No Dole Slavery! No Wage Slavery!

Anarchist Communist Federation

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October 7th, imaginatively named 'A-day' by the employment services, has now passed and the Job Seekers Allowance has replaced Income Support and Unemployment Benefit. Unlike previous benefit changes, it is clear that the new JSA is less to do with cuts and much more about an direct attack on conditions, pay and security for workers and unemployed as a whole. While it is true that many people (especially those under 25 years of age) will lose money now unemployment benefit has become 'contributory JSA' and in forth-coming changes to housing benefit rules, the JSA is predominantly a means to force us into low-paid work by the threat of having no money to live on.

Perhaps the nastiest effect of the JSA is due to the combination of the Job Seekers Agreement and the new Labour Market System computer database. This Agreement will eventually be signed by all claimants, with new claimants being affected straight away, and existing claimants to be dealt with at 'advisory' Restart interviews when they next attend. The Agreement states, amongst other things, exactly what you will do to find work, the lowest wage you will accept and how far you are prepared to travel to a job, which will apply for up to 13 weeks after the agreement is signed. After this, you can be forced to take any available job or face loss of all benefits. New Job Seekers Directives can make you take steps to improve appearance or attitude, again with the threat of 100% benefit cut for failure to comply. All training schemes which may have been voluntary before October 7th have become compulsory under JSA. The LMS database contains both job details and personal information so you can be linked to 'suitable' jobs every time you sign-on, called Active Signing. It also maintains a signing-on record, including information as detailed as an excuse given for signing on late. Sending a claim for adjudication, that is, referring you for a possible benefit cut, can be done literally at the press of a button on the LMS screen. These new powers and procedures are obviously bad news for all claimants.

The last Groundswell network meeting, attended by anti-JSA groups across the country, highlighted the need to see the JSA as only one part of the attack on benefits which is happening in Britain, and in many cases the JSA has a knock-on effect on other benefits. Incapacity benefit is already much harder to get due to the 'all work' test, where you virtually have to prove you are incapable of doing any job to get your money. Many people who fail this despicable test will have a hard task fulfilling the strict criteria for work availability under JSA, meaning many ill or disabled people may not get any benefits at all. Housing benefit is also under attack with a capping of weekly rates to a maximum of £39 and in most cases to much lower amounts as money is taken off for shared facilities or rooms etc. In Sheffield, for instance, it's nearer £28 tops for a room in a shared house. Child Support is also under threat, and single parents are increasingly under pressure to work for benefits.

Peanuts

The JSA is not the only way we are being forced to work for peanuts. The weapon of USA-style 'workfare' schemes has already been piloted in the Hull and Medway areas, under the name of Project Work, which is compulsory work-for-dole plus £10. In Hull, where the scheme was dubbed the chain-gang (with some people actually breaking rocks to build stones walls), around 1000 of the 5000 participants have been forced off the dole register in one way or another. 40% of these are said to have found 'jobs' via the Job Centre. As for the other 60% who signed off, the government is claiming a victory against 'working-on-the-side'. The state sees the 1000 ex-

claimants as a triumph for its ideology and budget-reducing strategy because they have been made 'independent of welfare', some having been pushed into shit jobs and the rest victimised into signing off. The government has just announced plans to extend Project Work pilot schemes to 29 other cities which will affect around 300,000 claimants. The Labour Party has similar plans if their Manifesto promise to get 100,000's of claimants into 'work' is anything to go by. For this reason, we should be very wary of the idea of 'Jobs not JSA' being pushed by the TUC and some leftist groups like Militant. Instead the Groundswell network has endorsed the alternative slogan "No Wage Slavery! No Dole Slavery!". The idea that there is no such a thing as a fair job under capitalism is rarely put forward by the left.

If all this were not bad enough an extended anti-fraud campaign began at the start of November. 12 cities have been selected for the snooper hot-line treatment, and people will be encouraged yet again to grass up benefit 'cheats'. The fraud campaign has also identified various groups for special attention, such as single parents cohabiting, market traders, fast-food and part-time workers claiming dole, or any parent who has not responded to a Child Support Agency questionnaire. In these cases the sole aim is to get as many claimants as possible off the dole register.

Angry

As far as the effect on pay is concerned, if claimants are forced into taking any old job the employer can think of at whatever wage, as will be the case under JSA and perhaps even worse under Project Work, this can only force down wages across the board. It is to the credit of Groundswell that we are now linking all benefits cuts and the reality of shitty low-paid jobs. No credit is due to unions like the CPSA who have consistently whined on about their need for security screens in Job Centres to protect workers from angry claimants, and have, along with others in the TUC and the left, condemned the '3-strikes' initiative aimed at exposing workers and management who are using the JSA to harass claimants. The unions have been a real obstacle in attempts to get workers and claimants together. Some dole workers have been able to show solidarity by walking out during Job Centre occupations, but this needs to be extended much further if we are to try and make the JSA and other benefit attacks unworkable. The need for claimants to take action together when individuals are singled out for sanctions will also be an important strategy in the future. We are now in a good position to bring in workers affected by sacking and redundancies as many will be facing the horrors of JSA. Links with dockers and postal workers already exist and are being strengthened. There are many other good ideas coming out of the anti-JSA campaign, mainly from an anarchist perspective. Another exciting development is the linking of workers struggles with anti-roads and anti-Criminal Justice Act issues at events like Reclaim the Future in Liverpool.

Finally, it is useful to take a look at what is going on outside of Britain. States throughout Europe have similarly attacked benefits and pensions to get ready for Monetary Union in 1999, which capitalist analysts say will 'cure' unemployment because of its stable conditions for economic growth, including low interest rates and inflation. The Maastrict agreement requires a budget deficit of 3% of Gross Domestic Product to qualify for EMU, and before membership is allowed participating states must also have low public debts and a stable exchange rate. At the end of 1995, it was believed that many states (e.g. Spain, Italy and Belgium) would be unlikely to fulfil the Maastrict conditions by the 1999 deadline and even the richer states were getting

worried, so at the end of 1995 France attempted to move in this direction, with the support of Germany, by introducing a set of welfare reforms. Prime Minister Alain Juppé announced his Plan to cut back on welfare spending and public sector pensions, and to cut 'non-urgent' medical expenditure in the national health service, which was greeted with widespread strikes and riots by workers and claimants. The Tory government is too tied up with internal ideological disagreements over Europe to openly link the JSA with EMU, but it has certainly made it clear that they will keep Britain's options open by making sure the Maastrict Conditions will be met. We need to recognise the additional threat of the proposed European unity for a fuller understanding of why these changes are taking place.

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