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Labour's Welfare Warfare

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Our statement in the last couple of issues of *Organise!* that Labour would start to attack working class people almost immediately in particular with a full frontal assault on welfare benefits might have surprised some. Now events have shown that indeed Labour has this in mind and is acting very rapidly to carry out its attacks.

Labour is planning to axe maternity benefits. It disguises this attack behind the propaganda that women earning £1 million a year should not get maternity benefits. In reality this is aimed at women in ordinary white collar jobs.

They are also planning to cut disability benefits by forcing the disabled into jobs that would be totally unsuitable. When Harriet Harman became Secretary of State for Social Security she refused to increase incapacity benefits, probably amongst the lowest in the EU. Now the disabled are being forced back to work with camouflage propaganda about personal advisers talking with the disabled-threatening and bullying them.

Another part of the attack on welfare benefits is the old lie much used by the Tories, now dusted off and polished up by Labour that fraud is taking place on a massive scale with the benefits system. Labour plucked the figure of 17% from the

air. This figure was supplied by the Department of Social Security itself, when other surveys suggest around 2% fraud. At the same time big businessmen, including people like Geoffrey Robinson, the Paymaster General are taxdodging by salting their money away in offshore trusts- perhaps as much as £96 billion.

Labour will cut single parent benefits further scapegoating a section of the working class that had already been scapegoated under the Tories. Labour knows that a large part of the social security budget goes on pensions. This is likely to increase with an increasing proportion of elderly in the population. Labour will attempt to close down State pensions and force people to take out private pensions. Many will find this difficult to pay, already finding it hard to make ends meet.

Labour's welfare to work scheme through the New Deal is designed to provide cheap labour to the employers through training, education and job opportunities. Those who refuse to be forced into derisorily low paid jobs will have their benefits removed. Many of these involve sending people to work for charities, councils, or for supermarkets. This will provide slave labour workers and threaten the wages of those already working in these sectors. The education part will mean NVQ Level 2 qualifications at further education colleges. This means training for semi-skilled jobs. Those already signing on and taking NVQ Level 3 will only be allowed to continue if it is thought that there will be "job prospects". 69,000 enrolled on A Level and Access courses will find themselves being forced onto these schemes. These education schemes would be totally shoddy, with little chance of a job at the end, and with a direct aim of camouflaging unemployment figures.

Labour is hiding these attacks behind the propaganda of "Radical Welfare Reform" "New Deal" "New Opportunities". These soap ad jingles disguise a brutal attack on the welfare system as does the statement that "The country can't afford the massive spending on the welfare state". In fact Britain is

the third lowest in the EU league of 11 countries' expenditure on health and welfare benefits. Labour wants to make sure the British bosses have to fork out less for benefits.

At the same time Labour has signalled its policy on wages. Public sector workers- teachers, health workers etc.- were due to get a pay rise of 3.8%. With 3.7% inflation and the cost of living soaring, even this would be pathetic. Labour intervened to stop the Pay Review Bodies paying out, and ordered that 2% only be paid from April. The rest to be paid in December. This means that 8 months worth of an already measly rise will be taken off wages. This is the biggest pay delay ever in public sector history. Nurses will lose £5 a week and teachers £50 a month.

In addition, all pay awards will be what Gordon Brown calls self-financing. No extra money will be given by the Government and schools and hospitals will make the pay awards by cutting elsewhere. This was already carried out by the previous Conservative government resulting in the loss of 250,000 public sector jobs since 1993.

Blair intends to make this a signal to workers in the private sector and to all public sector workers not covered by the Pay Review Bodies. Unison, the union representing many public sector workers has put forward a demand for a 10% pay rise or an increase of £1,000 (whichever is greater). This is due to outrage among public sector workers. In fact, it will do nothing to push this demand and the Unison leaders are ready to accept the PRB decisions. Unison will attempt to sabotage any industrial action by pointing to the implementation of a national minimum wage as a solution. It will also point out that David Blunkett, threatened to ban strikes in the public sector.

We cannot rely on the unions. Now is the time to think about organising independent action outside the control of the unions. Let's wipe the smug grins off the faces of the Labour government.