>45</sup> Void, Johnny (2013) ‘PCS Leadership Refuse To Even Discuss Fighting Benefit Sanctions’, <https://johnnyvoid.wordpress.com/2013/04/23/pcs-union-leadership-refuse-to-even-discuss-fighting-benefit-sanctions>

SUWN has always argued that if a law is unjust people have the right, and in certain circumstances the duty, to break it: and that 'just doing my job' is never an excuse when that job involves destroying the lives of others. But today's trade unionists seem to have forgotten that past gains were not won by staying safely within the law. There is, though, a small source of hope – and from a most unlikely quarter. The new rules coming in with Universal Credit will see many low-waged part-time workers subject to the same discipline and sanctions as the unemployed. This will include a significant number employed by the DWP, which could open the way for an industrial dispute around the issue.

### The cannon fodder

In his 1931 novel, *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley imagined a dystopian future where people were conditioned from before birth to conform to their given social status, and critical thinking no longer existed. And in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell conceived a fear-driven world where horrors would be masked through the appropriation of once-positive language. The twenty-first-century DWP appears to have regarded both these terrible visions as a blue-print for its treatment of the unemployed – adding a healthy dollop of more modern cod psychology along the way to make it all seem more palatable.

In our neoliberal world, where the blame for being unemployed lies firmly with the individual who has 'failed' to find a job, and not with a system that fails to create jobs, the DWP and its subcontractors must be seen to make these 'failures' 'employable', and the unemployed must be conditioned to accept their personal accountability. Besides the impact of the more general propaganda, everything about an unemployed person's interaction with the DWP – from the endless tasks set and the detailed sanction regime, to the use of language such as 'Claimant Commitment' (for their contract with the jobcentre), is gauged to contribute towards that conditioning. Kitty Jones has emphasised the role played by David Cameron's Behavioural Insight Team and their discredited and simplistic understanding of human behaviour, which argues that people can be 'nudged' - through punishment and the reinforcement of approved behaviour - to modify their outlook and actions in line with the government's world view.<sup>46</sup>

Much of the responsibility for this process has been handed to the

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<sup>46</sup> <https://kittysjones.wordpress.com/2014/12/17/camersons-nudge-that-knocked-democracy-down-a-summary>

private contractors who have been running the DWP's compulsory Work Programme for the long-term unemployed, and they have taken up the task with enthusiasm. Indeed, the list of courses provided by Triage Central Ltd in Dundee could almost be mistaken for parody. There is even a section entitled 'Working Towards a New You' - which, it seems, can be accomplished in just one or two days. All those people we have spoken to who have found their attendance at Triage to be a major source of fear, stress, anxiety, loss of confidence and depression, will be pleased to discover that in just a few hours all these problems can be addressed by the very same people who helped cause them in the first place. You can also spend an hour learning 'assertiveness' – though perhaps it's as well this isn't longer as people asserting their rights too insistently in the jobcentre can find themselves back out on the street. There is a bit of practical stuff around computers and interview skills, but the rest reads like a particularly annoying self-help book, with titles such as 'How to spot a tiger and climb a mountain'. I don't know about tigers, but it's not hard to spot the psychobabble.

Lynne Friedli and Robert Stearn are looking at how the DWP is using psychology to legitimise and validate neoliberal ideas and undermine ideas of solidarity and collectiveness through practices of 'enforced self-improvement'. They have observed that, 'Working on psychological deficits becomes the full-time, unpaid labour of millions of people'. Despite the importance given to work, the goal becomes a change in personal attitude rather than the ever elusive paying job; and despite all the emphasis on positivity, the result is generally far from upbeat.<sup>47</sup> In a recent video, Friedli describes this as aiming to create 'a sort of happy clappy Lalaland workforce' of 'perfectly employable' people. 'Employability', she explains,

is a shift from what you have to do to get a job... to what you have to be. And what you have to be, increasingly, is a very narrow set of characteristics. You have to be optimistic, positive, aspirational, motivated. And what that, in effect, means is that the state, via the jobcentre and a whole range of subcontracted contractors in a whole welfare-to-work industry, are scrutinising and surveying your basic attitudes and beliefs and feelings.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Friedli, Lynne, and Robert Stearn (2015) 'Positive affect as coercive strategy: conditionality, activation and the role of psychology in UK government welfare programmes', *Medical Humanities* 41:40-47, <http://mh.bmj.com/content/41/1/40.full>

<sup>48</sup> Friedli, Lynne, speaking in *And this time it's personal: Psychocompulsion and Workfare*, Well Red Films, February 2016, <https://vimeo.com/157125824>

Take a step further and you could find yourself in the terrifying world of Adam Perkins' *The Welfare Trait*, with its chimera of an 'employment-resistant personality'. Perkins' simplistic packaging and categorising of 'personality' is even more frightening than his abuse of statistics to attack welfare – especially as 'aggressive, rule-breaking' characteristics, which are regarded negatively in welfare claimants, would be looked on positively in capitalism's elite.

With the growing acceptance of the idea of employability through personal change, widening areas of life are being brought within the DWP's punitive orbit, either directly, or through taking on DWP understandings and practices. There is pressure from the UK Government to integrate DWP 'job coaches' into a range of public and community organisations and spaces, including libraries, schools, social care settings and housing schemes.<sup>49</sup> With Big Brother everywhere, people will be reluctant to use their own community services and won't know where to turn for independent and confidential advice. Our local Dundee City Council seems determinedly complacent about the implications of this type of approach. Their website explains that they are 'working closely with a range of partners including Jobcentre Plus'; their first suggestion for anyone affected by welfare 'reform' and considering looking for work is to contact a Jobcentre advisor; and their independent 'employability' service, Discover Opportunities, hosts a jobcentre 'outreach worker' twice a week.<sup>50</sup> If they cannot see how important it is to keep services designed to advise and help separate from those set up to control and punish, then we would suggest that they try and imagine what they would think if they learnt about a similar system of state surveillance in some distant autocratic regime.

A recent article about a training scheme for unemployed people in Ardrossan, run by North Ayrshire Council, produced a flurry of online anger with its illustration of the system of fines being imposed on its impoverished trainees: 10p for tutting or having your hands in your pockets, £1 for forgetting your name badge, £5 for falling asleep or getting a call on your mobile. That this had been running for three years before it was brought to public notice demonstrates how people have come to expect to be mistreated and infantilised. These fines also suggest that the skill deemed most desirable in today's labour market might be forelock tugging. (The story appeared in the *Ardrossan Herald* on 1 April and we had to ring the paper to check it wasn't an April fool.)

<sup>49</sup> Armour, Robert (2016) 'DWP job advisers to be placed in libraries and schools', Third Force News, 9 March, <http://thirdforcenews.org.uk/tfn-news/dwp-job-advisers-to-be-placed-in-libraries-and-schools>

<sup>50</sup> [www.dundee.gov.uk/welfarereform/workandlearning](http://www.dundee.gov.uk/welfarereform/workandlearning)

Disabled people and people with mental health problems have fought long and hard for opportunities to be included in wider society. Now their campaigns have been hijacked and twisted into compulsion to take part – and not on their own terms, but on the terms of an establishment that knows best.<sup>51</sup> People and ideas from the private health insurance industry have helped create a system that dismisses all but the most intractable problems as behavioural issues, and that regards work as a panacea for everything. The claim that ‘work is generally beneficial for health’ is hammered home in the government’s guidance for GPs on how to issue the new ‘fit notes’ that, without a hint of irony, have replaced sick notes.<sup>52</sup> It would be interesting to see the DWP attempt to square their approach to the health benefits of work with recent research from Australia that showed how retired people were able to develop healthier lifestyles by using the time not spent working.<sup>53</sup>

The blurring of the line between healthcare and welfare is a frightening and growing trend. People are increasingly deemed to be responsible for their health problems and for getting back to being a full healthy member of society, and work is regarded as a health outcome. Health professionals are getting sucked into the system – at the expense of their independence, their relationship with their patients, and their professional ethics. The DWP employs ‘work psychologists’ to assist their ‘hardest-to-help customers’ with the aid of psychometric tests and motivational interviewing;<sup>54</sup> and although it is important to help people who want to work to look for ways in which problems of health and disability can be accommodated, even the most well-meaning psychologist is bound to be compromised when working as part of a system so clearly based on fear and punishment and on ensuring the maintenance of a compliant and docile workforce.

The 2015 budget announced plans for online Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for claimants of JSA and ESA, and for CBT therapists in the jobcentres to give ‘integrated employment and mental health support to claimants with common mental health conditions’.<sup>55</sup> G4S, who have

<sup>51</sup> McKenna, Denise (2016) ‘Welfare Reforms and Mental Health’, speech given to the ‘Welfare Reforms and Mental Health – Resisting Sanctions, Assessments and Psychological Coercion’ conference on Saturday 5 March 2016. <http://recoveryinthebin.org/2016/03/10/welfare-reforms-and-mental-health-resisting-sanctions-assessments-and-psychological-coercion-by-denise-mckenna-mental-health-resistance-network-mhrn>

<sup>52</sup> DWP (2015) ‘Getting the most out of the fit note: guidance for GPs’, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fit-note-guidance-for-gps>.

<sup>53</sup> Print, Kobi (2016) ‘Retirement is good for your health’, University of Sidney, <http://sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2016/03/14/retirement-is-good-for-your-health.html>

<sup>54</sup> Coates, Moira (2007) ‘My working day: Moira Coates on her life as a work psychologist for Jobcentre Plus’, *The Psychologist* 20:7 pp 436-7

<sup>55</sup> <https://kittysjones.wordpress.com/2015/03/22/the-power-of-positive-thinking-is-really-political-gaslighting>



fingers in many different areas of the privatised public services, recently advertised for Cognitive Behaviour Therapists to 'provide return-to-work advice' in jobcentres in Surrey, Sussex and Kent.<sup>56</sup> While the ubiquitous use of CBT more generally is the subject of considerable debate, and the effectiveness of this reprogramming is highly doubtful, it still has the ability to cause major distress and to distract from structural causes of poverty and lack of work. It can also to generate a barrier of distrust around psychological services.

In a related development, Islington GPs were persuaded to pilot the introduction of 'job coaches' in their surgeries<sup>57</sup> - an idea first proposed by New Labour<sup>58</sup> that could have serious impacts on the doctor patient relationship and disastrous consequences for health. (We have asked the Scottish Government to rule this practice out, but so far they have only said that 'The Scottish Government currently has no plans to run a similar pilot scheme in Scotland'...)<sup>59</sup> Even if therapies or supposedly therapeutic work advice are nominally voluntary, the atmosphere in which these are delivered, with the ever-present fear of sanctions, makes it difficult for people to exercise their right to say 'no'; and so we inch another step closer to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, and the enforced pressure to discard *crimethink* for *goodthink*.

The sick and disabled have become super skivers who are acting against their own best interests and have to be saved from themselves, including by having their benefits cut. People who have been put into the ESA Work Related Activity Group are there because they have been found currently unfit for work, but their social security payments are due to be reduced by £30 a week to 'encourage' them to look for jobs. They will find themselves increasingly in the sights of the DWP as the UK government moves towards 'genuine integration between the health and work sectors'<sup>60</sup>. (We hope that our small share of new devolved powers and the Scottish Government are both strong enough to provide some protection from this north of the border.)

While the DWP may have difficulties making people positive, their wider propaganda has succeeded in instilling a stigmatisation of the

<sup>56</sup> [http://careers.g4s.com/jobs/Cognitive-Behavioural-Therapist\\_58526/](http://careers.g4s.com/jobs/Cognitive-Behavioural-Therapist_58526/)

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.boycottworkfare.org/?p=4612>

<sup>58</sup> Rutherford, Jonathan (2007) 'New Labour, the market state, and the end of welfare' Soundings 36, Lawrence and Wishart, p 49

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Shona Robison, Cabinet Secretary for Health Wellbeing and Sport, to SUWN, 8 March 2016

<sup>60</sup> UK Government press release, 'Department for Work and Pensions' Settlement at the Spending Review, 25 November 2015, [www.gov.uk/government/news/department-for-work-and-pensions-settlement-at-the-spending-review](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/department-for-work-and-pensions-settlement-at-the-spending-review)

unemployed as a group even among people who are themselves without work. I have lost count of the number of times that people have insisted to me that they have worked hard all their lives and are now seriously looking for a job, with the implication – sometimes articulated – that this differentiated them from the other, problematic, unemployed people. This is a common observation. Tracy Shildrick and Robert MacDonald interviewed people who were ‘caught up in “the low-pay, no-pay cycle”’ in the North East of England and found that although people were struggling they drew a line between themselves and the stereotypical underserving poor.

In presenting themselves as largely unremarkable, in rejecting the label of poverty, in stressing pride in coping with hardship, research participants constructed a self-identity in contrast to a (usually) nameless mass of ‘Others’ who were believed, variously, to be work-shy, to claim benefits illegitimately and to be unable to ‘manage’ and to engage in blameworthy consumption habits.<sup>61</sup>

The acceptance of the idea that individuals are generally to blame for their own fate, even by many of those at the sharp end of government attacks, hinders people from making common cause and from looking for, and organising against, structural causes of poverty in the economic and political system.

### Sowing the seeds of its own destruction

But, despite the extent of all of this - or, more properly, because the extent of all of this has encouraged the government to pursue their ‘reforms’ even further and more blatantly - there is a growing awakening to what is happening. More and more people are acquiring personal knowledge of someone affected. More and more examples of absurd and gratuitous bureaucratic cruelty are creating outraged headlines and circulating on social media. If we were to share all the readily-available, powerful and pertinent stories on our Facebook page, people would switch off to escape the sheer volume of material. The basis for resistance is growing – and we are determined to do our own small part in giving it a boost.

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<sup>61</sup> Shildrick, Tracy and Robert MacDonald (2013) ‘Poverty talk: how people experiencing poverty deny their poverty and why they blame “the poor”’, *Sociological Review* 61:2 285-303, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-954X.12018/abstract>

***Fit's a 'Fit Note' fit fir?***

They say that work is guid fir health,  
see me, I should be superman.  
But 'facts are chiels that winna ding',  
ma strength's all vanished doon the pan.

## *Discipline and Punish*

*Sarah Glynn*

Any system of support that is not available for everyone has to include a test of eligibility. The only system that avoids this altogether (at least for the able-bodied) is a universal basic income. Support for the unemployed has been dependent on three main criteria: payment of national insurance for people who have recently been in work, a means test for those falling outside the national insurance scheme, and evidence that the recipient is looking for work and cannot be blamed for being without a job. People who are sick or disabled have to show they are unable to work. Rules for all these criteria have varied in detail and severity. The requirement to look for work can be extended to include a requirement to undertake other actions that are supposed to increase a person's chance of finding a job and discourage them from remaining dependent on the state. Failure to fulfil the basic criteria disqualifies a person from benefits, and failure to carry out the tasks is punished by temporary withdrawal of benefits - sanctions. Since 1980, and especially in the last few years, there has been an intensification of both requirements and sanctions. This has been accompanied by an overall harshening of the whole regime, including the way people are treated and spoken to, so that it becomes a form of punishment. The return to pre-war, even nineteenth-century, attitudes is consistent with the neoliberal concept that unemployment is the result of personal fault. And it makes people who are in work more likely to tolerate worsening conditions rather than risk losing their jobs.

Of course signing on was never pleasant, but with the establishment of the Welfare State there was an attempt, at least, to remove the stigma and blame. Arthur Woodburn, Secretary of State for Scotland, summed this up in his parliamentary speech in support of the 1947 National Assistance Bill:

We establish in this Bill one of the great slogans or ambitions

of the early days of our movement—the establishment of work or maintenance in this country as the moral principle governing the treatment of people who are in need. Under this Measure, those who get assistance get it without humiliation or abuse. Perhaps the greatest thing about the Bill is that it removes from the treatment of people who are hard hit in life the humiliation which accompanied a great deal of charity in the past. I think that the greatest injury done to the poor in the past was not the fact that they were deprived of food or nourishment, but that they were deprived of their self-respect.<sup>62</sup>

The first decades of the Welfare State saw a booming economy, low unemployment, and a political consensus in support of a strong system of social security – if only as a counter to the allure of communism. Even then, some unemployed people were disallowed benefit, generally as a result of giving up their job and so being deemed to have made themselves unemployed. But since the 1980s, and especially in recent years, receipt of unemployment benefits has become increasingly dependent on performing given tasks, and failure to do these, or to follow every rule to the letter, can result in a benefit sanction. Policy people call this ‘conditionality’ – an ugly word for an uglier regime. Rules have often been tightened at the same time as the chances of actually finding paid work have decreased. This forces people to accept, and remain in, badly-paid work and poor working conditions, so making it next to impossible to develop their abilities and potential. It is a system designed to perpetrate fear and lower expectations, to accustom people to their place in the UK’s low-skill low-pay economy. Although this rush-to-the-bottom offers only poor prospects for the UK’s future – as well as for the future of the families immediately affected – in the short term it can be extremely lucrative for the big employers.

## Relief Work

Basic labour schemes for the unemployed have a long history. In the Nineteenth Century they were used as the ultimate resort in times of economic downturn and unrest. Edinburgh’s Radical Road and many of the other paths between the back of Carlton Hill and Salisbury Crags were built as a job creation scheme for unemployed weavers at the time of the Napoleonic wars. Many of the weavers held radical political views, and Walter Scott, who was no friend of radical politics, had proposed

<sup>62</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1947/nov/24/national-assistance-bill>

that they be found work to prevent them turning into 'revolutionists'. A special fund was established to pay for the work.<sup>63</sup>

*The Report of the administration of the Glasgow Unemployed Relief Fund during the winter of 1878-9* noted that every winter produced a crisis, with the unemployed demanding relief forbidden to them under the 1845 Scottish Poor Law, and the city authorities forced to co-ordinate the collection and distribution of charitable donations. This was done through funding public work schemes, and it explained that,

The work consisted of stone-breaking for the roads, earthworks at the Public Parks, and scavenging in the streets, and never, in any case, yielded a return sufficient to recoup the outlay in wages; but continuance at it was generally found an effective test of the applicant's destitution and willingness to work.<sup>64</sup>

Payment was partly in the form of tickets that could be exchanged for food. The report recorded 'considerable dissatisfaction... regarding the kind and amount of their daily wages and work', which was often expressed through strikes. However the committee was determined that conditions in relief work could not be better than in the open market.<sup>65</sup> Similar schemes continued up until the Second World War.

Poorhouse inmates were also expected to work 'to the best of their ability', as calculated by the medical officer. The rules for Glasgow's Barnhill Poorhouse from 1906 show that men could be expected to break up to five hundredweight of stone a day and women wash up to sixty sheets.<sup>66</sup>

The interwar years also saw the growth of government training centres that effectively functioned as labour camps.<sup>67</sup> Ministry of Labour Instruction Centres were residential camps based in remote areas where unemployed workers would go for twelve weeks and be put to work on projects such as forest clearing or road-making. Although they were never made compulsory, people felt under pressure to go, and anyone who went but left before the end of the twelve weeks would be suspended from benefits for six weeks. Unlike in the contemporaneous

<sup>63</sup> Thanks to Neil Davidson for information about the Radical Road

<sup>64</sup> Report of the administration of the Glasgow Unemployed Relief Fund during the winter of 1878-9, p8 [available in the Mitchell Library]

<sup>65</sup> pp 34-5

<sup>66</sup> Rules and Regulations for the Management of Barnhill Poorhouse, Glasgow 1906, pp32-34 (There is a copy in the Mitchell Library)

<sup>67</sup> Hannington, Wal (1937) *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*, London: Victor Gollancz, Chapter VII 'The Slave Camps'

American New Deal, which provided work at standard rates of pay, workers were unpaid, and a large part of their benefits was deemed to go towards their board and lodging, leaving them with only a few shillings pocket money. At the end of their stay, the great majority returned to life on the dole. They had received little in the way of real training, and anyway there were no jobs to go to. Revisionist historians have attempted to dismiss detailed criticisms of the camps by the National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM) as left-wing propaganda, and present them almost as holiday camps.<sup>68</sup> No doubt, for some unemployed workers who were young and single and went over the summer months, the camps provided more adventure than their previous existence; and the food, despite many complaints, might sometimes have been better than they got at home. But this is an indictment of the general poverty and desperation of unemployment in the Thirties. Wal Hannington, the NUWM's National Organiser, recorded many instances of poor conditions in the camps, and of protests against them, but the Movement's fundamental objection was to the fact of people working without pay. They argued that this was demeaning to the worker, and would have a serious impact on wage levels more generally. This is not just a historical argument.

### The return of work schemes

The post-war settlement had heralded a new era, but the election of the Thatcher government in 1979 put this history into reverse. Industrial training schemes – which had always been inadequate – now became increasingly focussed on pushing young people into low-paid work. Hopes for long-term skill development were brushed aside to meet industry's immediate demands for cheap labour and to take people off unemployment registers that were growing expensively and dangerously long.

Many of today's young unemployed will have parents who went through – and perhaps fought against – work-for-your-benefits schemes in the 1980s. The Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) was set up by Labour in 1978 to provide training and work experience for sixteen to eighteen year olds not in work or education, who were paid a basic allowance. Initial optimism soon vanished as the chances of this leading to a real job shrank with rising unemployment. Under Thatcher, the programme expanded and the training given was minimalised. There was little

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<sup>68</sup> Walsh, Lorraine and William Keneick (1991) 'Bread, water and hard labour? New perspectives on the 1930's labour camps', *Scottish Labour History* 34, pp14-33

monitoring and a high level of accidents. Like today's schemes, YOP provided cheap labour at the expense of other workers; and it was regarded as a trick for reducing the unemployment statistics. In 1981 the Tories proposed that the scheme be made compulsory, with 'trainees' paid £15 a week (the equivalent of around £50 today). They were forced to think again after major protests, including a four thousand person lobby of parliament organised by the newly set up Youth Trade Union Rights Campaign (YTURC), which was supported by Labour and the TUC.

The Youth Training Scheme (YTS), which replaced YOP in 1983, entrenched all the earlier problems. YTS trainees were not covered by the Employment Protection Act and were given little health and safety protection; and there was very little real training. Some went through the 'training' process more than once. In 1985 the government again planned to make 'training' compulsory for all. Their plans were met with protests and school student strikes. YTURC co-ordinated the growing discontent, bringing ten thousand school students out on strike in Glasgow, and following this with a half day national school students' strike of a quarter of a million. Plans for making YTS compulsory were withdrawn. (A clip of BBC footage from the 1985 school students' strike can be seen on line – featuring the SUWN's own Tony Cox.)<sup>69</sup> Labour responded by evicting YTURC from their headquarters and by increasing attacks on the Militant-dominated Labour Party Young Socialists.<sup>70</sup> This was an inspiring victory at a time of working-class retreat, but compulsion was brought in three years later,<sup>71</sup> and today sixteen and seventeen year-olds are only eligible for unemployment benefits in exceptional circumstances.

In the Nineties the private sector was given a much greater role in the running of unemployed training schemes. Local Enterprise Companies (similar to the English Training and Enterprise Councils) operated within government rules that prioritised competition and meeting immediate demands for low-skilled labour, and penalised long-term or expensive investment in skill-development. These organisations were consciously modelled on a US precedent. The final year of John Major's Conservative government also saw a tightening of rules and requirements with the introduction of the Jobseeker's Agreement, and the imposition of

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p040qbk8>. As you can see, Tony's use of a finger to accentuate his point, which the DWP has tried to claim as threatening, is a long-ingrained habit.

<sup>70</sup> Taaffe, Peter (1995) *The Rise of Militant*, Chapter 7, <http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/militant/mil2frame.htm?ch27.htm>; Militant 3 January 1997, <http://www.militant.org.uk/Militant.html>; discussion with SUWN activist Tony Cox, who was involved in organising the strikes.

<sup>71</sup> In the 1988 Social Security Act



compulsory community-based work for the long term unemployed, for which they received only £10 on top of their benefits.<sup>72</sup>

## Learning from the United States

The United States has led the way in welfare 'reform'. They have pioneered the deliberate dismemberment of social security and the return to the idea that unemployment is the fault of the individual who is unemployed, who must be forced to take personal responsibility by acquiring a proper work ethic. Current thorough-going 'reform' programmes in the UK, which began with New Labour but built on the approaches started under the Conservatives, take inspiration from the US Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. This Act itself is the product of a long history.<sup>73</sup>

Richard Nixon's attempt at a major reforming bill was knocked back, but he started a process of local 'experimental' changes through the 1970s that were to build under successive administrations to create an unstoppable momentum and cross-party consensus. US welfare was based on a federal system, and it was undermined by a piecemeal transfer of power to individual states, which competed to demonstrate their reforming credentials, creating a dynamic of more and more radically punitive measures. Although these were presented as trials, their 'success' was pronounced rather than properly tested. In the Eighties, Reagan cut eligibility and payments, and enabled and encouraged states to develop their own reforming programmes – including Arkansas under Governor Clinton. When Clinton became president in 1993 he had made a campaign promise to 'end welfare as we know it'.<sup>74</sup> At first he was not able to do more than bring more states into the process, but by 1996 federal welfare faced its death knell in the Personal Responsibility Act. This came out of a Republican Congress dominated by Newt Gingrich. The Republicans had claimed that 'The welfare state is not fixable because the model is wrong at

<sup>72</sup> Clement, Barrie (1996) 'Workfare scheme will target dole cheats' Independent 8 November 1996, [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/workfare-scheme-will-target-dole-cheats-1351234.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/workfare-scheme-will-target-dole-cheats-1351234.html)

<sup>73</sup> The history below is taken from Peck, Jamie (1998) 'Workfare: a geopolitical etymology', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 16:133-161

<sup>74</sup> Clinton, Bill (1991) 'The New Covenant: Responsibility and Rebuilding the American Community Remarks to Students at Georgetown University', 23 October, <http://www.ibiblio.org/pub/academic/political-science/speeches/clinton.dir/c24.txt>

its very foundation.<sup>75</sup> And Gingrich had supplied party members with a list of acceptable positive words contrasted with negatives with which to label opponents: workfare and freedom, not welfare and red tape.<sup>76</sup> But by this time, key political opponents were talking the same language. Despite reservations about underfunding - which precluded any possibility for real training and proper childcare - and about lack of support for immigrant families, President Clinton signed off the Act, tying his name and his presidency to the end of federal welfare. Block grants to the states were accompanied by funding restrictions, lifetime limits on the length of time any individual could receive welfare payments, and compulsion to work for benefits.<sup>77</sup>

The Act was designed to push people – especially lone mothers – off benefits and into work, which generally meant unskilled low-paid and insecure jobs. Individual states could devise their own strategies, and the trail-blazing and punitive Wisconsin Works programme, admired by both New Labour and David Cameron,<sup>78</sup> set the benefit limit at a total of two years over the whole of a person's life and expected mothers to go to work as soon as their child reached three months. The private contractors who administered it were paid by results, with success being measured by the number of people got off the welfare roll, regardless of the fact that the vast majority remained in poverty, with many having to be helped out by overstretched voluntary organisations – and that was before the recession.<sup>79</sup> Last year Arizona laid claim to be the meanest state when it limited lifetime benefits to a total of twelve months.<sup>80</sup>

In his first public speech after becoming Prime Minister in 1997, Tony Blair announced 'this will be the welfare-to-work government',<sup>81</sup> and the new approach began to be put into effect the next year. Blair's 'New Deal' was seen as both a punishment for the 'lazy' and a deterrent to those who might be tempted by a life on benefits. New Labour brought

<sup>75</sup> Moore, S (1995) (Ed) *Restoring the Dream: A Bold New Plan by House Republicans* (Random House: New York) quoted in Peck (1998) p 149

<sup>76</sup> See Peck (1998) p 135

<sup>77</sup> For Clinton's press conference before the vote on the Act, 31 July 1996, see, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6QOuoqeOFQ>

<sup>78</sup> Blair's New Labour sent people to look at the 'reforms' in Wisconsin and invited experts from Wisconsin to Britain, see Cabezas, Ameia L, Ellen Reese and Marguerite Waller (2015) *Wages of Empire: Neoliberal Policies Repression, and Women's Poverty*, Routledge, p89; see David Cameron's Conference Speech 2007

<sup>79</sup> Pfeifer, Bryan G (2002) 'W-2 indicted: Report confirms failure of "welfare reform"', <http://nyc.indymedia.org/en/2002/01/9384.shtml>

<sup>80</sup> Associated Press Phoenix (2015) 'Arizona legislature votes to cut off welfare benefits after 12 months', *The Guardian*, 19 May, [www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/may/18/arizona-legislature-votes-cut-off-welfare-benefits-12-months](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/may/18/arizona-legislature-votes-cut-off-welfare-benefits-12-months)

<sup>81</sup> Blair, Tony, speech at the Aylesbury Estate, Southwark, 2 June 1997

in compulsory unpaid 'work experience' that generally had little impact on job prospects or relevance to real training needs. They introduced ill thought out programmes that were purported to make people more employable but often paid scant regard to individual needs and skills. They started the ramping up of benefit sanctions. They tightened up the tests for those unable to work. And they contracted out the administration of many of these policies as a source of private profit.

Under the Conservative-dominated Coalition (2010-2015), and now the Conservative Government, this regime has only got tougher. People are faced with less say over which jobs they apply for, more pointless tasks, more forced labour, stricter and harsher sanctions, more intrusive means-testing, more hurdles for the sick and disabled, further benefit cuts, and more contemptuous treatment. And the whole punitive regime is currently being extended to include a layer of people on in-work benefits.

Numerous potentially devastating rule changes, coupled with cuts and benefit freezes, demonstrate a government callousness that can only be sustained by a complete failure to empathise with anyone who is out of work or reliant on benefits. Take Universal Credit, Ian Duncan Smith's flagship benefit that is gradually replacing the main means-tested benefits, including Jobseekers' Allowance, and also replacing working tax credits.<sup>82</sup> At the time of writing, in most areas people are being signed onto the benefit if they are single jobseekers making new claims, and these people will stay on Universal Credit even if their work or family situation changes. There are also a few 'Pathfinder' areas (including Inverness) where the process started earlier and where they are now signing up people with more complicated claims. Evidence from the pathfinder areas shows increased poverty, rent arrears, administration problems, and delayed payments; but this hasn't stopped the DWP going ahead with the full roll-out.

Universal credit is paid monthly, making it harder for poor families to manage. It is paid to the household, despite concerns being raised for people in abusive relationships. It includes rent, which is no longer paid

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<sup>82</sup> Universal Credit was touted as simplifying a complicated system, but people have complicated and varied needs, especially when so many have to rely on precarious jobs and incomes, so it is proving complicated in itself. There have also, notoriously and predictably, been major problems and delays with its computer programmes. The one positive note is that, in general, people doing a bit of part time work will be able to keep more of what they earn than with Jobseeker's Allowance – but that isn't saying much, and when a couple receives Universal Credit the second earner will keep considerably less. Despite the government's professed love for entrepreneurship, the self-employed will find the system particularly burdensome.

directly to the landlord despite concerns being raised over unpaid rents leading to evictions and over potential difficulties finding landlords willing to accept tenants on benefits. It has no allowance for claimants to take time off for a holiday. For no justifiable reason, no benefit is paid at all for the first week, and payments are then made a month in arrears. This leaves a theoretical gap without support of five weeks; and the reality is even worse as inefficiencies in the system can leave people waiting a further three weeks or even more. Most need to ask for a benefit advance, which they will only receive, if at all, after an intrusive examination of their finances and spending habits, and which they will have to repay through deductions from their benefits for many weeks to come.

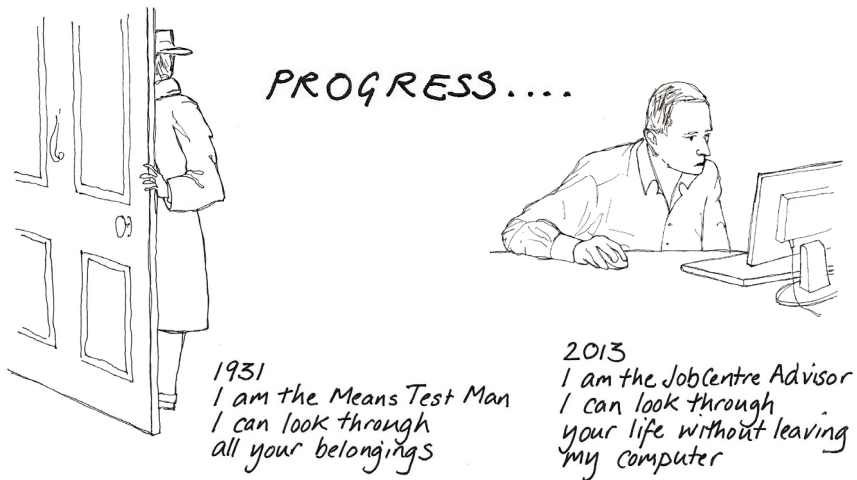
As Universal Credit increasingly replaces Tax Credits for workers on low incomes, those earning less than what they would get for a thirty-five hour week at the minimum wage are being put under pressure to find more or better paid work, and exposed to a similar regime of tasks and sanctions as people who are unemployed.

With the system premised on the idea that a person without work is responsible for their predicament, and designed to check constantly that they have not broken numerous rules for which they can be punished by loss of benefits, jobcentre interviews quickly become antagonistic; especially as jobcentre workers are under pressure to meet their manager's disciplinary expectations. With power all on one side, any unemployed person who is too insistent in pressing their case may find themselves escorted to the door by a security guard, or even the police.

### **Looking for work becomes a full time job**

People signing onto Universal Credit are expected to sign a Claimant Commitment in which they generally have to promise to carry out set numbers of job-search actions and job applications and to spend thirty-five hours a week looking for work. Many people have already signed Commitments that stipulate that they are to look for work seven days a week. Like in the much hated 'not genuinely seeking work' test that forced folk to tramp up and down the country in the 1920s, these rules have little to do with actually finding jobs, and are primarily concerned with ensuring that living on benefits is nasty and difficult. The unemployed are to be deprived of the one compensation of having no work, their own time. Of course the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) doesn't watch people thirty-five hours a week, but 'claimants'

have to give an account of their time, and people are put under huge pressure to sign onto the DWP's Universal Jobmatch website and tick the box allowing the system to keep a tab on their activities. As a way to find a job, this website has been repeatedly shown to be almost useless,<sup>83</sup> but people are not told that they don't have to sign up unless specifically directed (via a Jobseeker's Direction), and that they cannot be made to tick the box.<sup>84</sup> The situation can get even more difficult if you are expected to call personally on employers in an area with only a small number of businesses, or if your jobcentre 'coach' decides that some of the things you have done don't count, so you fall short of the number set. The law only requires you to take reasonable steps to secure the best prospects of obtaining employment, not necessarily to follow every step in your Claimant Commitment;<sup>85</sup> but by the time you have protested your benefit sanction for breaching the Commitment through an (internal to the DWP) 'Mandatory Reconsideration' and an (external) Appeal, you could already have suffered months of hardship.



Other mandatory tasks include a panoply of courses and activities that are supposed to improve 'employability'. It is rare that any of this is actually beneficial. Even courses that sound as though they should be useful, such as computer skills or CV writing, are frequently badly

<sup>83</sup> 'Government website plagued with bogus and duplicated job ads', Channel 4 News, 7 August 2014, <http://www.channel4.com/news/universal-jobmatch-bogus-misleading-ads-nao>

<sup>84</sup> DWP (2015) 'Using Universal Jobmatch v56.0 26.02.15', Chapter 3 paragraph 40. They were also not told that in 2013 someone created a computer programme that could do automatic applications. This doesn't appear to have been updated.

<sup>85</sup> <http://www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/Sanction%20Busting!%20-%20Workshop%20Notes.pdf>

run and geared to standardised situations that bear little relation to a person's actual needs. Further, the requirement to do these activities – or face sanctions – often cuts across people's ability to do things that really could be helpful. These activities can also be forced on people who don't have to apply for jobs: people in the Employment and Support Allowance Work Related Activity Group - who are deemed unfit for work at present, but fit enough to prepare for work in the future – and single parents with young children. Parents on benefits are expected to be back in the job market once their youngest child is five, and to prepare for work even earlier. For their child's first birthday they will receive a call to a Work Focussed Interview.

The running of much of this, and of the 'workfare' schemes described below, is contracted out to private companies. People who have been unemployed for a period of time have been sent to these companies for two years under the Work Programme. Measuring the impact of the Work Programme on finding a job is not really possible as there is no equivalent group of people outwith the Programme with which to compare. However, the percentages of people on the Programme who have found work have been distinctly unimpressive, especially in the first years (when it was widely claimed to be worse than useless) and for people deemed less employable or living in places with few jobs.<sup>86</sup> Improvements in the overall statistics are meaningless as they coincide with an improvement in the job market. Seven out of ten people have ended up back in the Jobcentre after completing the two-year Programme;<sup>87</sup> and Paul Morrison, Policy Advisor for the Methodist Church, told the BBC's File on 4 in January 2015, that in the Work Programme 'you are one and a half times more likely to be sanctioned than you are to get a job'.<sup>88</sup>

While there is clearly scope for real skills training, even the most carefully tailored job-finding system, which this isn't, would be limited by an economy that is not creating enough decent jobs. But that hasn't prevented governments from continuing to pour public money into this vast parasitic unemployment industry and its private bureaucracy. The main concern of these businesses is their bottom line. In order to get paid they need to tick the boxes, but payment by results can inspire

<sup>86</sup> Davies, Bill and Luke Raikes (2014) 'Alright for some? Fixing the Work Programme, locally' report for the Institute of Public Policy Research, p 30; Dar, Aliyah (2015) Work Programme: background and statistics, House of Commons briefing paper

<sup>87</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/461257/work-programme-statistics-to-june-2015.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/461257/work-programme-statistics-to-june-2015.pdf)

<sup>88</sup> 'Benefit Sanctions', File on 4, 20 January 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04yk7h6>

extra effort. In 2009 the Observer discovered that Triage Central in Dundee, who were then being paid to find work for people on health-related benefits, were offering £100 to people signing with them who had already found a job themselves.<sup>89</sup>

### Workfare - unfair!

People who have been unemployed for a period of time can be made to work for nothing on pain of losing their benefits and being left destitute. There have been various different work-for-your-benefits schemes - including schemes dressed up as 'work experience'. Until recently, four-week Mandatory Work Placements could be imposed at any time in order to 'establish the discipline and habits of working life'.<sup>90</sup> And for those who had gone through the Work Programme, there were Community Work Placements that mandated people to work unpaid for thirty hours a week for six months: a total of 782 hours, or more than two and a half times the maximum Community Payback Order given as punishment for a crime.<sup>91</sup> Although no more people are being referred to these particular schemes, there are still Community Benefit Work Placements, and Universal Credit rules give Work Programme subcontractors considerable scope to choose what activities to impose. Additionally, people can be asked to go for Work Experience. Although this is not strictly mandatory, that is not always made clear, and the climate of fear is such that people are often unwilling to risk saying no. Other placements are voluntary to start with, but can't be left early without incurring a sanction.<sup>92</sup>

Work-for-your-benefits schemes are commonly known as 'workfare'. This term, putting work at the centre, has been used to cover the whole US welfare 'reform' agenda; but in the UK it has become a convenient word to refer explicitly to all the different unpaid work schemes that both punish and exploit the unemployed. Very few provide anything at all in the way of useful experience, and the people forced to do them are often treated like skivvies, both in the work they are made to do and the

<sup>89</sup> Helm, Toby and Rajeet Syal (2009) 'Inquiry into private firm's cash lure for jobseekers', Observer 5 July, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/jul/05/inquiry-observer-incapacity-benefit-lure>

<sup>90</sup> 'Mandatory Work Activity Provider Guidance', April 2015, paragraph 1.7

<sup>91</sup> As an alternative to these placements, people could be made to come to the jobcentre every day, where they were supposed to be given help, though staff didn't generally have time to do more than record their presence. This phase of intervention was called Help to Work.

<sup>92</sup> Sector-Based Work Academy placements, which also offer a job interview (though not necessarily a job) at the end

attitudes shown to them. Like the other tasks set, workfare can prevent people from doing activities that might actually lead to new skills and jobs; and far from building their confidence, as official documents suggest, this forced labour saps the spirit and wears down people's mental health. If they deviate at all from what they are being instructed to do they can end up sanctioned and penniless. In addition, rather than increase the numbers of people in paid work, these schemes actually cut across the creation of paid jobs and undermine minimum wage legislation. Why pay someone to work when you can get the labour for nothing? And how can another business pay reasonable wages when its competitor has minimal wage costs? We are at risk of drifting into a world where the normal expectation is for people to work without pay in order to earn the right to earn a living.



Before introducing workfare to the UK, the New Labour Government commissioned a review of analyses of similar schemes in the US, Canada and Australia – and it was hardly encouraging. It concluded:

There is little evidence that workfare increases the likelihood of finding work. It can even reduce employment chances by limiting the time available for job search and by failing to provide the skills and experience valued by employers.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Crisp, Richard and Fletcher, Del Roy (2008) A comparative review of workfare programmes in the United States, Canada and Australia, DWP, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130128102031/http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep533.pdf>



That they went ahead anyway, demonstrates the ideological nature of these 'reforms'. More recently, a briefing paper for the House of Commons on the post-Work Programme Help to Work scheme, which included the six-month Community Work Placements, had a damning section entitled 'Questions over effectiveness'.<sup>94</sup>

Rules stipulate that the work is supposed to be of benefit to the community and not at the expense of paid jobs, but these seem more honoured in the breach than the observance. Exploiters of this unpaid labour range from big companies, such as Poundstretcher, B and M, and The Range, to charities and not-for-profit organisations. Like in the 1870s, many people are forced to work in today's versions of public parks and scavenging: cutting grass in the housing schemes and sorting through recycling. The image of people reduced to sorting through rubbish for subsistence is not what is usually associated with one of the world's wealthiest nations.

While most exploiters will be fully aware of the nature of the arrangement they are entering into, it is possible that some of the small voluntary organisations have been misled by DWP documents into thinking that by participating in these schemes they are actually helping unemployed people. When Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty protested to the Trussel Trust that one of their Edinburgh foodbanks was exploiting workfare labour, the Trust had to explain the situation to the foodbank concerned. On the other hand, some of the 'voluntary' organisations involved have demonstrated a shocking callousness towards their new recruits. People have told us about dirty menial work (such as sorting through old clothes or shifting furniture in a cold warehouse), disregarded safety checks for work with vulnerable adults, a lack of understanding about their health problems, and a general disdain that ensures they are treated as second class. And, in case any charity is tempted to argue that because they are treating people better it makes it acceptable for them to use forced labour, we would remind them that being kind to your slaves does not excuse slavery, and that by taking part in the programme they are effectively supporting the concept of workfare and even giving it a cloak of respectability.

It was only a matter of time before someone was told to work for nothing for the same employer that had made them redundant. This is what happened to John McArthur of Motherwell, who, in August 2014, was instructed to go on a six-month Community Work Placement with his

<sup>94</sup> Dar, Aliyah (2016) 'Help to Work: post-Work Programme provision for the long-term unemployed', House of Commons Briefing Paper, 8 January 2016,

former employer, recycling charity LAMH. He preferred to face a sanction than submit to 'a deeply unethical and immoral system' of 'slave labour', and struggled for months on his small work pension while carrying out a lone protest vigil outside the charity's gates. Public outrage, including threatening messages, forced the charity's reluctant withdrawal from the scheme.<sup>95</sup>

Workfare schemes are a major source of anger and worry for everyone who is faced with them, but they have not gone unchallenged – and challenges have elicited widespread support. Boycott Workfare (centred in London) has lead the way in the naming and shaming of companies and organisations who have exploited this forced labour, and this has persuaded many well-known names to pull out. The Government recognises the potency of this and the strength of feeling against workfare, and has refused to publish the names of organisations involved as this would expose them to protests and make the system untenable. They have just been forced to release the list of organisations exploiting the Mandatory Work Activity Scheme between 2011 and 2012, after fighting a Freedom of Information request for four and a half years.<sup>96</sup> Keep Volunteering Voluntary argue that workfare undermines the concept of volunteering and the ethics of the charities who exploit it; and they have persuaded large numbers of charities and non-profit organisations to sign up to their promise not to use forced labour.<sup>97</sup> At an individual level, activists in the SUWN and other groups have helped people to argue that proposed schemes will not help them, and to do all they can within the rules to impede the bureaucratic wheels that would deliver them to workfare placements. Turning up is mandatory, signing Work Programme paperwork is not – but without it placements can't go ahead.

This resistance has made it harder for the DWP to find workfare placements, and may have contributed to the decision to abandon the Mandatory Work Activity and Community Work Placement schemes; but we can't afford to lower our guard. There is still plenty of opportunity for people to be sent on compulsory placements or pressured into 'volunteering', and if one scheme encounters problems the DWP can

<sup>95</sup> Motherwell Times, 29 October 2014, <http://www.motherwelltimes.co.uk/news/one-man-protest-over-slave-labour-scheme-1-3587213#ixzz46frwxKS>, and 13 November 2014, <http://www.motherwelltimes.co.uk/news/motherwell-charity-cuts-ties-with-controversial-work-scheme-1-3603623#ixzz46fsKuW7Q>; Guardian, 3 November 2014, [www.theguardian.com/society/2014/nov/03/dwp-benefits-electrician-work-placement-labour?commentpage=12](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/nov/03/dwp-benefits-electrician-work-placement-labour?commentpage=12)

<sup>96</sup> Boycott Workfare, 31 July 2016, 'Another win: 4-year legal battle finally reveals workfare exploiters!', [www.boycottworkfare.org/?p=6675](http://www.boycottworkfare.org/?p=6675)

<sup>97</sup> [www.keepvolunteeringvoluntary.net](http://www.keepvolunteeringvoluntary.net)

move sideways into another. Recently we have noted a dangerous blurring of the voluntary/compulsory divide, with people being told that if they find their own 'voluntary' work they will be under less pressure to do other things: but is this really voluntary, and how will it be monitored?

### A destitution lottery

Today, for many people on benefits, getting sanctioned is not a case of 'if' but 'when' - especially if their lives are already difficult. People have found their benefits stopped for the smallest deviation from the duties specified in their increasingly onerous Claimant Commitment – and often due to errors and omissions by the DWP or their private subcontractors. These private companies can recommend that the DWP impose sanctions if the claimant doesn't do everything requested. Unlike in the workplace, there is no system of prior written warnings. The highest rates of sanctions were imposed under the Conservative-dominated coalition Government, but some of the policy changes had been brought in by the out-going Labour Government. Of the people who were on JSA during the twelve months ending June 2015, around 16% were sanctioned, and a quarter of those were sanctioned more than once, resulting in long periods of no or reduced benefit. The sanction rate – which varies hugely from area to area<sup>98</sup> – has dropped from a peak 21% in 2013-14, and the most recent monthly figures (for March 2016) show it continuing to fall. The March figures show about a quarter of JSA sanctions were challenged and three quarters of these challenges were successful (usually at the initial review stage before going as far as a formal Mandatory Reconsideration).<sup>99</sup> The decline in sanction rates may be a response to widespread public concern, though it can be argued that from the DWP's perspective it is the fear of sanctions that is important. At the same time as people are becoming more aware of their rights and of sources of help and advice, a fear of the consequences of not observing DWP demands has become entrenched.

Sanctions can last up to three whole years for a repeat offender. When someone is sanctioned they can apply for even-more-minimal Hardship Payments, at 60% of Jobseekers' Allowance. These are discretionary, and, as benefits barely cover living costs, Hardship Payments are not enough to cover basic needs. Someone on benefits will have had

<sup>98</sup> Walker, Fiona and Claire Harris (2015) 'Figures suggest Dundee-Glasgow benefit sanctions "lottery"', BBC, 26 August, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-33862498>

<sup>99</sup> The statistical releases are regularly analysed by David Webster and his briefings can be found on the CPAG website: [www.cpag.org.uk/david-webster](http://www.cpag.org.uk/david-webster). The percentages given here are for sanctions before appeal.

no chance to put anything aside for a rainy day, but no Hardship Payments are made for the first two weeks unless the claimant is classed as 'vulnerable'. Having no other means of support doesn't count: qualifications for vulnerability have been neatly defined by some distant technocrat, and include phrases such as 'the claimant or partner's health would decline more than that of a normal healthy adult'.<sup>100</sup> The regulations don't consider how someone might live for two weeks on no money, though if they were to do so they might think that the health of even a normal healthy adult could decline quite a lot in that time. In addition, claimants have often not been told that they can apply for Hardship Payments or that they can appeal the sanction decision. Indeed, some don't discover that they have been sanctioned until they find that no money has been paid into their account; and some can find payments held back while the DWP decides whether or not to impose an official sanction. There have also been problems with sanctioned claimants finding out too late that an insensitive bureaucracy had automatically triggered a stop to their housing benefit. Though this problem has largely been resolved, it has reduced some people to homelessness.

Under the Universal Credit system that is replacing Jobseeker's Allowance, Hardship Payments are treated as loans paid back by deductions from future benefits, so a person would be expected to live on reduced rates for two and a half times the length of their actual sanction. And even so, anyone receiving Hardship Payments is expected to have exhausted all other options, including forgoing all 'non-essential' expenditure, such as after school activities for their children. If someone on Universal Credit receives a further sanction before the previous one expires, it will be added on to the end. And if they are receiving Universal Credit as a top-up to low paid part time work, and so receiving less benefit because of their earnings, part of the sanction will be taken from the money that used to come from separate child tax credits and housing benefit, and they could be left without enough money to pay the rent.

In many cases, friends and relations step in to help – generally a case of the poor helping the very poor. When that is not possible, people can resort to foodbanks, which have reported an exponential growth in

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<sup>100</sup> JSA Regulations, Amendment 44 October 2105, Chapter 35 Hardship, 35070, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/470852/dmgch35.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470852/dmgch35.pdf)

demand. Or some may be forced to shoplift.<sup>101</sup> The consequences of having next to no money can be profound and long term, particularly to mental and physical health and to family relationships. In April 2016, a survey for mental health charity, Mind, found that 29% of respondents who had considered or attempted suicide gave fear of losing or the loss of welfare benefits as a contributing cause.<sup>102</sup> Sanctions can also make it very difficult to look for work effectively.

This punitive regime and the intimidating atmosphere that accompanies it make claimants refrain from questioning their Claimant Commitment, with the result that they are more likely to agree to conditions that will be hard to keep, and so are actually more likely to run foul of the system.

