Brighton & Hove

Spending Review special

Solidarity

Bulletin of Brighton Solidarity Federation

NEWS // ACTION // ANALYSIS

They say:



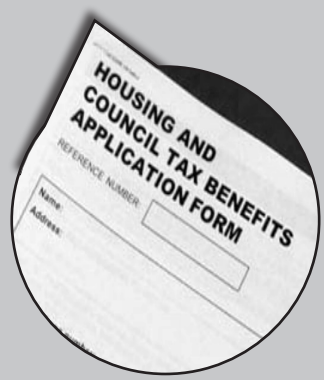
We say:

Make the country **ungovernable!**

OCTOBER 20TH saw the unveiling long-awaited Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR), the coalition government's detailed blueprint on precisely how they plan to screw the working class. Little within the CSR was a source of surprise, with cuts roughly at the level that had been predicted in the run up. While the scale was predictably significantly below the 40% that had been mooted, this was clearly an attempt to 'soften us up' and feel lucky the cuts were "only" 20%, as if it had been taken straight out of the pages of 'Negotiation for Dummies'.

These attacks are directed across the entire working class, with no section spared. Savage attacks on the unemployed, sick and disabled sit alongside mass public sector redundancies, attacks on parents side by side with increasing prices through the VAT increase. Clearly, this is not an attempt to attack or discipline any section of us, but a comprehensive,

Housing benefit slashed



Learning from the anti-war fight



Restaurant workers still being screwed



INSIDE

Brighton SolFed speaks to a benefits claimant about the effect of the cuts

Housing benefits slashed

THE MEDIA keep running stories about benefit fraudsters living it up no doubt in preparation for drastic changes to the benefits system. Brighton SolFed spoke to one of the supposed benefit scroungers to find out what it's really like to live on benefits.

Since finishing a postgraduate course, Teresa has been looking for a job in Brighton. "I have been applying for at least 4 to 5 jobs a week for the past 4 months but did not get any job. Often I have been told I am overqualified for the positions and even though I tried to impress on them that I would like to work - I was told that they can get someone less qualified to do the work on minimum wages."

"When renting any place I have to keep in mind that I will not get any help towards any heating or water rents etc. I only get £62 a week for unemployment benefit, which also has to cover heating and water bills together with food, travel expenses or any other bills that I may have to pay."

"I am in deeper debt now than before I was on benefit. I had to borrow money off friends to pay for any extra cost that I incur. For example, I needed to move out of my place and had to find £1420 to secure myself a studio apartment away from the city center which is relatively cheaper."

"It is very difficult to find something that is suitable. Ideally I would have liked to rent a one bedroom flat, but that is out of question if you are living in Brighton as the maximum we can claim on housing benefit (HB) is £600/month. And remember there is no extra money for gas/electricity/water bills. A decent sized studio with a separate but very small kitchen in Brighton/Hove and surrounding area will cost approx £575/month. You can find a bedsit (one room containing sleeping and cooking area) for less, but they are extremely small and badly kept, often sharing bathrooms with several other tenants - they are utterly depressing. People on benefit are forced to choose from the bottom of the pile as most of the time these are the only properties rented to them.

Given their precarious money situation, people on HB face additional hurdles. "Most places are reluctant to rent out to people on benefits and sometimes say so openly. "No DSS needs to reply" and such. Also, even if they do not say this openly, often they will require you to to pay a minimum 6 weeks rent as a deposit and a month's rent in advance on top of minimum £270 for agency fees. This is almost impossible to pay for someone who is in receipt of benefit and so in all probability does not have any savings."

"I know a few people that have ended up in hostels, an environment that is extremely depressing and self destructive as it is very difficult to keep up hope without help and understanding. The system does not cater for this reality but is geared to make one feel unworthy and a failure instead of pointing out that this is a failure of the society as a whole."

How can we fight back? By making sure we spread the truth : anyone can end up in this situation. Unemployment is the product of a warped capitalist society that we live in today which is only interested in making the maximum profit with giving very little back to the society. A decent standard of living by unemployed people is not a privilege but is the right for everyone including employees who work in an environment which provides no job security or guarantee. And remember, todays employed are tomorrows 'dole scroungers'.

The proposed changes

- The local HB rates will be reduced from the median rent in a particular area to the 30th percentile. This means that while at the moment half of all places are affordable, from 1 October 2011 only the cheapest 30% will be.
- The maximum amount that can be claimed will be the four bedroom rate, rather than five as now. This means that some families will have to move if their rent is higher than the four bedroom rate.
- An end to "excess" payments of up to £15 a week which claimants could keep if their rent was below the average local rent (from 1. April 2011).
- People under 35 will be forced into shared accomodation (from April 2012). As more people will require shared accomodation, rents will go up for everyone – landlords are already rubbing their hands.
- The unemployed will be arbitrarily punished: after one year on JSA, HB will be slashed by 10% (from April 2013)
- For example a 30 year old currently receiving £150pw to stay in a one bedroom flat, will only receive £78pw to stay in a bedsit (30th percentile, current B&H rents). If they are jobless for a year, this will go down to £70pw.
- Changes will not take effect at once for all claimants, but will generally be on the anniversary of the first claim

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wholesale assault on us all. Basic safety nets of the welfare state that most of us would take for granted are being dismantled before our eyes – this can't be seen as just a slight rejigging of government spending, but an attempt to significantly shift the balance of class forces, and to redefine the support an individual can expect from society.

What becomes clear however, is that just as much as these attacks are clearly not about reducing the deficit or dealing with the recession (with most major economists predicting it will have the opposite effect), it is also not just a matter of 'nasty Tory ideology'. These are the exact same attacks that any of the other political parties would have been forced to make at this point – the administration of a capitalist state requires constant attack on the working class to be profitable, and here it continues. While certain leftists may lie about or whitewash the past in order to deliberately hide Labour's complicity (and essential role) in the cuts in order to serve the ends of their organisations, this is far too important for that – while the vast majority of the public quite rightly blame these cuts on the coalition, attempts to lumber the movement to resist them with the legacy of an utterly despised and discredited party such as Labour would clearly be suicide.

As this is an attack across all of us, it is only on that basis it can be successfully fought – the opposition to the cuts must be on a class-wide basis. It is no good a multitude of separate contesting campaigns resisting the cuts "in their area" – as this will just reduce any movement into a zero sum game whereby the exact allocation of cutting is battle out – it would be a tragedy if where cuts are successfully fought off, the government is able to merely push them onto a different section of society. Nor is it something we can win by making the correct argument and appeal to the rational judgement of politicians. The only way these cuts can be stopped is making their implementation impossible. As the anti-Poll Tax movement of the early 1990s showed, and as the current movement in France begins to reveal, the only way these plans can be derailed is if we simply do not accept their imposition, and make the country ungovernable.

Stopping the cuts: lessons from the anti-war movement

AS THE scale of the budget cut-backs begins to sink in, there are signs of a nascent movement against the cuts, with hundreds attending public meetings across the country, including a packed-out meeting in Brighton for the local launch of the Stop the Cuts Coalition. The last time this many people were mobilised, over a million marched through London with the Stop the War Coalition against the Iraq war. But Blair called our bluff and the war went ahead. What can we learn from these experiences for the fight against cuts?

After the massive demonstrations in London, many in Brighton felt that sheer numbers alone weren't enough. Instead, the anti-war movement in Brighton took a different path, based on mass direct action.

The usual large demonstrations were organised, but instead of predictable A-B strolls these became mass acts of civil disobedience. Roads were taken over and blocked all over town, hundreds of school kids walked out of school to lead the demonstrations and the town hall was stormed and briefly occupied. While some of these actions remained as symbolic and spectacular as big A-B marches, peoples' strong feelings of anger changed a usually passive form of protest into something with the potential to be more.

This sense of possibility not only shaped the actions but also the participants. For a while, it really seemed possible to actually stop the war through civil disobedience and mass direct action. Alas, it was not to be. Which brings us to the anti-cuts movement.

The current cuts are a direct attack on our livelihoods in a way not seen since Thatcher. This raises the possibility of industrial direct action – strikes, occupations, work-to-rules, sabotage – as well as street-based civil disobedience. This starts to sound like something which really could force the government to back down as the 'necessity' for the cuts is revealed as plain old-fashioned class war.

What we need is direct action organized from below. With sufficient rank-and-file anger, the TUC may be pushed into calling only the second general strike in British history. However, it's us, not the union bosses who can stop cuts.

Most importantly, we need to recognise that stopping the cuts is more than just a numbers game. The biggest imaginable march past parliament won't reverse policy. Mass direct action, especially industrial action, just might.

We need to be supporting others and organising in our own workplaces. And if we want to see this happen we can't put our faith in anything other than our solidarity and ability to organise. We must take a lead in organising ourselves rather than waiting on the TUC or anyone else to do it for us.



Restaurant workers still being robbed one year on



THE CURRENT onslaught on the public sector now mirrors what has been happening to private sector workers since the start of this crisis. Along with redundancies and wage cuts, one area that has been an ongoing problem in the catering industry is the stealing of tips by unscrupulous bosses.

The beginning of October saw the first anniversary of a change in the law designed to give waiters 100% of their tips. It was brought about by a long campaign by catering workers in Unite, among others. But one year on, there are still problems front of house, because employers have ignored the law.

This shows that the law is a paper tiger. For a year now it has demanded that waiters get all of their tips - but employers know that they can find ways to get around it. The law also says that workers must be paid in full for work done - but as the Solidarity Federation has learnt recently rogue employers in Brighton are ignoring this and using the recession as an excuse not to pay up.

The only sure way of getting what we are legally entitled to is to demand it directly from our bosses in our own workplaces. Workers facing this kind of threat to their livelihoods need to stand together to demand their full wages and tips, backed up with the threat of industrial action.

Of course, this is no easy task - employers hate their authority to be challenged. But if you do decide to stand up to your boss you are not alone. Brighton Solidarity Federation is committed to acting in support of local workers having difficulty with their bosses. See below for details.

About Brighton Solidarity Federation

BRIGHTON SOLFED is a group based on the idea that through solidarity and direct action, ordinary people have the power to improve our lives.

Our members are workers, students and others looking to build a libertarian working class movement. Our aim is to promote solidarity in our workplaces and outside them, encouraging workers to organise independently of bosses, bureaucrats and political parties to fight for our own interests as a class. Our ultimate goal is a stateless, classless society based on the principle of 'from each according to ability, to each according to need' – libertarian communism.

We believe in direct action solidarity. That could mean anything from organising with your co-workers, to pickets and occupations. We also believe in collective action - that we are stronger when we stand together. We are ordinary workers who are sick of being screwed around ourselves and want to do something about it. We can provide training in workplace organising, as well as sharing experience, information and support in methods that have proved effective in the past.

An injury to one is an injury to all!



Getting messed around by a boss or landlord?

Want to do something about it? *Get in touch!*





ABOVE: Picketing Subway for an unfairly sacked pregnant worker and BELOW: delivering a letter of protest to Zara for sacked Peruvian unionists as part of an international day of action.

