

Legal Aid Bill Access to justice is under attack

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For those of us working in legal aid, the initial government Green Paper - Proposals for the Reform of Legal Aid in England and Wales - heralded a massive attack not only on our jobs, but also our clients, the welfare state and the principle of justice.

Hundreds of thousands of people with family, housing, welfare, education and immigration problems will, if these proposals are allowed to be introduced, no longer have access to free legal advice.

The Green Paper had an amazing 5,000 responses, from solicitors groups, trade unionists, and ordinary working class people - overwhelmingly against the proposals outlined by the Con-Dem government.

So, what was the effect of the 5,000 submissions to the Ministry of Justice? In two words - very little.

The Ministry of Justice assured legal aid solicitors that they had carefully considered the 5,000 submissions to the Green Paper. However, apart from tiny concessions the consultation responses were ignored.

Unless we are able to win major concessions in the coming months the bulk of the cutbacks outlined initially in the Green Paper, and now consolidated in the Legal Aid Bill, will go through parliament.

The Con-Dem government has clearly made a careful calculation that they do not need to listen to legal aid lawyers, trade unions, or working class people in general.

It intends to force through these changes by highlighting the 'national debt' - arguing that the current annual £2.1 billion legal aid cost is 'unaffordable'.

But although capitalism faces a real crisis, the national debt argument is a deception of epic proportions.

A recent report issued by the PCS trade union and War on Want illustrates that at least £18 billion is hidden away in tax havens every year.

In addition, the Sunday Times (April 2010) Rich List revealed that

"the collective wealth of the 1,000 multi-millionaires... has climbed to £335 billion, up £77 billion on 2009. This is a 29.9% increase, easily the biggest rise in the 22 years of the Rich List."

Cut to the bone

The Legal Aid Bill is now in its House of Commons committee stage until October 2011.

The Bill is a vicious attack on access to justice, social justice and civil liberties. The attack is to create a new kind of state where laws and policies may on the face of it guarantee minimum standards. However, in creating a rump legal aid system, a rump that is cut to the bone, such guarantees will not be worth the paper they are written on.

At this stage the attack on legal aid concentrates itself primarily on civil legal aid. It strips away rights to legal aid in employment law, social security/welfare rights, immigration law, and many aspects of housing law. In family law, the Bill seeks to exclude most cases apart from those to do with child protection.

However, criminal legal aid also faces an attack in the future. The Bill includes provisions for the Lord Chancellor to exclude a large number of suspects from receiving advice at police stations by using means and merits tests to decide if a person qualifies for assistance.

Legal aid and its survival is at a critical point. The Con-Dem government has made it clear that ideologically it wants to see its demise.

Legal aid will only be saved as part of the wider campaign to defend public services, and the welfare state. It is up to legal aid lawyers to join with the trade union movement to raise the issues of the defence of legal aid, and it is up to the trade unions and the working class as a whole to embrace the defence of legal aid as the fourth pillar of the welfare state.

For more info see:

<http://www.justice-for-all.org.uk/>
- supported by Unite and the PCS
<http://soundoffforjustice.org/> - the Law Society legal aid campaign



The cuts can be stopped photo Paul Mattsson

Privatisation and cuts undermine the NHS

Andrew Walton

Unison rep, Leicestershire Partnership Trust - personal capacity

The chief executive of UHL (University Hospitals Leicester) has threatened that staff will not be paid in August and September, if current spending rates continue at Leicester's hospitals. Already, 200 staff have not been paid for overtime this month. Staff have been asked to take unpaid leave or reduce their hours.

The Socialist Party totally condemned this action and called a public meeting to launch a campaign to demand that staff receive their full pay.

Management are saying that not keeping to financial plans would have 'terminal consequences' for the hospital's application to become a Foundation Trust. Instead of putting patient care first they are prioritising finances. It is dangerous to expect 'efficiency savings' to make up the shortfall when wards are already chronically under-staffed.

Foundation Trusts will force hospitals to compete with each other rather than cooperate to provide the best care. Hospitals could go bankrupt. In Leicester, UHL Trust has to make budget cuts, year on year over the next five years amounting to £158 million, due to spending cuts from the government. Cuts of this scale will undoubtedly lead to redundancies.

These cuts can be stopped. Unison, the main union in the NHS, needs a fighting leadership, and to

coordinate industrial action with the other public sector unions. The Socialist Party calls for a 24-hour public sector general strike.

The Tories were lying when they said that they would not cut the NHS. Jobs will have to be slashed as a result of more than £20 billion of 'efficiency savings'. Yet the process of privatisation, encouraging hospitals to become Foundation Trusts, began under Labour. All three main parties are in hock to the interests of big business - ordinary people need to build their own party to represent their interests.

