

HOW WELFARE

WAS

WON



A HISTORY

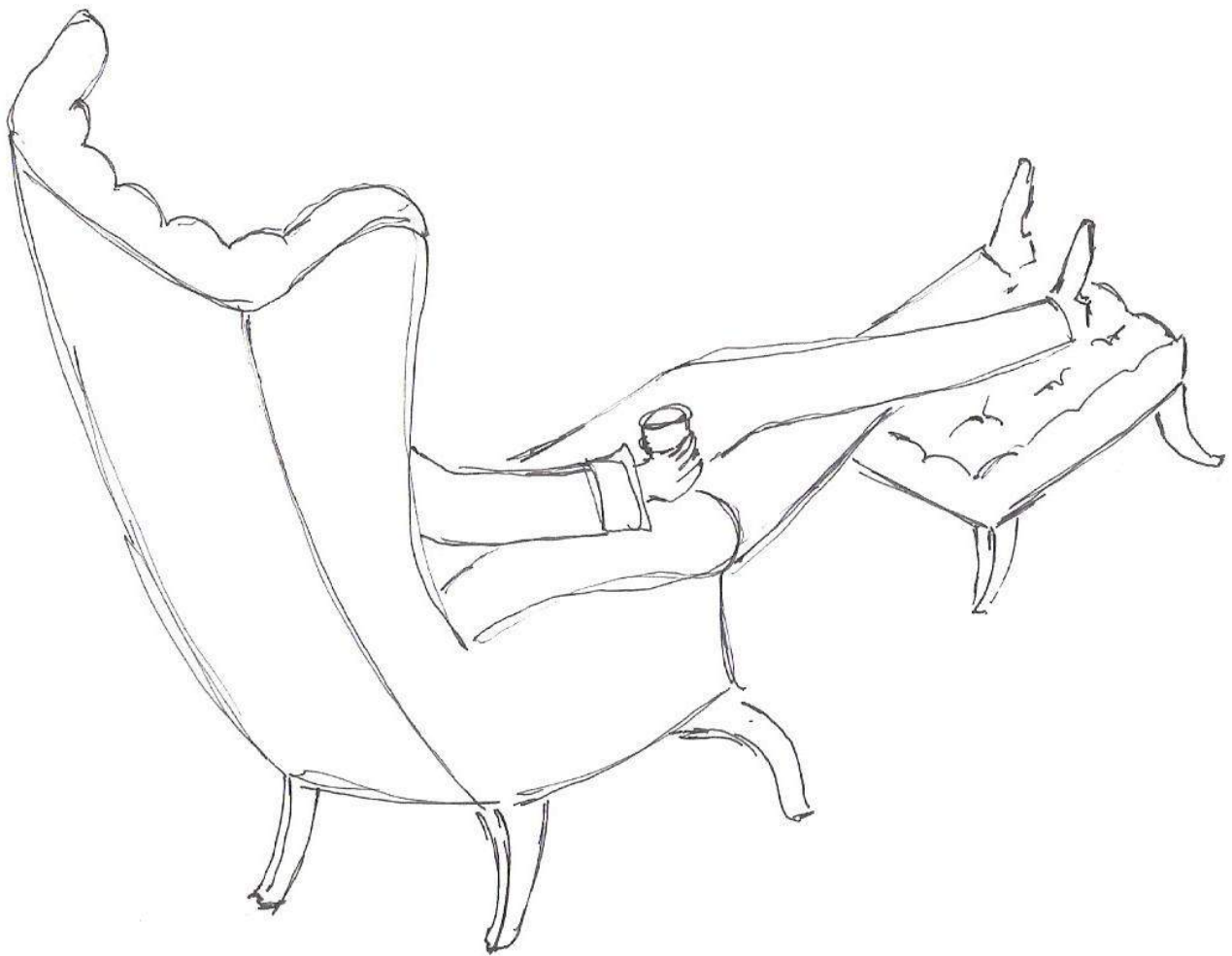
STARRING THE UNEMPLOYED

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. Some parishes did do a little, but often only for people who 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.



