Britain's welfare reform and pensions bill

Blair government targets unemployed, disabled and lone parents

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18 February 1999

On Wednesday, February 11 Social Security Minister Alistair Darling released the Labour government's Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill. "Harsh but justifiable", was how Darling described the bill which would introduce a new regime "far tougher than people thought". Its objective is to break the "dependency culture" that prevails in Britain, Darling insisted. "There is no automatic right to benefit," he warned.

This was complemented by Prime Minister Tony Blair's article in the *Daily Mail* the next day, heralding the measures as a charge against the "something for nothing" society. It would be "tough, but the right thing to do", he threatened.

The aim of the new bill is to save approximately £750 million per year from state benefits paid on housing, income support, council tax receipts and incapacity benefit. But the main objective of the so-called "gateway to benefit" measures is to force benefit recipients into low-paid work. Those claiming benefits will have to appear at "back to work interviews" three days after the first claim is made and from then on at least every five years. Interviews will be timed to coincide with specific "milestones", such as a child starting school or the end of a training period. Single mothers will have to attend back to work interviews a few days after their child is born. Non-attendance will be punished by benefits being stopped.

In a significant clampdown on disability benefits, the government is to change the basis for eligibility in what it has described as an "all or nothing test". Disabled people will be tested for "employability" rather than their incapacity to work, as at present. If they are able to fulfil certain physical criteria they will have to make themselves available for work.

The measures received widespread criticism from organisations representing the disabled and lone parents for the negative impact it will have on some of the most vulnerable layers of society. Disabled people will lose their relative financial security and many thousands will lose the right to disability benefits. As well as struggling with the pressures caused by their disabilities, the disabled will face additional pressures from the social security department. Lone parents who may have been through traumatic experiences such as divorce, separation or the death of a partner will be pressured to take up jobs. There will also be additional emotional strain on children who, having faced the lack of contact with one parent, could see the remaining parent forced out to work.

Part of the bill concerns the introduction of Labour's "stakeholder pension" plan. Aimed at compelling people to take out private pension schemes, it marks a major step in the dismantling of the welfare system. The consequences will be increased hardship for large numbers of workers.

But this is not the end to the assault being mounted by Labour. The most radical change was outlined on February 9 by Home Secretary Jack Straw when he announced measures that effectively end the right of asylum-seekers to receive benefits. Those awaiting immigration decisions will be dispersed throughout the country and receive vouchers that can only be exchanged within certain districts and stores specified by the government.

When Labour first floated making such changes in welfare last year, big business complained that they did not go far enough whilst others, including some within its own ranks, appealed for "caution". The

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government's emphasis on the new bill's harshness is no accident. Labour is using the most right-wing language to target lone mothers, the unemployed, immigrants and the disabled--effectively denouncing them as scroungers and parasites. In doing so, Blair is attempting to reassure his big business backers that the government will ensure their interests prevail, regardless of the consequences.

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