

Universal Credit - a thinly veiled attack on the sick and unemployed

THE GOVERNMENT launched its white paper proposals for universal credit to replace most of the current benefit system with a barrage of publicity that sought to demonise the unemployed. The white paper is entitled: 'Universal Credit - welfare that works'. But as **Jane Aitchison**, PCS union president of the Department for Work and Pensions (personal capacity) asks, who for?

Making it simpler

THE NEW universal credit system is supposed to be simpler and who could possibly be opposed to that?

The current system has become complicated as it addresses claimants' circumstances and needs - but to the penny through means testing. It is not in any way generous. Any attempt to simplify it can only be done by rounding up what is paid to everyone or rounding down.

The details revealed so far of caps put on housing benefit and total claim caps suggest that the intention is to reduce benefit levels further, forcing millions of people further into grinding poverty and inescapable debt.

Helping people into work?

THE TORIES have made great play about getting people off benefits and into work. This rings very hollow when there are no jobs. Currently there are 2.5 million unemployed in Britain and less than half a million job vacancies. In reality there are many more people looking for work but not signing on or in part-time work who would like full-time work.

Those half a million job vacancies are misleading too. It isn't about a

skills mis-match or ok jobs that people are too picky to take - they are mainly part-time jobs, virtually all temporary, some for only a week.

They are mainly not jobs that you could make a living from. With at least five people chasing every job vacancy it is a sick joke to suggest that people just need to get on a bus to look for work. The problem isn't that people aren't looking for jobs - they are looking - there are no jobs.

Making work pay

THE NEW benefit will ensure that people are always better off in work, apparently. This might sound good and could be if it was accompanied by increases in the minimum wage. Instead the intention is to increase in-work benefit levels to ensure that no job is 'not worth taking' and to subsidise the worst paying employers to the hilt.

The effect will be to drive down wages further and keep more people dependent on benefits to survive.

Compulsory workfare

A NEW proposal is compulsory work trials of four weeks' duration - working 30-hour weeks for your benefit.

With no job at the end of it and the severe shortage of jobs in the country this has to be viewed as a cynical attempt to further demonise, punish and humiliate the unemployed. If work trials aren't genuinely going to help people find work because there is no work then the fear has to be that they will be used to deter people from claiming benefits, either through stigma or through falling foul of these additional hurdles.

The government has already stated that failure to attend these schemes will lead to very tough



Hounding the unemployed - cruel and unnecessary.

sanctions - including having benefit removed for up to three years.

Bringing in a tougher sanction regime when there are so few jobs is particularly cruel and unnecessary. The Samaritans announced plans last week to try to reduce the number of suicides as unemployment rises. Suicide rates double when people become unemployed.

Making it cheaper

IT IS clear that there is also an intention to reduce costs by cutting the staff who administer it. In particular there is a proposal to make access to

benefits almost entirely through online applications. The BBC revealed that less than half of all unemployed people have access to the internet. There is a massive danger that many people could fall through the gaping holes that are now being cut in the benefits safety net.

What is the alternative?

AS SOCIALISTS we must be clear about the alternatives. Job creation is part of what is needed rather than slashing half a million public sector jobs and watching unemployment spiral.

Coalition turns back the clock on justice

THE COALITION government intends to virtually end legal aid in civil cases, with few exceptions. This devastating move will turn the clock back 60 years by denying justice to hundreds of thousands of people.

It means that many people will be unable to obtain legal advice over certain housing issues, family law, clinical negligence, education, employment, immigration, benefits, and debt. Individuals are expected to take out medical-style private insurance instead.

Some £350 million a year (15% of the budget) will be cut from state aid to individuals in plans announced by justice secretary Kenneth Clarke.

The government will also introduce a new financial qualifying threshold of £1,000 for legal aid.

Currently, anyone with assets worth less than £8,000 qualifies for civil legal aid. Those with savings up to £3,000 pay nothing and others are expected to make a contribution.

Under the new system, the limit would be a flat £1,000 of assets with property values included for the first time, effectively ruling out almost every homeowner.

The contribution expected from claimants would rise from 20% of weekly income to 30%.

Organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau are at risk of closing down because they face a cut in their legal aid funding.

Legal aid firms and local law centres providing equally valuable services are already under the financial hammer and are closing down. Six



Clarke - nothing but a hound dog.

law centres closed in 2008 (including Leicester and Lewisham), and a further six became critical in 2009. There are now only four law centres in the North East, and only one in Liverpool.

