

UN says millions in Britain deliberately plunged into “great misery”

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The report on poverty and human rights in Britain by United Nations Special Rapporteur Philip Alston is an extraordinary depiction of the social catastrophe devastating the working class.

For years, the special rapporteur only investigated “developing” countries such as China, Ghana and Mauritania, where “extreme poverty” is endemic.

However, the offensive against the working class in the advanced capitalist countries is so severe that Alston has been forced to turn his attention to them. He visited the United States in 2017, where he was confronted with levels of poverty and inequality that “shocked” him.

Alston has now published a 24-page UK report after visiting nine areas, including the cities of London, Oxford, Newcastle, Cardiff, Glasgow and Belfast.

Opening the London press conference on his findings last week, Alston said that he wanted to contrast the “great prosperity in Britain,” the fifth largest economy in the world, with the fact “that a fifth of the people, 14 million people, are living in poverty. Four million of those are more than 50 percent below the poverty lines and one and half million are destitute.”

Child poverty rates are “staggering” and “are predicted to go up significantly over the next couple of years.”

Millions of people are suffering “great misery,” he writes, as “British compassion for those who are suffering has been replaced by a punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous approach.”

There is an “immense growth in foodbanks and the queues waiting outside them, the people sleeping rough in the streets, the growth of homelessness, the sense of deep despair that leads even the Government to appoint a Minister for suicide prevention and civil society to report in depth on unheard of levels of loneliness and

isolation. ...

“For almost one in every two children to be poor in twenty-first century Britain is not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster, all rolled into one.”

Most telling of all is Alston’s revelation that the impoverishment of the working class is a deliberate policy. Alston declares that austerity is not simply determined by economic circumstances but is driven by a political agenda for “radical social re-engineering.”

“Successive governments have brought revolutionary change in both the system for delivering minimum levels of fairness and social justice to the British people, and especially in the values underpinning it. Key elements of the post-war Beveridge social contract [welfare state] are being overturned,” he concludes.

Alston quotes National Audit Office figures showing that local governments in England have seen central government funding halved over the last seven years. As a result, more than 500 children’s centres closed between 2010 and 2018 and more than 340 libraries closed between 2010 and 2016.

The resulting level of social misery is appalling. “In England, homelessness is up 60% since 2010, rough sleeping is up 134%. There are 1.2 million people on the social housing waiting list, but less than 6,000 homes were built last year.”

Alston writes, “During my visit I have spoken with people who depend on food banks and charities for their next meal, who are sleeping on friends’ couches because they are homeless and don’t have a safe place for their children to sleep.”

The use of food banks is “up almost four-fold since 2012...there are now about 2,000 food banks in the UK, up from just 29 at the height of the financial crisis.”

The working poor are turning to food banks in

droves. The Trussell Trust charity that runs many food banks told Alston that “one in six people referred to their food banks is in work. One pastor said, ‘The majority of people using our food bank are in work. ... Nurses and teachers are accessing food banks.’ ”

Millions more are on the verge of going under: “A social safety net is not just for people already in poverty. ... Many families are living pay check to pay check. And 2.5 million people in the UK survive with incomes no more than 10% above the poverty line. They are thus just one crisis away from of falling into poverty through no fault of their own.”

A sizable section of Alston’s report deals with the suffering imposed by the punitive Universal Credit (UC) system, which the government is attempting to roll out nationally during this Parliament. He notes: “no single program” involves the “promotion of austerity programs more than Universal Credit.” The move to UC was the government “wanting to make clear that being on benefits should involve hardship.”

Even claiming UC proves impossible for many people due to it being an entirely online process. Not only does “digital by default” entail severe hardship for claimants, but UC is “designed with a five-week delay between when people successfully file a claim and when they receive benefits. Research suggests that this ‘waiting period,’ which actually often takes up to 12 weeks, pushes many who may already be in crisis into debt, rent arrears, and serious hardship, requiring them to sacrifice food or heat.”

Central to UC is the “imposition of draconian sanctions, even for infringements that seem minor. Endless anecdotal evidence was presented...to illustrate the harsh and arbitrary nature of some of the sanctions, as well as the devastating effects that resulted from being completely shut out of the benefits system for weeks or months at a time. As the system grows older, some penalties will soon be measured in years.”

So draconian is UC, that Alston recalls conversations with local authorities and the voluntary sector “about their preparations” for its rollout. “I was struck by how much their mobilization resembled the sort of activity one might expect for an impending natural disaster or health epidemic. They have expended significant expense and energy to protect people from what is supposed to be a support system.”

Alston writes, “We are witnessing the gradual

disappearance of the post-war British welfare state behind a webpage and an algorithm. ... The impact on the human rights of the most vulnerable in the UK will be immense.”

He draws attention to the statement of philosopher Thomas Hobbes that without a social contract, life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Turning the clock back decades, to the era before the existence of welfare state provision, will provoke a social backlash, Alston warns. “Almost all studies have shown that the UK economy will be worse off because of Brexit, with consequences for inflation, real wages, and consumer prices.”

If current policies “towards low income working people and others living in poverty are maintained. ... This could well lead to significant public discontent, further division and even instability.”

Speaking to Channel Four News, Alston said government figures he spoke to “were pretty much unconcerned” about the devastation their policies had wrought and were “in denial.”

This is a charitable statement, given his insistence that austerity is a deliberate policy of social engineering. The newly appointed work and pensions secretary, Amber Rudd, is the former home secretary and a pro-European Union (EU) “Remainer.” Confirming the hostility to the working class shared with the “Brexiteers,” Rudd rejected Alston’s findings. Adopting a pose of outrage, she expressed how “disappointed” she was “by the extraordinary political nature of his language,” which “discredited a lot of what he was saying.”

This is a declaration by the ruling elite that, in or out of the EU, the offensive against the working class will continue unabated.



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