

Running to Stand Still: Globalisation, Blagging and the Dole

2001

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Over the years the government has helpfully financed many campaigns and actions against itself. Lots of people in the direct action movement rely on dole money from the state in order to survive. However, over the last few years there has been a big shake up of the welfare state. What has our response been to this? How will it affect us? And has the supply of free money finally run dry?

Throughout the past two decades, the dole has provided the basis for a number of creative projects and movements, some of which have been overtly political. In the 1980s, the relaxed benefit regime allowed many to drop out of work and form new types of antagonistic lifestyles and tendencies, for example around the anarcho-punk scene. This was carried on into the 1990s when the dole became the basis for the growing anti-roads movement, the campaign against the Criminal Justice Bill, as well as the more recent development of the militant direct action movement. Being on the dole has simply given us the time to become full-time politicians; the dole has in effect been a 'trouble-maker's grant'. After all, who can find the time to do an office action on a Monday morning, spend days waiting for an eviction or take part in days of action from J18 to Bastille Day that always seem to be on a week day? Fair enough, phoning in sick became part of the action on J18, but we can't exactly phone in sick every week when we want to go to an action, let alone risk being locked up in a cell for days. But apart from giving us the time to become full-time politicians, in an important sense opting out of work has become a political statement in itself in the direct action scene.

The first major attack on this lifestyle came in the mid-1990s when the Conservative government replaced the old-style benefit regime with the Job Seekers Allowance (JSA). This was followed shortly by the workfare scheme, 'Project Work', which was piloted in a number of towns and then implemented more widely by the New Labour government. Both were met by some collective resistance. However, when New Labour introduced a much more ambitious quasi-workfare based programme, the 'New Deal', the limited collective resistance there had been previously was reduced to individual solutions, characterised by blags and scams.

It was this lack of collective resistance to the New Deal, and more recently to the Welfare Reform Act, that led some to emphasise the tragic consequences this would have for the direct action scene.¹ Arguing that the dole was the financial basis for the so-called full-time politico, the recent attacks on the dole were seen as potentially a threat to this movement. Whereas previously long-term unemployment, and hence the political opportunities it afforded, could almost be thought of as a

¹ See the pamphlet *Dole autonomy versus the re-imposition of work: Analysis of the current tendency to workfare in the UK* by Aufheben. (Available for £1.50 Europe/£2 elsewhere (including postage) from: Aufheben, c/o BHUWC, 4 Crestway Parade, Hollingdean, Brighton BN1 7BL, UK.)

life-time career, the slogan ‘no fifth option’² – repeatedly voiced by the Blairites in No. 10 – served to illustrate that such careers would no longer be possible.

However, two years into the New Deal, it seems that all this fuss was over nothing. Quite a few people have been on the introductory stage of the New Deal as well as on placements, and contrary to the doom and gloom predictions, in some areas at least, people have found it quite easy to blag their way through it. Perhaps the introduction of Welfare to Work-type schemes wasn’t such a big threat to the movement after all.

The Global Workhouse

Before discussing the effectiveness of blagging, it is necessary briefly to examine the rationale behind the current tendency for workfare-type programmes and to situate their introduction in the context of our struggles. After all, what has the New Deal got to do with genetics, road building, animal liberation, prison actions or reclaiming our streets?

The concept of ‘globalisation’ is one which many in the direct action movement have used to make the link between our diverse struggles. As has been discussed in these pages, ‘globalisation’ is the problematic term commonly used to describe the strategy pursued by capital in response to the last revolutionary upsurge which took place at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s.³ In Britain and other advanced industrialised countries, the post-war compromise between capital and labour was essentially based on a productivity deal in which higher wages were conditional upon a growth in productivity. But by the end of the 1960s, workers demanded higher wages only now for less and less work. At its highest point, this tendency expressed itself as a refusal of work at the point of production. The link between wages and work was being stretched to the limit and beyond. The response of capital was flight from investment in those industries and countries characterised by this ‘bloody-mindedness’ and refusal. Such flight thus served to outflank areas of working class strength.

