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UK: Workers speak to the World Socialist Web Site at Sheffield Arbourthorne food bank

Our reporters
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A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers donating, volunteering at, and using the Spires food bank in Arbourthorne, Sheffield about the cost-of-living crisis. Arbourthorne is a working-class district of a city formerly associated with the steel, engineering and mining industries, where 44 percent of children are officially living in poverty.

Danielle Thorpe has had to resort to using foodbanks since February. She is a carer for her husband who has several debilitating conditions. Danielle explained that while life was always tough for her and her family, she has struggled to cope financially in the last four months.

“I have had a cut of over £200 a month in child and tax benefits. My eldest daughter has type one diabetes but gets no help, not even a bus pass as she is deemed to be able to manage her condition. Me and my husband have to drive to school and pick her up when she is on a “low” and passes out. She is starting university in September and we will lose our child benefit. She will be living with us and we will need to provide for her.

“My husband had two security jobs at the same time to help make ends meet. He cannot work any longer. He has had one knee replacement and is waiting on a second. He has a spinal injury and he was attacked with a metal pole at work which has left him with some brain damage. He is told that he can still work, doing computing. It is impossible for him to work, but they keep pressuring him.”

Fuel costs have been challenging. The family are very cautious and don't use fuel unless absolutely necessary. Their food shop has increased from £30 per week to £60. The package of support measures announced last month from the multi-millionaire Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak, “is not going to fix it, it's like putting a band-

aid on a large wound. It's degrading that I have to rely on a foodbank and I feel even more sorry for those who work full-time and still can't afford to live. I see teachers and nurses here. They are struggling. This is a disgusting situation the government have put us in. They only care for the rich, not the poor.”

Graham is retired and used to be a carer for his wife. He has been visiting the food bank for the past three weeks.

“I live in sheltered accommodation right now. They charge me for heating, water and electricity every week. I got behind with that. It used to be £30 but last time it was £45. And I've not been using the electric oven either. I've not used it at all for the last month. I owe a few people money, like British Telecom from two or three years ago, that's £1,200. “

Graham's pension payment is only £185 a week but as with millions of others it is calculated to reach a threshold to make him ineligible for additional financial help. “I can't get pension credit because I'm £2.50 over the limit.”

“Food prices have gone right up. I used to go to Asda to buy a loaf of bread for a pound, its £1.20 now. Milk, 99p, everything is just going up and I can't afford it. I owe that much money and I have to pay that back, so I have to use the food banks.

“Why don't they reduce the prices for us? It's alright the chancellor saying we're going to get £350 in November. That's six months' time. We need it now for the fuel. And I don't qualify for this extra £650 because I'm not on means tested benefit. I'm on a basic state pension and that's £2.50 over the limit for pension credit.

“When I was working in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, I was earning £400 a week. I was doing all sorts, but the main job was as working in a British sugar factory in

York. We got overtime. There was time, double time, and treble time if we worked on Christmas. I used to make fencing panels and I was making almost £500 on piecework.

“All these MP’s [Members of Parliament] earning tens of thousands a year and getting all their allowances and expenses paid for them and we’re getting nothing. Look at the chancellor, him and his wife. They’re all the same. The working man will be no better off even if there’s a Labour government. Labour will say, ‘We wouldn’t have done this or done that,’ but if they actually get in they will not reverse any of the decisions the Conservatives have made. They’re just as bad in my eyes.”

Bladette had been volunteering at the soup kitchen that preceded the food bank and has recently found herself needing to use it herself.

“I’ve been working voluntary before the food bank started about seven years ago for people that couldn’t afford a meal. And then we had lock down. So, it got cancelled. We started doing deliveries. Now with the cost of living, with everything rising, I’ve had to use the food bank myself. I’ve never done that before, but you know, you can’t feel proud and don’t be ashamed. If you want to eat, you’ve got to ask for help.”

Due to her difficult circumstances, Bladette has been pushed into debt. She has been lumbered with an exorbitant meter system for her gas and electric bills.

“I’m just putting a tenner [£10] on all the time. It used to be £20 pound a fortnight, now it’s that every other day. Even if I’m not using the gas, I’m still getting charged every day. The meter was already there before I moved. I did ask them to take it out, but they said that it would cost me hundreds of pounds to have it changed.

“I’ve been going into the Co-op [grocery store] after 6 o’clock, you know, looking for the reduced items. The first couple of times I felt really embarrassed. But I see everyone else doing it now. So, I get in and I know what I’m eating the next day.”

“Politicians are all for themselves. They can all afford cheese and wine at their office parties. I’ve never even voted because I wouldn’t know who to start with because they’re all the bloody same. We feel awful when a family comes into the food bank and there’s not much left. Even people who used to work and have lost their jobs are coming in now.”

Sue Cohen has health difficulties, including sleep apnoea, asthma, and a heart problem. Her daughter, a single parent of four children, is also having to use the food banks.

“My electric is pay-as-you-go. The amount I’m putting in now has basically doubled. And my food bill has doubled.

“Our ignorant government doesn’t speak for us, that’s for sure. They speak for the rich. Once they can line their own

pockets, it doesn’t matter about the little people. Yet, it’s us that’s keeping the country going.

“I can’t even get pension credit because they say I get that little bit too much. And I mean a ‘little bit’ too much. What happened to all the money that my brother paid in, my dad paid in, my mum paid in? They all died before they were 66.”

Joe used to be in the military from 2006 to 2020 and has done several tours of Northern Ireland and Afghanistan. He was visiting the food bank for the very first time.

“I’m here because of the cost of living. I just can’t afford it. It’s degrading. It took me a few minutes to work up the courage to come out, just to admit that you’re in the position.

“I’m barely affording the rent. I’m waiting on my first electric bill, which I’m dreading. Because I’m on Universal Credit [welfare payment], I can’t afford all these things.

“So, I left the army and I was homeless for a little bit. But again, you’re just another veteran on the streets. I eventually started getting the help that I needed. I got a council flat, but now I can’t afford to live in my flat. So, I’m struggling or back on the streets.

“Everything’s sky rocketing apart from the minimum wage. If you can’t afford to live and you can’t afford to eat, then that’s not living. Some people are getting rich off the suffering of most of the people.”

Paul has retired from numerous jobs and has been forced to use the food bank for the past six months.

“Everything’s going up with a bang. And with this war in Ukraine, that hasn’t helped so oil prices are going up so it’s pushing everything else up.

“I think they should take the money off the rich and give it to the poor. But while they’re letting them get away with it, the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.”



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