UNICEF details growth of child poverty in Britain

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"Through Thick and Thin: Tackling Child Poverty in Hard Times" is the title of UNICEF's research into contemporary social conditions facing British children. With the number of jobless workers approaching 2.5 million, the report describes the impact of the downturn on the most vulnerable sections of the population. The opening line sets the scene: "Rising joblessness has created a new crisis of child poverty in Britain."

The report continues, "Families on benefits are being left high and dry. A couple with two children who lose their jobs is having to survive on £115 below the poverty line. The latest jobless figures show that the number of children in out of work households has jumped back up to 2 million. One in five of our chldren has no parent in work."

This figure has risen by 170,000 in just the past year.

In one of the most industrially advanced and wealthy countries in the world, millions of working class people, adults and children, do not have enough money for a civilised life.

UNICEF points out how "Children growing up in poverty are more likely to fail at school, to become unemployed as adults and to get in trouble with the law. This will be costly not only to themselves but also to the rest of society, costing the economy and the Treasury an estimated £25 billion a year."

The Labour government had promised to end child poverty by 2020 and to halve it by April 2010. On present projections, 2.3 million children will live in poverty in the UK by 2010. Even without the onset of serious economic recession, this target of halving child poverty would have been missed by the government.

Between 1997 and 2008, the number of children being raised in a family where no adult worked fell by half a million, a quarter of the total. To a large extent, these circumstances were created by the government introducing in-work benefits (tax credits), which subsidise the poverty level wages paid by business. Once the economic bubble burst, those receiving in work benefits have frequently been laid off and thrown back onto regular welfare benefits that guarantee poverty because they are set so low. Over the past year, the number of households with two parents where neither parent is in work has risen by 18 percent.

In addition, the report notes that even during the 10 years between the election of the Blair-led Labour government in 1997 and 2007, unemployment fell but in-work poverty failed to "fall significantly." Even though business was able to continue paying poverty-level wages, the tax credits available to workers, paid out of public funds and constituting a public subsidy to big business, failed to lift considerable numbers of workers and their families out of poverty.

After the wholesale turn towards deregulated free markets during the 1980s and 1990s, the wages of the poorest workers "fell sharply" and contributed towards an increase in "relative poverty." Consequently, the tax credit system brought in by the Labour government did, in the words of the UNICEF report, "make work pay"—i.e., it raised a layer of workers above the income levels they would have received if reliant on welfare benefits, but against a background of falling wages and the creation of a vast population of the working poor.

The UNICEF report notes that "the jobs squeeze is affecting some parts of the country more severely than others." Studying figures for Job Seekers Allowance (JSA)—a small state payment for unemployed workers actively seeking a job—the report notes, "In the year to September claims doubled across the country as a whole." The highest increases proportionately came in constituencies within towns in the Midlands and the South, which have enjoyed relatively lower levels of

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unemployment over recent years—places like Northampton, Peterborough and Swindon.

In 10 parliamentary constituencies the report calls "relatively affluent areas," the claims for JSA are at least two and half times in 2009 what they were in 2008. For instance, in the Mole Valley constituency, claims for JSA rose by an incredible 162 percent; in Windsor, by a no less astonishing 158 percent.

In absolute terms, the increases have been largest in the inner city wards of the former industrial cities, where unemployment has remained above the national average since the late 1970s and early 1980s. Of the 12 constituencies with the highest jobless rates, 5 are in Britain's second largest city, Birmingham. As the report states, "These are areas where families have repeatedly suffered more than elsewhere during hard times."

In 10 constituencies, located in a mix of areas, claims for JSA have risen by at least 1,750 people. In the West Bromwich constituency in the Midlands, a further 2,003 people claimed JSA on top of the existing 2,673 out of work before the collapse of the banks—a 75 percent increase. Also in the Midlands, the Walsall North ward was hit by a 72 percent increase in the number of unemployed workers. The South Swindon constiuency suffered an increase of 119 percent over the past year, with another 1,823 workers thrown out of jobs.

In 12 inner city constituencies, there are now in excess of 5,000 workers without employment. Erdington in Birmingham has over 5,500 residents out of work, an annual increase of 53 percent, while Tottenham in North London has almost 6,000 residents out of work, an increase of 41 percent. Located amidst the incredible wealth of the financial capital of the world, claims for JSA in Bethnal Green & Bow on London's East End increased by 35 percent in the past year alone and now number 6,228.

The authors of the UNICEF report called upon the government to pledge £4 billion for low-income families. By comparison, they note, "The government has recently spent billions of pounds rescuing banks, knowing that not to do so would be more costly in the long run. Just as we could not afford to allow the banks to fail, we cannot allow society to fail, by failing our children."

The authors of the UNICEF report call for "one more push" by the Labour government on tax credits to lift more families out of poverty. But "Tax credits can only be part of the story," the authors note, adding that a proper attempt to tackle poverty would require much more from the government—namely, "decent jobs with decent wages." Such appeals to the government will fall on deaf ears. The banks were "saved" because the government acts as an instrument of the super-rich, whose wealth has been accrued through the impoverishment of the working class.

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