

7. Starting From the Social Wage

Camille Barbagallo and Nicholas Beuret

We wrote the following article almost two years ago, when the global economic crisis had in many ways just begun, as had the intensification of the neo-liberal program of ‘austerity’ in Britain. Stuart Hall has recently argued¹ that the current conjuncture must be seen as an intensification and continuation of the neo-liberal project. While questions remain as to the ‘sustainability’ of neo-liberalism in the long term, we certainly agree that in relation to children and childcare as well as the (dis)location of women, it is very much a case of a continued onslaught. Unfortunately, many of the regressive processes and possible outcomes we describe in the article have come to pass or are currently being implemented. In the last two years in Britain, the number of unemployed women has reached over one million, the highest since 1988. Women now make up over 30 per cent of those

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claiming unemployment benefits – the highest proportion since the data series began in 1983. For those women who are still employed, nearly three quarters of a million are involuntarily working part-time.

Such dramatic changes and attacks make it clear that it is not enough to simply trace and track statistics and impacts or to outline possible futures for social reproduction and childcare that are currently taking shape in Britain. We need to place these changes within a context that is now clearer than ever – that is a crisis of social reproduction. Most importantly we need to develop methods and practices that mean we can not only survive this crisis but also create new terrains of resistance, hope and revolt.

What is this crisis? It is not just a social crisis – one of “Broken Britain” and social collapse – which has a much longer history, one which has intensified, though not been dramatically transformed, during the current economic crisis. It is also a crisis for capitalism. It is a crisis in the sense that as a system, capitalism finds itself lacking for both adequate markets for its goods and adequate profit rates. Currently the neo-liberal answer is to attempt to reduce the cost of ‘doing business’ by shifting more and more of the social costs of reproduction back onto the broader mass of society. From the contours of how these changes are impacting our families, homes and communities, we know this not a

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gender or race neutral process. However, it is also a crisis for the state. In that it is a failure of the institutions of governance of our social reproduction. Not only in relation the costs that the state has in relation to social reproduction – research shows that despite their best efforts, the basic ‘social wage’ in Britain has not been significantly reduced during the previous 30 years of neo-liberalism. It is more than that in that the state has failed to sufficiently transform and discipline the working class into solid, decent consumers and entrepreneurs who will do anything to get ahead.

Therefore, it is crucial to emphasis that the current British Government (as would the so-called opposition party) intends to resolve this multi-faceted crisis through processes of privatisation and abandonment to the market. If you can’t pay for it, and you will have to pay for all of it, you don’t get it. It is at this front line – of privatisation and abandonment – that the battle over the costs of living, the fundamental cost of reproduction and the availability of the resources essential to reproduction, must be fought.

– September, 2011

Try as she might, Margaret Thatcher failed in the early 1980s to impose ‘true’ austerity on Britain. Which is relevant for us today because the current financial crisis is not only being used to further the aims of the neo-liberal project, it is also trying to succeed where previous attempts have failed. Across Europe, the financial crisis

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has turned into a social crisis as wages and the conditions of work and life are attacked through programs of austerity. The crisis is being used - indeed it is being put to work in the best tradition of neo-liberalism - to subject the populations of Europe to a brutal process of structural adjustment.

In Britain, as in previous decades, the neo-liberal reforms are going deeper and moving faster than elsewhere in Europe. The last remnants of the British welfare state are currently being abolished and restructured and in the process the government is winding back the state provision of social services to levels not seen for decades. Thatcher, and the New Labour governments that followed her, responded to the collapse of demand that austerity inflicted on the economy at the start of the 80s through the creation of a dynamic housing market (by selling council housing and increasing access to cheap credit) and an increasingly deregulated financial and banking market. For the last thirty years, wages and income have diverged, with credit (and rising asset values, especially housing) coming to stand in for relatively stagnant wages. The current round of restructuring is very much about a fresh attempt to impose true austerity. All the 'belt tightening' is focused on reducing incomes to the level of wages.

