

Unemployed worker sets himself on fire outside UK Jobcentre

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On June 29, a 48-year-old man tied himself to the railings outside Selly Oak Jobcentre in Birmingham, England, dousing himself with fuel and setting himself alight. He was protesting not receiving his benefit payment.

This horrific event is the direct outcome of the austerity measures implemented by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition.

The man, who has not been named, was taken to hospital after police extinguished the fire. He is reportedly in a stable condition, with non-life-threatening injuries. A *Guardian* source reported that the man had been identified as vulnerable, with longstanding health issues, but had been found “fit to work” by a work-capability assessment. His payments had been delayed.

One eyewitness reported by *Birmingham Mail* said, “The guy came into the Jobcentre with petrol and made threats, so they evacuated the whole building.... He tied himself to the railings and tore open the bottom of his trousers.... He would have to have been very desperate to have done something like that. It’s shocking that somebody could have been driven to those depths.”

This comes two months after a man in Merseyside slashed his wrists after he was told his benefit could be stopped after it had already been reduced from Incapacity Benefit to Job Seekers Allowance. A Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) caseworker commented to the *Guardian*, “We are getting people who are massively on the edge, people who are genuinely close to killing themselves. It’s not scaremongering, it’s absolutely real.”

Nationally, all unemployed workers in receipt of sickness benefit are being re-assessed. If they are considered “unfit for work” they are put onto Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). This falls into two categories: “work-related activity” and “support”. The latter is for the most sick and resembles ESA’s predecessor Incapacity Benefit, but the former is

designed to force those whose impairments are not considered “serious” off welfare.

Fully 37 percent of people who have been re-assessed were judged to no longer be too sick to work and put onto Job Seekers Allowance (JSA). Many appeal their cases and are supported in this by health care professionals and disability charities.

If the decision is appealed, it is common that JSA is delayed, leaving claimants without any money whatsoever.

Greater cuts to social spending and benefits have been announced as increasing unemployment is pushing more people into poverty and crisis. As a result of this, the DWP issued Jobcentre staff with “guidance” on how to deal with claimants who threaten suicide, as well as targets for stoppages of benefit. (See “UK: Official guidelines to deal with suicide by the jobless”)

Although these targets for sanctioning claimants were officially scrapped when the story broke in the mainstream press, it is reported by DWP staff that the unofficial “benchmarks” for sanctions still exist, with staff under pressure to stop between 6 and 8 percent of people’s benefits for failing to comply with regulations.

This, combined with regulations introduced in previous years that increase sanctions for those refusing to apply for a job recommended by a Jobcentre advisor, or who fail to attend a mandatory (unpaid) work placement, means that many people are facing months at a time with no income.

Those claiming Job Seekers Allowance in the big working class districts are desperate and the numbers affected in some areas are appalling. In Birmingham, Aston 29.8 percent claim Job Seekers Allowance; Washwood Heath, 29.2 percent; Nechells, 26.2 percent; Lozells & East Handsworth, 25.3 percent; Sparkbrook, 24.9 percent; Soho, 22.2 percent; and Bordesley Green, 19.9 percent.

The *Birmingham Mail* published responses to the horrific event in Birmingham. One respondent explained, “I’ve suffered from the jobcentre’s lack of understanding myself. Recently I was forced to ‘volunteer’ by the jobcentre while at the same time was being denied any form of payment, JSA or otherwise. I literally couldn’t afford to eat and had to scavenge in bins at night to find food. Thankfully I was able to head them off at the pass when they tried to take my housing benefit, otherwise I would have been homeless to boot.”

Another responded, “Feel sorry for this man, it’s so sad that that he was driven to this, I can totally understand how frustrated he must have felt. After a freak accident on my bicycle in September 2010, my injuries to my knee stopped me from working for 19 months (I’m now only doing 10 hours) and because work does not pay sick pay I had 28 weeks on SSP [Statutory Sick Pay] and then when that ended I was told I would have to claim ESA....

“In all this time I have felt like banging my head up a brick wall, I’ve been told I was fit for work, to sign on (even though I have a job), that I could propel myself in a wheel chair to a job as I have good upper body strength, failed medical assessments even though I was in a leg brace due to ligament injuries ... yet every time I call Jobcentre plus I get spoken to like I’m a lazy scrounger!”

Another respondent said, “I know exactly where this guy was coming from. In the last year I lost my job with the DWP, lost my home, lost two friends, my mother, two uncles, one aunt and my godfather. I had acute gallstones, which took a year to be operated on, and recently diagnosed with a motor neurone disease. And all the DWP could do (this week) was suspend my JSA for refusing work even though I have been applying for 10 jobs a week and have interviews for jobs coming up. I now have no income at all.”



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