

RESISTING AUSTERITY, 17.8.15

**Mike Vallance,
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ACE, which has its office in Montgomery Street, developed from the Edinburgh Unemployed Workers Centre (EUWC) in Broughton Street. The EUWC was closed down by the city council in 1997. ACE is a centre for benefits claimants, low paid, part time and temporary workers. ACE handles cases by representing people when dealing with the authorities.

This involves fighting individual claims. We also support collective struggles, in particular against welfare abuses. We see this as just part of the international struggle against capital.

Since 1997 there has been a weekly drop-in at ACE every Tuesday. The main problem we deal with is benefits, but we also handle debt and housing problems. Many of the cases now involve benefit sanctions, particularly for the unemployed and disabled. There has been a huge increase in our caseload. The drop-in is officially from 12.00 - 15.00, but sometimes we have to remain open until 17.00 or 18.00, such is the increase in numbers. The horror is stepping up.

Workfare leads to community work placement for up to 6months. This involves 30 hours work a week for no extra money. Even MAXIMOS (the replacement for ABOS) admits that people who are unsuitable get put on Workfare.

To counter the threat of people being put on Workfare, we have developed the Solidarity Network (SN), which can draw upon 200-300 people in the city willing to give support.

Recently a claimant was asked to turn up at the Stockbridge Hospice of Hope. About 10 people from SN went along in support. The management had been told that those being directed to work were all volunteers. When confronted by the people from the SN, the manager agreed to pull out of the system. He also said that he would ensure that the authorities were told that it had been his decision not to take on the claimant. We have the support of Learn Direct, which represents genuine volunteers.

Adam (present at the meeting) is another person we have represented at 4 different levels of the Workfare procedure.

The Department of Work and Pensions do have courses to provide help, financed from the Flexible Support Fund. However, they do not advertise this. The SN is able to provide real help through its knowledge of the system.

What we are trying to develop is a counter-power to make Workfare unworkable. This was achieved with the Anti-Poll Tax Campaign.

We also have links with other groups in the UK. These include Boycott Austerity, Action Against Austerity, Dundee Against Welfare Sanctions, Perth Against Welfare Sanctions, Castlemilk Against Austerity, IWW and the Anarchist Federation.

We saw the 'Yes' vote in last year's referendum as a vote for fairer society. However, we don't believe you can rely on the state. There are many other issues that will bring people up against Holyrood, e.g. fracking and open cast coal mining.

In Edinburgh the council is run by a Labour-SNP coalition. They have been involved in a continued offensive against the cleansing workers. We have been involved in blockades against scab lorries. Dundee Against Welfare Sanctions was prominent in the campaign in support of the Ninewells Hospital Porters.

One problem has been trying to link up with the workers employed in the Jobs Centres. The last useful contact we had was Bill Scott. A major job is to try and link workers and benefits claimants in the face of the huge offensive to divide the working class. There is a link between the employers' workplace offensive, and the attacks on housing and on disability benefits.

One important case is the upcoming case against Tony Cox. He was representing a particularly vulnerable woman on Arbroath. Job Centre officials called the police, and although Tony was no longer in the office when the police arrived, he was still arrested. He comes up for trial in the Sheriff Court in Forfar on 13th October. There will be activity at Job Centres on October 12th in support of the right of advocacy.

Kate said she had been involved in the struggle for justice since 1992. People had been driven to despair by Thatcher. The City of London had wanted mass unemployment to promote a divide between the employed and unemployed. This divide was economic, social and psychological.

In the move from an industrial to a service economy, many people became "surplus to market requirements". Blair and Cameron have continued Thatcher's war and stepped up the propaganda offensive. The charities, which have been increasingly left to deal with the social consequences, do not recognise this offensive.

In Drumchapel women are being denied welfare rights. People dying of cancer, who are deemed to have more than 6 months to live, are being denied benefits. Many young people are increasingly accepting individual responsibility for socially created problems. They are being demonised, driving some to suicide.

Kate had been to Nicaragua in the past and learned from the women there that people who do not understand their history or present can not make their future.

Jane asked how much support there was from the voluntary sector.

Mike answered saying that there was support from the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations, Shelter, Oxfam, and Church Aid. They all wanted to keep the voluntary sector voluntary.

However companies like Poundland and Asda resort to Workfare labour.

Stewart said it was a heartbreaking situation. The growth of food banks shows there is now mass hunger. Workfare is designed to undermine the bargaining power of labour. The problem is that people have internalised capitalist values.

Willie said that he had learned from the Occupy movement. He had been involved in occupations of charities. However, he felt frustrated by the lack of action on a mass scale. Who will be the agent of real change? How do we involve wider layers of people?

More people are now anti-austerity. The political terrain is changing. This is reflected in the Corbyn campaign and the election of 56 SNP MPs. It is reflected in RIC and now the Scottish Left Project. We need political action as well as direct action.

Bob said that we need to reach out to union members, especially the workers in the benefits offices. An injury to one is an injury to all. However, to do this meant that members had to reclaim their unions and broaden their vision.

Kathy said that people were believing all the propaganda and had begun to internalise this. As a consequence people who had to claim benefits for the first time were really shocked.

Pat said that a lot of work needs to be done to deal with all the hype. The papers and the government are out to demonise the poor.

However, Pat's experience during the referendum campaign was that people began to see others' situations and think differently. People understood that the problem lay in the lack of power.

Luke said that Labour were part of the problem. Three of the current leadership candidates voted for Ian Duncan Smith's welfare cuts. Even the tax credits brought in under Brown were just subsidies for the employers. Will Corbyn organise extra-parliamentary action? Only this could be successful in resisting austerity.

Izy said that the use of language was important. We shouldn't describe people as claimants but as unemployed or disabled.

Mike said that people are increasingly judged by the job they do, not by any other contributions they make to society.

We need a society which can guarantee shelter, food, heating and transport for all. Our aim is not to get everybody into employment. Being employed is being exploited.

Back in the 1970's Mike Cooley and the Lucas Shop Stewards, when their factory was threatened with closure, produced a plan of socially useful production.

The Edinburgh Campaign Against Poverty was involved in direct action. But this is not all. We must relate to post-'Yes' campaign situation.

Campaigning can be successful. This was shown by the Anti-Poll Tax Campaign. There were over 30 local groups in Edinburgh. The poll tax was defeated. The Scottish government was forced to back down over the Bedroom Tax and provide funding.

In Spain there is a mass movement to resist evictions. Other countries such as Italy and France had a better record of workplace activity. The Edinburgh cleansing workers had had to fight against their unions as well as the city authorities.

Mike saw electoral work as a dead end. It is difficult to organise autonomously. He had visited the Zapatistas in Mexico, where people had taken over the land and were running their own communities.

Mike said that he was prepared to work alongside those who held different political ideas, so he welcomed the invitation from RIC to speak to the meeting..