

## British Labour government's latest attack on teen parents

# A modern-day equivalent of the workhouse

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The British Labour government's Social Exclusion Unit has produced a report on teenage pregnancies. It proposes that: "By 2003, all under 18 teenage lone parents who cannot live with family or partner should be placed in supervised semi-independent housing with support, not in an independent tenancy". This is to be piloted in a number of areas from the summer of 1999. From autumn 1999, mothers under the age of 16 will be required to return to finish full time education 18 weeks after the birth.

Teenage mothers will also be forced to attend back-to-work interviews on pain of losing benefit. The Child Support Agency will pursue teenage fathers more rigorously. In addition to asking for a minimum of £5 per week maintenance from those on benefit, they may be prevented from holding driving licences.

Justifying these measures the government notes that, "Of the 90,000 teenage conceptions a year, around 7,700 are to girls under 16 and 2,200 to girls aged 14 or under. Roughly three-fifths of conceptions—56,000—result in live births. Around 50 per cent of conceptions to under-16s ended in abortion. The UK has teenage birth rates, which are twice as high as Germany, three times as high as France, and six times as high as the Netherlands. In Western Europe, the UK stands out as having the highest rate of teenage births."

But instead of addressing a growing social problem with compassion and seriousness, the measures outlined are an attack on democratic rights, which throws progressive social reforms into reverse. By removing the right of a young person to choose where and how to live, the Blair government is introducing a form of regulated living and punitive relief that has not been seen in Britain since the abolition of the workhouses in the 1930s.

Hilary Land and Jane Lewis explain in their study

*The Problem of Lone Motherhood in the British Context* (1999):

"Prior to the abolition of the Poor Law in 1948, lone mothers were treated as workers and were told to keep as many of their children as they could by wage earning. The rest would be cared for by the state... Unmarried mothers were treated the most harshly because of their moral taint and relief was usually only given to them inside the workhouse."

Postwar legislation changed this. Under the National Assistance Act of 1948, mothers were not required to register for work if they had dependent children under 16. As the demands from big business to slash public spending have grown, however, so the attack on lone parents has intensified. Since 1988, the most important shift in lone parent policy is in relation to employment, which has moved from an assumption that mothers should stay at home and care for their children (with additional assistance to help with this) to a position which makes it virtually compulsory to work.

The SEU report makes clear that the cost factors involved in supporting teenage parents and their children have to be reduced even further. "The UK cannot afford high rates of teenage conception and parenthood at the end of the 20th century. Other developed countries have seen their rates steadily fall," it notes. In the report's introduction, Blair states, "Our failure to tackle this problem has cost teenagers, their children and the country dear."

Yet there is little in the report and nothing in the proposals outlined that will contribute to the government's declared goal of halving the rate of teenage pregnancies in 10 years. The SEU acknowledges that teenage pregnancies are a social problem, which is far worse in the poorest areas and among the most vulnerable young people, including

those in care and those who have been excluded from school.

The poorest areas in England have teenage conception and birth rates up to six times higher than the most affluent areas. Four of the five areas with the highest rates of under-18 conception are in the London boroughs of Lambeth, Hackney, Lewisham and Southwark. The other is in the north east, which also has the next four highest.

The SEU rebuts the right wing's frequent claim that teenagers become pregnant so they can claim additional benefits and jump the housing queue—a slander recently repeated by Labour's Minister of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett. Yet, as if the trauma of having a baby at such a young age wasn't enough, the government's plan is to doubly penalise vulnerable young people by withdrawing their entitlement to housing and benefits.

To back up its judgmental stance, the government will launch a press campaign to stress the harsh reality of life as a young mother and give “new and better” guidance to schools on sex education. Blunkett summed this up as the product of consultation with parents, teachers and “faith groups”. It will stress, “responsible sexual behaviour and the development of fulfilling relationships, including the importance of marriage.”

Some ministers are known to be keen to promote the idea of adoption, but this has been rejected so far because of the bad memories of older women who were forced to give up their babies.



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