



# Starving us into cheap labour

I BEGAN signing on in late August, having turned 18 in June. I began a part-time further education course in early September. It's slightly more interesting than Richard and Judy, isn't it?

But the government will go to almost any length to deny an unemployed school-leaver doing a part-time course what he's entitled to. You would think the dole was some valuable, desirable honour, not the inadequate, small, socially embarrassing excuse for an income that it is.

I go to the dole to tell them I'm doing a course. Whoops! My claimants adviser (the narky woman on the front desk), when told of my aspirations to an education, says: "You'll have to sign off, you're doing a full-time course." This I find worrying — I like to eat while I study. It is also a bit annoying, as I started my course in the knowledge that it was part-time. That is, it fell in line with the government's new law, the Jobseeker's Allowance, which came into force at the beginning of October.

This law has two main purposes — to save the government money, and to fill shit, poorly paid jobs at the bottom of the employment market.

The legislation allows the Benefits Agency to cut people off if they refuse to take up a job paying £2.50 an hour for 40 hours a week — as any sane person, as well as the mad malignants who drew up these new laws, would. Your benefits are cut off for 1 to 26 weeks, according to a sliding scale of nastiness. The idea is to starve you into taking the shit jobs.

This is the first 'legitimate' though immoral way the government achieves its goals of cost-cutting and shit job filling.

The second way is by deliberately obscuring and confusing rules regarding claimants, leaving the outcome of claims to the discretion of staff who may be ill-trained or are under pressure to fill quotas. It seems now that the job of Benefits Agency staff is to get as many people cut off as they can, or on to state training schemes.

Anyway, knowing that Ms Narky on the front desk was wrong about the 16-hour rule and my part-time course, I went to see a student adviser at college who gave me a letter stating this. Because of the change in the law reducing a "part-time course" from 21 to 16 hours, all FE colleges have similarly cut their courses.

As I explained to Mr Narky (no rela-

tion, same job) upon returning to the dole office with my college letter: "It is possible that every further education establishment in the country got it wrong when they cut their courses, specifically in line with government guidelines. It is possible that thousands of lecturers, teachers, principals and advisers are as thick as the people who work in this office. It is possible, but it's not very fucking probable."

This did not go down well.

Aside from my large gob, Mr Narky also realised that with an official letter from the college stating more politely what I'd just said, this bullshit about 16 hours was not going to do as an excuse for cutting me off.

So he dreamed up a new one. "Mr Baker, as you can see from the guidelines, you must have been signing on for three months before you can start an education course." But, hang on! "I wasn't 18 until

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June, and I was still at school, anyway. It would have been illegal for me to have been signing on for three months!" Mr Narky looks puzzled.

I'm now late for my course. I sign on, everyone there telling me not to expect anything.

Six weeks pass. Lo and behold, an enormous cheque lands on my mat for about six weeks' missed payments. Wehhey! I go to sign on the same day, expecting no trouble but, guess what, someone tells me to sign off.

With a cheque for £200 in my back pocket, I'm all smiles and resigned. I do the hurdles to the Post Office before they can cancel me on the computer. What had probably happened was that, on paper, there were no grounds for cutting me off, but, in person, the people on the front desk thought I was an easy write-off.

If the rules were less ambiguous, they couldn't get away with this. But then their very ambiguity exists for misuse.

A few weeks later, dole money safely tucked away, I go for one last row, this time with the adjudication officer, Chief

Nark. "Take a seat, Mr Baker, I'll be with you in just a minute."

15 minutes later Chief Nark returns. What he'd been doing for 15 minutes was scanning my documents for an excuse to cut me off. "You say here that you are unwilling to give up your course if we find you a job, therefore you do not meet the criteria of being 'available for work', which you agreed to when you signed the Jobseeker's Agreement."

Uhh? "So, because I won't give up a part-time course..."

"No, it's not a part-time course. It's a full-time course..."

"Don't start. I've had this row already. Because I won't give up my course you're cutting me off."

"Yes."

"First I was cut off for taking too long a course, now for being on a short course. If what you say is true, then there's no point in having a 16 hour rule, because any length of course, from 1 hour to 100, disqualifies me from benefit. You can't call me lanky and shorty at the same time, can you?" Chief Nark's eyes begin to cloud over. "This is illogical. You are presenting me with a contradiction in terms. Don't you think this is ludicrous?"

Chief Nark's ears pop in confusion. "I can't comment on that. I am merely carrying out the rules of the Employment Act."

He's had enough, and I'm about to explode. As a result of these laws, many young people will become homeless. I'm lucky. I still live at home and can find some part-time work. For many more, this law will cause misery.

The fact that I know so many of the low-paid workers in the dole shop hate this nonsense too makes me feel even more frustrated. Through union action, they should refuse to do this dirty work for the Tories.

None of us have to put up with the JSA, nor the government's new Workfare schemes, where you do a full-time job for your dole. The Tories can't do anything to us unless we let them.

I went back to college, to the students' union, and got them to make a leaflet, telling people their rights under the JSA. We are going to leaflet the Jobcentre and hopefully get a campaign going. There's enough people angry about this measure to take action.

*Teddy Baker*