

Issue 38

Winter 2012

SOLIDARITY

The quarterly newsletter of DUWCs and OFFA

SANCTIONING SAVAGERY

As the sanctioning regime for people claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) becomes even more draconian, Derbyshire Unemployed Workers' Centres are hearing stories from sanction victims which beggar belief.

Internet forums are filling with first hand accounts from people affected by over-zealous application of the rules. Here in Derbyshire, we have had a case where someone arrived just five minutes late for a Job Centre appointment—and had their benefits stopped. It begs the question of those dealing out the sanctions—have they never been late for anything, ever?

Another case dealt with by our volunteer adviser, Justine Bark, involved a man who was regularly volunteering for the Salvation Army. He was told by the Job Centre to stop that and go and volunteer for another charity instead. On arrival at the designated centre, they could find no work for him and sent him home. When the Job Centre learned this they stopped his benefits!

The new regime sees the new minimum sanction length being raised to four weeks—that's potentially a whole month with no money—because you missed or were late for an appointment. On a second "offence" the sanction will last for 13 weeks. The next levels are six months, then three years.

The new Universal Credit benefit will also be subject to sanctions, meaning that people in low income jobs could also lose a vital supplement to their incomes. Colin Hampton, DUWC Co-ordinator said 'Stopping people's benefits causes real hardship for those on the receiving end. There are few jobs around, but the use of benefit sanctions is now greater than ever. It makes no sense unless you are interested in manipulating statistics or bullying and penalising the vulnerable.'



Miss your bus? You could be without benefit for a month or more.

Campaign News

Workfare Woe

The Government's Workfare programme continues to provoke JSA claimants and their sympathisers. The current news is that some of those taking part in the programme are again using forced labour to replace their usual Christmas time temporary vacancies. One of our Boycott Workfare campaign group contacts tells us that at one branch of Argos, Workfare people are doing more hours than the paid average. Argos continue to take part in the programme, but at least the British Heart Foundation have now announced that they will no longer be involved. As Boycott Workfare stated:

"It is good to see a charity that was using Workfare on a massive scale acknowledge that forced unpaid work isn't palatable for their supporters or customers."

We couldn't have put it better ourselves.

Meanwhile, the DWP is refusing to release a list of all those employers who are taking part. This shows that they are scared of the protests that would ensue if campaigners had official confirmation of who to target. The DWP knows that the unfavourable publicity would result in many withdrawing from the scheme, resulting in its collapse.

Frozen Benefits Will Leave Even More Out in the Cold

DUWCs have been arguing for years that benefit payments are subject to an unacceptable standard of uprating each April. Forty years ago, unemployment benefit payments were 21% of the average wage. In 2011, the average UK wage was calculated at £26,200. Job Seekers Allowance for a person aged over 25 is currently £71 per week, which over the course of a year amounts to £3,692—around 14% of this average wage. The value of benefits has been sliding down over the years.

As prices for basics such as household fuel soar, leaving many claimants with the stark choice of either heating their home or eating, it would take a financial expert to make ends meet on £71 per week. But the Coalition Government is now considering yet another blow to society's poorest. Part one of this plan involves freezing benefit payments for two years. Part two will end the link with inflation when considering future upratings, linking it instead to increases in average pay. This will inevitably reduce the value of the increases as prices rise faster than pay.

Outrage

At a time when it is emerging just how little, if any, some of the major household company names are paying in taxes, this is an outrage. The Government says that another £10 billion in savings need to be made to the welfare budget. This is taking money from those that have the least, while multinational companies seem to be given a license to make money from UK citizens while putting nothing back into the system. Meanwhile, propaganda wheels turn to ensure that much of the British public believe that the benefit claimants are the cheats, and will let the Government ride roughshod over those least able to fight back.

DUWC will argue vocally that these plans should not go ahead. Watch this space for further news.

