

Workfare

Boycott Workfare

During the Tory party autumn conference 2013 George Osborne declared:

“No one will be ignored or left without help. But no one will get something for nothing. Help to work – and in return work for the dole”⁷.

But to call “work for the dole” – or more commonly workfare – help, is for many a painful lie. Furthermore, this particular brand of help, where people are forced to carry out activity under the threat of losing the benefits they need for survival, is not a new idea.

Although conditionality for receiving benefit had been creeping in since the 1980s, the 1996 Jobseekers’ Act paved the way legislatively for workfare in the UK⁸. This act was happily exploited by New Labour to introduce the first work for your benefit placements under the New Deal - as well as mandating people to do activities at the request of the Job Centre or private companies, the latter a broader form of workfare.

After the Coalition government came to power the amount and type of workfare schemes has exploded. After the planned roll out in May 2014 of Community Work Placements (the type of workfare outlined in George Osborne’s speech) there will have been nine different workfare schemes introduced in this parliament varying in length of placements, type of work and how direct the threat of income loss is⁹. At the indirect end of workfare the particular scheme can officially be voluntary, but you can have your benefits sanctioned for dropping out, or be sent on a workfare scheme with direct sanctions if you refuse¹⁰. Another feature of these schemes, such as the Work Experience Scheme, is that it is common for the Job Centre to still make out to claimants that it is mandatory. In comparison, the proposed Community Work Placements will be up to 30 weeks of work with threat of sanctions of 1-3 months if you refuse to take part at any point¹¹.

The expansion in the number of schemes has coincided with an increase in the different demographics and groups of people sent on them. Originally only for people signed on for a year, there are now schemes for young people from their first day of signing, placements specifically for single parents and since December 2012 people on disability benefits can now be sent on workfare¹². This last advancement has led to the farcical situation where people who are officially ‘unfit for work’, are apparently fit for workfare.

⁷ <http://www.politics.co.uk/comment-analysis/2013/09/30/george-osborne-s-conference-speech-in-full>

⁸ Workfare States by Jamie Peck (2001)

⁹ http://www.boycottworkfare.org/?page_id=663

¹⁰ <http://www.boycottworkfare.org/?p=2230>

¹¹ <http://vcsassist.org.uk/2013/11/13/food-for-thought-on-community-work-placements-dwps-new-mandatory-work-for-benefits-scheme/>

¹² Young person scheme <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/esf/news/day-one-support-young-people.shtml>
Single parent scheme
http://www.workinglinks.co.uk/media_centre/latest_news/lone_parents_checkout_job_op.aspx

Although definitive numbers are difficult to get hold of, as some statistics are not made available and Freedom of Information requests have been refused for some schemes¹³, at least 345,000 referrals were made onto a workfare scheme between January 2011 and February 2013¹⁴. However the rate of referral has increased over the last three years, and as of February 2013 a minimum of 22,000 claimants were being referred each month.

As can be seen in the quote off George Osborne above, workfare is being rebranded as “help” by the government. This rides on the idea that workfare is giving people, by force, the work experience they need to get jobs and is ultimately a good thing because of this. However this idea ignores all the evidence about workfare.

Workfare replaces paid jobs, reducing the amount of work available. Examples of this are common because why would companies pay when they can get staff for free. In the first years of New York’s workfare scheme 20,000 park jobs were replaced with 30,000 workfare placements¹⁵. This replacement of jobs in the public sector has been seen in the UK with councils using at least 2,000 workfare placements over the last 2 years¹⁶, with Bexley Council taking on 54 placements in its libraries as it cut 35 jobs¹⁷, and Homes for Haringey taking on workfare placements as jobs were cut¹⁸.

The private sector has also been using workfare to replace paid jobs. Argos boasted:

“We can confirm that Argos does not have a policy to recruit colleagues through the governments Work Experience Programme, but we do make use of it to offer work experience... Christmas is our busiest time of year and we are pleased to provide the opportunity for work experience during this time”¹⁹.

Meaning they will not employ anyone doing workfare, but will happily use their free labour at Christmas to avoid paying over-time or hiring more staff. The Two Sisters food group went

Disabled people <http://www.boycottworkfare.org/?p=1808>

¹³ Statistics were refused for the Day One Support for Young People Trailblazer https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/number_of_young_person_work_expe#incoming-436086 and the Work Programme does not publish the numbers of work placements due to its “Black Box” approach.

¹⁴ Statistics were obtained from official statistics from the Department of Work Pensions on Mandatory programmes https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/208900/mwa-may13.pdf and Get Britain Working Measure statistics https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/230333/RESTRICTED_GBW_Official_Statistics_Release_Aug_2013_final.pdf

¹⁵ <http://www.herinst.org/BusinessManagedDemocracy/culture/work/labour.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/jan/02/councils-benefit-half-a-million-hours-unpaid-labour-foi-request>

¹⁷

<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:ijj23CD8FksJ:www.publiclibrariesnews.com/2012/01/private-eye-libraries-news-special.html+&cd=10&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk>

¹⁸ <http://www.haringey.org.uk/content/debtwelfare/253-haringey-forced-labour-protestors-celebrate-victory-and-line-up-next-target>

¹⁹ <http://www.boycottworkfare.org/?p=533>

even further and used workfare to break a strike²⁰. When 193 employees were made redundant at their Leicester factory the rest went on strike. Two Sisters then sacked another 157 staff and moved the particular operation to a Nottingham factory where 100 people on workfare were hired to do the work.

