

Foodbank organisers in Bournemouth, UK: “We’re having to fill in where the state is failing miserably”

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Andrew Talbot from We Are Humans and Chris Curtis from Heart and Soul, are the organisers of two groups working at a soup kitchen in Bournemouth town centre.

Over the last 18 months they have seen a massive influx of people dependent on their services due to the devastating conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a result of more than a decade of austerity measures of Conservative led governments, the social position of the working class has severely eroded. More than 130,000 preventable deaths have occurred since 2012. In 2019, a year before the pandemic, Sir Michael Marmot, Professor of Epidemiology at UCL, a leading authority on health inequalities for over four decades said of declining life expectancy in the poor in both the UK and the US, “Social injustice is killing people on a grand scale.”

A team of volunteers run these food banks with the support of ordinary working people by repurposing produce from supermarkets which would have otherwise ended up in landfill. They operate four days a week, giving out food to families in need. Since early 2020, food banks and soup kitchens Talbot and Curtis organise have facilitated 25,000-50,000 visits from needy people.

Tens of thousands across the country now depend on foodbanks.

WSWS: Why did you organise this foodbank?

Andrew Talbot (AT): I've been doing it about 10 years. I first started feeding people on the sanctuary sites [encampments providing a safe area] in Bournemouth and I've carried on ever since. And then when the pandemic hit, Chris started to distribute in the town square, and I came along and helped him. We've worked together for the past two years delivering these services to homeless and vulnerable people on the streets of Bournemouth.

My nephew runs an operation the same as this in Merseyside. So, he's covering St Helens, Liverpool and surrounding areas. He does street distributions of hot food, clothing, toiletries, support packages. During the lockdown he also kept a complete hotel fed every day of the week, because they were put into a hotel without any food, very similar to what was done here.

Chris Curtis (CC): There are many other groups working round the UK as well.

WSWS: What impact does the work you do have on poverty stricken people and homeless?

AT: It's essential survival for them.

CC: It takes them out of their element for a while. For an hour they can get a nice hot meal, they can get some food, they can feel supported, like someone cares. There's nothing worse than someone being on the street and having nobody and having nothing. They can come here, they can get supported. There can be unjudgmental, unconditional, friendship. We help people out in need without any questions. It doesn't matter if you're homeless, vulnerable, housed, or whatever, if you want to turn round and set foot in our queue, as long as you treat us with respect, we'll more than happily help you.

WSWS: Who attends your foodbank looking for help? Not only the socially destitute and homeless are compelled to go to foodbanks these days, but some poorly paid workers...

CC: Well, everybody's only one step away from being homeless.

AT: We never ask questions, there are no tick boxes, no forms to fill in. Anyone can come along. There's no one paid, we actually go into our own pockets every week to provide some services.

CC: This is the reason why we're liked here, because someone could walk past us. They can see people getting fed and they're more than welcome to come over and get fed. That person could have gone without food for the day, but because they've seen our distribution they're going home with food in their belly and they're feeling a lot better about themselves because they're not hungry anymore.

WSWS: What impact does the COVID-19 pandemic have on the people you serve?

AT: It was because of COVID-19 that we really put every effort into this. Because what the local council [Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council (BCP)] did when COVID hit was put people, vulnerable and homeless, into hotel rooms, B&Bs, with no food, no way of getting clean clothing, and all the shops were shut. So, the local council actually put

vulnerable people in more danger.

CC: They were making vulnerable people more vulnerable!

WSWS: Do you think there is a link between the austerity measures that have lasted over a decade and people forced into foodbanks? As you know wages are stagnating and inflation is running extremely high. The government has decided to take away the £20 uplift from the Universal Credit benefit.

AT: I think the repercussions of what COVID is, and what it's done, we've not even seen properly yet. As interest rates start to rise, it'll bite more people, bite the working poor more. Most people have probably gone to the last penny on the mortgage. When the interest rates start rising, we'll have a similar situation to the late '80s, early '90s, of people dealing with negative equity, which'll have massive social impact. It'll affect people's pockets so severely that our services will absolutely be needed more and more and by more people.

WSWS: What do you think about the coming winter, with the pandemic? Cases are rising, hospital admissions are rising, and, as you said, more people are becoming poor and vulnerable?

AT: We're already seeing people ending up on the streets that shouldn't be here. Not your normal street homeless. And the Universal Credit system of sanctioning people's entitlement and removing their Housing Benefit when they don't do what they should do. To remove the housing element, and to remove all the payment of Universal Credit and make them reapply is absolutely devastating. I see this on a business level, because I manage properties, and I manage lots of bedsits, HMOs [Housing in Multiple Occupation], as well as houses, so I can see the impact that Universal Credit is having on the poor. And it's shocking that they could remove people's Housing Benefit and risk them being made homeless.

No one should have to work 60 hours a week and still claim benefits. It's fundamentally wrong, and as a society we have failed.

I think it's a failure by the state. An absolute travesty that the state is responsible for. This is work that the state should be doing. We're having to fill in where the state is failing miserably. And not just the vulnerable, it's with all of its citizens.

The austerity measures were devastating for the working poor. They were poor anyway, and to make them even poorer, while 5 percent of the richest part of this country keeps making money! The poor are getting poorer, the rich are getting richer.

WSWS: Even life expectancy has fallen in some areas of poverty, and in some affluent areas people live 25 years longer than the people in poorer areas. This is the 5th richest country in the world and they can't feed people!

AT: As a country we should be lifting our people and moving them forward, not dragging them back to Dickensian times, which is what's happening now. The government has money to build warships, they're wasting their money on spaceships, arms, while their own people are starving on the streets.

WSWS: Elon Musk, Richard Branson, Jeff Bezos...

AT: This year, what they've spent blasting into space between them could've solved the world hunger problem.

CC: Another thing is, it's not good that Bournemouth had a publicly funded night shelter that's now been turned into a hostel where they're charging up to £350 a week for a person to live there. It was £2.50 a night to stay at this night shelter. It's been taken over by Bournemouth Church Housing Association, who now run it.

They're no longer a night shelter, there's no longer a day centre there. And a lot of the hostels in Bournemouth, they're saying the service users have to be clean before they're willing to help them. It's hard enough to turn round and get clean from drugs as it is, and drink and things like that. It's disgusting. The first port of call should be getting that person off the street. If they're willing to change, fair enough. If they mess up when they go into this place, that's a different matter. But to give them that chance to get in there first, this is what needs to be happening.

WSWS: A couple of miles from here, in Sandbanks, an area where super rich have properties worth millions, you can see the wealth!

AT: And over in Southbourne, too, which is the new up and coming Sandbanks, which is being developed along the same way, overpriced housing for the "special" and nothing for the needy. A severe lack of building social housing.

CC: Things need to be shaken up, and things need to be shaken up properly. We will carry on being here until we are no longer needed. At the end of the day, as long as there's someone on that street, or someone vulnerable that needs help, we will be there to help them unconditionally and unjudgmentally.



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