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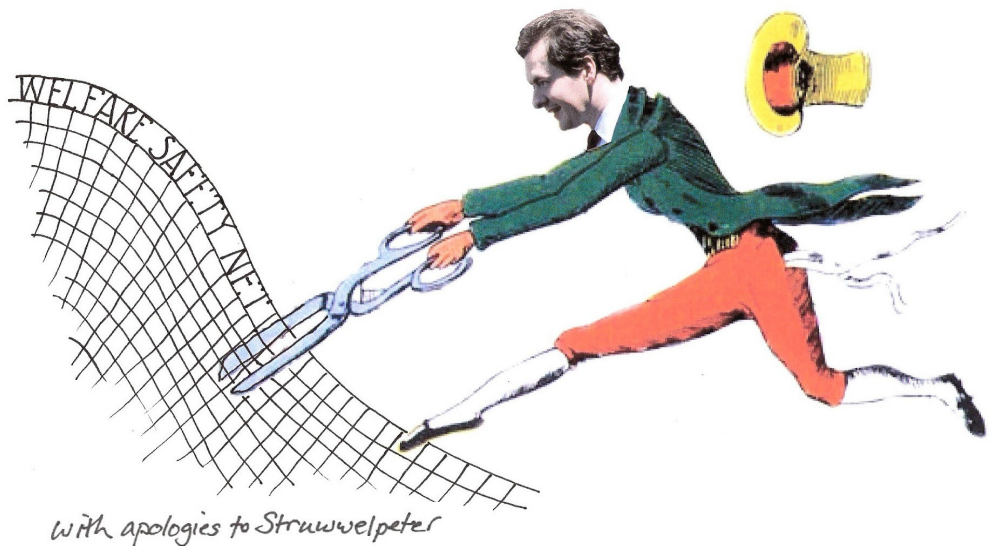
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Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network

Cuts and more cuts

As the ConDem Government continues to cut welfare with ideological zeal – and present plans are for public spending levels to drop below those in the US by 2017 – we look at how people on Job Seekers' Allowance are increasingly falling through the safety net; and at another case of one law for the bosses and another for the rest of us. We also look at the role of local councils who are expected to act as the government's axe-men.

In October, Edinburgh City Council passed a motion condemning workfare. It states that the council 'Believes that this undermines paid employment, genuine volunteering and the social welfare system, and does not benefit individuals or communities, but perpetuates poverty;' and that the council 'Resolves not to take part in any Workfare or other forced labour scheme.' This is only a very small beginning, but one that any council could easily take up and help raise general awareness of what is happening. There are historic examples of councillors refusing to implement grossly unfair government policies – most notably the councillors in the East London borough of Poplar in 1921, who went to prison in their fight for fairer rates – but it is impossible to imagine any of our current batch of councils taking such a stand, particularly when so many of them include Conservatives as coalition partners. The Green councillor who proposed the Edinburgh motion looks at the problems facing councils today.



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www.scottishunemployedworkers.net

(where you can also link to our Facebook Group)

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Sarah Glynn looks at how the ConDem government is

CUTTING HOLES IN THE WELFARE SAFETY-NET

I've just been reading the regulations on which job seekers can be granted hardship payments when they have been sanctioned and their benefits have been stopped. Somewhere in Whitehall, men and women are helping turn government welfare cuts into brutal reality by making detached bureaucratic decisions that will impact on thousands of lives. They are ruling, for example, that hardship payments can only be given for the first two weeks if the claimant is classed as 'vulnerable'. Having no other means of support doesn't count. Qualifications for vulnerability have been neatly defined. They include phrases such as 'the claimant or partner's health would decline more than that of a normal healthy adult'. It is not their job to imagine how someone might live for two weeks on no money, though if they were to do so they might think that the health of even a normal healthy adult could decline quite a lot in that time. There's something peculiarly chilling about bureaucratic decisions that don't have to engage with the realities of the lives they rule over. As the bureaucrats dotted the 'i's and crossed the 't's and made sure there were no loopholes, did they stop and think that these rules make the welfare state less even than the minimal safety net supported by writers in the Daily Mail? No wonder that one of the few things that are booming in Britain is food banks.

Food parcels have become a reality for growing numbers of unemployed people, as the DWP's increasingly demanding rules, and job centres' bureaucratic over-zealousness, have been used to sanction

more and more recipients of Job Seekers' Allowance (JSA) and to stop their benefits. The bar for what claimants are expected to do to prove that they are looking for work is continually being raised, and anyone who does not complete every task requested – however unhelpful it may seem – and record that they have done so, can be caught out. There is nothing wrong with the principle that those receiving benefits should look for work, but that is not what these rules are about. They are part of a new punitive approach to welfare that seeks to overturn the idea that in a decent society everyone has the right to a decent quality of life, and that aims, one way or another, to get people out of the benefit system. That there are next to no jobs for people to go is not mentioned. Government has broken the social contract, leaving citizens to sink or swim – or, as in Victorian times, appeal to the mercy of the church.

