Britain’s poorest summonsed to court to pay council tax arrears

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As a result of the Conservative/Liberal government’s elimination of the Council Tax Benefit scheme in April of this year, thousands of British citizens are being summonsed to court for failure to pay council tax bills they cannot afford.

In London’s Labour Party-controlled Southwark borough alone, more than 5,000 residents were summonsed to court in October and forced to pay past due council tax plus court fees. In the Labour-controlled borough of Brent, 3,500 summonses were issued to the poorest residents. This is being repeated across the country. The Citizen’s Advice Bureau in Hull reported that up to last August it alone dealt with 3,000 cases, compared to 1,000 the previous year.

A long queue formed outside Camberwell magistrates court, Southwark, in a kind of conveyer belt summary justice meted out to the poor, reminiscent of scenes from Charles Dickens’s novels. For the overwhelming majority of these residents, the council tax bill is plunging them further into poverty.

The council tax benefit cuts are part of the government’s Welfare Reform Act 2012, which is being promoted as a way to create a culture of work, rather than a “culture of welfare”. The act transfers the responsibility for social welfare onto local councils by eliminating the council tax benefit and replacing it with a grant to local councils that covers only 90 percent of welfare beneficiaries’ monthly council tax bills. Local councils are seeking to bridge the 10 percent gap by deducting the amount directly from their monthly benefit payments.

It is estimated that more than 19,000 of Southwark’s most impoverished residents are expected to start paying at least £12 per month. Southwark Council leaders say they are being forced to collect council tax from all residents, regardless of their financial circumstance, because the borough is facing serious budget shortfalls. This is a complete lie. Since the 2008 economic crash, British politicians across the political spectrum began implementing draconian austerity measures to transfer the burden of paying for the City’s stock market gambling losses onto the working class. Rather than opposing central government cuts, local councils are simply cutting other services and benefits in their respective parishes and towns.

The benefits cuts and council tax hikes are plunging thousands of citizens into extreme levels of poverty. Single parents, working part-time and receiving the national minimum wage (NMW) with children in child care, are being asked to pay council tax bills ranging from £96 to £577 annually, depending on the level of the local schemes being introduced.

A couple with children, where one partner is in full-time work on the NMW, are seeing their council tax bill increase between £96 and £446, again depending on the local schemes being introduced. At the same time they are being asked to pay council tax for the first time or contribute more toward their council tax, the costs of transportation, food and gasoline are skyrocketing. This means that these families will have virtually nothing left over at the end of every month and are living hand to mouth.

In an October 23 *Daily Mirror* article, Alex Brew, a charity worker, said that she already goes without TV, Internet, a landline and sometimes heating. “I can’t possibly find £12 a month,” she said. She is £106.32 in arrears and also has to pay £65 in court costs.

This March, Chris Goulden, head of poverty at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, told the BBC that council tax increases mean that “some of the country’s poorest families must find £140 extra from their strained household budgets to pay council tax for the first time.

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Making up the shortfall will be beyond most, with working hours under pressure and benefits falling behind inflation. This tax hike will push people into poverty or cause more hardship for already very poor households, taking money from families who had little to start with."

The Foundation cited a research study projecting that 150,000 families will pay an average of £300 more a year. One million will pay less than £100, and 1.9 million claimants who currently do not pay any council tax will have to start paying an average £140 per year.

The Labour Party and its affiliated unions, including the largest trade union, Unite, are "protesting" the council tax benefit cuts by advocating that councils find creative ways to meet their budget by cutting other services. Unite points to the example of Merton Borough's Labour-led administration that cut its budget by more than £26 million this year.

Pilgrim Tucker, a Unite union coordinator, said, "We know councils face difficult decisions, but we are calling on Southwark council to make a stand and not punish residents who simply do not have the money available to pay these bills. Many of these families face an impossible choice this winter, between paying their bills and feeding their families. Merton, a fellow south London council, has found a way of absorbing the cuts, so we are calling on Southwark to try and do the same."

Merton's way of "absorbing the cuts" has resulted in the loss of 222 borough jobs, the closing down of children's centres, elimination of garden waste collections, removal of the Merton Music Foundation grant, reduced library hours, and the deferral of critical road maintenance across the borough. Next year, it is expected that the borough will restructure park staffing and reduce services for all but the most severely mentally ill residents.

Labour-controlled authorities are the most determined exponents of this brutal class policy. Labour has gathered statistics that show, in the first six months since these measures were enforced across England, potentially up to 500,000 people could have been issued summonses.

With these measures, the UK government in alliance with local council administrations, whatever their political coloration, are forcing the poorest into utter destitution. In sharp contrast, the UK's 1,000 wealthiest residents, the majority based in London, only a stone's throw away from the desperate scenes outside Camberwell magistrates, have received a 5 percent tax cut from 50 percent to 45 percent. This measure will further enlarge their combined wealth, which already stands at £450 billion.

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