

UK local elections: Record unemployment in St. Helens

Danny Dickinson
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The following statement has been issued by Danny Dickinson, candidate of the Socialist Equality Party (UK) for the Town Centre ward of St. Helens in the May 3 local elections.

During the Socialist Equality Party's campaign in the Town Centre ward of St. Helens, I have spoken to people, of all ages, for whom unemployment is now a daily fact of life.

The latest official figures released last week demonstrate the terrible human cost of unemployment. They are a damning indictment of capitalism. Nationally, the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) increased for the 17th straight month up to March, up by 3,600 to 1.61 million. A total of 2.65 million people are officially unemployed nationwide, according to the Office for National Statistics. Some 170,000 more people have joined the unemployment rolls from the same point a year ago.

Nowhere is the plight of unemployment more evident than in St Helens.

St. Helens is just one of the many towns and cities in the northwest of England that have long been unemployment black-spots due to the decline of traditional manufacturing industries. These include mining, textiles, engineering and glass production, with which St. Helens was once synonymous due to its reliance largely on Pilkington Glass.

Unemployment continues to soar throughout the northwest. The region had the biggest rise in unemployment across the UK. In the quarter to February, the total number of unemployed in the northwest stood at 325,000, an increase of 18,000 or 9.6 percent.

The unemployment rate in St. Helens is even higher than the regional average. Joblessness is at a record

level in the town with 5,932 people, of all ages, claiming JSA last month. More than 4,000 of these claimants are male.

The situation facing young people is the worst of all. They are being systematically robbed of any decent future.

In St. Helens, 2,045 18- to 24-year-olds were claiming JSA in March, a massive 13.2 percent of the eligible young people. Of these, 165 are classed as long-term unemployed, having not worked for at least 12 months.

Many people have told SEP campaign teams that there is virtually no chance of getting a decent paying job in the town. This is backed up by the official statistics, which show that locally there are now 8.2 JSA claimants per unfilled job vacancy.

The lack of any decent full-time employment is most clearly seen in the explosion of people forced to work part-time—a state of underemployment and financial hardship that helps conceal the full impact of the economic crisis.

The number of those working part-time rose by 89,000 to 1.4 million, the highest level since records began in 1992.

And the jobs continue to go. In February, Pilkington announced that it was shedding 3,500 jobs worldwide, as part of a global restructuring of its 20,000 strong workforce. Only around 1,000 workers are now employed at Pilkington in St. Helens, where the firm was founded, and 150 of these are set to be made redundant.

According to sources, one of Pilkington's "float glass" lines in the UK is to be mothballed.

Earlier this month, management at the Viridor glass recycling factory in the Sutton district of the town told

its workforce that 15 jobs were to go. This represents nearly half the workers at this small plant.

The loss of jobs in what remains of private industry is being more than matched by redundancies in the public sector. In our campaign, I have spoken to workers who have been made redundant from the local authority and from St. Helens College.

From May 2010 to August 2011, the Labour Party-run St. Helens Council shed 141 jobs and is primed to make more workers redundant this year as it continues to impose austerity cuts on behalf of the Conservative-Liberal government. In 2010, St. Helens College made 60 staff redundant. Further jobs were lost last year, and another 90 are set to go in 2012.

None of these jobs have been defended by the trade unions. Their only role is to work with management to carry out the redundancies as smoothly as possible. Commenting on the planned job losses at Pilkington, the GMB trade union senior organiser, Charlie Leonard, confirmed there would be no opposition, merely responding that the “GMB is working to reduce the number of job losses and the impact on the local community”.

In opposition to these management stooges, the Socialist Equality Party fights for the right for all workers to have a job with a liveable income. The right to employment is the most basic of all. Against mass unemployment and the continual destruction of jobs in the private and public sectors, the working class must defend unconditionally the right to work.

The SEP calls for an emergency public works programme to be enacted that will pour billions into the economy to end unemployment and provide decent paying jobs, free and high-quality health, housing, education and social services.

Such a programme can only be realised on the basis of the fight for a workers’ government that will nationalise the banks and major industries under the democratic control and public ownership of the working class, as part of the socialist reorganisation of economic life.



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