

UN special rapporteur to examine extreme poverty in the UK

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The United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Professor Philip Alston, is to visit the UK with a view to reporting on the impact of “extreme poverty” on people’s lives.

Alston begins his visit on November 6 and will spend 10 days talking to organisations dealing with effects of poverty and to those experiencing poverty. On his final day, November 16, he will hold a press conference in London to announce his initial findings.

Alston’s visit is significant, given that such visits are normally to “developing” countries where extreme poverty is a more endemic situation. Among the last countries he visited were Saudi Arabia and Ghana. The fact that the UK is now seen as requiring a visit demonstrates how large swathes of the population have been thrust into poverty, as a result of brutal austerity policies imposed over more than a decade. More than £110 billion in spending cuts have been imposed, with around a million jobs lost in the public sector. Alongside this, the National Health Service (NHS) and public education budgets have been cut to the tune of tens of billions of pounds.

The rapporteur’s visit is the first to a Western European country since a trip to Ireland in 2011. Like their class brothers and sisters in the UK, workers in Ireland have suffered crushing austerity measures over the last decade, in order to pay for the bailout of the bankers and super-rich.

Alston is to speak to organisations as to what constitutes poverty, including the impact of child poverty. Alston is to investigate the impact of the austerity measures imposed by the 2010 Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition and Theresa May’s current Conservative government in response to the financial crisis. Also being investigated by the UN is the role that the hated Universal Credit benefit system, first introduced in 2010, has had, and how Brexit will impact those living in poverty.

He stated, “Welfare cuts have taken place but there is now an interesting debate on whether they have gone too far and what measures need to be taken to shore up the NHS and other programmes.”

Alston in his role as special rapporteur visited the United States at the end of last year, where inequality is also growing at an exponential rate. In his report on his US visit, issued last December, he noted, “The dramatic cuts in welfare, foreshadowed by the President and Speaker Ryan ... will essentially shred crucial dimensions of a safety net that is already full of holes. ... I saw sewage filled yards in states where governments don’t consider sanitation facilities to be their responsibility. ... I heard about soaring death rates and family and community destruction wrought by prescription and other drug addiction ... at the end of the day, particularly in a rich country like the USA, the persistence of extreme poverty is a political choice made by those in power.”

The Trump administration reacted with anger and denial when the special rapporteur’s final report was issued earlier this year. US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, described the report as “misleading and politically motivated,” adding, “it is patently ridiculous for the United Nations to examine poverty in America.” She accused Alston of wasting the UN’s time and resources by focusing, “on the wealthiest and freest country in the world.”

A similar reaction can be expected from the ruling elite in Britain when Alston publishes his final report next year. In 2013, a report on UK housing by UN Rapporteur Raquel Rolnik was dismissed as “a Marxist diatribe” by Kris Hopkins, the then-Tory housing minister. Rolnik had called on the government to reverse its policy known as the “bedroom tax,” which led to huge cuts in housing benefits for people in houses deemed to have unused bedrooms. Needless to say the request was ignored.

The right-wing Centre for Social Justice think tank has

already declared it will not make a submission to Alston. One of the co-founders of the organisation is Tory MP Iain Duncan Smith, who as a former minister was responsible for setting up the Universal Credit system.

Prior to his visit Alston has called for submissions to be sent to him, from both organisations concerned with poverty and from individuals affected by poverty. The deadline for submissions was September 14.

One individual who has already sent in his submission is Alexander Tiffin. Tiffin, a former soldier, is now confined to a wheelchair and reliant on Universal Credit. He has created a web site—<https://universalcreditsuffer.com>—and explained his dire living conditions in a *Guardian* piece August 22.

Tiffin explains that he receives £95.35 in universal credit payments every two weeks. This leaves him just £10.50 after paying energy bills, fuel for his adapted car, TV licence, broadband connection and milk for his baby son.

He has kept a diary of his experiences. Relating his diary, he explained, “At one time in February, I had no food at all for two weeks. I probably ate on less than a quarter of the days in that month. I just had nothing. I lost two and a half stone [35 pounds] ... my hair has started to fall out and my teeth are loose due to a lack of vitamin intake.”

Another entry for May 8 read: “I wanted to be able to make myself some sandwiches, so I bought a loaf of bread for 45p and a small block of cheese for £1.72. This left me with £3.30 [with 10 days to go until the next payment]. I must admit I felt bad after buying it as I shouldn’t have wasted the money.”

Tiffin has suffered mental health problems and says he has come near to a full mental breakdown.

Among organisations submitting to Alston is the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a charity that researches social policy issues. Together with Edinburgh’s Heriot-Watt University it issued a report in June giving figures for the levels of destitution among the population in 2017. According to their report, around 1.5 million were classed as destitute. Of these, around a third of a million were children.

The study defines destitution as lacking two or more essentials over the past month because they have been unable to afford them. They give a list of six essentials—shelter, food, heating, lighting, clothing and basic toiletries. As an example, they classed as being in destitution people who had fewer than two meals a day for two or more days or had been unable to heat their

homes for five or more days.

The report noted, “Destitution is clustered mainly in northern cities with a history of de-industrialization, together with a number of London boroughs and other places with a similar history of de-industrialization.”

While citing official figures claiming levels of destitution had fallen since 2015, it added, “there is a very real risk that destitution will rise again if Universal Credit continues to roll out with its currently high sanction rate.”

A growing problem for many in poverty is being able to afford food. Human Rights Watch (HRW), more commonly known for its advocacy of human rights abroad, plans to highlight food poverty in the UK in its submission.

Speaking to the *Guardian*, HRW researcher Kartik Raj explained, “There is a lot of hunger that goes under the radar. ... People have a right to food and an adequate standard of living. ... If the fifth largest economy in the world is failing to ensure that basic minimum ... then that is certainly something we will be bringing to the rapporteur’s attention.”

The Trussell Trust, an NGO coordinating 420 foodbanks from more than 1,230 centres across the UK, will also submit to Alston. Among the issues it will highlight are that the use of food banks in areas where Universal Credit has been rolled out rose by 52 percent. In areas where Universal Credit had not yet been rolled out or had just been introduced the rise in the use of food banks was 14 percent.

Regardless of the results of Alston’s investigation there can be no doubt that the policies that are driving increasing poverty will not be abandoned, as the ruling elite seeks to impose the crisis of capitalism on the backs of the working class.



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