Britain: Disabled widow commits suicide after benefits withdrawn

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Despite being partially sighted, only able to walk with the aid of a cane and in constant pain due to slipped discs, Jacqueline Harris, a 53-year-old former nurse from Bristol, England, was pronounced fit for work in November 2012, following a government Work Capability Assessment (WCA).

WCAs have been carried out by private medical company Atos Healthcare for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) since 2010. In 2008, the previous Labour government replaced Incapacity Benefit with the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), with eligibility dependent on the outcome of a WCA. After completing a WCA, a disabled person will either be assigned to the "Support Group" category because of severe disabilities and receive up to £106.50 a week, placed in the "Work Related Activity Group" because they are deemed likely to be work in the future, or refused ESA altogether and told to "actively" seek employment.

Following her assessment that deemed her fit for work, Harris had her incapacity benefit of £99.15 per week stopped in January. She lost her appeal against the decision.

The treatment of Harris was all the more abhorrent because she was also only capable of using one of her hands and wrists after having previously being attacked by a dog and having bones from her hand removed. This left her unable to bear the pain of being touched.

Harris fought for a second time against the decision, presenting medical evidence showing how her injuries had dramatically impaired her mobility and use of one hand. The date for a second DWP tribunal hearing was set to take place in Cardiff on November 15. Jacqueline didn't make it to the tribunal. On November 2, she was found dead at her home, likely having taken an overdose of medications.

Harris's sister, Christine Norman, insisted Harris committed suicide after being put under pressure to return to work. Norman said, "They asked her one question, 'Did you get here by bus?'.

"Jacqueline replied with one fateful word, 'Yes'. She hadn't even had the chance to take her coat off.

"She said she couldn't do it anymore and that no one was listening to her and that nobody believed that she couldn't work. She just wanted her benefit—it wasn't a massive amount of money."

Harris's suicide is only the latest and most devastating example of the callous treatment meted out to millions of disabled people in order for companies to turn a profit and for the government to claw back some of the billions given to the banks.

In June, an unnamed man who had been recognised by Jobcentre staff in Birmingham as being vulnerable with a variety of health issues chained himself to the railings outside the Jobcentre, doused himself in petrol and set himself on fire. Thankfully, the flames were extinguished quickly, and the distressed man was taken into police custody and assessed by mental health services. He had recently been assessed and classified as being fit for work by Atos.

In August, Elaine Lowe from Battersea, London, was admitted to hospital after taking a drug overdose. Lowe had been informed that her benefit was to be stopped, as she had been declared fit for work by Atos. Having made a full recovery from the overdose, Lowe died several days later with a verdict of natural causes recorded on her death certificate.

In September, Alex Scott from Perthshire, who has had both of his legs amputated below the knee due to the congenital condition Talipes (club foot), lost a second tribunal appealing to have his assessment overturned. Speaking on the decision to the *Perthshire*

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Advertiser, Scott said, “I’m stuffed, basically. I’ve got to put in another claim for Employment and Support Allowance to get a basic rate of £71 a week—which is going to be hard for me to live on.”

Last year, the BBC *Panorama* programme investigated the terrible problems disabled people now face. It showed that the WCA system was in chaos, with more than 600,000 forced to appeal against Atos decisions. The DWP’s own statistics showed that on appeal up to 30 percent of people won their cases, with one expert explaining that when people are given proper advice this figure rises to nearly 90 percent.

Most of the blame for the crisis has been directed at Atos and its CEO, Thierry Breton. He was awarded a pay increase of some £280,000 in June, bringing his annual salary of pay, bonuses and perks to £2,329,250, a figure that could support 5,293 disability claimants each for a year.

Typical was Labour MP for Rutherglen and Hamilton West and Shadow Energy Minister Tom Greatrex, who declared, “Many who have been through the indignity of failing the Atos test will be sickened to see that the chief executive was rewarded with a hike in his pay and bonus.”

What Greatrex conveniently fails to mention is Labour’s role back in 2008. On the basis of vastly exaggerated government claims, seized upon by the media that many people were “benefit scroungers,” it introduced the ESA despite the DWP’s own statistics showing only a minuscule number of claimants abusing the system. Labour ministers dressed up ESA as a means of “enabling” those who could work to return to work. They insisted that it was not a “target-driven” system designed to slash welfare spending—a claim repeated by Conservative/Liberal Democrat employment minister Chris Grayling, who told *Panorama*, “There are no targets anywhere in the system.”

Last week, new evidence was presented in a report, “Investigating the real reason for the misery of ‘fit for work’ assessments,” by disability rights campaigner Kaliya Franklin, which refutes these claims. Franklin says that her research “clearly indicates that the outcomes for individual sick and disabled ESA claimants are not driven solely by the severity of their condition or the nature of their disability.”

From the start, the ESA was designed using an “artificially imposed ‘statistical norm’ ” in order to get the “desired result”—i.e., a cut in the numbers claiming benefits.

“It was an inevitable feature of government policy that disabled people would be divided into these three different groups, of these specific sizes. This is not the uncovering of skivers—as the headline implies—rather it is simply the division of disabled people into three pre-determined categories in order to save money.”

The real reason for the rise in benefit claims is the government’s £155 billion austerity measures. Government budget cuts have driven up unemployment and slashed wages, making it impossible for millions to meet the rising cost of housing, utilities and other basic necessities.

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