The agenda of re-linking the wage to expenditure is about reducing the amount of support provided by the state - that is to say, a reduction of the social wage. The social wage in Britain has remained stubbornly high throughout the decades of neo-liberalism, despite the attacks, cuts and reconfigurations it has suffered. The current austerity program aims to drastically reduce the social wage, and in the process deepen the divisions

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between so ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. However, the aim of the present austerity program is not just to wind back state expenditure, to reduce the ‘tax burden’ on corporations and banks, or to impose an even harsher discipline on workers. It is all of these to be sure, but it is also a continuation of the project of the production of a neo-liberal subject. As Thatcher famously said “Economics are the method, the object is to change the soul”. One of the aims of neo-liberalism is to produce a new kind of social subject – one that is coldly rational and entrepreneurial; one that is totally responsible for their own care, education and reproduction and is morally judged on how they put their ‘freedom’ to work. The processes of privatisation and marketisation that feature so heavily in neo-liberal ‘reforms’ are, as well as being part of a process of accumulation by dispossession, a means to that end.

The processes of neo-liberal subjectification, the re-linking of wages to income, and reducing social expenditure have certainly not been achieved and at best can only be said to have only partially succeeded over the previous decades. Continuing levels of high social expenditure and numerous consumer and housing ‘bubbles’ testify to the uneven successes and failures of the neo-liberal project, not to mention people’s stubborn refusal to act and think as cold entrepreneurs. This article will not attempt to examine the whole of the proposed neo-liberal ‘British experiment’, but will focus on one specific aspect: childcare and the social wage. We begin with the question of ‘who will look after the kids’ because that is where we have started from in practice (our need for childcare) and because theoretically we see a need to develop a critique of

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neo-liberal capitalism that recentres and revalues social reproduction. We became involved in a campaign to ‘save’ community nurseries in the London borough where we live in 2010.¹ The nursery campaign, and its connects and disconnects to the broader neo-liberal austerity reforms, are our starting point for understanding the program of government reforms in Britain and the effects of the social wage more generally.

Women and Children First

The restructuring and reduction of the social wage is overwhelmingly an attack on women – no other group of bodies can be said to do so much unwaged work as women. And so it is women who will suffer most from the latest cuts to the social wage in Britain. Numerous studies in Britain have already shown that it is women who will bear the brunt of cuts to social expenditure, wage austerity and job losses. Research by the House of Commons Library² has shown that women will bear two-thirds of all of the financial effects of the neo-liberal reforms currently being proposed by the central Government. All across Britain, government funded services that provide care and facilities for children are being defunded, abolished and downgraded. This article addresses some of our experience in the east London borough of Hackney with a campaign to

¹<http://friendsofhackneynurseries.wordpress.com/>

²A gender audit of the Budget was commissioned by Yvette Cooper MP, and carried out by the House of Commons Library in June 2010. <http://www.yvettecooper.com/women-bear-brunt-of-budget-cuts>

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save community nurseries. Community nurseries are one of the remnants of previous feminist struggles in the 1960s and 1970s that fought for progressive childcare provisions. They are not-for-profit nurseries run by community members, with control of the running of the nurseries very much in parents' and workers' hands as well as managers. But before discussing the specifics of both Hackney and childcare in Britain, it is necessary to explore the concept of the social wage.

The Program of 'Cuts' & the Social Wage

Let's be clear from the start. The public services that are being cut include things that we need, but we hate how they are given to us: like unemployment benefits. They also involve jobs that we rely on but resent having to do. But what is also true is that they are part of a 'social wage' fought for and won by previous generations. By 'social wage' we mean the services and direct payments provided by the state that enable our subsistence. The health services, childcare, unemployment benefits, social housing – they are our social wage. The social wage has a dual effect. It is a method by which the state organises our lives and produces disciplined social subjects, and it also a means of reducing the direct cost (to us) of our own material reproduction. It is both our tool and theirs. The social wage is a way of providing for those needs that exist under capitalism that cannot be or are not paid for by individual capitalists, for example the need for an

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educated or healthy population. These are the social costs of capitalist reproduction and they are paid for through state expenditure. However, our needs are met on terms that are not our own or defined by 'us'. By determining both our needs and problems, as well the 'solutions', the state is able to produce particular compositions of social relations and subjects.

