

UN Special Rapporteur denounces extreme poverty in UK for second time

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United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights Olivier de Schutter visited the UK in November and denounced the levels of poverty in the country maintained by the Conservative government.

“If you look at the price of housing, electricity, the very high levels of inflation for food items over the past couple of years, I believe that the £85 a week for adults [Universal Credit benefit payment] is too low to protect people from poverty, and that is in violation of article nine of the international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights. That is what human rights law says,” De Schutter told reporters.

He continued, “It’s simply not acceptable that we have more than a fifth of the population in a rich country such as the UK at risk of poverty today.”

Concluding with a reference to his predecessor’s visit five years ago, he said, “The warning signals that Philip Alston gave five years ago were not acted upon. There’s a huge gap, which is increasingly troubling, between the kinds of indicators the government chooses to assess its progress on one hand, and the lived experience of people living in poverty.”

Alston’s visit to the UK in 2018 was unprecedented, following a similarly extraordinary trip to the United States the year before. Normally tasked with investigating poverty in “developing countries”, the UN representative was sent to examine the social devastation wrought on large sections of the working class in the imperialist centres by decades of austerity and inequality. He published a 24-page report on Britain after a tour of nine areas, including the cities of London, Oxford, Newcastle, Cardiff, Glasgow and Belfast.

At the time, Alston said that he wanted to contrast the “great prosperity in Britain,” the fifth largest economy in the world, with the fact “that a fifth of the people, 14

million people, are living in poverty. Four million of those are more than 50 percent below the poverty lines and one and half million are destitute.”

Most importantly, Alston concluded that the “systematic immiseration” of the working population was deliberate social policy aimed at “radical social re-engineering.”

De Schutter’s findings five years later are that “Things have got worse.”

A November report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), *Destitution in the UK 2023* (the fourth in a series), paints the devastating picture of the life endured by millions in 21st century Britain. The report authors use a definition of destitution that encompasses all those unable to meet their most basic physical needs to stay warm, dry, clean, and fed.

Under the heading *Accelerating Destitution*, they write, “Destitution is no longer a rare occurrence in the UK. Around 1.8 million households were destitute in the UK at some point over the course of 2022. These households contained around 3.8 million people, of whom around a million were children.”

The report notes that between 2017 and 2022 the overall number of households experiencing destitution more than doubled. This extreme level of poverty has increased by over 60 percent between 2019 and 2022. Over half of destitute households have a weekly income of less than £85.

Migrant workers are hugely disproportionately affected. A fifth of those in destitution in 2020 were migrants and almost half a million migrant households fell into destitution in 2022.

The JRF report also highlights the widening geographical scope of extreme poverty in the UK. “A general tendency was apparent in our 2022 survey for destitution to have spread out from established areas of

concentration to affect more places, although people living in London and other major cities and former industrial areas across the north of England, the Midlands, South Wales and West Central Scotland remain the most affected.”

The causes are familiar: extremely low incomes, the rising cost of living, high levels of debt and a punitive social welfare system. Significantly, the report concludes that such “horrible levels of destitution” are the result of official political choices. Paul Kissack, chief executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, commented, “The government is not helpless to act: it is choosing not to.”

The report’s authors condemned the abandonment of basic social functions to the third sector: “relying on charity to fulfil what should be the responsibility of the government is morally unacceptable.”

Last month, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that the Trussell Trust, the largest UK-wide food bank network, had given out 16 percent more emergency food parcels this year than last, and 116 percent more than five years ago. The main recipients are the burgeoning ranks of the working poor: workers on incomes so low that they have no alternative but to turn to food banks to feed themselves and their families.

The Trussell Trust has warned the situation is so dire that its network of food banks could end up distributing more than one million emergency parcels this year.

Human Rights Watch—which recently criticised the UK government’s assault on democratic rights, such as the right to protest—noted that this situation is enforced by the government in the face of massive popular opposition. “Recent polling data shows that the UK public is strongly supportive of treating hunger, homelessness, destitution, and inadequate social security as rights issues,” it wrote.

Such devastating social hardship is set to continue. The *Financial Times* commented recently, “Although inflation has eased sharply since the start of the year, it is still well over twice the BoE’s [Bank of England’s] 2 per cent target. The price level measured by the consumer prices index is still up by one-fifth since the eve of the inflationary upsurge in early 2021, highlighting a fierce squeeze on household incomes.”

For electricity, gas and other fuels, prices are even higher, 82 percent above January 2021. Food prices are still 30 percent higher than they were that month.

Tomasz Wieladek, chief European economist at investment company T Rowe Price, told the FT consumers would “continue to feel the effect of higher prices on their disposable incomes for some time to come”.

Soaring prices and levels of inequality are not a British phenomenon, but a systemic one. De Schutter told the *Guardian*, “We’ve seen in most OECD countries that growth of GDP has been going hand in hand with increasing inequalities and a failure to reduce levels of both relative and absolute poverty.” Current policies were sustaining an economy “that creates wealth for the elites and particularly for the shareholders of the largest corporations” while millions suffer destitution.

Though De Schutter and the UN will not draw the conclusion, this is a devastating indictment of capitalism as a form of organisation of social life and calls for a revolutionary struggle to build a socialist alternative.



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