Already, Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS) has reported a huge rise in sanctions – with up to 240 Scottish JSA claimants being sanctioned every working day. Since that figure was recorded, new tougher regulations have been brought in, stipulating longer sanctions of up to 3 years duration. And with more and more sick and disabled people who were formerly on incapacity benefit now being forced to apply for JSA, we can expect many more sanctions for missed appointments, since the system has not proved good at taking account of individual circumstances.



These sanction rules are implemented by overstretched job centre staff who know that if they are seen to be causing problems they could end up on the other side of the desk. A lot are genuinely helpful, but there is management pressure to reduce numbers on benefits, and, as the CAS report demonstrates, there are many harrowing examples of sanctions being applied without thought and even beyond what was stipulated. We are not expecting job centre workers to lead a revolt (or at least not until there is a wider mood of revulsion at what is happening from across

the population at large!) but we ask that they do what they can to help people avoid sanctions. They may not be able to choose to avoid the letter of the law, but they can avoid adopting its spirit. We have protested against job centre closures, and admire the campaigning work done by the PCS union, so we hope we can work with job centre workers to expose what is happening to the welfare state and counter the poisonous propaganda through which government attempts to set low-paid workers against the unemployed.

Sean Cudden, who blogs at skintandangry.wordpress.com, finds a blatant case of:

SANCTIONS HYPOCRISY

The hypocrisy of attacking the poorest people in the country while giving tax cuts to millionaires is obvious, but there is another hypocrisy facing benefits claimants every day.

Letters from Work Programme providers warn against missing appointments or not carrying out tasks you are required to by the provider. They say nothing about sanctions levied against Work Programme providers or the DWP when they fail to live up to their responsibilities. When a claimant turns up more than 10 minutes late for an appointment they may find their appointment cancelled, and they may, given the sanctions regime, find themselves in real trouble. Go to a job centre or a Work Programme provider any day, Monday to Friday, and you will find people who have been kept waiting for much longer than 10 minutes. I have been kept waiting for appointments at my Work Programme provider for well over an hour. I have had appointments cancelled when I was en route. As another claimant told me, "as far as they're concerned I'm unemployed so I must have nothing better to do with my day than sit here".

Claimants are warned, threatened or sanctioned if they are late for or cancel appointments 'without good reason', but the DWP and Work Programme providers are free to keep people waiting or cancel appointments whenever they wish. We face the threat of sanctions when we fail to live up to our responsibilities but they are not similarly obligated.

This is just one more example of the victims of the economic depression being blamed and punished while those who caused it walk between the rain drops.



Maggie Chapman, Green Councillor for Leith Walk, discusses:

WELFARE REFORM AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

£18 billion is to be removed from the UK's Welfare budget by 2015 and £2.5 billion of it will be lost to those who need it in Scotland. The Westminster Government seems determined to make the poor and not-so-poor pay for the gross excesses that the very wealthy have enjoyed for the last few decades. Half of the cuts will be made to services used by the most severely disabled in the country. The other half will hit pensioners, large families, young unemployed people, and single people under 35. So, anyone not born into wealth and privilege.

In a cunning move by Westminster, rather than these cuts coming from central government, local authorities face the grim task of cutting people's housing allowances, capping council tax support, slashing disability support, and imposing harsh restrictions on unemployment support. And many of the details of the welfare changes are not yet available, making it virtually impossible for councils to plan any transition to the new plans. Over 80% of local government resources comes from the diminishing grant from central government, making it impossible to address the serious issues of poverty faced by citizens.

While Councils have been given responsibility for delivering government cuts (especially in housing support), there is no corresponding devolution of power to avoid cuts. In both Scotland and England, Council Tax has been frozen. The opportunity to raise further revenue through initiatives like a tourist bed tax has been ruled out by ministers. Government has also refused to clarify what legislative change is required for Councils to develop their own revenue generating energy companies.

And all the time, our citizens face ever-increasing economic pressures. I have seen several serious pieces of case work concerning young, single social tenants. The new 'Shared Room Rate' means that single people aged 25-34 will receive a maximum of

£285 per month for rent rather than the current £500 per month. Social landlords let properties for significantly more than this, so tenants face eviction if they cannot afford to make up the difference.

Mandatory work schemes (such as Workfare), which substitute paid jobs with punitive forced labour by job seekers on threat of loss of benefits, are being used by large companies, charities, and even some Councils. This has resulted in a noticeable lack of seasonal employment, as retailers like Poundland and Tesco use these forced labour schemes instead of employing additional staff, and to supplement their massive profits. I am glad that I was able to persuade the City of Edinburgh Council that such schemes are wrong, and that we should not participate in them.

There is, of course, an important role for Councils in community leadership. For too long, local authorities have avoided speaking out on the immorality of welfare reform. Someone must stand up on this, and Edinburgh's position on Workfare is a start that others would do well to follow. Councils need to act quickly to ensure that mitigation plans against the worst effects of the welfare changes are in place; we cannot afford, as a society, to allow the worsening of poverty and social inequality that we currently face.



*Marching against the cuts
Glasgow 20 October*