Through services and payments the direct costs associated with reproducing ourselves are reduced (and our needs to some extent satisfied). Instead of paying the 'full' cost for childcare out of our wages, we get subsidised or 'free' childcare. Instead of paying directly for health services when we are ill, such services are funded by taxation and provided by the NHS. Instead of having to put aside money in case we are sacked, we can claim the dole. In so far as our needs are real, these gains are real. By reducing the connection between wages and our 'quality of life' we have weakened the power of money to command our work and our existence. The social wage disconnects our material reproduction from our income levels, thereby undermining the discipline of the wage.

Importantly the social wage is also a way of 'paying the unpaid'. The social wage is one way of redistributing income so as to benefit those people whose (unwaged) labour is fundamental and vital for the reproduction of workers and capitalism in general. The primary focus of the social wage is social reproduction and this involves labour processes that would otherwise be unwaged. This work has historically been known as 'women's work'³ and involves

³Not women's work in the sense that these kinds of work are more natural for women, but that capitalism has created a gendered

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tasks such as caring for young children, the elderly, the sick and disabled, the health of the body and emotional and psychological services such as counselling. The last forty years have seen significant shifts and changes to the who, where and how social reproduction occurs. For instance, more men are now involved in the work of looking after their children and more migrant workers are employed to look after our elderly relatives. While it is true that such work has been and continues to be gendered and racialised it is important to recognise that the landscape of social reproduction is by no means simple or without contradictions.

None of this is to say that the social wage is unproblematic. Obviously it is - because under capitalism wage relations are based on exploitation and alienation, and the various elements of the social wage are no exception. We need the services because we have no other choice. This need relates back to the dual 'freedom' that Marx saw as the precondition of wage labour in capitalist societies: we are free to sell our labour and we have been 'freed' from the ability to reproduce ourselves in any other way. In the past struggle around the social wage has had a tendency to orientate to the second aspect of this 'freedom' - our ability or lack of ability to reproduce ourselves outside of the wage-labour relation. It is here that the contradiction of the social wage appears because it is not a wage like any other. Its very existence undermines the authority and power of command of the wage. However, left as it is, the social wage also operates as a form of control and

division of labour where some forms of mostly unpaid and unwaged labour have been naturalised as 'women's work.'

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discipline, and as a way of enabling wage labour to exist at all in its current form. So, like other wage struggles, our ultimate aim must be to go beyond the immediate relation and create a new social relationship. But we can't do this by opting out. Not only because dropping out and making our own little utopias does not get us any closer to the necessary transformation of the world in which we live, but because the social wage represents real struggles and gains. We need to be in, against and beyond the social wage.

The Hackney Situation

Hackney, situated in north-east London, shares its borders with the City and financial districts. With a population of around 220,000, the borough is densely populated. There is a concentration of migrant working class communities and unemployment that is above average, at around 11 per cent of the population. The state is the biggest single employer in Hackney; around 23,000 people are employed in the public sector. As one of the most deprived boroughs in the UK, Hackney will be particularly heavily hit by the Conservative /Liberal Democrats (ConDems) proposed cuts to social expenditure. The Hackney Council is already talking about possible 'restructuring', with temporary agency workers mostly likely being the first to go. If everything goes according to plan, there will be further cuts to local libraries, young people's services and there will continue to be job losses and cut backs in the already privatised social service bodies that deal with social housing (Hackney Homes), refuse and waste col-

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lection, nurseries and other childcare services. Despite the ConDems championing of ‘family values’, parents in Hackney will be hard hit by the cuts to social benefits with a freeze on child benefit payments and restructuring of housing benefit. The cuts to housing benefits will particularly affect Hackney residents: almost 40% of households in Hackney claim housing benefit, with a quarter of these households in privately rented accommodation. The estimates of the number of people who will be forced to leave inner London because of cuts to housing benefits has been estimate to be around 250,000.

