

What the capitalist cuts really mean

EVEN BEFORE the Con-Dem government's cuts hit hard, the economic crisis and neoliberal economic policies are cutting jobs and making job-seeking harder and even more exploited. From both sides of the counter, reports below show how vital it is to fight these vicious cuts and to fight for a socialist solution to joblessness, low pay and poverty.

SIGNING ON week six. 9.20am the door is locked. The laminated sign says: "Back to Work session 9.20am. If you are late you have missed your session. If you fail to carry out this Jobseekers direction you could lose Jobseeker's Allowance and National Insurance credits. If you are late go to the Job Centre immediately."

Nervous job seekers are panicking about the sign. At last we're welcomed in and the dread and uncertainty is over. "Welcome, you're here because you received a letter from the secretary of state outlining 'What we expect from you!'"

"As your advisers we can support you, but you, yourself, need to take steps to find work and end the signing-on period. The new government has a new idea. Jobseekers will get results if they follow a three step plan."

A flickering powerpoint presentation reminds the audience of former workers of the steps we should take to make a "suitable effort to find work" while claiming Jobseeker's Allowance.

The phrase "work trial" ominously flashes against a white background. As our advisers stress - this is another new government idea and employers are "warming to it".

It sounds cosy. "Employers are being persuaded by Jobcentres but also by you the Jobseeker to trial JSA claimants". We learn the bosses themselves do not have to pay any

wages or guarantee a job vacancy to the trialist.

"It is up to you to show the boss you're the best worker, that they do not need to think about employing anyone else. Many employers don't yet know about this new scheme. The Jobseeker can be the messenger! Explain to employers that you are willing to be put 'on trial' for any of their advertised vacancies."

I thought of the 1980s YTS schemes and the unemployed in the 1930s who showed their worn-out boots to prove to means testers that they'd walked miles offering themselves for work.

One adviser seems unenthusiastic about these ideas. Clearly an overworked, exploited public sector worker who has seen lots of new ideas rise and fall.

She explains that the Jobcentre now uses a private company JHP Employability instead of trained Jobcentre staff to match job seekers' skills with the job market. Public sector cuts mean overcrowded job centres but JHP happily step in for a lucrative contract.

Her powerpoint colleague says that, like us, he was once a jobseeker and found it hard. He gives a dose of reality "in these economic times finding work is hard" but employers still want workers. They want "flexible" workers who may expect less in terms of secure, well paid work. We just need to be open to the idea of discovering opportunities...



The crisis is hitting both sides of the counter.

Emergency financial loans Our system is in crisis!

WORK IN the crisis loan system, meant to provide emergency financial help for those in need, as a 'crisis loan decision maker' (CLDM). Our system is in crisis! In one week this August, the Social Fund Crisis Loans service line left around 30% of calls unanswered.

When 'customers' get through, having maybe waited 45 minutes, they're understandably angry. Imagine how much worse things will be if proposed cuts in public service staffing levels take place.

In 2008, when the recession kicked off, the capitalist media reported how Jobcentre Plus could not cope with the upturn in claims. This was due to tens of thousands of job cuts already made in the previous six years.

Management used this to privatise, giving Vertex, a private company providing call centres for credit card companies, the go-ahead to start performing basic job-seeking services (Jobseeker Direct) over the phone. Now they take most of these calls.

People claiming crisis loans don't have enough money for food, gas and electricity - they are very vulnerable. Most Jobcentre Plus staff want to provide an excellent service to them. But management's target-driven culture doesn't let us.

They unilaterally cut average call-handling times from a target of 22.5 minutes to 17.5 minutes. A few CLDM workers try to end the call as quickly as possible to meet their targets and avoid being hit with a disci-

plinary measure which could result in dismissal.

New security procedures mean CLDMs now have to ask more questions to verify a caller's identity before a claim can continue. So some CLDMs end the call quickly if correct answers aren't given. This is an unacceptable effect of unacceptable targets.

The enemy of poor benefit claimants is not the person at the other end of the phone, but the politicians and super-rich backers who create - and benefit from - such an unequal, poverty-stricken society.

Some claimants have mental health problems, drug and alcohol dependency issues, and may live chaotic lives. So itemising what they received and spent in the last two weeks can be hard. Some people have not eaten for days and live in dark, cold homes as their gas and electricity meters have run out.

This constant barrage of misery can numb workers to the hardship. Some staff can be immediately sceptical about people's needs, especially if they give misleading and contradictory information about their circumstances.

In office, New Labour wanted to

outsource Crisis Loans delivery to credit unions. This plan was shelved after it emerged that 'customers' could be forced to pay up to 24% interest, not 0% as currently! It would be a huge step backwards if this plan returns in the Con-Dems' 'Big Society'.

Already, many claimants seek help from companies such as Greenwoods and Provident and some end up repaying more than double what they borrowed! The vast majority pay for gas and electricity by pre-payment meter and are in their emergency credit facilities. Privatisation and deregulation of the utilities sector means the poorest now pay the most for their energy needs.

Harsh government policies have led to misery in many areas. Massive investment is needed in a public works scheme to build houses, repair and upgrade our public infrastructure, create jobs and solve our energy crisis.

Meanwhile, trade unions like PCS fight all cuts in benefits and public services, highlighting the damage both to those delivering and those using services like Crisis Loans and opposing privatisation too. Crisis loan workers deliver a crucial social role and need all the support we can get.

The enemy of poor benefit claimants is not the person at the other end of the phone, but the politicians and super-rich backers who create - and benefit from - such an unequal, poverty-stricken society.

Graduate unemployment Fight for your future!



I'M KATIE, an unemployed graduate. I finished my degree a year ago but I'm still struggling to find work. Recently I handed out over 26 CVs and applied for six jobs. I was qualified for all of them but got none.

I had five interview offers, all in workplaces that wouldn't even need GCSE qualifications. They all paid minimum wage despite some jobs requiring great flexibility and physical stamina. I went for an interview in a coffee shop and got a two-hour trial.

As a psychology graduate this job was obviously not within my area of expertise! But I worked very hard, unpaid, for the two hours to prove I was suitable for the job. They told me they'd contact me the following day.

I waited by the phone but when in the end I rang them they told me I had been unsuccessful. I was gutted.

I then got a letter from the jobcentre telling me I wouldn't

receive my jobseeker's allowance for that week for failing to attend a Jobcentre interview the month before. I missed this because I was busy going to job interviews and moving home.

The interview had been rescheduled and none of the Jobcentre staff knew I'd lose my allowance for that week. The decision was made miles away and the letter sent to me after I should have received my payment.

I had been struggling to feed myself already and spent the weekend with a friend in order to have proper meals. I'm trying to live off £100 a week and it's hard not to get angry. I feel as though three years of study and financial struggle only led to further financial struggle.

The government is destroying our future. Every young person should be out with their local trade union groups fighting the cuts and standing up for their future.

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