Not only does workfare replace paid work but unsurprisingly it has not helped people doing it to get work quicker. In June 2012 the DWP published results of a study into Mandatory Work Activity (MWA)²¹. MWA is a 4 week workfare scheme eligible for anyone signing on, from the first day you sign on (7% of referrals happened in peoples first 2 sign, ONS)²². You can receive benefit losses starting at 3 months if you refuse to take part in MWA. The research found that although there was a small decrease in those still claiming Job Seekers' Allowance (77%) compared to the control group (82%) two months after referral, this was accompanied by a rise in people who had been referred to MWA beginning to claim disability benefit instead. Also, these changes were temporary and there was no difference between the two groups 3-5 months after referral. When looking at the amount of people from each group who obtained work, there was no difference between the two groups. Similar results were also found during last year's trial of Osborne's new Community Work Placements²³. None of the schemes evaluated have been found to increase employability, thus the idea that workfare is "help" is completely wrong²⁴.

Even if workfare did help people get jobs it would still be abhorrent. Not only does it help make work more precarious and low paid, as shown by the real threat to jobs that workfare poses, but also because it is never ok to threaten people with benefit sanctions for anything. As workfare has expanded we have also seen a parallel rise in the total number of benefit sanctions – see figure 1. As can be seen in figure 1, the percentage of people claiming receiving fixed length benefit sanctions each month has grown from around 0.25% before 2010 to 2-3% in the years 2010-2012. Sanctions can be argued to have risen due to the introduction of targets for job centre staff with Job Centre advisers offered financial rewards²⁵ and in one instance Easter eggs for taking people's subsistence money away²⁶.

In October 2012 a new regime of benefit sanctions was introduced where up to 3 year sanctions could be imposed and the smallest sanction was for a month²⁷. In a 6 month period

²⁰ <http://www.boycottworkfare.org/?p=1577>

²¹ <http://www.boycottworkfare.org/?p=1577>

²² https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/week_of_referral_to_mwa

²³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/193333/rrep824.pdf

²⁴ Other work scheme reports:

http://www.cesi.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Young_people_and_unemployment_FINAL.pdf

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/222943/early_impacts_of_work_experience.pdf

²⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/mar/21/jobcentre-set-targets-benefit-sanctions>

²⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/mar/22/labour-demands-action-jobcentre-targets>

²⁷ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/jsa-sanction-changes.pdf>

of this new regime 429,380 benefit sanctions were made – with 35,000 of these being in the most severe category where sanctions reach 3 years loss of benefits for your third offence²⁸.

The total number of sanctions between September 2012 and 2013 was the highest since JSA was introduced in 1996 (897,690)²⁹. This has been accompanied by a sharp increase in the percentage of unemployed people who are not claiming JSA³⁰.

Although most these sanctions are not due to workfare, they have the same effect. They allow the job centre greater control over claimants' lives, whether that is through a month placement at a Salvation Army charity shop, (fake) psychology tests³¹, daily meetings at the job centre or pointless motivational courses³². They also make your life more precarious and stressful, not knowing if your money could be stopped at any moment for minor acts. This means you will take any work, or live in complete poverty, just to avoid the degradation at the job centre. This is the real focus of workfare and sanctions. It has reached such a point that on the Work Programme you now have a higher probability of getting sanctioned than getting a job.³³

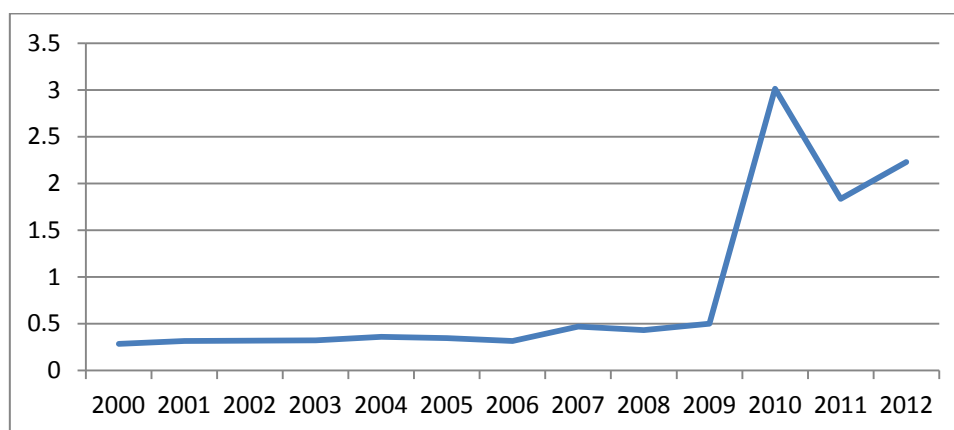


Figure 1: Percentage of people claiming who were given fixed term sanctions in August of each year up to the sanctions regime change in October 2012. Statistics sourced from DWP's tabulation tool.

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²⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/jobseekers-allowance-and-employment-and-support-allowance-sanctions-decisions-made-to-june-2013>

²⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/feb/19/record-number-sanctions-benefits-claimants>

³⁰ <http://www.cesi.org.uk/blog/2013/nov/sharp-rise-sanctions-many-drop-their-jsa-claim>

³¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/apr/30/jobseekers-bogus-psychometric-tests-unemployed>

³² <http://izzykoksai.wordpress.com/2012/04/13/adventures-at-a4e/>

³³ <http://npi.org.uk/publications/income-and-poverty/monitoring-poverty-and-social-exclusion-2013/>