In late 2014, the SUWN compiled a report on sanctions consisting of ninety-one case histories collected outside the buroo in Dundee.<sup>103</sup> In a very significant number of cases the fault that had led to the sanction had been down to the authorities and not the claimant at all. Most strikingly, many people had been sanctioned for missing meetings for which they never received an appointment letter or for which the letter was sent out too late. Triage (contracted to the DWP as a Work Programme provider) appeared to be especially culpable here, but the jobcentre was also implicated. One of the claimants affected told us he had been arrested after having to resort to shop lifting. There were also instances of Triage wrongly claiming that appointments had been missed, and many examples of benefits stopped due to clear administrative errors - such as lost forms - made by the jobcentre or DWP. Another fault committed by both the jobcentre and Work Programme providers was the failure to pass on a crucial message after a claimant had made contact to explain why they couldn't make an appointment and had been assured that this would be OK. There were examples of claimants not knowing whether they had been sanctioned or not, or not knowing the reason why they had been sanctioned, or for how long; and there were numerous examples of people not being told that they could apply for Hardship Payments or that they had the right to appeal. Reasons for sanctions included the patently absurd - being unable to sign on through being at a job interview or on work experience - and also a very large number of examples that demonstrate

<sup>101</sup> In Italy a recent Supreme Court ruling stated that stealing a small amount of food in the face of an immediate and essential need for nourishment did not constitute a crime. See [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-36190557](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-36190557) (Thanks to David Webster for drawing attention to this.)

<sup>102</sup> [www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/one-in-two-people-with-mental-health-problems-have-felt-suicidal-because-of-money-housing-or-benefits-issues/#.V5YGUKLdKrp](http://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/one-in-two-people-with-mental-health-problems-have-felt-suicidal-because-of-money-housing-or-benefits-issues/#.V5YGUKLdKrp)

<sup>103</sup> [https://suwn.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/sanctioned\\_voices.pdf](https://suwn.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/sanctioned_voices.pdf)

the cruel inflexibility of the system and its failure to accommodate the restrictions and traumas of people's actual lives. These last included sanctions for missed appointments due to illness or bereavement - even a hospital stay and a father's funeral.

Requirements for carrying out job searches and applying for prospective work had failed to take account of mental or physical ill health or child care. No allowance was given for a dyslexic claimant who had to have help filling in his job-search diary, or for those without computers or computer skills who were still expected to complete on-line searches and had to rely on finding a computer and assistance in their local library. Another claimant was sanctioned for leaving a job due to bullying.

When sanctions could be attributed to a fault made by the claimant, the outcomes were out of all proportion to the error committed, even if one were to accept the logic of the sanction system. The actions expected of claimants varied hugely (and apparently arbitrarily) and could be absurdly onerous, such as applying for thirty-two jobs every fortnight. Even the smallest misdemeanour, such as mislaying the job-search diary or being a few minutes late for an appointment, was enough to deprive a person of basic subsistence. And this could set off a chain of negative consequences. One man who was sanctioned for being fifteen minutes late ended up homeless, attacked when sleeping rough, and unable to see his child.

The fear of sanctions and the dismissive and unsympathetic approach of some jobcentre staff was making people literally ill with worry; and putting some people off claiming the benefits they were due at all.

### **Miracle cures and the wheel of misfortune**

The multiple attacks on benefits for those unable to work could fill a whole book on their own. The sick, the disabled, and especially people with mental health problems, are seen as the ultimate 'skivers'. Demands from disabled people for employers to accommodate to their needs, and their success against the odds in the sports stadium, have been twisted by the current regime to suggest that work is the end to which all must aspire, and that anything is possible if people only try hard enough. The DWP insists that 'work is generally beneficial for health'.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> DWP (2015) 'Getting the most out of the fit note: guidance for GPs', <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fit-note-guidance-for-gps>

Qualification for disability benefits has been made a lot harder. The clamp-down on benefits for those unable to work began under the last Tory government. From 1995, eligibility no longer depended on whether a person's own doctor considered them unfit for their previous job, but on whether government assessors considered they could do any work at all. The present arrangement, with its tick-box style computer-based rating system, was introduced by New Labour and made even more stringent under the Conservative coalition. From the start, the government has received advice and help from US-based insurance company, Unum, who had experience in dismissing individual claims as just in the mind, and who made no secret of their ambition to sign those who no longer expected state benefits onto their private insurance scheme.<sup>105</sup> Despite public castigation in the US, where it was found to be operating illegal practices and forced to reopen hundreds of thousands of claims, Unum embedded itself firmly in the UK establishment, even sponsoring a sympathetic research centre at Cardiff University.<sup>106</sup> Their argument that many problems can be solved by changing people's attitudes has become engrained in the system, and the replacement of welfare with private insurance is the underlying logic of welfare 'reform' as a whole.

To get Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) – the current benefit for people unable to work - you generally have to complete a standard questionnaire and assessment. The assessments have been contracted out to private multinational businesses – first Atos and now Maximus. Although the assessors have some variety of medical qualification, there is no attempt to match their knowledge to the cases they are judging. Decisions often appear arbitrary, and official reports of an assessment can deviate wildly from what actually happened. People who have struggled to look clean and neat for the 'doctor' find this used as proof of their ability to manage. Casual observations and trick questions are used to demonstrate fitness: 'it takes me an hour to walk the dog to the end of the road', becomes, 'I take the dog for hour long walks'. It was always intended that more people would be found fit for work than before, and there is pressure to keep down the numbers qualifying for the benefit. The assessment centre in Glasgow is commonly known as Lourdes in recognition of the number of people who go in sick and disabled and come out told that they are well. Appealing has become a

<sup>105</sup> Foot, Paul (1995) 'Doctor on Call', *Private Eye*, 16 June 1995, reproduced here: <https://beastrabban.wordpress.com/2015/04/13/private-eye-from-1995-on-unum-and-peter-lilley-in-the-tory-government>

<sup>106</sup> Rutherford, Jonathan (2007) 'New Labour, the market state, and the end of welfare' *Soundings* 36, Lawrence and Wishart

complicated two-stage process (as for all DWP decisions), but for those who have the stamina - and help - to persevere, over half are succeeding in getting the DWP's initial decision overturned.<sup>107</sup>



*Campaigners protested that Atos was allowed to be a Commonwealth Games sponsor – the games mascot wasn't too happy either*

The system causes appalling strain on all those who have to go through it. For those who fail to get the benefit, the strain and worry can be unbearable. Campaigners have recorded a growing list of suicides, and academic researchers have shown that there is a strong association between the number of Work Capability Assessments in an area and the incidence of both mental health problems and suicide.<sup>108</sup>

At our stalls outside the jobcentre we meet a large number of people who have been found 'fit for work' but are clearly unable to cope. Even if they dispute the decision, their only opportunity to get benefits meanwhile is to go onto Jobseeker's Allowance. Many are naturally reluctant to do this as it involves agreeing that they are able to take up

<sup>107</sup> Stone, Jon (2016) 'More than half of appealed DWP 'fit to work' decisions found to be wrong at tribunal', Independent, 10 March, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/dwp-fit-to-work-esa-appeal-tribunal-a6923066.html>

<sup>108</sup> <http://blacktrianglecampaign.org/2014/10/21/uk-welfare-reform-deaths-updated-list-october-21st-2014>, Buchanan, Michael (2015) 'More suicides' in government disability test areas', BBC, 17 November, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34838539>



work at any time, which they see as dishonest. (We let people know that they can then get a doctor's note to say they are unfit for work for up to thirteen weeks, but they have to get accepted into the system first.) If they don't appeal, or the appeal fails, they may have to try again when the stress of it all has made their condition acceptably worse.

Even if you do get awarded ESA, you can be called in at any time for a reassessment. You may also be deemed able to work in the near future and put in a group that is made to do 'Work Related Activity' – so, after all the stress of the assessment to prove that you are not fit to work, you are still exposed to a regime of pointless tasks and potential sanctions. People put in this group from April 2017 will only get the same level of benefit as they would on Jobseekers Allowance or Universal Credit.

### Unity in adversity?

When George Osborne announced cuts to tax credits for low-paid workers, there was outcry that he was attacking just those hard-working families that he claimed to be fighting for, and the House of Lords helped force a U-turn.<sup>109</sup> The switch to Universal Credit is ensuring that the cuts will happen eventually. It will put some of those hard-working families under the same pressures that are currently reserved for the unemployed. In fact this is happening already, both in pilot areas such as Inverness, and when someone already on Universal Credit gets a job. Under the new system, part time workers who earn less than the equivalent of thirty-five hours on the minimum wage are expected to look for more or better paid work – providing evidence of their job-search activities and going to interviews at the Jobcentre - or face sanctions. The UK Government is playing a pioneering role in applying this approach to in-work benefits, and they have described it as 'a high priority for the DWP'. As with other areas of 'welfare reform' they are keen to make 'fundamental changes' to people's 'attitudes to work', and to further engage the 'voluntary, community and private sectors'.<sup>110</sup> With working hours in many low-paid jobs being both inflexible and

<sup>109</sup> Stewart, Heather, Nicholas Watt and Rowena Mason (2015) 'George Osborne scraps tax credit cuts in welfare U-turn' The Guardian 25 November, [www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/nov/25/george-osborne-u-turn-scrap-tax-credit-cuts-autumn-statement](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/nov/25/george-osborne-u-turn-scrap-tax-credit-cuts-autumn-statement)

<sup>110</sup> UK Government Response to the Committee on in-work progression in Universal Credit, 19 July 2016, [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmworpen/585/58504.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmworpen/585/58504.htm)

unpredictable, missed interviews and sanctions are unavoidable.<sup>111</sup>

By labelling in-work benefits 'tax credits', New Labour had cleverly preserved the division between workers and the unemployed. In their eagerness to extend their disciplinary reach, the Conservatives may have inadvertently succeeded in uniting their opposition. This is not automatic. After all the scapegoating, there is an unsurprising resentment from some people in work at being treated the same way as the unemployed;<sup>112</sup> but there is the potential for mass resistance to the new punitive 'welfare' state.

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<sup>111</sup> As demonstrated by a team of academics who are carrying out a five year study on 'Welfare Conditionality' – for preliminary findings see [www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/publications](http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/publications). In Scotland the research is led by Sharon Wright, who was interviewed in the Sunday Herald, 31 January 2016

<sup>112</sup> See link above

*IDS has gone to war*

IDS has gone to war  
'DWP, attack the poor!'  
JSA – there's sanctions mounting  
ESA – the casualties counting  
DLA – cut with his axe  
WTF – now Bedroom Tax!

## *Basic Sense: the case for a basic income*

*Jack Ferguson*

Work hard and you will be rewarded. Those who are rich have earned that status through hard work and those who are poor lack resources because they are lazy and stupid.

These are some of the central myths of modern society, used to cajole and coerce us into our place in the labour market. But, due to a convergence of social, economic and technological factors, they have never appeared more hollow.

Since the neoliberal counter-revolution - which has seen unions crushed, public spending slashed and the tax burden shifted from rich to poor - wages have stagnated. In the UK, workers in whole sectors of the economy have barely seen wages increase in thirty years. For some, such as forklift drivers and bakers, pay has actually fallen since the 1980s.<sup>113</sup> The removal of workers' means of resistance, and the safety net for those out of work, helped create this situation.

The process of wage freezing has also been driven on an international level by the opening up of China and highly populated regions of the post-colonial world to participation in the globalised economy. This means that the immense inequalities in wealth between different regions of the planet can be used to play workers against each other. On a global level, it has almost always been possible to find somebody poorer who is willing to do the same job for less. As a result, work globally has got cheaper, and employers everywhere have gained a massive upper hand.<sup>114</sup>

However, while capitalists, collectively, have held wages in check for

<sup>113</sup> Lansley, Stewart (2011) 'Britain's Livelihood Crisis' TUC Touchstone pamphlets, [www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/tuc-19639-f0.pdf](http://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/tuc-19639-f0.pdf)

<sup>114</sup> Foster, John Bellamy, McChesney, Robert W, and Jonna, R. Jamil (2011) 'The Global Reserve Army of Labour and the New Imperialism' *Monthly Review*, November 2011, <http://monthlyreview.org/2011/11/01/the-global-reserve-army-of-labor-and-the-new-imperialism>

decades now, they have also required the same people who have been refused more pay to continue to increase their consumption. Advertising and marketing have been increased to unprecedented levels, penetrating ever more spheres of popular culture and everyday life via social media and online monitoring. But where is the income to come from to finance the consumption we are all exhorted to engage in daily?

The answer up until now has been cheap credit, and the creation of debt bubbles. The growth in financial instruments, credit cards, cheap mortgages, and other incentives to get into ever more debt effectively became the paper-over-the-cracks of this inherent contradiction. But the crash of 2008 and its on-going global consequences is just the latest and most spectacular demonstration of how such a fix is unsustainable.

The result of these processes is that work that provides enough for a decent life has increasingly become a vanishing prospect. For those not born with inherent advantages of social position and privilege, it can only be reached through a heavy dose of luck combined with years of education and self-sacrifice, incurring yet more debt. Those who cannot fulfil these demands are deemed less worthy, despite the obvious facts that this is a system in which the majority are destined to fail. Our neoliberal economy requires a two-tier workforce, and, unless you are part of a well educated elite, you can expect a future of permanent low pay and insecurity.

The UK Government's 'welfare reforms' are purposely designed to create and contain second-class workers. They impose a regime of endless, meaningless, self-presentation work, through CV writing, 'training' and 'work experience' schemes, and job applications, while making people ever more dependent on labour-market discipline by pushing them into the most insecure and exploitative working arrangements, including zero-hours contracts. All of this is enforced with the threat of destitution via sanctioning of benefits, leaving people with nowhere to go but the ever burgeoning number of food banks. These policies are perverse from the point of view of human rights and social cohesion, and are transforming the social safety net into a form of discipline and surveillance. The impact reaches far beyond the unemployed, as people in work count themselves lucky, no matter how intolerable their conditions, when faced with the alternative.

Given the failures of decades of neoliberal policies in relation to work and welfare to provide a decent income to most people, many are left wondering what a welfare state fit for the 21st century would look like.

This process has only been accelerated by rapid advances in robotics, automation and artificial intelligence. These have resulted in bold forecasts of rapidly increasing technological unemployment as machines become ever more capable of taking on complex tasks once thought only possible for humans.

## A Twenty-First-Century Welfare State

The solution proposed by an increasingly broad and international coalition is an idea that runs completely counter to the means testing and disciplinary regime currently being imposed. A Universal Basic Income (UBI) is an idea with a long history.<sup>115</sup> It would provide everyone in society with a regular payment, regardless of whether they are in paid employment or not, as a right of citizenship. This is usually seen as replacing much of the current maze of different benefits, with all their individual entitlements, eliminating the need for humiliating means tests and the whole compliance regime.

This payment would not be taxed, while all earned income would be taxed at progressive rates based on the ability to pay. This means eliminating the 'poverty traps' inherent in the current benefit system, where taking on work ends up not being financially rewarded, as the withdrawal of benefits is almost as great as the income earned. (If someone on JSA gets a few hours' work, the benefit money they lose after the first £5 is equivalent to a 100% tax. Universal Credit was supposed to address this, but the rate is still 65%.) With a UBI, the basic amount each person receives is guaranteed, while income earned in addition goes to reward work that is done, and is taxed to help fund the welfare state.

Awareness has grown of successful small-scale trials of the idea that were discontinued. Notable among these was the Mincome scheme in the 1970s in the town of Dauphin in Canada. All residents who fell into the lowest income brackets were guaranteed access to an income, varied by family size and other factors. While this is still not a fully universal Basic Income, the positive effects should be hard to ignore. The project was shelved by conservative governments, and the evidence left unstudied until recently. When records of the scheme were examined, it was found that during the course of the experiment health improved in Dauphin, with fewer hospital visits, reduced need for mental health services, and, even, fewer traffic accidents; more students completed high school; and

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<sup>115</sup> [www.basicincome.org/basic-income/history](http://www.basicincome.org/basic-income/history)

numerous individuals had their lives changed, gaining the chance to work less and take part in education while still supporting a family. One couple became successful working artists after getting the opportunity to give up paid work and develop their skills. Crucially, the predicted drop-out from the labour market did not take place. Opponents feared people would have no impetus to work; but, in fact, most people only reduced their working hours slightly if at all. The only groups that did so significantly were parents with young children and young people taking part in education.<sup>116</sup>

At its most radical, this idea has been described as ‘a capitalist road to communism’,<sup>117</sup> with thinkers such as Phillipe van Parijs and André Gorz seeing a basic income as a way to give people freedom and autonomy from the alienating capitalist labour market. In this hypothetical idealised vision, if every member of society were guaranteed enough to live on, and were not dependent on work for survival, then it would be harder to get people to do many of the most difficult and unpleasant jobs. Today these are often stigmatised and poorly paid. This would have to change, they argue. Hard and unpleasant work would have to pay more to attract people to do it, creating an economic incentive to automate more work and reduce the need for human drudgery. Meanwhile, socially desirable and respected work would require people to be less highly paid in order to do it. With more freedom from paid employment, everyone would have more time for family, the community, involvement in the democratic process, environmental restoration, artistic creation, sport, and other voluntary ways of engaging with the world around them.

It is this utopian vision that has fired the imaginations of activist and academic proponents of a Basic Income across the world. They are dissatisfied with left and trade union responses to the neoliberal crisis that, in most cases, only amount to calls for state stimulus programmes to create jobs that were common in the era of Keynesian economics. There is, indeed, much socially needed work that still must be done, as demands like the Green New Deal highlight, and strong public investment remains desperately required. The necessity of public investment and regulation of work is missing perhaps from views of UBI as some kind of magic bullet.

<sup>116</sup> Jourdan, Stanislas (2013) ‘A Way to Get Healthy: Basic Income experiments in Canada’ <http://basicincome.org.uk/2013/08/health-forget-mincome-poverty>; Mallett, Whitney (2015) ‘The Town Where Everyone Got Free Money’, <http://motherboard.vice.com/read/the-mincome-experiment-dauphin>

<sup>117</sup> Van der Veen, Robert and van Parijs, Philippe (1987) ‘A Capitalist Road to Communism’, *Theory and Society* 15:635-655, [https://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ERU\\_files/PVP-cap-road.pdf](https://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ERU_files/PVP-cap-road.pdf)

But the brute facts of globalisation, not to mention the automated near future, make it clear that it is a return to a capitalist economy based on high-waged full employment that is utopian. For many supporters, a Basic Income provides a means to manage the fact of the decline of formal employment in a socially productive way that increases the scope of human freedom. They question a deeply ingrained but flawed assumption that work is always good for people, which is common on the traditional left as well as the right.

### Rise of the Robots

Universal Basic Income is not only a popular demand among activist and anti-poverty organisations, but is also discussed disproportionately by futurists and authors dedicated to examining the impact of advancing technology. Within this field, an ever growing chorus of writers is urgently warning of what they see as an imminent economic crisis of human obsolescence. Much publicity has attended the on-going efforts by various companies to automate driving, which will eliminate a huge swathe of jobs from truckers to cabbies, and will see commercial services entering the market place in the near future. But it would appear this is the tip of the iceberg, as robots become physically more dexterous and skilled at carrying out fine and difficult tasks. This is coupled with rapid advances in machine learning, meaning that traditionally untouchable middle-class jobs involving specialised knowledge, such as law or basic medical care, may soon be automated to a far greater degree. A cursory examination of the progress being made in this field demonstrates that policy makers, and society as a whole, are not prepared for the potential for economic chaos as even more huge sections of the population become economically redundant.

For those focused on this oncoming disruption, a Universal Basic Income presents one of the few ways that rapid advancements in automation could be harnessed for the benefits of all. Through the concrete redistribution of wealth, all are able to share in the dividend of reduced need for human labour. The more this process advances, the more the way most people spent their time could be freely chosen and personally meaningful, leading eventually to an explosion in the human potential of people currently trapped in dead end jobs. A Universal Basic Income therefore holds the key to transforming the technical revolutions of automation from a massive threat to our economy and society, into a welcome opportunity to transform our working lives.



## Feminism and UBI

A Universal Basic Income also speaks to long-running issues of concern for the feminist movement,<sup>118</sup> particularly in relation to how society recognises the care, domestic and reproductive work that is still done predominantly by women without any kind of remuneration. One response was the International Wages for Housework Campaign, founded in Padua, Italy, in 1972. This argued that capitalism was based on a false division of the work done in society into 'productive' waged work, dominated by men, and 'reproductive' unwaged work, generating a gender-biased division of labour,<sup>119</sup> in which 'poverty is feminised'.<sup>120</sup>

The campaign aimed less to secure a specific payment for housewives, than to expose and highlight the unfairness of the dichotomy between different kinds of work, both essential for society to survive. Yet one form of work (productive) is rewarded, whilst another (reproductive) is not.

In 1977 the UK National Women's Liberation Conference passed a demand for a basic income. Support for this emerged out of the experiences of claimants' unions and grassroots women's organisations, which were battling sexism in the benefits system: rules such as the surveillance of single women, where any sign of speaking to a man was taken as evidence of a relationship, resulting in benefits being cut.<sup>121</sup> Current 'welfare reforms' are reintroducing sexist norms to the benefits system, with the UK Government insisting on paying the new Universal Credit by household – returning to the model of one 'breadwinner'. Even worse are the cuts to tax credits for families with more than two children – except where the 'extra' children were conceived by rape. We must ask how claimants will be expected to prove this to a vindictive and disbelieving DWP bureaucracy.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>118</sup> See McLean, Caitlin and McKay, Ailsa (2015) 'Beyond Care: Expanding the Feminist Debate on Universal Basic Income' WiSE Working Paper Number 1, September 2015, [www.gcu.ac.uk/media/gcalwebv2/theuniversity/centresprojects/wise/90324WiSE\\_Briefing-Sheet.pdf](http://www.gcu.ac.uk/media/gcalwebv2/theuniversity/centresprojects/wise/90324WiSE_Briefing-Sheet.pdf). The late Professor Ailsa McKay, who founded the Women in Scotland's Economy (WiSE) research centre at Glasgow Caledonian University, was one of the leading feminist proponents of a Basic Income in Scotland.

<sup>119</sup> Tortorici, Dayna (2013) 'More Smiles? More Money' n+1, Issue 17, <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-17/reviews/more-smiles-more-money>

<sup>120</sup> Donald, Kate (2012) 'The Feminisation of Poverty and the Myth of the Welfare Queen', Open Democracy 6 March 2012, [www.opendemocracy.net/5050/kate-donald/feminisation-of-poverty-and-myth-of-welfare-queen](http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/kate-donald/feminisation-of-poverty-and-myth-of-welfare-queen)

<sup>121</sup> Yamamori, Toru (2015) 'Reclaiming the Women's Liberationist Demand for a Basic Income', [www.basicincome.org/news/2015/04/opinion-reclaiming-the-womens-liberationist-demand-for-a-citizens-income](http://www.basicincome.org/news/2015/04/opinion-reclaiming-the-womens-liberationist-demand-for-a-citizens-income)

<sup>122</sup> Alison Thewliss, SNP MP for Glasgow Central, has led a campaign against this, see [www.alisonthewliss.scot/category/rape-clause](http://www.alisonthewliss.scot/category/rape-clause)

A Universal entitlement to support for all adults would allow women (and men) greater independence to end abusive relationships and leave coercive or exploitative working situations. It would also provide much needed recognition for women's reproductive labour that society depends upon.

### How will we afford that?

Before the last UK election, the Green Party of England and Wales published detailed calculations for a Basic Income system predicated on people receiving just over existing benefit levels, with every adult of working age being paid £80 a week. Their proposals allow £50 for everyone under eighteen, £180 for pensioners, and supplements for lone parents and single pensioners. Most of the cost would be met by savings on the current costs of benefits and tax credits, by the abolition of the personal tax allowance (which allows people less than they would gain from basic income) and by savings on running costs. This would be supplemented by extending National Insurance to a flat rate 12% on all money earned and limiting tax relief on large pension contributions. Housing benefit and disabled benefits would be extra, and almost all lower-income households would be better off.<sup>123</sup>

However, as anyone who has signed on can testify, current benefit levels are certainly not adequate provision for a decent life. In a more radical implementation of the idea of UBI, one which truly sought to give everyone freedom from the coercion of the labour market threatening their ability to survive, we would wish to see a higher level of support. Surely this then would become economically unsustainable?

The simple answer to this question is that UBI should be about the redistribution of wealth. Therefore, the sources of funding for it must be taxes and revenues gathered from where wealth is currently unfairly and unsustainably concentrated. As has been well documented by a host of authors, the neoliberal period that began in the 1970s has seen fantastic gains for the super-rich, while wages and incomes for the vast majority have remained stagnant or declined – redistribution from poor to rich. The tax base has been systematically moved from taxes on wealth to those on the incomes of middle and low earners. Richard Murphy and Howard Reed have put forward a proposal for a

<sup>123</sup> Green Party of England and Wales (2015) 'Basic Income: a detailed proposal', <https://policy.greenparty.org.uk/assets/files/Policy%20files/Basic%20Income%20Consultation%20Paper.pdf>

household basic income paying the Minimum Income Standard. This is meant to reflect what people need to achieve a socially acceptable living standard, and in 2015 stood at £196 a week for a single adult. They pair this with a simplified progressive tax system that replaces income tax, national insurance and taxes on unearned income, and they would replace Council Tax with a land value tax that would more effectively tax wealth. This is just one solution, but it shows the scale of what could be possible.<sup>124</sup>

Multinational corporations exploit the wrinkles in the international state system to reap immense profits around the world without contributing anything to the societies that make this possible. Wealth almost always also translates into power, helping to ensure that neoliberal policies have become dominant in almost every state on Earth, and that elected leaders must either be rich, or have the rich's backing. Confronting this inequality, collectively on a global level, is central to the future of democracy, never mind the welfare state.

Redistribution of wealth also applies to natural resources. Although the dangers of climate change should rule out any system built around the exploitation of oil, we can still learn some basic principles from the unlikely example of Alaska. Here, a form of Universal payment has been implemented through the Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend – an annual sum paid to all Alaska residents, which varies in size but is generally between \$1000 and \$2000. While this is far from enough to live on, and therefore cannot qualify as a true UBI, what is more interesting is how this benefit is funded. The immense carbon wealth in Alaska's oilfields generates massive revenues for the state, and when its exploitation began Alaska chose to invest 25% of profits in a permanent fund to provide for future generations once the oil ran out. Investments are made from this fund, and the returns on these redistributed to all Alaskans. In this way, Alaska demonstrates how community ownership of resources can be used to redistribute wealth from a capitalist industry in what can at times be one of the most right-wing states in the US. How much more might be achieved under a socialist system?