Clearly, for the Tories and their Lib Dem chums, legal representation, first and foremost, should be a privilege for the rich.

Legal aid providers and clients must take the campaign to the trade union movement. The threat to the legal aid system is part of a general attack on services and the working class and poor. Defending it and all our services will take a mass movement of service users, trade unions and communities.

Law lecturer, Kent

fastnews

More jumpers

PRIVATISED ENERGY giant British Gas has dropped its charm offensive of lower prices to customers with a 7% rise in gas and electricity bills this winter. The increase comes into effect on 10 December. Back in 2008 Jake Ulrich, the managing director of Centrica, which owns British Gas, advised hard-pressed customers facing a 15% price hike to wear an extra jumper!

The latest move by British Gas follows recent gas-price increases of 9% by Scottish and Southern Energy. Other gas companies are expected to follow suit.

Ann Robinson of price comparison website Uswitch commented on the increase: "Unfortunately for consumers, the 8% or £99 reduction seen over the last two years failed miserably to reverse the impact of the 42% or £381 increase seen in 2008. And now, whatever small benefit was seen is about to be wiped back out again."

She said the average household bill for a dual-fuel British Gas customer would now go up from £1,157 to £1,239.

In July, British Gas made operating profits of £585 million for the first half of 2010, up 98% on the same period last year. Centrica, also saw a big increase in profits, up 65% to £1.56 billion.

Torturer in chief

FORMER US president George W Bush has gained much publicity for his memoir, Decision Points, with the justification for his authorisation of the torture technique known as 'waterboarding'. Bush maintains that waterboarding, which simulates drowning, is not torture.

Interviewed on the BBC World Service, Bush said 'the ends justified the means' as it prevented further terrorist attacks and, anyway, a White House lawyer told him it was legal.

However, Bush didn't provide any concrete evidence of particular terrorist attacks being thwarted and obviously the US president wouldn't have had any difficulty in finding a lawyer to say waterboarding was legal - in much the same way as the British attorney general Lord Goldsmith (on the eve of war) told Blair what he wanted to hear, ie that invading Iraq in March 2003 was legal. Back in 2005 Bush responded to reports of secret CIA prisons overseas by saying "we do not torture". Presumably he was only referring to waterboarding and not the widely reported other methods of bestial torture practised by US forces at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, Bagram airbase in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay in Cuba to name just three prison camps.

Stalin lives

THE SOVIET union collapsed in the early 1990s but it seems that Stalin's secret police - the KGB - survived the transition to capitalism.

Referring to a double agent who has defected to the USA, a Russian official is quoted in the Kommersant newspaper as saying: "We know who he is and where he is. Do not doubt that a Mercader has been sent after him already."

Ramon Mercader was the Stalinist agent who murdered the exiled socialist revolutionary Leon Trotsky in Mexico in 1940.

Tories promote fast food nation

MUCH OF the nation's unhealthy consumption of sugar, salt, trans fats, saturated fats, and alcohol is down to the promotion of products containing them by the giant corporations that dominate the food and drink industry.

How galling then that Pepsi, McDonald's, KFC, Mars, Unilever and Diageo etc, have been asked by Tory health secretary Andrew Lansley, via five 'responsibility deal' networks, to help write policies on obesity, alcohol and diet-related disease for the government.

According to the Guardian: "The alcohol responsibility deal network is chaired by the head of the lobby group the Wine and Spirit Trade Association. The food network to tackle diet and health problems includes processed food manufacturers, fast food companies, and Compass, the catering company famously pilloried by Jamie Oliver for its school menus of turkey twizzlers. The food deal's sub-group on calories is chaired by PepsiCo, owner of Walkers crisps."

"The leading supermarkets are an equally strong presence, while the responsibility deal's physical activity group is chaired by the Fitness Industry Association, which is the lobby group for private gyms and personal trainers."

It's tempting to sum up this

farce by saying "it's like putting Dracula in charge of the blood bank" but even Dracula would struggle to levitate on a diet of fizzy pop, burgers and fries.

Lansley is continuing the Tory ministerial tradition of putting company profits ahead of health. In May 1990 during the 'Mad Cow' BSE epidemic John Gummer, secretary of state for agriculture, attempted to reassure the public that beef was safe (despite the accumulating evidence that BSE could jump the species barrier to humans) by trying to feed a beefburger to his four-year-old daughter, Cordelia. She sensibly declined!

