

British government denounced by charities for neglect of the poor

Simon Whelan
28 April 2009

“Save the Children has launched hundreds of grants projects in developing countries to help children in crisis. The UK public generally believe there’s no need for this sort of crisis grant here, but today Save the Children is helping distribute money to families right on our doorsteps. If the Government can find money for the banks then why can’t it afford money for our children?”

This comment came from Colette Marshall, director of UK programmes for Save the Children, better known for its work helping children in war zones and famine regions. Marshall was launching an emergency aid package for Britain’s children.

“We didn’t think that we could stand by and do nothing,” she said. “We’re very worried about what’s happening. This is how we would respond to an emergency overseas. There are children whose parents can’t afford a proper meal or to fix a broken boiler without going deep into debt. The financial crisis makes the situation even bleaker.”

Within days of Save the Children launching its campaign, another major charity turned its attention to the accelerating social crisis in Britain. Oxfam made its strongest-ever attack on the inadequate protection available for low-income families. The group said the growing tide of redundancies and extremely low-benefit levels are leading to very real hardship that threatens to scar British society for decades.

Oxfam’s press release stated that “the UK is in recession” and that “things stand to get much worse for the fifth of the population already living in poverty, and for the millions more whose livelihood will become more vulnerable as a result.” The charity called for “pro-poor policy responses to the recession that lays down the foundations for a more equitable, sustainable

society.”

Save the Children stated that growing unemployment, a crisis of affordable housing and rising food prices, compounded by the resulting emotional stress, are contributing towards a “perfect storm” buffeting British families.

Families who previously struggled financially before the crisis are now living in deep poverty.

The charity stressed that its grants project was “a demonstration to the government of what can be done.” Government failure, it argued, would leave millions of British children at the mercy of poverty. The organisation believes research supports their call for governments to stimulate the economy by increasing the incomes of the poor.

The Campaign to End Child Poverty had also called on Chancellor of the Exchequer Alistair Darling to deal with child poverty through financial redistribution in this week’s budget. Instead, Darling unveiled an austerity budget, with major cuts in public spending that will hit poorer families particularly hard.

Save the Children, which had appealed to Darling to invest £3 billion in the poorest families “as a one-off cash injection,” declared the budget “deeply disappointing ... Despite Alistair Darling’s words today renewing the government’s commitment to eradicating child poverty, the government will now miss the target of halving child poverty by 2010. This budget missed the opportunity to give some hope to the 3.9 million children who will go to bed in poverty tonight.”

One in three British children still live in poverty, a figure little changed since the early 1980s. Together with Family Action, Save the Children has established a system delivering grants of between £100 and £200 to families in financial crisis. The cash grants are for one-off expenses like school uniforms, a cot, a school trip

or a carpet in an attempt to “take the pressure off families.” Save the Children aims to assist 5,000 of the poorest families with an initial £150,000 to help the first 900. Marshall readily acknowledges that these efforts are “only scratching the surface of the crisis.”

Helen Dent, Chief Executive of Family Action, said, “We know from our grants programmed that growing numbers of families in the UK are struggling to provide their children with the bare essentials.”

Oxfam released the results of a YouGov survey showing 76 percent of adults think the current rate of jobseekers allowance of £60.50 a week is insufficient to live on. Just 31 percent believed they could survive on less than £100 per week after being made unemployed.

Oxfam have called on the Labour government to adopt a six-point rescue plan, including an emergency increase in out of work benefits, raising the threshold at which income tax starts to be paid and enforcing the national minimum wage.

Oxfam has created the term 'Fred' to describe the people they now seek to assist “**F**orgotten by those in power, **R**ipped off by taxes and the benefits system, **E**xcluded from opportunities, **D**ebt ridden because they can't afford to get by.”

Antonia Bance, Oxfam's deputy director of UK poverty, stressed that the present economic crisis was fundamentally different from previous postwar crises: “The difference is that this time round we have a welfare state that is not prepared to support people.”

According to official figures, in the year to February the cost of food rose by 11.3 percent; the cost of vegetables climbed by 18.6 percent. The own-brand lines of supermarkets have also gone up in price, hitting the poorest in their pockets. Research by Save the Children suggests that 35 percent of parents have cut back on food expenditure, and amongst the poorest parents, 48 percent have reduced food costs.

The collapse of pound sterling on international markets is maintaining the steep rises in food price inflation. Citrus fruits from European Union countries like Spain have increased by up to 25 percent. Some other foodstuffs have risen by almost as much, including beef, pork, cereals and milk. Pork sausages have gone up in price by 50 percent. British Lamb, in the words of the *Independent* Economics Editor Sean O'Grady, is “an expensive delicacy” after a price increase of almost 27 percent.

World food prices have doubled in just six years, according to the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organisation.

Some commentators have tried to counter the negative news associated with economic crisis by claiming living costs have fallen due to deflation. But in working class households where food prices and utility bills represent the majority of the family budget, this is not the case. The Institute for Fiscal Studies recently revealed that the wealthiest 20 percent of society have an average inflation rate of minus 1 percent. The poorest 20 percent of society suffer from an average rate of 3.5 percent. Pensioners in the bottom fifth of British society suffer inflation rates of almost 7 percent. Utility bills have risen at rates above even those achieved recently by foodstuffs.

Unemployment has broken through the two-million mark and is widely predicted to grow to three million by the end of this year.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact