

Britain: Labour government plans further cut in disability benefits

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The Labour government has outlined proposals to curb welfare provisions for the disabled. Incapacity Benefit, currently paid to those unable to work due to disability, will now be time-limited. All those claiming the benefit for three years will have to undergo a health check to establish if they are fit for work.

The new measures are an extension of those implemented in 1999—when Labour cut Incapacity Benefit entitlement by introducing means testing and a so-called “all work” test. At that time the opinion of a family doctor was deemed inadequate in qualifying someone for Incapacity Benefit and claimants could be randomly summoned to face tests. If a disabled person was judged to be able to carry out certain tasks that meant they could perform some sort of work, their benefits could be withheld. The Blair government now wants to make this test mandatory for all new claimants and for it to be taken every three years.

Once again the most needy sections of society are being cast as “scroungers” and “workshy” in order to justify the assault on universal welfare provision. Prime Minister Tony Blair stated, “It cannot be right that we have a situation where people coming on to disability benefit receive up to £4,000 a year for 10, 15 or 20 years without anyone checking if they have recovered from injury and are able to work.” The government claims that up to 70 percent of people currently on Incapacity Benefit could return to work.

Incapacity benefit is set at a minimal level. It starts at £53 per week and there is an incremental rise to £62 a week after six months, reaching a top rate of £69.75 after a year. As a result a report last year by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that 60 percent of disabled people with children lived below the official poverty line.

The drive to stop claimants receiving benefits is

bound up with the government’s overhaul of welfare provisions. The Department of Social Security is to be merged with the former Employment Department in a new Ministry for Work and Pensions. This will create a tougher regime with the express purpose of reducing eligibility for benefits. All people who claim benefits, from single parents to the disabled, will be asked about their job prospects first in an interview at a new agency combining the functions of the presently existing job centres with those of benefit offices.

Secretary of State Alistair Darling commented: “We are increasingly looking at tightening up conditionality, so that people get their rights, but there is a tighter regime to make sure people can and actually do help themselves.”

The government’s tough posturing is aimed at convincing big business that it will be ruthless in its drive to overhaul the welfare state. More generally it is a manifesto for encouraging intolerance and resentment. As with the case of asylum, government policy sets out to stigmatise and scapegoat the most vulnerable in order to legitimise cuts in social spending and attacks on democratic rights.

In an effort to deflect criticism, the government claims that the new measure is not solely cuts driven but is aimed at creating a more inclusive society by helping people to find work. This is at odds with reality. Disabled people are more than six times as likely to be out of work as the non-disabled. There are still currently around 1.2 million disabled people in employment, accounting for more than 3 percent of the workforce. But the disabled are likely to work part-time, or be self-employed and receive extremely low pay. To date 90 percent of employers have been made exempt from the Disability Discrimination Act introduced in 1995. According to the charity Mencap,

an estimated 1,000 people with learning disabilities lost their part-time jobs or had their hours reduced because employers were not prepared to pay the derisory minimum wage of £3.60 an hour after it was introduced by Labour during its first term in office.

There is a clear connection between a life characterised by social hardship and suffering from disability. Aside from Inner London, the greatest concentrations of claimants are to be found in former areas of heavy industry and mining such as the north of England, Scotland and Wales. Over half of claimants are men over 50, with work-related physical problems such as back injuries, heart disease and arthritis or mental health problems mainly connected with stress and depression. A quarter of men over 60 claim Incapacity Benefits—double the number 20 years ago.

A steep increase took place between 1981 and 1991 as the Conservative government carried out a major dismantling of heavy industry and mining. Many of those made unemployed were left with obsolete skills, their health ruined by years of intensive and hazardous work. The increase in the number of people moving off unemployment benefit and onto disability benefit also helped to massage the official unemployment figures.

Over 1,000 disabled people demonstrated outside Westminster as the government finalised its budget proposals. The demonstrators demanded an end to cuts in welfare and expressed their hostility to Labour's "welfare to work" policies which only encouraged the growth of cheap labour employment.

The demonstration was led by Lord Ashley, the former Social Security Minister for Labour who led the initial revolt in 1999 against the restructuring of Incapacity Benefit. That initial backbench revolt by over 60 MPs who voted against the government has dwindled to just a handful of dissenting voices, whose concern is over the naked contrast between Labour's attacks on the most vulnerable members of society and its toadying towards big business and the rich.



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