UK: Man who appeared on reality TV show “Benefits Street” dies in poverty

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A 43-year-old man, Lee Nutley, who was a resident on the street where the reality TV show “Benefits Street” was filmed , was found dead at his home in Stockton-on-Tees in North East England at the beginning of October. Hundreds of people attended his funeral, which took place October 20, to pay their last respects.

The exact cause of his death is unclear, although police reported they did not believe there were any suspicious circumstances. Nutley, who took part in the filming of Channel 4’s “Benefits Street” from 2014 to 2015, suffered from substance abuse problems, epilepsy and had been on and off anti-depressants for eight years. After being laid off by a construction company, he relied on paltry Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) payments while seeking medical help for his epilepsy, depression and anxiety.

Nutley’s already wholly inadequate income of £45 a week from his JSA was also repeatedly cut off due to Job Centre sanctions for allegedly missing scheduled meetings. Nutley denied missing them. On one occasion, filmed in the show, Nutley’s welfare benefits were sanctioned for a four-week period. This meant his JSA was not transferred into his account for another two weeks after that, effectively depriving him of any income for six weeks and forcing him to rely on food banks and the support of his neighbours to feed himself. Nutley was just one of countless people who have been driven to food banks, substance abuse and, in the worst cases, ultimately to their deaths after sanctions to their benefit claims.

There is clear evidence that benefits sanctions may be linked to increasing numbers of deaths. In 2015, a Freedom of Information Request by the Disability News Service revealed that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had investigated, via peer reviews, the welfare payments of 60 people after their deaths. This is a procedure that must be undertaken when suicide is associated with DWP activity.

John Pring of the Disability News Service said that although the admission that the DWP had investigated 60 cases was highly significant, he suspected that the true extent of the problem could be far larger, with the number of deaths possibly ranging anywhere from 60 to several thousand.

In November 2011, the bodies of Mark and Helen Mullins were discovered in their home in the small market town of Bedworth, Warwickshire. The married couple had made a suicide pact. When the couple died, they had been living on just £57.50 a week for the last 18 months. This tiny sum, just £4.10 each per day, was the unemployment benefit that was claimed by Mark.

In another tragic case, David Wood starved to death in 2014 after his benefits were reduced to £40 a week when a mandatory DWP medical visit mistakenly found him fit for work.

Indeed, malnutrition and food bank usage are increasingly found to be linked to benefit sanctions. According to a report by one of the UK’s main food bank providers, the Trussell Trust, over 40 percent of people referred to food banks in the 2015/2016 period had experienced some form of problem with their benefits, whether through changes, delays or sanctions. Other reasons cited included low income and debt.

In October 2012, new rules were introduced that further strengthened the potential for sanctioning JSA or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants. This allowed for the sanctioning of benefits for a minimum period of four weeks, and for up to three years, if a claimant is deemed to not have taken sufficient steps to search for work, leaves a job voluntarily, or if they turn down an offer of employment.

Under the new rules, the DWP has sanctioned an estimated 1.97 million JSA claimants, as well as approximately 79,000 Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants, between October 2012 and

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These attacks on welfare benefits are part of a wider assault on the working class by the ruling elite, which seeks to destroy the hard-won post-war social benefits system, which they deem to be an unbearable constraint on profit accumulation. The welfare system has suffered relentless cuts under both Labour and Conservative governments, under conditions in which real term wages are stagnating and employers demand increasing levels of productivity from their workers.

"Benefits Street" was filmed on James Turner Street in the Winson Green area of Birmingham. It was reported that 90 percent of the residents on the street claimed welfare benefits. TV programmes such as "Benefits Street" play an essential role in the propaganda offensive of the ruling class to demonise the poor and the unemployed, and are deliberately aimed at manipulating public opinion for further assaults on living standards and the creation of a more competitive, "flexible" and exploitative labour market.

Such reality TV shows aim to construct a distinction, based on the Victorian premise, between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor—that is, those who are deemed to be poor and reliant on state aid through no fault of their own and those who are as a result of their own "personal failings," such as a lack of effort in finding employment, alcoholism or criminal leanings. No attempt is ever made to critically examine and present to the viewer the real causes of unemployment, substance abuse or crime, which are social ills rooted in the crisis-ridden capitalist system. However, the end result of such propaganda is to castigate all welfare recipients as "scroungers."

These attempts to portray those on benefits as scroungers, drug addicts or criminals go hand in hand with efforts to accustom workers to ever more exploitative working conditions. In line with these aims, other television programmes such as the BBC's "Britain's Hardest Workers: Inside the Low Wage Economy" do their part to drive home to the working class the inescapable nature of the super-exploitive job market.

In this five-part documentary shown in August, 20 volunteers took part in real-life work situations, experiencing the same gruelling conditions faced every day by the UK's 5 million minimum wage workers. The volunteers were pitted against each other, with the "least productive" leaving the show at the end of the episode, in order to demonstrate the cutthroat nature of the jobs market. The prize for the eventual "winner" was a minimum wage job for a year.

The high-pressure and exhausting nature of these low-paid jobs is evidenced by the stress and demoralisation of the volunteers, who regularly broke down in tears. The program invites viewers to draw the conclusion that in an increasingly competitive job market, workers should be grateful for their job, no matter how terribly paid or degrading.

The message of this foul propaganda is that workers must submit to their super-exploitation, because with the global economy in crisis, and governments around the world increasingly employing protectionist measures, Britons must now work harder to compete with other workers internationally. In this way, these documentaries do the government of the day an immeasurable service in providing the ideological justification for slashing wages and welfare, and driving up productivity.

Last October, Jeremy Hunt, Tory health minister, stated that proposed cuts to workers' tax credits were essential as "[W]e want [Britain] to be one of the most successful countries in the world in 20, 30, 40 years' time." He added, "Essentially, are we going to be a country which is prepared to work hard in the way that Asian economies are prepared to work hard, in the way that Americans are prepared to work hard." Following June's Brexit vote to leave the European Union, the Conservative government is stepping up its demands that British workers compete with workers internationally.

Lee Nutley was one more tragic casualty in a class war waged against the working class by the ruling elite. His death, and the deaths of countless others forced into similarly terrible poverty, is an indictment of the capitalist system as a whole, where the living and working conditions of the working class are sacrificed in the name of increased productivity and profit.

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