A letter on “Court decision to electronically tag dementia sufferer”

12 August 2008

Below we are posting a letter received by the WSWS on “Britain: Court decision to electronically tag dementia sufferer.” *It is followed by a reply by the article’s author.*

I read with interest your article concerning the above gentleman. I read this site regularly and support the ideals stated therein. I am confused, though, as to what relevance your article has other than an opening fear statement and no substance beyond. I would suggest to you there are many wrongs to expose; this isn’t one of them.

WB

Dear WB,

Thank you for your email.

The WSWS frequently reports and comments on the deepening social crisis facing broad sections of working people internationally. We note the driving forces of social immiseration in terms of the failure of the old national parties and organisations of the working class. We explain the roots of these organisations’ transformation into instruments of big business as a response to the fundamental changes at the root of economic life. We comment on new statistical reports compiled by widely differing groups and authorities giving figures and revealing trends within this process.

We also report on particularly revealing individual cases. The case of former Glasgow scaffolding worker Edward Flaherty is one of those. We do not have full background information, and must rely on what was reported in the media. However, the basic facts are clear and are particularly tragic.

A retired worker suffering from dementia killed his wife. Press reports made clear that his condition had been degenerating for some time. Flaherty and his wife lived in a tower block in one of the poorest areas of Britain, in a corner of Glasgow not far from the tourist attractions and wine bars of Glasgow city centre, but which regularly tops many UK league tables for poverty, ill health, short life expectancy, and alcoholism amongst many other indicators of social deprivation. Like many elderly people in Britain, it is clear that neither he nor his wife were given adequate support, if indeed they were given any, to deal with the complicated and progressive condition of dementia, which in this instance was combined with the impact of alcohol misuse.

Flaherty killed his wife over a minor disagreement, in an incident which seems to have been totally out of character, which he cannot remember and which stands in contrast to the long years of their marriage. The fatal consequences can be attributed to his wife’s bad health, and to his own mental condition. As a result, instead of receiving belated treatment and support, he will be electronically tagged and effectively barred from leaving his flat after 11am. The judge made clear that the only reason he was not sending Flaherty to prison, to punish the sick man, was to avoid burdening the prison system. Tagging was the cheapest punishment available. Support was not even considered.

Flaherty’s case is one amongst many. Those suffering most cruelly from the consequences of the long-term decay of social provision, the privatisation of social services, all the policies pursued by the ruling parties for years, often come into conflict with the legal system, in complicated and frequently tragic circumstances. Generally, and this case was no exception, they are seized upon by the media to place all responsibility for whatever terrible event has occurred onto the individual. No comment is made on the impact of the rundown of social spending, nor is the consequences of the transfer of billions of pounds into the hands of the financial elite considered.

In this case, the media universally considered the

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judge to have been overly lenient in not jailing Flaherty for life.

The media also systematically avoid attributing political responsibility. Glasgow has been controlled by the Labour Party for decades, and Flaherty's tragic case must be seen as arising out of the long-term refusal of both the Labour Party and the trade unions to mount any defence of the living standards of the working class. So, this is not a "fear statement"—I guess you mean something intended simply to alarm—but one of many tragic events out of which the working class must draw sharp political conclusions on the need for a new socialist party.

Regards,

Steve James

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