UK welfare benefit sanctions bring hardship and hunger

Katie Rhodes
22 April 2015

The following is a statement by Katie Rhodes, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Glasgow Central.

I am a welfare rights officer in a Scottish local authority and deal with the human cost of draconian welfare "reform" measures, including the "sanctioning" of welfare benefits.

Every single day, I see the terrible impact these cuts are having on working people. Such is their brutality in reducing many to penury that in some cases the sanctions have led to starvation and even deaths. There has been a marked increase in people who have been the victims of these sadistic policies committing suicide.

The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) benefit sanctions can mean a reduction or loss of benefits for a minimum period of four weeks and up to three years. They can be applied whenever the DWP deems that a claimant has not complied with the requirements of specific aspects of a claim to a benefit. These include when a claimant does not attend just one appointment at the Job Centre or work programme provider or if he or she is deemed not to be proactively looking for work while claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA).

In 2013, the DWP imposed more than a million benefit sanctions throughout the UK. This included 1,046,398 sanctions on JSA claimants, 32,128 on Employment and Support Allowance (ESA—sickness benefit) claimants, and approximately 44,000 on lone-parent recipients of Income Support. The number of sanctions was higher than the number of fines—some 849,000—imposed by Magistrates and Sheriff Courts.

A new joint study by the West Cheshire Foodbank, several other charities, and the University of Chester finds that families are being plunged into hunger, financial crisis and an increased dependence on food banks to survive. It adds to a growing body of evidence that links cuts in welfare benefits to a dependence on food banks to be able to feed themselves and their families.

The study was supported by the Trussel Trust, which runs hundreds of food banks nationally. It examined 1,711 referrals that had been made to West Cheshire Foodbank over a seven-month period in 2014. It looked in some detail as to why people had been provided with food bank vouchers and estimated the length of time they would have to depend on food aid.

The West Cheshire Foodbank covers an area with a population of more than 200,000 people and includes more-affluent areas in and around Chester, and more-deprived areas such as Ellesmere Port. The number of food bank referrals shot up by 14 percent in the May-November period from the previous year.

Nearly half of the food bank referrals (47 percent) were due to problems with social security benefit payments. The majority of these problems resulted from welfare benefit sanctions, administrative delays and incapacity benefit stoppages. The length of time a benefit clamant can end up in crisis, dependent on food aid, due to a negative interaction with the benefit system ranges from 7 to 28 days. In extreme cases this could be up to 26 weeks.

Sanctions accounted for 11 percent of referrals and placed a household in a crisis for between 1 and 13 weeks. Benefit changes accounted for 9 percent of referrals, and the crisis situation lasted for between one and four weeks. Administrative and other delays accounted for 23 percent of referrals and the period of crisis lasted for between one and four weeks.

ESA stoppages accounted for 4 percent of referrals, and the crisis period was between 2 and 13 weeks.

© World Socialist Web Site

Those claiming ESA include people who are sick and some of the most vulnerable people in society.

The largest crisis category outside that caused by the benefit system comprises those on low income and those in debt, accounting for 31 percent of the people referred to the food bank. Low income was effectively caused by high utility bills and housing costs, with the resulting crisis lasting for between one and four weeks.

Those whose benefits are sanctioned are vulnerable, leaving them with a financial gap that they cannot fill without resorting to expensive credit, pushing them further into debt. The impact can be catastrophic. The report notes: “The abrupt loss of income that results [from sanctions] is likely to destabilise household finances for a greater period than the duration of the sanction itself.”

There is a large body of anecdotal and qualitative evidence from food banks, (including academic studies) that supports a link between welfare cuts and the use of food banks. The government has sought to disparage these, with the DWP casting doubt on research carried out by the Trussel Trust, claiming that it is not robust enough.

The Cheshire study is able to provide a much more detailed picture. Previous studies were not always able to differentiate between those referrals to food banks caused by administrative delays and those relating to problems caused specifically by government policy changes—such as the draconian use of benefit conditionality, or mandatory reconsideration of appeals for the work capability assessment (WCA)—failing a medical.

The findings about the length of time a benefit claimant experiences a crisis are revealing. At present, the Trussel Trust operates a policy whereby a client is only able to obtain three food bank parcels per “crisis”. The study suggests that a large number of clients are going hungry for longer than the 9 to 15 days that the three Trussel Trust food parcels are expected to last.

The Trust has recorded a year-on-year increase in those households being referred to food banks in their network—now standing at over a million people. They have been reduced to a reliance on charity simply in order to survive; at the same time, they are being expected to meet near-impossible conditions to be able to claim welfare payments, leaving them in fear of losing their only source of income.

Nothing so graphically exposes the destruction of the welfare state established following the Second World War than such a return to Victorian social norms.

The welfare benefits system is still often described as a safety net, there to prevent people falling into poverty. For many, due to the gutting of the welfare state provision, growing job insecurity and mounting debt, no such safety net exists.

In our election manifesto, the Socialist Equality Party calls “for the cancellation of all debts to the international financial institutions and the transformation of the banks and major corporations into publicly owned and democratically controlled utilities.”

We demand: “The wealth must be taken from the billionaires and used to meet essential social needs. All austerity measures must be reversed and billions poured into the economy to end unemployment and provide decent-paying jobs, free and high-quality health care, housing, education and social services for all.”

Only such a programme can end the social nightmare facing millions and build a new socialist society in which such horrors as state-enforced hunger will not happen.

For further details visit www.socialequality.org.uk

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site