Campaign News

DWP Publishes Study into Mental Health and Job Seekers

The DWP has published a research summary on mental health and Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) claimants. Put the findings to any Welfare Rights Adviser and it would be akin to teaching your granny to suck eggs—but at least it sets out officially the problems faced by claimants. Some of the points made include:

- People claiming JSA have worse mental health than the average working age population. More than one fifth have anxiety/depression.
- Recent adverse life events are common among JSA claimants.
- People with mental health disorders have less confidence in their job search abilities and were less likely to find work.
- Those with ongoing problems tend to have broken or limited work histories.

It concludes that:

“Poor physical health, low levels of social support, neighbourhood context and adverse life events all play a role in whether or not someone will experience a decline in mental health during a period of unemployment. However, there is an important distinction for policy makers to consider between people who arrive on JSA with relatively stable employment histories having developed symptoms of distress as a result of recent life events, and those for whom a mental health condition is one issue among an array of longstanding life adversities.”

See the DWP website for the full report.

http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/report_abstracts/rr_abstracts/rra_810.asp

Who's Who at the Centres

Welfare Rights Team:

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Campaign News

20 Food Banks in Derbyshire—A National Disgrace!

Many members of the public think that poverty only exists in developing countries and it couldn't happen here. Well, we have got news for them. In Derbyshire there are now 20 food banks open with more in the pipeline. These charities, churches and organisations are taking collections of food donations to distribute to those who cannot afford to feed themselves.

It is admirable that so many people have stepped up to the plate to come to the help of those that are struggling, often as a result of policies which have targeted taking money from the poor.

Benefits sanctions, where the DWP take away a person's benefit for transgressing their rules are one reason why people have to approach food banks. Administrative delays and the inadequacy of the social fund are contributing factors, as is the low level of benefits which do not keep pace with the cost of living.

Derbyshire Unemployed Workers' Centres will give support to those giving food to those in need but at the same time will lobby and campaign for their services to become unnecessary. It is a national disgrace that in such a rich country we have come to this.

The Roman Catholic Arch Bishop Dom Helder Camara said during the last century 'When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why are they poor, they call me a communist'. DUWC's will fight for a welfare state built on rights and solidarity not a return to Victorian philanthropy where the poor must beg for food.



User Feedback Gives DUWC 100% Support

Each October we ask DUWC users to complete a user feedback form after their visit. As usual, we had an excellent response with all respondents saying that they would use the service again. 90% were very happy with the service, with the other 10% satisfied. Here are a few of the comments:

- ◆ Thank you for your time and effort, thanks for being there when other doors have closed
- ◆ A good public service for help and guidance
- ◆ Worth your weight in gold
- ◆ Should be one of these places in every town and village
- ◆ Should have your money re-instated, you are a credit to the community we would be lost without you

DUWC News

All Hands Needed on Deck

Ask any voluntary organisation and they will tell you that times are hard. DUWCs have suffered from a series of funding cuts over the past few years.

In the next financial year we will have to find £65,000 to maintain our current spending levels on our advice services provision. This is a real crisis!



Welfare reforms and the deluge of Employment and Support Allowance tribunals mean that we are more in demand than ever before. We can't meet this demand without a full complement of advice staff, and yet we can't afford to continue paying all of our current staff members. We can't even afford to give volunteers the training that they need to support us.

WHO WILL BAIL US OUT?

To meet the new challenges we will need all our friends and supporters to rally to the cause. We need regular contributors to support our activities in lobby and campaigning work as well as enabling us to support people in advice and representation.

CAN YOU HELP US FUNDRAISE? ALL IDEAS AND INPUT WELCOME – CONTACT COLIN ON 01246 231441

All Change at Staveley

In October, DUWC sadly said goodbye to Kathy Farr, our Staveley stalwart. Kathy has been involved with DUWC since 2004, when she first joined us as a volunteer. This experience led to her finding work elsewhere in Chesterfield for a while, but she retained links with us by joining the Management Committee.

