



In this issue:

Universal Chaos – Coming to a Jobcentre near you

Mhairi Black shows why we need to change this system

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Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network

Time for *Direct* Action

With the Tories smugly back in Westminster, what can we do? We are looking at 5 years under a UK government that attacks the Welfare State with as much delight as ISIS attacks edifices constructed by earlier civilisations. Their promised £12 Billion of further cuts to welfare are so severe that even they are finding it hard to find anything left to cut. These are cuts that we didn't vote for in Scotland, from a party that only got 37% of the total UK vote; a party that only got this electoral support in England due to a democratic system corrupted by the lack of any effective opposition, and by a mass media that faithfully echoed the government narrative. The Scottish lion has roared, but the SNP's options in opposition are limited. If we are to give substance to that roar we need to give critical support to our pride of SNP MPs. This doesn't mean waiting on their lead. Democracy doesn't stop at the ballot box. We need to be active in our communities making sure that Tory attacks on people's lives and livelihoods can't happen. Already the trade unions have been talking about the need for non-violent direct action if the Tories impose more restrictions on the way they can operate. We need to take similar actions in other areas such as welfare. Occupations of companies exploiting unpaid benefit claimants will be just a start. Our elected representatives may be reluctant to give public support to such actions, but they need to feel the people of Scotland behind them, demonstrating that the roar is backed by strength. We need to make sure that Tory cuts and attacks are inoperable; we need to spread the call for direct action; we need to generate pressure for the maximum of powers to be transferred to Scotland; and we need to ensure that the Scottish Government uses every power that it can get to demonstrate by example that a better society is possible.

STRIVING

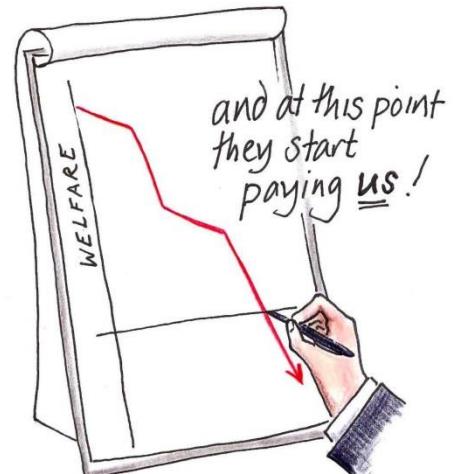
It disnae mean we dinnae work
just because we'll no get paid
As they destroy society
through folk like us it gets remade

Poverty's nae good for health
Destitution's purgatory
Stress destroys relationships
Depressed - well yeh! - wha wouldnae be?

But, can we afford to rest?
Without spare cash there's mair to do.
We have to help each other oot -
plus pointless tasks set by the burroo

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



OSBORNE'S ECONOMIC MIRACLE

So listen up Jobcentre Plus,
Killers of humanity,
Dinnae you look doon on us
We're striving for the right to be!

Please find us on

www.scottishunemployedworkers.net
www.facebook.com/scottishunemployedworkersnetwork
www.facebook.com/groups/scottishunemployedworkersnetwork
and contact us on **07803 052239** or **0789 9798979** or at
admin@scottishunemployedworkers.net

Sarah Glynn looks at Universal Credit, or

UNIVERSAL CHAOS – COMING TO A JOBCENTRE NEAR YOU

Universal Credit, the benefit that replaces and combines out-of-work and in-work benefits, is being rolled out across the UK. The first people signed onto the benefit in each area will be new single claimants, but in the pilot areas it has begun to be extended to other groups. The inexorable and hugely expensive problems with the IT system have been well-covered in the mainstream media, but have these distracted attention from fundamental problems with the benefit itself?

We don't have to look far to find plenty of reasons to be seriously worried, but first I want to look at the limits of the system's much touted positive points. It is true that Universal Credit will enable those doing part time work to keep more of their hard-earned money, and not see it almost all cancelled out by benefit reductions as at present; but the improvements are hardly inspiring. Above a certain sum low earners on Universal Credit will still effectively be forfeiting 2/3 of each extra pound earned, and when a couple receives universal credit the second earner will keep considerably less than they do now.

The other potential advantage is that people moving in and out of unemployment and low-paid work will not have to keep signing on and off. However, in bringing everything together as one system, Universal Credit will extend the regime of claimant commitments and sanctions to include in-work benefits. Currently, a single person over 25 who works 30 hours a week qualifies for Working Tax Credit. Under the new regime, the crucial measure is not the number of hours worked, but the total amount earned. If you earn less than the equivalent of 35 hours on the minimum wage you will be required to look for more or better-paid work, or lose your benefit payments. And when it comes to looking for work it's the hours that count. Every hour under 35 that you are not doing paid work you are expected to spend on your job-search. The same as for other 'Jobseekers', your 'work coach' will make sure you comply. There are also more

demands being put on people responsible for looking after a child. Currently you can get Tax Credits for part time work until the child is 16 or leaves full-time education. To receive Universal Credit the child's main carer will be required to look for full-time work when the child is 13, and they will be called in to discuss plans for future work as soon as the child's first birthday. So much for the Tories' regard for the family.

The way the rules have been extended to cover self-employment will make this virtually impossible. The persecution of the unemployed has driven many people to set up their own small businesses where often-meagre incomes are bolstered by Working Tax Credits; but now these people face major financial hardship and a mountain of paperwork. Each month's Universal Credit will be calculated separately and profits or losses will not be carried over from one month to the next. The highest rate of Universal Credit they receive will be based on them earning the equivalent of 35 hours on the minimum wage, even if they actually earn much less. And if they are deemed not to be earning enough, they will be forced to look for and take other work. So much for the government's regard for entrepreneurship.