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<sup>124</sup> Murphy, Richard and Reed, Howard (2013) 'Financing the Social State: Towards a full employment economy', Centre for Labour and Social Studies, [http://classonline.org.uk/docs/2013\\_Policy\\_Paper\\_-\\_Richard\\_Murphy\\_\\_Howard\\_Reed\\_\(Social\\_State\\_-\\_Idleness\).pdf](http://classonline.org.uk/docs/2013_Policy_Paper_-_Richard_Murphy__Howard_Reed_(Social_State_-_Idleness).pdf). This particular scheme destroys the simplicity of the personal basic income, with implications for independence within a relationship and for monitoring. The authors' suggestion that it might be combined with a job search requirement would need to be resisted.

## Different Visions and Potential Problems

Proponents of a Basic Income often note that it is an idea with support across the political spectrum. While many associate it with the left, with a pedigree going back to Thomas Paine and Martin Luther King, forms of guaranteed minimum income were also supported by Richard Nixon and Milton Friedman. In fact, it may be a policy that is reaching a tipping point in moving from thought experiment to practical reality. At the time of writing, several Dutch cities, led by Utrecht, are experimenting with an unconditional income to be paid to existing welfare claimants;<sup>125</sup> the centre-right government of Finland is preparing for an experimental trial by looking at different Basic Income models;<sup>126</sup> Switzerland has just held an unsuccessful, but consciousness raising, referendum on instituting a Basic Income, initiated via a citizen-led campaign; and in France, a parliamentary commission is being set up to look at the idea.<sup>127</sup> In the UK, Basic Income has been most associated with its long-term advocates, the Green Parties; however, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell has said that a future Labour manifest 'may well' include 'commitments to pilots, experiments, etc, to gradually introduce [universal basic income] in some way', and has compared the current state of debate to the initial reluctance around the introduction of child benefit in the 1970s.<sup>128</sup> The SNP's 2016 Spring Conference supported the idea of a Basic Income and agreed to look further at how this might be implemented in an independent Scotland.<sup>129</sup> And the 2016 TUC Congress passed a somewhat rambling composite motion that included acknowledgement of UBI.<sup>130</sup> In April, an EU-wide survey found 64% of respondents said they would vote for a Basic Income, with support

<sup>125</sup> See Sanchez Diez, Maria (2015) 'A Dutch city is giving money away to test the "basic income" theory', Quartz, 30 June, <http://qz.com/437088/utrecht-will-give-money-for-free-to-its-citizens-will-it-make-them-lazier>

<sup>126</sup> See press release from the Finnish Social Insurance Institution, Kela, 3 March 2016, [www.kela.fi/web/en/-/from-idea-to-experiment-preliminary-report-on-a-universal-basic-income-completed](http://www.kela.fi/web/en/-/from-idea-to-experiment-preliminary-report-on-a-universal-basic-income-completed)

<sup>127</sup> Teke, Nicole, (2016) 'FRANCE: the Senate gets into the swing of things', Basic Income Earth Network News, 10 June, [www.basicincome.org/news/2016/06/france-senate-commission/](http://www.basicincome.org/news/2016/06/france-senate-commission/)

<sup>128</sup> Quoted in Stone, Jon (2016) 'Labour manifesto could include universal basic income pilot, John McDonnell says', Independent 6 June

<sup>129</sup> Jamieson, David (2016) George Kerevan MP: SNP could begin laying ground for citizen's income', Commonsense, 8 June, [www.commonspace.scot/articles/8563/george-kerevan-mp-snp-could-begin-laying-ground-citizen-s-income](http://www.commonspace.scot/articles/8563/george-kerevan-mp-snp-could-begin-laying-ground-citizen-s-income)

<sup>130</sup> You can see the motion here: <http://citizensincome.org/news/the-tuc-votes-for-a-resolution-on-in-work-benefits-and-universal-basic-income/>

greatest among those already familiar with the concept.<sup>131</sup>

Nevertheless, while it appears that Universal Basic Income may be a policy on which the left could build a wide coalition across the political spectrum, not all proposed schemes are equally good. Many left-wing critics of the idea argue that if libertarian capitalists and neoliberal ideologues can support the concept, then they cannot have the same utopian goals in mind as its most radical proponents. They fear that a right right-wing government would implement a low Basic Income, with the aim of depressing wages and providing a subsidy for employers. With UBI reaching critical mass as an achievable policy, it seems likely that future political conflict over the policy will take place over whether the provided amount is actually enough to live on. In order to achieve the goals that most supporters hope for, it must do so.

Critics also fear a right-wing government would gut all other existing benefits and the welfare state as a whole, seeing a cash payment as a suitable alternative. The ability to replace an overly complex welfare system is, rightly, often touted as an advantage of UBI. It is true that, in the UK in particular, the maze of benefits is obfuscatory and confusing, leading to millions of pounds of benefits lying unclaimed by those eligible for them. However, there cannot be a single universal amount of financial support that all citizens are expected to live on, as not all people have the same needs. The most obvious example is people with disabilities, who require extra financial support in order to be able to live comfortably. If society is to implement a Basic Income at a level that is liveable, then it must do so truly universally, which means recognising differential levels of need. After the fight over the level of UBI, the next most important political question is embedding Basic Income as a *part of, and addition to*, rather than a *replacement* for the welfare state. This is where left left-wing proponents of UBI part company with neoliberals and libertarians. Universal access to free health care and education, affordable public housing for everyone that wants it, care for children and the elderly – these are non-negotiable essentials that must be guaranteed alongside a Basic Income as human rights. UBI should be paired with access to public sector employment, with the state (central and local) investing collectively in doing the work that must be done: caring for human beings, improving our infrastructure and repairing our ecosystems.

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<sup>131</sup> Jourdon, Stanislas (2016) 'Europe: 64% of People in Favour of Basic Income, Poll Finds', Basic Income Earth Network News, 22 May, [www.basicincome.org/news/2016/05/europe-eu-poll-basic-income-support](http://www.basicincome.org/news/2016/05/europe-eu-poll-basic-income-support)

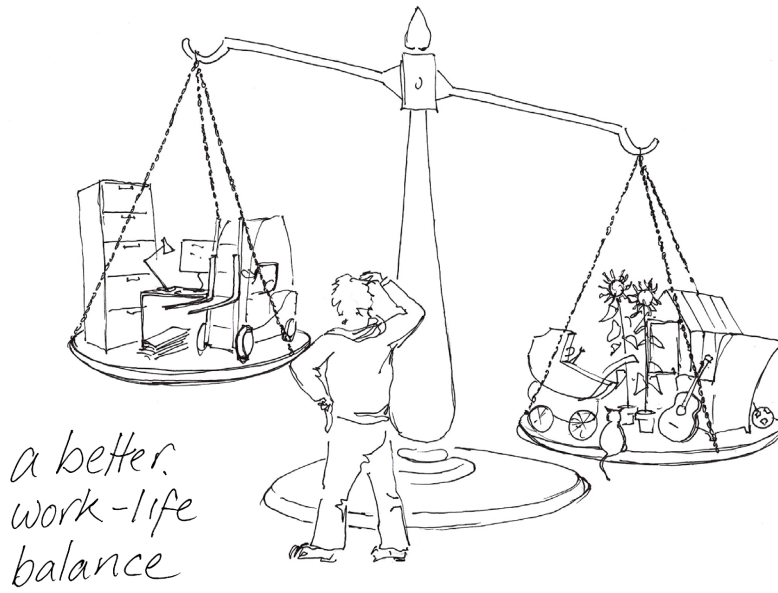
So it is clear that there are different versions of UBI, proposed by people coming from radically different first principles. The devil is in the detail of what exactly is proposed. Even a low Basic Income, that did not provide enough to live on, would be a substantial benefit to the poorest in society currently – but not if it came at the expense of cutting other public services. Nevertheless, the challenges and opportunities posed by automation are set to impact advanced economies massively, and faster than is frequently understood. In this context, UBI is suddenly on the political agenda across Europe and around the world, and is increasingly being seen as an essential response to transformations in the structure of work. Given this, the left and trade union movement internationally would do well to learn from the example set by their counterparts in Finland. There, both the Social Democrat party and the major trade union federation had traditionally been long-standing opponents of UBI, holding fast to the ideal of well-paid employment for all. However, in light of the advance of the concept politically in Finland, the leaders of both organisations have signalled a shift. Recognising the inevitability of the implementation of UBI, they saw the need for their voices to be represented in the debate, to attempt to ensure the scheme actually put in place is as genuinely liberatory as possible.<sup>132</sup>

Those who seek to defend the welfare state everywhere should follow this example. In the face of austerity implemented via divisive and discriminatory welfare policies such as the Bedroom Tax and sanctions, we respond by cutting out the whole logic of the ‘deserving’ versus ‘undeserving’ poor. The right to a basic subsistence is a human right. By recognising that, we have the potential to eliminate poverty, reduce exploitative and unhealthy work, and address fundamental social and economic inequalities in society. But most excitingly of all, we could unleash an explosion in human potential, especially when coupled with rapid advances in technology, taking us closer than ever to Karl Marx’s vision of the ideal life under communism:

... where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he [or she] wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.<sup>133</sup>

<sup>132</sup> Jourdan, Stanislas (2015) ‘FINLAND: Social Democrat and Union leaders change mind about Basic Income’, [www.basicincome.org/news/2015/07/finnish-leaders-change-minds-basic-income](http://www.basicincome.org/news/2015/07/finnish-leaders-change-minds-basic-income)

<sup>133</sup> Marx, Karl (1845) *The German Ideology*, [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology)



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Plus fear, forced labour, and sobs.  
We're looking for work, but not  
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## Skint and Angry: rants from the world of unemployment

Sean Cudden

*These pieces were originally posted on <https://skintandangry.wordpress.com>*

**10 July 2012**

### **WORK PROGRAMME, WHAT DO YOU DO?**

The following is not verbatim but it is based on real conversations I have had with Work Programme Advisors.

**WP:** Hello, it's really nice to meet you. We're really looking forward to getting you into sustainable work.

**Me:** That's great. What happens now?

**WP:** You go off and look for work.

**Me:** And what do you do?

**WP:** We wait for you to find work.

**Me:** Eh... OK.

\* \* \*

**WP:** Did you look for work?

**Me:** Yes.

**WP:** Did you find anything?

**Me:** I've got an interview.

**WP:** Brilliant! We're so happy for you.

\* \* \*

**WP:** How did the interview go?

**Me:** It went well. But I need a Disclosure which I can't afford to pay for.

**WP:** Can't is a negative. We don't do negatives.

**Me:** We don't do negatives is a negative.

**WP:** H'mmm we might have to think about how we can make your attitude more positive.

**Me:** I'll look forward to that. What about this Disclosure check? Can the Work Programme pay for it?

**WP:** Yes we can. All you have to do is get an offer of work and we'll pay for your Disclosure.

**Me:** But they said I have to have a Disclosure before they will offer me the job.

**WP:** Don't worry we'll pay for it when you've got the job.

**Me:** But they won't give me the job without a Disclosure.

**WP:** That's OK, just explain to them that you'll get one when you've got the job.

**Me:** So I should embarrass myself in front of a potential employer by telling them I'm long-term unemployed and can't afford the Disclosure check that they say I need, but that the Work Programme will eventually pay for one if they exempt me from the criteria they're applying to all the other applicants?

**WP:** That's it. Much more positive. Now you're getting it.

**Me:** Could you remind me what it is the Work Programme gets paid for?



**5 November 2012**

### **IAIN DUNCAN SMITH FOR BEGINNERS**

Iain Duncan Smith (IDS) was born in Edinburgh in 1954, the son of a WWII airforce group captain and a ballerina. Aged 14, young master Duncan Smith went to HMS Conway, a naval school, after which he did exactly what you'd expect someone with a naval education to do – he joined the army. Maybe he suffered from seasickness. Having attended the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst he became a lieutenant in the Scots Guards. During his six years in the army he served in Northern Ireland and Rhodesia. He did not excel as a soldier or rise through the ranks.

His military connections didn't end when he left the army. He went on to work for GEC Marconi and Jane's Information Group, which are both part of the defence industry. In this period he was also educated in Italy and went to the Dunchurch College of Management.

In 1992, after 11 years in the Conservative Party, he was elected as MP for Chingford. Since 1997 he has represented Chingford and Woodford Green. Nine years after becoming an MP he became leader of the Conservative Party. This was an inglorious period in the history of the party and in the life of IDS. He never really settled into the role and almost from the start he had to deal with constant internal opposition, meanwhile the rest of the country barely noticed him. Until, that is, he made his disastrous 'Quiet Man' speech at party conference and became the butt of jokes.

It got worse for Iain Duncan Smith. He was questioned on the veracity of his CV. It was pointed out that his attendance at the impressively named Dunchurch College of Management amounted to a few weekend classes at GEC's staff college. As for his time in Italy, IDS claimed he had a degree from the University of Perugia, but it turned out that he had actually attended the Università per Stranieri which did not give degrees at the time.

If all that wasn't enough, IDS then had to face a final blow delivered by his own wife – Betsy. Betsy Duncan Smith (BDS) was employed as her husband's Diary Secretary. Michael Crick, of BBC's *Newsnight*, alleged that her pay 'was not commensurate with the duties she performed' between September 2001 and December 2002. When asked if BDS earned her money, Rikki Radford, Iain Duncan Smith's constituency agent at the time, said 'I know for sure she doesn't... she's his wife and she gets on with looking after the kids' (*Telegraph* Oct 13, 2003). Many others, including six Tory MPs, said they had seen no evidence of BDS earning her way.

The House of Commons Standards Committee investigated, and although they found that roles in Mr Duncan Smith's office were vague, no rules had been broken. Personally, I've never done a job where no one knew if I was there or not or if I had done any work or not, but let's give Betsy the benefit of the doubt, she is married to a quiet man after all so perhaps she is a quiet woman, so quiet no one in the office noticed her. Regardless of the findings of the Standards Committee, IDS was finished as Tory leader, the Good Ship IDS had foundered on the rocks of Betsygate Island, and he resigned in 2003 after a vote of no confidence. He went off to lick his wounds.

But IDS wasn't gone for good. He founded a think tank, as many people do when they've just lost a job, the ironically named Centre for Social Justice. He also took

the time to write a novel (is there no end to the man's talents?) of which one critic said 'Really, it's terrible... Terrible, terrible, terrible.'

Giving up a potentially great career as a novelist, he concentrated his efforts on social justice. This led to him being made Chair of the Tory Party's Social Justice Policy Group in 2005 – the Tories love a good euphemism. IDS had found a way back in and the issue of welfare reform was the key. David Cameron's 'victory' in the 2010 election heralded the return of the quiet man. Who better to tell the Tories about welfare than the privately educated son of a ballerina who went to school on a boat, lied about his degree, and paid his wife from the public purse for work she may or may not have done (but probably didn't)? IDS had gone off into the political wilderness a semi-disgraced former party leader with a relationship to the truth which was questionable at best, and he had returned the self-proclaimed world expert on the benefit system, poverty, social justice and everything in between. It was one of the greatest political rebirths of recent times.

Now IDS is the Generalissimo of the DWP. He has taken the idea of the carrot and stick approach and radically rethought it, coming up with the stick and stick approach.

IDS has said he is against a something for nothing attitude and people sitting at home all day with the curtains closed; presumably when his wife was being paid to sit at home all day watching Jeremy Kyle she did it with the curtains open. The curtains, it should be pointed out, in a £2 million Tudor farmhouse in Buckinghamshire that he doesn't pay any rent for because it's owned by his rich father-in-law, the 5th Baron Cottesloe.

Where next for IDS? If politics doesn't work out for him he could always write another novel – well, perhaps not.

**8 July 2013**

### **CADOGAN STREET**

The first thing you notice when you walk into Cadogan Street are the groups of people milling around and gathering at certain doors. Different groups at different doors at different times – none look particularly happy.

Cadogan Street is home to the offices of Atos in Glasgow. [IT multinational, Atos, was then contracted to run the assessments that determine whether people receive ESA, the benefit for those unable to work.] About its door you see dejected, fearful and downtrodden people, some having a cigarette to calm their nerves before going in, some lighting up with shaking hands on the way out. Some are worried that a person with no medical experience, or perhaps a nurse under pressure to meet quotas, is about to tell them that their ailment is

imaginary or even a lie, and that either way it shouldn't stop them working so their benefits are being taken away from them. What's that you say Mr Smith? Oh I see. Yes that's a shame, but many, many people in wheelchairs who suffer from severe depression, insomnia and terminal cancer work. So don't worry about losing your benefits, you don't really need them. Have you ever thought of being a taxi driver? They work sitting down, and a night shift would fit in well with your insomnia. Besides, even if you can't find work you won't have to worry about it for long thanks to the cancer.



Protest opposite the Atos assessment centre in Cadogan Street, 19 February 2014. The centre is now run by another private company, Maximus

A connected group, including some of the same people, can be seen in Cadogan Street in the early afternoon of the last Friday of every month. Glasgow Against Atos protests against cuts to benefits for disabled people and against an assessment system that has been designed to take money away from people - and that neither properly assesses their ability to work nor truly helps them identify the support they need to get back into work.

Across the road from Atos, you might see groups of predominantly young people milling about. These are door to door charity collectors preparing for a shift where they will hear the word 'no' repeatedly, have doors slammed in their faces, and generally have their youthful perkiness knocked out of them. The charities they collect for include some who have had government grants cut just when individuals are less able to give.

Around 9pm, just next door to Atos, another group gathers - homeless people in grateful receipt of food from a soup kitchen. The dozens of desperate, hungry

people who meet there receive food parcels, compassion, and a true taste of the Big Society<sup>134</sup> – no home, no income, no hope, but a hand out of food.

Sometimes a bus is parked in Cadogan Street late at night. It's a drop in centre for sex workers who work in the surrounding area. Like many who use its services, the singing prostitute - who actually sings the words 'looking for business?' - is bleary eyed and walks with faltering steps.

All of this goes on in a street full of the offices of a variety of companies that service the very same financial sector that caused the economic crisis: a crisis that has given the preachers of austerity the opportunity they were praying for. Perpetrators and victims share this street. When government ministers and other apologists for the cuts want to defend their position on the need for austerity, they might want to take a walk down Cadogan Street first and see what it looks like in the flesh.

### **16 August 2013**

#### **SIGNING OFF JSA**

A while back I signed off Jobseeker's Allowance again, but it's not as easy a process as some might expect. It has always surprised me that it's not easier, but this time round was really an extraordinary experience.

First I checked my signing book for a phone number. There is a box on the front of the book under the words 'If you need to tell us that your circumstances have changed, please call us on this phone number'. The box was, of course, empty. Memories of previous occasions when I'd signed off came flooding back. For some reason no one ever bothers to put a number in that box. I found a number on the back of the book as far from the box as possible. When I phoned it I had to listen to some dreadful music for a while. Eventually someone answered. This is a truncated version of what happened next –

**Jobseekers Direct (JD):** You're through to Jobseekers Direct, how can I help you?

**Me:** I want to end my JSA claim.

**JD:** This is Jobseekers Direct, how can I help you?

**Me:** Eh I want to end my claim for JSA.

**JD:** Which Jobcentre do you sign on at?

**Me:** It's...

**JD:** Can you tell me which Jobcentre you sign on at?

**Me:** Yes it's... in Glasgow.

**JD:** OK I'll put you through.

**Me:** Thanks.

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<sup>134</sup> The Big Society, trumpeted by the Conservatives after the 2010 General Election, was supposed to replace the weakened Welfare State with a US-style dependence on local voluntary organisations, hijacking the idea of social solidarity.

Telephone rings... and rings... keeps on ringing... rings some more. Telephone is answered.

**JD2:** You're through to Jobseekers Direct, how can I help you?

**Me:** What?!

**JD2:** You're through to Jobseekers Direct, how can I help you?

**Me:** I want to stop my JSA claim.

**JD2:** Which Jobcentre do you sign on at?

**Me:** It's...

**JD2:** That's in Glasgow right? I'm putting you through.

Telephone rings... and rings... rings... rings a bit more. Telephone is answered.

**JD3:** This is Jobseekers Direct, how can I help you?

**Me:** Seriously?

**JD3:** How can I help you?

**Me:** I'm trying to sign off and end my JSA claim.

**JD3:** And which Jobcentre do you sign on at?

**Me:** It's...

**JD3:** Could you repeat that please?

**Me:** I already have. It's...

**JD3:** I'll put you straight through.

Telephone rings... continues to ring... more ringing... and a bit more. Telephone is answered.

**JD4:** This is Jobseekers Direct, how can I help you?

**Me:** (under my breath) F... sake!

**JD4:** Hello? This is Jobseekers Direct, how can I help you?

**Me:** I'm just trying to end my JSA claim.

**JD4:** Which Jobcentre do you use to sign on?

**Me:** It's...

**JD4:** Putting you through now.

Telephone rings... rings a bit more. Telephone is answered.

**JC:** Hello this is... Jobcentre. I'm... how can I help you?

**Me:** (under my breath) Thank F...!

**JC:** How can I help?

**Me:** I'm trying to sign off and end my claim for JSA.

**JC:** OK, this isn't actually the right office for that. We don't deal with that here.

**Me:** !

**JC:** I'll give you the number. Do you have a pen?

**Me:** Can't you just put me through?

**JC:** No, sorry. Do you have a pen?

**Me:** Yes.

JC gives me the number. I note it down and call it. Telephone rings... and rings until an automated response tells me – 'We are taking a high volume of calls right now and all of our operators are busy please try again at another time. For "call back" press 5.' I press 5 and a different automated voice says "call back" doesn't

work on this type of call.' I put the phone down calmly, take a deep breath, and then unleash a string of swear words, shouts and threats at the phone, at the wall, at the heavens, and at everything, so angrily, loud and long that I forget to breathe for a while. I get dizzy and have to go and sit down well away from the phone and put it out of my mind until I've recovered. After a while I get up and try again and get the same automated messages, once, twice, three times, four times, five times, take another break, try again, and again, and finally a person answers. It takes the very helpful call handler about five minutes to end my JSA claim.

I'm now convinced that a dead rabbit lying at the side of the road being consumed by maggots could design a more user friendly system than Jobseekers Direct and Jobcentre Plus. Of course the system is in general designed to be difficult to put people off claiming benefits or to confuse them so much they don't know which benefits they are entitled to, but you'd think they'd at least make it easy to sign off. They actually make it difficult for you to stop them giving you money!

*17 September 2013*

### **BENEFIT FRAUD: THE NIGHTMARE RETURNS**

It's that time of the year again. No wait! It's that time of the week again when all of society's problems are set aside because of the menace of – BENEFIT FRAUD Dum! Dum! Dum! The sky darkens, the wind picks up, a crow croaks in the distance and the dead stir in their graves.

So what's the moral panic about this time? Well Keir Starmer, Director of Public Prosecutions in England and Wales, has announced that benefit fraud, sorry – BENEFIT FRAUD Dum! Dum! Dum! the sky darkens, the wind picks up, a crow croaks in the distance and the dead stir in their graves (I'll just write BF from now on), can now be tried in crown courts. He has decided to take a 'tough stance' and class BF alongside money laundering and bank fraud because 'Getting one over on the system is not a victimless crime' (bbc.co.uk). This is a move 'warmly welcomed' by the Prime Minister. Let's hope he, one day soon, warmly welcomes a 'tough stance' on millionaires and billionaires who don't pay their tax – and cost the UK £95 billion, compared to £2 billion from benefit fraud.

This latest move means that in England and Wales people convicted of bene... oops! BF, could be sentenced to up to 10 years in jail. In the past the maximum sentence was seven years and anything under £20,000 carried a maximum six month sentence or twelve months for multiple offences. Now the £20,000 threshold has been removed. Owen Jones has pointed out that the new rules mean that someone who had defrauded the benefit system of £10 could, in theory, end up doing more time than some murderers or rapists. As his interviewer on the BBC pointed out that is hardly likely to happen, but then as we



all know, except perhaps that BBC interviewer, not all judges have a firm grip on reality, which is why there are sentencing rules and guidelines in the first place. For example, think about the woman who was given a pair of shorts looted in the 2011 riots and was sentenced to five months in prison.

But of course the sentencing of people guilty of BF is a side issue. It's not the point and they aren't the real targets. No, the real targets aren't fraudsters: the real targets are all benefit claimants. Consider the release by the government of a bizarre list of fraudulent claims for benefits, or stories in the press (ever eager to help the government in this project) about claims for £100,000s from drug dealing layabouts who have never worked a day in their lives.

These stories are anomalous. They actually represent a few extreme cases where people who are often involved in other, frequently far more serious, crimes are also thieving from the benefits system. But that's not the impression given. No, you're not supposed to think that criminals are targeting the benefit system, you're supposed to think they're all at it. The idea is to make the term 'benefit claimant' interchangeable with 'criminal'. The sad truth is, it's a battle they seem to be winning. A recent poll found respondents believed that around 27% of benefit claims were fraudulent when the real figure is just over ½ of 1%. In 2011 Richard Hawkes, the then Chief Executive of the charity Scope, warned that, "The government really has to stop over-simplifying the debate on welfare and using unusual fraud cases to support changes [to the benefit system] which could have a serious and negative impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of disabled people.' He was right - but of course that was the government's plan.

