

UK: Mother collapses from hunger at South Tyneside Food Bank

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A mother collapsed from hunger and exhaustion after walking two miles with her two young children to a food bank in South Shields, in the north east of England.

On January 13, staff at the Hospitality and Hope centre in South Tyneside had to arrange for the family to be taken home and for emergency food support to be provided. The mother and partner are both working but had been going hungry so their children could eat.

Rising living costs—caused by corporate price gouging—meant their wages no longer covered their needs. Hospitality and Hope chief executive Brian Thomas said, “this is not an isolated case... Working people are entering deprivation at a scale previously unseen.”

The family’s tragedy received little coverage outside of local newspapers and social media.

Food bank usage has increased exponentially. The Trussell Trust charity says it supplied 1.3 million emergency food parcels to people in need, half a million of whom were children, between April and September 2022. Citizens Advice says it referred the equivalent of 3.5 people every minute to a food bank in the first week of December—more than in any other week on record.

One in five of those referred to food banks were in households with at least one adult employed. The Trust said, “For the first time, need for emergency food is outstripping donations as the cost-of-living emergency is leading to a drastic increase in the number of people turning to food banks for support.”

A survey by the Independent Food Aid Network (Ifan) of 550 groups across the UK found that 91 percent of food banks had seen greater demand this winter compared with last year. Food bank managers told the *Independent* of a “tsunami of need” which means they may have to turn hungry families away as demand outstrips supply.

The situation is worsening. Although headline inflation dipped slightly to 10.5 percent, the Retail Prices Index (RPI) stands at 13.4 percent. Even that does not reflect the real impact on working-class households. Basic foods costs have risen at the fastest rate since 1977. Food and non-alcoholic drink prices increased by 16.8 percent in the year to December, and bread, sugar and eggs were up 28.9-38.5 percent. Energy price

increases—caused in part by the NATO-led war in Ukraine against Russia—has seen electricity costs rise 65.4 percent and gas 128.9 percent, forcing many to “choose” whether to “heat or eat.”

Food banks have been a life-line for the poor and vulnerable since the 2008 crash, which was the pretext for 15 years of austerity, and counting. Growing numbers of professional workers are now having to turn to them.

A survey by NHS Charities Together and the *Observer* found more than half of National Health Service trusts and health boards are either providing or planning food banks for their staff. The charity, which usually funds staff training and research, says it is having to provide benevolent funds for staff unable to meet basic living costs for the first time in its history.

Hospitals in the Black Country this month reported opening food banks and free breakfast for NHS workers. A survey of six food banks found nearly 5,000 NHS staff were accessing food parcels on a monthly basis, of which 550 were nurses. There are reports of teaching staff, paramedics and firefighters, among others considered previously to be in “decent” employment, accessing food banks as they struggle with rising costs and collapsing real wages.

The Resolution Foundation thinktank estimates average household disposable income will fall 7 percent over this and the next financial year. Families will lose £2,100 in that time. Approximately six million people are already reporting that they did not eat due to lack of money in the past month and 76 percent of adults that they are having to try and cut back on spending.

“Only one group ... are set to see typical incomes rise during this period”, the Foundation, states, “those at the very top.” “Rising interest rates this year and next will drive a surge in savings and investment income, much of which will be captured by the richest 5 per cent of households. This means that they alone will see their typical incomes rise (by 4 per cent between 2021-22 and 2023-24)”.

On January 14, one day after the incident in South Shields, the FTSE 100 stock market hit its highest level since 2018, fuelled by the massive subsidies supplied by the government to the corporations and super-rich. Some £82 billion in “support” has been handed over, including the

“energy price guarantee” (a subvention to the energy companies), dwarfing the £70 billion of so-called relief during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The corporate heads of the UK’s 100 biggest publicly listed companies saw their average pay packets rise by 23 percent in 2022, from £3.2 million to £3.9 million, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers. Bonuses in finance and the insurance sector reached a record £20,000 yearly average—one-and-a-half times the salary for a teaching assistant.

