

Review - 'Poor Kids' TV documentary

Child poverty increasing under the Con-Dems

Georgina Webb

Three and a half million children in Britain live in poverty. The gap between rich and poor has never been greater. BBC One's "Poor Kids" filmed children in their homes and neighbourhoods and let them talk. What a sad, sickening picture of life in one of the richest countries in the world.

We're told we all have to tighten our belts; that we've all been profligate and now wasteful public spending has to be reined in.

We saw a boy who was bullied for wearing hand-me-down school clothes from his older sister, and a girl who had never had a holiday apart from a school trip to Scarborough. All the children filmed occasionally went without meals, and all of them were cold in the winter because their parents couldn't afford to properly heat their homes.

I normally hate programmes like this. I am very aware that my own children and many of their friends are in the poverty statistics, and I dread programmes that claim to show what it's really like. Aside from the fact that inevitably editorial decisions distort what we see, they also lift people out of their context. With very little commentary we are

largely left to draw our own conclusions, and it would be very easy for some viewers to see these children's lives as the product of individual problem parents.

But that is clearly not the case. The statistics injected at various points in the programme showed that these children simply illustrate general conditions. When children talked about their asthma and eczema problems, we were told that poor children are two and a half times more likely to suffer chronic illnesses and 85% of children living in damp conditions suffer breathing problems.

What linked all the families shown was long-term unemployment. One was a single father, struggling to find work that would fit around childcare, while in his city five people chase every job. Officially, the poverty line for a family his size is £1,000 a month after housing costs. This family lived on £420 a month. The father explained that when he was in work their income was that amount a week.

Massive public sector cuts are going to make these conditions far worse. If the government realises its plans, job prospects are going to get much worse, benefits will fall, housing conditions worsen and access to decent children's services, limited



photo BBC

as it already is, will be slashed. The happy ending for one child in the programme, when her damp block of flats was knocked down and her family was rehoused, is unlikely to be repeated for many children in this age of austerity.

In fact the people in the programme are the target of Con-Dem attacks. These are the 'scroungers' allegedly living in luxury at the expense of hard-working taxpayers.

The final statistics in the programme were probably the most

devastating. On measures of child poverty, Britain comes 18 out of 22 European countries, with only Slovenia, Poland, Hungary and Italy worse. And child poverty is set to rise 11% over the next three years.

Of course the programme offered no solutions. It is up to the Socialist to provide that - to end the horrors of child poverty we must organise to defeat the cuts, and fight for a programme of full employment, and investment in decent housing and public services.

Say no to government's slave labour programme

Paul Callanan
Youth Fight for Jobs,
national organiser

Last week the government unveiled its national back-to-work scheme - the 'Work Programme'. Yet again this Bullingdon Boys' government wants to make the most vulnerable in society pay for a crisis caused by their big business mates.

The scheme will see up to 30 hours a week of "work placements" provided for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claimants. This effectively amounts to the punishment of the unemployed; if you can't find a job then you are forced to work for free.

The government has obviously taken little heed of the fact that there are too few jobs out there. Currently

there are around 2.5 million people unemployed in the UK (including nearly one million young people), and this is before the full impact of the Con-Dem cuts, which will put over a million more people out of work, have been truly felt.

Rather than being a "matter of deep regret" as David Cameron put it; the government sees unemployment as an opportunity for its business mates to save a bit of money. Businesses and voluntary organisations are queuing to take taxpayers' money to pressurise vulnerable people into taking low-paid work.

Among the companies lining up for the lucrative contracts are privatisation giants Serco and G4S. Under the programme's 'payments by results' scheme, participants can expect to receive £4,050 for a

JSA claimant aged 18-24 and up to £13,120 for an ex-incapacity benefit claimant.

But even 'incentivised' private contractors will struggle to find jobs for claimants in areas of high unemployment.

The Work Programme is not providing opportunities for long term unemployed people or an incentive to work but it is providing the rich with a source of slave labour. It is reminiscent of the workhouses in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The programme will trap people in a cycle of working poverty as these companies realise that is cheaper to keep someone on for a temporary period rather than give them a permanent job and start paying them the minimum wage.

The only way a real alternative to

unemployment and Con-Dem austerity can be built is through mass action. That is why Youth Fight for Jobs (YFJ) will be marching from Jarrow to London later this year to mark the 75th anniversary of the 1936 unemployed workers' march.

We will be saying no to all cuts, opposing slave labour schemes and calling for the nationalisation of the banks and major monopolies to protect and provide jobs. We demand that the government provides real jobs and pays a living wage for them. We will take to the streets in October to say that we will not pay for the bosses' crisis but we will fight for jobs and services.