This restructuring was particularly acute in Britain. Unlike some of the other advanced industrialised countries, Britain was a relatively developed centre of finance capital, and therefore could afford to abandon huge swathes of its manufacturing industry. Politically, therefore, the Thatcherite project meant the introduc-

² The New Deal for 18–24 year olds entails four ‘options’: subsidised employment, study or training, work in the ‘voluntary’ sector or work on the ‘Environmental Task Force’. Refusing the ‘options’ can mean a benefit sanction.

³ See ‘Globalisation: Origins – History – Analysis – Resistance’ in Do or Die No. 8.

tion of policies that capitalised on the transformation of large-scale manufacture into footloose global finance capital.

Most importantly, the post-war consensus around full employment was abandoned. Instead, unemployment was allowed to let rip. Along with anti-strike legislation, the creation of a pool of unemployed workers was intended to eliminate some of the more militant sections and to discipline the working class as a whole.

While the 'neo-liberal' policies employed by many of the governments in the advanced industrialised countries had some success in curbing militant and revolutionary tendencies among workers, they also served to create a number of barriers to further capital expansion. From the point of view of capital, a pool of unemployed workers encourages those within work to work harder and accept lower wages by operating as the competition. Yet if the pool of unemployed is allowed to become stagnant, it will no longer represent such competition, and instead existing workers will still retain some leverage in their relations with the bosses. What had in fact emerged was a dual labour market where those out of work were either unwilling to find work or perceived as being unemployable; as a result, the people in work could move around from job to job still demanding relatively high wages.⁴ It therefore became hard to impose flexible working conditions. Some of the highest expressions of this unemployed 'recalcitrance' were among those who consciously used the dole as the basis for various anti-capitalist projects. In effect, the refusal of work that had previously appeared at the point of production had now been displaced onto the dole.

Industrial capital in countries such as Britain transformed itself into globally footloose finance capital in order to seek the most accommodating labour markets. Yet, in proletarianising workers in less-industrialised countries such as Taiwan and Korea, it served to create militants where they hadn't previously existed. The multinational companies and investment firms that we associate with globalisation therefore continually need nation-states to re-impose the most conducive labour conditions so that they can flee those countries where they are threatened by worker militancy. In short, globalisation is essentially about the re-imposition of work.

In Britain and other advanced industrialised countries, the stagnant reserve army of labour had to be done away with in order to attract greater capital investment. It is no coincidence that all these countries are now pursuing similar policies in order to develop compliant labour market conditions. The policies in Britain, the USA, France, Germany, Holland, Denmark, Canada, Australia and New Zealand go by a number of names and vary in their degree of compulsion, but all are vari-

⁴ Though there is often talk of a 'skills gap', what apparently puts bosses most off employing the unemployed is our lack of 'soft skills' — by which they mean basic work-discipline.

ations on the theme of work-for-dole, or workfare. Workfare, then, is the face of globalisation for many of us. Workfare overcomes the problem of ‘recalcitrance’ in the reserve army of labour by inculcating work-discipline in everyone. Both those who seek a job but who have been out of work for too long and those who found in mass unemployment an opportunity to pursue anti-capitalist lifestyles are to be instilled with the necessary work-discipline to participate in the labour-market.

Although in Britain it is New Labour which has made the principles of workfare the keystone of its attempt to restructure the labour-market, the foundations were already laid by the Conservatives, with the introduction of the Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) in 1996. Being unwilling to increase public spending, the Conservatives hoped that the dual labour-market could be overcome simply by pressuring people into the existing jobs. By putting in place sanctions for any of us who couldn’t provide proof that we had been applying for jobs, it replaced the notion of us being passive claimants with one of us being active job-seekers. A further advance was made in the re-imposition of work with Project Work – a quasi-workfare scheme presented as a ‘work experience’ programme rather than ‘work-for-your-benefits’.