How do you attack the unemployed during a recession, cut their money and force them to work for nothing on workfare schemes (undermining the position of those in paid employment at the same time)? How do you force disabled, even dying, people to go through humiliating capability assessments? How do you introduce a policy as blatantly anti-working class as the Bedroom Tax, and all without popular outrage? By making sure that the rest of the population (and sadly even some individuals who are actually on benefits) have no sympathy for those being attacked. One way of doing that is to create a narrative in which the unemployed are work shy, the disabled are putting it on, people in social housing are taking the rest of us for a ride, and - perhaps most importantly - by linking all benefit claimants with criminality. Oh! And of course if you want to deflect attention away from your rich mates pilfering billions from the treasury, BF makes a great distraction.

The worst thing about the benefit fraud - BENEFIT FRAUD Dum! Dum! Dum! the sky darkens, the wind picks up, a crow croaks in the distance and the dead stir in their graves (oops!) - the worst thing about the BF narrative is that in

percentage terms BF has actually decreased. It was 0.8% of the benefits bill in 2010/11, now it's 0.7%. How do I know this? Because I looked at the government's own figures as published by the Office for National Statistics. Perhaps one day the government will read their own reports and the media will give some thought to how their sensationalising of serious issues like this can have dire consequences for people. In the meantime please remember BF is rare, so please don't have nightmares and do sleep well.

**23 April 2014**

### **CAMERON'S CHRISTIANITY**

There has been a lot of talk recently about the Christian values of David Cameron and the Conservative Party. I don't think a Prime Minister should 'do God', but if he's going to latch onto a religion to try to shore up his core support he should at least make sure he knows what the values of that religion are.

Perhaps he could start his own – Cameronity or Big Societyism. He could even start with some rules or, what could we call them? Commandments! Yes, he could have some commandments. He could have quite a few of them, a hundred maybe... no that's too many... four? Not enough. Ten? Yes, ten commandments. They'd guide his actions and those of his followers. Maybe they'd read a bit like this –

1 – I am Dave your PM, who brought you out of the recession I plunged you back into as soon as I entered office, out of dependency on the welfare state (and into the workhouse if I'm in office long enough). You shall have no other PMs before me.

2 – I, the PM, am a jealous PM, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me (or those who just happen to be poor or didn't go to Eton), but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My Commandments (by voting Tory and dodging their tax).

3 – You shall not take the PM's name in vain. The PM will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain – unless you're rich in which case you can do what you like such as taking names in vain, tax avoidance, shredding evidence, whatever takes your fancy.

4 – Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour (but not the chaps I know, they don't do work), but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the PM. In it you shall do no work, unless you're low paid in which case you'd better just work whenever you're awake: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant (what do you mean you don't have servants? Who dresses you in the morning?), nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates (presuming you haven't been made homeless by the bedroom tax, who better not be claiming housing benefit while

staying with you - the stranger not the cattle, although many people in the Tory party think of you lot as cattle anyway). For in six days the PM made pronouncements on the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them and how important it is to preserve them by fracking, and rested on the seventh day, but of course if you happen to be unemployed you'd better keep looking for work on the seventh day or I'll take your dole money off you.

5 – Honour and brown nose your boss that your days may be long in work because heaven help you if you end up signing on. No one in my party knows much about it but IDS tells me it's shocking – well it better be, giving the unemployed a hard time is what I pay him for.

6 – You shall not murder unless you're a cop on a demonstration or a company we've contracted to take benefit payments off people.

7 – You shall not commit adultery unless it's with a young party researcher.

8 – You shall not steal unless you're a pay day loan company or the DWP or a billionaire who isn't keen on paying tax. Oh and those nice chaps at Amazon can get away with it too.

9 – You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour unless he's disabled and you are an Atos 'doctor', in which case go for it, be creative and have fun.

10 – You shall not covet your neighbour's house - well actually you should because coveting is what drives capitalism; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife unless she's pretty and her father is an Earl, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbour's – again it is OK to covet as long as you've got the cash to follow through – if not get yourself down to cash converters or call a pay day loan company.

**18 August 2014**

### **A TEST OF MY SANITY WITH UNIVERSAL JOBMATCH**

I've just spent two hours trying to log in to Universal Jobmatch (UJM). Two hours! I recently became unemployed again and when I tried to use my old account it wouldn't let me, so I reregistered. It sent me a user ID and password which I used to get into the site – so far so good. I realised I'd have to upload a new CV so I had a look at the old ones I had on my laptop and decided I needed to do a bit of work updating them. By the time I had done that my session on UJM had timed out. That was when the fun started. When I logged in using the same details I had used before it told me my 'details could not be confirmed.' I naturally assumed I'd miss-keyed and tried again, only to get the same message. I went back to the emails I'd been sent and copied and pasted my user ID and password directly from them – no joy. It still wouldn't recognise them as being valid.

So I tried another password reset. Then I tried the new password and yes, you've guessed it, it didn't work. I got the same message again and again and again. I decided to try yet another password reset and clicked on 'Forgotten your password?' Which, by the way I resent the wording of. I hadn't forgotten my password. By this time I had two passwords written on a post-it, written in a word document, and in emails UJM had sent me. Far from forgetting my password I'll be having nightmares about it for weeks now. But I pressed the thing anyway.

What happened next? Did it reset my password? Did it send me a new email? No it took me back to the page I'd started with.

By this point I felt like screaming. OK that's a lie, I didn't feel like screaming I was screaming. And then an epiphany. 'Wait!' I thought. 'How stupid. The answer has been staring me in the face the whole time. I'll just click the "help" button.' And that was that. Problem solved. Issue fixed. I could get on with uploading my CV and looking for work. Well... no, not exactly. When I pressed the 'help' button all that happened was a blank screen appeared. I tried again. No success. I put my ID and password in again as if the passage of time would make them more useful – it had not.

Finally I found a section where you can make a comment or report an issue. There is a drop down menu listing frequent problems. Top of the list? Login problems.

It's hard to believe UJM has cost something in the region of £20 million (the exact figure seems to be a state secret). For all its problems, let's not forget this site has won at least one award – the Wooden Nora from the National Online Recruitment Awards for the worst recruitment website. Based on the evidence of my own experience I'm not surprised. I'm only grateful the contract expires in 2016 and doesn't look like being renewed. In the meantime I have to wait one working day for my issue to be looked at.

### **6 January 2015**

#### **POVERTY PORN: HARMLESS TITILLATION OR CLASS WAR**

From the BBC's *The Scheme* to Channel 4's *Benefits Street* an entire genre of television programme has developed in recent years focusing on the lives of benefit claimants. Most people on benefits would probably have hoped that that would be a positive development. Sadly it has simply opened up another front in the war against the poorest and most vulnerable, and in fact many who are not so poor and vulnerable who have to rely on benefits from time to time.

The debate over the last year or so has centred on Channel 4's *Benefits Street*. Charlie Brooker, writing in the *Guardian* (12/01/14), summed up the controversy

– ‘Benefits Street has caused a row with several distinct yet interwoven strands. Some on the left think it’s an offensive and misleading example of “poverty porn”, which is just like regular porn, minus the money shots. Some on the right believe it’s a damning indictment of the welfare state. And some people, brimming with unfocused rage, see it as a televised “scum zoo” full of pariahs for them to fling peanuts and hashtags at.’

You may have seen this Channel 4 programme and perhaps were angered by its portrayal of benefit claimants. If so I’ve got bad news for you – Benefits Street is not only the tip of an enormous iceberg, it’s also one of the least offensive and least negative examples of the genre. And Channel 4’s offerings are just the warm up act. When it comes to attacking the poor, unemployed, disabled, and benefit claimants in general they can’t compete with the masters of the craft – Channel 5. If all this stuff is ‘poverty porn’ then Channel 4 are mere dabblers in soft core, Channel 5 makes the hard stuff. They make televisual garbage like *On Benefits* and *Proud*. If the title doesn’t give away the tenor of the programme the tag line on the website should tell you exactly what you’re supposed to get from this guff – ‘Not in Work... but working the system’.

This ‘documentary’ from 2013 begins with Heather a single mum of eleven, yes eleven, kids. I added the emphasis to give you an idea of what watching the programme is like. Every time we see Heather we are reminded she has eleven kids by three men and we’re told to feel shocked, as if she’s just assaulted a puppy. In fact Channel 5’s ‘poverty porn’ continually reminds you to be shocked. It uses the words ‘benefit’ or ‘benefits’ absolutely relentlessly. For example in another of its offerings *Benefits Britain: Life on the dole* the viewer is bombarded with phrases like ‘benefits house’ (that’s a house paid for with Housing Benefit), ‘benefits flat’ (likewise) and, my favourite, ‘benefits buddy’ (I think that’s a buddy who is also on benefits rather than a buddy who is provided by the welfare state), as if people on the dole shouldn’t be allowed to have friends.

Unlike Channel 4’s efforts in this genre, Channel 5’s ‘Benefits’ stable of programmes have no room whatsoever for warmth or compassion. This is where Charlie Brooker’s phrase ‘scum zoo’ really comes into its own. It’s not just that we’re not supposed to feel for the people in these programmes, we’re actively discouraged from it. The characters in Channel 5’s ‘scum zoo’ fall broadly into two types: 1 – those to be vilified and reviled because they are so good at playing the system and so blatant and open about it, and 2 – those we are supposed to laugh at while they cavort for our amusement. Don’t be fooled by the second type, we are continually reminded; their inability to play the system no matter how hard they try might render them amusing but they are still scum so don’t feel pity for them just because they are about to be evicted.

Heather, mother of eleven, is clearly an example of the first type. She knows how to work the system and gets three times the average wage in benefits. (Eleven children need to be housed and fed.) She was labelled the Dole Queen by the press. Lorna, in Benefits Britain, is an example of the second type. She is a 'benefits mum' and is about to be evicted from her 'benefits house' due to massive rent arrears. We are to find her funny because she believes there is paranormal activity in the house and that she has been groped by a ghost. Untypically for a type 2 she actually wins her case and avoids eviction. This leads to her and her 'bezzie benefits mate' celebrating a 'benefits victory'. The use of language to elicit a negative response is absolutely constant.

And if all that isn't bad enough there's more. Gypsies On Benefits & Proud is a variant on the established theme. The tag line on the website is 'An insight into how easily gypsies can get their hands on benefits.' I can imagine the day they came up with this show:

- What if instead of attacking people on benefits or gypsies... what if we attacked gypsies on benefits?!
- Genius!

**30 June 2016**

#### **DAVIE FRASER REMEMBERED**

*Sean Cudden posted a long obituary of his friend and comrade, Davie Fraser. After recalling better days, he wrote:*

Now comes the dark stuff. When I think about the good times we had I should feel happy to have known him, and I'm sure those feelings are there, but right now they are buried under a furious anger. Davie Fraser was still a fairly young man, just approaching his forty-second birthday, but his health had not been good for quite a long time. Sometimes he'd be improving, sometimes getting worse. Last year he had pneumonia and ended up in intensive care. He had two toes amputated, and his time in hospital had taken a lot out of him. He needed time to recover, and he needed help. Instead, what happened was a prolonged period of being pushed from pillar to post. He was told he should be getting disability benefit, then he was told he should be on JSA, then back again and again. Often he was getting neither, and that meant he wasn't eating properly which led to complications with his diabetes.

This year that all seemed to have been sorted out. He had moved to a nice new flat, he had even joined a scheme to look after abandoned or abused dogs that were waiting to be re-homed. But that period of stability was only a brief respite. Once again they cut his money and he was left with nothing. The last time I saw him was three weeks ago. I'd gone to Paisley to visit him and give him some money for groceries. He was gaunt, having lost a lot of weight, and walking very slowly. Twice as we crossed the pedestrian precinct in Paisley High Street he

had to stop to rest against a lamppost. When we went into a cafe for lunch he would only take a cup of tea – he was worried he might be sick if he ate because he'd barely eaten for days, and he didn't want to risk that in public. He told me he felt old, and said he was sure if he went to the hospital they would admit him immediately.

A week and a half later Davie was in intensive care fighting for his life. They had to amputate his leg below the knee. He fought on. Finally, on Monday 27th June Davie fell into a diabetic coma and later died. His death was entirely needless. The benefit system that should have helped and supported him the last time he was hospitalised instead failed him and even punished him. Rather than help him recover, they pushed him around, they threatened him, they starved him, and they eventually wrecked his health and killed him.

If you said to me 'surely a life-long socialist and activist like Davie should have shouted louder for help?' I'd agree. If you said 'couldn't you have done more?' I'd say yes. Whenever he asked for help buying food I helped him; but I shouldn't have waited to be asked, I should have asked him what he needed. If you said 'couldn't the people around him have done more?' I'd say yes. But to all of these points I'd also say, you just don't expect that in twenty-first-century Britain someone could be allowed to go hungry for days or weeks just because they're on benefits. You don't expect someone in that situation to be allowed to die. You say to yourself 'I'll phone him at the weekend and see how he's doing.' When the weekend comes, maybe you phone but maybe other things get in the way. You expect any problems with benefits will be sorted out eventually. It never occurs to you that someone might die waiting for that to happen, even when you've heard stories like that so many times. You just don't expect it. I could finish by saying that we should all check on people we know who are having a hard time, but while that would be a good thing to do, it misses the point. Davie and thousands like him should never be in a position where they need to ask a friend to buy food for them. The DWP is responsible for David Fraser's death, his and many many more – unequivocally.

## The Lollipop Lady's Story

E.M. Smallpiece

Having lost my job at the zoo because of financial cutbacks, I went to the jobcentre. I've never been very good at filling in job applications - I got my last job on the strength of volunteering for them before being employed - so the first thing I did was ask for help in improving my application and interview techniques. The jobcentre told me that this was the Work Programme's job these days, and if I hadn't found another job in six months then I would be referred there and they could answer my questions then.

So I searched for work for six months and failed to get any (possibly because I needed help with my application and interview techniques), and then with much implied finger-wagging and actual tutting, was referred by the jobcentre to the Work Programme. In my case, I was sent to Ingeus.

Ingeus offered a variety of workshops on exactly the sort of things I'd been hoping to brush up, and I signed up for all of them. There tended to be three parts to each workshop; Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced. Of particular note was the Interview Skills workshop. Basic Interview Skills was, in essence, the sentence 'Have a wash, comb your hair, wear clean clothes, and don't pick your nose, break wind, or swear during the actual interview', rephrased enough times to fill three-quarters of an hour. Since the group to which I was assigned consisted of four university graduates, one post-graduate (myself), an ex-postman of thirty-five years who had been made redundant due to cutbacks, and two gentlemen who had until the financial crash run businesses of their own, we all felt this was a bit, well, basic; but the general consensus while we had our break was that it was reasonable to set the first rung low, and that the Intermediate workshop must surely be more helpful.

During the Intermediate workshop, the man running it, who I will call Gee, asked the room how we would respond to the hypothetical interview question, 'What would you do if you were working on the customer service desk, and a customer approached you wanting to return something?' One of the two chaps who'd been businessmen, let's call him Tam, immediately replied, 'You would



refer to their rights under the Trade Descriptions Act and return it.' Gee looked sadly disappointed, like a teacher receiving a glaringly wrong answer from a pupil from whom they expect better. 'Anybody else?' he said, without passing comment on the older man's answer. Gee pressed us for a good couple of minutes on this one, and we were all too puzzled to engage with him because, as it turned out, we all thought Tam had given the right answer. Eventually somebody was brave enough to say so. Gee sighed and shook his head, and then said, 'You should be aware of the returns policy of the company interviewing you, and tell them you'd do that.' Perhaps naively, I said, 'Do company returns policies often contradict the Trade Descriptions Act?' 'Of course!' he said, as if I was the silliest goose in the world, 'You can't expect companies not to defend themselves.' 'But the Trade Descriptions Act supersedes company policy,' said Tam, 'Because of it being, you know, the law.' 'Look,' said Gee, starting to sound exasperated, 'You can't expect anybody to hire you if you don't demonstrate how loyal you're willing to be.' 'Hang on, though,' said one of the graduates, 'If you told someone you couldn't return something because that's company policy, then they went away and found out that the law says you're wrong and they can return it, wouldn't that open the company up to all kinds of legal problems?' 'Well,' said Tam, 'It would unless the company went "What? Oh no, lovely customer, our company policy says no such thing and never ever would, this is obviously a misunderstanding because of a stupid bad employee, who we've now fired."' Everybody chuckled except for Gee, who went all disappointed again and told us he would have expected better from us and broke for coffee.

Advanced Interview skills consisted of reviewing further interview questions, of which this was the most peculiar: 'If you could be any animal, what animal would you be?' Tam, rapidly becoming the unfavourite in this class from Gee's point of view, said, 'Is this the Interview skills workshop or the 60-Second Interview in the Metro?' Gee informed us in increasingly waspish tones that this was a real, extremely popular, interview question asked by all the best firms and companies, and that it was based on actual medical studies that reveal your psychological personality type based on what sort of animal you choose. Then he went round the room and we all had to tell the group what animal we would pick and why. The graduate who had wondered whether attempting to circumvent the Trade Descriptions Act could result in legal problems said the animal he'd choose to be was Homo Sapiens. 'You're not allowed to choose that, it's not an animal,' said Gee. The graduate refused to back down, 'Pardon me, but every biologist and anthropologist in the world begs to differ, as does David Attenborough. He devoted the whole last episode of Life On Earth to it. You're definitely an animal once David Attenborough has done a whole hour-long programme about you. Anyway, humans are the only animal that has indoor plumbing, the internet, cooked food, contraception, and memory foam mattresses. Why would I want to be anything else?' Gee insisted that you couldn't choose 'human' because it wasn't

on the list. He did have a pre-set list of animals we could choose from, he just hadn't mentioned that because he didn't think anybody would mention an animal that wasn't on it. We didn't get to look at the list, but it is possible to infer some animals that weren't on it from the ones Gee barred people in the group from choosing, including, to the best of my recollection, aye-ayes; birds of paradise; wolverines; dugongs, sea cows, or pinnipeds of any kind; coyotes; and polar bears, although brown bears were okay. Once again, Gee seemed frustrated by our group. None of us, he said, had gone anywhere near the right answer. Right answer? One or two of us wondered aloud. 'Alright, okay, there's no right answer. But there is one optimum answer that all interviewers like to hear.' And what is that? 'A dog,' he said, 'A dog is loyal. A dog isn't complicated. A dog never rocks the boat and it knows that the boss knows best. If you tell them you'd love to be a dog they'll know you're telling them just how loyal you're prepared to be.' Here was me thinking that loyalty was something you give carefully to people who have earned it, rather than something you should tout as immediately available to the first (not even the highest, the first) bidder.

I subsequently mentioned all this to one of my flatmates, who had done his degree in sociology. He said this sounded to him like it was extrapolated from a Smalley/Trent personality test of the kind used to assist children in self-perception exercises, and that he thought it a bit weird if it was being applied to adults in a work context.

I finished the Interview Skills workshop with a great sense of Gee's disappointment in all of us. Our facetious attitudes, he told us, would surely be a great obstacle in our quest to become productive members of society through work. As a result, I went through the CV writing workshops without asking any questions at all, and did just as I was told, including radically altering my CV exactly as I was instructed to do. I was also applying online for twenty jobs per week, sending ten unsolicited CVs through the post to legal firms and doctor's surgeries begging for reception or secretarial work, and applying to every college I could for their Primary teaching courses.

Over the course of this year, my partner became very seriously ill and required my full-time care for eighteen weeks, and shortly after that my father was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. I had struggled with and overcome clinical depression some years previously, and under these additional family troubles I relapsed and was having difficulty coping. My Ingeus advisor demanded I spend one full day per week at their offices, applying for work, doing workshops and so forth. During my break on one of these days, the week after my dad received his diagnosis, I had locked myself in a cubicle in the ladies because I needed to cry. I was trying to be quiet and go unnoticed, but I was overheard and this woman tapped on the door and asked if I was alright. She spent a good five minutes

coaxing me out of the cubicle, handed me some tissues, and asked me about my troubles. I assumed she was another Ingeus client and told her I was having trouble staying afloat because of family problems. She also asked if I'd had trouble coping in the past, and I told her I'd suffered from clinical depression a while since. She patted me on the back, expressed sympathy, and left.

Five minutes later, I returned to my advisor. The first thing she said was, 'So I understand you've been deceiving me about your mental problems.' Now, this woman had been my advisor for nearly a year by this point, and was growing less and less patient with me over the course of time. I did everything she asked of me without complaint, but I still didn't have a job and this was evidently annoying her. I said I hadn't been deceiving anybody; she flatly stated that the fact that I hadn't disclosed my previous episodes of clinical depression on our first day was an act of deception. I was a bit taken aback, but still protested that I didn't realise I had to present my full medical history to my Ingeus advisor. She replied that mental problems (she repeatedly used the phrase 'mental problems' to refer to my private mental health issues) would always be a serious obstacle to finding work and that I should have brought them up the moment she asked, during our assessment meeting, whether I could think of any serious obstacles within myself to my finding work. Then before I could reply she went straight on to, 'Now, these family problems of yours, tell me about them.' I didn't want to, and said as much. She insisted, and when I tried to hold out, said that she would have me sanctioned right here and now. She actually picked up the phone and started dialling. I was bewildered, frightened, and completely unaware of any rights I may or may not have had, so I told her. She then said that, since I was doing everything she'd told me to do and still hadn't found work, the issue must obviously be my personal life, and that she expected me to have dealt with this the next time I saw her. Dealt with it? I asked, even more bewildered. 'Dump your partner.' She said, 'Make your mother put your father in a hospice. Then you can concentrate on your jobsearching without any distractions.'

My initial reaction to being told to cut off all contact with the people I love the most just as one was recovering from a near-death experience and the other was coming to terms with the fact that he was approaching a-rather-nearer-death-than-that experience was, I hope understandably, 'You what? No! 'I'm sorry?' she said 'Are you refusing to take reasonable action to find work? I can sanction you for that.'

I don't know if anybody reading this has ever been commanded to choose between loved ones and destitution. It's not a very pleasant experience, even if the person doing the commanding is a pettifogging little bureaucrat telling you your choice between your loved ones and destitution is an entirely free and voluntary one, rather than a chap holding a gun to your head and telling you it's not. I took

refuge in silence, and after five minutes admonishing me for having, and I quote, 'deeply and disturbingly skewed life-priorities,' she sent me away with instructions to return at the same time next week, my personal problems 'dealt with' and 'my attitude corrected'.

When I returned, consumed with anxiety because I had not in fact dumped my partner or commanded my mother to put my father in a hospice, it was to find a small knot of about a dozen irate people in the waiting area, all clients of this one particular woman. I, like the others before me, was told that the advisor would be with me shortly and that I should wait. It was after lunchtime, and some of them had been waiting to see her since the office opened. Whenever anybody went to reception to ask for information, they were told to return to the waiting area. As schools-closing time approached, those with children to think of staged a loud protest at reception, refusing to sit down until they were told what was going on and had a guarantee from a manager that leaving to collect their children from school would not result in sanctions. The receptionist did threaten to call security, but we could see security from where we were standing, and they were outnumbered two to one by people who had been waiting since 9am that morning. A manager was forthcoming within five minutes, and told us that the advisor no longer worked for Ingeus. We would all receive new appointments through the post. She didn't actually snarl 'Now will you please all go away' at the assembled jobseekers, but the implication was quite clear.

I did not receive a new appointment through the post. After a fortnight I rang them up and asked if one had been sent and was told no, but it would be. I rang them once a week after that, and it was twelve weeks before they booked me in to see a new advisor. I met him for one session, and when I came back for the next one it was to be told that he, too, had left Ingeus without any of his clients being informed or farmed out to different advisors for their appointments, and that I should go away to await further information by post. When this information had not arrived within a fortnight, I rang them again and asked if I had an appointment booked yet, and was told no, but I would have. This time it only took four weeks of phoning before I was referred to a new advisor. This one at least told me that I shouldn't get too attached to him because he was applying for every other job he could get. We saw one another three times before he had the courtesy to tell me that he wouldn't be there the following week, adding that since my sentence with Ingeus would be up in a mere eight weeks, in his opinion I should keep my head right down after his departure, as those who go unnoticed are the only ones who can be certain they won't be sanctioned.

So, two months later I was referred back to the jobcentre. During this time, as well as continuing to apply for work (the only difference being that the work I was applying for was work I thought I might get rather than work selected for me

on the grounds that my Ingeus advisor thought I might get it), I took my Ingeus-revised CV to a friend of mine who had worked in HR for some years, and asked if he would take a look at it and venture an opinion. When he'd stopped laughing (no, really) he told me this: 'If you'd given me this CV without telling me where it came from, and asked me to guess, I would have said it came from a high school student who had only ever received advice on CV writing from somebody who didn't care what happened to them.'

\* \* \*

## February 2015

I was out of work for nearly three years before I got my current job as a lollipop lady. I place at least some of the blame for this at the feet of Ingeus's back-to-work programme.

