

(No) Wage Slavery – Down the Dole

Anarchist Federation

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ONCE TOO OFTEN we've been subjected to the accusation that being on the dole is an 'easy life'. This has even been translated into various MP's trading places for a week with someone who's unemployed, in a feeble attempt to show just how easy life on the dole is. The video diary of a MP's week on the dole, patronising in the least, fails to offer the opportunity to see exactly what a fortnightly visit to the dole office entails.

The experience of a fortnightly visit to your local dole office, generally humiliating and intimidating, can vary dependant upon local office policy. For example the '16/21 hour rule', which relates to the number of hours that you can study and still sign on, which under the Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) is to be reduced to 16 hours, has already been implemented in some offices. One certainty in the build up to the JSA, where on every signing a 20 minute interview will be carried out, is that "stricter back to work regimes" are being enforced up and down the country.

So what does "stricter back to work regimes" mean in real terms ? Firstly, you'll be greeted by a worker that assumes that you are guilty and a 'scrounger', your guilt will vary in degree dependant upon your class and colour. Those 'middle class' people signing on generally have a far easier time, the more articulate you are the less open you are to harassment. Likewise black people signing on, will be subject to the racism of the worker that deals with their claim. Further discrimination occurs with an extremely low tolerance level shown towards semi-illiterate, illiterate and dyslexic people signing on. Secondly, the salary of that worker is performance related. This, however, does not mean that they have a vested interest in providing a quick, efficient service or in offering advice on how to muddle your way through the maze that constitutes the benefit system. In fact performance related pay is dependant upon catching individuals out on the grounds that they are not 'available' and /or 'actively seeking' work. In reality performance related pay is based on an ideology that assumes all work is good and all unemployed people are 'scroungers', and is motivated by the desire to stop benefits from being paid.

Work Regimes

The government has officially singled out "stricter back to work regimes" for 'priority groups', those groups being identified as the long term unemployed (i.e., 12, and 24 months unemployed). This has been translated into various patronising courses and schemes, to aid your procession into gainful employment, such as the 'Restart Interview' and 'The Back to Work Plan'.

The 'Restart Interview' is sold as a 20 minute interview with your client advisor, who will be able to advise on how to succeed in the labour market, but in reality is no more than a 20 minute interrogation about what, where and how you are seeking work. The attitudes of many of these advisors can best be described as arrogant. Arriving 5 minutes late for your interview would appear to confirm the advisors belief in their own superiority.

The 'Back to Work Plan' form, which is a detailed agreement between you and the dole office which outlines what you are doing and will do to find work, can result in the signing away of your benefit, if for example, the hours that you are prepared to work or the wages sought are viewed by the client advisor as unreasonable. The unemployed are systematically being bullied and intimidated into signing declarations regarding their job searching which are unreasonable and impractical. Being told that your benefit will be reduced if you do not sign the declaration is generally enough to make you sign it. Remember disqualification is the name of the game.

The 'Job Plan Workshop', a mandatory attempt to brainwash those unemployed for 1 year or more into believing that any job is better than no job, will if you fail to attend, result in reduction of benefit for that period.

Active signing

In addition to the official 'priority groups' singled out, random 'active signing' is being implemented on a wide scale as a preempt to the JSA. The motivation being to meet office targets of disqualifying as many people as possible from receiving benefits. In some offices 'active signing', a 20 minute interrogation prior to every signing, can be even more distressing than the official 'Restart Interview'. After signing an agreement which is to eventually form the basis of the JSA agreement, often the over enthusiastic worker will drag you down to the Job Centre and force you to apply there and then for jobs which they have deemed as suitable for you. Not simply satisfied with forcing you to apply for jobs and requiring that you report back to them the outcome of your application, telephone calls to the employer, made to check up on your performance at the interview, are becoming common practice.

The "stricter back to work regimes" in the build up to the JSA have resulted in the tightening of the system and the intensification of bullying of claimants. Those people signing on at the present time who are not on the receiving end of these bullyboy tactics could be in the near future. And it could be a lot sooner than the introduction of the JSA.

The Unions

Given the discriminatory treatment of individuals occurring in the dole office under the current system, the JSA will further enhance the ability of such workers to treat people like shit.

The workers who are responsible for carrying out the "stricter back to work regimes" whilst tied up in the game of performance related pay, are implementing these policies. Sadly some are doing so with great enthusiasm. Whilst the trade unions representing the dole office workers are opposed to the performance related pay system, they have allowed it to be introduced. They appear to be more concerned with how much money that their members are to lose under the performance related pay scheme, than what that scheme means to those signing on. Whilst those more 'militant' members of the unions blame the system for breeding an over all attitude of contempt towards the unemployed, they are in danger of ignoring the ideology of the work ethic which precipitates such contempt on a general level in capitalist society.

The daily abuse of the unemployed up and down the country cannot be excused simply as a symptom of performance related pay, it must be recognised as product of the generalised contempt for the unemployed felt amongst not only the ruling class but significant sections of the working class itself. For many people signing on at present who have been unfortunate enough to have been randomly singled out under the "stricter back to work regimes", the onslaught of the JSA will come as no great surprise. Their only surprise will be how much more easily the threat of reducing their benefit will be implemented.

However, the struggle which may develop against both the performance related pay scheme and, more likely, the JSA may begin to break down the rigid division which currently exists between dole office workers and the unemployed.

Handy hints for hassle free signing on

- Turn up in plenty of time and make sure that you are seen to be early, this way they can't be pissed off and say that you didn't even bother to get there on time.
- Don't create a scene, always try to stay in control. The more aggressive you get the more likely they are to try catching you out.
- If you have any problems filling in any of the forms they give you get some help from friends then they have no excuse for hassling you.
- Remember that your benefit is paid on the condition that you are actively seeking and available to work so, if you turn up late to sign on never say that you were sick or looking after your sister's kids. Simply say that you forgot to turn up. Then its near impossible for them to prove that you weren't available or actively seeking work.
- When filling in the 'Going Away from Home' form don't tell them that you are leaving the country as you won't be entitled to any benefit for that period.
- If you do work and sign on, try to not work in public places, like market stalls, close to your dole office. Just remember that the majority of the workers in your dole office live in the area that you are signing in.
- And don't forget the fraud officers are dependant upon the hunches of those workers that sign you on every fortnight.
- If there is a Claimant's Union in your area join it.
- Get involved in your local campaign against the JSA.
- Don't let the bastards grind you down, get ACTIVE and ORGANISE.

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