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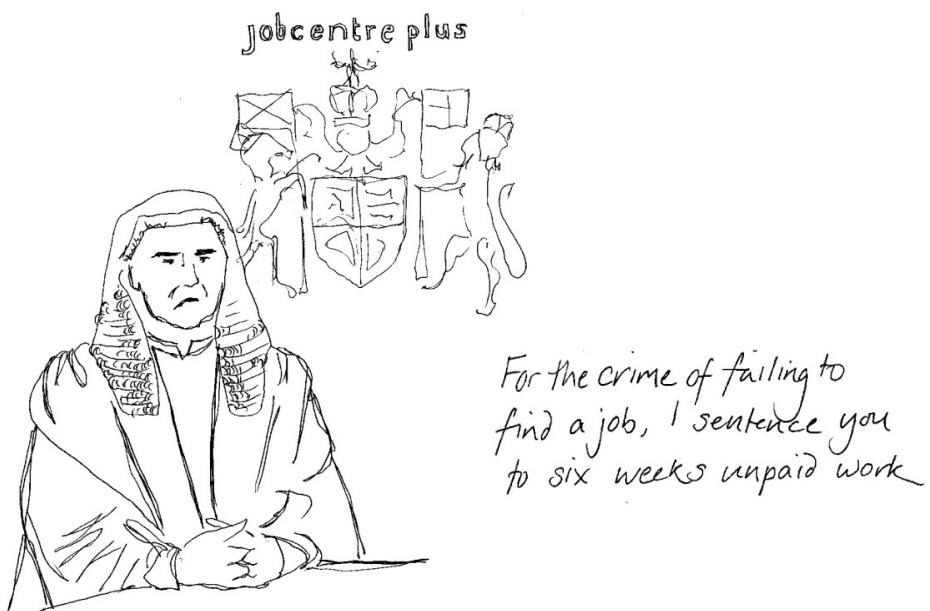
# Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network

### **We need to talk about workfare**

When Tesco made a mistake and openly advertised for workers paid only Job Seekers' Allowance plus expenses, this helped lift the lid on the government's degrading and punitive attitude to the unemployed. After some well-targeted protests and good investigative journalism, image-conscious businesses have declared they will stop using unemployed workers as forced unpaid 'slave' labour, and the government has had to listen to these businesses. But the changes we have seen so far have only scratched the surface of the problem. Even if the government does make their 'work experience' scheme genuinely voluntary, there are still thousands of people being forced into other mandatory unpaid schemes, and mandatory schemes for the sick and disabled are set to be extended. There is no evidence that work experience schemes help those on them to find jobs; and unpaid labour for a commercial company (or public organisation) exploits those who are doing it, while preventing others from being paid to do the work. Workfare does not attempt to address the fundamental problem of lack of work. Instead it tries to lay the blame on those who can't find jobs.

All the main political parties need to look again at their policies on unemployment. The Con-Dem coalition is particularly harsh, but the framework of workfare was introduced by Labour. And the SNP's Youth Employment Minister, Angela Constance, talks about altering the details of the 'work experience' scheme to 'ensure neither young people or other workers are exploited'. How can working for nothing not be exploitation?

Our central article shows how today's battles are part of a much longer struggle.



Please find us on

**[www.scottishunemployedworkers.net](http://www.scottishunemployedworkers.net)**

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Sarah Glynn from Dundee writes

## WORKFARE – REFIGHTING OLD BATTLES

Current welfare policies take their inspiration (and name) from the United States, but there is a history of similar ideas and practices in the United Kingdom, and these have formed the battleground of past struggles. Underlying all these programmes is a rejection of the idea that unemployment is largely caused an economic system that is not creating enough jobs. Instead, individuals are expected to take the blame for not trying hard enough and not pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps. Those in power, who have done well from the economic system, are absolved of responsibility for those the system has failed, and can benefit from the resulting supply of cheap labour.

What we are seeing is a return to the attitudes of the nineteenth-century, when the able-bodied unemployed were allowed no assistance, and those people who were helped were generally sent to the poorhouse, where demeaning conditions were used as a test to put off all but the most desperate. Glasgow's Inspector of Poor told an 1895 parliamentary committee that unemployment should be blamed on the moral character of the unemployed: that 'the contest is not with industrial conditions, but with original sin'.

In the following century, decades of struggle resulted in growing acceptance of government responsibility towards those out of work, but help was given only grudgingly. See

[www.scottishunemployedworkers.net/history](http://www.scottishunemployedworkers.net/history)

In the interwar years, the National Unemployed Workers' Movement organised the great hunger marches of destitute unemployed workers, fought against the humiliating household means test, and coordinated resistance to schemes that expected unemployed workers to carry out relief work for only poverty wages. In 1928 they helped Glasgow relief workers go on strike, and they protested against the spread of government work camps in the 1930s. Work in the camps was generally hard manual labour, and although they were not officially compulsory, people were put under pressure to go and were deprived of benefits if they left early (which must sound a bit

familiar to those on 'work experience' schemes now).



*'Ministry of Labour Instructional Camp'*  
from *The Problem of the Distressed Areas* by  
Wal Hannington of the NUWM, 1937

The post-war settlement heralded a new era. The government accepted the principle of 'work or maintenance' 'without humiliation', and the preservation of full employment became a government priority. But the election of the Thatcher government in 1979 put this history into reverse.