But as with other overtly neo-liberal measures introduced by the Tories, these policies not only failed to gather public support, but the orthodox neo-liberal insistence on not increasing public spending on welfare was to be their downfall. The punitive approach to unemployment meant that not only claimants directly affected by the measures came out in opposition, which on the direct action and anarcho scene mainly manifested itself in the actions of the Groundswell network, but the dole workers themselves put up considerable resistance, in some areas downing tools on the day the JSA came into force.⁵ But although this resistance did prevent the smooth implementation of both the JSA and Project Work, the limits of both ultimately became obvious more as a result of them being grossly under-funded, and consequently serving more to fiddle the unemployment figures by pushing people off the dole than dealing sufficiently with the dual labour market.

⁵ Job Centre workers and claimants had different reasons for opposing the JSA, but both were opposed to the increased ‘policing’ aspects – the dole workers because they realised that it would bring them into greater conflict with claimants. Although the common ground of discontent between claimants and dole workers could have been used to our advantage, in most areas around the country it wasn’t. In fact, the struggle against the JSA by some people around the Groundswell network often manifested itself in very personalised struggles against the dole workers themselves (e.g. ‘Three Strikes and You’re Out’, an initiative whereby individual dole workers who gave claimants hassle would receive warnings on their first and second ‘offences’ and action would be taken against them on the third). In Brighton, however, an alliance was made, and occupations of Job Centres were accompanied by downing tools.

The New Deal and the Welfare Reform Act

When New Labour, shortly after they came into office, launched the New Deal as the government's flagship policy, it was hoped that both the problem of public perception of the schemes and the problem of their overtly punitive nature could be effectively avoided. In line with the so-called 'Third Way' between social democracy and neo-liberalism, they abandoned Conservative dogma against state intervention. By investing £3.5 billion in the programme (a lot more than they could ever hope to save in the short-term from getting people off the dole), their intention was clear: the New Deal was not just supposed to slash a few million quid off the welfare bill, but was an altogether more ambitious scheme aimed at tackling the dual labour market once and for all.

And unlike the old punitive schemes relying on merely pushing people off the dole, the New Deal was sold as a state-led attempt to do away with 'social exclusion'. Consequently, when the New Deal was launched as a compulsory scheme for 18–24 year olds in April 1998, the initial 'Gateway stage' was presented not as an extension of the intensive job-search introduced with the JSA, but as a three-month period of 'individualised job-counselling'. The subsequent four 'options' of educational training, sweeping streets on the 'Environmental Task Force', or a placement either in the 'voluntary' sector or a subsidised job were presented not as working for your dole but as work experience programmes that would provide the unemployed with a smooth entry into the job-market. The New Deal has since been extended to most other age groups, single parents and partners of the unemployed.

With the recent introduction of the Welfare Reform Act, this 'help' has been extended to all other claimants not sufficiently covered under the other schemes: by the simple act of centralising all the benefit offices into a 'one-stop-shop', the work-focused interviews associated with the JSA will now be extended to all other claims. Under the banner of 'helping the disabled back into the community', they are justifying getting people off the sick (whereas encouraging people to go on the sick previously served as a means to fiddle unemployment figures, New Labour has made it clear that whatever your condition, there is now no safe haven from the labour market). Moreover, abandoning the social-democratic dogma of public ownership, New Labour have sought to introduce the dynamism of the market into the Job Centres themselves, by privatising Employment Service functions at the same time as some of the new elements of 'Welfare Reform' have been introduced. Thus

⁶ Employment Zones involve a 'personal job account' whereby money is supposedly spent on whatever the claimant and advisor regard as 'maximising employability' — be it wage-subsidies or training schemes. Any money left over when the claimant is shoved into a job is kept by the providers as profits. Employment Zones were introduced in 14 high-unemployment areas in April 2000. The scheme is compulsory for those over 24 who have been claiming JSA for over 12 months.

not only is the New Deal delivered by private firms (such as Reed Employment) in some areas, but the new intensive 'Employment Zones' are the responsibility of consortia made up of partnerships between the Employment Service and companies such as Ernst & Young and Manpower.⁶

In other words, although New Labour tries to present their Welfare to Work programme as a more integrative approach to the issue of unemployment, and as such a departure from the punitive and openly neo-liberal approach of the previous government, the reality is that they do this only because it is a more efficient way of integrating the recalcitrant unemployed into a flexible labour market. The language and state-intervention normally associated with social democracy has come to the service of a neo-liberal agenda. And as is acutely clear for anybody who has had to sit through one of their work-focused interviews, and politely turn down their 'help', the bedrock of the New Deal is of course still the harsh JSA regime they so proudly proclaim themselves to have departed from: refuse the counselling or the 'options' and you will have all your benefits stopped.

