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Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network

On May Day, workers all over the world celebrate their solidarity and determination to struggle against exploitation; and an increasing number of these workers are unemployed. Unemployment is an integral part of capitalist exploitation. As Marx pointed out over a century and half ago, this 'reserve army of labour' is used to ensure that those workers in jobs obey their bosses for fear of being replaced. Many of today's bosses feel that they can crack down on their employees with impunity, especially as life on the broo is getting increasingly hard. Relative benefit levels have fallen while basic living costs have gone up. And unemployed workers are being forced to spend many hours on fruitless tasks that are nominally meant to help them find work even while there is no work to find. There has been well-warranted publicity given to cases of forced unpaid labour for companies such as Poundland, but as well as this, every day thousands of other unemployed workers are being forced to waste hours of their time, and to open up details of how they spend their day to an increasingly intrusive bureaucracy. Any who fall short of that bureaucracy's rules can find their vital benefits taken away. These benefit sanctions can last for as much as three years; and by the time Universal Credit is introduced unemployed workers will be expected to spend a full 35 hour week looking for work.

In this issue we follow our previous articles on the sanctions regime with a look at how one person managed to regain some control over his own 'work experience' programme. We also look at the Anti Bedroom Tax Campaign, which is gathering widespread support. Unlike the Poll Tax, this Tax (strictly a Housing Benefit cut) only affects 4.4% of Scottish households – those who are in social housing and in receipt of housing benefit and are deemed to have more bedrooms than they 'need'. However its affect on those households and their communities is so sudden and potentially so devastating, and the attack is so patently inspired by class politics, that this latest cut has been greeted by widespread outrage and protest; and these protests can form an important focus of anger against the attack on welfare as a whole.



A spectre is haunting Europe...

Please find us on

www.scottishunemployedworkers.net

(where you can also link to our Facebook Group)

and contact us on **07803 052239** or at

admin@scottishunemployedworkers.net

Sean Cudden, who blogs at skintandangry.wordpress.com, discovers

HOW NOT TO BE BULLIED BY THE DWP

Joe from Glasgow was sanctioned under the rules governing Mandatory Work Activity. He shared his experience of the benefit sanctions regime with me.

Why were you selected for Mandatory Work Activity?

I was selected for Mandatory Work Activity by my jobcentre adviser who claimed I lacked certain skills and needed more experience. My adviser also told me that it was policy now, that if you have been claiming Job Seekers Allowance for more than six months you are automatically referred to Mandatory Work Activity.

Why did you turn down the placement?

I met with a work experience adviser at my local Jobcentre who advised me on work experience and gave me a self-marketing form to send to potential work placements, and told me I can source my own work experience as long as it meets DWP requirements. Through my own initiative I searched for my own work experience and contacted an organisation called Project Scotland in which I spoke to an adviser who informed me that they can offer me a work placement meeting the demands of the DWP, as Project Scotland works in partnership with the government and DWP. Project Scotland matched my skills and experience to a work placement called Fareshare in Glasgow. This was for thirty hours per week and was for a period of three months, and Fareshare is also a voluntary organisation – meeting all the demands of the DWP. Throughout my attendance at my local Jobcentre I spoke to many advisers and explained to all of them that I was in contact with Project Scotland and planning on starting the work experience in January 2013.

I also refused to start mandatory work experience due to the fact that JHP Employability (the work placement sourcer) told me to attend a group

interview at their local office. There were around 20 people – a diverse range of people – we were all told the same thing and the adviser who took the group meeting pointed to posters in the office which gave us reasons why we were there. The reasons included we 'lacked soft skills' and we 'had no discipline for work' also we 'lacked the experience of work'. I refuse to believe that all the 20 people who were referred to JHP lacked all of these skills and experience.



How did the jobcentre react to you not accepting the placement?

I asked to have an interview with my job adviser at my local jobcentre regarding my decision not to attend and to explain the reasons why I was refusing. However, when I attended the interview my adviser informed me that there's nothing she can do, that it is now a matter for a DWP Decision maker. They were not cooperative when I tried to ask to speak to someone regarding my work experience. The staff's tone and language used towards me in the interview was degrading and my adviser ended my interview by stating, 'Well Joseph there's no such thing as free benefits anymore.'

What were the sanctions applied to you?

I was informed of a sanction about a week after I refused to attend. The sanction was for a period of three months. That was without any payment, and even after the three months I would still have to do work experience. The only assistance you are offered is a hardship form to complete, and even that then takes many interviews to get processed.

Did you appeal, and if so how is that going?

I appealed the decision to sanction me by filling out the Jobcentre appeal form, but received a rejection back from my first appeal. However, I then appealed with an appeal letter, and for the second time sent it to a DWP decision maker. I also went to my local MP's office for some advice about my sanction and to seek any help they could offer. The caseworker did help my appeal by writing on my behalf to the DWP in support of my appeal and asking them to overturn the sanction. After sending my appeal letters away to the DWP I waited several weeks until I received a response stating that my benefit has been reinstated and I will have my money back dated. The letter was very vague as to the reasons why they were reinstating my benefits but it was a great relief.