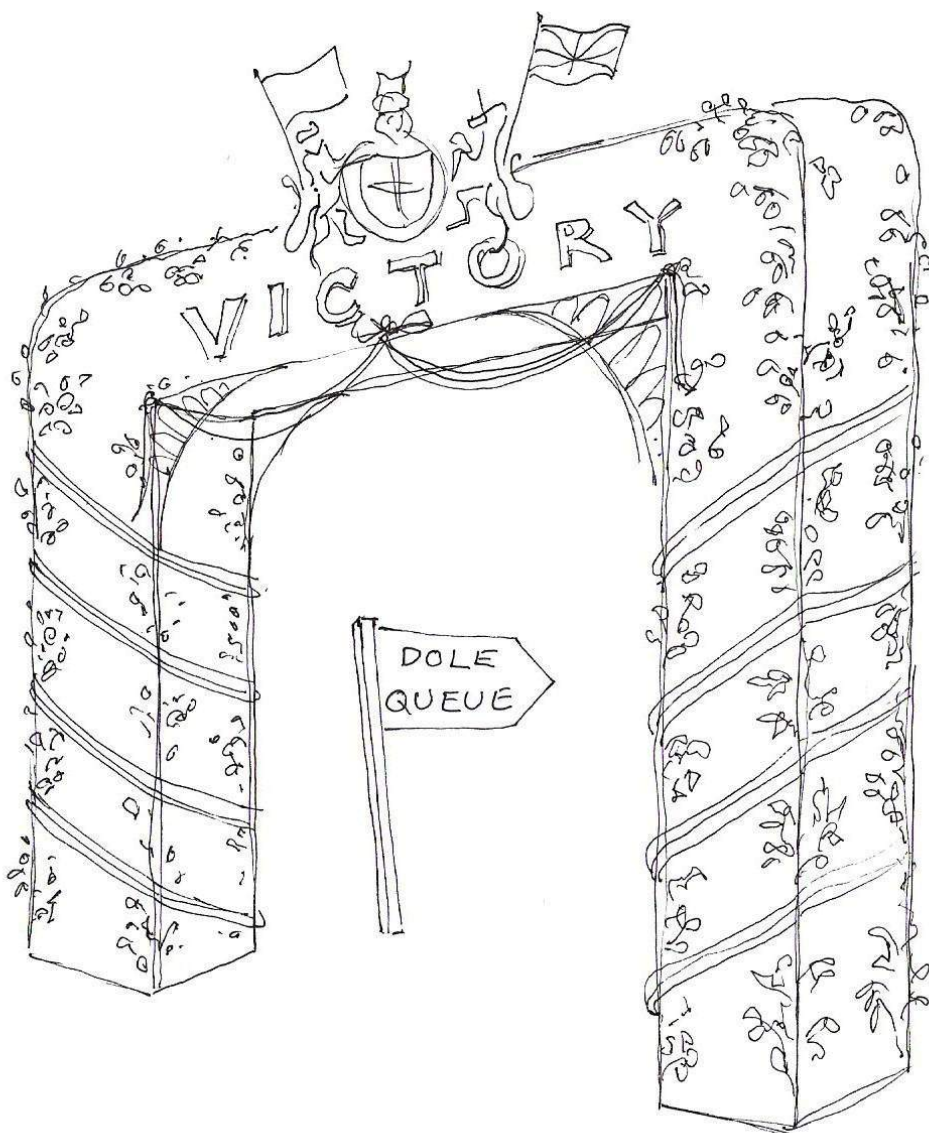
'They should just get rid of the blighters. This idleness is completely immoral!'

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

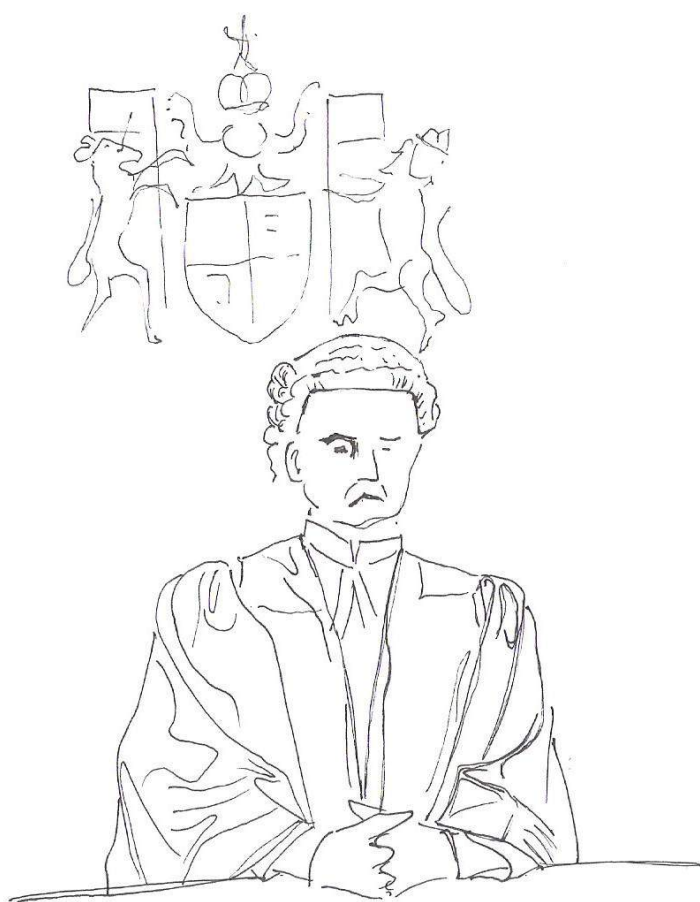
'Of course it's just a temporary fix until the economy gets back to normal.'



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 make them make mistakes 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 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. The work was paid less than trade union wages. The NUWM resisted this 'work test'. In 1928 they helped Glasgow's relief workers go on strike. 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:

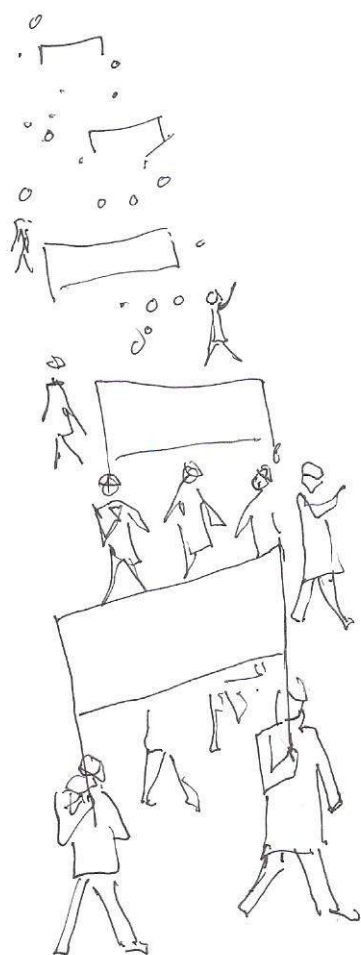
'Me, I used to be a skilled carpenter' 'And I was a stonemason'

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.



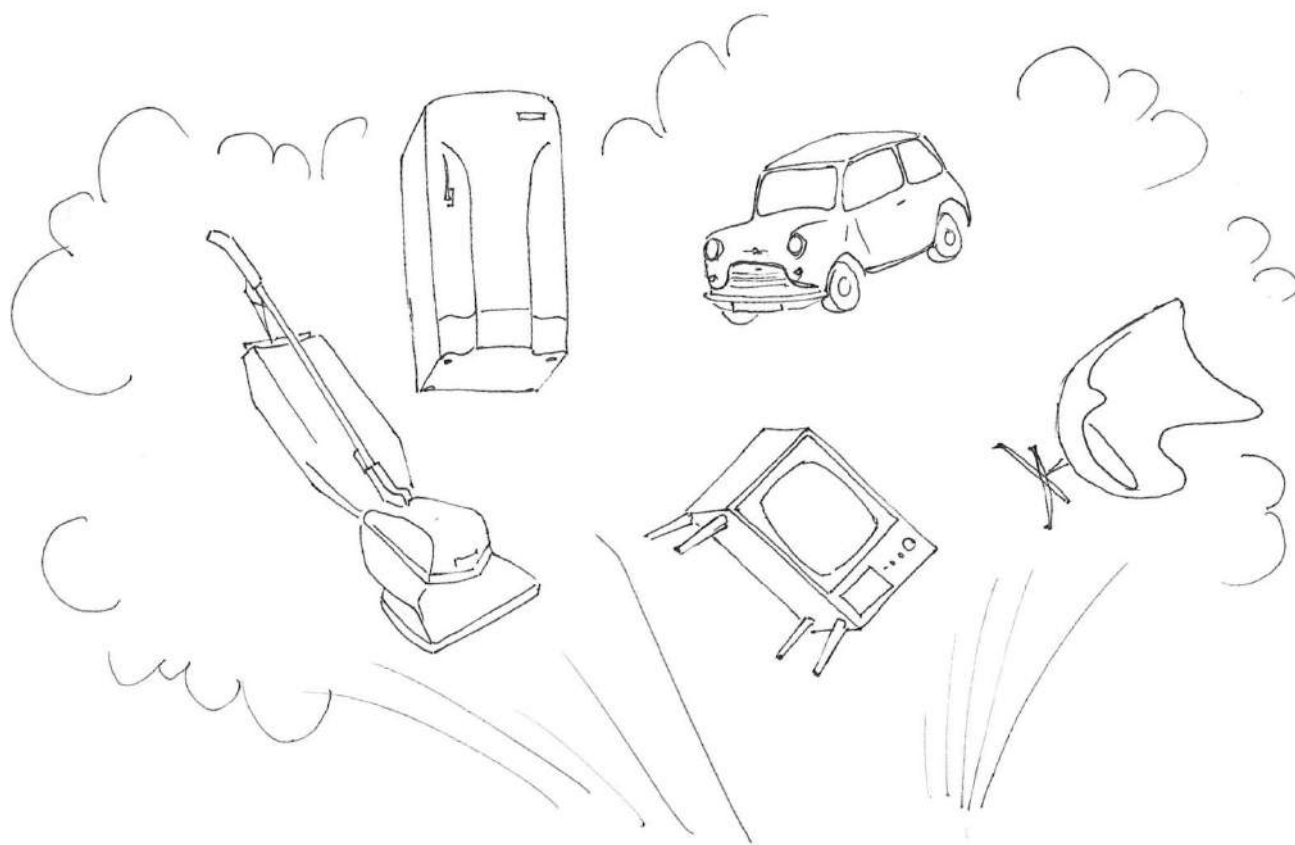
'And that's for saying the state is brutal!'

In 1930, the NUWM had 20,000 members. By 1932 they had 50,000. 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.



THE RETURN OF BEVERIDGE'S 5 GIANT EVILS

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 a wall of propaganda that, once again, portrays the unemployed as immoral

We believe that, in a civilised society, everyone should be able to have a decent job and anyone unable to find work (or unable to work) should get support to lead a decent life.

We are still campaigning...





Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network
www.scottishunemployedworkers.net