Dole Workers and Activists

Despite the clear discrepancy between the reality of the recent attacks on the dole and the ideological offensive that has accompanied it, a lot of lefty-liberals seem to have bought into it. Indeed it has to some extent succeeded in getting the people on board who had previously shown the most fierce and effective resistance to the JSA and Project Work, namely many of the dole workers. To some extent identifying with the concept of 'work being important for your self-respect', many see their role as being one of helping the individual claimants into a better existence. The New Deal with its seemingly individualised claimant-based approach and job counselling seems to do just that, and as a result the resistance of the past has become more muted, despite continuing cynicism among dole workers about government policies.⁷

A similar thing seems to have happened in the direct action scene. Where there was at least some collective resistance against the JSA and Project Work, resistance to the New Deal has been if not non-existent, then much less visible — mostly taking the form of individual blags. Has the direct action scene been taken in by

⁷ This simmering down of resistance should not be overstated, however. It was always more overtly collective than that of claimants themselves and has expressed itself in continuing opposition to the incursion of private companies into the Employment Service; the involvement of such private firms threatens not only the 'new ethos' of the New Deal but also the wages and conditions of the relatively entrenched public sector dole workers. Indeed the latter is the key reason for the government's decision to involve the private sector in the Employment Service.

NewLabourSpeak? We think not. In fact, in an important sense, they couldn't be further apart. Where the lefty-liberals' part endorsement of New Labour's Welfare to Work programme, in contrast to their opposition to the previous schemes, is essentially based on an identification with social democracy, the people in the direct action scene seem to have no such illusions about the supposedly progressive nature of this. The notion of 'duties and responsibilities to society' is quite clearly seen as duties to state and capital. And the notion of 'work being good for your soul' hasn't exactly had any resonance either.

The reason why there has been no overt resistance to the New Deal and the Welfare Reform Act in the activist scene lies not so much in ideology as in practicalities. The very inclusiveness of New Labour's Welfare to Work scheme has made it a great deal easier for us to blag our way through than it was at first thought. Ironically, one of the reasons why this has been the case in at least some areas around the country lies in the fact that the dole workers have in certain unforeseen ways taken seriously the 'new ethos' of the New Deal. Many dole workers resent the 'policing' aspects of their job and have taken advantage of the flexibility of the new schemes to avoid pressuring people; they have allowed people to stay on the Gateway job counselling stage well beyond the three months limit set by the government. Their acceptance of the New Deal and the Welfare Reform Act as genuine measures to 'help' claimants also means that they have welcomed claimants' own initiatives, thereby making it easier for us to sort out our own soft placements. The result has in many areas been that a lot of claimants have found it easier to stay on the dole without much hassle.

But apart from this, people in the direct action scene have, as always, been quick in developing a number of elaborate blags and scams. Before the current purge of those entitled to sickness benefit, the easiest and quickest way to avoid being included in the New Deal would be to fake depression or an unidentifiable physical illness. But even if this is no longer possible, plenty of other avenues are still open. Out of a whole number of scams, the most common one has been to find some fake placement with a friend or contact in which you are officially placed on a work experience programme in whatever company. In this way many have been able to keep the dole office off their back, without ever having to show up either at the so-called placement or to sign on every fortnight. Of course, not all of us are so lucky — instead we find that we are actually expected to help out a bit at our 'fake' placement (a favour for a favour). But even so, digging some organic allotment once in a while, helping out in some right-on book shop, political archive or 'Third World' centre isn't really that much of a hassle. In fact, it might not even be that far removed from what we would be doing anyway. Even better, some have been able to turn the New Deal to their own advantage by getting on an otherwise pricey mountaineering, Desk Top Publishing or Web Design course — all handy

skills when you want to set up a road camp, occupy buildings or produce political magazines and web sites.