But I then wanted to pursue a complaint against two members of staff who had been my personal advisers, who I believe had been speaking to me in a degrading manner and using comments

that should not be used when speaking to the unemployed. Also I raised issues in the complaint about my experience of JHP Employability and the way they group people together and judge them without assessing them and how that has affected my self-esteem and confidence. At the beginning of this month I was informed by the deputy manager for the DWP Glasgow region over the telephone that my complaint has been processed, and that the two members of staff have been interviewed and disciplined by their line managers. She then passed on her apologies on behalf of the DWP and admitted that errors were made when assessing me and giving me information regarding mandatory work experience. The deputy manager also informed me that she was concerned about the issues I raised about JHP Employability and she would be passing this complaint on to higher management and to government level.

What advice do you have for people in a similar position?

My advice to people who find themselves in a similar position is to know your rights and seek out all the information before you attend interviews about work experience. Keep records of your visits to the job centre and complain about any member of staff who you find acts unprofessionally towards you. Seek advice from your local MP and don't be disheartened, keep appealing and know you are not alone!

You can check your rights at
<http://www.boycottworkfare.org>

volunteer *n.* Someone forced to work without pay. *v.* Allowing oneself to be forced to work without pay. (As in: 'If you don't *volunteer* for this we will take away your benefits.')

work experience *n.* Generally menial task done without pay and of no relevance to existing skills or future job prospects. (As in 'If you don't take this *work experience* opportunity we will take away your benefits.')

home *n.* The place where you live permanently – unless you are a tenant in a private rental or rely on benefits and government thinks your house is too big. (As in 'We don't care if it has been your *home* for 38 years.')

Sarah Glynn looks at

FIGHTING THE BEDROOM TAX

Fighting the Bedroom Tax is important in itself, and also provides a focus for the growing campaign against all welfare cuts.

The first thing is for tenants to appeal against their raised rents, and Govan Law Centre has put together practical advice for tenants making appeals, with suggested legal arguments – which you can order from their website www.govanhillc.com/brtax. In individual cases these may succeed in reversing the tax, but this is also a collective tactic to delay and clog the system.

Many people will refuse to be forced from their homes, and even those prepared to move may be unable to find anywhere to go to. As people on benefits already find it hard to make ends meet, a very high proportion of these will be unable to pay the extra charges even if they try to. They will fall into arrears and may eventually face eviction. These tenants will include people taking a deliberate stand against the tax – campaigners are calling for mass non-payment – and others who have just been caught out by it. Anyone receiving an eviction notice should seek legal advice and apply for legal aid in the first instance, but if/when this fails local groups need to be ready to rally round quickly and physically prevent evictions.

The main focus of the fight against the tax is, of course, the Westminster Government. Already they have been forced to make concessions for situations such as live in carers; but the hope is that widespread appeals, non-payment and resistance to evictions, backed up by a mass popular movement will make the tax impossible to administer. Not only would the bedroom tax have to be abandoned, but this could affect the government's ability to implement other benefit cuts and even weaken the government itself.

However, demands are being made at Scottish and local levels too. These demands are important in themselves, and if taken up would also put more pressure on Westminster by giving powerful political weight to the campaign against the tax.

For a start, all councils need to agree not to evict. However, this alone is not enough. They could also reclassify their homes as having fewer bedrooms, but this would

affectively amount to them making up the difference of the lost rents. And that they could only do by making other cuts, which is not acceptable, or by setting a deficit budget. Despite historic examples, no councils seem remotely ready to take such a principled stand.

Also, many homes are now owned by housing associations rather than councils, and while the associations will campaign against the tax, they will also implement it.

Opportunities for the Scottish Government to do something are much more practical. For a start, they should adopt the Govan Law Centre proposal and make eviction for rent arrears due to the tax illegal. The SNP promise no Bedroom Tax after Independence, but people can't wait until 2017. If the SNP really want to prove that they have a new fairer vision for Scotland, then they should provide the funding to make up the lost benefits and effectively wipe out the tax. They have some reserve funds and also have some powers to raise more money (e.g. through raising the top band of council tax) – and in the long term this would actually cost them less than dealing with the consequences of this huge social upheaval.

The Labour Party are not trusted to remove the tax even if they get back into power. And people are fed up with politicians from both SNP and Labour treating the issue as a political football.



The new All Scotland Anti-Bedroom Tax Federation reflects a consensus of opinion on how to fight this tax. A lot of tenants have come to local meetings, but this is not yet a mass movement and at this stage it is organisationally dominated by Glasgow activists and Sheridan's Solidarity. It needs to become a people's campaign: to move beyond the Central Belt and to be organised and led by tenants who are themselves actively affected. So let's make it grow!