

All party support for local authority cuts in Scotland

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Further social cuts are being prepared across all 32 of Scotland's local authorities that will remove thousands more public-sector jobs and impact all areas of social care and cultural provision. They will add to the social misery of youth unemployment figures of 90,000, double the 2008 figure, and adult unemployment of 207,000.

A shocking indicator of the real level of social stress was shown by a recent report of advice given at Citizens Advice Scotland bureaux. Volunteers at the advice and welfare agency were recently given suicide watch training because, in the words of the organisation's head, Margaret Lynch, the welfare system is being "ripped asunder".

The cuts are in line with the 8 percent budget cut to 2015 being implemented by the Scottish National Party (SNP) government in Edinburgh on behalf of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition in London.

Labour-controlled Glasgow City Council, which has shed 3,000 workers since 2010 and cut spending by £130 million (US\$176 million), intends a further £70 million reduction over the next two years. As the city has already farmed out leisure, culture, car parking and home care to semi-private agencies, this year's cuts will fall most heavily on education and social care, which form some 70 percent of the city's remaining budget. Some 600 more workers are expected to lose their jobs.

Measures include the merger of specialist schools for children with learning disabilities and a consequent reduction in teacher numbers, saving £2.5 million. Teachers in nursery classes will be replaced by less skilled "child development officers". Primary head masters and mistresses will supervise multiple schools. School maintenance and after-hours availability will be reduced. School dinner cost will be increased by 33

percent, while nursery costs will increase by 10 percent.

Social care services bought from external charities and companies will be cut by £2 million, while supported living budgets will be cut by £4.6 million. The "personalisation of care" programme, designed to push more services to external providers, will be extended to elderly dementia sufferers. Cordia, however, one of the agencies that provide home care, is itself expecting around 287 jobs to go.

In a typically mean move, the meals on wheels provision for pensioners will be reduced from three courses to two. Charges to be increased include car parking, stair lighting, bereavement services, and entry to leisure facilities.

East Ayrshire, run jointly by the SNP and the Conservatives, intends to cut £25 million over the next three years. Plans include hiving off libraries, sports facilities and community centres to stand-alone agencies, which can then reduce wages and staffing levels at will.

Major budget savings will also be found by increasing to three miles the distance beyond which transport will be provided to local schools. This is expected to save some £2.5 million. The council's finance director, Alex McPhee, warned that more "radical" measures may still be needed.

Dundee City Council, run by the SNP, intends to cut £14 million from its budget over the next two years. All departments have been told to find 5 percent savings. School class sizes will be allowed to rise. As in other areas, some of the largest cuts will fall on external organisations providing social care and housing support for vulnerable people. Neighbouring Angus Council, also run by the SNP, intends to close 51 of the county's 100 play parks.

The City of Edinburgh authority is run jointly by the

SNP and Labour. By 2013, the city's workers, who have faced a pay freeze for three years, will have lost between 10 and 15 percent of their real terms income. The council, however, intends to cut £90 million from its budget over the next three years at a cost of 1,200 jobs lost through "natural wastage"—the standard euphemism for not replacing workers who leave, retire, or are forced out.

Other targets include cuts to school management and support and the closure of a Blindcraft factory offering jobs to disabled workers. Charges are set to rise for parking and other services. Half of the city's public toilets are to close. Neighbouring Midlothian Council has concluded that school children in primary one and two will no longer receive free fruit.

North Lanarkshire, run by Labour, is pressing ahead with its previously announced 1,200-1,400 job losses to save £105 million over three years. Measures include the closure of care homes, cuts to numerous support and maintenance services, extension of the school year by three weeks, the closure of school swimming pools and large headcount reductions on leisure and environmental services.

In all instances, the teaching and public services unions have responded to the threat of devastating job losses and service degradation with outright support, indifference or routine posturing and bluster.

Speaking in December, prior to a token protest outside North Lanarkshire's HQ in Motherwell, Unison's Scottish secretary, Mike Kirby, offered support to the local authorities, agreeing that "finance and welfare reform are two big issues facing all local authorities". Kirby's response was to suggest that the Scottish government increase the council tax—thereby increasing the tax burden on most working people—while insisting that only "compulsory" redundancies would be opposed.

The Unison trade union has 6,000 members in North Lanarkshire alone. It is also a leading light of the misnamed Scottish Anti-Cuts Alliance (SACA), which in early 2011 claimed its formation was an "historic" step forward in the fight against austerity. The SACA web site does not even appear to have been updated since. In general, the ex-lefts who for a brief period set up a number of similar anti-cuts and anti-austerity alliances, have moved into the campaign for a yes vote in the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence.

A recent demonstration outside Glasgow City Chambers reflected the same dangerous and bankrupt perspective. Protesters against the closure of disability day care centres in Cardonald, Summerston and Maryhill were opposing the destruction of facilities that hundreds of vulnerable people rely on for daily support. The demonstration attracted around 100 supporters who called for the council's cuts to disabled services to be put on hold.

Along with the ex-lefts, one of the speakers was writer Alasdair Gray, a well-known local artist, writer and lifelong Scottish nationalist. Gray recently complained of the influence of English "colonists" and "settlers" in the arts world.

In reality, the cuts being imposed by Scottish local authorities are inseparable from the general assault on the health, education and welfare of working people across Britain. The suggestion—by the trade unions, the ex-lefts and the nationalist writers such as Gray—that the cuts can be opposed on the basis of Scottish nationalism, or pressure on the Scottish government, is false to the core and utterly divisive.

Rather, working people viewing with anger the ongoing destruction of vital social services must study the NHS FightBack campaign launched by the Socialist Equality Party (Britain). The lessons of the struggle against the destruction of socialised health embodied in the NHS apply entirely to those seeking to oppose cuts to every area of social care and education.

The SEP states: "The defence of health care and every other basic social right can only be taken forward through a break from the unions and the Labour Party. Action committees must be formed by patients, hospital staff and the workers and youth whose lives and health are being jeopardised." The SEP calls for "a mass movement of the working class to bring down the coalition government and replace it by a workers' government based on socialist policies".



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