

Britain: 15,000 jobs to be cut at Ministry of Justice

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Leaks from the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government reveal that the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) is to face a £2 billion cut in its £9 billion budget, with the axing of 15,000 jobs from the current total of 80,000 within 12 to 24 months.

The reduction is part of the £100 billion cuts in public services by 2015. Details of the specific cuts are to be unveiled on October 20, but it is reported that government departments have been instructed to find reductions of between 25 to 40 percent.

According to the *Guardian*, a letter sent to senior civil service staff by Ann Beasley, the MoJ's director-general of finance, stated, "Over £4 billion of the department's current budget is spent on staff costs, and we cannot streamline the organisation to work effectively and efficiently without considering staff numbers".

She continued, "The level of savings we expect to have to make from our headquarters and administrative areas alone is around £450 million, around one-third of our current administrative costs. This is in line with the one-third savings required by the government".

The MoJ is responsible for courts, prisons and the probation service in England and Wales. A whole range of vital services, such as legal aid and public protection, will be detrimentally affected by the cuts. Around £4 billion of the MoJ's budget goes toward legal aid and prison running costs. Some 150 courts are to be closed in England and Wales, restricting access to services and cutting court staff.

The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) stated that, "[The] £2bn of savings to be found is equivalent to the entire budget for prisons, or the money the department spends each year on courts and tribunals".

The PCS has previously said that 25 percent cuts in the Crown Prosecution Service—involving some 1,800 job losses—would make it virtually impossible for remaining staff to deal with workloads and cases effectively.

Cuts in the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), which comprises the probation and prison services, will lead to a rise in the UK prison population. This is already proportionately the highest in Europe, with some 85,400 inmates as of June 2010—a record level. It will lead to cuts in staffing numbers, fuelling overcrowding and damaging the monitoring of dangerous offenders in the community.

Rehabilitation programmes will also be compromised. A report published by the probation union Napo in March 2009 stated that at least 2,500 jobs would be lost due to £120 million cuts imposed by the then Labour government. Prisons also face cuts of £325 million in addition to the £400 million imposed by Labour. Although no details have been released as to the specific effects of this new round, they will obviously worsen the situation.

Reductions in the £2.2 billion legal aid budget have already resulted in the number of law firms offering the service falling from 2,400 to 1,300. The *Community Care Magazine* cited a letter to the chief executive of the Legal Services Commission (LSC) from Sir Nicholas Wall, the president of the Family Division of the High Court. In the letter Wall stated, "The principal losers, of course, will be those whom the system is most designed to protect, namely vulnerable families and children. Cases will take longer, there will be many more [parents representing themselves], and there is a grave danger that the system will simply implode".

The Law Society's Mark Stobbs said, "The LSC is potentially creating advice deserts here, where people

simply can't get access to a proper lawyer". He continued, "We are worried about places like Wales, where it seems the number of solicitors is being reduced by a half; we are worried about Cornwall, where 50 firms are being reduced to less than 10, and places like Poole and Dorset, where there is only one firm of solicitors with a contract for over 140,000 people".

The implications of the cuts in legal aid are severe. During its 13 years in office, Labour introduced a raft of legislation attacking civil liberties and basic democratic rights. These included legislation allowing the indefinite internment of alleged foreign terrorists, ending the right to jury trials for some offences and limiting the "double jeopardy" rule, under which you cannot be retried for an offence. As these and similar measures are increasingly employed against workers fighting to defend their rights, jobs and living standards, the attack on legal aid will lead to more people being convicted and imprisoned without legal representation.

The public sector unions, such as Unite, Unison and the PCS, are complicit in these attacks. Derek Simpson, leader of the Unite union, has stated that he is opposed to strike action against the government's spending cuts. His statement underscores the degree to which the trade unions have been incorporated into the government and state apparatus. Both Unite and Unison have rejected calls for any protest march on the day that Chancellor George Osborne unveils his spending review in October.

Even where the trade unions do feign oppositional sentiment, it is only in order to divert opposition into toothless actions, such as demonstrations and/or petition drives, while they co-operate with management and the government to facilitate the cuts.

PCS head Mark Serwotka is one of the signatories to the call by life-long Labour apologist Tony Benn for a "broad movement of active resistance" to the coalition's austerity measures. (See "A fraudulent 'coalition of resistance' in Britain")

But while claiming that the "time to organise resistance is now", Benn, Serwotka and others are only proposing a conference to be held in November. The intention is to turn this conference into a platform for various trade union and Labour officials in an attempt to rebuild the credibility of the Labour bureaucracy. In

the meantime, the government—with the aid of that same bureaucracy—will have had six months to prepare to force through the destruction of jobs and working conditions.

There is widespread opposition to the austerity measures, but it can only be taken forward in a political and organisational rebellion against the Labour Party, the trade unions and their political apologists. It requires the development of independent rank-and-file organisations, uniting all sections of workers, on the basis of the fight for the socialist re-organisation of economic life.



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