

Britain: Young mother commits suicide and kills her son after months of poverty

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Earlier this month, a London Coroner's Court heard that on June 13 this year, Christelle Pardo leapt from the sixth-floor balcony of her sister's flat in Hackney, east London, holding her five-month-old son Kayjah in her arms. She did so after months of dire poverty. Both mother and son were killed.

Thirty-two-year-old Christelle, who was pregnant with her second child, was a French national who had been living in Britain for 11 years. She graduated from the London Metropolitan University in May 2008 with a degree in philosophy and shortly after began claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA)—the main benefit available for those without employment but “actively seeking work.”

In December 2008, her JSA was stopped as she was within 11 weeks of giving birth and was therefore considered unable to work. The withdrawal of JSA meant that Christelle's entitlement to housing benefit also stopped.

The court heard that Christelle had tried to claim back-up Income Support—a means-tested benefit paid to those temporarily unable to work, with little other means of sustenance. But although she met the criteria, her application was rejected on the grounds that she had not proven she had been in continuous employment in the UK for the five years prior—despite having worked or studied in Britain since 1997.

Christelle's application for child benefit was then rejected in April, on the grounds that she had been denied Income Support. With Hackney Council having served a demand for the repayment of £200 housing benefit, Christelle made two further appeals for Income Support, both of which were rejected.

Her attempt to challenge the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) by taking it to tribunal was repeatedly thwarted. Time and again, she was not given

a date for her hearing.

Christelle last phoned the DWP on June 12. No details are available of what was said during the phone call. One can reasonably infer, however, that she once again came up against indifference to her plight. The following day, Christelle killed herself and her son.

Her sister, Olaya, told the inquest that she had gone to the shops to buy some milk, and returned home to find the front door open. “I called for Christelle and didn't hear anything,” Olaya said. “I went out to the balcony and when I looked over I could see my sister and Kayjah.”

Christelle died at the scene. Kayjah died in a nearby hospital later that day. At the time of their death, mother and child had been left without any financial support for seven months. They only had a roof over their heads because Olaya had taken the pair into her own home. Christelle was unable to return to France because she no longer had relations there, Olaya said. “If it had not been for me she would have been out on the street,” she told the court.

Describing the distress her sister had experienced, Olaya said that on the day of her suicide, “she was distant, she didn't say much. She was upset and wanted a date for her tribunal.

“She was stressed about her benefits. She didn't want her son to feel all the stress that she was going through with the paperwork.

“We talked sister to sister and she told me how she was feeling. She said she was upset because she felt that she didn't exist.”

Olaya told the inquest, “Her application was completed—she had the right paperwork.

“Also to get her student loan she needed to go through the same tests and had to be a habitual resident in the country. She received her student loan, and they

could have made inferences from that.”

Recording a verdict of suicide on Christelle and one of unlawful killing for the death of her son, Coroner Dr. Andrew Reid said, “She was not in a position around the time her son was born to be actively seeking work, and was not in a position to claim Income Support, which eventually stopped her housing benefit.”

How can it be that in twenty-first century Britain, an expectant mother with a young baby could have been left without a home or income for an extended period of time?

It was not the case that Christelle “slipped through the net.” From reports, it appears that the DWP, which appeared at the inquest, was completely unrepentant—insisting that as Christelle had not proved to its satisfaction her entitlement, the decision to withhold financial aid was justified.

The sums of money involved are tiny. Income support for lone parents is just £64.50 per week, while child benefit (for the oldest child) is £20. The DWP would have been aware that Christelle had been left without any income as a result of its decision. It would also have been aware—given her repeated applications and attempt to secure a tribunal hearing—that Christelle had become increasingly desperate, especially with a second child on the way.

Yet nothing was done, and there was no one that Christelle could turn to for help in resolving the dire circumstances she faced. “She felt that she didn’t exist,” Olaya said of her sister. And her feeling was correct. She “didn’t exist,” and not simply because of bureaucratic indifference. Rather the indifference—or, more truthfully, contempt—for Christelle’s plight is the result of long-running politically motivated efforts to marginalise and pillory the poor and the unemployed.

A profusion of welfare benefits, based on differing conditions, time-scales, qualifications, etc., has been created with the aim of discouraging, if not actively preventing, their take-up. Consequently, an estimated *£13 billion in benefits goes unclaimed each year*. This has been accompanied by a hysterical campaign by the government and the media, in which those who do take up their legal entitlement are routinely portrayed as “scroungers,” “parasites” and potential fraudsters.

As a result, research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation earlier this year found that the public grossly overestimated the scale of benefit fraud, which

they thought was incomparably more costly than tax avoidance. The DWP itself estimates the cost of fraudulent benefit claims to be just £800 million a year. In contrast, tax avoidance by transnational corporations and the super-rich is estimated to cost as much as £80 billion a year.

The death of Christelle Pardo and her son was the outcome of this cruel and dehumanising set-up. The coroner stated that Christelle had been placed in a “very parlous situation” due to the DWP’s stance on her circumstances. Yet the verdict of suicide means that there will be no further investigation and no one will be held to account.

The inquest findings were released at the same time that news broke of directors at the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) threatening to resign en masse if the government carried through its threat to block their bonus payments worth millions. RBS has been a major recipient of tens of billions in taxpayers’ money over the last months, after it was effectively nationalised to prevent its collapse. The directors are insisting on their right to pay out up to £2 billion in bonuses. While the media and official parties discussed the rights and wrongs of the directors’ stance, the death of Christelle Pardo and her son received barely any coverage. Only two national newspapers reported the inquest verdict, and then without comment.



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