



## In this issue:

Sanctioned!

Universal Credit

# Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network

### 'Reforming' the Welfare State out of existence

Recently released documents have revealed how thoroughly Thatcher wanted to dismantle the welfare state. In the early 1980s that was thought politically impossible, but now it's happening. The official opposition is putting up only token resistance, and public attitudes have been hardened through a deluge of government-inspired misinformation. Freedom for the super-rich to exploit the other 99% is no longer considered unacceptable, and has come to be protected as a natural right. On the other hand, the Tories and their friends are keen to remove protection from the unemployed and to further restrict workers' rights. They have both ideological and selfishly practical reasons. They want to hold down wages and strengthen their grip over their labour force by increasing workers' fears of doing anything that might bring on dismissal.

Our last issue took a broad look at the tightening sanctions regime aimed at people on Job Seekers' Allowance. This time we record one person's experience.

We also take a first look at some of the many problems that are predicted to follow the introduction of Universal Credit. Already, in preparation for this, unemployed workers are being made to do their job-searches on line. Besides problems of access to computers, this can allow alarming intrusions into peoples' private life. Data protection laws provide some theoretical privacy, but only if people know their rights and are not scared into signing them away.



Please find us on

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

(where you can also link to our Facebook Group)

and contact us on

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8  
NEWSLETTER  
January 2013

A student describes his experience of being

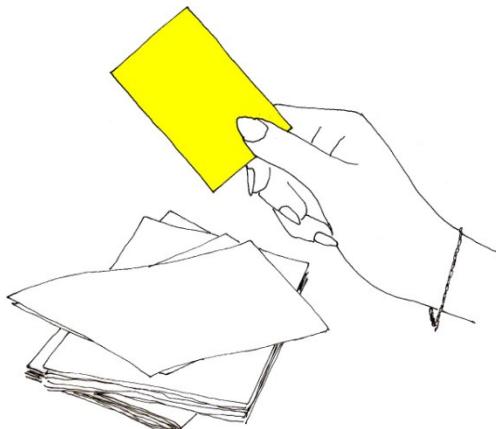
## SANCTIONED!

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This time last year I was quite privileged, living-off my student loan and stupidly letting other things get in the way of my uni work. Then I found myself having to re-do two modules and unable to progress into 4th year. I managed to re-register as a part-time student, and then applied for Jobseekers Allowance and, most importantly, Housing Benefits. It wasn't my first time visiting 'the Broo', but the changes were quite stark since I was last there. Visits have become very impersonal and conveyor-belt like; you say why you are there, get sent to jobsearch machines, wait 5 minutes, spend no more than 10 minutes speaking to an advisor, and then you're out the door. This is in Drumchapel, one of Glasgow's sprawling housing schemes and most deprived areas, and the us-and-them siege mentality is all too evident. After two appointments I was officially signing on, and for the next few weeks I followed the routine. I'd look for jobs and fill-in my wee diary, turn-up and present it for approval. A few weeks later I got my first payment and managed to pay off some debt and get some food in the freezer (yep, strictly Farmfoods and Iceland). My landlord had received housing benefit payment and seemed to have given-up trying to evict me. All was as well as it could be. Then I missed my first appointment.

Within a fortnight I had more paperwork from the jobcentre than I'd expect from a class at uni. Add to that was the need to go in one week to sign on and the next to see an advisor. I got easily confused, as I'm sure many others have. So I missed an appointment, and had to sign a form

saying that I was aware of the new sanctions regime. In effect this was my final warning.



At my next advisor meeting I was told I needed more work experience due to the gap in my CV, despite them knowing I'd been in college and university and still was. I knew the advisor meant workfare, but was at a loss as to what to say and how to object. I was told it was not 'workfare' but 'mandatory work experience' for 4 weeks, which differed from workfare because it only involved charity shops. I said, if it does not give me a wage I don't care what it is called, I don't want to do it. I told him, I have done voluntary work and would rather choose a time when I'm more able to do this, rather than a time when what I urgently need is a job. A circular argument ensued, with me getting more cautious, due to my desire to keep my benefits, and him more forceful and confident in the knowledge that he could sanction me for refusing. In the end, he arranged another appointment for the following week, but told me if I had not found work by then I would be starting the mandatory work experience scheme. He didn't say I had no choice in the

matter; he didn't have to.

