



The war on workfare is worse than workfare itself

by Brendan O'Neill, Tuesday 28 February 2012

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The pity and tears of the anti-workfare lobby are far more insulting to working-class youth than asking them to stack shelves in Tesco. As a radical leftist of some years' standing, it pains me to point out the following: we are rapidly entering a new era in Britain in which radical protests against government austerity measures are more reactionary than anything proposed by the government itself.

We saw it with the debate around the National Health Service, where the clumsiness of the Lib-Cons' cash-saving reforms were more than outdone by the conservatism of the left-wing anti-reformers, who think a moral forcefield should be erected around the creaking, increasingly

authoritarian NHS. We saw it in the debate about having a household benefits cap of £26,000, where the government's naivety about how to roll back the recession was overshadowed by the cynicism of liberal campaigners begging unelected bishops in the House of Lords to mow down any tweaks to modern welfarism. And now we see it in the controversy over workfare, where the fact that this initiative is far from perfect pales into insignificance when compared with the patronising politics of pity and vicarious workshyness of its influential opponents.

Introduced by the Lib-Cons in January 2011, the welfare-to-work programme, or 'workfare', is a voluntary scheme for people aged 16 to 24 who have been unemployed for three months or longer. The government, in tandem with big corporations like Tesco or Burger King, provides these youth with placements, where they work for 25-30 hours a week for a period of two to eight weeks. They don't get paid an actual wage, but they continue to receive their jobseeker's allowance and possibly some additional travel and childcare costs. Theoretically, anyone who opts out of a placement can have their benefits cut, though according to the government, out of the 34,200 people who did workfare between January and November 2011, only 200 had their benefits docked.

That's it. It is hardly the best government job-creation scheme in history, yet nor is it 'slave labour', as its historically clueless critics claim, some of them even turning up at Westfield shopping centre in London dressed in Dickensian garb with placards saying 'Westfield Workhouse' and 'Say "No" to slave labour'. Perhaps if these people spent more time reading *Oliver Twist* rather than doing am-dram versions of it on the streets of West London, they would know that asking a 19-year-old to spend a few hours serving sausage rolls in a Greggs bakery is not quite the same as the system of exhausting child labour that existed in the past.

Of course, there is much that can be criticised about the workfare scheme, primarily the impact that it could have on the existing working population. By subsidising the supply of effectively free workers to massive retail outlets and other workplaces, the government is potentially

isolating and even threatening the positions of those members of staff who got their jobs by their own volition and who currently must (and should) be paid a full-time wage. Rather than work so closely with big businesses, which are driven primarily by a desire to cut costs and boost profits, it might have been better for the government to set up and fund proper apprenticeship schemes and social-based work projects, which would allow unemployed youth to get a taste of the world of work without coming into conflict with actually employed workers.

However, the noisy and shrill critics of workfare are attacking the scheme for all the wrong reasons – not on the basis that it might harm existing workers, but on the basis that it is somehow harmful to ask unemployed youth, those apparently fragile creatures, to work in return for some of society's resources, for the monies they currently receive from the state. This can be seen in the widespread use of the terms 'unpaid labour' and 'slave labour', which overlooks the fact that these young people are actually being rewarded for their short bursts of work (in the form of small benefit payments from the state, which are not as good as a full wage, of course). And it overlooks the even more important fact that sending young people the alternative message – that they should receive these resources in return for nothing, in return for never working – is a far more dangerous and destructive thing than a scheme pressuring them to do some shelf-stacking in Tesco.

The small but influential middle-class anti-workfare lobby, which has already successfully pressurised Tesco, Burger King and others into withdrawing from workfare, seems incapable of thinking through the consequences of its arguments and its actions. It seems not to recognise that fighting to preserve a situation in which huge numbers of young people have their bodies and souls sustained by the state is not a 'good fight'. On the contrary, it is a fight which is likely only to exacerbate young people's dependence on external favour and patronage rather than on their own inner drive and ambition, and which will further tie youth into an unhealthy relationship of reliance with the state. In the long term, this will have a far more damaging impact on them, on their capacity for social solidarity and on their individual self-respect, than workfare ever could.

It is in fact entirely reasonable to expect able-minded, able-bodied people, anyone who is not a child or disabled or sick or old, to do something in return for resources, to make some practical, real-world contribution to their communities or the running of society. Of course, it would be ideal if they could be provided with gainful and fruitful employment, but where that is not possible it is quite legitimate to request that individuals contribute to the upkeep of their communities in return for monetary sustenance. This is especially the case with the young, with people who are loosening their ties with their families and entering for the first time into proper social and community life. Absolutely the worst thing society could do for this section of society – for the 16- to 24-year-olds whom workfare is aimed at – is communicate to them the idea that society will sustain and reward you for doing nothing, for simply existing.

The impact of that message on youth is likely to be dire: it will inflame today's already existing culture of entitlement, and further alienate youth from both their communities and their peers, encouraging them to suckle at the teat of the state rather than to use their own resourcefulness to strike up relationships with people and institutions in their communities. At precisely a time when young people should be showing initiative, taking risks, 'getting on their bikes' perhaps, venturing into the unforgiving world and making a niche or a name or just a living for themselves, they are instead encouraged by the welfare statisticians of the modern liberal elite and the anti-workfare lobby to stay home, wait, be sustained by external actors. The healthy pressure of economic need is replaced by the soul-zapping sustenance of the state's largesse. It might even be an idea to withdraw benefits from the 16- to 24-year-old age bracket entirely, apart from those who are disabled or who have children to care for, in order to demonstrate how seriously society takes the exercise of self-drive and risk-taking amongst the young.

None of this, none of the consequences of entangling large sections of youth into a deadening relationship with the state, crosses the minds of the anti-workfare activists. That is because these campaigners – well-fed, middle-class, utterly removed from the condition in which many working-class young people find themselves today – relate to these people's problems entirely through the vicarious prism of pity rather than through the lived and shared political category of solidarity. Viewing working-class youth more like lobsters in a restaurant tank whom they want to save rather than individuals capable of fighting and striving for work and a better life, they employ that most self-flattering, luxuriant emotion known to man – pity, the aloof projection of a highly condescending sorrow on to people of whom they know little. And as that ancient proverb says: 'Friends help; others pity.'

That should be the motto of self-respecting working-class youth in modern Britain: 'Friends help; others pity.' They should reject the patronising assistance offered by the welfare state and its thoughtless, well-off cheerleaders and instead turn to 'friends' – family, peers, colleagues, communities – for opportunities and tips and the kind of proper, face-to-face moral sustenance that can never be provided by a faceless bureaucrat. That would be better than falling deeper into the system of what we might call 'vicarious workshyness', where it is patronising outsiders who now seek to convince working-class youth that they should be shy of work, afraid of it, because it might be asking too much of them and it might damage their self-esteem. Yes, there is something Dickensian in the workfare debate, but it isn't that workfare is like the workhouse – it is that the critics of workfare are driven by the same priestly moralism and 'Good Tory' desire to save the downtrodden that afflicted rather too many of Dickens' characters.

Brendan O'Neill is editor of spiked. Click to visit [Brendan's website](#) .

Some other useful readings on the issue

[Yes, we need to get our country working again](#) by Sonia Poulton, Daily Mail 29 February 2012

[Workfare programme is a hit with the unemployed](#) by Sarah Rainey, Telegraph 03 March 2012

[My job was replaced by a workfare placement](#) , by Martin Dunne, Guardian CiF 3 March 2012

[The myth of the workshy Greek](#) , by Ashley Frawley, spiked 5 March 2012