When her work contract ended, Kathy returned to her volunteer adviser role at DUWC. Soon, the part time position of adviser at the Staveley office became vacant after the departure of Neil Turner. Kathy applied for the post and was successful, heralding five and a half years of solid work for the Staveley community. Kathy's dedication and warm personality will be missed—as will her experience and knowledge. Kathy has understandably decided to leave for a more secure role within the NHS.



The Staveley outreach has always been in a precarious position due to funding being awarded on an annual basis. We also always knew that our premises would never be permanently available to us. We have been lucky in a succession of willing funders such as the now obsolete Staveley Neighbourhood Management and Coalfields Regeneration Trust to keep it going for so long. But now our luck may be running out. We have exhausted our search for new funders - who are unlikely to fund an ongoing project anyway; and the lease on the premises runs out next April. We hope that with the help of Staveley Town Council and Chesterfield Borough Council we can provide some service to the town, but this will probably have to be scaled back somewhat.

It seems to be the end of an era at Staveley—let's hope that it's not the end altogether. We'll keep you posted.

Events

Poverty Conference Report by Sharon Coles

Like most people, I thought there were very few in the country who were affected by the issue of poverty. After all, Britain is the seventh richest economy in the world; this should be enough to ensure our residents have sufficient basic human rights - the three simplest rights - food, shelter and warmth. I suppose like most I thought that the main groups affected by poverty would be the single people on welfare benefits.

Attending the TUC conference certainly changed my view on the subject. I was shocked to discover how most of the affected families were working families, most of whom are working for National Minimum Wage. It is true these families' income are topped up by Tax Credits, however this benefit is being 'streamlined' by the present government. As with most other benefits, Tax Credits are being cut across the board without consideration of the consequences to the lowest paid residents of the country. While the top earners are able to get richer, the Coalition Government is penalising the lowest paid groups in society.

The Workshops enabled information to be presented, allowing delegates the opportunity to try and work out solutions to the problem. These workshops were based on six main topics:

- ◆ Job creation
- ◆ Poverty benefits
- ◆ A fair day's pay for a fair day's work
- ◆ Disabled people and responsibilities
- ◆ Reciprocity: what right? Whose responsibilities?
- ◆ With the final workshop, a special interest to my self, Women and reciprocity.

Alternatively delegates could have attended a single workshop - Unemployed Movements from History. The day was an enlightening experience; as a student of social history, I have realised that Britain, rather than going forward, is in fact returning to the Victorian attitudes. Unless we change these attitudes I am certain soon we will see the return of children begging on the street, or even worse, the return of the dreaded workhouse...



The DUWC delegation at the 2012 TUC Poverty Conference

Sharon is a DUWC volunteer from our Shirebrook office.

DUWC Listens to Amber Valley

With funding from the Midlands TUC, DUWC have been able to organise two Speaking and Listening Events for Amber Valley residents. The first will be held in Alfreton on November 23rd, while the second will be held in Heanor on December 7th.

The events are aimed at encouraging benefit claimants to speak out about their experiences, and to organise campaigns for change. Local politicians have been invited to engage with the participants and to listen to their concerns.

The events are based on a model that was trialled in Chesterfield last year, and attracted a large number of participants. We'll report back on the results next time.

TRUST/DAST

Europe's Asbestos Catastrophe: Supporting Victims and Preventing Future Tragedy

Joanne Carlin writes: I was privileged, as part of the Asbestos Support Groups' Forum, to be invited to Brussels to "Europe's Asbestos Catastrophe: Supporting Victims, Preventing Future Tragedy". (17 – 18 September 2012). The aim was to bring together asbestos victims, support groups, trade unionists and campaigners as well as representatives from the European Commission.

What was evident throughout the conference was the different levels of knowledge on asbestos throughout Europe. Poland is leading the way in preventing future asbestos related disease by setting a deadline of 2030 for the asbestos decontamination of the country. They will see an end to asbestos related diseases. Furthermore, they invest significant efforts in training Labour Inspectors, businesses and workers about asbestos dangers.