Many of the current 'lost generation' will have parents who went through – or fought against – workfare-type schemes in the 1980s, under similar conditions of high unemployment and right-wing government as today. The Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) was set up by Labour in 1978 to provide training and work experience to 16-18 year olds not in work or education for a basic allowance. Initial optimism soon vanished as the chances of this leading to a real job shrank with rising unemployment. Under Thatcher, the programme expanded and the training given was minimalised. There was little monitoring and a high level of accidents. Like today's schemes, YOP provided cheap labour at the expense of other workers; and it was regarded as a trick for reducing the unemployment statistics. In 1981 the Tories proposed that the scheme be made compulsory, with 'trainees' paid £15 a week (the equivalent of around £50 today). They were forced to think again after major protests, including a 4,000 person lobby of parliament organised by the newly set up Youth Trade Union Rights Campaign

(YTURC), which was supported by Labour and the TUC.

The Youth Training Scheme (YTS), which replaced YOP in 1983, entrenched all the earlier problems. YTS trainees were not covered by the Employment Protection Act and were given little health and safety protection; and there was very little real training. Some went through the 'training' process more than once. Those who refused to go on the scheme or left it early could be punished by loss of benefits. In 1985 the government again planned to make 'training' compulsory for all. Their plans were met with protests and school student strikes. YTURC co-ordinated the growing discontent, bringing 10,000 school students out on strike in Glasgow and following this with a half day national school students' strike of 1/4 million. Plans for making YTS compulsory were withdrawn. (Labour responded by evicting YTURC from their headquarters and by increasing attacks on the Militant-dominated Labour Party Young Socialists).

The current round of welfare, which began with New Labour but builds on approaches begun under the Conservatives, takes inspiration from the US Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act and also earlier experiments in California. Passed by a Republican Congress in 1996, the Act was signed into law by Bill Clinton, who five years earlier had promised to 'put an end to welfare as we have come to know it'. It was designed to push people – especially lone mothers – off benefits and into work, which generally meant unskilled low-paid and insecure jobs; and it put a lifetime limit on the cumulative length of time someone could be supported on benefits. Individual states could devise their own, stricter strategies, and the trail-blazing and punitive Wisconsin Works programme, admired by both Labour and David Cameron, set the benefit limit at a total of two years over the whole of a person's life and expected mothers to go to work as soon as their child reached 3 months. The private contractors who administered it were paid by results, with success being measured by the number of people got off the welfare roll, regardless of the fact that the vast majority remained in poverty with many having to be helped out by overstretched voluntary organisations – and that was before the recession.

In his first public speech after becoming Prime Minister, Blair announced 'this will be the welfare-to-work government', and the new approach began to be put into effect the next year. Blair's New Deal was seen as both a punishment for the 'lazy' and a deterrent to those who might be tempted by a life on benefits. New Labour brought in compulsory unpaid 'work experience' that generally had little impact on job prospects or relevance to real training needs. They introduced ill-thought-out programmes that were purported to make people more employable but often paid scant regard to individual needs and skills. They began to replace Incapacity Benefit with Employment Support Allowance, for which applicants are put through a widely-criticised inflexible procedure to determine whether they are fit enough to work. And they contracted out the administration of these policies as a source of private profit.

Under the Conservative-dominated coalition, the welfare regime has been made even tougher – and it is set to be tougher still when many sick and disabled people become liable to perform 'work related activity' for an unlimited period or face cuts to their benefits. In addition, its effects have been greatly magnified by the recession. An official UK unemployment figure approaching 3 million has exposed the cruel hypocrisy of a system that blames people for failing to find work when none is available.



*Protester in Tesco talks with a cusotmer, Edinburgh, March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2012  
Picture from Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty*

These last few weeks have seen the beginning of a fight back, but there are many more battles to be won.

# A CHARTER FOR UNEMPLOYED WORKERS

**We combine together in mutual solidarity, and independent of government, employers and other organisations, to fight for the rights of all unemployed workers.**

**WE DEMAND:**

**Full employment as a government aim and priority**

This would be aided by government investment in building and improving social housing, in developing green technology, in public transport, and in education, training and research. This level of investment can be achieved through progressive redistributive taxation and cutting down on tax avoidance and evasion.

**All those looking for but unable to find waged work to receive benefits of at least the level needed for the essentials of a decent life (the living wage)**

We are fully supportive of the principle of rewarding people more for working, but this must be done by increasing the money received by those in work, not by penalising unemployed workers.

**No-one to be expected or required to work without proper wages**

We demand an end to welfare schemes, which exploit unemployed workers as unpaid labour and displace paid jobs.

**Government to invest in supporting real apprenticeships where people can learn skilled trades**

Apprentices should also receive a living wage; and there must be an end to pseudo apprenticeships that are no more than underpaid basic on-the-job training.

**Secure employment**

We demand full employee rights from the first day, repeal of the anti-trade union laws, and an end to the casualisation of labour and to the use of outsourcing to drive down wages and conditions.

**A shorter working week**

This would allow work to be more evenly distributed, and must be instigated without loss of pay.

**The right (but not compulsion) to retire at 60**

**No private profits from unemployment**

Not only should there be no direct profits from welfare, but we also demand an end to the contracting out of unemployment policy administration as a source of private profit.



*Marching with Scottish Students  
Against Cuts  
Edinburgh 29<sup>th</sup> February*