There was a gap of about three months between my being offered this job and the actual start date, and I went to the jobcentre to inform them of this on the same day I was offered the job. About three days after I told them I was about to be employed I received a letter from the DWP ordering me to attend a Claimant Compliance Interview. So I turned up to the interview, and the first ten minutes of it consisted of being grilled by a manager about my job searching practices. I had brought all of my paperwork - three months' worth of job diaries, screenshots of jobs I had applied for saved to my phone and, of course, the formal offer of work I had been given the previous week - so when the interviewer suggested right out of the gate that I hadn't been keeping up my end of my jobseeker's agreement I was able to produce ample evidence to the contrary. 'Oh, I see you've been offered a job.' 'Yes.' 'And what is your reason for turning down this job offer?' 'I...didn't? I accepted it. The next page of the letter you're holding has my signature and that of my new line manager on the confirmation of that.' The interviewer looked a little nonplussed at this. Or maybe that was just me. At any rate, he spent a short while in total silence leafing through the papers he had in front of him, and then started asking questions about my living situation. I was sharing a flat at the time with an old friend. 'And is there anything you haven't told us about your...arrangements?' And yes, that pause was distinctly there. 'No.' 'Are you sure? You know you can get into an awful lot of trouble for telling us lies, and I find it difficult to believe that two women in their late twenties would co-habit.' Now, since Housing Benefit for the under-thirty-fives was capped at £65 per week it has been virtually impossible to find an affordable single-bedroom flat. In fact, rents are so grotesquely inflated at the moment that I don't actually know more than two people - and them in highly-paid jobs - who can afford to live on their own, so this struck me first as a little bit disingenuous; and then the penny actually dropped. 'I'm sorry,' I said 'Are you accusing me of defrauding the

Social by being secret lesbians with my flatmate?’ If you cohabit with a partner who is in full-time work, you are not allowed to claim most benefits. To this man’s credit, every word he uttered from this point came out of him like a pulled tooth. I have rarely seen a middle-aged man in a suit look so uncomfortable. But yes, that was what he was accusing me of, and the next thirty to forty minutes was taken up with a battery of increasingly uncomfortable and frankly weird questions about my sexual preferences, my sex life, why my boyfriend and I don’t cohabit, my flatmate’s sex life, her recent messy break-up with her partner of twelve years, and whether I was too ashamed to admit to being gay. By the end of this, I had passed through disbelief and indignation and was becoming quite upset, while the interviewer looked like he wanted the ground to just swallow him. He eventually said that he had nothing else to ask and dismissed me. As I got up to leave, he apologised (he didn’t say what he was apologising for, but he apologised) and wished me well with the new job. A few days later I got a letter from the DWP stating that I had been cleared of any wrongdoing.



I wasn’t sure at this point whether the position I was being offered was full or part time. If it was full time, I would need some means of support in the interim between signing off from the Jobcentre and my first pay packet coming in, so I returned to the Jobcentre to inquire about this. They told me that there was no support they could offer and that I should ring the Crisis Grant people instead. This I did, and was told that I could theoretically claim £20 per week (hooray) until I was paid, but that I was ineligible for any Crisis Grant due to having had a Claimant Compliance Interview (CCI). I pointed out that I had been exonerated by that interview. They told me that didn’t matter; the very fact of having had one disqualified me from claiming a Crisis Grant for six months following the interview. I went back to the jobcentre and told them about this, asking how I was supposed to survive in the coming month, and they told me that the Crisis Grants people were wrong, that having a CCI does not disqualify you from claiming crisis support, and told me to ring them back. I did this and was again informed by the Crisis Grant advisor that the jobcentre was wrong and I was not allowed to claim from them. Back at the jobcentre I was told a second time that the Crisis Grant people were wrong. Again, the Crisis Grant people said the jobcentre were

wrong. Again, the jobcentre turned it back to the Crisis Grant people. No, they couldn't speak or write to them on my behalf. It's a different department and so none of their business. Their hands were tied.

I took my problem to the Citizen's Advice Bureau, where the young man I spoke to said that being given the all-clear after a CCI does not disqualify anyone from a Crisis Grant, but that they had lately seen an increasingly high number of people who had been told on the Crisis Grant phone line that it did. Then he asked me if I'd recently been offered a job, and when I said I had he told me that every last one of the people who had been denied a Crisis Grant due to a CCI were in the same position as me.

As it turned out, I was offered part time hours and therefore was able to keep claiming Jobseeker's Allowance until I was paid, but if I had been offered a full time job I would have starved for that first month.

I ended up with ten hours per week work as a lollipop lady in Parkhead. My monthly pay is roughly £10 short of the minimum amount the government says you need per month to survive (a bit less during school holidays), so I was still required to deal with the jobcentre and sign on. I had thought that being in work, even though it wasn't full-time work, would result in a bit less opprobrium and a bit more support from the DWP. I was sadly wrong.

The next time I visited the jobcentre to sign on, I asked whether I might revise my Jobseeker's Agreement; one of the five handlers I had while at Ingeus (they kept leaving the firm to work elsewhere) had decided that I should apply for no fewer than twenty jobs per week. The advisor at the jobcentre was outraged (his own words) at the notion that having a job was good enough reason to do less for the jobcentre, and I left that interview under the obligation to do ten hours extra job-searching per week under threat of sanctions.

I was told at the jobcentre that they would adjust my benefits upwards during the school holidays when I have no work, but they tell me that they can't log my payslips until after I've been paid and as I sign on on a Monday and get paid on the Tuesday immediately following, these adjustments only take place two weeks later - that's if they take place at all. I have lived below the poverty line during that time for all three major school holidays since I started work.

The summer was particularly bad. Just as the school summer holidays began, the intercom system for my building broke down and this meant that the postman couldn't alert any residents to let him in. As a result, everybody in the building kept missing their mail and this included my payslip for that month. I explained the situation to the advisor at the jobcentre, who first suggested that I get my



payslips forwarded to the school I worked at, and then, when I pointed out that the school was closed for six weeks, told me to outline the situation in a formal letter, which would cover me for the missing paperwork. It didn't.

I was not informed in any capacity that my benefits had been suspended, even when I went to sign on. When I went to check my bank balance on the day I should have received my benefits, I discovered I hadn't been paid. At the jobcentre straight afterwards I was told that they had no record of my benefits being stopped, and they gave me a phone number to ring, which I did, to be told that missing a payslip automatically results in stoppage of benefits. No, they had not received any letter about mitigating circumstances. After two hours spent on the phone, during which time I was cut off twice for no reason that I could discern, I finally persuaded the man on the other end of the phone to allow me the princely sum of £30 per week while the schools were off for summer. I survived because a couple of friends chucked me a tenner a time for cleaning their homes, but I am too afraid to declare this work to the DWP.

I ought to tell the truth, I know, but every time I do something horrible happens. For example, in the last eighteen months my family has been severely shaken by bad health in both of my parents. My mother has severe arthritis, and my father has been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. There are times when caring for my dad is too much for my mum to physically cope with. Because my brother (who is the main breadwinner for our family these days) works abroad in Afghanistan and my sister is a final-year medical student, it sometimes falls to me to go down to England for a week or so at a time to look after my parents. The DWP only allows a certain amount of time off for family emergencies, and over the course of the year I have used almost all of it up. I have been trying to save the last for this April, when mum is having an operation and I will be needed to care for dad while she recovers.

I also, however, wanted to be able to spend Christmas with my family (it might well be the last Christmas my dad has left), and as the Jobcentre was closed from December 22nd to January 5th and the likelihood of being offered a job with an immediate start over the Christmas/Hogmanay season was so vanishingly small, I asked if I could go home for Christmas without using up the little time off I had left in hand. I promised that I would keep applying for work, that I would keep my phone on and on my person at all times and that I would check my email every hour if necessary so that I wouldn't miss out on any potential job offer. The advisor stated that, as a jobseeker, there was no promise I could make in which the jobcentre would believe, and that he was appalled at how mixed up my priorities were. When I tried to argue, he said that he would veto any remaining holiday time I tried to take in the future if I wasn't careful. I'm not sure if he can do that, but I'm too frightened of having to choose between being made destitute



and spending time with my dying father to enquire further.

Overall, then, it has been much more stressful dealing with the jobcentre since I started working part-time than it ever was when I was fully unemployed. If I didn't enjoy my job, which I very much do, I would be cursing the day I accepted it.

Of course, that wouldn't do me much good, as you are disqualified from benefits if you are either fired or leave a job of your own volition.

\* \* \*

### **November 2015**

In early September, my father's health took the final plunge. My brother (who had taken leave of absence and had been living at the old family home for some weeks by this point) rang me on Friday 11th September and said that Dad was so ill they didn't expect him to last the weekend, and that I should come to his side as fast as I could. The only thing I paused to do other than throw a few things in a bag was to ring my local jobcentre on a landline number given to me by the manager, who had specifically said I should use it if I needed to notify the jobcentre that I was rushing off to my sick father's bedside at short notice. The first thing the person who picked up the phone said was, 'How did you get this number?' I ignored that question and ploughed on with telling them that I was going to England right now because my father was dying. The woman on the phone said that if I was leaving town I would have to come in to the jobcentre and fill in the relevant forms. I told her I didn't have time, I was catching a train within the hour. She said I should have come to see them as soon as I knew I would be travelling. I told her that I had only found out I would be travelling ten minutes ago. She said that that was none of her business and that if I didn't fill in the forms I would be sanctioned. I asked if I could fill them in online, or have them posted to my parents' address. She said no, and repeated that if I left the city without physically coming to the jobcentre, I ran the risk of sanctions. I said that since you only get to be at your dad's deathbed the once, it was a risk I was willing to take.

My father passed away on September 13th. It was a week before I rang the jobcentre again due to organising the funeral, getting in touch with my father's many friends to inform them of his departure, and comforting my mother. When I rang them, on September 21st, which was the day I was scheduled to sign on, the phone just rang out and rang out until it cut off. I tried twelve times. So I rang the DWP central office and was told that all jobcentres were shut that day. If I had not followed my instructions and told my local jobcentre that I was going away, they would never have known that I was out of town. So much for honesty.

Anyway, I asked the operator to put a note on my file explaining what had happened and that I would be back in town within the week.

One week later, I phoned the Jobcentre and explained that I was back in Glasgow. I was told that rather than my being sanctioned, my claim had been completely terminated. I said I would like to come in and sort it out. The phone-answerer told me that it would take 'months' to resolve the issue. I made an appointment to see them anyway.

At that next meeting I was told that my claim had been terminated from the last time I signed on before going to England, which, due to the summer bank holiday, was a full twenty-five days before I notified the Jobcentre that I was leaving Glasgow. *[E.M. later discovered that the reason the claim was terminated was because she had exceeded her quota of four domestic emergencies a year, and had been misinformed about the rules. However, the DWP could still have counted her absence against her remaining holiday allowance.]*

The advisor also informed me that I would now be signed on to Universal Credit rather than JSA. Now, my landlord does not typically rent to people on benefits, and only agreed to allow me into his flat on production of a signed guarantee from my flatmate and on condition that all Housing Benefit would be paid directly to his account. I have been told that if I were in receipt of UC, all benefits would be paid to me directly. Therefore, if I were to go onto UC I would be in danger of being forced out of my home. I explained this to the advisor and asked if there was any way I could simply carry on on JSA as before? He very emphatically said no, that was completely impossible, but I held out against signing anything until I had taken advice. I phoned the SUWN who gave me a number to ring for a Rapid Reclaim, and within seven days I was put back on JSA.

When I next signed on, I was told that I needed to re-register the details of my second small job (of two to three hours a week), and would get a form in the post to this effect. The advisor asked me at this time if I was claiming any other benefits that might have been affected by the termination. I said I was claiming housing and council tax benefit, but that I had spoken to their office and they said that my claim with them was still up and running. He said 'That's alright then,' and that was the end of our meeting. Four days later, I received a letter from the Housing and Council Tax Office stating that, due to information received from the DWP on the day of my signing-on, they were discontinuing my housing and council tax benefits. I called them immediately, and the operator said that the DWP had said that I was no longer on JSA. I said no, this was not the case, and having looked at my account the operator agreed that I was correct. She seemed frankly bewildered that the DWP had been in touch about my case at all if they

hadn't been in touch when my claim was originally terminated some two weeks previously.

When I received the form for re-registering the details of my second job, I found nothing in it to indicate a time-limit for sending it back, and so - since my dyspraxia makes filling in forms without making awful obvious mistakes a bit of a trial - I decided to bring it to my forthcoming meeting with a new jobcentre advisor.

At the meeting, with Lillian, I was told that my benefits had been suspended because I had not returned the form that nobody told me had to be returned within a certain time, the lack of which nobody over the course of two intervening signing-on days had chased up with me. I explained about my dyspraxic tendencies and asked Lillian if she would help me with the form. This she did, but we came up against a stop when she asked me for my employer's address. My second employer works from home. I had read through the form and told her that it asked for the employment's address. She said that I was welcome to pass on her business phone number and email address so that they could confirm that I really worked for her and how much I earn, but that she was not comfortable with the jobcentre (with whom she has had uncomfortable experiences herself) having her home address. I told Lillian this, and she became quite irate, but finally agreed to refer it to the central office, who would call me back that afternoon.

At this point, Lillian announced that I had been categorised as 'post-Work Programme'. This came as something of a surprise for two reasons - firstly, I had been post-Work Programme once before, when I had just left the Work Programme with Ingeus, and was told at that time that the reason I was so categorised was because I had left the WP without finding employment, and since then I have found two jobs and a volunteer position; and secondly, I had left the WP in April 2013, more than two-and-a-half years before. I mentioned this, and Lillian said that didn't matter, and that as a result of this categorisation I would be given a mandatory work placement. I told her that I already had a volunteer job. She said that wasn't important, and that I would probably be sent to Tesco's, up to thirty hours a week. I pointed out that this would prevent me from doing my volunteering at all, and that the sort of work I'm qualified to do (in museums) asks for volunteer work in the museum environment as a prerequisite for applying for museum work, therefore were I to give up job-relevant volunteering it would actively hinder my search for work within my actual profession. She said it was mandatory. I said I wouldn't do it.

Lillian then said that if I didn't do the placement (the placement she told me less than half a minute beforehand was mandatory) then I would have to come

in to the jobcentre, sign on, and do an hour's job search every single day for thirteen weeks. My work is the other side of Glasgow. Normally, to save money, I walk the nearly-two hour journey there and back. If I were to walk between my shifts, two hours walk either way, I would not have the time to do the hour's job search as I would have to turn round and return as soon as I arrived in order to make it back for my second shift. If I was to take public transport there and back every day I would not be able to run my mobile phone and pay my share of the electricity bills, and still afford to eat. I explained this to Lillian and asked if the jobcentre would provide travel expenses? She said 'Certainly not' and seemed quite indignant that I asked. In that case, I said, it wouldn't be possible for me to spend an hour at the jobcentre every day for thirteen weeks, literally not physically possible, unless Lillian was happy with my being uncontactable by phone for any potential employers to whom I had applied for full time work, due to being unable to pay the phone bill, or with my starving. Lillian said that this was no concern of hers, and that my JSA would not be reinstated until I picked one of these two options. Again, I said that I couldn't afford to travel by bus or train every day, and if I walked I would risk returning late to my second shift, which would result in my losing my job and having to return to full JSA. She shrugged. I said I wouldn't sign up to anything without seeking advice, and that I wouldn't meet with her again without an advocate present. Again, she shrugged. I was nearly in tears by this point. Lillian handed me a piece of paper with a new appointment, and as I began to cry she told me that if I didn't leave she would get security to escort me out physically.

Three days later I received a phone call from the DWP central office, and the woman to whom I spoke said that my claim was suspended until they received my second employer's address. I explained to her about my employer's address also being her home address and her not wanting to just hand that out, and said I'd given her phone number and email address in lieu. The woman on the phone said 'Oh, so you have. Well, that's alright then. That's your claim reinstated.'

*When E.M. wrote this she was quite distraught. At the SUWN's suggestion she asked her doctor for a sick note to take off the immediate pressure while she and her partner worked out a more long-term strategy. He has now applied for and been awarded PIP, and she will be able to apply for Carer's Allowance and Income Support and get off the jobcentre's radar. Not that this was simple. His initial appointment for a PIP assessment was in Stirling, and E.M. was concerned that the journey from Glasgow would be enough to leave him in pain for days. We reassured her that they did not have to accept being treated like that, and his housing association helped them reschedule the appointment to Glasgow.*

*When we were talking she also mentioned an earlier crisis, and in response to our request, she has written about that too:*



I'm not proud of this, but there was a point when I tried to steal food.

My partner, who was at the time just my boyfriend, had come to the end of a call centre contract when he suddenly fell ill with pancreatic problems. His health deteriorated very quickly and he had to spend some time in hospital, with a protracted period of regular follow-up appointments afterwards that continues to this day. I was on Jobseeker's Allowance at the time, then £67 per week. My partner had been in contact with the jobcentre to tide him over between contracts but had not completed the process of signing on before he got sick, so for the period that he was in hospital, and for about a month after he was discharged, he had no income at all, and that £67 per week of mine was all there was to live on for the two of us. I did my best to budget, but my partner was quite literally too sick to walk, even as far as the bus stop, and when we went to his check-ups at the Victoria, we had to take taxis. That was a fiver each way, which was basically two days' food money. Skimping on the food budget wasn't an option, as my partner's digestive system was too fragile to cope with the usual cheap junk you have to live on when you're out of pocket, like ramen noodles. I couldn't bear to let the electricity go out, which was the other thing I would do when I had to choose between bills and food. In the past I could spend the money I would have put on the power key on food that could be cooked on the little spirit stove I take camping, and put up with a couple of evenings reading by candlelight while wrapped in a duvet - but the doctor said my partner should be kept warm. The money just flowed away through my fingers like water.

I attempted to get a Crisis Loan, but was told that having a sick boyfriend was not reason enough to claim any extra money unless I was willing to register as co-habiting with him, which would take another few weeks to sort out. I borrowed from friends a few times, a tenner here, a fiver there, but it was painful to do that because at the time all my friends were pretty poor as well; even the ones who had succeeded in getting graduate-level jobs after university had massive great swingeing student debts which took such a huge bite out of their monthly income that they weren't materially any better off than those of us on minimum wage. I felt like I was taking food out of their mouths. I went into my overdraft, which turned out to be a terrible mistake as the bank took a higher charge than I had anticipated for this directly out of my account at the end of the month, and this was what led me to shoplifting. I went to the local supermarket, stopping at the cash point directly outside with the intention of getting out my last tenner. This was when I found out that the bank had charged me, and that this charge had taken me to the limit of my overdraft. I had about £1.50 on me in change, my benefits weren't due for four days, and we had no food left in the house.

So I went into the shop, where I found I had enough money to buy pasta, two potatoes, and two pints of milk. In a moment of awful desperation, I slipped a block of cheese and a packet of noodles into my coat pocket. I paid for the things I could afford, and then, because I had been a depressingly well-behaved thoroughly middle-class teenager and had never shoplifted before in my life, the store detective nabbed me the second I passed through the checkout. I was taken through to the back, where the detective and a manager emptied my pockets for me. It was pretty mortifying. What stands out, however, is how kind they both were. The security guard brought me a chair to sit on and helped me off with my coat, as I was shaking so much that I was struggling to take it off myself. Once it was established that the cheese and the noodles were all there was to find, the manager even seemed surprised. He asked me why I was stealing those while paying for other things, and I ended up blurting out the whole story, then begging him, literally begging him in a way I thought people only did in over-the-top old movies, not to call the police because I had someone at home relying on me and I was terrified of what would happen if I had to spend a night in the cells and he had nobody to look after him. They said they were obliged to call the police in; but they brought me tissues and a glass of water while we waited.

Then when the police arrived, they took one look at the things I'd stolen, and one of them basically wrote my statement for me. He said, 'So, you're on £67 per week benefits?' as he wrote 'I am on £67 per week Jobseekers and it simply isn't enough to live on.' He then put in, without reference to me, a breakdown of weekly costs for vitals like food, electricity and so forth, stating at the end that this all added up to considerably more than £67 per week, and adding, when the manager

put in that I was in the middle of a family crisis, 'I have recently had a medical emergency in the family and am under great psychological stress.' I was rather beside myself with fear, worry and embarrassment by now, so I was very grateful that he was able to articulate everything on my behalf. He did it as if he'd had some practice. They cautioned me for the stealing, and then offered to take me to a food bank. I was very much moved by their compassion.

*E.M. was horrified to find herself on the wrong side of the law, but she also observed that her father, who was a Shropshire Solicitor, had found that several of his legal aid clients had deliberately courted a prison sentence as a preferable alternative to jobcentre harassment and sanctions.*

## Survivors' Tales

*Most of these came to us as emails or Facebook messages or comments. Unless the full name is given they have been anonymised.*

**Seb Thirlway, Glasgow, January 2012**

I'm working. Why am I writing for the Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network?

I'm not unemployed. But people can't be divided neatly into the 'employed' and the 'unemployed'. There is a word for what I am. The word is under-employed: I work, but not enough to make a living. It's not a word you hear much on the news; certainly not nearly as often as unemployed – maybe because the under-employed, unlike the unemployed, aren't so much of a 'problem' (to our dear leaders).

But we also depend on benefits to survive. We face the same problem as the unemployed: simply, there is not enough work for everyone. And there are plenty of us. In 2010, a government survey of part-time workers who would work longer hours if they could get them estimated the total as 2.8 million. So the number of people who can't find either any or enough work for themselves is more than double the official unemployment figure.

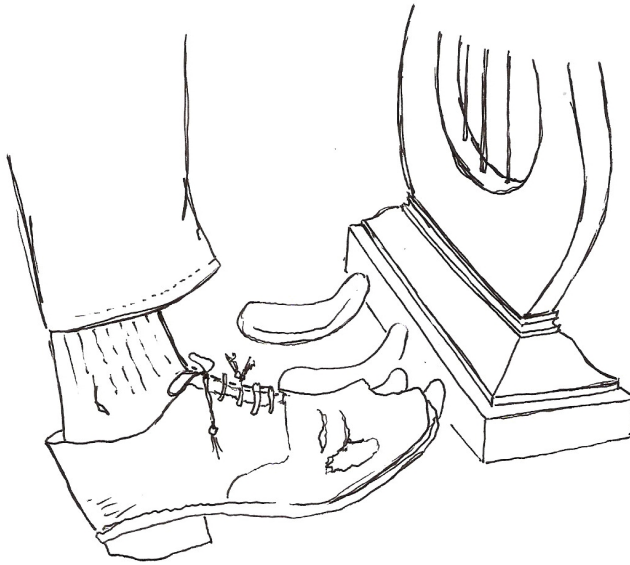
The solution to employment is supposed to be 'jobs'. Jobs for the unemployed = no unemployment. That's all very well for the statistics: but what about for you or me? I've been off Jobcentre Plus' books for two years now: I'm not 'unemployed', so surely I must be 'employed', and everything must be fine? But it's not that simple. Under-employment is the proof that jobs are not necessarily the solution. What kind of jobs are available, and how much work they provide, is just as important.

For two years now I've been self-employed – but under-employed – as a pianist and piano teacher. Under-employed because there simply isn't enough work out there for me to earn a living. Without Self-Employed Tax Credits, and Housing



and Council Tax benefits, I wouldn't be able to work at all.

But I'd rather not have to rely on these benefits; I'd rather not live on an income which makes replacing a pair of shoes full of holes into a big decision; where taking time off is impossible (in case I have to turn down a last-minute call for work); where visiting family and friends is too expensive to think about.



Like any musician, I've always known very well that building a living through music is very difficult. You have to have some other work as well, part-time – at least to start with. I worked for fifteen years in IT; I've also worked as a typist, secretary, tour guide, cashier, receptionist, kitchen porter, cleaner, and probably other things I can't even remember. So I was confident, two and a half years ago, that I'd find some job to pay the rent. I'd just graduated from the RSAMD with a postgraduate Diploma in piano – a course I funded myself to improve my skills, raising the £12,000 fee by working long hours (before practising every night) for years.

Unbelievably – to me at the time, but perhaps no longer unbelievably – I found nothing. Jobs in IT; jobs through temping agencies; jobs from on-line websites; minimum-wage jobs in bars and kitchens – nothing! My folder-full of job applications made since June 2009 got me precisely one job-interview, over two years ago. (I didn't get the job, obviously!) Sometimes I've applied for dozens of full-time, permanent jobs, thinking that I'd have to make the hard decision to give up on the progress I've made so far in building up my business as a teacher and

musician. But it never came to that decision: again, no interviews!

Politicians like to talk about the UK's 'creative industries', and how supposedly vital they are to the economy. The initiatives they talk about are usually aimed at the top end of the industry, feeding the notion that music, art and performance are all about the glamorous side of things: Britain's Got Talent. But creativity in the arts comes from an unglamorous place: from people like me, working for very little or nothing, improving our skills and teaching others – and perhaps also holding down an unrelated part-time job. Like so much else, the 'creative industries' depend on the UK being a place where you can get work if you want it and look for it.

After two and a half years, a short-term, full-time IT job has finally come up. Only a month's work, but it's work. I don't know whether I'll be able to carry on my own business alongside it, but I intend to try.

The worst thing about my situation – apart from having no money to spare for anything except rent, eating, and a little bit of socialising – has been the constant question in my mind: what am I doing wrong? Surely, I thought, there must be some place out there I haven't looked, some person I haven't contacted, some kind of work I haven't considered? After over two years of this, I've come to the conclusion that no, I'm not doing anything wrong; there is simply no sense in the UK labour market. That I've just found a bit of work, for a month, but couldn't find any for the previous two and a half years, is simply down to luck. It hasn't been my 'choice'.

But this is what we hear all the time from politicians: that we are unemployed or under-employed because we choose to be. It is our fault for living in a certain place; having family commitments; wanting to start or build up a business; having certain skills and experience and not others; looking for jobs that will actually use them; being a certain age rather than another.

This argument would say that I chose not to find any minimum-wage work, simply by being forty and experienced (employers in those workplaces prefer younger, less experienced employees); that I chose to be dependent on benefits for the past two and a half years, in spite of being willing to take any part-time job I might be offered. And, turning to younger people, that all 500,000 of them in the UK who haven't been lucky enough to find any work at all are in this terrible position because they freely chose to be looking for a job now, with no experience: it's their fault for being born at the wrong time!

There's no room, in this way of thinking, for the simple reality, known by all too many people; that you can be as willing to find work as you like, as determined in

looking for it as you like, as flexible about what kind of work you're prepared to do as you like, and still come up against the brick wall:

There just isn't enough work out there for everyone.

#### **Karen, November 2014**

I used to work in the jobcentre and I thought I knew policy, but when it came time for me to claim I realised how hard it was to speak to a human being. I was twenty-nine weeks pregnant and was changing from JSA to ESA due to pregnancy difficulties. I was thirty-seven years old, this was my first pregnancy and the first time I had claimed benefits in twenty years of working. The benefit delivery centre had lost my claim. They said they couldn't speak to me as I had got my own security questions wrong! They then said they found my claim and it was being processed. In all, after fourteen phone calls, five emails and six weeks, they finally found my claim and processed it. During those six weeks I felt like a beggar relying on hand-outs from family. I even contacted Jo Swinson MP's team and they took three weeks to get back to me. And she's supposed to be all for women's rights! It was hopeless. No-one would talk to me. My blood pressure was sky high with worry about losing my housing benefit too. I ended up very ill throughout the entire pregnancy due to the stress and had an emergency c-section before my due date. THIS is the impact they have when no-one takes responsibility.

#### **Glenn Millar, Dundee, November 2014**

Went to sign on today and was informed that I had to sign up for Universal Jobmatch (UJM) and that it was 'mandatory'. I happen to know of, and have, written DWP statements that it is not mandatory except when one is compelled by a 'Jobseekers Direction'. After I had steadfastly refused to accept my signing clerk's repeated assertions that UJM was mandatory, she eventually sought her supervisor who repeated the same mantra for a while. I maintained that I would like to be provided with a written and signed copy of DWP regulations stating their position on this issue. Instead of providing this she arranged another interview for me on Wednesday morning.

I took the opportunity to inform her that it was my intention to film this interview. She said that's not possible, and I pointed out that according to Freedom Of Information Request 3032 Response 04.07.13, it was not only possible, but it was obligatory upon them to provide a private room and willing interviewer to conduct this meeting. Again the stony face of the DWP tried to

stare me down and deny this. I offered to bring copies of all relevant regulations with me to our meeting. At this point, interestingly, the 'advisor' tried to negotiate the terms of this encounter asking what use I intended for this video (notice how this implies that she is now not certain of the DWP regulatory position). She also attempted to get me to agree to sign documentation stating limits and parameters of the video usage. Again this is tantamount to an admission that she is unsure of the binding rules in this matter. I am not. It is my intention to resist this incursion upon our civil liberties and the general DWP employee trend of just making up imaginary rules to further abuse people. I have printed out numerous documents from the UK Government, PCS, DWP etc., including excerpts from the Universal Jobmatch Tool Kit, their own internal 'rule book', and I look forward to updating you all with further information in due course.

UPDATE - had meeting today! and they rolled over without difficulty. I waived my right to film as it would have meant them having to reschedule to accommodate this. I was keen to get to the main issue. When presented with documentation they admitted that UJM sign up was NOT MANDATORY; they did not try to argue otherwise as the proof was right there in front of them. Instead they adopted a more conciliatory attitude and agreed to arrange a meeting with a disability employment advisor so that my particular circumstances can be properly taken into account. This is a wonderful opportunity to renegotiate my Jobseeker's Agreement. My simple insistence was that UJM was not for me and would not be of any benefit to me; that my medical condition made me unsuitable for a wide variety of job types, and that my personal efforts to obtain work were more realistic in terms of actual job outcomes.

I was pleasant toward them, but insistent that they merely follow the rules as laid out in the documents I put before them. Knowing that they were up against someone better informed and prepared than them, they were happy to take the easy way out and simply capitulate. Ten pages of documentation were presented with relevant sections highlighted in cheerful orange felt-tip pen. It took me ten minutes to find all this stuff online, ten minutes to print, and ten minutes to highlight. Careful preparation of one's case is vital to presenting a winning argument. Thank you to Tony Cox for sitting in on this meeting as my witness (another right they don't tell you about). We had a most pleasant time, with our greatest difficulty being that of restraining our understandable mirth at this clear vindication of my position, and by extension the position of many others.

### **John, Arbroath, February 2015**

I was enthralled and yet unsurprised at the story about Arbroath Jobcentre in the

news recently and felt compelled to write to you with my experience.

I was unlucky to be made unemployed last year and found the Arbroath Jobcentre staff extremely unhelpful, brash, argumentative, uninterested and completely counterproductive to finding a job!

Most weeks when signing on, the staff were utterly despondent and couldn't have cared less what I had done to find work. Suddenly, without warning, when signing on I was immediately accused of not applying for jobs. The person who spoke to me tilted the screen and said 'what about these jobs?' Two jobs were shown to me, one expired a month previous and the other was only 10 hours a week in another town (so deducting tax/pension/NI/Travel costs would make the job pointless). Because I hadn't applied for these jobs I was sanctioned for two weeks and told 'That's the way it is'.

Without a reason I was sanctioned a further two weeks.

I tried to complain but a condescending response was sent back to me stating 'no maladministration had occurred'.

I have no idea if my experience is relevant to you in anyway, but hopefully it may add weight to another's claim that Arbroath Jobcentre is not geared to helping people but, instead, massaging statistics.

### **Frank, Clydebank, May 2015**

I was placed in a charity shop, Debra's Charity, which is a charity throughout Scotland.<sup>135</sup> I was placed in the Dumbarton shop where there was six of us at one point, all on this Community Work Placement. People from areas such as East/West Dumbartonshire have been put into Argyle and Bute Council. On all the paperwork it's the word VOLUNTEER, when we are not volunteers at all. We are coerced into this. Why? Because if we don't do it we get sanctioned from the jobcentre and left destitute. They send folk to Greenlight Recycling based in Alexandria, West Dumbartonshire. They have to go through people's rubbish and have to put aluminium cans to one side and paper to the other and other different types of plastics that can be recycled. It's riddled with rats and stinks.

### **Irene, Dundee, July 2015**

I used to work for Triage but left once I realised it wasn't what was sold to me

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<sup>135</sup> DEBRA is a UK charity for people with a genetic skin condition

during the interview. We were told to sanction first and ask questions later. I couldn't do that to people, so left. I would rather be unemployed with no money than do that again. I was told not to put up who I worked for and wasn't allowed to talk about it. I even had to sign a form to that effect.

I got a job within a few weeks because I've got experience, qualifications and can talk the talk. I also know how lucky I am to have a job. Any job. I've been at the bottom, unemployed, homeless, working poor, single parent and can relate to those going through the hell of sanctions. We seriously need to look at our 'society'!!

Whilst we weren't exactly set targets we were told that we had to sanction if an appointment was missed. I remember a few people being very unhappy as they hadn't received letters asking them to come in for an appointment or they had phoned to say they wouldn't make it and the message didn't get passed on. Not surprising really since the receptionist was an apprentice with no experience and the reception was very, very busy.

### **James, Tayside, November 2015**

I've just seen your post about the Blue Mile shared to a group I'm on. I too have just been refused either rate of mobility component of PIP because I was able to walk this corridor with a stoop and at a slightly slow pace without showing any pain; so because I have lived in pain for fifteen years and learned to deal with it without vocalising, I'm refused any benefit. I was on highest rate mobility DLA up until May of this year, and wasn't sent any migration forms. My claim was just allowed to run out, and I left it months to make a claim for PIP because I was so anxious about it. I'm in no fit state mentally to appeal this decision, or ask them to reconsider first, as I'm on the brink of just topping myself. I've spent over half my life in agony and have had to deal with the incompetence of the DWP so often that I just can't face it again; the on-hold song alone drives me insane when forced to listen to it for half an hour at a time so I put off phoning. I've had so much unfair treatment at the hands of these unscrupulous bastards that I have no more fight in me and nobody who wants to deal with the DWP on my behalf, therefore I'm now getting low-rate care and no mobility and haven't the strength to fight them any longer.

I've been left for eight months before by them without benefit because they tricked me into work and out of benefit five years ago - sent me to mandatory work-focused interviews, where I was told I was to find a job up to sixteen hours and I'd keep my Income Support. Needless to say, my first payslip was sent to them and promptly a letter was sent back saying I had worked over the maximum

amount and therefore wasn't eligible for it anymore. I appealed three times with no avail. I'm just so sick to death of the system! I'm honestly at the brink of walking into a jobcentre and taking my own life. This system is actually causing me more problems than it's helping; I now have social anxiety to add to the list of problems I have, but because I've not spoke to my GP about it, it's not there. I don't know what to do or where to turn.

*(after we'd got back offering help)*

I know I have a case and could win, it's just the massive effort it takes me just to get out of bed in the morning never mind any of the appeal process. I've had to do it so many times already, I'm just struggling to find any motivation to continue to fight them. The whole system is geared to remove the 0.7% who wrongly claim benefit, and punishes the 99.3% who need and rely on it. It's so unfair and thoughtless. Why is it then OK for MPs to fall asleep in parliament? I saw a picture the other day of about five MPs all asleep in parliament. It's disgusting. So fed up of the way things are.

*February 2016 (after we contacted to check all was OK)*

I'm still here anyway. I still have no fight in me to try to appeal the decision. Just having to explain it all to someone gets me down because it basically rubs it in my face every time how rubbish my quality of life is. Also I have mandatory biweekly work based activity to do. Even though I'm in the ESA Support group, they've got me working on a CV etc. The weeks they don't call me in I get a phone appointment which is just them asking if my circumstances have changed, basically do I still have my life long, degenerative condition? Obviously 'yes' being the answer, but it's very degrading, for lack of a better word.

*We gave him details of organisations that could help and drafted a letter for him to send to the DWP asking to be withdrawn from work-related activities with an assurance he would not be sanctioned.*

Ok thanks ever so much, not used to people actually caring about my wellbeing.

### **Michael, Dundee, December 2015**

I visited the offices of Triage today. I was ten minutes early for my appointment, but was left sitting for almost twenty minutes past the appointed time before someone appeared. The lady in question started handing out forms, telling us to fill them without any hint of an apology. She wasn't best pleased when I pointed out how rude this was and, had the shoe been on the other foot, I would have been sanctioned. I had brought my C.V. on a pen drive, but was told at this stage that this could not be used. I was also informed that I could not leave the

building until they had a copy of my C.V. They told me that, although they cannot sanction me, they would inform the Jobcentre that I would not comply with them. I was shocked. They had threatened to lie to a government body to get me into trouble. Now I was being blackmailed as well as being held prisoner. Before I left the building I had to sign a form saying that I knew where the fire escape was and where I could get a drink of water and where the toilets were. I left there with only a vague description of what going to Triage entails, along with a dry mouth and full bladder. At least there wasn't a fire.

### **Joyce, Dundee, March 2016**

I first got involved with the SUWN in the summer of 2014 when I helped with registering disenfranchised people to vote in the Independence Referendum outside Dundee Jobcentre. Then, in the immediate aftermath of the crushing disappointment of the result, activists from the SUWN organised a meeting, the 'Big Red Yes' meeting, where many people came together to talk about where we go from here. At a time when activist groups were disintegrating and people felt lost and depressed, I was impressed by the SUWN's drive and commitment to do whatever possible to mitigate the effects of ideological austerity on our people. Thus I began to regularly attend SUWN stalls, meetings, training and events and I can honestly say it is one of the best things I've ever done. I get a lot of satisfaction out of my involvement and enjoy participating in varied activities. I get particular satisfaction from assisting people who are suffering injustices and destitution due to the evils of neoliberalism. I have also gained skills and confidence which helped me improve my personal prospects. It has been truly life-changing and I shall be forever in debt to my comrades in the SUWN.

### **Lorna Carr, Glenrothes, May 2016**

...My son, who had anorexic issues was told by Glenrothes job centre to 'eat less' when he protested about a threatened sanction. I complained to DWP and had the police at my door. Poor guy could hardly stop laughing. (sanction overturned).

SUWN: We would urge you to immediately lodge a complaint regarding your treatment, Lorna, and take the case to your MP.

Lorna: We did. 'advisor' was removed from duty and shunted to a back room, son given better treatment and a new advisor who was wonderful. Previous advisor was overheard chuntering about some kind of legal action she was facing....

...of course, sending a copy of complaint to regional and area managers may have helped...



**Gary, Dundee**

whens the next stall people??? am bored as f\*k

***Never dispute with Jobcentreplus***

Never dispute with Jobcentreplus  
Whatever we say, you do!  
We'll call the police if you make a fuss,  
What we tell you three times is true.

We've set you a task that you're bound to fail:  
A hoop that you can't jump through.  
We'll chuck you out if you rant and rail,  
What we tell you three times is true.

You thought you'd get help and bring a friend?  
What an arrogant thing to do!  
Wherever might such thinking end?  
What WE tell you three times is true

If you want to have rights then you shouldn't be poor  
They don't apply to you.  
And if you complain, we'll change the law  
And throw in a sanction or two!

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**jobcentreplus**

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## *Taking on the Control and Surveillance State*

*Tony Cox*

'If god punished men for crimes as man punishes man for poverty, then woe to the sons of Adam'<sup>136</sup>

We live in a world that has caught flame; where mass terror and civilian bombings are the openly expressed policy of the most powerful countries on earth; where corporations court politicians in much the same way that city dealers buy and sell any other form of commodity; where those same politicians wage war on their own citizens in the name of 'fiscal responsibility' and the 'war against terror'; where justice has a price that the poor and working people cannot pay. It is not a pretty sight, this spectacle of power spinning out of control, lashing out in its desperation to avoid accountability and judgement.

Some may say, 'it has always been thus', and they would be correct, but only up to a point. The quotation above seems to bear out this observation. It is taken from an article in the *Illuminated Magazine* that detailed the awful conditions in the barrack-like workhouses that were being raised, in their hundreds, throughout the length and breadth of the richest and most powerful country in the world following the passing of the English New Poor Law in 1834. Frederick Engels, an insightful critic of Victorian moral hypocrisy, explained that, with this legislation, 'all relief in money and provisions was abolished; the only relief allowed was admission to the workhouses immediately built.' He described these 'Poor Law Bastilles' as 'the most repulsive residence which the refined ingenuity of a Malthusian can invent.' The food was poor, and made up of 'chiefly potatoes' and the 'worst possible bread and oat meal porridge'. And work was obligatory, meaning that,

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<sup>136</sup> *Illuminated Magazine*, quoted in, Engels, Frederick (1936) *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd: London, p.289

....he who does not finish his task gets nothing to eat; he who wishes to go out must ask permission....; the paupers wear a workhouse uniform....and they are set to rather useless tasks: the men break stones....; the women, children and aged men pick oakum for I know no what insignificant use.<sup>137</sup>

Engels does not end his description of the horrors of Victorian 'poor relief' there; the unremitting inhumanity of the workhouse regime is forensically examined in page after shocking page of repulsive detail. The Scottish Poor Law, which followed eleven years later, added a further brutal twist. Unlike the English workhouses, Scottish poorhouses were expected to refuse help to the able-bodied and their families.

Whilst this awful description of Victorian inhumanity may set the minds of some readers at rest - after all, however bad things are, they are surely better than the plight of our ancestors who were unlucky enough to be born in the wrong bed - we are, in fact, currently living under a punitive regime, that, in key regards, has adopted the same way of thinking in its treatment of some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in our increasingly divided society. One example that is central to DWP policy will suffice; the sanctions regime, which the unemployed face for failing to comply with the conditions of their Jobseeker's Agreement. When a person is sanctioned, which can be for as long as three years, they face the withdrawal of what DWP officials, without a hint of irony, describe as a 'benefit' of £73.10 per week. Those who are sanctioned can apply for a 'Hardship Payment', allowing them the privilege of subsisting on 60% of their former 'benefit' - the granting of this payment is, though, 'discretionary' on the part of DWP officials, and cannot be relied on.

This state of affairs seems to be a thousand miles removed from the post-war Labour Government's attempts to banish the five 'Giant Evils' of 'squalor, ignorance, want, idleness, and disease' through the implementation of the Beveridge Report. In 1952, the *Times* carried a long article reviewing the progress of the new welfare state, which proved to be very mixed in its findings; shortcomings and compromises were all too evident, however, a clear objective was visible: 'The strengthening of civic solidarity by provision of services on the footing of common citizenship seems a fundamental aim of the welfare state.' The establishment of a link between the post-war legislation and citizenship was a means whereby the success of the new system could be measured. As David Vincent observes;

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<sup>137</sup> Engels (1936) pp 287-8

The granting of equal legal and then political rights had finally been complemented by the establishment of full social rights through the granting of equal access to education, health care and a minimum level of income.<sup>138</sup>

For a whole generation of post-war social reformers, many of whom were tasked with a hands-on role in introducing the welfare state, the removal of poverty was crucial in order to ensure that all citizens could play a meaningful role as social and political actors in their own right, because 'poverty means the exclusion from the living standards, the life styles and the fellowship of one's fellow citizens.'<sup>139</sup> In other words, a poor citizen was seen as a contradiction in terms.

The introduction of the welfare state in the immediate post-war years, and in the face of a severe financial crisis that puts more recent financial convulsions in the shade, represented an attempt not only to banish poverty and degradation, but also to link the war on poverty with the aim of producing an active and engaged citizenry. This aim was, though, partially undermined due to the fundamentally passive relationship that those in receipt of welfare were expected to adhere to in their dealings with a system that was designed for their benefit. So, despite the best efforts of a generation of committed social reformers, and a Labour government supposedly dedicated to transforming social and economic relations, the welfare revolution remained incomplete, open to challenge and to reversal.

The aims and ideals of those who conceived the welfare state were focused on strengthening the sense of citizenship of those who, for a variety of reasons, could not work. Whilst this aim was more often honored in the breach than the observance, the achievements of the welfare system should not be underestimated. Not only were countless lives saved and enriched as a result of welfare provision, the ethos of the welfare state, as a national political ideology, also impacted on the nature of social relations across the board: reform aimed at expanding social inclusiveness, at least in theory, became the *raison-d'être* of government, with organised labour closely consulted, and often centrally involved, in the evolution and implementation of national economic policy.

All good things come to an end, but the degrees of separation between

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<sup>138</sup> Vincent, David (1991) *Poor Citizens: the state and the poor in twentieth century Britain*, Longman: Harlow, p205

<sup>139</sup> Vincent (1991) p205

the founding principles of the welfare state and the current obsession with 'Austerity' demonstrated by the ruling Tory Government must lead us to the conclusion that so-called 'welfare reforms' are nothing short of a determined effort at counter revolution, nothing less than an attempt to transform the nature of the welfare state, from one based on the maintenance of social security, to one based on the systematic control and surveillance of the employed as well as the unemployed and the disabled. In an alarming and unprecedented development, low-paid workers in receipt of top-up benefits (currently tax credits) are being brought within the disciplinary orbit of the DWP. Anyone earning less than the equivalent of thirty-five hours a week on the minimum wage will be forced to look for employment at better rates of pay or for more working hours, with refusal to co-operate leading to the removal of benefits.

Whilst the Tories appear secure in the knowledge that their zero-tolerance approach to stripping large parts of the poorest and vulnerable of the right to welfare provision speaks to the public mood, at least in their middle England vote banks, they should fully consider the possible consequences of such actions. The state, by removing or withholding entitlement to welfare provision, also denies those who are affected *the* fundamental prop of citizenship. Whilst this affects all those across the UK who are solely reliant on welfare provision, it also has major repercussions for even relatively well-paid working people who do not qualify for Working Tax Credits. Workers cannot assume that the state will be there for them when they lose their jobs: instead they will be pitched into a highly bureaucratic and invasive system that may well remove their right to welfare through sanctioning or by refusing provision all together. Even if welfare is neither sanctioned nor denied, the newly unemployed worker will be subjected to increasing levels of compulsion expressly designed to make the experience of being unemployed as unpleasant as possible, so that increasing numbers are voting with their feet by completely removing themselves from the welfare system. The stark reality is that welfare reforms are aimed squarely at changing the, already skewed, balance of power between the unemployed and employed on the one hand and the employing classes on the other.

This issue is, however, further complicated by the new and developing relationship between Westminster and the devolved Scottish Government. Whilst the recent Independence referendum delivered a majority NO vote, a promise, borne of panic on the part of all of the UK party leaders, was made in the last days of the campaign that further powers would be granted to the Scottish Parliament. This promise

resulted in the establishment of the Smith Commission, but the powers that are eventually being granted have proved to be much less than even the most sceptical YES voters expected. Although the Scottish Government is about to be given authority over the management of disability benefits, the vast bulk of welfare still remains under the control of Westminster. Even mitigating benefit sanctions is expressly ruled out.

Given the centrality of the welfare issue to the debate around the need for Independence, and the large numbers of the unemployed and low paid who rallied to the YES message, the Tory response to Scottish demands for greater control over the management of welfare not only represents a major threat to the security of some of the most vulnerable elements within Scottish society, but also opens up the possibility of a major constitutional crisis developing between the UK and Scottish governments.

Scotland has, so far, been spared some of the worst impacts of Austerity through the determination of the SNP Government to mitigate the worst of the cuts. But there are limits to what they are able to do, and even within these limits they can only hold the line for so long. Without further powers, any future Scottish government, of whatever hue, will simply be forced into deciding which parts of the welfare state they want to retain and which to cut, within the constraints of Westminster imposed spending limits. We believe that the issue of welfare and welfare 'reform' represents the soft underbelly of Conservative claims to legislate on behalf of Scotland. Perhaps nothing more exemplifies the limited nature of devolution than the fact that, as things stand, the Scottish Government *cannot* look after the interests of its poorest citizens when they are out of work, and neither does Holyrood possess the economic levers that could create decent paying jobs within the Scottish economy. This *should* represent the 'red line' that triggers an 'indyref2'; but the Scottish Government has shown little inclination to take a lead on the fundamental issue of class justice. Instead, they have focused on the idea of a second Independence Referendum in response to the recent vote by the UK electorate to leave the European Union. At the time of writing, they are involved in negotiations aimed at ensuring that Scotland will be able to retain membership of the EU whilst still being a part of the (dis) United Kingdom. This seems a very unlikely outcome, and little progress has been made in these negotiations, which could yet drag on for months, and possibly even years, before clarity is achieved. Meanwhile, the Scottish Government will be reduced to attempting to plug the welfare gap created by Tory cuts. This solution to the developing humanitarian crisis is not sustainable.

The wider Independence movement, and those on the Scottish left who oppose Independence but who support devolution, are not bound by constitutional niceties, however. They could, and should, take a lead in developing a broad based united front aimed at challenging the right of the Tories to impose their values on people who have consistently voted and fought against a poisonous and selfish neo-liberal ideology that 'knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing'. We understand the very real divisions that still exist within the Scottish left in the wake of the 2014 Referendum, particularly within the trade union movement, which is why we believe it is necessary to build a Scottish united front on the basis of a minimum programme of demands that *all* sections of Scottish progressive and left opinion could unite around.

This would put pressure on the Scottish Government to use every power it has to improve welfare and mitigate cuts; it would highlight the limits on what is allowed under the current and proposed devolution settlements; and it would further pressure the Scottish Government to refuse to implement changes that damage people's life chances. We believe that, in the face of Tory Austerity, the Scottish Left – and anyone who cares about the welfare state - has no alternative but to promote and support such a policy, and also to demand that full powers over welfare provision and employment law be transferred to Holyrood. Because we cannot trust Westminster to look after the interests of the most vulnerable elements within our society. This transfer of power would, at the same time, provide a serious challenge to the drive for welfare 'reform' across the UK.

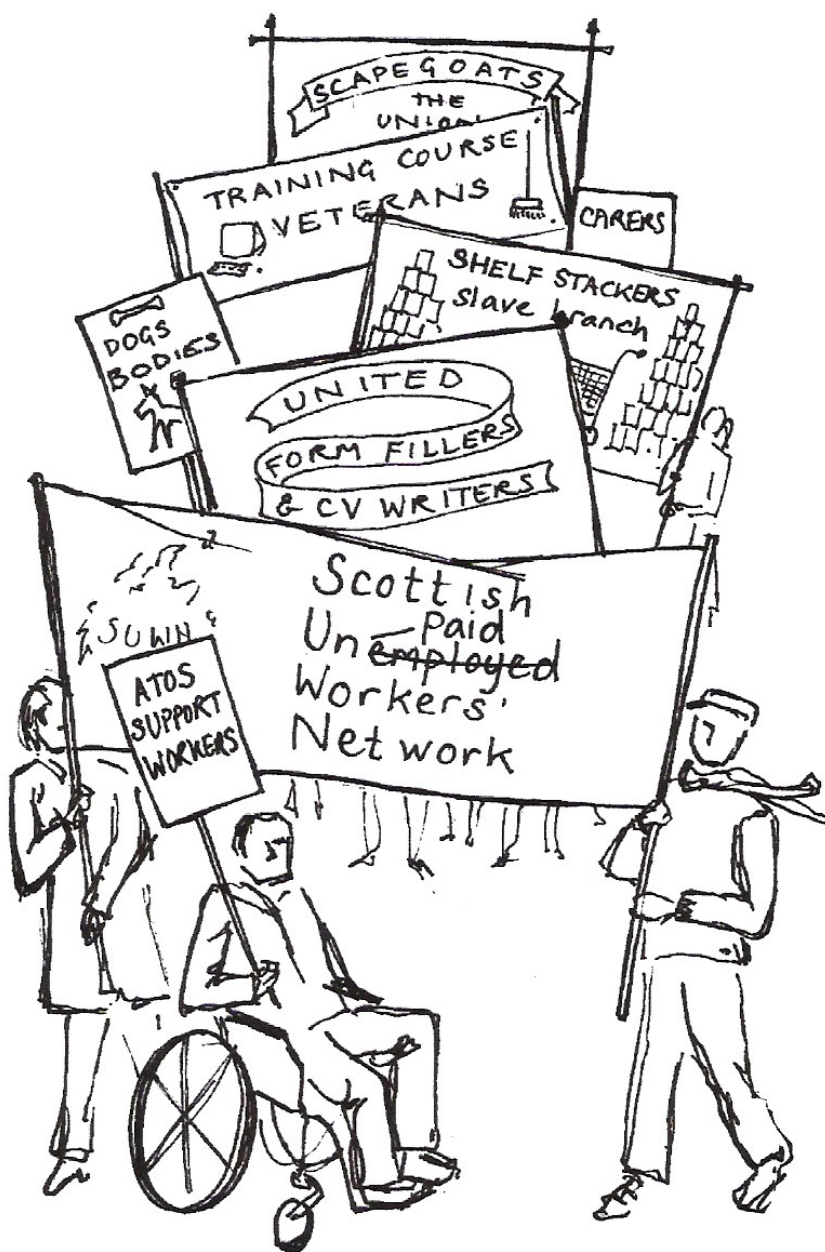
Such a united front would encompass trade unions, community groups, political parties, voluntary organisations, local councils and, ultimately, the Scottish Government itself, organised around the principle of social and political solidarity with those who are at the sharp end of 'Austerity'. We understand fully the very real barriers to the success of such a strategy, but we also understand the urgent necessity of fighting back against the present Tory attempt to bring the Thatcherite revolution to fruition. If Austerity's casualties - the majority of working people as well as the unemployed and disabled - do not unite and fight, then this generation surely deserves the terrible consequences that will follow – the end of the welfare state as we know it, a low wage, low skill economy, and an increasingly authoritarian control and surveillance state.

