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Marching on: Protesting Against Proposed Welfare Reforms

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In London last May, disabled people came together in their thousands to protest against the government's proposed welfare reforms. This month saw the movement go national, with a series of rallies and marches that took place across the country on October 22nd under the Hardest Hit banner. Annie Makoff finds out more...

An estimated 5000 people turned out for 12 Hardest Hit rallies and marches across the UK at the end of October, in protest against government cuts and welfare reforms that many assert will hit disabled people the hardest. It was the second of two disability lobby movements to take place in 2011, the likes of which has never been seen before in disability history. The first Hardest Hit event in May this year saw nearly 10,000 people march through the streets of London, coming together in an unprecedented campaign organised by disability organisations and disabled people themselves.

Speakers at the recent London rally included Kirsten Hearn, Chair of Inclusion London, Jennette Arnold AM for North East London and Chair of the London Assembly and Sean McGovern, Chair of Unite's National Disabled Member's Committee. There were chants from the crowd of "No ifs, no buts, no benefit cuts!" and "No way, we won't pay, hands off our DLA!" Some attendees were furthermore given the opportunity to address the crowd from the stage and speak about their experiences.

The Disability Benefits Consortium and the UK Disabled People's Council, both of whom have been instrumental in organising the protests, say that for every single attendee on these rallies, there were thousands more who had been unable to attend due to their disabilities.

In real terms, this is huge. Considering that many disabled people experience difficulties with travelling, let alone attending a protest, this indicates just how frightened and angry people are in the face of severe cuts that will potentially push millions into poverty.





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Protect and resist

Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) trustee and member of the UK Disabled People's Council, Ellie Southwood, who also spoke at the London rally, firmly believes that the protests could be a force for change. "I've never felt that the disability lobby has been as united in the past as it has in the past 18 months," she says. "This is a pandisability movement determined to protect and resist at the same time. We are protecting what organisations like the RNIB have worked so hard for – like the higher rate mobility component of the DLA and the employment support allowance (ESA) – and we are vehemently resisting the government's propaganda messages that disabled people are scroungers and benefit cheats."

A view shared by a number of people, and those involved with the protests in particular, is that the mainstream press essentially functions as a propaganda machine for the government, one that reinforces negative and deeply offensive stereotypes of disabled people on benefits. Yet for thousands across the UK, there is the growing feeling that such attitudes and governmentsanctioned treatment can be strongly resisted. "Our collective voices are being heard," says Ellie. "That's why we need to keep the pressure up and keep attending these rallies and protests. We need to show the government that we are not going away, we're not an easy target. We'll shout and we'll keep shouting until we see change for the better."

Linda Burnip, Co-founder of the group Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) agrees. "Westminster saw us as easy targets and thought we could be easily victimised, but the response against these government cuts has been overwhelming. Disabled people have realised that we can do things for ourselves and we can work togetherand fight together."



Keeping up the pressure

Initially formed in October last year, following protests against Birmingham City Council's spending reductions on disability services, DPAC has since been campaigning tirelessly against one of the government's key welfare reforms, in which the company Atos Healthcare plays a key – and for many, unwelcome – role. It is currently contracted to carry out the Work Capability Assessments that determine if individuals are eligible to claim ESA, the results of which are then submitted to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). From April this year, it has also been reassessing whether those currently on the soon to be phased out incapacity benefit are eligible to continue receiving payments in the form of ESA, or if they are instead fit for work.

Over recent months, however, these assessments have caused considerable unease within the disabled community and beyond. The Guardian reported in May that some



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400,000 appeals had been lodged against DWP decisions to stop benefits on the basis of Atos' recommendations, 40% of which had been successful, and concerns about the company and its practices have been raised in numerous Parliamentary debates.

Linda says, "We believe that doctors working for Atos are in breach of their Hippocratic oath. To date, we've made a lot of progress – we've targeted their recruitment fairs, making potential employees aware of what Atos are like, we've worked with the London Coalition Against Poverty to campaign against Atos, we've raised awareness in the press and we are still fighting."

Whilst Linda acknowledges that there are many areas of the government's Welfare Reform Bill that they still need to target, she is confident that progress is being made. For Linda's group and others like it, it's very much about keeping up the pressure.

According to Ellie, "It's not right that the banking crisis has led to cuts that will affect the most vulnerable. That's not a society we want to live in. Both disabled and non-disabled people have come together at the unfairness of it all.

"People have also come together to share their experiences and to feel that they are not alone. We are keeping up the momentum, and will keep fighting until the proposals are reversed and the cuts are abandoned. If it's worth fighting for, it's worth fighting for in its entirety."

For more information on the Hardest Hit campaign, visit www.thehardesthit.wordpress.com



Speaking out

Voices Heard At The Hardest Hit Rally In London

"Together our voice can be louder than propaganda, louder than the media. Their cuts are unfair and we will resist them. We are talking about a government looking to cut the benefits of the most needy. They are looking to attack the benefits of those living within sheltered accommodation and social housing, and now they have returned the bonuses to the city. How dare they! The job of government is not to push people with the greatest need into poverty, but this is exactly what they are doing."

Jeanette Arnold

London Assembly Member for North East London and Chair of the London Assembly (Speaker)

"The cuts are grossly unfair. People need to have a good quality of life, and to simply take their benefits away without understanding the poverty which people will be forced into is just completely wrong. The government need to be made to listen and hear that we do not agree with what they are doing. That's why I have come here to support the rally today."

Dayo Adenowo

Croydon (Attendee)

"A lot of my peers don't believe their benefits will be taken away from them, so they won't attend these rallies. They don't realise how close they are to losing their benefits. For me, I had to go quite far down until I had nothing left to lose before I started

fighting. It's about taking a courageous stand. I don't want my eyesight to be the definition of my whole character, but at the same time, you have to fight for the things you believe in."

Mark Norman
London (Attendee)



Comments

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