

British working class families forced to rely on charity food handouts

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As the poverty and hardship imposed by the British government's austerity package begin to bite into already meagre budgets, thousands of British families and individuals are increasingly reliant upon charitable food parcels. Such is the degree of chronic need emerging across the UK, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition are to reinstate the issuing of food vouchers that the previous Labour government had stopped in 2008.

Chris Mould, for the Trussell Trust, told the *Independent on Sunday*, "It is a scandal that hundreds of thousands of Britons every year hit crisis and are forced to go hungry. These are not homeless people on the street. These are people struggling on low incomes. This is largely a hidden problem and there is still a taboo about people getting this type of help".

The number of people requiring emergency food assistance, according to the Trussell Trust, has increased by 50 percent since 2009. The charity has 70 food banks which are working full-time to feed thousands of needy people. Job Centre staff will return to handing out the vouchers to those deemed the neediest. Others will be referred to the food bank by health visitors and social workers and receive food vouchers to exchange for food parcels.

Many of the people seeking food assistance are families and people in employment. Construction workers are now being paid monthly and the abrupt shift to stretched budgets from weekly wages can leave cupboards bare. Self-employed workers especially are experiencing extended periods without wages.

Delays in receiving welfare benefits can leave families, couples and individuals without money for days on end, sometimes even weeks. Those waiting for benefits constitute one-third of those who require food aid. The charity said that some people who came to them for assistance had contemplated criminal activity to feed their children and themselves.

The number of those who require emergency food boxes, which contain three days essential supplies of tinned meat and fish, fruit, pasta, tea, milk and sugar, has grown in two years from 25,000 to an astonishing 60,000 today. Of these, one-third—some 20,000—are children. A three-day emergency food box for a family of four has a value of just £28.

The Trussell Trust estimates that on current trends these numbers could swell the number of food banks needed to meet requirements to 10 times the current number, up to 700, to feed an expected half a million people by 2015. The British population is only 58 million.

The charity's estimate of such deprivation is underscored by the latest unemployment figures, which reveal that the number of jobless has increased by 35,000, to 2.5 million people. Much of the increase is the result of redundancies in the public sector, as a consequence of the coalition's austerity measures, which have yet to take on their full import.

Research published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation showed the fallacy of claims by the government and the media that "work pays"—the argument used to justify the slashing of welfare provision. Some 2.1 million British children live in families where at least one adult is working but which are still living on the official "breadline"—set at a bare minimum. A total of 3.7 million children live in poverty, with 58 percent of them in families where a parent or carer is in paid work.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation research also revealed that between 2008 and 2009, 13 million people in the UK were living in poverty. That is almost one in four of the population on a measurement that underestimates the number living in relative poverty. Those living on or slightly above the official breadline may constitute as much as half the entire working class.

This is the situation before the full scale of the austerity measures hits home, with ever more cuts in the pipeline.

Job losses, reductions in benefits and wage cuts will be exacerbated during the coming period as a combination of speculation on international markets and shortages means basic food prices rise. In addition, Value Added Tax, the most regressive form of taxation, is to increase to 20 percent in the new year.

The acting director for Oxfam UK, Helen Longworth, told reporters, “Over the past 10 years the price of food has risen by 50 percent. We hear stories every day of families who turn to soup kitchens for something to eat. There are children with scurvy in Islington [north London], that’s a disease that should only exist in 18th century stories”.

While it should be a historical memory, many such horrors are returning as the ruling elite attempts a dramatic reversal in the social position of the broad mass of the population, to conditions that prevailed in Victorian times.

Staffed by volunteers and funded by donations, the Trussell Trust is the kind of charity that, according to the Dickensian rhetoric of the coalition government, will be expected to fill the gap left by the slashing of the welfare state. Workers are to be reduced to soup kitchens and reliant upon food parcels that are more normally associated with famine relief.

Mould told the *Independent*, “The welfare state is creaking and far less able to cope than it was 10 years ago. There are people who cannot put food on the table for themselves and for their families ... they are faced with impossible choices between heating, keeping a roof over their heads and eating”.

This means that hundreds of thousands can expect to face absolute, not just relative poverty. Going without the essentials of human sustenance in one of the largest and wealthiest economies in the world is a scandalous and damning indictment of the degree of social inequality that exists—even more so when Britain spends the fourth largest amount in the world on its armed forces.



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