

UK Tory government maintains benefit sanctions as misery and deaths continue

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Last week, an inquest in North Wales recorded a verdict of suicide in the case of an 81-year-old woman left virtually penniless after the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) froze her pension payments.

Joy Worrall had received an inheritance in 2014 and informed the DWP. In 2017, the DWP “re-assessed” her pension situation. Instead of only freezing her pension credits, the DWP froze her state pension as well, leaving her with no income.

The inquest heard that she was “too proud” to tell her family of her financial difficulties. She lived on her savings. When Joy had just £5 left to her name, she threw herself into a 40-foot quarry.

In a letter to the inquest, Suzanne Mitchelson of the DWP wrote that the two pension payments should have been “de-combined,” saying “I am sorry that due to an administrative error this did not happen.”

After the hearing, her son Ben said the DWP was “guilty of a failure of duty of care.” He described her case as “a disgrace,” and worried that “this could happen to someone else.”

The DWP’s “unreserved” apology “for the error” and its “pledge to learn the lessons” of Joy Worrall’s death are hardly convincing in the face of the brutalisation taking place daily in the benefits system.

Conservative Work and Pensions Secretary Amber Rudd has announced an end to three-year term welfare benefit sanctions, declaring that it has been “counterproductive” and “ineffective.”

However, the apparent softening over sanctions policy is no such thing, with Rudd reaffirming a punitive policy towards the poorest and most vulnerable layers of society.

Even as she abolished three-year benefit sanctions, she endorsed the continued use of six-month sanctions and a better targeted vindictiveness towards the poorest.

The three-year sanction was “unnecessarily long” and its “additional incentive” was “outweighed by the unintended impacts to the claimant,” she said. The DWP’s position is that the six-month sanction “already provides a significant incentive for claimants to engage with the labour market regime.”

Under sanctioning, unemployment benefits can be reduced or withheld on the grounds of alleged infringement of rules, or whenever the DWP decides that a claimant has failed to comply with the requirements of specific aspects of a claim. The minimum sanction period is four weeks, the loss of around £300.

Sanctions are imposed arbitrarily, for failure to attend an appointment at a jobcentre or with a work programme provider, or if the claimant has been deemed not to be looking for work actively enough. In one case, a claimant who had carried out 60 job searches was sanctioned for missing one that matched his profile.

A 2015 report by the Trussell Trust highlighted the way in which sanctions were used to reduce benefit payments for those in need of them. One claimant was sanctioned for missing an appointment because he was at hospital with his partner, who had just given birth to a stillborn child. Another missed an appointment because his brother had died that day. He tried to ring and explain but could not get through, so he left a message which was not passed to the right person. One man was sanctioned for missing an appointment because he had been hospitalised that day with a suspected heart attack.

In a case reported from an Essex foodbank, a claimant was sanctioned because, although he had turned up in good time, the length of the queue in the jobcentre meant he failed to keep his appointment.

An Oxford University study in 2015 confirmed that benefit sanctions have led to an increased use of foodbanks. Last month, the Trussell Trust reported that it has distributed a record 1.6 million food bank parcels throughout the UK, including 500,000 to children.

Three-year sanctions were introduced in 2012 under then Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith, and then Employment Minister Chris Grayling. They were to be applied against three or more serious breaches of work-related requirements. The capricious reasons given for sanctions meant this was just another opportunity to turn the screw.

Sanction numbers rocketed. Over one million were issued in 2013. Official figures point to 32,647 claimants issued with sanctions longer than six months since 2012. Two-thirds of them were on the government's hated Universal Credit (UC).

Under Duncan Smith, the government took a bullish line defending sanctions, even as report after report condemned them. A five-year study of welfare conditionality led by the University of York reported last year that sanctions were not only ineffective in their stated aims of getting the jobless into work, but were more likely to lead to poverty, ill-health and desperate resorts to survival crime.

Two years earlier, the National Audit Office (NAO) concluded that there was no evidence that sanctions worked, and that ministers had no interest in finding out their effect on claimants. The NAO revealed that the government was spending more on assessing whether people were fit to work than would have been saved in benefit reductions.

All reports noted that the most disadvantaged were hardest hit. The NAO concluded that sanctioned disabled people were less likely to find work.

Alison Garnham, chief executive of the Child Poverty Action Group, expressed the hope that Rudd's announcement would see "a review of the sanctions system overall because ... it is overly harsh and counterproductive for claimants."

The brutality of Rudd's language gives the lie to that wish. The dismantling of social provision, at the expense of the most vulnerable first, remains the government's programme.

There are almost daily reports of the savage human toll of the austerity agenda.

Days before Rudd's announcement, it was reported

that a young woman with a two-year-old child in south Wales had been left virtually destitute when her benefits were stopped following the death of her fiancé.

Melinda Hornyak came to Britain in 2015 from Hungary. She fell in love, and moved to Abertillery with David Brooks, where their daughter was born in 2017. He died in March. It is believed he took his own life.

After his death, all Hornyak's state welfare payments stopped apart from £20 a week child benefit. While the local community is supporting her as best it can, she is struggling with private rented accommodation. The DWP have told her that because she has only lived in the UK for four years, rather than five, she has no entitlement to other welfare benefits.

The DWP have told Hornyak that she should look for work. As she has pointed out, if she did go out to work, she would have to pay childcare costs in any case.

New Life Community is a church group supporting Hornyak. Project manager Louise O'Connor told local press that they are also helping "a Polish gentleman who has been here for more than six years and isn't getting any benefits."

The DWP said that eligibility for certain benefits is based on a "permanent right to reside." The European Commission has criticised the application of the additional right to reside test as a means of refusing benefits to European Union nationals, who under current rules are entitled to social security.

The author also recommends:

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