

UK's “Bedroom Tax” drives grandmother to suicide

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Early this month a 53-year-old grandmother from the West Midlands took her life in despair at the coalition government's “Bedroom Tax.”

The tax is levied on those receiving housing benefit whose homes are deemed to be under-occupied, forcing many even deeper into poverty.

Stephanie Bottrill, from Solihull, told neighbours that she could not cope with the extra costs of living. After leaving notes for her children and friends, she walked onto the M6 motorway into the path of a lorry. In a suicide note to her son, Stephen, she wrote, “Don't blame yourself for me ending my life. The only people to blame are the Government.”

Two days before her suicide she had rung Steven, telling him she was struggling to cope. He rang her doctor, who prescribed sleeping tablets. Steven had seen her the day before her death. He had decided to take her to hospital the following day to get her the help she needed.

Since childhood Bottrill had suffered from the autoimmune disease Myasthenia gravis, leaving her unable to work and requiring constant medication. She was not registered as disabled and received no disability allowance, although doctors had told her she was too ill to work.

Bottrill had lived in her house for 18 years, and had raised two children there as a single mother. Steven, 27, had moved out to set up with his own family. In the last few months Laura, 23, also moved out. As their rooms were now unoccupied, Bottrill was subject to the benefit cut implemented as part of the government's austerity programme. The tax imposed for “under-occupancy” is punitive: claimants with one extra room face losing 14 percent of their rent support; those with two extra rooms lose 25 percent.

Stephanie informed the council she was now living in

the £320-a-month house on her own. It meant her benefit was cut by £80 a month. It also meant losing out on basic necessities that should be available for all. Tracey Hurley, said her neighbor “hadn't eaten for three days” the day before her suicide. Steven said there “wasn't any proper food” in the house. All he found was “about 30 tins of custard.” The benefit cut, said Steven, was “just too much for her.”

Steven told the *Sunday People* that his mother “didn't want to go but she knew she had to. She couldn't afford to stay. It was too hard.”

Bottrill was going to have to move to a smaller place, but the council had found nothing close to her family and friends. Officials had told her that she would be charged for any repairs to the property, eating into the money offered her to move. She had to strip wallpaper, lift carpet, and mend her fences herself.

The impact of the benefit cut will be felt across the estate where Stephanie Bottrill lived. As Tracey Hurley told the press, “They are making me pay and it's going to be tough but people don't have any choice. This is not just politics, this is people's lives.”

Some commentators have suggested that Stephanie Bottrill's suicide could not be laid at the door of the government, noting that depression is a complex problem and the act of suicide is one of its most extreme manifestations. This is no defence at all. Provisions for mental health have been drastically eroded over a protracted period. The last Labour government instigated the carve-up of the National Health Service that has been continued enthusiastically by the current government.

As Lyn Boyd, chief executive of Mental Health North-East, has explained, “One of the forgotten impacts of recession is a rise in the number of people with mental health problems.... Cutbacks in health and social care,

benefits and welfare reforms are having a hugely negative impact on the mental health of so many vulnerable people.”

Mental health services are also under threat, with charities reporting a surge in mental health problems and problems with funding. The mental health charity SANE has reported “a marked increase in the number of people contacting us with enduring mental health problems who are deeply fearful about unemployment, reduced benefits and debt.”

These cuts are being imposed based upon the lie that there is no money. In fact, the richest in Britain and internationally are hoarding more wealth than ever before, while the banking institutions are showered with taxpayers’ funds.

Bottrill’s death necessitated crocodile tears from the architects of austerity. Constituency Conservative MP Caroline Spelman told the press, “I’m only so sorry that I didn’t receive a request for help from Mrs Bottrill and, of course, I stand ready to help her family.”

Local council Labour group leader David Jamieson said he was “appalled this poor lady had taken her own life because she was worried how she would pay the Bedroom Tax,” but his only solution was to “hope the Government will take notice and reconsider this policy.”

Labour offers no way forward. They have expressed support for cuts generally, and the party’s track record speaks for itself. Labour is fully for privatisation and big business, not just in housing but across the board. Rather than tackling the issues of housing with public works programmes, the agreed cuts strive to pay private landlords less from the public purse. They funnel money into their pockets at the expense of workers.

Before the welfare cuts and changes were imposed, Chancellor George Osborne said he was “proud of what we’re doing.” He said welfare claimants would have to make choices like living in “a less expensive house, to live in a house without a spare bedroom unless they can afford it, to get by on the average family income.”

“These are the realities of life for working people,” he boasted. “They should be the reality for everyone else too. I’m proud of what we’re doing.”

In other words, if employed workers struggle then the unemployed or underemployed should be made worse off still so as to encourage a race to the bottom. A recent survey from the *Independent* revealed that in

April alone, over 25,000 people applied for emergency discretionary housing payments to make their rent—compared to 5,700 claimants at the same time last year.

Disabled people who often require a “spare” room for carers or medical equipment are some of those at the front line of the cuts. The most vulnerable sections of society are in the firing line to further an unrelenting pursuit of profit and a wider attack on the working class.

In the midst of a global economic breakdown, people like Stephanie Bottrill are made victims by the financial elite as working people are forced to pay for the crisis of the capitalist profit system, sometimes with their lives.



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