

Scottish government imposes more cuts

Minnie Watson
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The Scottish National Party's latest government budget announcement again exposes their pro-business credentials.

In the second budget after their independence referendum defeat in September 2014, Finance Minister John Swinney announced cuts of between £500 million and £600 million in the coming year. Three hundred and fifty million pounds of this target is in local government and represents a 3.5 percent cut from the annual £10 billion budget.

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) President David O'Neill called the cuts an "austerity budget" and said there would be the loss of 15,000 local government jobs as a result. This would be around 6 percent of the national workforce of 244,800. O'Neill said the cuts are the "equivalent of 50 Tata Steelworks"—a reference to the recent announcement of the closure of Tata Steel in Motherwell and Cambuslang with the loss of 270 jobs in North and South Lanarkshire.

Rory Mair, chief executive of COSLA, in an interview with the *Sunday Herald*, said that a number of local authorities might defy the Scottish Government by ending the nine-year old Council Tax freezes and decreasing teacher numbers. Moray Council has recently announced that it is likely to be the first to break the tax freeze, which could see council tax bills rocketing by 18 percent. Highland Council is reported to be considering similar action, raising bills by 5 percent.

Education is expected to take a big hit as councils currently spend 40 percent of their budget on schools. Four thousand teaching jobs have already disappeared since the SNP took office in 2007 according to the teachers union, the Educational Institute for Scotland. Council leaders have been warned by the government that they will face financial penalties if they further reduce teacher numbers. A further crisis is also

developing in Scottish universities, whose teaching budget will drop from £1,062 billion to £1,027 billion in 2016.

The arts are also in the firing line of government cuts, with Scottish Opera, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Scottish Ballet, the National Theatre, Museums and the National Galleries part of a culture spending drop from £170.2 million to £154.1 million for the coming year.

The SNP, aided by their friends amongst the pseudo-left groups, the Green Party and the trade union bureaucracy have maintained the lie that they are the victims of a cruel and sadistic Westminster government. In reality, the SNP have overseen 500 million in cuts last year and a total of around 10 percent of public spending cuts since 2010. Some 40,000 public sector jobs have disappeared, including frontline services such as social work—job losses cynically described as "natural wastage." Social work posts lost in this way are not replaced, putting further burden on an already overstretched and pressurised workforce. Social care has, under the SNP Government, been privatised to levels comparable with England.

The SNP have not resisted the "dictates of Westminster," but have imposed spending levels set by the Conservatives and the previous coalition with the Liberal Democrats. They are accomplices in the destruction of many of the UK's local government vital services. Together, the SNP and Tories will oversee further "savings" in UK local governments of £30-£40 billion in 2016.

Swinney has claimed that he has delivered a Scottish alternative to Tory austerity, but he has simply robbed Peter to pay Paul by diverting £500 million from local authorities to prop up the beleaguered National Health Service. Another £55 million was taken from local authorities to save Police Scotland. Swinney had his first opportunity in this budget to set income tax at a different level to the rest of the UK and refused to do

so.

In a further move, Swinney demanded, that the “old boundary of NHS and councils ceases to exist” as he announced a large chunk of the NHS Scotland budget will be funnelled into social care. Swinney calls this an “integration” of the two vital services and a “radical reform” of the NHS in Scotland, echoing the language used by the Tories in their continued and sustained efforts to dismantle the welfare state. This policy is a rehash of the Tories “integrated care” introduced via the Health and Social Care Act (2013) in England.

Under the new arrangements “integrated care” administrations will take over all aspects of care of the most vulnerable people. This service will then be farmed out according to regional and local conditions and will inevitably mean a sharp increase in badly paid staff employed by charities and private companies who will oversee services previously run by the NHS. The proposals are packaged as an unavoidable response to the “demographic time-bomb”, otherwise known as people living longer. Both Unison, the Royal College of Nursing and the other health unions support integrated care.

Another round of budget cuts will devastate public services. Scotland’s largest council, Glasgow City, is overseeing £100 million in cuts and savings since 2014 on top of the new cuts. Edinburgh City Council announced in October of last year that 2,000 jobs have to go by June 2016 via voluntary redundancies. Council leaders have said compulsory redundancies will follow if the 2,000 people aren’t found. In Dundee, council leaders have had their budget slashed by £11.3 million for 2016-17. In the same authority, 6,000 letters have been sent out to workers asking them to consider voluntary redundancy. If volunteers are not found, compulsory redundancies will likely follow.

North Lanarkshire Council will make cuts to jobs and services amounting to £45.5 million between 2016 and 2018. This will equate to around 1,095 posts, which is just under 9 percent of the workforce. Fifteen hundred posts have already been lost in previous budget cuts. Cuts are proposed in home care affecting 400 workers and classroom assistants, with either 66 or 131 full-time posts facing the axe.

North Ayrshire Council has proposed a cut to the education budget by £500,000, telling workers employed in Education Business Support, School

Offices and Pupil Support to expect losses. In Aberdeen where £10 million worth of cuts will be imposed and with an estimated shortfall of £50 million over the next five years, an SNP councillor has said that the council leaders should know that belt-tightening in times of austerity is necessary, sending a signal to councils that the SNP will squeeze every penny necessary out them.

The reaction of the biggest public sector union, UNISON, in the face of the largest assault on its members in history was to issue a statement reacting to the budget. Mike Kirby (Scottish Regional Secretary) conceded, “UNISON Scotland recognises that Tory austerity limits the options available in the Spending Review.”

In other words, the trade union leadership are insisting that while austerity is inevitable, the Scottish government and the SNP bear no responsibility.

Last Sunday, at the Unite Scotland union’s first policy conference in Clydebank, its leader Len McCluskey offered himself as a “critical friend” of the SNP, stating that “Nicola Sturgeon and her team have reached out to trade unions—including on vital issues like blacklisting—and we would be letting our members down if we responded anything other than enthusiastically.”



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