

“At the end of the day, it’s them and us”: UK workers and youth speak on the cost-of-living crisis

Our reporters
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Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers and students in Manchester and Bristol about the effect crippling price rises and government austerity are having on their lives.

On Thursday, the Bank of England announced that it expected the lower CPI measure of inflation to rise to over 10 percent this year. RPI inflation, which includes housing costs, is already at 9 percent. The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has predicted an increase in RPI to 11 percent by the end of the year.

Price rises fall hardest on the poorest. The New Economics Foundation think-tank forecasts that the poorest half of households will see their actual income drop by between 1.7 and 10.6 percent between 2021/2 and 2022/3—with the biggest falls for the poorest families. Only the richest 5 percent will see their income increase.

John, from Bristol and receiving social welfare, explained that he was left with £30 a week to live on. “Out of that, I have to clothe myself, feed myself around the clock. When I get paid my monthly money is around £280, I pay my bills and it’s gone within 7-10 days. Every 21 days I’ve got to go to the bank of Mum. If it wasn’t for her, I’d have no clothes, no food and I’d be starving. I go to a food bank on Wednesday in Bedminster.”

The Trussell Trust, representing a nationwide network of foodbanks, reported last month that more than 26,000 emergency food parcels were given to Bristol households last year—over 10,000 of them to children—almost 10,000 more than in the year before the pandemic and well over double the figure five years earlier. One in 20 households in the city, considered one of Britain’s more affluent, are experiencing severe

or moderate food insecurity, rising to one in 11 in some areas.

Stressing that he was “grateful” to foodbank staff and donors, John described how the food available is frequently not enough to live on, or of poor quality. “The reason I bring this up is because governments are saying, well you’ve got the food bank to help, so on the right arm we’ll screw you over with your benefits. It is disgusting.

“I read in the *Metro* [newspaper] this week, it’s not just me. There are 2.1 million people in the UK, suffering hunger, starving like me because the government has messed up the whole benefit system. Families, people with children and so on, our country is going to the dogs and it’s going to get worse and worse.”

Last October, the government scrapped a £20-a-week uplift in Universal Credit benefits payments introduced during the pandemic—in what amounted to the biggest overnight social security cut since the Second World War.

John continued, “The government can find millions to bomb babies and kids in different countries, but they took my money away from me—£360/£380 a month but now it’s way under £300. I am a victim of the governments change on benefits. I used to be able to stretch my benefits up to 20 days, now I’m lucky if it goes to 14. Losing £20 a week might be a cocktail to some people or a bit of petrol, but to me that’s a week’s shopping. Gone.

“The MPs in parliament don’t know about the real world. I’ve looked at their salaries.”

Speaking on the NATO-Russia war over Ukraine, John said, “The war that they’re dragging us into is

going to get worse and worse and I believe that there will be a World War Three coming up. Ukraine was waiting for the war with Russia and soon enough there won't be anything left of it. It will just take China to get involved and the US with their big guns and that will be it, World War Three."

Nigel told our reporters, "I think in general, the government that we have in place at the moment isn't helping with the cost-of-living crisis. I think there is a lot of polarisation.

"Bristol is not a place that is as equal as everyone says it is. I still think there is a class division within Bristol, and we need to work harder to close that gap. People are more socially mobile than other people—there is a class division and if you look around Bristol you will see that areas that are still trying to be gentrified, but still areas of poverty within there."

Over 15,000 children under 16 live in relative poverty in the city, an increase to 18 percent from 15.7 percent in 2016/17. Over 12,000 are in absolute poverty.

On the current price rises, Nigel said, "Energy bills have gone sky high. The only people benefitting from this are the fat cats, and it's so sad that you are seeing people resort to food banks, and politicians in Westminster who are not setting a good example, whilst your average person on the ground is scrabbling to get by.

"The average wage for a person in the UK is £26k a year and we're still struggling. For me, I'm on quite a good wage, I still have to be very careful and all that—I can't be complacent when it comes to money. I think that at the end of the day, it's them and us. You've got [Prime Minister] Boris Johnson; a chancellor not paying tax. It's a terrible place to be in."

Rosa, a criminology student in Manchester, said falling real wages meant "shopping in food shops with lower quality food. You don't have much money to do anything, like go for a meal with your friends or go out. You just have to turn the lights off and sit and watch TV, which is costing more as well. It's more existing, not living. Trying to live every now and then, but maybe not as much as we would like to. Certainly not how my parents lived when they were at university."

Manchester has some of the highest rates of deprivation in the country. Even before the pandemic, one in every four children up to the age of 18 (over 180,000) were in relative poverty—68 percent of them

were in families with working parents. COVID hit these communities so hard that the death rate in Greater Manchester was 25 percent higher than the already appalling average figure for England.

Glynis described the situation today: "I just think it's terrible because how can ordinary people cope with it? You've got all of the people at the top who don't care because they've got plenty. The little people are unimportant. As long as there are enough people to do the work to get them their money then they're fine."

Asked about the UK's military spending, including on fuelling the war in Ukraine, she said, "I don't know where the money's coming from. They keep finding reserves when they do need it, they can find it when they want it."



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