



## In this issue:

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and a  
court case

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on the buroo in  
Glasgow

### Three funerals and a court case

It's been a hard winter. We have said a final farewell to three fine campaigners: Albert Mitchell who was active against the Bedroom Tax as well as outside the buroo and whose coffin was draped in the Stobbie4AYE flag that had become almost a part of him; Jen Spark who founded Perth Against Welfare Sanctions and was another anti Bedroom Tax campaigner, and June Paterson who was central to Bin the Bedroom Tax in Dundee. The angels will be getting organised.

We have become experts on funerals, and now we have to mug up on legal procedure. Jobcentres tend to react badly when being told that they should keep to the rules. When SUNW activist, Tony Cox, told Arbroath Jobcentre that it was not reasonable to force a dyslexic and vulnerable claimant to use the computer-based Universal Jobmatch or to apply for five jobs a day, they told him to leave or they would call the police. By the time the police came, Tony was already outside the building, having secured a promise of a further meeting, but he was arrested anyway. He is charged with 'threatening behaviour', 'not giving his name to the police' and 'resisting arrest'. This has serious implications for him, and is also an attack on the fundamental and legal right of claimants to have an advocate with them at these crucial and often hostile meetings.

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### *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!*

*SRG*

jobcentreplus



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## *An everyday true story of life on the buroo in Glasgow*

I was out of work for nearly three years before I got my current job. I place at least some of the blame for this at the feet of Ingeus's back-to-work programme, but that's another story.

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-35s 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 indignance and was becoming quite upset, while the interviewer looked like

he wanted the ground to just swallow him up. 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 Loan 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 Loan 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 Loan 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 Loans 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 Loan 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 Loans people were wrong. Again, the Crisis Loan people said the Jobcentre were wrong. Again, the Jobcentre turned it back to the Crisis Loans 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 Loan, but that they had lately seen an increasingly high number of people who had been told on the Crisis Loan 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 Loan 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 20 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 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 22<sup>nd</sup> to January 5<sup>th</sup> 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.



*The Jollypop Lady*

### ***continued from page 1***

The SUWN stands firmly behind Tony and we are receiving messages of support from as far as Australia. On the day of his appearance at Forfar Sheriff Court there will be SUWN protestors outside, and there will be other protests outside jobcentres across the UK, including Edinburgh, London, Cardiff, Liverpool and Dorset. Thank you to our good friends in Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty (ECAP) and Boycott Workfare for spreading the word. Our petition, <https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/advocacy-is-not-a-crime-1>, has over a thousand signatures (please add yours if you've not yet done so). With every day bringing more accounts of destitution and persecution at the hands of the DWP, and announcements of further screw-tightening by the UK Government, concerted UK-wide action is a priority. We are resolved to strengthen the links that have been made.



*Protesting outside Arbroath Jobcentre  
(pictures: Ailsa Weir)*

None of this has stopped us from continuing to expand on our campaigning and advocacy work outside the buroo. Thanks to Tony's organising and to a growing team of volunteers - from self-taught advocates to film makers and our own soup dragon - we have been holding regular stalls outside the buroo in Dundee and have now begun to have a regular presence in Arboath. We are developing an effective combination of campaigning and welfare work and hope to be able to work with other groups who want to get similar activities going in their area. There are a great many people who need welfare rights advice who aren't searching

out office-based advisors. There are also many people who don't know about - or don't want to believe - what the UK Government is doing to the Welfare State and to that section of its citizens who have the misfortune to be poor. Before Christmas we put out a report on the impact of Benefit Sanctions in Dundee

([http://scottishunemployedworkers.net/media/Sanctioned\\_Voices\\_-\\_final\\_version.pdf](http://scottishunemployedworkers.net/media/Sanctioned_Voices_-_final_version.pdf)), which demonstrated - among many other worrying things - how many people have been deprived of all support for failing to turn up to a meeting they had never been told about; and we plan further research and reports.



*Picketing the Sally Army, Broughty Ferry  
(picture: Karen Brownlee)*

We've also co-ordinated with ECAP to protest against the Salvation Army's use of forced unpaid labour by benefit claimants, and Saturday shoppers in genteel Broughty Ferry were surprised by an impromptu march complete with placards bearing biblical texts such as 'the labourer is worthy of his reward' (1 Timothy 5:18). There are more protests in the pipeline. We are none of us experts, but we are developing new skills and knowledge all the time - and with them a new anger and determination.



*At the NO to Austerity demo organised by the SUWN, Dundee SNP and Stobbie4AYE to coincide with the Autumn Budget  
(picture: Grant Campbell)*