

CUTS HIT DISABLED PEOPLE HARD

Disabled people and family carers are now experiencing an unprecedented attack. Cuts made and planned by the Tory/Liberal coalition will hit the public and community services they use and the benefits they rely on. All but the most severely disabled will be expected to look or prepare for work, and face the loss of benefits if they refuse even a few hours of employment. As these articles show, the cuts will have a devastating impact unless a mass campaign is built to stop them.

Benefits slashed

A recent Care and Support Alliance survey of 1,000 disabled people and family carers, found that 22% have support needs but are not receiving services; 54% said changes to services had a negative impact on their health; 52% said their independence had been negatively affected; and 43% were less able to afford essentials such as food or heating. This was before the latest round of cuts.

In the name of a 'deficit' caused by the greed of the bankers and their profit-driven system, £81 billion in public spending cuts are planned to be carried out over the next four years.

The 28% cut in government funding to local authorities has already led to £1 billion cuts in social care spending this year and the tightening of eligibility criteria. This is at a time when there is a growing population of older disabled people.

£18 billion cuts in welfare spending will also lead to significant changes in benefits. Of the 70,000 who lost all benefits in October 2010, 20,000 were disabled people.

For example, a new Personal Independence Payment (PIP) will replace the mobility and care components of the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) from 2013. This is a move to reduce entitlement by at least 20%. Automatic entitlements will end, and the successful use of aids, such as a wheelchair, could lead to the loss of benefits.

PIPs will require incapacity benefit claimants to be reviewed. They will face the possibility of sanctions for making mistakes when claiming. Already 20,000 disabled people lose their benefits every month.

Increasing rents for some social housing to 80% of market rates, and cutting the amount given in housing benefit will have an impact on thousands of disabled people, placing many vulnerable people at risk of homelessness. Also, the National Housing Federation has warned that over 400,000 including vulnerable people, such as pensioners and victims of domestic violence, are at risk of losing essential housing support funded by the Supporting People programme.

The misnamed Welfare Reform Bill being rushed through Parliament is the vehicle for most of these cuts. It will also introduce, from October 2013, a Universal Credit that will eventually replace tax credits, housing benefit, social fund loans, income support and income based Employment Support and Jobseeker's Allowances.

My mum told me: "Wheel me to the local DWP office or the NHS. Tell them you're on strike. Imagine if all the carers did that!"

United action can stop cuts

A disabled Unison member

Given the scale of these cuts, the initial response of disabled people's organisations has been mixed. Following the autumn spending review, Inclusion London published a briefing that condemned outright the Tory/Liberal cuts. Both they and the Norfolk Coalition of Disabled People have since produced a detailed analysis of what the cuts will mean for disabled people and family carers in their areas.

But the United Kingdom Disabled People's Council (UKDPC) post-spending review statement said it had discussions with the Tory minister for disabled people, Maria Miller, and stressed the need for full impact assessments that would 'identify the effect the cuts will have' on disabled people.

The winter 2010-11 edition of UKDPC's Activate newsletter contained no outline or analysis of the cuts, but did announce the setting up of a Disability Rights Watch UK to gather evidence "to show the UK government where they need to improve the law, policies and practices to ensure that disabled people can enjoy their full human rights".

Gathering personal stories of how the cuts and discrimination are impacting on people can have an effect in countering government propaganda if they are widely circulated. But reasoning with a coalition that sees its historical legacy as completing the dismantling of the welfare state, started by Margaret Thatcher, is like trying to scratch a diamond.

There has also been a failure to publicly condemn the planned closure of the Independent Living Fund (ILF) that will put many of its 21,000 users at risk of having to choose between living independently with the most basic of support or being forced into residential care.

The government's announcement in December that the ILF is 'financially unsustainable' was supported by the Fund's trustees, and made only after consulting with 'disability organisations' that still have to be named.

In response to the ILF planned closure and the broader cuts, the National Centre for Independent Living has reiterated its long-term demand for a 'right to independent living'. But granting this right, without the billions in resources needed to achieve it, would ring hollow.

