

UK: Sheffield Jobcentre workers continue fight against job losses and relocation

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Seventy members of staff employed by the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) at the Eastern Avenue Jobcentre in Sheffield walked out on a 24-hour strike June 2. This was followed by a five-day strike by 70 members of staff beginning June 12. These actions were initiated by the staff, not their union, the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS).

The dispute centres on the DWP's national plan to close more than 1 in 10 Jobcentres around the UK, with the loss of up to 750 jobs. Twenty-seven back-office buildings will also be closed, with moves to build five new larger service centres from 2018.

DWP workers from Annesley in Nottinghamshire, whose centre has also been earmarked for closure, joined the Sheffield strikers on their first picket line.

Clare Goonan, who works at Eastern Avenue, told the *Sheffield Star* her colleagues were "'speaking with their feet' and walking off the job." Goonan, who has worked at Eastern Avenue for 12 years, said that although the staff jobs had been guaranteed, they will be moved to other centres, but the "6,000-7,000 people who use the service would be the ones who lose out if it is allowed to close." The Jobcentre is situated in a deprived area of Sheffield.

Under government plans to reduce the number of Jobcentres nationally, Eastern Avenue will be merged with two other centres at Cavendish Court and Bailey Court—both situated three miles away. Striking opposes attacks on claimants, who will be financially affected if the closure goes ahead by having to find travel expenses. Those who are in ill health will also find the journey physically challenging.

It was leaked that the DWP nationally had used Google maps to calculate the distance claimants would need to travel to get to the new Jobcentres, ignoring the fact that bus routes don't follow the quickest route. The

Eastern Avenue staff have gained support from local health action groups and local welfare help groups.

Prior to striking, the workers said they ensured welfare payments were made in advance and that people attending jobseeker's allowance interviews were not penalised.

Research by PCS found that the time and the extra distance Jobcentre claimants will have to travel leaves them open to falling foul of the severe sanctions imposed by the DWP for being late for an interview. Sanctions regularly used for minor infringements against the unemployed and sick include the suspension of claimants' benefits. The enormous level of food bank usage in the UK is in part due to unemployed and sick claimants being sanctioned for minor infringements and having no other way of feeding themselves or their family.

The cuts going ahead were trialled in Scotland. Last December, when the DWP announced 20 Jobcentres and 8 administration sites would be closed, half of Glasgow's 16 Jobcentres were earmarked for closure.

The "Jobcentre Restructuring Plan" was officially announced in January this year by the DWP. It aims at merging staff and facilities from 78 smaller Jobcentre offices into fewer, larger sites, as well as amalgamating another 50 Jobcentres into existing council or "other similar buildings"—creating what it calls one-stop shops.

The PCS claim the cutback at UK Jobcentres could see 30,000 redundancies.

In a parliamentary debate on the national closures, Caroline Nokes, the parliamentary under-secretary of state for welfare delivery, outlined "the need for the cuts." She declared, "Since 2010, the claimant count has dropped from almost 1.5 million to about 800,000, and employment has risen by 2.7 million to near record

levels.”

The DWP, in a media handout, said the reason for the restructuring is that its £3.2 billion 20-year Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contract with Telereal Trillium, which manages its estate in Britain—including Jobcentres—is to end in March 2018. The government expects the Jobcentre cuts will be implemented before this date.

As a result, the DWP is reducing by 20 percent “futurist estate” relocations for Jobcentre Plus and other offices in Britain. The reduction is part of a wider plan to sell £4.5 billion worth of government land and property by 2020/2021. It is claimed the Jobcentre cuts will generate savings of approximately £180 million a year for the next 10 years.

Telereal Trillium also manages property used by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. The company runs a complex tax-avoidance scheme. After paying corporation tax in the UK, it funnelled £163 million of its post-tax profits in the form of share dividends into a parent company based in the British Virgin Islands—paying zero in income and corporation tax there. A 2013 article the *Daily Mail* noted, “Since 2010, the Trillium group has given £673 million in share payments to its offshore owner.”

At the time of the Jobcentre cuts in Scotland, the Scottish National Party (SNP) government claimed it had no warning. SNP MP Chris Stephens claimed the closures would affect 68,000 people in Glasgow. In a recent statement, the DWP admitted compulsory redundancies across the UK cannot be ruled out.

The PCS, replying to the initial government statement on the cuts, informed its members: “We have pledged to oppose plans announced today to close more than one in 10 jobcentres.” This is the latest burst of hot air by the union. A recent survey shows that since the Conservative government came to power in 2010, 1 million public sector jobs have been cut. The PCS was instrumental, along with the other unions, in selling out the public sector workers pensions’ dispute in 2011. After gaining massive support and a clear mandate for strike action from its members, the PCS folded, allowing the government a free shot at reducing the pension entitlements of millions of workers.

The PCS has recently allowed 30,000 staff to be cut from the DWP workforce. It has also agreed to pensions being slashed—the result of its opposition to

mobilising its members against the government in 2011. Moreover, the strike at Eastern Avenue was initiated by staff themselves, not the union.

The Jobcentre closures are just part of the job losses being planned by the DWP. The *Guardian* reported in January that “thousands of experienced employment coaches are expected to lose their jobs over the next few weeks as ministers trigger the first stage of a massive shakeout of the government-funded welfare to work sector that will see it shrink by 75 percent.”

The article noted, “The work and health programme shortlist...begins a process in which the remaining eight work programme firms will compete with three new entrants for just six new regional contracts.” Kirsty McHugh, the chief executive of the Employment Related Services Association, said, “This means large job losses among really experienced frontline advisers, the majority of which are in charities.”

These attacks indicate that the destruction of thousands of public sector jobs is to proceed apace under Theresa May’s minority government, with the attacks on the unemployed that began previously under Labour and Conservative governments to be accelerated.



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