The money is there to fully fund our public services. The government bailed out the banks with over £1 trillion of our money. The economic crisis was caused by the rich and big business, not public sector workers. The money exists to pay for jobs, education and health care for all but it is in the hands of tiny rich minority.

The Socialist Party is against all cuts in public services. We demand:

- Staff to be guaranteed pay in accordance with their contracts, including overtime and enhancements.
- Services should be properly funded and wards staffed to meet patient need, not financial profit.
- For an all-members meeting of the trade unions to be held urgently to discuss action, including industrial action, to defeat these attacks.
- No cuts to jobs and services.
- No to Foundation Trusts and privatisation. For a fully funded, publicly owned and democratically run NHS.

Safety threatened by coastguard cuts

Carrie Anne Watkins

Coastguard workers and the people of Swansea are shocked by the announcement that Swansea coastguard station is to close, with 28 job losses.

The announcement follows a u-turn by the weak Con-Dem government that has resulted in some threatened coastguard services, including neighbouring stations in Milford Haven and Holyhead, being saved. This follows a huge campaign by PCS union and local campaigners who fought to keep Milford Haven and Holyhead open with local protests and a 20,000 signature petition sent to David Cameron.

The busy Swansea coastguard station covers one of the largest natural deepwater harbours in Europe. It deals with an area with three refineries, the Devon coast-

line and the Bristol Channel.

Last year Swansea coastguards attended more than 2,000 incidents. People's safety is being put at risk by the cuts.

Sian Thomas, a PCS rep who was heavily involved with the Milford Haven campaign, said: "It is brilliant news that Milford and other stations are to be kept open and shows that campaigning does work."

"However the closure of Swansea is unnecessary and dangerous to the people who unfortunately need the coastguard service each year. The coastguard service needs more resources not less and proves the government's stance on cuts is just an ideological, politically driven excuse to decimate the public sector."

At the time of writing a campaign to save Swansea coastguard service has been set up including a Facebook page.

Fast news

Fuel poverty

Government figures for 2009 show that more than one-fifth of all households in the UK suffered from 'fuel poverty' ie spent 10% or more of their household income on heating.

This is before the full impact of the recession and the government's swingeing austerity cuts have been felt in the country.

The department of energy and climate change (DECC) reckons that "between 2004 and 2009, domestic electricity prices increased by over 75%, while gas prices increased by over 122% over the same period."

DECC predicts that fuel poverty will increase for the years 2010 and 2011 due to further price increases by the 'big six' energy utilities. Earlier this month British Gas (BG) announced an 18% and 16% increase in its gas and electricity tariff to its 16 million customers from August.

BG last increased its prices in December 2010 by 6.9% (or £43) for gas and 6.7% (£28) for electricity, as the country suffered the coldest winter for 100 years. In the last year BG customers will have seen their bills rise by £258 or 25%. Similarly, Scottish Power customers took a £239 hit or 21% increase last month.

Operating profits at British Gas rose 24% in 2010 to £742 million while its parent company Centrica achieved pre-tax profits of £2.8 billion, with operating profits up 29% to £2.4 billion.

The only way to end fuel poverty is by nationalising the energy companies and planning production to meet the needs of the population.

Capital gains

Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation paid 20% tax on its \$2.5 billion in profits in the US last year even though the corporate tax rate is 35% and, according to the Financial Times, "still managed to receive a tax benefit".

The US government reported in 2009 that News Corp had 152 subsidiaries in tax havens or "financial privacy jurisdictions" as they say in polite society. Only Citigroup and Morgan Stanley had more.

In 1999 the Economist magazine found that News Corp had paid no net UK corporation tax since 1987 while making £1.4 billion profits. In some years the company did pay some tax, but in other years it claimed rebates.

Jack Ciesielski, publisher, of the Analyst's Accounting Observer, called the strategy "brutally simple".

"Companies go where the rates are lowest to do business and keep costs in jurisdictions where they're most deductible," he explained. This attitude to paying tax is in sharp contrast to the headlines in the likes of the Murdoch-owned Sun newspaper - hounding ordinary working people who, being forced out of work or are in low-paid jobs, receive housing benefit as just one example; the "have nots".

Last year Rupert's "compensation" (that's wages to you and me) was \$22.7 million. His second son, James, struggled by with \$10.3 million. His eldest son, Lachlan, brought home \$1.8 million; the "have yachts".

John Sharpe



photo Paul Heron