After a week of mulling over whether I should refuse to do it, I didn't have to make that hard decision. On the morning of the appointment I was in the West End, having stayed at my girlfriend's, and ended-up running late. I'd been checking my email and twitter for news from Gaza, which at the time was being bombed relentlessly by Israel. A friend came online from Gaza for the first time in over 24 hours, and, relieved to hear she was OK, I was very reluctant to make as much haste to get the jobcentre as I probably should have. I decided to spend my last £10 and get a taxi. I got there 4 minutes late and was told to come back in an hour. When I returned, I was not seen by the advisor, but was sent to another desk and asked my reason for 'not attending' the appointment. I explained that I'd come from the other side of town, spending the last of my money, and was only 4 minutes late. I was curtly told that a form would be sent to 'the decision makers'.

After a few days I was sent a letter informing me that my benefits had been suspended for one month. I should have read further, as at that point I wrongly assumed I had to wait one month before going back to sign-on. I was wrong, and when I did not attend my next sign-on date I was informed my benefits had now been suspended till February. By this time I had two other major issues to deal with. The gas company had gained access to my house and installed a pay-as-you-go meter (a week later they also installed a similar type of electricity meter) and now I had no gas at home. This was during the

extreme cold weather. I also had an exam to study for. Needing the internet (not to mention warmth) I applied for a hardship payment, then went to my girlfriend's to concentrate on studying for the exam. After exams, I went back to my flat to find the electricity was off and the freezer defrosted and food ruined. I went straight to the jobcentre to enquire into the progress of my hardship application and was told it was void and my claim had been stopped. I was also told, by increasingly unfriendly and antagonistic staff, that I was now not allowed to use the jobcentre phones.



I am fortunate that the Local Housing Organisation that manages my flat has submitted a 'nil-income' form, and my Housing Benefit looks to be sorted at least. Their welfare advisor has also lodged an appeal against my benefits being stopped. I'm also very fortunate to have a support network of family and friends (despite their patience running thin). Many more people falling foul of the benefits system this winter are not so lucky.

A DWP worker shares her concerns about:

## UNIVERSAL CREDIT

The government states that the implementation of Universal Credit: 'will help claimants and their families to become more independent and will simplify the benefits system by bringing together a range of working-age benefits into a single streamlined payment'. What follows is a very brief account of Universal Credit and some of the growing fears surrounding it.

The benefit, to be launched in the autumn after a limited trial in April, will replace income support, jobseekers allowance, employment support allowance, child tax credits, working tax credits and housing benefit. Essentially, the named benefits will be amalgamated into a one-off monthly payment into the claimants' bank account. If two people in a household are both on universal credit, the payment will go into only *one* of the claimants' accounts. And where currently housing costs are paid directly to landlords and/or housing departments on behalf of the claimant, the new benefit scheme pushes the housing payment responsibility onto the individual.

The government maintains that Universal Credit will improve work incentives, reduce in-work poverty and simplify the benefit system, making it 'easier for people to understand'. There are, however, multiple concerns across many charities, trade unions and women's organisations that universal credit will push vulnerable people further into poverty. (*We will look at more of these in future articles – e.g. the severe doubts about the viability of the computer system, the*

*implications of monthly payments, and the punitive impacts on the self-employed – Ed*)

A study conducted by Citizens' Advice, the Children's Society and Disability Rights UK claimed that 450,000 disabled people could significantly lose out under the implementation of Universal Credit. The findings of this research suggest that many disabled people are likely to struggle for basic essentials such as food and heating, pushing vulnerable people further into debt and poverty. Around one in ten of the disabled people within this research expressed fears that they will no longer be able to afford their homes.

Universal Credit will only be paid to a single family member as opposed to benefits being split between couples as at present. Many women's organisations believe this will prove devastating for those in abusive relationships. Women's Aid state that it will allow 'abusive partners to trap people in a financial straitjacket from which there is little chance of escape... Women's Aid supported 180,000 adults and children last year. This support could disappear completely when Iain Duncan Smith's inept benefit changes are driven through'.

The government's response to these and other fears has been to claim 'there will be no cash losers'. But an impact assessment carried out by their own Department for Work and Pensions estimates that 2.8 million households stand to lose an average of £137 a month.

## PROGRESS....



2013  
I am the JobCentre Advisor  
I can look through  
your life without leaving  
my computer