

Britain: Labour government forces one million disabled workers to find work

Paul Mitchell
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The Brown Labour government is forcing a million disabled, sick and injured workers off social benefits. The vast majority are being driven into low paid employment or onto poor quality training schemes, at the same time as the number of workers losing their jobs soars.

The current drive began in 2001 when the Blair Labour government introduced new regulations in 50 jobcentres, forcing people claiming incapacity benefit to attend “job-focused” interviews every three years or risk losing payments. Blair defended the scheme, saying that “if people are severely disabled and cannot work, we will give them every protection; indeed, we will increase it”.

The then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Alistair Darling added, “The crucial thing is that I believe that these regulations will mean, for the first time, we can make sure that everyone of working age gets the help and support they are entitled to, because our objective is to make sure we get as many people into work as possible.”

However, guidelines sent out to jobcentre staff made it clear that continued payment of benefits could “be considered only as a last resort when a meeting with a personal adviser is inappropriate and would be of no benefit to the customer. Deferrals should be used infrequently and waivers very rarely.”

In the ensuing period the press was full of lurid stories about “benefit cheats” and “Britain’s sick-note culture”. But claiming invalidity benefit was never an easy option for people unable to find work.

As the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation explained, benefit was not paid automatically when a claimant produced a sick note as the media tried to portray. Claimants had to have paid

in sufficient National Insurance contributions during the previous two tax years to qualify. Their cases were regularly reviewed by the Benefits Agency Medical Service and an examination by an Agency doctor was often required. The Agency continued to assess as unfit for work eight out of ten cases referred to it and of the rest, over half successfully appealed. The Association concluded, “This shows that far from being claimed by those who are not really sick or disabled, invalidity benefit is often withdrawn incorrectly.”

Nevertheless, the government pressed ahead, publishing its Green Paper, “A new deal for welfare: Empowering people to work” in 2006. It aims to replace Incapacity and other benefits with the Employment Support Allowance and JobSeekers’ Allowance was called “part of the biggest shake-up of the modern welfare state since the Beveridge Report of the 1940s.”

At the end of 2008, then Work and Pensions Secretary James Purnell said the government’s intention was to force virtually every claimant to take steps to get back into work, work for benefit or face sanctions. He declared that the recession “was not an excuse for anyone to avoid getting a job” and quoted a Labour wartime minister, Herbert Morrison, “We have not hands or brains to waste, and no resources to fritter away on those who don’t contribute to our national effort.”

Purnell stated that all 2.7 million Invalidity Benefit / ESA claimants will be tested by 2010 and anyone who can walk more than 400 metres, stand for 30 minutes or climb 12 steps without the aid of a banister would risk losing it.

Claimants now have to show they are “moving towards work”, undertake compulsory Work Focused Interviews and produce Action Plans or risk losing

benefit. Only those people with “the most severe disabilities and health conditions” are exempt from “work-focused activity”.

John works as a job training adviser. He spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the humiliating and degrading treatment handed out to those on incapacity benefits.

At his local job centre the number of unemployed workers has increased six-fold. Group interviews involving up to 15 workers at a time often take place, rather than the one-to-one consultations that used to occur.

Unemployed workers aged 25 or over receive Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) benefits of just over £60 a week and those below 25 get an even more miserable £48. After six months JSA is stopped and it is means tested so that someone with savings over £16,000 will not receive it. Although there is some assistance for housing, the cost of a one-bedroom flat is at least £700 a month and the sudden arrival of a £140 TV licence or £300 water bill makes life impossible. “Some of my clients end up with less than £1 a day to spend on food,” Stephenson explained.

Many companies are using the economic crisis to slash wage rates. Semi-skilled jobs such as truck driving that were until recently paid seven, eight or nine pounds an hour are now being advertised at the minimum wage (£5.80). Increasingly, firms are employing people on promises of higher pay after six months on the minimum wage only to sack them. One of John’s clients came off JSA benefit and took up an offer to be trained as a car mechanic, only to be sacked after working 40 hours a week for £60 for six months.

Because of the lack of real jobs, many unemployed and disabled workers are being referred to private companies for advice on “training opportunities.” John explained, “The government says it is spending billions on training but there is no strategy for long-term jobs. In the meantime private companies are making a fortune.”

“The government has made a big fanfare over training. It says the main aim is to get employers to agree to take on someone after training, but I have never seen a letter or contract resulting from this.

“There are a plethora of companies with lucrative contracts to provide training. They are not worth the paper they are written on,” John continued.

“Many courses are mindless and pointless. At the moment there are loads of fork lift truck training courses being advertised, but no jobs for those who complete them. The nearest one I found being advertised was 40 miles away.

John said that, from his experience, the vast majority of workers on incapacity benefits have genuine health issues resulting from industrial injuries, heart attacks, strokes, mental problems and drug addiction. The last thing they need is more pressure on them at such a vulnerable time in their lives. At the end of most interviews he finds himself saying, “How the hell did you get sent to see me? It’s really heart breaking.”



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