

FULL BLAST

nipsa
Youth

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The Newsletter Of NIPSA Youth

Winter 2012

Welfare Reform?

What's it got to do with me?

"Sure, I don't claim benefits, not like them scroungers down the street"; "Oh aye, she has a kid and gets a free house"; "They're going to stop my tax credits, I don't know what I'm going to do. How will I survive?"; "I'm 18, I'm trying to find work, but there is nothing out there. Is this the future I have to look forward to?"; "I've just found out I'm pregnant, but I've a part-time job. I don't think I'm entitled to any benefits"; "My boyfriend has left me and I don't know how I'm going to afford the rent on my own"

Any of that sound familiar? Let's face it, if you are a young worker in the public sector, whether in front-line benefit services or back office staff, you will have heard those type of things being said at work, in the pub or the canteen.

So what is welfare reform all about and what does it mean for young people today? Let's set the scene.

For context, "reform" means "to improve by removing faults". Welfare reform, by its very definition, was supposed to "improve" and "enhance" our welfare system, something that NIPSA itself acknowledges needs to happen for the benefit of all of those in society who are vulnerable and in need. The problem, however, is that Iain Duncan Smith's version of welfare reforms does exactly the opposite.

Instead of improving and enhancing the system, he is ideologically driven to dismantling the very thing that has stopped so many young people, families, elderly and disabled people falling into poverty and despair. Surely our elected representatives must do everything in their power to resist this?

Unfortunately, the Welfare Reform Bill is passing through the legislative process at Stormont, bringing us a step dangerously further along the path that Iain Duncan Smith wants us to take, removing any sort of help to the most vulnerable in society and indicating that it is not up to the state to defend or assist those people. Surely that is just wrong? There is a social floor, through which people must not be allowed to fall. Our MLA's owe us this much: to fight on our behalf.

continued overleaf





CHAIRPERSON'S WELCOME

After a lot of hard work, here it is: the first edition of Full Blast, the NIPSA Youth newsletter. We hope to bring you on a regular basis all the facts, campaigns, thoughts and issues that affect young NIPSA members in their daily lives. Times are very difficult at the minute and we believe that young people's voices need to be heard. Members of NIPSA Youth are at the forefront of the fight against the attacks on our welfare system, our NHS and our education system. NIPSA Youth is committed to defending those services and to growing activism among young NIPSA members. We want to see as many young people as possible in NIPSA become active and engaged in the trade union movement. So, if you are one of those young people, why not get involved in your branch committee, and why not get involved in NIPSA Youth? For more details, contact Geraldine Alexander at NIPSA HQ (e-mail: geraldine.alexander@nipssa.org.uk Tel: 02890661831)

Ryan Wilson

Welfare Reform, What's it got to do with me?

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Some credit must be given to the minute concessions that have been made in a Northern Ireland context. But what must be criticised is Social Development Minister Nelson McCausland's refusal to allow all interested groups and communities more time to draft submissions in response to the Bill. It begs the question: why was he so afraid that he felt the need for such a tight time frame? Perhaps we shall never know.

NIPSA has never said that welfare reform is not needed. But we need genuine reform based on the aforementioned principles: to improve and enhance what we have and remove faults; faults which were, incidentally, brought about mainly by bad policy decisions, such as those made by Iain Duncan Smith.

Welfare reform is very much to do with young people. Whether you are in work or not, whether you are a young mother on tax credits or a young disabled person in the workplace, it has a direct impact on your standard of life, independence and mobility. Children are especially vulnerable. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Mrs Patricia Lewsley-Mooney, said:

"The proposed conditions and sanctions have the capacity to cause breaches of children's rights. Even with the Westminster commitment to continue to pay the child element of benefits to sanctioned parents, that does not go far enough to protect the rights and best interests of children in sanctioned families, as the removal of any income from a household budget will have an severe impact on the children living in it."

The percentage of unemployed young people in Northern Ireland remains at 24%, a figure that has been consistently high. I bet you know someone, in your family or circle of friends, who falls into that 24%. You know what a struggle it is for them to find work of any kind. The question is: what measure, exactly, is being introduced that will have any sort of impact on the youth unemployment figure? Funny thing is, it appears that no politician has a clue, given the amount of ducking and diving done when you bring the subject up. Perhaps we should all take the opportunity to write to our local MLAs on this matter? Now there's an idea.

NIPSA Youth and its members are worried about whether or not we can survive in today's climate. You should be too. Many of us are poorly paid public sector workers and, in many instances, the recipients of the very benefits that we pay out. And now in addition to that our jobs are under threat.

We must apply pressure to stop Iain Duncan Smith's reforms, which are not reforms at all, but an attack on the very fabric of our society. If not halted, this attack will affect our generation and subsequent generations after us. How we defend ourselves now will echo far into our future and our children's future.

We must hold those responsible to account.

Stand with us, or our future falls!

NIPSA LGB&T Group Launch 'Historic' Event

NIPSA's LGB&T Group was formally launched at an event in the Belfast City Hall on 14th November 2012.



Members of NIPSA Youth take part in this year's Belfast Pride festival.

Speaking at the event Geraldine Alexander, NIPSA Assistant Secretary, said: *"Today's launch of the NIPSA LGB&T Group is a historical and important day for the union. We want to send a clear message to our LGB&T members that they have a rightful place in this union and have a right to have their working lives characterised by visibility and dignity. This Group will give our LGB&T members the platform for their voices to be heard free from the fear of intimidation and prejudice. We recognise that our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members are each distinct groups of people whose particular needs must be catered for. We can assure you that this Group will provide a space for each of them to devise a mechanism for ensuring that all the distinct voices are heard."*

NIPSA's LGB&T Group is open to LGB&T members and non-members. The objectives of the Group have been formulated around the principles of: equality, inclusiveness, raising awareness, enabling activism, holding employers to account, ensuring confidentiality and a safe environment for the Group. Strict confidentiality procedures

have been put in place and a dedicated and confidential answer service and email address have been established (see below for details).

If you are interested in being part of this dynamic and vibrant Group please come along to our next meeting, details of which are contained below.

nipsa
Protecting Public Services
Supporting Public Servants

Inaugural Meeting of LGB&T Group

Monday 10th December 2012 at
4:30 pm in Room A, NIPSA
40 Wellington Park, Belfast.

For more details contact:
028 9068 6566 or
email: lgb&t.group@nipsa.org.uk

**ALL LGB&T MEMBERS
WELCOME**

We Need To Talk About Suicide

To mark and support World Suicide Prevention Day 2012, the Northern Ireland Assembly endorsed the recommendations of the Protect Life strategy to develop a cross-departmental framework to assist the community and voluntary sector in suicide prevention. Suicide is the third biggest cause of death, after cancer and heart disease. Professor Mike Tomlinson of Queen's University published a report this year claiming that suicide rates among those directly affected by the Troubles are particularly high, with those growing up between 1969 and 1978 having the most rapidly increasing suicide rate of any age group in Northern Ireland. The age rate with the second highest suicide rate is young men between the ages of 25 and 34, while the suicide rate among women in Northern Ireland, 7.3%, is significantly higher than the UK average.

During the Assembly debate, the DUP'S Pam Brown acknowledged that:

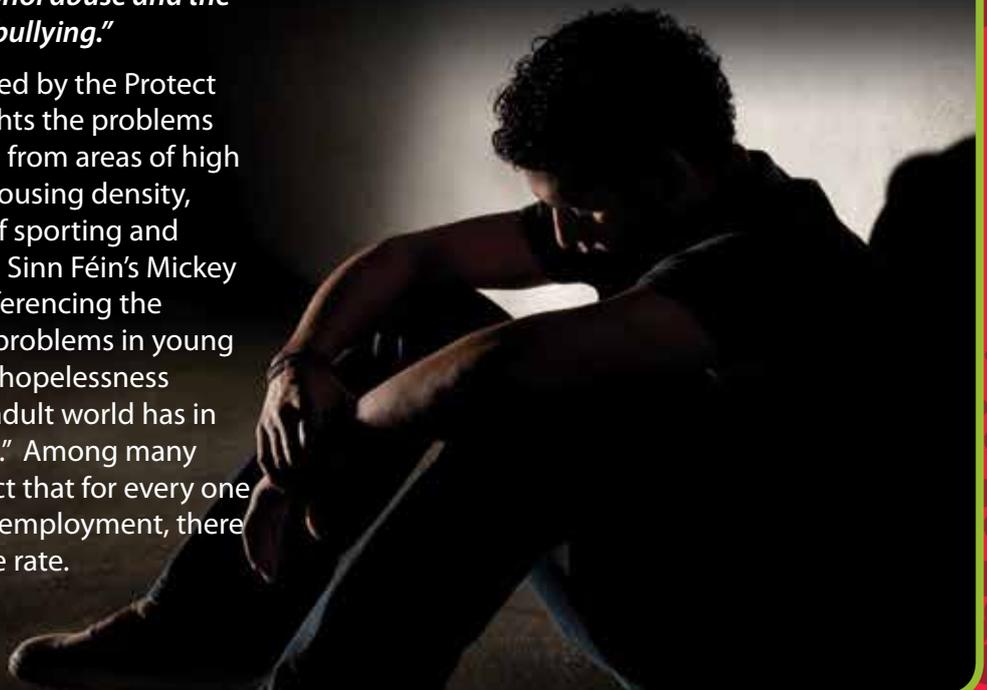
"The pressure on our young people has never been greater. Many of our communities face real deprivation, which brings a host of difficulties. There are also no employment opportunities, poor educational achievement, high levels of drug and alcohol abuse and the pressure of social network bullying."