But our focus is the state of childcare provision through nurseries. Nurseries in Hackney are under attack ironically not directly because of the ConDems austerity budget, but because the Learning Trust, a private company that controls the provision for children’s services in Hackney, cut nursery funding in April 2010. In response Friends of Hackney Nurseries (FHN), a coalition of nursery workers, parents and community activists began campaigning and organising to try and stop these cuts from occurring.

The Hackney Learning Trust – the UK’s first private not-for profit company to take over the responsibility of running all education services for an entire borough⁴ – imposed cuts of up to £50,000 to community nurseries receiving commissioning grants. Commissioning grants subsidise childcare places for parents on low incomes. Commissioning grants have, until recently, only been paid to

⁴Hackney Council ‘outsourced’ the running of education services in the borough to the Learning Trust in 2002. However the Council remains responsible for allocating the Learning Trust funding and the Major of Hackney ultimately remains responsible for borough run services

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the 13 remaining community nurseries in Hackney, out of 68 childcare ‘settings’ in the borough. These 68 include Council run children’s centres, community nurseries (not-for-profit parent and staff managed nurseries) and private nurseries (private nurseries make up half of the total childcare places). As a result of the massive cuts to commissioning grant funding and cuts to other funding streams, many community nurseries had to reduce both staff numbers and childcare places. Some are even facing closure because of it.

Both the Hackney Council and the Learning Trust have, after much public pressure, claimed that the overall pot of money for low-income families in Hackney had not been cut – apparently it had just been ‘redistributed’. They have resisted providing evidence of this redistribution, and the timeline of action then reaction tells another story – one of incompetence and a slow but steady strategy of privatisation.

When community nurseries were first told of the cuts (one month before they were to be implemented), FHN quickly reformed after 10 years of inactivity and immediately set about working with parents and nurseries to put pressure on the Council and Learning Trust to reverse the cuts. This all happened just prior to the national elections in 2010, making public shaming particularly effective as a tactic. In short order the Mayor of Hackney, Jules Pipe, condemned the Learning Trust’s behaviour⁵ and the Learning Trust scrambled to meet with the handful of nurseries that had started to publicly voice their

⁵<http://www.hackneycitizen.co.uk/2010/05/04/mayor-speaks-out-over-hackney-nursery-cuts/>

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opposition. Despite saying publicly that the money had not been cut but redistributed, in the end the Learning Trust reversed half of the cuts largely through something they called a ‘cushioning fund’ – a one off grant to help the affected nurseries through the hardship of the cuts. They didn’t say where this extra money had been found.

After this shambles, things got even more interesting. Meetings between nurseries and the Learning Trust were set up then cancelled without explanation. Different letters were sent, seemingly at random, to different nurseries all saying slightly different things. The Learning Trust started contacting community nurseries to offer them help in winding down their operations. However, during the weeks of confusion and misinformation the Learning Trust announced that commissioning grants would now be available to all nurseries in Hackney, further reducing the amount available to community nurseries (due to increased competition with the private and Council run nurseries). Finally, the Learning Trust decided in July to cut yet another stream of nursery funding. Under the new Single Funding Formula – the funding stream that pays for the 15 hours of free childcare for all 3 and 4 year olds – all nurseries will face a per child funding cut compared with previous years. In addition, funding for children with special needs has been reduced, something that must be seen within the context of a general attack on the benefits and services for the disabled within the national austerity measures.⁶ FHN has managed to get a significant amount of funding returned to community nurseries for at least the next financial year. And we are continuing to apply

⁶<http://www.scope.org.uk/news/disabled-people-hit-by-welfare-cuts>

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pressure on both the overall funding and funding for children for special needs. But the future of the latter two remains an open question.

What does all this mean? It would seem that the redistribution of funding from community nurseries to private nurseries is part of the last stages of the privatisation of childcare services. Over the last 20 years the total amount of money given to community nurseries has been steadily reduced. At the same time there has been an explosion of private nurseries in Hackney. Fifteen years ago there were no private nursery spaces in Hackney. Now, around half of all childcare places are privately provided. This process of privatisation has taken place within the context of reduced state funding, indicating not only a process of privatisation but also of marketisation of services.