The government has kept to its predecessor’s pledge to scrap the cap on bankers’ bonuses. Overturning the cap is viewed as integral to its Edinburgh Reforms—doing away with all financial regulatory safeguards introduced after the 2008 crash—so as to accelerate the orgy of financial speculation at workers’ expense.

The explosion of inequality is a global phenomenon. The latest report from UK-based charity Oxfam, “Survival of the Richest”, sets out how an unending pandemic, war and inflation are the means by which a tiny corporate and financial oligarchy have become “dramatically richer.” Delivered ahead of the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, Switzerland, it documents that billionaire fortunes are increasing by \$2.7 billion a day, even as inflation outpaces the wages of at least 1.7 billion workers.

This is fuelling social unrest. The strike action encompassing hundreds of thousands of workers in Britain, from teachers, civil servants, rail and bus workers to nurses and paramedics, is part of a global resurgence of the class struggle.

As with their counterparts internationally, the ruling elite in Britain are responding with ever more authoritarian measures.

The Tory government, headed by the unelected Rishi Sunak—the richest prime minister in British history—insists that demands for pay increases in line with inflation are “unaffordable”, while criminalising protests and bringing forward anti-strike legislation to restrict workers’ rights to withdraw their labour.

Tory MPs have taken to the airwaves to denounce reports of nurses using food banks as “ridiculous”. Brendan Clarke-Smith MP said emergency workers using food banks should learn “how to budget and prioritise,” while another Tory MP, Lee Anderson, claimed, “anyone earning more than £30,000 a year, as most nurses are, using food banks, then they’ve got something wrong with their own finances.”

The *Daily Mail* claimed that “tales of woe” as to nurses resorting to food banks was “self-serving victimhood”, “emotional” and “political” “blackmail”, even while acknowledging that “surging inflation and rising energy bills have had a brutal impact on all wage earners...”

Perhaps the most revealing statistic of all, however, is that cited by Phillip Inman in the *Guardian*. The Indeed job search site said its “tracker of more than 7,000 distinct job titles and thousands of employment sub-categories shows average pay rises have fallen since June from 6.4% to 6% and are

continuing to slide,” he relayed.

“Could it be that British workers are pathetic negotiators...”, he asked.

As Inman knows, “British workers” are not involved in wage negotiations. They are entirely excluded from talks on pay between government, management, and the trade union bureaucracy. Taking place almost entirely behind the scenes, union members are denied any democratic oversight over discussions supposedly being held in their name.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), for example, announced January 19 that it had received a “new offer” from bosses and that “The union’s NEC [National Executive Committee] will now consider the detail within the offer and what next steps to take.” RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch said the NEC “will give an update on our next steps in due course.”

All the unions involved in strike action repeatedly make clear they are prepared to accept below-inflation offers. Royal College of Nursing (RCN) General Secretary Pat Cullen called on the government to meet it “halfway”, saying the union would be prepared to accept a 10 percent rise, despite a powerful strike mandate for 19 percent from its 300,000 members delivered only last November.

It is not that the union bureaucracy are “pathetic negotiators”. They represent a privileged petty-bourgeois stratum whose class position puts them in direct opposition to the members they nominally lead.

The average remuneration of the main posts in the public sector unions, for example, was £152,272 in 2021, putting them easily in the top 5 percent of the population, and in the top 3 percent in several instances.

Socially and politically, the bureaucracy is committed to capitalism and its nation state system. Their operating principle is not what the working class needs but what the bosses are prepared to give. Especially under conditions of the global crisis of the profit system, they work to suppress the class struggle and reject that the fight for decent wages and workers’ rights necessitates a political struggle against the government, its allies in the Labour Party and the capitalist state.

The developing social explosion, in Britain and internationally, requires the building of rank-and-file committees as worker-controlled democratic organisations and the building of a socialist political leadership in the working class.



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