

“Managers, directors and council leaders should be held to account if people become ill or die”

UK social worker speaks out on unsafe conditions sanctioned by management and unions

Our correspondent
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The WSWs spoke to Jane, who works as a children’s social worker in a Local Authority in northern England, about the conditions she and her clients face amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

WSWS: How has the coronavirus outbreak changed the way you work?

Jane: We are used to stress change and having to be resilient, but many social workers are scared. However, it is an unspoken fear as it is frowned upon in child protection social work. We are reading about a social worker, council refuse worker, numerous NHS workers, bus drivers in London and Glasgow taxi drivers dying as a result of COVID-19 and ask ourselves when it will be in our team.

We now work alone in our homes most days, only going to the office when needed for emergencies. We must try to support our most vulnerable children and young people without putting them and ourselves at risk. We get little or no guidance of how we should do this, with management’s mantra being “Keep calm and wash your hands”! Individual workers have come up with initiatives; ideas such as using video chats to see children. This has not been led by managers. It is almost as if they just want you to carry on visiting people’s homes, but are smart enough not to come out with those words.

WSWS: What measures has your employer taken to protect you, your colleagues and your clients?

Jane: In a nutshell, none! I kept checking the official guidance in February and it was just general advice,

which said if you hadn’t been to Wuhan or in contact with anyone from Wuhan it didn’t really affect you. Finally, around two weeks into March, the “Keep calm and wash your hands” advice started to appear. In the weeks before lockdown we had no access to anything remotely protective. We had cleansing wipes, which we have always had, for wiping our desks if someone else needed to use it. However, by the week lockdown started there were no wipes left.

Frightened social workers started trying to purchase their own makeshift protection. Some managed, some didn’t. A week after lockdown, senior managers announced children still had to be seen, but that we weren’t to go into houses. It was farcical. No concrete advice was given on how we could do this.

A minority of workers, under pressure from lower level managers, continue going into people’s homes after the lockdown and are being hailed as “selfless” by managers. Last week, a high-ranking manager praised staff who continued to go into the office. No senior manager that I know of has criticized this or spoken of the dangers to both worker and service user. It is criminal. Managers, directors and council leaders should be held to account if people become ill or die.

WSWS: What advice has your union given?

Jane: There are several unions covering the social work profession. During pay/conditions negotiations you can see it’s divisive. However, in this situation they are saying the same thing—absolutely nothing! Unison has reproduced government advice without

comment. Then on March 31, they issued “Coronavirus: your rights at work.” It had advice for education, health care, local government workers and the police. It appeared social workers came under the heading of local government workers.

Social workers have a specific role in protecting vulnerable children and adults and this was not mentioned in the guidance. There was no guidance on safety equipment to use while being asked to make visits, no guidance on whether to go into homes, no guidance on what to do if asked to continue with home visits. In other words, a complete cop out!

WSWS: How do you think the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown will impact the families you work with?

Jane: We already deal with families who are either on low pay and in-work benefits or are on benefits because they are unemployed. We have seen an increase in the last few years of dependence by some families on food banks. Ironically, other low paid workers in the NHS and council workers regularly contribute to food banks. Now, with the coronavirus restrictions, job losses and food shortages, food bank donations have begun to dry up. This is under conditions where children who normally get free school meals are now at home all day. Although schools are providing packed lunches for children who qualified for free school meals, for some of those children the school meal would have been their only cooked meal of the day.

Since the lockdown, we have seen a rise in domestic abuse in families, and parents who are telling us they are at breaking point. Many with a low income had already been hanging on by a thread.

WSWS: Could you say something about how the years of austerity have impacted on social work provisions and on the families you serve?

Jane: To place our work into context, we now have almost a third of children in the UK living in poverty—that is around nine children in every average classroom. Prior to COVID-19, this was predicted to rise to five million this year. Of those children, at least two-thirds have at least one parent in work and are said to be in poverty because the family income is below 60 percent of the UK average (about £195 a week for a lone parent with two children). Some of the main causes of these growing levels of inequality are years of

austerity, which have caused stagnating wages, low pay, zero-hours jobs, benefit cuts. Pay and benefits have not kept pace with the cost of living.

Child protection social workers have seen increased caseloads year on year. In a national survey in February, 70 percent of social workers said their caseloads were unmanageable. We have seen services to support families reduced at a frightening rate, the growth in parents presenting with mental health problems, parents misusing drugs or alcohol and rising domestic abuse levels.

Children growing up in these families are at a higher risk of harm, and the damaging effects can be both physical and emotional—with a devastating and lifelong effect. The sad reality is there is no real social work provision. More and more children’s social workers refer children to other services where they can, but often those services are bursting at the seams and have much higher thresholds than previously.

With heavy hearts we often fear the next “Baby Peter” case—a 17-month-old boy who died in London in 2007 after suffering more than 50 injuries over an eight-month period, during which he was repeatedly seen by the London Borough of Haringey Children’s Services and National Health Service health professionals. Often, we are forced to close a case with no further action. This is the unspoken admission that we have no real answers to the political and social catastrophe of austerity.



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