



In this issue:

Being Under-Employed

What is a Community Trade Union?

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Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network

Politicians singing off the same hymn sheet?

Even as economic predictions for the coming year get progressively bleaker, and the chances of finding any work - let alone a decent secure job at a decent wage - recede even further into the distance, we still have a long way to go to get our politicians to acknowledge that the cause of the rising benefits bill is not idleness, but lack of jobs. Politicians from both Labour and the Conservatives have competed to pander to (and reinforce) popular prejudice and blame those who 'choose' not to work. The following quotes are from Ed Miliband and Liam Byrne for Labour, and David Cameron, Iain Duncan Smith and Chris Grayling for the Conservatives, but it is not easy to guess who said what - *answers are on the back page*.

1. 'The benefit system has created a benefit culture.'
2. 'the overwhelming majority of people... still play by the rules. Working hard. Paying taxes. Obeying the law. Caring for others. Good citizens. But they feel others are not doing the same. They are having to pay the price for the behaviour of an irresponsible minority... they still have to pay taxes to fund the bankers and to fund some people on benefits who aren't bothering to work.'
3. 'If people who are fit for employment, still haven't managed to find a job after the intensive support provided by the work programme, we want them to do community work and get into the habit and routine of work. No one should expect to be able to sit at home doing nothing.'
4. 'bring an end to the something for nothing culture'
5. 'let's restore the idea of "something for something"'



Please find us on

www.scottishunemployedworkers.net

and contact us on

admin@scottishunemployedworkers.net

Seb Thirlway from Glasgow writes about

BEING UNDER-EMPLOYED

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 2 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 15 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 2½ 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 40 and experienced (employers in those workplaces prefer younger, less experienced employees); that I *chose* to be dependent on benefits for the past 2½ 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 very little 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.



Sarah Glynn from Dundee discusses

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY TRADE UNION?

Our first newsletter discussed relations between the Trade unions and the unemployed. Now (on 5th December) Unite, Britain's biggest trade union, has launched its new 'community membership', which will be open to unemployed workers, students and others not in paid employment for 50p a week. This second newsletter will look at how this could help unemployed workers.

Unite has produced a leaflet that lists '15 reasons to join'. (See <http://www.uniteunion.org/PDF/006-foldout-v2.pdf>) These are all useful and practical things, such as a legal helpline and debt counselling, but most are available from other agencies. When SUWN talked to Ellie O'Hagan of Unite, she said that, although the practical benefits of community membership are helpful, the primary motivation behind the scheme was to promote a sense of collectivism in local communities. She explained that Unite hopes to help unemployed people to become community activists.

While initial interest may come from existing Unite members who have lost their jobs, community membership is open to people from all kinds of trade and none. The idea is that they will form community branches of Unite, which will be able to affiliate to local trades councils, like other union branches.

This development is being co-ordinated from London and the first organisational steps are being put in place in Tower Hamlets. Trade union bureaucracies are not known for speed of action, so it may be some time before we see similar organisational structures in Scotland; however, if this new organisation is to work as an effective force for the interests of the unemployed, then it must be built up in co-ordination with local people on the ground, and not simply depend on slow-turning distant bureaucracies. Exactly how quickly and efficiently it becomes established will depend on actions here in Scotland.

£26 a year can't buy much, but it is not negligible when you are on the broo. Unite will have to prove that the union can provide real help with activism and that 'community members' will be welcomed to play a full part in the trade union movement. Unite's press release pledges to 'organise the marginalised and revolutionise British trade unionism'. (http://www.uniteunion.org/news_events/latest_news/community_membership_pledge_to.aspx) This is a big promise which will demand serious engagement with the union's new members.

If you want to get involved and try and make this work, or just want to find out a bit more, you can email community@uniteunion.org or ring 0333 240 9798.



Members of SUWN marched in support of striking public-sector workers in November

Answers to who said what on page one:

1. David Cameron
2. Ed Miliband
3. Chris Grayling (Employment Minister)
4. Iain Duncan Smith (Secretary of State for Work and Pensions)
5. Liam Byrne (Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions)