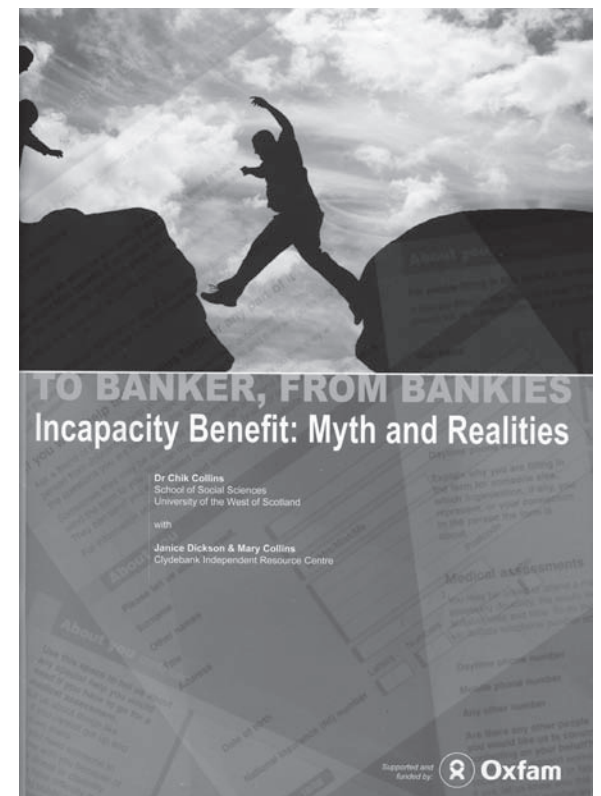
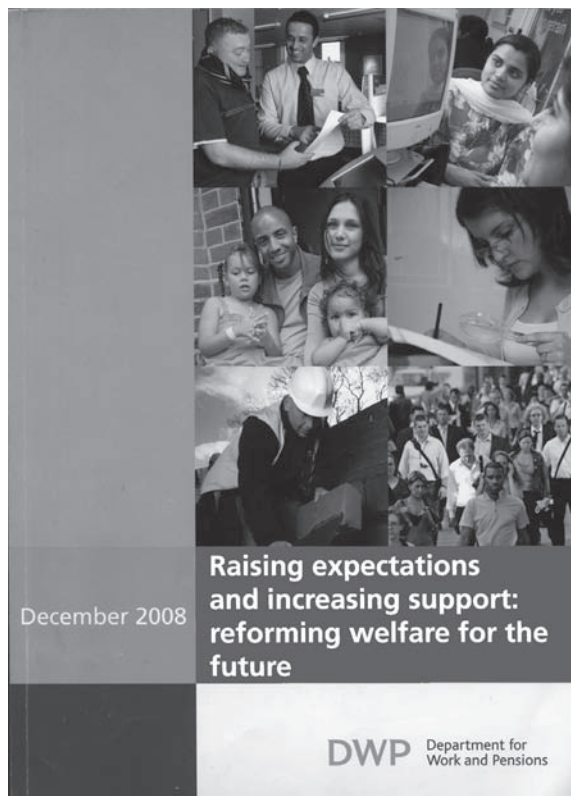


Vagabonds, criminals,

“They hang the man,
and flog the woman,
That steals the goose
from off the common;
But let the greater villain loose,
That steals the common
from the goose.”

Anonymous, 17th century



James Purnell's 2008 Welfare Reform White Paper¹ is the latest in a series of punitive welfare reform policies which go back at least as far as the infamous Youth Opportunities Programme of the late 1970s. Each 'reform', a word now inextricably linked to privatisation, has tended both to immiserate the claimant, and, in the language of Purnell, "deepen" and "widen" the *obligation* to work. The key area of restructuring the resulting *Welfare Reform Bill 2008-09* intends the abolition of Income Support and the movement of all claimants to either Jobseekers' Allowance or Employment or Support Allowance. For the first time all benefits will be made *conditional*, marking the removal of the universal right to benefit based on need alone. Indeed, the Social Security Advisory Committee have called these reforms: "a major departure from the principles ... that have underpinned UK social protection for almost 60 years"².

Purnell's White Paper represents an historical low in post-war welfare provision. Other significant changes include: requiring work-related activity in return for receipt of Employment and Support Allowance (formerly Invalidity and Disability allowance); work-focused interviews for the over-60s; job search compulsion for partners of benefit claimants; a regime of economic sanctions for non-attendance at Jobcentres (particularly hitting vulnerable claimants who are mentally or physically unable to attend); a requirement for births to be registered jointly by both parents (potentially criminalising *any* woman who refuses to name the father of the child³, whether out of fear of violence or personal independence). These demeaning, exploitative measures, with their punitive conditionality represent an extreme assault on the poorest and most vulnerable in society. As part of 'workfare' schemes – the requirement to undertake work in order to receive benefits – claimants could be working for as little as £1.50 an hour. With an election looming and ministers chasing headlines, moral panic and macho posturing against an 'undeserving' poor is again daily sport. The mood is palpable; evidenced by the likes of Channel 4's 'poverty porn' series *Benefit Busters*, which aggrandises private job agency A4E's pilot government scheme to get stigmatised single mothers on benefits into 'work'.

In a low-wage system predicated on structural unemployment and working poverty⁴, welfare reform is the stick that beats the subject into the

fickle embrace of wage-labour: low paid work and dead-end jobs that are likely to increase workers' debt. As Demetra Kotouza recently argued, the political re-emergence of 'workfare' reveals the persistence of a perennial problem faced by capital and the State, "that of the production, management and moulding of property-less populations"⁵. From the state's point of view, he argues, the task is to "eliminate any conception of survival not based on selling one's labour power". Moreover, there are profits to be made by the private and voluntary sectors constituting the 'poverty industry' – *an annual multi-billion pound market*. The Voluntary Sector is where a moralised civic engagement is routinely 'perverted' into cheap labour, while the Social Enterprise Sector helps people get the 'work habit' and reinforces the commercialisation of social relations at a 'community' level. Indeed, the Confederation of British Industry described the Voluntary Sector as, "the weapon of choice for those involved in the ongoing battle over public service reform,"⁶ providing cover for the privatisation process while remaining relatively weak and vulnerable to the larger prime contractors. The government's commissioning strategy is for fewer and larger welfare contracts. By March 2008, 33 out of 34 new contracts had been outsourced to private sector firms despite leaked reports showing the public sector outperforming the private sector 2-to-1.

Meanwhile, the education sector has to operate in an increasingly marketised and competitive environment and is inexorably drawn in the direction of a 'skills for work' regime. Welfare reform sees a re-routing of money into both colleges and private agencies running training courses supposedly designed to meet labour market needs. However, a recent study of young people, training and work in Glasgow suggests that for those leaving school and not going on to university "the norm is becoming a low wage and casualised work environment or an unregulated and degraded training system."⁷ One interviewee, from one of the larger training establishments, reported over 2,000 applications for just 75 Modern Apprenticeship places in 2007. The study also discovered "examples of young people being paid as little as £60 per week in some instances, and in others, abuse of the Modern Apprenticeship system where young people leave placements with no qualifications."⁸

Welfare and wages are inextricably linked: by

providing a minimum source of income (though barely livable at current rates, at less than half the poverty threshold) the *dole* once acted as a floor to the depression of wages. In 1999, age-dependant minimum wages were introduced; their inadequate levels undercut wage rises generally at the same time as they produced a ceiling to social assistance. It should be noted that, quite arbitrarily, claimants of Jobs Seekers Allowance under 25 years of age are only entitled to £50.95 per week, compared to the full 'adult' amount of £64.30.

This problematic linkage between Welfare and wages is explicit with Working Tax Credit; a complex benefit payment for people in-work but with poverty incomes. Robbing Peter to pay Paul, Housing or Council Tax Benefit is deducted to reflect any tax credits. It is a system that eulogises the well-being of work, "it pays to be in work", especially self-employment and self-exploitation. Notorious for overpayments followed by significant hardship and bullying as repayments are doggedly pursued, millions of people are deterred from claiming Working Tax Credit or its companion Child Tax Credit despite being entitled to it.⁹ Up to £10.5bn benefits went unclaimed in 2007/08, up from £8bn unclaimed by those entitled to it in 2004/05.

With large, financially incentivised Employment Agencies working either end of the privatisation of Welfare delivery *and* job flexibility/precarity, government attacks on Welfare should be seen as part of a broader labour restructuring programme designed to resign workers to more work, worse conditions, and less money.¹⁰ But Welfare restructuring is not about saving public money. Despite the rhetoric, the enormous costs of privatising and outsourcing services ensures as much. Take the objectives of Working Links (a public-private partnership that includes an employment agency, aimed at getting the long-term unemployed into work), they include to "grow the value of the business" and "see sustained growth in profits", as well as "diversifying the business by bidding for new DWP contracts". To do so, they claim to be "in a great position to be able to deliver *and* influence plans for welfare reform".¹¹

Welfare restructuring around workfare is fundamentally about increasing market share of the poverty industry. However, the government's own commissioned research has found "there

paupers & gangrels?

is little evidence that workfare increases the likelihood of finding work. It can even reduce employment chances by limiting the time available for job search and by failing to provide the skills and experience valued by employers.¹² It is also about exploiting the reserve army of workers by coercing the unemployed, “where punishment is the strategic withdrawal of the means of subsistence”, into any and all forms of precarious work, with ‘work for your benefits’ pilot schemes offering up cheap, indentured labour. All of this puts increasing pressure on existing workers through intensified labour-market competition which drives down wages and reduces the leverage to press for improved conditions. Yet despite this obvious correlation between welfare and work there have been few effective movements to defend the unemployed and low-wage workers collectively. The National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM) of the ‘20s and ‘30s was one obvious, well-organised exception to this.¹³ The Unemployed Workers Centres and Benefit Claimants groups which contested ruinous Thatcherite policy are another, but overall the picture has been underwhelming.

Life on the *dole* has occasionally provided some form of political independence for collective radical activities – such as the anti-roads movement, the Criminal Justice Bill and anti-Poll Tax campaigns. But reductions in benefits, the rising cost of living, and the individualism and atomization that occurs through the welfare system, means that most people are left to deal with their claims alone and remain outside of any broad social movement traditionally precipitated by the massing together of different individuals in shared experience. Claimants are tacitly encouraged to find individual ‘lifestyle’ solutions to alienation and poverty instead of making collective demands to defend the Welfare State and the limited space for personal development that it has sometimes afforded. This narrow breathing space has been especially significant for artists, musicians and a range of cultural producers and it is perfectly respectable for some to admit publicly how they have depended on Welfare in the absence of any other support.

A false division between those in work and those ‘out of work’ has dominated and this is what is now being exploited. However, with the unemployed increasingly being herded into a privatised workfare industry, and with the onset of large-scale unemployment under recessionary conditions, there lies the possibility of a convergence of interests and perspectives between the unemployed, people in precarious work and all those who contribute to society outside of the wage-relation. Most obviously, we may ask, how do we value parenting in an advanced capitalist society? This unjust Welfare system that shows all the contradictions of capitalist globalisation may be likely to collapse in new and unforeseeable ways as the State struggles to maintain its legitimacy in the face of wage arrests, home dispossessions, unemployment and insecurity for ever increasing sectors of the population.

In opposition to these continued attacks on the poor, there have been some challenging community responses to the proposals. In a collaborative riposte underpinned by research from Chik Collins and funded by Oxfam, the *Clydebank Independent Resource Centre*, state that: “No one apart from a desperate and despairing coalition of poverty groups and trade unions seem to much care that this curiously scanty bill gives the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions sweeping and vaguely defined powers to remove benefits from anyone who does not or cannot comply with a raft of ‘work preparation’ activities.¹⁴” *Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty*¹⁵ and *Edinburgh Claimants* are among those groups that are only too well aware

of the implications of this legislation. They were set up by people who are unemployed, too sick to work, or on low incomes in order to provide “advice and solidarity” on benefits hassles and debt woes. *Variant* interviewed these groups in Spring 2009 because building and strengthening coalitions between people in low paid work and people on benefits is surely more urgent than ever.

What is the history of Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty (ECAP) and the Edinburgh Claimants’ Group? Where did they come from?

Mike: There were several active Claimants’ Unions in Edinburgh and the Lothians in the early 1980s linked to the Unemployed Workers’ Centres. Edinburgh Claimants’, formed around 1992, was operating out of The Edinburgh Unemployed Workers’ Centre at Broughton Street, which had been occupied by the users after the Council cut off funding. There was also a lot going on throughout the ‘90s – around ‘96-’97 there was opposition to the new Job Seeker’s Allowance, which brought in more stringent conditions for unemployment benefit. There were occupations of Job Centres and of the private companies that were running the compulsory schemes. It was also the period when we were doing the ‘three-strikes-and-you’re-out’ actions against bullying dole officials. That was a high point of collective activity – there were actions with about 30-odd people invading Job Centres, and so on. We got the Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh premises here, at West Montgomery Place off Leith Walk, in early ‘97, and we’ve been running the weekly claimants’ sessions just about every Tuesday since...

Sacha: ...even if, occasionally, single-handedly... [laughter]

M: Often in challenging conditions; before the refurbishment, hunched over a Calor Gas stove in freezing temperatures ...as the ceiling collapsed around us. So there’s been that continuity. By 2003-04 it was getting to the stage that, although the advice was keeping going, there wasn’t really any activism. We were still doing a bit of fly-posting but we hadn’t been going out to the Job Centres to leaflet and we certainly weren’t able to do Actions. There was really only just three or four of us then.

S: In the end it seemed to be an unofficial Advice Centre, providing advocacy, even though that does serve a useful purpose, especially with people who have maybe bent the rules. We accept that the laws and the system provided for welfare is actually grossly inadequate, whereas places like Citizens’ Advice follow a more legal line. While that side of things is quite important, all of us feel that there has to be a broadening of scope into political action.

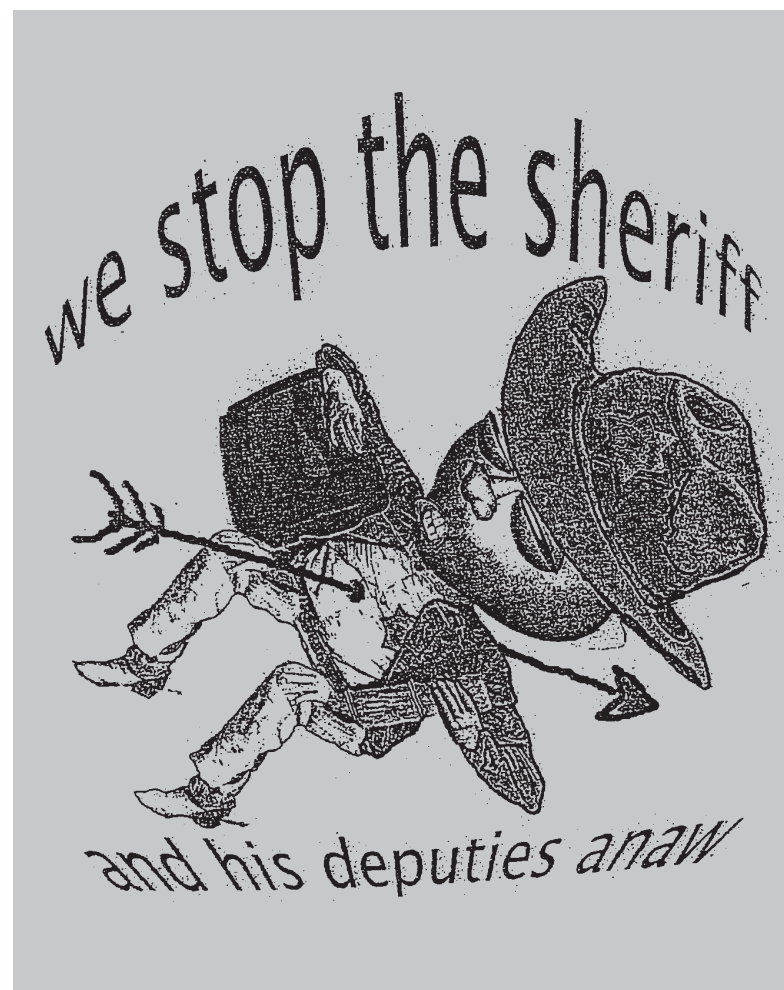
M: That was how we started thinking about how we could re-launch things and, around 2005, we started talking about launching a solidarity network and phone tree.

S: It was sort of based on techniques used during the resistance to Poll Tax.

M: The Poll Tax did influence us, because of the successful resistance to debt enforcement. It showed that active resistance to Sheriff Officers was really possible.

Is it correct that the Claimants’ Groups in the earlier period were actually funded by the City Council – the State?

M: Through the ‘80s into the ‘90s, there was a lot of Unemployed Workers’ Centres that were State funded; by Local Government, by Labour Councils – I suppose as a kind of Social Democratic response to mass unemployment and to Thatcherism. Although the funding meant that there was a certain amount of



bureaucratic control, at the same time it meant there were groups which emerged that were quite independent, like the Claimants’ Unions that were active in Edinburgh, East Lothian, and West Lothian. Then the Unemployed Workers’ Centre (UWC) in Edinburgh had its funding cut by the Council, basically because of our involvement in the Poll Tax non-payment movement. That sparked off a big struggle because, in response to the cutting of the funding, the paid worker and the Labour Councillors who were on the UWC Trustees’ Committee actually locked all the unemployed people out! [laughter] They said that it was a financial crisis and they needed to work out how they could continue. They were going to do that by shutting us out and deciding amongst themselves what they were going to do. [laughter] So we broke in and took it over again; the paid worker called the police to evict us but we refused to go, so the police retired in confusion [laughter]. Then, the paid worker and these Labour Councillors broke into the Centre at night and stole all the equipment, all the computers and stuff, so we broke back in again and re-opened it and ran Broughton Street for two years unfunded. The Claimants’ Group (CG) was a big part of that. All around Britain there were State funded UWCs, but the funding got gradually pulled.

To get a sense of that trajectory of the Labour Party – because it’s quite a shift from then to the current regime: Why do you think they were funding UWCs? Was it in opposition to the Tory Party at that time?

S: I suppose the Labour Party has now transformed itself into a neo-liberal party. It was pushing out the left of the Party even in the 80’s, but I suppose at the time the UWCs were useful for them to have as attempts to counter Tory policy. The Claimants’ Group, Broughton Street, was then becoming kind of autonomous and officialdom didn’t really like the idea of that. Labour of course controlled a lot of the councils at the time, and though they said they were against the poll tax – as Councils they went on to try and collect it, and set the sheriff officers on people.

Then there was the SNP, although they were

kind of against the Poll Tax, they believed that you should actually pay it in the end – they had this stupid idea that you should save your money aside and then, when the law was changed, pay what you were due. Completely forgetting the fact that the reason a lot of people weren't paying was because they couldn't afford to pay it, and, still to this day, can't afford to pay it. Council Tax still takes up quite a lot of our time; water rates, and stuff like that build up... That's what we've been doing recently; it's been quite a big thing. Councillor Gordon McKenzie, head of finance at Edinburgh Council, was involved in pushing the Sheriff Officers to actually doorstep people to demand council tax arrears, and so we attended one of McKenzie's surgeries and gave him a large mock 'Final Notice' letter.

M: A certificate of Moral Bankruptcy [laughter] to mirror their policy of threatening people with bankruptcy and homelessness for Council Tax arrears.

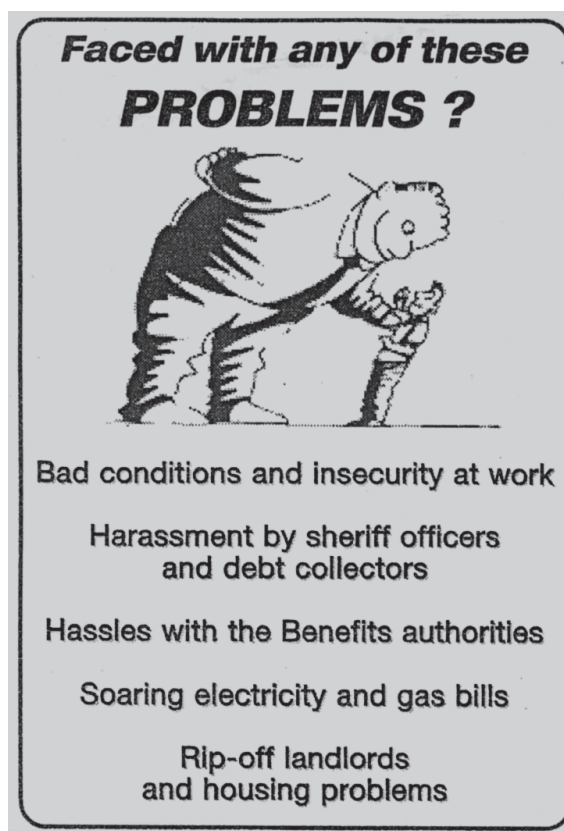
S: There were people, including people who work here, who, in having a mortgage are particularly vulnerable as they can be threatened with sequestration, therefore possibly losing their homes. Or being able to stay in their homes, but having to pay their mortgage to the Council, but then it still belonging to the Council – all really bad!

What are the issues that people have to deal with when they're claiming? Where are they finding themselves short?

S: Loads of problems arise from the way the system has become so automated and managed. To me, the Labour Party have just become this technocratic managerial Party and it's reflected in everything. You go to the Job Centre and you can no longer just walk in, you have to phone some call centre, so people with grievances have very little access to actually directly speak to somebody and that in itself causes loads of problems. Often the advisors themselves, the ones you get limited access to, are on the phone; it's just that culture of reading off the screen with set answers, so people get misinformation all the time. An example of the kind of thing I've had to work with is you're allowed to work or study if it's under 16 hours. Most people don't understand how that works and there's been a lot of people falling foul of receiving misinformation ... there was a guy in, he was told by his advisor at the dole that what he was doing was ok and then suddenly he was told that he owed them £200 and he was to attend an interview about potential fraud investigations. So there's this kind of criminalisation of the unemployed; an idea that everyone's at it coupled with negligence. There are a lot of single mothers who take on jobs and end up getting in trouble. There was a case I dealt with a couple of years ago – the dole couldn't even work out the exact sums she owed. It seemed to go from £1,000 to £7,000, and they were threatening her with court prosecution. It's a continuation of that '80s Tory idea: 'single mothers and all these people – they're all somehow criminals'. But when you actually look at it, often they're not advised very well and then they're threatened when the administrative system gets it wrong.

Our experience has been that quite often the letters the authorities send out are very misleading and sometimes quite alarming. For instance, they might tell you that your claim has been suspended in a letter and then when you challenge it, it turns out that it was only an administrative problem. Do you deal with that type of problem very often?

S: With the Council Tax in particular, it seems that the Council themselves have no idea, really, of what people owe them; it can jump from being £1,000 and the next minute £5,000. So we get a lot of people with that... a lot of people feeling anxious because the demands letters are quite threatening. But in Scotland, for the Sheriff Officers to come into your home, they've now got to have a special court case, and then got to give you an exact date – there are certain procedures



they must follow. Poindings [forced sale of your belongings] are restricted but they could still happen. People feel really intimidated by their language, by tactics like door-stepping, with their demands letters, but we just try to get across the idea that often, with a bit of solidarity, officers don't have as much power as they make out.

Do you think they mobilise threat and menace as a deliberate way of scaring people?

S: Oh yes, definitely!

M: The Council in Edinburgh actually instigated a new policy of threatening people with bankruptcy in order to try to get them to pay their Council Tax arrears within a year. They actually adopted a deliberate policy of targeting several thousand people and saying to them, 'OK, you've got an existing agreement: pay £25, £35 a month, but that's no longer good enough. Now you're going to have to pay enough each month so that you pay off your grand, or six grand, debt in a year'. Which was obviously impossible for those people.

The Council were also breaking an agreement?

M: That's right: the Council and the Sheriff Officers... the situation in Scotland seems to be worse than in England for old debts because Poll Tax debts got written off in England, but not in Scotland!

So, as well as the Poll Tax coming in a year earlier in Scotland, the debt still has to be paid here whereas it doesn't have to be paid in England...

M: There's two people in particular that we were helping that were being victimised by this demand to pay off their Council Tax arrears. That was when we employed the tactic of going *en masse* to Councillors' surgeries to support one of the families. As well as going to Councillor Gordon McKenzie's surgery, we went to Cllr. Cardownie's surgery, the leader of the SNP group in Edinburgh. We went with the family who were being threatened with bankruptcy, and Cllr. Cardownie, who previously had refused to meet the family, said, 'Oh, it's being dealt with – there's nothing I can do'. But when 16 or so of us turned up at his surgery he was really taken aback. He was stunned [laughter]. We all just went into the surgery and he had to listen to us for about an hour. In the end, he sort of agreed under the pressure that he would back the family's case and that he thought the sum they were paying already was totally reasonable and that it was wrong to threaten them with bankruptcy and all the rest. So that was quite a good result. But then, of course, he tried to back-track on it, became very evasive, and didn't follow up on it. So it still needed a lot of pressure from

us. It still definitely helped though, because, in the end, we accompanied the family to a meeting with top Council officials. We also started contacting the Council leader, Jenny Dawe, and put pressure on her, and in the end the Council backed down and agreed, more or less, to the original terms of the repayment being continued.

Thousands of people were being threatened with this?

M: Yes, thousands of people. We've had a couple of victories, but we don't really know what's happened with all those other cases – although the Council figures looked as though they'd been quite unsuccessful enforcing people to pay more and they hadn't actually made people bankrupt, as far as we know. So maybe people are resisting in their own way, or maybe the Council are finding it difficult to push through.

S: I suppose if people can't pay, they can't pay. Really, that's the thing. Even Cardownie himself admitted, in the case of the family who had two children: 'What are you going to do? Are you going to feed your two children well, or are you going to pay your Council Tax? Or pay more Council Tax arrears than you'd already arranged?' Anybody can work out what comes first. And with the rise of food and fuel prices, and the like, people on welfare or low incomes are really struggling to get by.

How important were the Council House sales on threatening people with bankruptcy? Is there more of an incentive for the Council, in that the property becomes available to them? You mention earlier about them renegotiating home ownership with somebody.

S: I think the mortgage thing in itself is to make people feel more vulnerable. I think if you live in a Council House you own your house more than folk who have a mortgage, because, theoretically, the bank owns your house if you have a mortgage, and, if things go wrong, people are potentially threatened with homelessness. It's probably going to become a bigger issue linked to debt as repossession rise. [not convinced about the clarity of the question, but the answer is good]

At a very localised level, how are things like the debt burden and the credit crunch affecting people – is that a very tangible thing in Edinburgh yet in the way that you deal with folk?

M: Certainly the Job Centres have become a lot busier. Somebody we know that signs on at Leith Job Centre said that the staff there had said that they were just overwhelmed. Before, staff were being cut back and now there's so many new people signing on. A claimant at High Riggs said the Centre were now having to cancel Job Fairs that they used to run because they didn't have enough staff [laughs] to organise them.

S: Then there's the private job clubs where they're almost warehousing the unemployed. ECAP did an action at one called Action for Employment.

M: Another tangible sign of the economic crisis in Edinburgh is that work has stopped on a lot of the private housing developments, which totally shows up how crazy capitalism is. You've got this housing crisis in Edinburgh with virtually no social housing available, with people homeless, can't find anywhere to stay, and you've got all these empty houses and developments that have just stopped. For example, beside the new Telford College in North Edinburgh, there's this huge big building that says, 'Hotel/Student Accommodation Development Opportunity'. [laughs] It's this big building, it's built, but it's been empty, I think, for at least 6 months because they can't profitably fill it.

Up at the dole today, I was talking to this young guy, he was 19, and he told me that he was homeless, that he was estranged from his parents, and he's in temporary Council accommodation, They're saying that after a couple of months it'll just be up to him: he's got to find somewhere because he's 19. They said he's not a priority, so he's now worrying he's going to be out on the streets.

S: I'm working on a case right now with a girl who's in a wheelchair. She's got a degenerative illness and she's been homeless for 9 months. They put her in temporary accommodation, but it's not adapted – there's not enough ground floor flats that can be adapted. Her human rights are being infringed: by law she's still homeless. They farmed it out to a group called 'The Access Point' who seem to deal with homelessness in Edinburgh. They seem to have less actual bargaining power than the homelessness department in the Council. [ECAP postscript: The woman concerned – after our hassling the Council on her behalf, phoning them up, writing letters, threatening direct action and accompanying her to meetings with them – has now been housed in a home she is happy with, which is adapted for her disabilities.]

M: Some of the treatment that she was getting from the Council officials was really bad, just totally uncaring and totally unsympathetic. Obviously the basic problem is the shortage of Social Housing, but it was made worse by the attitude of the Officials, which is probably not just down to individuals but is structural.

S: It's the institution. But, I do think as an independent organisation we have the ability to put more pressure on them through a variety of tactics; some of them within the system, and some of them involving direct action and that kind of thing.

M: The whole idea of the solidarity phone tree is if we get to an impasse with negotiating and conventional channels then we can call together a group of people just to turn up somewhere, wherever is the relevant point, the relevant office, and just be there in a big group to let them know that unless they come up with a decent solution then there's going to be public outrage.

The London Coalition Against Poverty (LCAP) has had an influence on ECAP. Can you tell us a little more about that link and about the strategies employed by both groups?

M: The idea for ECAP came partly out of our situation here, in Edinburgh, partly the inspiration from Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP), and partly from LCAP. The situation here was that our activity was maintaining the advice, but we didn't seem to be doing a lot else, so we realised that we needed to involve a lot more people and, also, I think we thought that it didn't really make sense anymore to concentrate solely on claimants or unemployed but that it had to be broader; that people were being forced onto compulsory schemes, the New Deal, that people were being forced into temporary work – they were out of work then they were in work again. We wanted something that would pull together everyone that was in that kind of precarious, low paid, in-and-out-of-work situation, so we didn't want to define ourselves as only supporting just claimants anymore. We wanted something broader, and eventually we came up with the idea of ECAP. Also, it tied in with these other groups. The OCAP in Canada has been on the go for over 10 years and they're incredibly successful at battling on fronts of homelessness and welfare, and all sorts of issues. They employ a combination of knowing the law, knowing your legal rights, and battling on that front, but also using direct action whenever needed. I actually remember that when we had the '3-strikes-and-you're-out' in Edinburgh, as a result of it we had a message of support from OCAP. LCAP formed 2 or 3 years ago, and they were being pretty successful which was a push to us: 'Well, they've done it so we have to get going', because we'd been discussing launching something for a couple of years.

This talk of precarity is really a critical point. Your benefits work is for unemployed people, and ECAP is now addressing questions of working poverty. Is there a separation between those that are unemployed and the precarious working poor who could very quickly become unemployed? Is there a possibility for a convergence or recomposition of these groups?

S: I think there is the possibility for convergence, definitely. But there's also problems in that when you are unemployed or very poor the day-to-day grind makes it very difficult often to commit. I mean, we do have single mothers who are involved here but for a lot of people their lives are difficult and they're marginalized. They often stick to what they know in their communities.

Personally, I'm finding young people now seem much more interested in ecology. If you think about it, there's a lot more advertisements that link to the ecological movement; there's very few adverts that link to anything to do with class struggle [laughter]. There's no ['class'] detergent or anything like that... [laughter] so you are literally fighting something that's been made invisible by the media. Why I'm involved with Claimants is that I still basically think that the axis of class contradiction is the basis of all struggles and solutions to what we're faced with.

With the emphasis on welfare reform and 'rights and responsibilities', that shift back to individual responsibility again...

S: ...that Victorian idea of the undeserving poor. You know, the poor are poor because they just went out and had sex and babies and drank or they were all junkies – all that crap. With some of ECAP's posters, like 'Don't grass on your own class', I think we're fighting a cultural hegemony. The lower working class are mostly the unemployed and, just as you get in other marginalized groups, there's often a lot of self-hatred, a lot of low self-esteem, but there's also this attitude of 'It's that lot's fault!', because that is what's pushed massively by the media.

M: Whether it's Polish workers [S: or junkies....] or single parents that 'get pregnant to get a house and I can't get a house' – that sort of thing comes out at the job centre when we're leafleting, but it's a good reason for doing the leafleting because you can sometimes get into a discussion about these issues and maybe sometimes get a few questions going.

Do you think it's possible to get a broader discussion going with workers to start considering unemployment issues, because that's additionally been a problem?

S: Precarity is something we've been aware of and been trying to address. But it's difficult – I personally don't think it can just be the work of a small group. It has to build when conditions appear. What's been interesting to me has been the Visteon occupation: when you listen to the Unions they're coming out with stuff like 'another world is possible', which is sort of the statement of the anti-capitalist movement or the social forum.

M: That's interesting – whether an actual movement of occupations of workplaces which are being shut down might emerge? As well as the one in London, the one in Belfast, [S: and the ones in France] and there was the Prisme occupation in Dundee. In the '70s there was a bit of a movement of occupations...

S: Another possibility might be house occupations, as people are forced to move out of their homes as the bank repossesses them. I think there's the possibility for organising around these areas. We're only a small group, but we do try with advice posters and leaflets to broaden the idea of solidarity in your [own] community – you don't have to be alone. We can give advice on things we've done in the past and things that have been successful.

M: I suppose at the time of the Poll Tax, groups like us actually did have a big effect because the conditions were ripe. There were a lot of people ready to take the step of not paying. It was quite significant what people like Community Resistance in Edinburgh did at the time in getting together, working out a strategy of non-payment and organising, and then starting up local groups. At the right time people like us can have a larger impact but most of the time we're just battling on

If

you're being harrassed by
"fraud" squad bullies - don't
stand for it....

- Don't panic...
- Don't speak to them alone...
- Don't let them into your house...
- Get their name...
- Contact the number overleaf for help and support.



TARGETING BENEFIT SNOOPS

in the face of big difficulties.

I suppose that's the point: the Poll Tax never went away and it's obviously still here in the form of debt, and the Council Tax, of course. ... So, I wonder, what are the means by which things become acceptable and how they become unacceptable? I'm thinking about house ownership, and obviously in Edinburgh you had the housing stock transfer, effectively a privatization of public housing stock, successfully defeated...

S: More people are getting more effected by poverty again, and they're starting to see what has been sold to them in the last 20 years... people who thought they were middle class, but who are now starting to see that their pensions and their mortgages and their share options are actually quite meaningless. I think the problem with some anti-capitalist struggles, is that they've been too limited in that they have almost fetishised (workerist, authentic) elements of the working class: 'Do you come from a housing scheme', 'Do you eat pie and chips' kind of thing. I would define anybody who basically sells their human labour to survive in an alienated manner as working class. Hopefully as these trinkets that people have been given in the last 20 years appear more shallow and hollow there might be some sort of realignment of people's ideas, and organisations like this might be able to offer some kind of, not leadership, but help and solidarity in that situation.

How do you see the relationship between your defense of state institutions to some extent – in the form of the welfare state – and your political antithesis to that institution? Is there a dialectic between what used to be called minimum and maximum programmes of activity?

M: What we're about is not really defending the welfare state or benefits, but encouraging people to support each other and to organise together and gain some collective power. So we're fighting over things like benefits and debts and stuff, not because we think the benefits system's great or anything, but because it's a way of people fighting for their needs, and also, hopefully in the course of that, forming new ways and ideas of relating and developing ideas of changing things on a bigger scale – realising that we can run things

together; that we don't actually need bosses and government. That's how we see it, and we try and incorporate that in the way we organise. We try and be as egalitarian as we can.

In a sense that would almost be a minimum programme, in a way, to defend a limited space of autonomy. Is it possible to make the link to a more libertarian movement, taking into account that the kind of solidarity you've described might be a basis for that?

S: As a group, we've all got similar ideas, but also slightly different angles. Personally, I'm quite anti-workerist. I think work is a major form of social control so I would much rather see people be unemployed but not marginalized. This, along situationist type lines, might possibly create a more radical subjectivity. I remember when I was at school, it was during a recession and welfare wasn't quite as... you didn't have to jump through quite as many loops as you do now. There was actually a culture of people on certain housing estates just hanging out and chatting and getting drunk. Stuff that a lot of people would probably think of as quite negative, I actually found quite empowering. I think 'work' is a way of atomising people, to keep them in their house, in a low paid job. Most people actually live under quite precarious working conditions, but they've been sold this illusion that somehow they're actually aspirational middle-class, self-actualisers, or whatever.

We have been talking a lot about unemployment, and the situations that can arise from that, but can you say a little bit about the extent of working poverty? The Welfare White Paper has said that work is the best way out of poverty, but given the extent of working poverty, is that really the case?

S: From my own experience of growing up as a kid, my mum was a single mum, unemployed for a long amount of time, and she did go into work schemes. We were actually poorer during those 'work' periods, because, for example, you can't shop around because work tires you out. It's better that people are on decent unemployment benefits than they're forced into work that doesn't even satisfy their basic needs, and that is how I think unemployment links to precarity and low pay.

There is also the question of so-called unproductive labour, particularly women's labour in the home. And you have in the Welfare White Paper the suggestion that single mothers, once the child reaches 7 years old (or younger!), be chased into work, which opens up the whole question of what is actually productive labour?

S: I've got quite strong feelings about this. I mean, so-called productive labour is actually quite unproductive.

M: It's actually socially harmful.

Also bodily harmful; physically harmful.

S: To say that mothers aren't working seems to me to be an extremely spurious argument when the most productive force in any society is probably mothers. I think we live in many prisons, the nuclear family being one of them, the job being another one of them. That's what attracted me, personally, to this organisation rather than, say, to other things of a more workerist type of position. You could say, 'Let's have everyone have jobs', but what's the point if they're shit?

Are there any other points you'd like to raise?

M: We recently decided to concentrate on having stalls and leafleting at High Riggs Job Centre in the city centre. The idea's to be there regularly, have a presence there, get to know people, get to know what the claimants signing on there feel are the main issues facing them.

We've done a news-sheet, *High Riggs Hi-Jinks*, laid out in the style of a jobcentre leaflet, we're giving it out there. The first issue has quite a bit on A4E, the company that makes loads of money processing the unemployed through useless compulsory courses, the New Deal and so on.

We hope claimants will get in touch with us

about the problems they're facing, and we can take up these grievances. The idea is that, in the longer term, we can start to exercise a claimants counter-power, so we can actually force a change in decisions and policy in the jobcentre, because we have the power to organise disruptive action.

The first feedback has actually been at A4E, their office is nearby and we sometimes go on to leaflet there after the jobcentre. A claimant sent there got in touch with us after A4E threatened to stop his benefits for, they said, photocopying *High Riggs Hi-Jinks!* The thing is he didn't do it, but now of course he's really mad at them for falsely accusing him. He asked us to accompany him to an interview there but the A4E managers said that wasn't allowed and called the police to have me chucked out!

Obviously we won't let them away with this, we have forced the authorities to recognise that we can accompany claimants to interviews at the job centre, medical benefits, housing benefit and so on, so they can't refuse us at A4E. We are making an official complaint to the District Manager of the Job Centre, we're going to insist on an interview for the claimant at A4E with one of us present, and we will also be stepping up the leafleting at A4E...

Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty was set up by people who are unemployed, too sick to work, or on low incomes. On Tuesdays 1-4pm ECAP and Edinburgh Claimants run a drop-in day at The Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh (ACE) when advice and solidarity is available for benefits hassles, debt woes and other problems.

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www.edinburghagainstpoverity.org.uk

ACE: www.autonomous.org.uk

London Coalition Against Poverty: www.lcap.org.uk

Ontario Coalition Against Poverty: www.ocap.ca

Notes

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'To Banker, From Bankies - Incapacity Benefit: Myth and Realities : Perspectives on welfare reform, from the Clydebank Independent Resource Centre' *Chik Collins, CIRC, funded by Oxfam GB, April 2009*
Can be downloaded at: http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/ukpoverty/downloads/To_banker_from_bankies.pdf

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