

“My utility bills are ridiculous”: UK workers speak on the cost-of-living crisis

Our reporters
20 April 2022

The squeeze on household incomes has reached its highest level in Britain since the 1950s. As with every country, further intolerable increases to the cost-of-living were triggered by the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. Millions were hit immediately by price rises as fuel costs and energy bills shot up.

Every household was hit by a crushing rise in energy bills on April 1. A staggering 54 percent rise in the price cap on which energy firms base their prices means an average annual increase of £693 (from £1,277 to £1,971), or £57.75 a month. Another rise in the cap by a projected 42 percent this October will cost a further £830 a year, cumulatively doubling the average annual bill to around £2,800.

Inflation is going through the roof. Consumer Prices Index inflation rose 7 percent in the year to March, up from 6.2 percent in February. Last week, the more accurate Retail Price Index measure, including housing costs, reached 9 percent, up from 8.2 percent to February 2022.

Conservative Chancellor Rishi Sunak offered no respite in last month's spring budget statement. He cut fuel duty by a miserly one-off 5 pence per litre and slightly raised the wages threshold for paying national insurance. Even after these measures, taking everything into account, families were still an average of £2,620 worse off this year.

WSWS reporters spoke to workers in Leeds and Sheffield about the impact of the price surge on their lives.

Leeds

Outside the St Johns Centre, many responded positively to a WSWS leaflet, A working class program to fight inflation, linking the necessity for a political struggle to defend living standards to the need for the socialist reorganisation of society.

Lauren, an admin worker with two children, said, “I’m struggling. I am on the same wage as I was in 2019. I haven’t had a pay rise since then. My money has to go even further now, with the increase in National Insurance Contributions. I get even less, and I don’t get a working families tax credit.”

Some people now had to choose between “heating and eating”, said Lauren, something “you shouldn’t have to in this day and age. I can’t afford to have a car, I get public transport, it’s cheaper. My utility bills are ridiculous. They want another £180 next month. Where do they think people find it from? They can’t magic it out of thin air.”

Lauren laid the blame for the situation at the door of the Johnson government. “They are not doing enough to help us. There’s no help for working class people. In the pandemic I was furloughed with 20 percent less wage.”

She didn’t want her children to see how much the family was now struggling, “If we want to treat them, it means we have to go without to pay for it.”

Kerry-Anne, a mother of six, said, “We have been hit hard by all the price increases. I am having to choose now between using the electric or having enough money to make them a good dinner. We are on our way to the cinema, but to be able to pay for that we can't buy a lot of the things we would normally buy on a Saturday.

“My husband works in production making cheese. When he started there his wage was very good but over the years wages haven't increased as they should have

done, so now we are struggling. They talked a lot about key workers during the pandemic, but that didn't mean they got a pay rise. It is shocking how they have let COVID-19 spread and kill so many people.

“And the fact that the billionaires like Jeff Bezos are getting so much richer during the pandemic is showing everyone what their real priorities are. It's become transparent to most people now that we are being exploited. We need to start taking the fight to the employers and not wait for them to come for us.”

Diane said, “As a pensioner, I have been affected a lot by the increases in the prices of gas and electric and the rising cost of food. They are not raising our pensions in line with the increase in our bills.

“My daughter has a medical condition that prevents her from working, but they are claiming she is able to work and taking away her disability benefits. There's going to be a court case over it, but even that is going to be done online. The Tories have always hit the most vulnerable, but Labour are not much different now.

“I have always voted Labour, but I know they are not a party for the working class. [Former Labour leader Jeremy] Corbyn wasn't as strong as he should have been. That was why people didn't vote for him.”

Sheffield

Krystian, who is studying film production at Hallam University explained, “I'm broke. Around 60-70 percent of my money goes on rent. It is hard to study and work. Everything is going up in price.

“I work for a fast-food chain. My hourly wage has gone up in April from £8.36 to just £9.18. I had worked before at Clipper (Pretty Little Thing) and we received no real protection against COVID-19 in the workplace. They brought in people for the Christmas period and then got rid of them afterwards.

“In my country, Poland, there is now a lot of support for socialism particularly among the youth because life is so hard for working people and there is so much inequality. That is why so many go abroad. There are a lot of 'leftist' parties who make promises but then do the opposite. I don't think the working class is represented. It is difficult for us to influence anything,

but I agree we need to get together.

“I stopped following the mainstream media. I don't believe it can be trusted, I look around the internet and social media.

“I am against Putin and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but I am worried where this is heading. I don't want a world war. It is in no-one's interest to start a nuclear conflict which would end civilisation. Polish troops were sent to die in Afghanistan for US oil.”

Chris, a warehouse operative, said, “At this moment in time, this could lead to World War 3. The media is just reporting what the powers that be are wanting you to hear.

“The world-wide consequences [of the war] are already starting. The whole economy could go into meltdown. A lot of businesses here, even those not linked to Putin in any way, are feeling the sanctions.

“Everything is going up in price. The price of petrol is crazy now.

“Why should we pay? We go to work Monday to Sunday, some of us, and we're taxed for it. It's like we're being fined for their incompetence.

“I don't trust politicians. They are all born liars. Look at the student tuition fees that former Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg said he wouldn't put up. But he did. All the working people should get together and rise against this.”

The WSWS urges workers to contact us with your experience of the cost of living surge.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact