

Update on the Jobseekers Allowance

and the 'Project Work' work-for-dole scheme

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Since last reporting on the Job Seekers Allowance in Organise! issue 40 and the realities of signing on under the current legislation, much has happened both inside and outside the dole office.

Inside

The new computer system known as Labour Market System (LMS), is up and running in the majority of offices, but remains to be connected nation-wide. LMS not only holds personal information about all claimants, such as interview history, it is the direct link to low paid jobs. The aim being to ensure that as many claimants as possible are forced into low paid jobs and off the register. LMS cuts out the middle-man, that being the job centre. It is a direct line to employers. That's all well and good if you choose to look for a job when you sign on and are well aware of the general shit jobs advertised through the job centre.

The introduction of LMS into the dole offices would appear to ensure that the preparations for JSA are well underway. This is motivated by the JSA implementation date of October 1996 and is aided by the performance related pay of dole office workers. However, those offices working towards JSA implementation ahead of the official implementation date, whilst unable to enact the JSA in terms of benefit criteria, are experiencing difficulties with LMS. Indeed LMS is proving to be a time consuming system. In some dole offices claimants are reported to be waiting over 1 hour just to sign on. The estimated reductions in staff, from 46,000 to 22,000 during 1996/7 will no doubt ensure that implementation of JSA is further complicated.

Outside

The recent dole office workers, Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA) strike against management's pay offer brought limited media attention and the hope that the union would add to the sabotage of the implementation of the JSA currently underway. However the CPSA, officially opposed to the JSA, have remained primarily concerned with issues of pay. Its' opposition to the JSA has sadly gone no further than demands for the introduction of screens in dole offices, recognising that the JSA will be difficult to administer and that a backlash against the JSA will occur. Failing to recognise the environment that the construction of screens fosters, such as arrogant off handish behaviour on the part of staff towards claimants will ensure that the division between claimants and dole workers is reinforced.

Outside the dole office campaigning against the JSA is gathering momentum. Groundswell, best defined as loose network of autonomous groups and individuals united against the JSA has concentrated upon gathering information about the JSA, distributing and co-ordinating that information, and offering practical advice and support against the JSA. In practical terms groups and individuals have been involved in a variety of activities ranging from leafleting outside dole offices to the occupation of Restart courses and Job Plan Workshops in both Brighton and London. Central to Groundswells' campaign against the JSA, and the distinguishing factor between Groundswell and other campaigns such as the TUC's' 'Jobs not JSA', is Groundswells' opposition to the idea of the 'right to work' and to have a 'good job'. Groundswell is organised around the idea of 'no wage slavery, no dole slavery', offering a critique of the work ethic so beloved of the left.

Arrangements for the next Groundswell, to be held in Sheffield, are currently underway.

Project Work

FROM THE 1ST of April the government has been piloting what it calls “Project Work”. In the pilot areas claimants aged between 18 and 50 who have been unemployed for two or more years may be put onto project work at Restart Interviews.

Project Work will consist of two parts. The first part is 13 weeks of “help” in getting a job. This will probably mean restart courses, jobplan workshops, training for work and pressure to take any crap job.

If the claimant is still unemployed after 13 weeks this will be followed by 13 weeks of compulsory work. For this work the claimant will only receive £10 on top of their usual income support. Failure to turn up for this compulsory work will result in loss of benefit. In fact the much harsher Job Seekers Allowance sanctions will be used even though the JSA is not due to be implemented until October. This means complete withdrawal of benefit for two weeks for the first refusal and for four weeks on the second refusal. Hardship payments are unlikely to be made during this period, so people will be left with no money at all.

The community action program has now been scrapped and it looks as if the government is looking to project work to replace it. The initial pilot in Medway and Hull will effect about 6,000 claimants, however, if the scheme is extended across the country it would effect about 370,000 claimants.

This is a major step towards workfare, where people are forced to do work before they are eligible for benefit. This is another attempt to force people into low paid jobs but will also effect the labour market by providing a large reserve of workers doing work for minimal wages.

The governments says ‘for those who have lost heart or motivation, it may be just the impetus they need’. In reality it is another kick in the teeth for those who have already been demoralised by the effects of dole and wage slavery.

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