

UK: Penniless father of three commits suicide while waiting for welfare payment

By Margot Miller
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Phillip Herron, a single parent from Durham, England, is another victim of the UK's punitive benefits system and the decades-long onslaught against the working class.

The 34-year-old father of three children was driven to suicide while waiting a month for his Universal Credit (UC) welfare payment to come through. At the time of his death he had just £4.61 in the bank. One can only imagine his desperation.

On March 18, he drove to a quiet country lane where he took his own life, after posting a photo of himself in tears on social media with a suicide note. Phillip left his job at a factory shortly before becoming the full-time care giver for his children.

His grieving mother, Sheena Derbyshire, 54, told the *Daily Mirror*, Phillip wrote that "his family would be better off if he wasn't there anymore." His family had been unaware of his financial difficulties, and his death came as "a complete shock."

Sheena later discovered that Phillip owed £20,000 to the banks, utility firms and the modern-day loan-sharks, pay day lenders who were charging him 1,000 percent interest. Phillip was in danger of losing his home. Among his paperwork, Sheena found an eviction notice received from his social landlord, the Bernicia housing association.

Sheena was able to form a picture of the last six months of her son's life by trawling through his computer and mobile phone. It revealed Phillip's life unravelling through no fault of his own. Listening to the last few months of voice messages revealing the deterioration of Phillip's mental health was "the most heart-wrenching thing I've ever done," said Sheena.

Phillip's death has had a devastating effect on the family. Sheena explained that his youngest daughter "is totally lost. She misses her dad so much. She had a dream the other night that he came to her. She said, 'I asked him not to leave again. But when I woke up, he wasn't there.' [The children] haven't even been offered counselling."

Sheena will present the evidence she uncovered among Phillip's belongings at the upcoming inquest into his death

to be held in Sacriston, County Durham—to expose how he was failed by the UC system.

UC was introduced in 2010 and rolled out nationally between 2013 and 2018. It is a single benefit payment replacing six existing previous entitlements for the unemployed and those with low incomes. Advanced by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition as simplifying the benefits system, it is designed to drive people into low paid jobs and cut benefits as part of slashing £12 billion cuts from the welfare budget.

As UC is paid a month in arrears, an initial claim is followed by at least five weeks before the first payment. This causes untold hardship. "When people turn to the government for help, they're already desperate," Sheena explained to the *Daily Mirror*. "To make them wait so long for payments is dangerous. There is no reason it should take so long. Phillip already had problems, but I think this was the final straw."

Phillip's death triggered an outpouring of sadness, outrage and anger on social media. Among the 260 comments on the *Manchester Evening News* Facebook page reporting the story are "This is barbaric," "those poor kids," and for "[t]he poorest debts should be written off like the banks were."

Singling out Amber Rudd, Secretary for the Department for Work and Pensions [DWP] who has been retained in Tory Prime Minister Boris Johnson's new class war cabinet, another tweeted: "You should hang your head in shame."

A DWP spokesperson had stated in relation to the tragedy, "Suicide is a very complex issue, so it would be wrong to link it to someone's benefit claim." In response one person stated on social media, "[N]ow another death on their blood-soaked hands."

Someone from Leeds posted, "So [former Tory Prime Minister] Theresa May cried when she lost her job. She didn't get upset for the working-class people who died in the Grenfell Tower. She never cried for the people who suffered due to cuts in Universal Credit and even committed suicide when all hope had gone."

Phillip joins a growing list of victims, whose deaths have been hastened by sadistic government cuts to benefit entitlement for hundreds of thousands of people.

Joy Worrall, an 81-year-old pensioner, threw herself into a quarry in North Wales in May after the DWP froze her pension benefits, leaving her destitute with just £5 to her name.

Martin John Counter, a 60-year-old from Bromley, took an overdose in September after being wrongly accused of benefit fraud. He suffered from myriad health problems making him unfit for work. He had forgotten to inform the DWP of some bank savings when he lodged a claim for Employment Support Allowance (ESA)—an essential benefit to assist people with disabilities.

On April 15, Stephen Smith, 64, died in Liverpool weighing just six stone after terrible suffering. The DWP had cut off his ESA and declared a chronically ill man “fit for work.”

Stephen Smith’s advice worker, Terry Craven, told the WSWS he found the news of Herron’s suicide “extremely upsetting. I cried when I saw Phillip’s case.

“He died needlessly. Phillip is the product of this evil government’s aims and objectives. [Former Tory leader and DWP minister] Iain Duncan Smith is back in government and will be wringing his hands in glee.

“Anyone reading about Phillip’s suicide will think, ‘Is that what it does to you, applying for Universal Credit?’ and will end up taking poorly paid work.”

Last year, the food bank Trussell Trust distributed 1.6 million food parcels to destitute households. A fifth of recipients needed help because of social security delays, half of which were UC claimants.

Because of the delay in the initial payment, renters can easily slip into rent arrears and face eviction. An *Inside Housing* investigation found that people on UC were twice as likely to present as homeless to their local councils as households under the previous benefits system.

Phillip’s death came just months after an academic study commissioned by Gateshead council found that claimants in the UC system had considered suicide over a number of issues. Alice Wiseman, the director of public health at Gateshead council, said of the study’s findings, “I consider Universal Credit, in the context of wider austerity, as a threat to the public’s health.”

An All-Party Parliamentary Group on Universal Credit report published July 18, “What needs to change about Universal Credit?” confirms the intention behind the UC welfare reforms is to intensify the impoverishment of the working class. It notes that under UC, tenants are left with a rent shortfall of between £100 and £300 a month. Families with three children lose an average £2,600 a year, while

larger families an average £7,800.

Families cannot qualify for free school meals above an income of £7,400 a year, leaving many households caught in a poverty trap. More than 100,000 families with disabled children will be worse off by £1,750 plus per year.

Parents under the age of 25 lose £66.05 a month under UC compared to the previous tax credit system. Parents who are students cannot claim childcare support. People with additional care needs stand to lose about £64 a week, while the most disabled adults in the support group for ESA will lose £42 a week.

Under UC far more people suffer welfare sanctions (with the first sanction being deprived of benefits for 91 days). Eleven percent of claimants have been sanctioned, around a fifth of them more than once.

Labour Party leaders routinely denounce the UC system. Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary Margaret Greenwood said, “The Coalition Government claimed Universal Credit would lift people out of poverty... [B]ut instead it is ruining lives.” This demagoguery conceals the fact that Labour refuses to even call for UC’s abolition. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn only calls for it to be “*redesigned*.” A party spokesman declared recently, “Universal Credit isn’t working and cannot continue *in its current form*.”

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