Her comments are supported by the Protect Life strategy, which highlights the problems for young males who come from areas of high unemployment and high housing density, and who have a low level of sporting and recreational opportunities. Sinn Féin's Mickey Brady echoed that view, referencing the "upsurge in mental health problems in young people" and their "sense of hopelessness and futility and ... that the adult world has in many ways forgotten them." Among many shocking statistics is the fact that for every one percentage point rise in unemployment, there is a 0.75% rise in the suicide rate.

While the Assembly was happy to talk the talk, all too often it is the voluntary and community sector that is left battling the challenge of suicide rates in Northern Ireland, specifically among young males. As front-line NHS services become more and more target driven and services are squeezed to breaking point, medical practitioners and social workers can no longer adequately do their job. There can be no cure following the brutal finality of suicide. That is why prevention and appropriate intervention must be at the core of any strategy or policy.

Workplaces have their part to play too. The importance of good mental health must be recognised, and managers must be adequately trained to follow correct health and safety procedures and provide healthy working conditions.

A generation must not be left in crisis. The stigma attached to mental health problems only intensifies for those individuals who contemplate suicide and those families left bereaved following suicide. If we are to encourage those in need to speak out and seek help, all of us must be willing to hear what they have to say.



A Fitting Paralympic Legacy?

Not Even Fit For Purpose

Chancellor George Osborne, Gideon to his chums, proudly boasts of introducing the most stringent cuts in public expenditure seen for generations. He and his millionaire colleagues, that cabal of cabinet capitalists, demonise the public sector, lionise the private sector, target the poor, the sick, the needy, the vulnerable and the aged, and reward the rich, their fellow travellers in capitalism.

As part of this ideologically driven attack on the public sector, the stratum so detested by the Government, Osborne has continued with the myopic policy of selling off public sector jobs to the private sector. In the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Social Development (DSD) this has meant that responsibility for carrying out work capability assessments (WCAs) has been contracted out to ATOS Healthcare. WCAs administered by ATOS usually last around 15 minutes, and use a points system to look at how a person is able to function physically, intellectually and socially. The assessment is so flawed that, at their conference in May 2012, representatives of Britain's 44,000 General Practitioners voted in favour of a campaign to end it. The system has been likened to the one used in Australia, which was introduced in 2006. Tests there have subsequently been dubbed "car parking attendant tests" — could the person sitting in front of the privatised, target-driven assassins sit in a parking booth and take money? The practice was applied throughout Australia, with no regard given to location, skills, injury, pain levels or disability. The company work capability assessment programme reduced Government welfare costs dramatically, without ever considering that it had mass-produced an unnecessary number of possible car parking attendants in small, remote towns in the bush. Never having seen the episode "Skippy Learns to Drive", I wonder whether they made him a parking attendant too.

When the Chancellor was greeted by boos at the Paralympics, the anger building up against the

welfare reform agenda of the ConDem coalition and their treatment of disabled people and those who are ill was explicit. Furthermore, the sponsorship by ATOS of a number of Paralympic events was, at the very least, insensitive. Obviously those at the core of the company did not realise that it had taken Government money to actively attack some of the very Paralympians ATOS was now claiming to support.

