

Six million suffer fuel poverty in UK

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As more and more people suffer the consequences of another harsh winter, the number of families suffering fuel poverty is rising. Four million households in England alone were classified as being in fuel poverty in 2009. This is three times the number in 2003. Today, over 6 million are in fuel poverty, a figure that is expected to rise to 9 million by 2016.

The human cost of fuel poverty is appalling. Previously the government had claimed that fuel poverty-related deaths stood at 2,700 a year. However, official figures released in November 2012 reveal that during the winter of 2011, 24,000 additional deaths were recorded in England and Wales. The previous winter, 25,700 excess winter deaths in England and Wales were recorded. On the basis of World Health Organisation guidance that 30 percent of winter deaths in Europe can be attributable to people living in cold homes, around 7,200 (65 a day) of those who died in the winter of 2011 likely did so as a result of not living in warm homes.

A household is said to be in fuel poverty if it needs to spend more than 10 percent of its income on fuel to maintain a satisfactory heating regime. One of the biggest challenges for poor families is their being forced to have pre-paid meters installed. Pre-paid meters are the most expensive form of fuel supply. The poorest are usually put on this form of supply because they are already in fuel debt, and there is little or no opportunity to have meters removed. Once in debt, most households cannot pass credit checks that are carried out for other forms of fuel supply.

It is almost impossible to know how many households are without heat or power because of “self-disconnection” due to high costs and the inability of many to afford to feed meters. Before pre-paid meters were installed, records of disconnections were available and families with young children could not be disconnected. With pre-paid meters there are such no such records.

The *Guardian* reported April 20, “Millions of mostly poor UK households are paying up to £300 a year more than customers on the cheapest fuel tariffs, with thousands

barred from switching to better deals.”

It adds, “Figures from uSwitch [a price comparison web site] show that more than five million households (20 percent) are in debt to their energy supplier, 6 percent more than last year. This is not surprising when you consider the average household energy bill is £1,353 a year, almost £100 more than a year ago and £831 more than at the start of 2004.”

Since 2010, 130,000 more children have been plunged into fuel poverty; a 9 percent increase in three years. There are now 1.6 million children living in fuel poverty in the UK, with 1.2 million in England alone.

A February article by the *Energy Bill Revolution* group explains that in a “Families and Fuel Poverty” study they carried out, it was estimated that since the “government came to power, funding to help fuel poor families with children has been cut by 27 percent. Fuel poverty can have a disastrous impact on the health and well being of children.”

A new film by the campaign *Fuel poverty: Growing up cold* shows a boy, Ryan, who is an asthma sufferer. Breathing problems such as asthma can be exacerbated by living in cold and damp rooms, with research proving that children living in cold homes are twice as likely to suffer from asthma and other respiratory problems, compared to those whose families can afford to keep the house warm. The “Families and Fuel Poverty” report lists the differences between the more affluent South and London regions and the Midlands and the North. A substantially higher number of children live in fuel poverty in the North West (236,000—13.9 percent), compared, for example, to the South East (125,000—6.6 percent).

In this climate of rising fuel poverty and hardship, British energy suppliers continue to report massive annual profit margins, extracting as much money as possible out of working people. Since 2010, there have been four cases of British energy providers being investigated and heavily fined by the energy watchdog OFGEM for various counts of malpractice and mis-selling.

This year British Gas announced an 11 percent increase

in profits for last year. The profits of its energy supply division rose to £606 million. Parent company Centrica said colder weather resulted in customers using more gas. But the company also raised prices for consumers. Centrica made a pre-tax profit of £2.7 billion.

In 2012, a report by Professor John Hills from the London School of Economics stated, “In February 2012, official statistics showed that carbon emissions rose for the first time in seven years, driven primarily by increased usage of gas for heating homes during especially cold winter months. It is not known how many of the people who turned up the heating did so because they could afford to or had to make sacrifices elsewhere. Nor is it known how many actually stayed cold.”

Hills stated, “Tackling fuel poverty offers multiple pay off.... Better living standards and conditions for people on low incomes, an improved and more efficient housing stock, fewer winter deaths and reduced costs for the NHS. This was no doubt the intended goal when in 2000, parliament agreed that fuel poverty should be eradicated as reasonably practical within 15 years.”

Some 13 years later, more people than ever are in fuel poverty. Millions already struggling to provide basic needs for their families are being devastated by continuous brutal austerity cuts. This state of affairs is an indictment of capitalism and all the parties of the ruling elite, including the Labour Party. The 1997-2000, Labour Party government, while pledging to end fuel poverty, fully endorsed the previous Conservative government’s privatisation of the electricity, gas and water industries, and continued to give these parasitic firms carte blanche to do as they please.



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