And if things start to get tough, if you are signing on with your partner, you can always swap the claim, or alternatively just sign off for about three months, do a bit of work and go abroad. So even if schemes such as the New Deal initially appeared as a potential threat to the movement, in some cases quite the opposite would seem to have happened. Not only have a substantial amount of people around the direct action scene been able to work their way around it, but it has arguably helped us to become more effective political activists. If the old dole regime was characterised as a 'trouble-maker's grant', this term has now gained an added meaning (a trouble-maker's training scheme?).

However, it is quite likely that the effects the changes in the dole have had on our movement are not at present visible. For largely unrelated reasons there are currently no large-scale campaigns involving loads of people. There are very few protest sites now and those which there are are smaller. The sort of activity that direct action people have been engaging in recently is more compatible with work; single big demos, one-day things etc. — not living up a tree for a year. It is possible that were there again to be a large campaign which would require people to be on the dole we would notice our depleted ranks more than at present.

Working to Avoid Work

Not everyone can blag all the time, and the government is slowly catching up on our different blags. As a lot of people have come to realise lately, remaining on the sick is becoming increasingly difficult.⁸ The government has even picked up on the phenomenon of the 'full-time politico' and has used it to cut our benefits by arguing that we can't be actively seeking work if we are involved in these sorts of activities. This has obviously been hard for them to prove unless they have got evidence of us living on site or otherwise engaged in some clearly 'full-time' activity.

But as people who have been 'PANSIED' (Politically Active Not Seeking Employment — apparently one of the dole office's official categories!) at various protest sites have found out, it is even possible for them to overcome this barrier. At the Manchester Airport protests in 1997, the dole office tried a new strategy. They simply matched up the signing records to where different sites had been (e.g. someone

⁸ Just as the Conservatives introduced the 'All Work Test' to make the conditions of claiming sickness benefit more stringent, New Labour have introduced further hurdles with their 'Personal Capability Assessment' test: if you can lick a stamp you can work, never mind that you're dying of heart disease.

who had suspiciously moved between Exeter, Newbury and Manchester), and attempted to cut people's dole on the basis that they weren't actively seeking work. (In this case, the protesters were able to successfully argue that they were religious and not political activists, threatening to take the DSS to court if they didn't give everybody their dole back.) In November 1999, a similar thing happened to 15 activists who had been living on or associated with the Gorse Wood site in Essex — only this time it seems that it came about through co-operation between the dole office and police intelligence, as people who had been spotted on site but weren't actually living there were amongst the 15 who got their dole money stopped on the basis that they were fraudulently claiming benefits.

Poster for a national unemployed demonstration against the French workfare scheme to be held in Perpignan, the French South coast unemployment blackspot (The Costa del Dole — sound familiar?)

In general, then, while a given individual might be able to blag for a certain amount of time, the government is always seeking to close these loopholes. Blags that existed in the 1980s dole heyday no longer exist; and by the same token, today's blags will eventually be snuffed out: you can run but you can't hide!

The inherently temporary nature of dole-blags means that the search for new blags becomes an objective in itself. But a culture of blagging — blagging as an end in itself — has side-effects upon ourselves and what we are striving to do as a movement. The need to find individual blags can obscure the overall situation in which we are all having to channel our creativity in these ways. It is as if this culture of blagging has taken on a life of its own, to the extent that we become blind to the overall facts of the situation. It is as if we are so used to being on the receiving end of countless state attacks, that we have given up on trying to collectively resist them and instead pat ourselves on the backs when we have found a new way of fiddling them individually.

But whilst we pat each other on the back for all our scheming, the government has meanwhile succeeded in getting what the Conservatives could only have dreamt of: in a very short space of time they have managed to dispose of the idea of passive claimants, and made it into an active process. Only five years ago we could have sat back content in the knowledge that if we wanted a life of leisure (if a rather low-budget one) all we had to do was to show up at the dole office every fortnight. Now, if not actively seeking work, we are actively avoiding work. And this in itself has become a full-time occupation.