For details of Jarrow YFJ march see: www.jarrow2london2011.wordpress.com And www.youthfightforjobs.com

'Slutwalk' protest: Fight sexism, discrimination and cuts

Claire Laker-Mansfield

"Whatever we wear, wherever we go, yes means yes and no means no!" That was the call that rang out throughout London's 'Slutwalk' demonstration on 11 June. Angry chanting, homemade placards and lots of singing made this a vibrant display of opposition to the sexism recently displayed by police chiefs and politicians alike.

Around 5,000 women (and a significant number of men) joined the march with a clear message: Rape and assault are never the victim's fault - women should have the right to live their lives as they choose without fear of attack.

The demonstration was called as part of a wave of protests sparked by the remarks of a Canadian police officer, who, in a talk at a Toronto

university, told female students that they should "stop dressing like sluts" in order to avoid being raped. The remarks ignited anger in women across continents with 'Slutwalks'



On the London demo photo S.Wrack

organised in several countries.

On the demonstration there was massive anger at the Con-Dem government. Calls for justice minister Ken Clarke to resign - he infamously implied that some forms of rape are "less serious" - echoed throughout the crowds.

With the cuts affecting everything from women's refuges to public sector jobs, with women making up about two-thirds of public sector workers, and with anti-abortion groups invited to advise the government on sexual health, is it any wonder that the government is seen as bigoted and anti-women's rights?

In order to take this movement against sexism forward, a mass campaign is needed. This campaign must encompass the material issues women and all working class people are facing if it is to successfully challenge these attitudes. Most of

the biggest gains that women won in the past have been made with the crucial involvement of trade unions and the labour movement.

As the government carries out unprecedented attacks on our living standards, with cuts which will disproportionately affect women, the most effective defence ordinary people have is the ability of workers to strike. On 30 June 750,000 public sector workers are expected to strike to defend pensions and against cuts. This will be a vital step in building the fightback against the Con-Dems.

Socialists recognise that sexism has its roots in class society and the demands of the capitalist system. We fight for a different kind of society - one without divisions on the grounds of class, race or gender, one run in the interests of the majority, not the tiny rich minority.

Fast news

Power profits

Scottish Power has dealt a body blow to its 2.4 million customers with a whopping 19% rise in gas prices and a 10% increase in electricity prices from August. This price hike coincides with rising inflation and pay freezes for millions of workers.

This rise will undoubtedly set the price trend for the other UK gas utilities to follow.

Customers can expect the usual excuse from these mega-profitable companies that they're the victims of rising wholesale prices. True, the futures market for winter contracts will increase but this is due to speculation, not 'supply and demand'. In fact there is a global glut of gas supplies according to the International Energy Agency.

Moreover, many gas companies have substantial stakes in gas fields making them handsome profits both as wholesale and domestic suppliers. The sooner the private energy utilities are renationalised, the better.

Drink responsibly

Multinational drinks giant Diageo - whose brands include Johnnie Walker, Smirnoff and Guinness - has walked much media publicity following its announcement to fund training for 10,000 midwives to offer advice on the dangers of alcohol during pregnancy.

Despite the apparent conflict of interest in this sponsorship, the government has been keen to involve big business in public health provision as part of its "responsibility deal".

Many health practitioners would question just how responsible drinks manufacturers are given the levels of alcohol abuse in the population. In May it was reported that alcohol-related hospital admissions in England exceeded one million in 2009-10, a 12% increase on the previous year. And alcohol dependency cost the NHS £2.41 million in prescription items last year.

Ed the grafter

Instead of fighting the government's swingeing cuts in public services Labour's leader Ed Miliband simply wants to redistribute the few resources left according to his meritocratic beliefs.

Despite 4.5 million on housing waiting lists and house building being at its lowest peacetime level for 85 years, Ed doesn't call for a massive building programme. Instead, he intends to set those in work against the unemployed by changing the priorities on current waiting lists, rewarding people who 'make a contribution to society'.

Labour's message is clear - if you lose your job through government cuts or a company layoff don't bother applying for public housing.

Housing in crisis - see page 5

All at sea

Speaking of out-of-touch Labour politicians, what does her majesty's opposition say about the scandal of Southern Cross's run-for-profit care homes which has left 31,000 residents and their families fearing if they will continue to receive care and put 3,000 workers on the dole? Instead of demanding these homes are brought back under public control, adequately staffed and properly funded, Labour's junior shadow health spokesperson, Emily Thornberry, Islington South, insisted that government intervention to takeover Southern Cross was a no-no. The "ship of state provision" has "sailed" said the free enterprise friendly MP.