

Media release – 20th February 2012

Grayling's claim a “simple lie” says Boycott Workfare as government forced unpaid work scheme risks collapse

The government's forced unpaid work schemes are looking shaky after major employers Sainsbury's, Waterstones, TK Maxx and 99p Stores have pulled out. They have been joined by large charities Marie Curie and Shelter who recognise the risk that workfare poses to their brands, reputation and income. Scope and Matalan have suspended their involvement with the scheme, while Poundland has its role under review.

Boycott Workfare has promised to step up the campaign, and calls on companies, charities and public sector organisations to publicly state they will no longer take part, before its national day of action on 3rd March.

Commenting on Chris Grayling's weekend PR offensive, Boycott Workfare spokesperson Joanna Long said:

For Chris Grayling who attempts to brand critics of forced unpaid labour as “job snobs”, we have one simple question: If these are jobs, why aren't they paid?

His claim that workfare placements are voluntary is a simple lie. There is nothing voluntary about working without pay on threat of destitution; he knows very well that workfare is backed by a strict sanctions regime.

Grayling has even ignored Tesco's calls for sanctions to be removed from the scheme. However Joanna Long emphasised that this would be an empty gesture unless all workfare schemes are ended:

Making DWP Work Experience genuinely voluntary will not stop forced unpaid work for those who need welfare. George Osborne has said that if young people don't “volunteer” for one of the 250,000 workfare places on the “Work Experience” scheme, they should be mandated onto another forced work scheme: “Young people who don't engage with this offer will be considered for mandatory work activity.”

The government has four other schemes which hand companies and organisations free workers who are forced to work unpaid. Unless all of these schemes are made voluntary and have the threat of sanctions removed, it would be a case of “volunteer or be volunteered”.

Rather than wait for government policy to change, Tesco's need to follow the lead of their competitors and withdraw from workfare. Then they need to start paying the people who work in their stores the living wage, and stop profiting from hundreds of thousands of hours of unpaid labour - at taxpayer's expense.

The government needs to realise that this storm will not go away. People know that workfare is bad news for everyone: it replaces paid work and drives down

wages and conditions. Boycott Workfare will continue to mobilise against these schemes until there is an end to them all.

Notes to editors:

1. Boycott Workfare is a UK-wide campaign to end forced unpaid work for people who receive welfare. 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. More info: <http://www.boycottworkfare.org>
2. Boycott Workfare maintains a list of organisations profiting from workfare, which includes links to statements of those organisations which have withdrawn: http://www.boycottworkfare.org/?page_id=16
3. Tesco calls for sanctions to be removed from DWP Work Experience: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2012/feb/18/tesco-jobless-scheme-work-experience>
4. The government intends 250,000 workfare placements on the Work Experience scheme: <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/newsroom/press-releases/2011/nov-2011/dwp132-11.shtml> Tens of thousands of forced unpaid work placements have already taken place: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/feb/15/thousands-unemployed-work-without-pay>
5. The four other DWP schemes which compel jobseekers to work without pay or face sanction are: Mandatory Work Activity, the Community Action Programme, Sector Based Work Academies, and Work Programme placements. Osborne's comments can be found here: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/budget/8924626/Autumn-Statement-2011-young-jobless-will-get-work-experience.html>
6. On DWP Work Experience, jobseekers lose their benefits if they leave after the first week: <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/m-08-11.pdf>
7. Chris Grayling's comments were reported in the Telegraph on Sunday 19th February: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/9091105/Critics-of-Government-work-experience-programme-are-jobs-snoobs-says-minister.html>
8. A recent DWP report on sanctions reveals that most of those sanctioned are recorded as having Mental Health problems: http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/workingage/esa_sanc/esa_sanc_feb12.pdf
9. Boycott Workfare is deeply worried that the DWP refuses to publish data and information on how state imposed Destitution can be mitigated through Hardship payments, this is also something the Human Rights Joint Committee expressed concern about http://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/hardship_payment_applications#incoming-255499
10. Mandatory Work Activity (MWA) carries a heavy sanction regime: "Customers who fail to complete a placement without good cause will lose their Jobseeker's Allowance for a minimum of 3 months." <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/newsroom/press-releases/2011/may-2011/dwp049-11.shtml>
11. MWA participation becomes mandatory when the provider issues the claimant with details of their placement. A claimant who fails to comply, without good cause, will be sanctioned for 13 weeks. A second such failure, within 12 months of the first sanction, will result in a 26 week sanction. 40. Sanctions imposed will continue to apply regardless of whether the claimant re-engages with the provision. <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/pg-part-p.pdf>
12. Work Programme: Re-engagement and Reviewing a Sanction "JSA participants who

have a sanction of less than 26 weeks imposed on them cannot have their sanction lifted."
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/wp-pg-chapter-7.pdf>

13. Hardship payments: In addition, the Government cites the hardship regime which will be introduced to protect vulnerable claimants and their families. However, these safeguards are largely to be provided in secondary legislation, which makes it difficult to assess whether they will be adequate to prevent claimants and their families falling into destitution.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201012/jtselect/jtrights/233/23305.htm#a15>