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Protest targets assessment contractor

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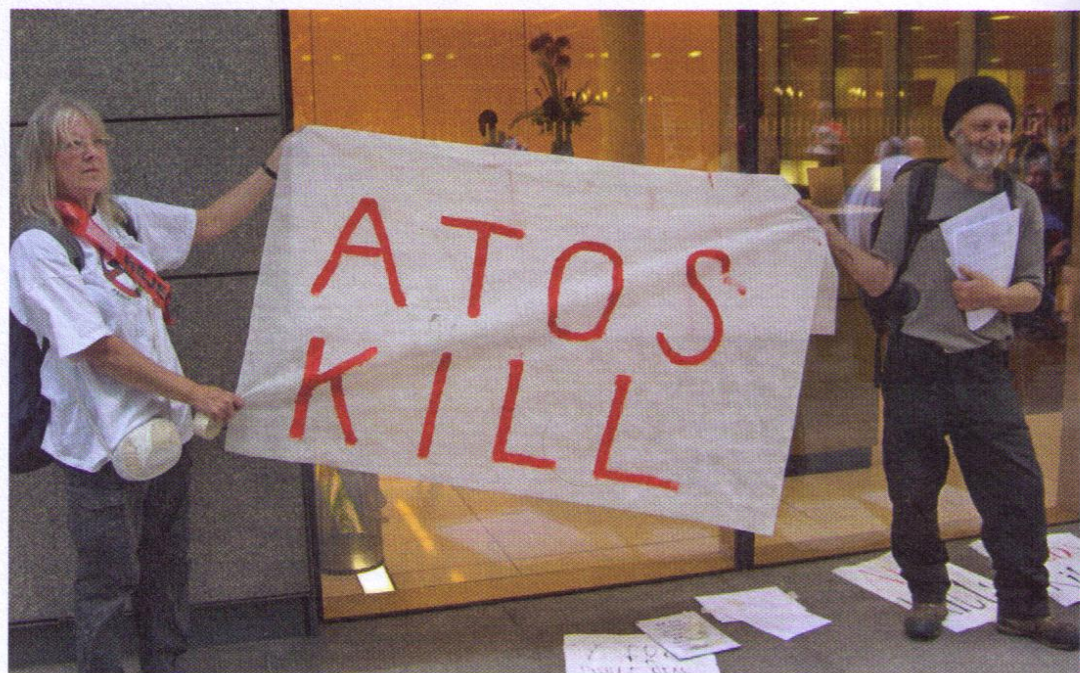
The London headquarters of ATOS, the corporation that carries out controversial benefit assessments, was the latest target for action by disability campaigning group Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC).

The group claims that benefit claimants are subjected to unfair and discriminatory assessments carried out under contract by the company which have resulted in record numbers of rejected claims for Employment Support Allowance (ESA).

ATOS has just signed a £300million deal with the Department of Work and Pensions to reassess ESA claimants until 2015.

Kicking off a week of action against government welfare reform and ATOS, the protest was attended by members of DPAC, the Euston branch of the Public and Commercial Services Union, and several groups of disability activists.

DPAC founder Linda Burnip who organised the protest said: "A lot of people don't know the crucial part ATOS plays in the assessments. Today is about educating people,



getting the news out and making sure that ATOS know that we're not giving up the fight against them."

She added: "I know hundreds of people who have lost everything. If you lose Incapacity Benefit, you lose Disability Living Allowance (DLA). If you lose DLA you lose all the other benefits you are entitled to. It is a massive knock-on effect."

Disability activist and DPAC member, Adam Lotun was also at the protest. Having had his DLA taken away based on the assumption that he was "high-functioning", he lost all his other benefits, his car, and his job. He said:

"Everything at home is the same height as my wheelchair so I use my stick at home. The assessor assumed I had lied about my wheelchair and took everything away from me. Because they took my car away too, I couldn't get to work and lost my job. I'm still waiting for a stairlift and a downstairs toilet. I've got eight-week-old twins and I can barely carry them."

Other people at the protest voiced concern about the vicious circle the Government is creating for disabled people, by denying them benefits which help pay for crucial support networks and services,

therefore forcing many into unemployment and poverty.

"We've already seen an increase in suicide rates among disabled people," Adam Lotun said. "Many are unable to afford medication, transport and their own support workers. These support workers are now becoming unemployed – where will it end?"

He added: "In the eyes of ATOS, Stephen Hawking isn't disabled anymore because he has got a wheelchair and a communication device. So if you have a mobility aid you are no longer disabled, so your claim will be rejected. The medical model of disability reigns."