

Media release – Embargoed until Monday 27th February

Twenty two towns plan workfare protests this Saturday as government hides evidence

Boycott Workfare have today confirmed that their national day of action on Saturday 3rd March will go ahead, despite reports that the government has asked the police to crack down on protests. Action is now planned in twenty two towns in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. [1] [2] [3]

The protests follow two weeks of mass social media campaigning that have seen many companies cease or suspend compulsory unpaid work placements in response to public pressure. The government has responded to concerns by trying to argue that unpaid work is only offered to the young and that it is voluntary.

Boycott Workfare takes issue with these claims [4] and points out that the DWP has edited documents to disguise that forced unpaid work is taking place. The following phrase was removed from Work Programme guidelines last week: "Where you are providing support for JSA participants, which is work experience you must mandate participants to this activity. This is to avoid the National Minimum Wage Regulations, which will apply if JSA participants are not mandated." A Freedom of Information response showing that mandatory work placements took place in several high profile high street stores has also been removed. [5]

Joanna Long, a member of Boycott Workfare commented:

"The government has responded to widespread public concern about forced unpaid work with a series of absurd claims, including that people who believe work should be paid are "snobs"! They have repeated the falsehoods that workfare is "voluntary" and that the schemes are helping people find work. They have rewritten their own guidance to avoid exposing that a minister has misled the public. Now they are threatening legitimate protest. It's hard to see how the government could do more to prove that it cannot win this argument."

Describing the reasons for the Day of Action, she said:

"Workfare has been pushed out on a massive scale. Big chains like Tesco, Asda, and McDonalds continue to profit from forced unpaid work in their stores. Others like Matalan, Argos and Superdrug have only suspended involvement. Charities like the British Heart Foundation and local authorities like Medway Council are also using workfare instead of hiring paid staff. The mass public action of the last few weeks is rolling back workfare in the UK. The day of action will show that it is not a niche issue. Workfare affects all of us; it drives down wages and replaces paid work. That is why hundreds of people will be taking action on their high street this weekend."

Boycott Workfare responds to Tesco

Boycott Workfare have also issued a formal response to Tesco's press release of 21 February [6].

Commenting in more detail on Tesco's position Joanna Long said:

"Tesco has not ended workfare in its stores, and until it does it remains a target for our day of action on Saturday 3rd March. A company which counts its profits in the billions can afford to pay the people working in its stores." [7]

Notes to editors:

[1] Boycott Workfare is a UK-wide campaign to end forced unpaid work for people who receive welfare. Workfare profits the rich by providing free labour, whilst threatening the poor by taking away welfare rights if people refuse to work without a living wage. We are a grassroots campaign, formed in 2010 by people with experience of workfare and those concerned about its impact. We expose and take action against companies and organisations profiting from workfare; encourage organisations to pledge to boycott it; and actively inform people of their rights. We are not affiliated to any political party and are open to all who share our aims. More info: <http://www.boycottworkfare.org/>

[2] It was reported in the Mail on Sunday that Iain Duncan Smith has asked the police to act against workfare protests: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2106601/Tories-order-police-halt-workfare-demos-MP-makes-formal-protest-BBC-bias-favour-hard-Left-militants.html>

[3] An up to date list of towns taking part in the Day of Action can be found here: <http://www.boycottworkfare.org/?p=359>

[4] For links to DWP documents that show that workfare schemes are mandatory and that workfare does not improve job outcomes, please see Boycott Workfare's "The Facts" page: http://www.boycottworkfare.org/?page_id=663

[5] The DWP guidance for Work Programme providers has been edited to remove reference to mandatory unpaid work. See Chapter 3, point 14. The original version: <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/foi-3238-2011.pdf> The edited version: <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/wp-pg-chapter-3.pdf>

This Freedom of Information response shows that people are mandated to work unpaid for private companies on the Work Programme: <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/foi-3238-2011.pdf> The DWP appear to have removed this link, so you can find the document here instead: <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/foi-3238-2011.pdf>

[6] The DWP announced that Tesco is still involved in its Work Experience scheme: <https://twitter.com/#!/dwppressoffice/status/171971246169407488> Tesco's position statement can be found here: <http://www.tescopl.com/news/news-releases/2012/tesco-offers-choice-on-work-experience/>

[7] Full statement from Boycott Workfare on Tesco:

Tesco have not pulled out of the DWP Work Experience scheme which compels people to work unpaid for 30 hours a week for eight weeks on threat of welfare sanctions. Tesco knows that the public object to this mandatory scheme, and this is why it is calling on the government to remove sanctions.

Tesco have announced that they will give people sent on this workfare scheme the option of a one month paid work trial with a job at the end if it is completed satisfactorily. We have a few questions about this that we'd like them to answer:

- Given Tesco only employed 21% (or 300) of the people who have already been on the scheme, will it be creating jobs to offer to the 1500 people still expected to be referred? If so, how many?
- Will Tesco pay the 1400 people who have already worked unpaid for approximately 336,000 hours in your stores?
- Will Tesco extend its "job guarantee" to the 1100 people who have already completed the scheme without a job offer?

Tesco has not ended workfare in its stores, and until it does it remains a target for our day of action on Saturday 3rd March. A company which counts its profits in the billions can afford to pay the people working in its stores.