

THE STAINES HOWLER

EMPLOYMENT, UNEMPLOYMENT AND BENEFITS SPECIAL

SCROUNGING ABOUT?

Newspapers regularly feature stories of people on benefits, and politicians are eager to speak out on the subject. And government campaigns urge us to be on the look-out for cheaters. But a lot of what is said is far from accurate relying on myths and distortions.

The amount of benefits claims made fraudulently or in error has fallen over the past few years and overspending due to fraud for all benefits is between 0.7% and 1.1%.

Yet newspapers regularly throw outrage at large families on benefits, particularly when they have made fraudulent or 'undeserving' claims.

It's a common move to then jump from these statistically rare cases to suggest the whole benefits system needs overhauling, perhaps even scrapping outright.

For politicians, it certainly doesn't hurt their careers to be seen taking a tough stand against as claimants. George Osborne was keen to publicly note the benefits bill stands at 'one third of all public spending', not mentioning 60% of this goes to pensioners, and only 2% on Jobseekers Allowance.

A misconception is that we've seen a constant increase in the level of spending on benefits. But in the decade running up to the current recession, spending on benefits had shown the longest period of stability since the welfare state was established.

Another misconception is that welfare spending goes mostly to people out of work. But



out-of-work benefits account for less than a quarter of welfare spending and just over half of non-pensioner spending.

The idea that welfare costs are high because of large out-of-work families is even further from the truth as families with more than five children account for 1% of out-of-work benefit claims. Also, it's worth noting the majority of recipients on housing benefits are in work.

One of the most common myths is that families can be wealthier while on benefits than in work. But for the vast majority, even the Minimum Wage would make them financially better off than if they claimed benefits. A single person working 30hrs/week at Minimum Wage would be £2,270/year better off than on benefits, and a couple with two children in which one partner works 30hrs/week would be £3,651/year better off. MPs and newspapers claim otherwise through a careful manipulation of the facts. An investigation into this states that 'government statements in support of capping benefit entitlements have persistently compared the benefit income of out-of-work families with children

with average wages, ignoring substantial entitlements to in-work benefits for families with children'.

Another trick is to compare 'the income of a non-working family with children with... the income of a working family without children, again airbrushing out of the comparison in-work entitlements for families with children'.

Widespread negative attitudes towards those on benefits has an effect on the people themselves. Claimants are well aware of the stigma against them, and this has been shown to impact on their confidence and feelings of worth - not a good thing for those trying to find work.

People are now less likely to claim benefits they are entitled to, or even go to the Job Centre, through a feeling of shame. Claimants often report unpleasant interactions with Job Centre staff, it being felt they are unsympathetically judged by them.

A related trend is the increase in hate crimes against the disabled, motivated by the belief that people with disabilities are fraudulently claiming.

With costs of living on the increase, and government cuts bringing about greater levels of unemployment and homelessness, attacks on the benefit system result in the poorest in society losing out all the more. It is politically convenient for politicians, and profitable for newspapers, to pretend those pushed to the bottom are the sole cause of their own problems.

Mia Riddle, 18 and looking for work after completing her A Levels.

I successfully applied to university (mostly out of the insistence of my school) but didn't feel ready for it, so I deferred my placement.

I went out in search for work for the year. The only experience I had was volunteering at a local arts centre and after a couple of months of applying for every job I could find, my mum convinced me to apply for Jobseekers. I felt awful despite desperately needing the money.

Two weeks later, I was at the Job Centre and feeling like shit. Every time I stepped in there I felt I

was being judged by everyone.

Eventually my mum told me to 'stop being so work shy' (to put it politely) and that I was going to be kicked out of the house if I didn't start bringing in money. I was feeling like it was my own fault that I didn't have a job.

I felt that one of the main reasons why I didn't hear back from anyone was that not only am I young with little experience but also I openly say that I am Bipolar. Even in jobs that required NO experience at all, I wasn't offered

even an interview, and didn't even get a 'Thanks for Playing!'

Now I've taken this information off my CV, but I'm scared of repercussions should I have a particularly bad episode at work.

Not only was I feeling judged by random strangers at the Job Centre but I was also facing a huge amount of scrutiny from my own mother, who subscribes to the popular view that working makes you a better brand of human.

