

The Department of Work and Pensions: the Eugenics Branch of the British State

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Many bourgeois ideologists exalt capitalism for bettering the condition of mankind. They frequently cite the misrepresented fact that prior to capitalism, humanity lived in an extremely backwards state both materially and ideologically. With the implementation of bourgeois society, they claim, humans slowly but surely have improved the lives of people around the world and that capitalism will continue to do so despite its “setbacks”. However, this ignores the reality for billions across the world. This narrative can be easily dismissed with the evidence that capitalism is directly responsible for the many ills it claims to cure and that even minor scrutiny can shatter the illusion that modern capitalist society has created a just world. Hunger, homelessness, unhygienic living conditions, and lack of education all still thrive under capitalism. One of these facets is disability and the ensuing deprivation which exposes the fundamental truth that capitalism does not better the lives of the vast majority of people but in fact, actively worsens them.

Contrary to the claim that Marx and Engels did not take disabilities and disabled people seriously, the struggle for socialism and the liberation of the working class never ignored the plight of those that were unable or limited in their ability to work. Indeed, Marx and Engels early in their lives documented how capitalism both exacerbated existing disabilities and illnesses as well as caused them. The revolutionaries also noted how bourgeois ideology and capitalism viewed these people as “superfluous” and expendable.

Engels in his ground-breaking study of the life of the working masses in Victorian Britain, “the Condition of the Working Class in England”, noted that capitalism and the destitution of workers by way of the negative impact that dangerous working and living conditions had, were tightly linked; arguing that “the industrial epoch alone enables the owners of these cattle sheds to rent them for high prices to human beings, to plunder the poverty of the workers, to undermine the health of thousands, in order that they alone, the owners, may grow rich” (Engels 1845). Engels further describes the effect that capitalist society had on the physical well-being of the exploited workers explaining how the harsh conditions of proletarian life created men and women with disabilities. He related how he saw “a crowd of cripples” who “clearly owed their distortion to the long-working hours” living in abject poverty, further citing the evidence of a number of doctors who relate particular 6 kinds of malformation and deformity to working practices, as an “aspect of the physiological results of the factory system” (ibid.) He continues “I have seldom traversed Manchester without meeting three or four of them, suffering from precisely the same distortions of the spinal columns and legs as that described... It is evident, at a glance, whence the distortions of these cripples come; they all look exactly alike” (ibid.) He continues at length to relate particular forms of impairment to factory working conditions and to condemn — “a state of things which permits so many deformities and mutilations for the benefit of a single class, and plunges so many industrious working-people into want and starvation by reason of injuries undergone in the service and through the fault of the bourgeoisie” (ibid.) His polemic written in 1845 could just as easily have been written today concludes “In all directions, whithersoever we may turn, we find want and disease permanent or temporary...slow but sure undermining, and final destruction of the human being physically as well as mentally” (ibid.)

The disabled and/or those that could not find work even if able to work were treated as a blight on society, due to the fact that their labour power was not very valuable to the capitalist. This attitude by the bourgeoisie led to the development of the

monstrous ideology of eugenics which was treated as a “science” by capitalist states until the middle of the twentieth century.

As the proletariat still languishes under the crushing rule of capitalism, these issues still affect and torment workers today. Indeed, the behaviour of bourgeois states still carries on the nefarious practices of the 1800s and early 1900s albeit in a more subtle form. One notorious case study is the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) of the United Kingdom.

Established in 2001, the department was the culmination of decades of anti-worker policies in Great Britain following the premiership of Margaret Thatcher. It is ostensibly the branch of the state bureaucracy that manages welfare, pensions and child maintenance. However, its true policy is one that continues the neoliberal policies of the era which attacked organised labour and the position of the proletariat, leading to a significant decline in living standards and wages. The DWP uses the threat of withdrawing welfare in order to increase competition in the labour force and to lower the amount of money spent on providing benefits to the most desperate of the proletariat. As such, its real purpose is to assault the most destitute section of the workers to the point that it can be strongly argued that it has been responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of British workers.

This campaign began slowly. Initially, in 1992 the Thatcherite Peter Lilley (Secretary of State for Social Security) announced at the Conservative Party conference that:

“I’m closing down the “something-for-nothing society.” This summer I announce tougher rules affecting so-called New Age travellers. Most people were as sickened as I was by the sight of these spongers descending like locusts demanding benefits with menaces.” (Peter Lilley speech to Tory conference 1992 - “I have a little list”, n.d.)

This rhetoric, intended as a threat against the destitute, would become increasingly common in British society. The following year the Prime Minister, John Major, told MPs that spending on invalidity benefits had risen from £1.5 billion to £6 billion in ten years and that “no responsible government could ignore an increase of that order”, and that “it beggars belief that so many more people have suddenly become invalids, especially at a time when the health of the population has improved” (Parliament 1993). His claims that people were exploiting the system for benefits funded by the taxpayer ignored the consequences that the Thatcherite assault on the British proletariat had; leading to mass unemployment and an increase in the rate of exploitation. As can be seen, by his rhetoric, the official bourgeois narrative was that too many people were benefit cheats and that the reason why those who needed welfare was not because the state was withdrawing welfare, but instead due to them being “parasites”. This is illustrative of the nature of bourgeois society which seeks at every turn to ensure that profit margins remain wide even at the expense of the well-being of the workers who create this wealth.

The following year, in 1994, Lilley hired John LoCascio, a senior executive of the US insurance giant Unum, to advise the government on how to reduce the number of claimants of long-term sickness benefits. His role was to ensure that a new points-based test was introduced that significantly moved the previous system of benefits to the kind that was pioneered by the American insurance industry (Pring 2022).

Therefore, it became policy that hired by the government private companies became the ones that determined who was eligible for benefits. This continued under the Labour government. In 2005, Labour gave Atos, a French company, a £500 million contract to carry out assessments for the next five years (ibid.)

As early as 2001, criticism of the system was beginning to become known. Its own report had concluded that the experiences of some claimants being assessed had found the process “distressing”, especially those with depression and anxiety.

Frequently doctors were described as adversarial and cold with one claimant who was “in a state of serious clinical depression which had left her unable to face the world said she was asked by the PCA doctor whether she had contemplated suicide, and if so, how she would carry it out” (ibid.) The National Audit Office even concluded that there were “serious problems” with the quality of assessments that same year (Bourn 2001).

However, despite these criticisms, various governments continued with this policy in an attempt to expunge so-called benefits cheats. In reality, many of those that desperately needed state support were having their welfare cut as the measures became stricter and more arbitrary. The bourgeois media at this time was also waging a propaganda campaign against the poorest section of the British working class. Television programmes from the 2000s hammered the idea that most people applying for benefits were cheating the system and using taxpayers’ money to live lavish lifestyles; a lie meant to soften the public to more cuts and restrictions whilst the bourgeoisie reaped record profits from the proletariat. This inevitably had a negative effect on proletarians that were out of work or had dependants that could not work for a substantial income. The system was also found to be harmful to the mental well-being of claimants by experts but attempts at change were routinely ignored as its purpose was not to help these disadvantaged Britons but to immiserate them further completely. Worse in fact was to follow.

Soon after, in October 2008, the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) were introduced. James Purnell, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions under Labour PM Gordon Brown, announced “today is the start of customers’ journey on ESA, which includes a clear framework of rights and responsibilities delivered using an enhanced regime of work-focused interviews, with a firmer conditionality regime” (Purnell 2008). An internal review published a year later did not raise any concerns, claiming that it was “accurately identifying individuals” capability for work, but recommending further “refinements.” The following spring in late March 2010, the DWP received its first coroners’ report (Pensions 2009).

In an act of extreme desperation, a man, named Stephen Carré, took his own life. The coroner, Tom Osbourne, and his report raised serious concerns about the role that the assessment of whether or not was fit for work played in his suicide. Stephen Carré was a former software engineer from Bedfordshire, the report found that the “trigger” that led to Carré’s decision to take his own life had been “the rejection of his appeal that he was not fit for work”, and added: “I feel the decision not to seek medical advice from the claimant’s own GP or psychiatrist if they are suffering a mental illness should be reviewed” (Pring 2015).

The WCA was rolled out despite calls that it was not yet ready to be introduced. Under the new conditions, tens of thousands of people with significant mental distress and who had been away from work for a substantial amount of time would be reassessed as to whether or not they are fit to go back to work. This reveals plain and simple, that no consideration is taken as to the needs of workers under capitalism. The proletariat is expendable and to the bourgeois, a “work-shy” proletarian is one that needs to be put to work, by coercion, if necessary, if he is to be of any use to the capitalist.

In tandem, the Tory government which replaced Brown’s Labour government, renewed their rhetorical assault on the working class. Britain used to be “the workshop of the world”, said Ian Duncan Smith, but had now “managed to create a block of people” who “do not add anything to the greatness of this country” and had

“become conditioned to be users of services, not providers of money.” This is a huge part of the reason we have this “massive deficit...” (Cameron and Smith 2010).

The Chancellor at the time, George Osborne, reiterated that the blame lay not with the bourgeoisie which they served but with the most exploited and oppressed section of the working class. He stated at the Conservative Party conference in October 2011 that:

“Where is the fairness, we ask, for the shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning, who looks up at the closed blinds of their next-door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits?” (Osborne 2012)

“When we say we’re all in this together, we speak for that worker. We speak for all those who want to work hard and get on” (ibid.)

It is at this point, that those deaths began to mount and despite the DWP and the government attempting to cover it up, the news was slowly emerging through local and national media as well as social media.

Statistics released by the DWP itself revealed that between December 2011 and February 2014 2,380 people died after their ESAs were stopped because the WCA found them to be fit for work. Many thousands have since likely perished in abysmal circumstances.

Mounting evidence made it impossible to maintain the secrecy of the Department’s role in the deaths of thousands. Peer-reviewed papers, internal documents and even government investigations confirmed that the DWP played an active role in “nearly six hundred suicides in three years” as well as “279,000 additional cases of self-reported mental health problems, and the prescribing of a further 725,000 anti-depressants” (Barr et al.: 2016).

Some cases are particularly haunting:

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Army veteran Mark Mullins and his wife Helen. Helen had a learning disability, so was refused JSA on the grounds that she was not fit for work. But because she had no official diagnosis of a medical condition, she was also refused incapacity benefit. The couple survived on Alan’s £57.50 a week JSA for 18 months, making a weekly 12-mile round trip on foot to get vegetables from a soup kitchen. “They could not face another winter living off handouts.” They were found dead next to each other at their home in an apparent suicide pact.

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Karen Sherlock had diabetic autonomic neuropathy, gastroparesis and diabetic retinopathy. She was partially sighted, with a heart condition, asthma, chronic kidney disease, B12 deficiency, anaemia, high blood pressure and was frequently doubly incontinent. At her disability assessment, she was put in the group of people who are expected to go back to work in some capacity and are only entitled to disability benefits for one year, although she had worked all her life for the NHS. Left without any money, Karen appealed the decision, which was eventually overturned, 10 days before her death.

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Robert Barlow who was also a trained classical pianist worked as a government scientist before giving up his job when diagnosed with severe cardiomyopathy. He was found fit for work by Atos in January 2012. His benefits were stopped 3 months later as was his right to free prescriptions, DWP said he tried to challenge the decision, but he felt too ill to fight the case. By the end of his life, he could not walk,

had poor eyesight and often fell over, and he died after one of these falls. He had been given one year to live by doctors. He died penniless.

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Mark Wood, 44, had a number of complex mental health conditions, but a fitness-for-work assessment found him fit for work and concluded his mental health was “normal”. His sickness and housing were stopped, leaving him with just £40 a week to live on. 5 months later, he died of malnutrition weighing 35kg. His doctor said his body mass index was not compatible with life. A DWP spokesman confessed later the decision was wrong.

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Stephen Smith was declared “fit to work” by the DWP despite being terminally ill and weighing 5 stones. He died while appealing his stopped benefits from his hospital bed. The DWP apologised to his family.

At this point, further comment on the DWP after 2015 would serve no purpose. In the past seven years, the DWP and the British state have maintained their course in the social murder of British proletarians. Numerous internal recommendations, scandals and investigations have yielded no change. The proletariat of Britain (indeed of any country) cannot rely on the supposed good intentions of the bourgeoisie. The treatment of the most vulnerable of the working class reveals nakedly the attitude of the bourgeoisie: the proletariat is only as valuable as their labour power. Should the worker’s ability to work become a hindrance to the bourgeois owner then the worker must be discarded inhumanely. With the worsening of the situation of workers globally due to the ongoing world crisis the situation that faces the working masses threatens to reduce them to extreme poverty. The stories of the DWP’s role in the deaths of disabled people will become more common as ordinary workers have their living standards reduced to the bare minimum.

There is only one option that the exploited masses have: to liberate themselves. As Engels noted centuries ago, these conditions are not merely the results of bad policies but hard-wired into the very machinery of capitalism. Only socialism, where the exploitation of man-by-man, can end this monstrous state of affairs where humans are treated merely as a means to extract wealth and can be starved, tormented and thrown away without a second thought. Marx noted that this is the historic role of the proletariat and only they can achieve the victory of a socialist society wherein all workers have a social role and when the maxim ‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his need’ can finally be realised.

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