In fact, the extent to which the culture of blagging has taken on a momentum of its own also becomes obvious in our relation to work. Whereas the whole alternative scene of the 1980s and 90s was accompanied by an anti-work ethic — a sentiment carried forward into the direct action scene today — it seems that our idealisation of blagging has gone so far that we are even willing to do a bit of

work if this becomes necessary. This has become clear in cases where our fake placements actually expect us to help out by playing on the good old unwritten rules of 'favour for favour' — a crude form of what can only be termed moralistic blackmailing that most of us might be annoyed by, but are nevertheless willing to accept. In effect, although blagging was only supposed to be a means to avoid work, we have conceded to working in the name of blagging.

Assets to Globalisation

In addition, the resourcefulness of people around the direct action scene has also helped the implementation of the recent attacks on all claimants. One of the major problems the government has encountered in implementing their Welfare to Work schemes has been that of finding the necessary amount of placements needed for the people they still haven't managed to push into a job on the Gateway stage of the New Deal. This might at first seem strange as from the employer's point of view New Deal placements would seem like an offer they couldn't possibly resist. Here's the deal: get people on the New Deal to work for you for free. And don't worry, there's no catch. You don't even have to commit yourself to employing them afterwards. As soon as the 6 month period of free labour is up, you just get rid of them and take on some new 'trainees'. However, if there is one thing that employers like less than paying £3.60 an hour to their employees, it is having workers they can't even rely on to show up, let alone do 'an honest day's work', hence the cautious take-up rate for the New Deal placement schemes. So by finding our own 'placements' we are helping the government in one of the tasks they have found most difficult to complete. Insofar as these are soft placements, this is obviously not a direct substitute for what the state would have wanted, but it increases the success rate of New Deal placements, hence giving it more credibility.

More importantly though, finding placements (real or otherwise) serves to justify putting more pressure on all other claimants who might not be as resourceful or have as many (green) middle class connections as some people in the direct action scene do. Measures such as the New Deal and the Welfare Reform Act have actually met substantial passive resistance from most claimants, which is exactly why the government has decided to increase some of its sanctions lately. But if there are claimants who, before even being forced into a placement, continually manage to find their own, as well as successfully completing them without any complaints from either the claimant or the 'placement provider', it obviously legitimises putting more pressure on the remaining claimants. They appear less co-operative and therefore become the 'undeserving poor'; those who have had the offers of work and who must be 'scroungers' because they have refused such of-

fers. They are therefore to be subject to more pressure and sanctions. It is ironic that the people who are actively trying to resist measures such as the New Deal, by doing so with individual blags, actually end up leaving the rest in the shit.

The seemingly boundless resourcefulness of people around the direct action scene does mean that we have avoided what was otherwise depicted as a doom and gloom scenario of welfare reform being a serious threat to the movement. But not only does it require more and more work for us to simply avoid being forced off the dole, but our continuous blags have also had the effect of justifying increased pressure on other claimants. Maybe more importantly though, it seems to have made us blind to the overall picture of why and how the state chooses to attack us. We constantly talk about the evils of globalisation and neo-liberalism, but when we actually experience what that means in Britain in our own lives we don't even seem to notice, let alone do anything about it except as individuals. Yet individual solutions are effectively collective problems. The 'welfare reform' we have seen the government pursuing for the past three years has entailed attacks on the benefits of different groups, one at a time (single parents, the disabled, under 25s etc.); the government has been careful not to attack everyone at once for fear of prompting collective resistance. By using individual solutions such as blagging we are relying on the atomised and fragmented climate they are seeking to create and therefore just playing into their hands. As mentioned, 'globalisation' has been one concept the direct action movement has drawn upon in order to overcome the fragmentation of struggles. Yet, since globalisation is actually about the re-imposition of work, and since the struggle within and against work is part of our daily existence, the concrete link we really need to make is between global capital and our own experience of being pressured to work. Individual blagging, when posited as the principal solution to the attack on benefits, only serves to further the very globalisation we are supposedly resisting in our trips to Prague or Seattle. Blagging isn't against globalisation; it is part of it..

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