The UK could learn a lot. Whilst Poland is investing in their enforcement body, the UK Government has cut the Health and Safety Executive's budget by 35%. Moreover, the Government, although having reinstated the successful "Hidden Killer" campaign which warned maintenance workers of the dangers of asbestos, have not as yet provided any resources for it to continue. Many dangerous industries, including agriculture, have been re-classified as low risk and the Government has not included asbestos in their Schools audit. Although the UK Government is auditing the condition of UK schools (for example, the state of fire alarms), it has deliberately not included the condition of asbestos in this audit. This is despite the fact that 16 teachers died of Mesothelioma in 2012. Children are 5.3 times more likely to develop Mesothelioma by the time they are 80 than a teacher of 30, purely due to the fact that they have more years to develop this devastating cancer.

Another issue for the UK Government is in relation to the punishment of offenders who knowingly expose people to asbestos. A lady from the Clydebank Asbestos Group was applauded when she said that she felt asbestos criminals should be locked up and the key thrown away! Criminal case law has already made history in Belgium and Italy. An Italian Court sentenced two men to 16 years in prison and ordered them to pay millions for causing over 2,000 asbestos related deaths of workers at the Construction Company, Eternit. **We cannot let companies get away with knowingly killing workers by exposing them to dangerous asbestos.**

At the end of the conference, there was a feeling of urgency to make progress. Doug Jewell, my colleague from the Asbestos Support Groups' Forum, suggested a European Charter to enshrine the rights of all European citizens. This is now being written and enabled delegates to come away with something positive and set goals to work towards.



**Trade Union Safety Team and Derbyshire Asbestos Support Team
Contact Joanne Gordon or Natalie Woodward on 01246 380415**

Where to get advice

ALFRETON Alfreton House High Street Tuesday 9.00am—12.00pm Wed,Thur 9.00am-12.00pm 1.00pm-4.00pm	BOLSOVER Kitchencroft Oxcroft Lane Monday 1.00pm—3.30pm	BRIMINGTON Community Centre High Street Monday 9.15am—12.15pm	CLAY CROSS Adult Education Centre Market Street Monday 9.30am—12.30pm
CLOWNE 48 Mill Street Tuesday 1.00pm—3.30pm	CRESWELL Limestone House Elmton Road Thursday 1.00pm—3.30pm	ECKINGTON Business Centre Market Street Monday 1.30pm—3.30pm	GRASSMOOR Community Centre New Street Thursday 10.00am -12.00pm
HEANOR Salcare Ray Street Friday 8.30am-12.30pm	NORTH WINGFIELD Community Resource Centre Thursday 1.00pm-3.30pm	PINXTON Village Hall Kirkstead Road Tuesday 1.00pm—3.30pm	SOMERCOTES Parish Hall Nottingham Road Monday 1.30pm-4.00pm
STAVELEY Learning Matters High Street Mon,Wed,Fri 9.00am—1.00pm	Telephone 01246 231441 01623 748161	CHESTERFIELD 70 Saltergate Mon—Fri 9.00am—12.30pm 01246 231441	SHIREBROOK 44 Patchwork Row Mon—Thurs 9.00am—11.30am 01623 748161

Help us Go Green!

If you are able to receive your issue of Solidarity via email, please send your address to:

info@duwc.org.uk

For more regular updates you can follow us on Twitter **@derbyshireuwc** and we also have a Facebook page.

Don't Forget...

To remember us in your will, or to ask for donations in lieu of flowers at your funeral.

Let our future be your legacy.

You Can't Work Here

You're fit for work ATOS said and so I started out
To look for jobs around the town and see what was about
"You can't work here" the manager said, as I interviewed a bit
"There's some lifting in this job and you must be really fit."

You're fit for work, ATOS said and so I tried again
I was interviewed on several days but all was still in vain
I'm good at this and I'm good at that, I used to work in't pit
"You can't work here with that bad chest; you might be off a bit."

You're fit for work ATOS said again so round and round I go
My chest is worse and so I move now very, very slow
I'm sure it can't be difficult; it's not beyond their wit
I can't get work, I can't get help, I can't get benefit.

By Shay Boyle