

British government reimposes welfare benefits sanctions as pandemic continues and unemployment rockets

By Simon Whelan
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In March, the Johnson government announced that those receiving welfare benefits including Universal Credit (UC) would not be sanctioned as they normally would if they failed to look for work or otherwise fulfilled their benefit conditionality.

Under pandemic lockdown conditions there was zero employment to find. Hundreds of thousands of workers were losing their jobs, becoming unemployed and themselves making claims. By June, the number of job center claimants had risen by 126 percent since the start of the pandemic, to 2.8 million.

With job centres closed for one-to-one meetings with “work coaches”, the system of “claimant conditionality” was suspended. This included the set of draconian rules that require among other things claimants to agree to carry out endless job search activities as a condition of receiving benefits. The minimum sanction period is four weeks—the loss of around £300—and the maximum 6 months. It was only reduced from a maximum three-year sanction in 2019.

Claimant conditionality involves the requirement that those claiming Universal Credit must demonstrate they are actively and constantly seeking work. A minor failure to adhere or an arbitrary infringement of the strict conditions frequently leads to benefits being cut off. Tens of thousands of workers have been made homeless, destitute, and hungry by this brutal system.

Today thousands of workers are losing their jobs across swathes of the economy. In May alone, over 5.2 million people claimed Universal Credit. By way of comparison, just over 2 million did so a year earlier. Unemployment is rising exponentially, and economists are predicting a return to mass unemployment that could rise well beyond that of the 1980s and reach

levels not seen since the 1930s Great Depression.

Even as the government reopens the economy in conditions that remain unsafe for millions with the pandemic still spreading, particularly in workplaces, it has ensured that benefit sanctions return. On July 1, job centres reopened including in-person meetings between claimants and work coaches.

With the government bringing an end to any measures to combat the virus, all obstacles to a return to profitability must be eradicated regardless of the risks to the public. This includes either driving the unemployed into cheap labour work in dangerous conditions or ending the costly provision of benefits to those unable to find or do a job, and therefore surplus to requirements.

A 2015 report by the Trussell Trust highlighted how sanctions were used to reduce benefit payments for those in need of them. One claimant was sanctioned for missing an appointment because he was at hospital with his partner, who had just given birth to a stillborn child. Another missed an appointment because his brother had died that day. In a case reported from an Essex foodbank, a claimant was sanctioned because, although he had turned up in good time, the length of the queue in the job centre meant he failed to keep his appointment.

The announcement that job centres were to reopen and sanctions reimposed came as the main trade union representing Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) staff warned that many job centres were expected to open on July 1 without having conducted a proper COVID-19 risk assessment. In a public place where hundreds arrive and leave all day, a survey by the Public and Commercial Services union revealed

widespread concerns among staff about insufficient floorspace in job centres to implement a safe 2-metre social distancing requirement. The government has now scrapped the 2-metre rule in favour of a nonsensical “1 metre plus”. The union also reported there was not enough plastic screens and personal protective equipment.

In addition to risking their lives, many thousands of physically and mentally vulnerable people must again visit job centres and be subjected to the de-humanising job search regime. People still suffering the effects of post viral fatigue will be pressured into work, as will those for whom the lockdown and its ending have been traumatising and stressful. Once more the benefit system will prey upon the most vulnerable as the ranks of the homeless, destitute, and imprisoned grow.

Ayaz Manji, senior policy officer at Mind, the mental health charity, described the decision by the government as “appalling” and demanded it be reversed: “Suspending benefit sanctions was put in place to protect people from the impact of coronavirus. But reintroducing sanctions when coronavirus is still very much an issue is nonsensical.”

The DWP claimed the government has “been there for those who have lost jobs or have reduced hours in this pandemic, promptly processing new claims and getting money into the accounts of those in urgent need within days.” Under conditions of an ongoing pandemic, the spokesperson continued, “Now our focus is rightly switching to Getting Britain Back into Work. From July, people can make an appointment with their work coach if they can’t get the help they want online or over the phone and work coaches will be calling all claimants to help them get ready for the world of work.”

After reminding workers they will be forced into whatever work is deemed suitable, the government claimed that conditionality arrangements would be sensitive to new claimants’ local jobs market and personal circumstances. Clear guidance would apparently be issued to staff to ensure people were not sanctioned unless they breached conditionality “for no good reason.”

This is fooling nobody. Thousands of workers over recent years have experienced the docking of their benefits by the DWP “for no good reason”. The tragic deaths of Stephen Smith and Errol Graham are only

two of the cases of the terrible suffering endured by those who required assistance, but instead received only hostility.

Last year, the WSWS reported a study which found that more than 900,000 Job Seeker’s Allowance (JSA) claimants who reported a disability have been financially sanctioned since May 2010. Also sanctioned were 110,000 claimants of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), a benefit paid to someone who is sick, and placed in the “work related activity group” (WRAG). A further 140,000 sanctions were applied, but later cancelled.

In the House of Commons on June 30, the day before job centres reopened, Work and Pensions Secretary Thérèse Coffey opposed the suspension of sanctions being extended beyond the three-month lockdown. “It’s important that as the job centres fully reopen this week, we do reinstate the need for having a claimant commitment” she said.

During questions in parliament, Labour’s Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, Jonathan Reynolds, played the role of a loyal partner in a de facto government of national unity. He made no call for the scrapping of sanctions, cautioning only that people could lose benefits at a time when “unemployment has risen sharply.”

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