The reluctance of the current Tory Government to devolve welfare provision lies in the fact that a fully devolved Scottish welfare state would provide the 'threat of a good example', which would lead to mounting



demands for an abandonment of Austerity throughout the rest of the (dis)United Kingdom. Further than this, to stand any chance of success, the Scottish anti-austerity united front would need to look outwards and forge links with progressive, left and civic groups and movements in the other nations and regions of the British Isles, including the TUC, the Labour Party, the Greens and Plaid Cymru.

If such a broad alliance could be constructed, the Scottish Government could well be pushed into a major face-off with Westminster over their refusal to implement the Tory Austerity programme, thereby laying the basis for a serious and unprecedented British constitutional and political crisis that could pave the way for deep-seated political and economic transformation. In so doing, we would be following in the footsteps of previous generations of Scots such as George Buchanan, the architect of 'Scottish resistance theory'. Buchanan justified the right of ordinary people, irrespective of class, status or gender, to take up arms against corrupt or oppressive government. His theory was used as legal justification by the Scottish Covenanters who, in alliance with the English Parliament, took up arms against the absolutist pretensions of Charles I - an act that led directly to the War of the Three Kingdoms, and to the regicide of Charles I. We are not calling for taking up arms, or regicide, but if ordinary Scots of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could take a stand against the oppressive power of government, what price should our generation put on the defence of the 'decent society'? When we consider the damage that has been inflicted on our society over the course of the last thirty to forty years, and the procession of self-interested elites who have governed in the service of big business and the corporations, surely the time has come to act.



## Glossary

**Buroo** – Jobcentre (now confusingly named Jobcentre Plus), from Employment Exchange Bureau (Scots). You can also be ‘on the buroo’, which is similar to being ‘on the dole’.

**Community Work Placement** – A six-month sentence of forced labour for the crime of being unemployed. This is meant to provide benefit to the wider community e.g. through working for Poundstretcher... The last referrals to this particular scheme were made in March 2016.

**DWP** – Department for Work and Pensions, often preceded by an unprintable adjective

**Employability** – Since unemployment is regarded as personal failure, it follows that what is needed is not employment, but more schemes to improve personal employability. Unfortunately, employability is not much help when it comes to paying the bills.

**Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)** – The benefit for people who are unable to work (no, we don’t understand why it’s called that either). People on ESA are divided into two groups. Those accepted as most unfit for work are put in the ‘Support Group’, where they get no support at all, but at least are generally left alone. Those accepted as unfit for work, but only for now, are put in the ‘Work Related Activity Group’ and are given what the DWP paints as support – to make them into future workers - though most people would regard this as harassment.

**Foodbank** – Organism once thought extinct that thrives in harsh conditions

**Fit Note** – What used to be called a sick note. As the official government line is work is good for you, doctors are now expected to focus on addressing your fitness to get back into the workforce (or looking-for-workforce). You are no longer to think of yourself as ‘sick’; you are, temporarily, un-fit for the central purpose of human existence – work. The DWP’s approach to language seems to be another example of their taking George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four as an instruction manual rather than a warning. Orwell described the principles of his fictional language, Newspeak, in an appendix to the novel:

The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium

of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible... Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever.

**Help to Work** – Harassment for those who have already served two years on the Work Programme. This can involve a Community Work Placement, daily visits to the jobcentre, or just being given stupid things to do. (Origin unclear as appears to be unrelated to ‘help’ or getting ‘work’.) This scheme appears to have been quietly dropped.

**Jobseeker’s Allowance** – The grudging term for social security for the unemployed

**Mandatory Work Activity** – Compulsory unpaid work for the unemployed. Each placement lasts four weeks and is supposed to ‘establish the discipline and habits of working life’ - such as expecting not to be paid... This particular scheme ended in March 2016.

**Personal Independence Payment (PIP)** – The new benefit that is replacing Disability Living Allowance. It is meant to cover the extra costs associated with being sick or disabled and can be awarded to people in work as well as people on ESA. The new rules were designed to reduce the numbers eligible significantly. Initially they weren’t cutting out as many people as had been hoped, which is why (until it proved politically inconvenient) the government wanted to tighten them further. Although these further changes were abandoned, there appears to have been a general crackdown to reduce award levels. The application process involves a slightly different ‘medical’ assessment from ESA. The name is a fine example of DWP positivism (‘Independence’ not ‘Disability’) and of putting responsibility on the individual rather than society. This benefit will be devolved from April 2017 and the Scottish Government is currently consulting on how they can improve it.

**Universal Credit** – The new benefit that is being brought in by stages to replace a range of working-age means-tested benefits, and the pet

project of former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith. It serves as a wooden horse to cover a whole range of new restrictions, including bringing some in-work benefits into the DWP's disciplinary regime. We wish that the media paid as much attention to the problems with the rules as they have done to the problems with its IT system. UC is by no means universal (lots of means testing and conditions) and is a credit to no-one.

**Universal Jobmatch** – The DWP's eye into your life – assuming you did as you were told and ticked that box to allow them access. And, also, probably the worst job website in the world. The only matches you'll find here are the same job advertised twenty times – which anyway may no longer exist, if it ever did.

**Volunteer** - Someone forced to work without pay, allowing oneself to be forced to work without pay. (As in: 'If you don't volunteer for this we will take away your benefits.')

**Welfare** – The new term for Social Security, adopted from the stigmatised system of poor relief in the United States. Social solidarity and security are so last century.

**Welfare Reform** – A thorough 'reform' of the Welfare State for those who prefer it dead (see Orwell's *Newspeak* again).

**Work Capability Assessment** – The 'medical' test and interview designed to reduce the number of people getting ESA. If you've not been to one, imagine if your doctor was replaced by a multinational IT company with an eye on the bottom line. Note the confusing positive terminology (as with the Fit Note): when people get turned down for ESA they naturally talk about failing the assessment, but in the DWP's eyes they have actually been passed as fit for work.

**Work Experience** – More unpaid labour for folk on the buroo, but theoretically optional - provided someone takes the trouble to make this clear. There also might be a possible paid job dangled ahead - but possibly not when your 'employer' can get more labour for free.

**Work Programme** – A system of government-sponsored harassment of the unemployed and others who have to do 'Work Related Activity'. The programme consists of two years of various compulsory and generally useless activities. Although this is officially portrayed as getting people into jobs, statistics suggest that the only significant impact on

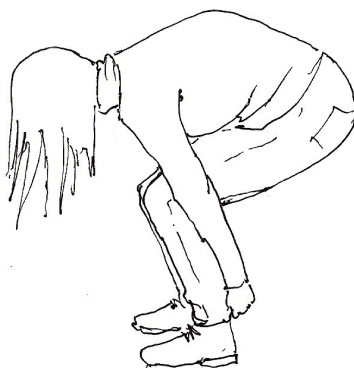
employment comes from the number of people running the system. The unemployment industry is an important growth sector worth hundreds of millions of pounds. This particular programme is coming to an end in April 2017.

**Work Programme Provider** – A private company that turns poverty into profit.

**Workfare** – A composite word of US origin that in the UK is used specifically to refer to work-for-your-benefits schemes, or forced labour for the unemployed. Although used by protestors against these schemes, it is rigorously avoided by the DWP, as though they were ashamed to admit what they are doing. Conveniently rhymes with unfair.

#### *Bootstraps*

How often are the poor and unemployed told to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps - or help themselves without help from others or the state? This phrase has been the subject of extended web-discussion by the American Dialect Society, and it seems that 'the original sense was not simply "to raise or better oneself by one's own unaided efforts", but to try to do so in a ludicrously far-fetched or quixotic manner.' In fact the whole point of the metaphor was that the task is impossible - a bit like looking for work when there are no jobs.



## Know Your Rights Leaflet *(updated July 2016)*



**Unemployed workers are facing more rules and restrictions than at any time since the Second World War. This leaflet has been written to make folk aware of the rights we do still have, and of how we can make sure they are respected. Everything here has been checked and referenced. If you need help arguing your position, please ask us.**

We want to make sure that as many people as possible know their rights - but this is far from enough. We also campaign to expose the real nature of the UK government's attack on the unemployed, and to persuade the wider public and the politicians of the need for a better system.

If you want to join us in anything we do, or if you would like help with a particular problem, or if you just want to find out more, then please ring **07803 052239** or **0789 9798979**, or email **admin@scottishunemployedworkers.net** or find us online at **www.scottishunemployedworkers.net** and **www.facebook.com/scottishunemployedworkersnetwork**



**BRING A FRIEND** You can bring someone with you to any jobcentre or DWP interview. This is your legal right, and we recommend you use it. Your friend may speak on your behalf - including asking questions - if they think this would be in your best interests. We would be happy to come with you to your interview - just contact us through phone, email or facebook - and try not to leave it till the last minute. ([www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/461988/working-with-representatives-sept-2015.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/461988/working-with-representatives-sept-2015.pdf))

**MAKE YOUR OWN RECORD OF YOUR MEETINGS AND KEEP COPIES OF EVERYTHING** You need to know and be able to prove everything you have or have not been told. Ask your advisor to write down everything they are asking you to do. You may need this as evidence if you are sanctioned as a result of a mistake that is



not of your making (e.g. if a meeting time has been changed without telling you). You, or your friend, are allowed to take notes, which you don't have to show the jobcentre. You can also make an audio recording of your interview. You are entitled to make a recording for your own use ([www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/recording\\_meeting\\_with\\_jobcentre](http://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/recording_meeting_with_jobcentre)), but the DWP can be obstructive, and it is generally easier to do this covertly. Lots of documents get 'lost in the system' resulting in delays in benefits, and even in sanctions. You need to be able to prove you are not at fault. Keep all letters from the jobcentre. Record or make notes of all phone calls - send a letter or email afterwards confirming what was discussed when you can. Make copies of all letters or forms you send or give to the DWP. (If you have a camera or smartphone you can photograph these.)

**BEWARE UNIVERSAL CREDIT** This is replacing Jobseeker's Allowance for increasing numbers of people – generally to their disadvantage. It is worth checking if you are in one of the qualifying groups as the DWP can make mistakes (see [www.citizensadvice.org.uk/scotland/benefits/universal-credit/before-you-apply/universal-credit-eligibility](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/scotland/benefits/universal-credit/before-you-apply/universal-credit-eligibility) - it's complicated). You won't receive your first Universal Credit payment for 6-8 weeks. When a benefit is delayed you can ask for a **Short Term Benefit Advance**. You have to prove your financial need, and you will have to pay the money back by deductions from future payments. If you have asked for an advance and been refused you can ask your local council for a grant from the **Scottish Welfare Fund**.

**MAKE SURE YOUR CLAIMANT COMMITMENT IS REASONABLE AND REALISTIC** This – which used to be called a Jobseeker's Agreement – states what you will do in order to receive your benefits. It should not make unreasonable demands, such as applying for an absurd number of jobs each week, and must take account of your circumstances, e.g. care arrangements, ill health, disabilities, problems with reading or using a computer. Don't be pressed into agreeing to something that can be shown to be unreasonable, and if you think that's already happened ask to renegotiate (we can help). You can try and suggest your own choice of voluntary work or courses. Most people on Universal Credit are expected to agree to spend 35 hours a week in jobsearch activities, but if it comes to appealing a sanction, remember that the law only requires you to 'take all reasonable action for the purpose of obtaining paid work', even if that takes less than the stipulated number of hours. ([www.legislation.gov.uk/uk/si/2013/376/pdfs/uk/si\\_20130376\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uk/si/2013/376/pdfs/uk/si_20130376_en.pdf), p51 clause 95) For possible jobsearch activities see [scottishunemployedworkers.net/universal-credit](http://scottishunemployedworkers.net/universal-credit).

**CHECK ALL MANDATED ACTIVITIES ARE REASONABLE** You may be issued with a **Jobseeker's Direction** requiring you to do specific things, or mandated to go on the **Work Programme**. Anything you are made to do is supposed to be reasonable in your particular circumstances and the DWP must follow strict procedures; if not you have grounds for complaint. ([www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/what\\_procedure\\_must\\_jobcentre\\_ad](http://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/what_procedure_must_jobcentre_ad); [scottishunemployedworkers.net/the-work-programme-a-survival-guide](http://scottishunemployedworkers.net/the-work-programme-a-survival-guide))



**AVOID UNIVERSAL JOBMATCH** The DWP's computerised job search contains large numbers of jobs that don't exist, are out of date, or are simply duplicates. Like most tasks, its main purpose seems to be to use up time rather than help find work. Signing up to Universal Jobmatch (UJM) is not mandatory. You can never be made to sign up on your own computer or phone, and unless you have been issued with a Jobseeker's Direction that states you must use the system you have the right to refuse altogether. The manual for Jobcentre staff (the Universal Jobmatch Toolkit) states that they can only give such a Direction if it is 'reasonable in terms of improving the claimant's employment prospects **and** the claimant being able to use the service' (3:41). They have to consider your health, language and numeracy skills, and internet access. You can ask for UJM to be taken out of your Claimant Commitment, but if you have said you'll use it and don't you may be sanctioned. Data Protection law states that you can never be made to allow the DWP access to check and spy on your account. (Even if you have already set up an account you can un-tick the boxes that let them see it.) ([www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/universal\\_jobmatch\\_toolkit\\_2](http://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/universal_jobmatch_toolkit_2), Chapter 3, 38-73)

**IF YOU MISS AN APPOINTMENT OR ACTIVITY – EXPLAIN WHY** To avoid getting a sanction, you need to give 'good cause' within 5 working days. Give your explanation to the Jobcentre in writing (keep a copy). (For some JSA sanctions, you should get another 14 days to provide evidence if they are thinking of sanctioning you.)

**IF YOU ARE SANCTIONED – CHALLENGE THE DECISION**, and if your benefit has been stopped, make a **Rapid Reclaim** (and make sure the council doesn't stop your Housing Benefit). The first step in challenging any DWP decision is to demand a **Mandatory Reconsideration**. This means it has to be looked at again by another person within the DWP. Explain in writing why you think you should not have been given the sanction and give your letter to the Jobcentre - most have no special form. (Keep a copy.) You should also apply for a **Hardship Payment** – ask the Jobcentre for the form. This is even meaner than JSA, is not given to everyone and is rarely given for the first two weeks. If you are on Universal Credit, Hardship Payments are given as loans and not grants, and you have to apply monthly. You can ask the council for a **Scottish Welfare Fund** grant to cover the gap while you wait for the Payment. If the Mandatory Reconsideration doesn't work you can take your case to appeal. It will then be heard by a tribunal independent of the DWP. **MANY PEOPLE GIVE UP AT THIS STAGE. BUT IF YOU STICK WITH IT YOU HAVE A GOOD CHANCE OF SUCCESS.** Check the DWP have followed procedure, and show that your behaviour is 'reasonable' even if you have not followed every step in your claimant commitment. For more information on challenging sanctions see: [www.cpag.org.uk/content/ask-cpag-online-challenging-sanctions](http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/ask-cpag-online-challenging-sanctions). There are set time limits for appeals etc., but if the DWP has not kept to the rules (e.g. not told you you have been sanctioned) then it is **always** worth putting in a complaint, even outside these limits. When sanctioned, you still need to keep signing on and doing the tasks set or you'll be sanctioned further. If you are on Universal Credit, any further sanctions that you get while you are still on a sanction will no longer start immediately but will get added on to the end.

**AVOID ZERO HOURS CONTRACTS** If you are on JSA (but not Universal Credit) you can't be made to take jobs that have zero hours contracts. You should also be able to argue that it is not 'reasonable' to expect you to take jobs of only limited hours. ([www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/zero\\_hours\\_contracts\\_2](http://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/zero_hours_contracts_2))

**AVOID FORCED LABOUR (WORKFARE)** If you are told to do an unpaid work placement, first check if it is mandatory. And beware activities that are non-mandatory but that you can't leave once started – e.g. a Sector Based Work Academy placement. If you find your placement is mandatory you can still refuse to sign the documents that are needed for them to process it. You have to show willing to do everything else, but when you are presented with the paperwork you can say that you will not be signing, as is your right. You will be sent a letter accusing you of failing to comply, to which you need to respond that you have done everything asked except sign the documents, which you have a right not to do. (See [scottishunemployedworkers.net/the-work-programme-a-survival-guide](http://scottishunemployedworkers.net/the-work-programme-a-survival-guide).)

**IF YOU HAVE BEEN REFUSED ESA, PUT IN FOR A MANDATORY RECONSIDERATION, THEN SIGN ON, AND GET A DOCTOR'S NOTE**

If you have been turned down for ESA because you didn't get enough points from your Work Capability Assessment you can ask for a Mandatory Reconsideration. While this is looked at, the only way you can receive any benefits is by signing on for Jobseekers' Allowance – even though you know you are not fit for work! This won't affect the Reconsideration decision. You can then ask the doctor for a note to say that you are not able to work – what DWP logic now calls a 'fit note'. (If you're on JSA you can get a note for an Extended Period of Sickness of up to 13 weeks.)

**ASK FOR THE EXTRA HELP YOU NEED** When the DWP has left you destitute you can still get help. Charities provide cooked meals most days, and welfare advisors can refer you to food-banks for basic supplies. They may also be able to get you help with fuel charges, e.g. an advance from your supplier. You can ask your local council for help from the **Scottish Welfare Fund**. This gives crisis grants, generally in the form of vouchers. If you are only getting hardship payments, you may still be able to get an interest-free Budgeting Loan or Advance for one-off essential items from the DWP, paid back off future benefits. Ask the Jobcentre for a form, or download from [www.gov.uk/budgeting-loans/how-to-claim](http://www.gov.uk/budgeting-loans/how-to-claim). When you ask for help this doesn't just help you and your family. It creates a record of what UK government policies are doing and provides important evidence in the campaign against their attack on welfare.

**ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE NOT ALONE** Please talk to our activists, and pick up our list of advice agencies in your area.

**KNOW YOUR RIGHTS, DEMAND YOUR RIGHTS  
AND THEN DEMAND SOMETHING BETTER!**

## Appendix B

# In place of Workfare

From 1 April 2017, 'Scotland will have the power to design and deliver its own employability services for disabled people and those at risk of long-term unemployment'. In September 2015, the Scottish Government held a public consultation on what should replace the current system. Below is our submission:

## Creating a Fairer Scotland: Employability Support A response from the Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network

We appreciate the generally holistic approach taken by the Scottish Government's discussion paper. We also appreciate the difficulties of putting it into practice when the core of the system, including the powers to sanction, remains with Westminster. It will require some skilled drafting for the new Scottish employability programme to be even half as different from what we have now as it needs to be. That is not our area of expertise, but we can say from our own experience what works and what doesn't.

The current system has not only scored miserably by its own criteria but is widely loathed by very many of those who have to go through it, for whom it is regarded not as help but as punishment. We want to see an end to people being made to waste hours doing often menial tasks that make little contribution to their chances of getting paid work, and that seem better calculated to destroy self-esteem than to build skills and confidence.

### **A system that is designed to help people must be voluntary.**

The vast majority of people who are out of work do want to work, so if services are readily available and helpful they will be used and used constructively. If 'support' becomes mandatory, with refusal of 'support' being punishable, the dynamic is completely changed. Trust is destroyed and what should be help, becomes a system of disciplining and punishment; a system that frequently prevents people from doing the activities that they really find useful. Even organisations established with a genuine supporting ethos tend to get corrupted once they become part of a mandatory system.

**Support should be geared to each person's needs.** While this should

be a prerequisite of genuine support, the current system has created numerous tasks for tasks' sake. This has been the result of linking 'employability' to a disciplinary regime, and also of the drive to turn employment support into measurable and marketable commodities. Appropriate support that develops people's potential – to the benefit of themselves and the wider economy – is also only possible if people are not being forced to take the first job available.

**Support should be given through the public sector and with a public sector ethos.** Private sector involvement has encouraged tokenism and the cherry-picking of easier 'cases'. Private sector involvement together with compulsion has been the worst possible combination. With their 'customers' guaranteed, there has been little incentive for companies to respond to 'customers' demands – or even, in cases we have come across, to provide competent training in basic computer skills.

**There should be no place for 'work for benefits' or 'workfare'.** For any employability system to be successful it must show respect to the people who use it. This means awarding them a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. A minimum wage is meaningless if it does not apply to everyone. If a system is serious about trying to build up people's confidence, then it needs to treat them fairly. Workfare abuses and takes advantage of the unemployed, and it uses them to undercut paid jobs. Many people already do an enormous amount of volunteering in their local community (both formal and informal) and there is no problem with that – so long as it really is voluntary and doesn't displace paid work. Current policies have even succeeded in corrupting once purely voluntary organisations by bringing them into a system where reluctant 'volunteers' get punished. A genuinely supportive alternative would encourage genuine voluntary activity, both through making people aware of what they could do and by allowing them time to take part.

**Disabled people who are able to work need a level playing field.** This means help that makes it easier for employers to take on disabled workers, and for disabled workers to do their work. **At the same time, people who are not able to work should not be compelled to carry out other tasks.** As with the unemployed – and also parents of young children – employability support should be voluntary.

These are the main points that should underlie any fairer system. We would also add, from our experience, that incentives targeted to encourage the employment of any one group – such as under 25s – can

end up merely benefiting them at the expense of everyone else.

In very many cases, it is sadly misleading to think of the jobcentre 'coaches' as providing anything in the way of real help. This means that an effective and independent system that gives genuine support is urgently needed.

## DWP Rules

### The right to be accompanied

'Claimants accessing Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) benefits and services can have someone to accompany them to act on their behalf. DWP will treat the person acting on behalf of the claimant with the same customer standards as the claimant...

'A customer representative is any person or organisation acting on behalf of or making enquiries for the customer. The representative could be helping a customer in several ways, including progress chasing, helping them make a claim, seeking an explanation of entitlement and how it has been decided, representing them with a reconsideration or appeal, or helping them manage their finances. This can be at any stage of the customer's business with DWP. Representatives may include:

- advice or welfare rights organisations
- professionals such as social workers, community nurses or doctors
- family members or friends'

Letter from DWP dated 24 February 2014 in response to a FOI request, <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/196795/response/486014/attach/3/Response%20634.pdf>

### The right to take notes at a Work Capability Assessment

The section below is reproduced from the DWP's 'Handbook' for Work Capability Assessment assessors, as revised 9 February 2015, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/408884/WCA\\_Handbook\\_Version\\_7\\_-\\_030315.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/408884/WCA_Handbook_Version_7_-_030315.pdf), p 147

#### **Taking of Notes during an Assessment by Claimant or Companion**

From time to time you may encounter a situation where the claimant is accompanied by a companion and either the claimant or companion may wish to take notes during the assessment.

Persons who are entitled to be in attendance are always entitled to take notes. This is because it is for their own purposes and not an official record of the process.

To attempt to deny the right to do so is likely to be contrary to Human Rights legislation.

To request a copy of the notes is unlikely to be helpful – it will place you in the position where you will be obliged to review the notes and comment on their reliability.

However, you should record in the medical report, the fact that notes were being taken. The following warning should also be given and the fact documented in the report. LiMA will offer the phrases as an optional addition.

For any handwritten report, on the rare occasions when this is necessary, the report should be annotated on the front cover.

The form of words you should use has been clarified on legal advice. Please replace any copies of existing desk aids you hold with the one incorporating the following form of words:

“Where notes are taken by you, we consider it of assistance to both myself, as the examining HCP, and yourself to point out the following:

1. It is your right to take notes for your own use and benefit.
2. The notes will not be included in the Report I make save for the fact that notes were taken and further, they are not accepted by myself or the DWP as an official record of this assessment.
3. If the notes are subsequently produced at any time for any purpose, such as part of an appeal process, I the Examining HCP, my employer and the Dept. of Work and Pensions reserve all rights to challenge anything in the notes in the event we are asked to comment on the content of the notes at a future time.
4. You are free to use your notes as you choose but if you chose to publicise the notes (other than in connection with correspondence with the DWP or under any appeal procedure) I would ask that you do not publicise my name.”