Cecilia Burns from Strabane died of cancer on 27 August. Her treatment at the hands of the benefits system managed by the Department for Work and Pensions, and in part the private company ATOS Healthcare, illustrates the nightmare situation anyone could find themselves in if they were to become disabled or fall ill. While undergoing treatment for breast cancer, Cecilia approached the state for help. She was subjected to the new work capability assessment system. Like hundreds of thousands of others, Cecilia was badly let down. She was informed that, despite her ongoing treatment, she was "fit to work". Cecilia's benefits were subsequently reduced by about £30 a week. At a time when Cecilia should have been allowed to concentrate on her health and be free of pressure, she had to appeal that decision. Her appeal was successful, and Cecilia's benefits were restored, just a few weeks before her death. Cecilia described her situation to the BBC.

"I was treated badly. I've been working since I was 17. I've paid all my stamps, all my National Insurance. The only time I was ever sick was when I was pregnant with my two sons. It has had a financial effect on me but it's more [that] they're getting away with it. They are just treating you like a second-class citizen. That's how I feel - that I don't count, I don't matter".

ATOS has made hundreds of millions of pounds running work capability assessments for DWP, and is now about to heap more misery on people as it reassesses millions of disabled people for the new personal independence payments (PIP).
continued overleaf

A Fitting Paralympic Legacy?... *continued from previous page*

Listen to the words of another person's experience of ATOS, as told to Disabled People Against Cuts.

"Until recently I was claiming two benefits: disability living allowance as well as incapacity benefit. My benefits didn't amount to much, but at least they allowed me to lead some kind of life. Earlier this year, that all changed when ATOS called me in for a work capability test. I was so angry when I first received the letter from ATOS. After attending a work capability test I was passed fit to work by ATOS and had all my benefits stopped. ATOS made their decision based on a 15 minute interview. They never contacted any of the medical professionals treating me; they never even researched my case history. Now I face a lengthy and stressful appeals process against ATOS. I'm being treated for depression and at times have experienced suicidal thoughts. ATOS never seemed to care what affect their ruling would have on my health or on the health of those around me."

The Guardian newspaper has written a damning report on ATOS, specifically mentioning its appeals process. It explains that you are more likely to have a successful appeal if you have an audio assessment. However, for "security reasons", ATOS will not allow claimants to use their own recording equipment. For that reason, ATOS purchased 11 machines to be used in audio assessments, and those were split amongst the 123 centres used to interview 11,000 people each week. At the last check, several machines were broken. As ATOS is a target- and money-driven company, assessments cannot be postponed to allow for repair.

A civilized society is defined by how it looks after its most vulnerable. The right-wing ConDem coalition stands accused of putting profit before people. Its pernicious programme of welfare cuts is but the initial salvo in a renewed class war. They gleefully rub their hands as thousands of the sick and disabled are found "fit for work". Meanwhile ATOS is making millions from this process.

Contrast this Government's treatment of our society's most vulnerable with their failure to address banker's bonuses or the billions in tax that goes unclaimed each year due to tax avoidance or evasion. We should be ashamed at how this Government treats our sick, disabled and vulnerable. We should recognise ATOS as a cash-hungry business with real targets to reduce benefit costs throughout GB. However, we must remember that it was our political elite who set those targets and commenced battle against our sick, disabled and vulnerable.

A Reve

On Friday 24 August and Saturday 25 August, I was lucky enough to attend the Global Solidarity Summer School 2012 at Whites of Wexford hotel. The aim of the summer school was to enhance the engagement of affiliate trade unions with international development issues.

I attended a workshop: "Flowers and Fashion — the truth behind our consumer choices". I felt that the topic would be very relevant to our youth membership, and was not disappointed. Anteneh Belachew, a PHD research student at UCC, gave a presentation on the "General Working Conditions of Flower Farms in the Ethiopian Rift Valley". The discussion focused on the labour standards in those companies and the fact that most employees are confused about their employment terms and unaware of what they are entitled to. Employees have no written job description or contractual agreement with the farm. Rates of pay and overtime are unclear, and many employees feel that their hours are not recorded correctly. Among employees, 74% have direct or indirect contact with chemicals, with 48% wearing no protective clothing at all. Any protective clothing provided was found to be unsuitable and of poor quality. As a result, many

aling Insight

Lesley English attended the Global Solidarity Summer School 2012 on behalf of NIPSA Youth

people are unwillingly exposed to chemicals without proper protective clothing or masks. Such exposure has had a huge impact on the health of the workers — 56% of employees have some kind of health trouble, including skin problems and respiratory issues, which many believe are directly related to their working conditions.