DISABILITY

Those with a disability have found themselves bearing a significant weight of the current attacks by the government on welfare in the UK.

The government claims that it needs to take strong action to reduce fraudulent disability benefits claims, despite their own figures placing fraudulent claims at 0.5%.

The government hired ATOS, a private company, to run 'fit for work' assessments, to determine if claimants were able to work and have their benefits cancelled. Strict instructions are given to ATOS assessors to avoid finding fewer than 87% of claimants fit for work.

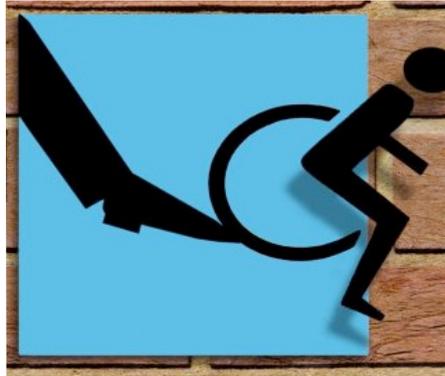
Some disabled people have been put off applying for disability benefits at all due to the process being extremely personal and intimidating.

The program has driven disabled people into poverty and in some cases suicide. During one ninth-month period last year 1,100 people who had been judged able to work, and had their benefits slashed accordingly, died.

John Harper is 45 years old and has a rare form of Lupus which effects his brain, causing him difficulty with balancing and seeing. He has trouble swallowing and chronic back pain. He has claimed Incapacity Benefit for 5 years.

How has the current government cuts programme affected you? "I'm finding that my utility bills and food are increasing with inflation and I struggle to pay these.

We've had a residents' meeting because the council will only pay our rent, not our service charges, we're charged £10-15 pound a



month for the pull cords we have. Some people don't want them but we were told we didn't have an option and we had to pay for them."

Have you ever faced prejudice for claiming benefits? I have been called lazy by another benefit claimant whose disability is more obvious than my own as he uses a walking stick. I feel disabilities are more accepted if other people can see for themselves what you're going through. This attitude is on the telly and in the paper, so everyone is influenced by it and it extends even to other disabled claimants."

Sue is currently claiming Employment and Support Allowance and Disability Living Allowance.

"2 years ago I applied for ESA and went for the assessment. I should say it's not like my disabilities are invisible. I'm a small person; I have 'restricted growth' - though I don't like that term.

They asked questions like "Can you pick up a pencil?", "How far can you walk in metres?" Thinking about it now it's clear what they're trying to do... Anyway, after this assessment

they graded me as 0, the lowest possible score for disability.

I had an opportunity to appeal, but no one was allowed to come with me.

In the corridor outside there was a guy on a ventilator and a woman in a wheelchair, both with stacks of paper. The impression is they're targeting the people who are the most disabled.

My local doctor was really supportive and wrote a note to the hearing and I won.

Then a little while later I was sent the same form again from the beginning. They say they're going to send it every 6 months.

The uncertainty this brings stresses you out beyond belief. I think it's basically slow eugenics.

If you speak to people they have no idea. There's an assumption that people have more than they need. At the same time I'm verbally abused pretty much every day. People with disabilities have to live with a really shocking level of ignorance."

The targeting of disability benefits is calculated; the ruling class expect little response from vulnerable groups who lack the power and influence. They don't raise taxes for those with large salaries or clamp down on tax evasion by big business as these people invest in their political parties and have friends in high places.

It is up to us facing these attacks on our welfare, to stand against those in power and fight for a society where everyone gets what they need to live a comfortable and dignified life.

Produced by:

STAINES  ANARCHISTS

"Anarchists?! Aren't you those people who love chaos and disorder?"

The short answer is, no. Contrary to popular belief we believe in a highly organised society in which workplaces and communities are self-managed by the people.

At the moment a small group of politicians and business owners make the crucial decisions on issues that affect our lives. The choices made are in the interests of profit and the social elite, not ordinary people. Instead we would like to see people making the choices that affect their community and workplaces, and taking control of their own lives.

Anarchism is a way of thinking about how society should be organised and challenging a system where ordinary people are being screwed over.

stainesanarchists@riseup.net

www.stainesanarchists.wordpress.com