In fact, the current statutory duty on local authorities to assess and provide social services, contained in section 2 of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970, is under threat. This is a primary target of Communities Secretary Eric Pickles' war on local authority legal duties in preparation for the mass privatisation or closure of services.

The decision by the UKDPC and the Disability Benefits Consortium (DBC) in January to organise 'The Hardest Hit'

(THH) march, rally and lobby of Parliament on Wednesday 11 May reflects the groundswell of anger and alarm building among disabled people and family carers since the autumn spending review.

However, it must be used as a starting point to build a national campaign against the cuts. Disabled people's and carers' organisations and the disability charities involved in the DBC employ several thousand workers and have tens of thousands of members across the country.

Mobilised into a national campaign with active groups in every town and city, it could quickly give disabled people, family carers and not-for-profit sector workers, many of whom are facing redundancies and wage cuts, the confidence to fight back together and build a mass movement that would find an echo among millions.

On their own disabled people and carers' organisations cannot beat this government. Although it is possible that partial retreats such as the decision to continue to give mobility benefits to those in residential care could be achieved.

It is vital that links are developed with the public sector trade unions and the developing anti-cuts movement. Disabled people and family carers must play a role in them and support the call for a one-day public sector strike, as the next step in the campaign following the 26 March trade union demo.

Together we can defeat this government, reverse the cuts made so far, and demand decent benefits, pensions, jobs, homes and services for all.

We call for:

- No cuts in benefits, jobs and public services
- Oppose the Welfare Reform Bill
- Decent benefits, education, training or work for all, without compulsion
- No privatisation of services. Take back in-house all privatised services
- Sack Atos Origin and scrap the Work Capability Assessment
- A living wage and provision of respite for all family carers
- Provide free health and social care services to all who need them
- Stop using children and family members as a substitute for professional services
- A national campaign to save the Independent Living Fund
- Massive investment in social housing, services and infrastructure to create jobs and meet need
- For a 24-hour public sector general strike as the next step in the campaign to defeat all the cuts
- For a socialist society that puts the needs of the millions before the profits of the millionaires



photos Paul Mattsson

Little help for carers

Pamela Smith

"Families are crumbling across the country as carers cannot cope", Bristol mum Riven Vincent posted this online in January. David Cameron had visited her before the 2010 general election and pledged that, if elected, he'd protect disabled children.

Yet across the country, centres for disabled people and their carers are closing. The services and charities that form the scaffolding for the shaky edifice of Cameron's Big Society have had funds cut. Key welfare benefits are being axed and it's harder than ever for carers to get respite.

Hypocritically the Tories praise carers but expect families to bear the brunt of the cuts. They preach good traditional values but it is costs, not values that matter to them.

Thousands of children care for relatives to the detriment of their own welfare. Women in particular are often thrust into caring roles in the home - and into poverty.

Cameron famously knows what it's like to have a disabled child and the tragedy of losing a child is immeasurable. But millionaire Cameron and his rich wife had all kinds of resources at their disposal.

The millionaires, sitting in Cabinet or inhabiting the boardrooms of big companies, probably never empty bedpans for their parents, go without holidays or, like Riven, care 24/7 for tube-fed, doubly-incontinent children without their nannies, drivers, cleaners, gardeners and

personal assistants.

Most carers have to leap hurdles before they get any help, waiting months for an answer to requests and when help comes it's often too little too late. Dave and Sam didn't crack under the pressure whereas Riven did. After six hard years and being told not to expect more than six hours weekly respite, she sadly asked for her child to be taken into care.

An extra £800 million has been allocated to respite care over the next four years, but it's not ring-fenced. Local councils can decide how to spend it and they are making cuts. Under Labour only 23% of the £400 million given for respite care in 2008 actually went into carers' breaks.

We deserve better

Caring involves financial, physical and psychological costs to the carer. It's a cheap option for the Con-Dem government.

But we and the people we love and care for deserve better: professional, dedicated support; training; weekly respite and proper holidays; a decent living income.

But let's face it - many of us wouldn't be doing it at all if there was a good, free and well-funded care system worthy of the name.

