

Community Employment Schemes

Government schemes to hammer unemployed

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1995

Contents

Taken in and tossed out again	3
No jobs but lots of work	3
Unionising the schemes	4
What next.. real jobs or workfare?	4

Community Employment Schemes (CE) were introduced by the Government last year and have replaced all the other schemes, such as S.E.S. CE is better than the previous schemes in some ways – you can keep your secondary benefits, your rent allowance, medical card and fuel allowance. It is much better for lone parents with young children because a special child-minding allowance was introduced. However, apart from these improvements it is still a ‘scheme’, with all the problems associated with that.

There are over 39,000 people on CE throughout the 26 counties. The scheme is only open to people over 21 who are on the live register of unemployed or are lone parents. There are now no schemes that take the 18–21 age group, a strange omission when we think of all that is said about youth unemployment. However they are probably the lucky ones when we consider what people on schemes have to put up with.

Firstly, the extra money above the dole is very little because the £79 a week for a single person is taxed. If a couple are on welfare and one is on a scheme, they only make about £10-£15 a week more. CE is a work scheme, not a training scheme, although lots of community groups try to use it for training. There is a £200 per worker allowance for training and an extra £100 each for personal development. A minority of schemes provide good training, most provide very little.

Taken in and tossed out again

The community sector is using CE in a big way to run all kinds of projects and services. Many of these projects are very worthwhile in themselves such as resource centres, drugs projects, community development schemes, youth groups and so on. The problem is that all of this work is being done on short-term schemes where the workers are being exploited and have very little chance of getting work in the project, even though they have the experience. When their year on CE is over a new group of scheme workers is taken on and have to be trained in the work.

The official purpose of these work schemes is to get the long-term unemployed back into the workforce, give them some skills and restore their confidence so that they can then go out and get a job. The reality is very different. A survey conducted by the Dublin Inner City Partnership and the Scheme Workers Alliance this year found that very few scheme graduates actually got jobs, only about 17% according to F.A.S. itself. Of the rest, 5% became self-employed and 23% extended their schemes while the remaining 55% had become unemployed, emigrated or died.

No jobs but lots of work

These figures are hardly surprising. There simply are not enough jobs out there even though there is plenty of work to be done. This is the basic contradiction that these schemes are showing up all the time. They exploit peoples’ desire to be working, especially in the community sector where so much socially useful work needs to be done.

Even though schemes are supposed to be approved by trade unions so that they are not replacing “real jobs”, in practise that is exactly what they are doing, especially in the local authority sector. Maintenance of parks and community facilities such as swimming pools is almost all done on CE now. The situation has reached such a stage of acceptance that the unions in Dublin Corporation, who are still holding out against the use of CE, found themselves the subject of vicious abuse by councillors of all parties recently when the issue was debated by the Corporation.

CE workers are denied many of the legal rights and entitlements which part-time workers have. There is no entitlement to maternity leave on CE, for example, and no holiday pay. The Scheme Workers Alliance is demanding that scheme workers' conditions be improved. The demands they list are:

- Proper certified on-the-job training
- Higher rates of pay, £100-£150 a week
- Full-time places in bigger schemes
- All legal rights and entitlements of part-time workers.
- All scheme workers to have the right to join the trade union of their choice.

Unionising the schemes

This last point is very important. Although this issue has been raised within the unions for the past five years, none of the unions has shown any great interest in organising scheme workers. Working in schemes is here to stay for the foreseeable future so it is essential that the unions get their act together and organise these workers to fight for better wages and conditions.

The real reason for the growth in work schemes is the Government's need to keep down the numbers on the live register of unemployed. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people have now been on several schemes and have done several F.A.S. courses as well. Most of them are still unemployed at the end of all that. Lots of schemes have third level graduates working on them. There is often competition to get a place. They have become a major part of peoples' experience of low paid work. In fact schemes really are no more than state organised low-paid exploitative work. It is an indication of peoples' desperation that so many end up working on them.

Work schemes are the forerunner of workfare, a system where you have to work for your dole. This is the logical outcome of the schemes. At a time when there are major attacks on welfare in the USA and Britain it would be logical to expect the same to happen here sooner or later. The massive rate of unemployment here makes it a bit harder to just go out and cut thousands of people off welfare in one go, as has happened in the States.

What next.. real jobs or workfare?

Some community groups such as the Connolly Unemployed Centre in Dublin are now arguing that because CE is realistically the Government's only job creation strategy, that full-time permanent jobs should be created where a scheme has proved to be successful. Not only should this be the case but full-time permanent jobs should be created everywhere socially useful work is being done on schemes.

Work schemes such as CE need to be taken seriously by the left. Organising campaigns around wages and conditions is necessary. The involvement of the unions is important. Up to now they have washed their hands of these workers. 39,000 part-time workers should be mobilised, not ignored. Apparently another new scheme is in the pipeline. The chances are that it will take us another step closer to workfare. Watch this space!

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Retrieved on 26th November 2021 from struggle.ws
Published in *Workers Solidarity* No. 45 – Summer 1995.

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