Vital concerns about the way Universal Credit will be implemented have been raised over a long time – but that doesn't mean that they have been addressed. Four major sources of concern are payments made to the household and not the individual, payments made monthly rather than fortnightly, payments for rental costs being made direct to the tenant, and insistence on a computer-based system.

The potential problems arising from joint payments have been highlighted by organisations working with victims of domestic abuse. Even in the most healthy of relationships people should have the option to be financially independent, but for Universal Credit they will have to produce evidence that split payments are necessary. How will an abused partner be

able to produce such evidence, and why should they have to? This could also be a problem if one partner has an addiction, or is simply careless with money.

The government likes to claim that monthly payments will encourage responsible budgeting, but budgeting is very difficult when your income is extremely low. When you always have to go for the cheapest option, the temptation to splash out when you have a bit of money in your pocket can be hard to resist. It might not be anything that others would consider extravagant – perhaps a day out for the kids – but if that money is meant to last you for a month, the result can be catastrophic.

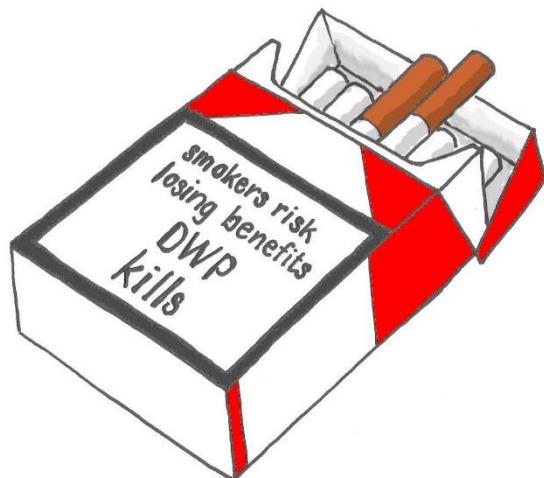
It can be particularly catastrophic if the money spent included the rent. And the prospect of this has knock-on effects for all low-income tenants. Private landlords will refuse to house people on benefits, and social landlords will find it harder to balance the books.

As Universal Jobmatch has demonstrated, when a population with a high proportion of people unable to use or easily access a computer - as well as with significant levels of illiteracy and dyslexia - is forced to rely on a computerised system, casualties are high. We can expect to see a lot more failed claims and stress-induced depression.

Less-noticed, is the change being made to hardship payments – the very minimal payments that can be given to people that the system has made destitute through sanctions. These are discretionary and claimants can be grilled as to their eating habits and why they didn't choose something cheaper. Under Universal Credit these payments are treated as loans, repayable from future benefits or wages. With sanctions lasting up to three years we can expect to see an increase in the shoplifting of basic goods.

Claimants first signing up to the system will undergo additional trauma. They will have to wait a month and seven days before receiving their first payment. And in order to get a subsistence level advance they will need to supply bank statements

and submit themselves to an inquisition on their past spending patterns – including such luxuries as booze and fags.



To make matters worse the staff who are administering the benefit feel insufficiently trained in the complexities of the new system and under constant stress from management that demands they deal with a targeted number of cases. Stress causes errors, and sanctioning can be quicker than sorting out problems. The unhappy DWP telephone worker who I spoke to told me that her job involved ringing people up to say they had been sanctioned, without being able to explain properly why. If the claimant starts to raise difficult questions some call handlers will terminate the call and mark the caller as 'potentially violent'. Because the new rules have been introduced in stages, DWP 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.' Workers are told that they are representatives of government, even outside work. A critical comment on social media could cost them their job.

And, of course, the system is being introduced under an overall regime where cutting welfare has become the ultimate virtue.

In response to a question from the SUWN at a public meeting in Johnstone

MHAIRI BLACK SHOWS WHY WE NEED TO CHANGE THIS SYSTEM

'The issue of sanctions is one that I am actually very familiar with myself. I volunteer at a mission in Glasgow where we get some of the most heart-breaking individuals I have ever met in my life coming in with a whole wide variety of problems. And there's one wee guy... he's now my best pal... but this week he wasn't in, and I worried about him 'cos I knew that he would be going for this interview. The following week he did come in, and I says to him, 'what happened, how did it go?', and he just burst into tears. A grown man burst into tears, crying. And what he said to me was... because he had to travel - he couldn't get to the jobcentre otherwise - ... he went without travel to come into the mission that week so he could afford to get a bus [to the Jobcentre]. Because of that, he hadn't eaten for 3 days... And before he went into his interview he fainted; and because he fainted he was ten minutes late, and they sanctioned him for 13 weeks... That parliament is filled with people who are so out of touch that they have no idea the pain that their policies are inflicting. And the saddest thing is, I wish I could say he is one guy that fell through the net, but he's not. This is something that's happening continually all through this

country. People are being treated as commodities, they're being treated as statistics, and they're told – the thing that really winds me up – is people who are unemployed are told that they're worthless. They're told that they're failures. Unemployment is not a failure on the individual's part, it is a failure on the government's part that refuses to supply them with a job. That's where the failure lies, and that's where the blame lies...

'A woman in the *Paisley Daily Express* – and it broke my heart actually when I read it, 'cos she hit it on the head - she said that... going to the jobcentre, makes her feel worthless... and they talk about her like she's not there. There are people, strangers, who are in total control of her money. And the thing that really punched me was she said 'It makes me feel like I did when I was in a domestic abusive relationship. I was told what I could and couldn't have. I was told to be thankful, grateful, for the little that I did get; and told you should be struggling, you should be living anxiously. That's what it feels like.' The fact that we've got people feeling like that, surely that is reason enough to start changing this system.'



Ailsa Weir speaks for the SUWN at Dundee May Day