My mum told me: "Wheel me to the local DWP office or the NHS. Tell them you're on strike. Imagine if all the carers did that!"

She's right: we deserve a break. But expect nothing from the Con-Dems, although the last lot were no better. Somehow we'll have to fight for it!



THE HARDEST HIT MARCH & RALLY
Wednesday 11 May, 11.30am
by Horseguards Avenue,
Victoria Embankment, London

Profiteer vultures circle over services

Jackie Russell

Since 2008 Labour and Con-Dem governments have paid around £100 million a year to Atos Healthcare, a division of Atos Origin, to assess new sickness and disability related benefit claimants for the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). By using the unfair Work Capability Assessment (WCA), many were found 'fit to work'.

From April 2011 the WCA will be used by the Tory/Liberal government to assess one and a half million current disabled and ill Incapacity Benefit claimants. Of these, only about a quarter of a million will be transferred on to ESA.

Even then, many receiving ESA will only be able to claim it for a year. Those transferred to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) will receive £26 a week less, causing further and unnecessary hardship.

Some disabled people, particularly people with learning difficulties or mental health problems or cognitive impairments such as dyslexia, will be at risk of sanctions.

Since the introduction of the WCA, there has been a massive rise in appeals at the tribunal service. At least 40% of those appealing have been found 'not fit to work'. This process is a waste of taxpayers' money that is better used to create jobs, as well as hugely stressful.

Incredibly, many reports have stated that claimants, diagnosed with cancer, have been declared as fit to work; many blind and deaf people will also no longer automatically receive sickness benefit and are unlikely to qualify

for extra help in finding work.

While most disabled people want to work, the government has also failed to appreciate that there are few supported jobs available to them and has not fully recognised the barriers that they experience in obtaining jobs - the institutional discrimination and prejudicial attitudes.

Atos Origin's renewed contract will involve them reassessing all existing Disability Living Allowance claimants to check if they are eligible for the new Personal Independent Payment.

This transition aims to save the government a further £1 billion plus that will result in many disabled people being found no longer eligible or placed on a lower rate than before.

Along with the privatisation of the welfare state, it seems that we are reverting to what working class and poor disabled people had to go through in the 19th century, where they had to provide for themselves and in times of crisis, were forced to go cap in hand to workhouses and philanthropists.

Most of the capitalist newspapers are aiding the government's ability to divide and rule by blaming the vulnerable in society, for example, scapegoating disabled people as 'scroungers', "greedy skivers" and "benefit cheats" for claiming benefits.

For the last six decades, the country has been governed by all three political parties and disabled people are no further forward in securing their right to live as equal citizens. They are still being denied welfare services. This indicates the need for society to become a socialist one, that puts people first, not profit.

The way I see things

Mark Wright

For me, someone who is registered blind, the cuts are a very real and worrying thing. Like many other blind and visually impaired people, I rely on Disability Living Allowance (DLA), not totally, but to top up the income we often can't receive.

Due to finding work difficult to come by I have only been able to get a part-time job. Many may ask why do I require DLA if I can work. That is missing the point.

Contrary to what Iain Duncan Smith, minister for work and pensions, has to say, the DLA is a non work-based benefit that has two components.

Access to work

The first is the mobility part which is used to help disabled people get about and remain as independent as they can be, given their disability.

The other part is the care component

which goes towards helping you pay the costs of living. If you require a carer it would go towards that.

Also, as someone who is registered blind, I have had mixed experiences with the 'access to work' scheme set up by the previous Labour government.

Despite its slowness and inefficiency it is still a very good service which helps many disabled people into work. My workplace was adapted for me to carry out tasks like any other employee.

None of the cost of this is funded by the employer, be they in the non-governmental public or private sector.

Cuts affect productivity

Instead a government grant can cover things like taxi transport to and from work if a bus service is not available or equipment like screen readers for use with computers, which I take full advantage of.

Cuts in these areas will not only affect me but will affect my productivity. I really think the government should be looking to encourage disabled people into work rather than making them feel like criminals for needing support and assistance to be on a level playing field with the rest of society.

