

UK: Thousands of sick and disabled people die after being forced into employment

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Between December 2011 and February 2014, at least 2,380 sick or disabled people in the UK died after losing their entitlement to sickness benefit and being declared fit for work.

So reveals a recent report by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

The report's release followed an earlier announcement, by DWP secretary Iain Duncan Smith, that the Conservative government aims to get another million more sick or disabled people off welfare benefits and into work.

All three of the political parties of the ruling elite--Tory, Labour and Liberal Democrats--share responsibility for these horrific figures.

In 2008, the Labour government replaced the existing benefits for sickness and disability with Employment Support Allowance (ESA) for new claimants. This was central to its Welfare Reform Act and was cynically portrayed as giving the sick and disabled a way into employment. Eligibility for ESA was and still is determined by a computer-generated test--the Work Capability Assessment (WCA).

Following a WCA, a claimant is put in one of three groups:

- * Fit for work

- * In the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG) category, and considered fit for work at some point in the future and on a reduced rate of ESA

- * The support group, which receives just £106.50 a week.

In the same two-year period, out of a total 50,580 ESA claimants, 7,200 who were in the WRAG group died, while 7,540 died before the assessment process had finished.

The DWP Secretary at the time the changes were rolled out was Yvette Cooper, one of the candidates in

the Labour Party's current leadership contest.

Labour's reforms were based on slashing the welfare budget rather than caring for the most vulnerable in society, as well as providing profitable opportunities for private companies.

The French firm Atos Healthcare administered WCA until March of this year. After a catalogue of complaints, it was replaced by the US-based Maximus. The company, which oversees Medicare and Medicaid in the US, will rake in £595 million over three years for the contract.

From 2011 to 2014, the Tory-led coalition government continued Labour's austerity measures. They reassessed all existing claimants on Incapacity Benefit or Income Support because of illness or disability, to determine whether they qualified for ESA. It was during this period that 90 people a month, who were deemed ineligible for ESA, subsequently died.

The DWP was reluctant to release the report, which had been promised by Prime Minister David Cameron since June.

A Freedom of Information request was initially blocked by Duncan Smith, who claimed his department did not hold the requisite figures, i.e., how many people died after being declared fit for work and losing their benefits. In April the Information Commissioner's Office overruled his decision.

Entitled, "Mortality Statistics: ESA, IB SDA", the report begins by declaring that the figures do not denote a causal relationship between losing benefits and death. This is because, it says, the DWP holds no information as to the reason for death in each individual case.

It claims, "nothing [in the publication] would allow the reader to form any judgement as the effects or impacts of the Work Capability Assessment."

First, all the statistics clearly prove that 4.7 percent of

seriously ill claimants were wrongly declared fit for work, which is an indictment in itself.

This experience was shared by consultant physician Dr Becky Hirst, who wrote a letter to the *Guardian* explaining that she had her claim for ESA turned down while suffering from depression.

She made the point that medical diagnostic tests measure either sensitivity—the ability to give a true positive result, and specificity—the ability to give a true negative result. Her case, and those of the unfortunate claimants who died while supposedly fit for work, prove that the “WCA has an abysmal specificity.”

One can imagine the anguish and distress suffered by sick claimants, as well as the financial hardship, when their claims are rejected. Such trauma is bound to have a deleterious effect on health and hasten death in the already fragile, as the figures in the report reveal.

The brutal impact of the welfare cuts, including punitive sanctions, has been well documented. Poverty and debt have increased due to long delays of up to 120 days in the assessment process, and more delays due to the appeals process, of which four out of ten are upheld. Some claimants have reportedly been driven to suicide by the pressure.

Andy Burnham, Labour’s Shadow Secretary of State for Health, who like Cooper is a contender in Labour’s leadership contest, condemned the “shocking figures”. He said they were a consequence of the government’s “punishing regime” and demanded a debate in parliament.

However in 2006, Burnham was Minister for State at the Department for Health, and in 2009 was Secretary of State for Health during the last Labour government, during which time the reforms were introduced.

In July this year, the Tories announced a further welfare cut of £640 million, targeting those in the WRAG group. From April 2017, the WRAG group will receive no more than the measly Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) rate. It means that people with chronic illnesses, like Parkinson’s disease or multiple sclerosis, will see their benefit cut by £30 a week.

Last month, in a policy speech, DWP Secretary Iain Duncan Smith announced plans for tackling the “sickness benefits culture”, i.e. forcing more people off ESA and into work.

While praising the reduction by half in those claiming JSA, he opined that the numbers on sickness benefit

had only fallen by 80,000, remaining at around 2.5 million. The JSA bill was reduced by forcing people into low paid jobs, or zero hours contracts, while some no longer sign on as looking for work.

The government’s aim, said Duncan Smith, is to “close the employment gap between the disabled and able bodied” and get a million more people off ESA and into employment.

Hounding the sick and disabled off benefits is integral to the Tories’ strategy of cutting welfare spending by up to £13 billion a year by 2020/21.

In an interview with the Press Association, Duncan Smith declared, “work is actually a health treatment”. The ruling elite recommends this prescription not only for the physically but also the mentally ill.

Harsh new measures are being primed to force many into what will invariably be dead end jobs.

If a person, due to sickness, is off work for more than four weeks, employers and General Practitioners (family doctors) will apply a new Fit for Work scheme, which works on the principle of determining “what can you do, instead of what can’t you do.” The DWP has sent out a letter to all already overworked family doctors in England informing them of their new obligations.

The Tories claim that this approach will improve the WCA’s catastrophic system, which, in a nod to Labour, Duncan Smith said, “was designed with the right intentions.”

Based on a “Return to Work Plan”, in no time at all the patient will undoubtedly be found to be as fit as a fiddle and raring to go. The plan will look at the “obstacles preventing a return to work” (sickness!), and employers will “do everything they can to remove them”.

The government’s ultimate aim in all this is to defend the rapidly increasing wealth of the oligarchs at the top, at the expense of the living standards of the working class, including the sick and disabled.



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