During the second half of the workshop, Rosie O'Reilly and Kate Nolan introduced the Clean Clothes Campaign, and discussed the issues faced by those working in the clothing industry. Those issues include a living wage, poor working conditions, health and safety, and human rights versus economic policy. An important statement linking all those issues is: "Living in a society, not an economy". Currently, the Clean Clothes Campaign has three important and urgent appeals: Deadly Denim, which focuses on work issues and work-related deaths due to the sandblasting of denim; justice for Aminul Islam, a Bangladeshi labour rights activist and former garment worker who was found tortured and murdered in Dhaka on April 4 2012; and Free Somyot, a call upon the Thai authorities to drop all charges against Somyot Prueksakasemsuk and

all other human rights defenders detained through the lèse majesté laws. More information on those appeals can be found

before they are sold in a shop!

A fascinating discussion followed on how individual small choices can impact the industry and improve conditions and standards. An important point to stress is that knowledge needs to be more available to "Joe Bloggs" to ensure that people can make more informed decisions.

After the workshop, there was a feedback session to discuss the possible action that individuals and trade unions can take to increase the impact of each issue and make improvements.

As someone with very little knowledge of the Global Solidarity Scheme, I found the course very worthwhile and informative. There was something for everyone, whether a newcomer or an old campaigner. Working in our own 9-to-5 bubble, it is easy to become blinkered and withdrawn from the bigger issues and problems facing others around the world.

The Summer School demonstrated to me that each individual is capable of making a difference, should it be by actively taking part in appeals, through fund raising, or simply by changing their attitudes and choices.

I came away from Wexford with a few points to think over and share with the NIPSA Youth Committee.

- **about 1 billion people live on less than \$1.25 a day**
- **850 million people (15.5% of the world's population) live in hunger**
- **863 million people live in slum conditions**
- **approximately 20.9 million people are in forced labour worldwide**
- **456 million workers live below the \$1.25 a day poverty line**

on the Clean Clothes Campaign website. In one memorable example, it was described to us how approximately 167 people will work on a single pair of jeans

MEET THE COMMITTEE



Name: Lisa Hoy

Branch: Department of Justice

Workplace: Department of Justice NIPSA Office

Why are you a NIPSA member?: I am a trade unionist and strongly believe that if workers organise themselves and stick together they can really affect change in their workplace and in society.

Favourite superhero: If I don't say Spiderman, I will be in big trouble with my nephew.

Ultimate holiday destination: Cuba

Dream dinner party guests: Billy Connolly

Turn Up The Volume

- On 20th October, thousands took to the streets in Belfast to call for a fairer, better way and declare that the Tories' cuts and austerity measures are not working.
- Three members of the NIPSA Youth Committee were elected to sit on this year's General Council.
- This year, Pride events in Belfast and Foyle, as well as the first such festival in Newry, proved a great attraction for thousands of people across Northern Ireland. As always, NIPSA members were proud to be a part of the programme, and a great day out was had by all.

We Don't Want To Hear It

- The trend towards privatisation continues with the announcement that Ards Borough Council plans to privatise the Exploris aquarium in Portaferry.
- The recent increase in farm fatalities currently affecting the industry reminds us that one death is one too many.
- As the Welfare Reform Bill trundles through its Committee Stage at Stormont, local politicians continue to hide behind parity rather than show true leadership and look at the viable alternatives.

WORDSEARCH

Hidden In Plain Sight: The TaxPayers' Alliance

Can you find some backers of the TaxPayers' Alliance? Most of their funding is not revealed. Find out more about the strategy and purpose of this organisation check out the NIPSA Policy and Research latest publication, 'Behind the Mask', which is available here

<http://tinyurl.com/chwfmnk>



Christopher Kelly

Sir John Craven

David Alberto

Sir Rocco Forte

Malcolm McAlpine

Stuart Wheeler

Sir Anthony Bamford

Tony Gallagher

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