A Brief Note on the Friends of Hackney Nurseries Campaign

The rebirth of the FHN campaign group came just prior to the national government and local council elections in the UK in May 2010. As a result the very first meeting saw over 30 people turn up, many of whom were associated with local political parties and looking for a community campaign to be identified with and 'support'. Over the next few months however, participation in campaign meetings was reduced to a smaller group of about eight core members who are a mix of local parents, feminist activists and nursery workers and managers (with more managers than workers participating on a regular basis).

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From the beginning the campaign collective has both struggled to find direction and retain members. The inability to figure out what was actually happening in the childcare sector in Hackney was both because of the complexity of childcare funding and because of the difficulty of getting enough information from nurseries where staff are both overworked and unsure of the state of their funding themselves. Because of the difficulty of finding out what was going on, it was not easy to establish clear objectives. As many of us were either new to childcare or were well established within existing structures, creating a collective vision of an alternative kind of childcare was difficult, especially as we spent most of our time just finding out what was already the case, rather than discussing what we wanted childcare to look like in Hackney.

It could be said that the lack of a clear vision has hampered the group's efforts to build its membership and create a more powerful public dynamic. It wasn't the only obstacle though. Time is the biggest stumbling block to mobilising both parents and community nursery workers and managers. No one has time to meet after work, or on weekends. Overworked parents and nursery workers have little space left in their lives outside of care and work (or care work). Those of us in the campaign felt the pressure of lack of time, and many of the activities we attempted or undertook suffered from this lack. Because of the lack of clear direction, and the reduced number of members and their lack of time, the campaign made most use of traditional lobbying methods as opposed to organising methods, despite the fact that many members of FHN had a clear preference for organising work. These methods led to a number of quick wins, but also to a series of engagements

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with officials and councillors that took time from other activities.

One unresolved tension in the group was around the decision for FHN to work with managers of the community nurseries. Some group members felt that management was management and working with them was a compromise. This reflects a broader tendency in the Left to see managerial roles as something apart from ‘the working class’. However such simple notions are becoming more and more blurred under neo-liberalism, as we have seen a diffusion of managerial responsibilities throughout the workforce over the last 30 years – from low-level line managers and team leadership to an explosion of middle management - just senior and middle management alone accounts for 15 per cent of the workforce in the UK⁷. Radical left politics needs to become reconciled with the reality of everyday labour relations in the UK, which sees many workers with at least some managerial responsibility. Management, as a general mode of social relations, is diffused through the body of the proletariat and not just something external to it and is embedded within the production of the neo-liberal subject. This proliferation of managerial ethics and ideas is on its own a blockage to the production of different collective social relations, and formed a very real concrete material condition within FHN, with managerial priorities forming the basis for many of our collective tasks.

Clearly, though, excluding all people with some kind of managerial responsibilities is not an option, especially

⁷http://www2.managers.org.uk/content_1.aspx?id=10:293&id=10:290&id=10:9

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not within a community nursery campaign where the gap between management and worker is often slight and at times imperceptible. However, different contexts lend themselves to different alliances. Of course a clearer distinction between management and workers would need to be made if the campaign involved staff undertaking union organising at nurseries. However, in the instance of a community campaign aiming to fight against government funding cuts and neo-liberal restructuring of the childcare sector, working with both affected nursery staff and managers, in community controlled and run premises, it not only strategic but necessary. The desire or idea of politics as pure neglects the actual messiness and contradictions so often present in the alliances, experiences and possibilities of social reproduction.

Why Does the Privatisation of Childcare Matter?

It could be argued, as it has been by many Hackney Councillors, that it doesn't matter if childcare is provided by the Council, by community-run centres, or by private businesses. So as long as the total number of childcare places in Hackney hasn't been reduced, does it really matter on what basis they are provided?

The short answer is yes. The case against privatisation can be summed up as follows. A service run according to the logic of the market tends to drive down costs (and therefore quality), reduce staff and employment conditions to the absolute minimum (reducing wages and reducing

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the quality of the childcare again), increase the costs to the service user (through fee increases) and reduce provision to those areas where it is profitable (creating a system where having a service and the quality of that service directly relates to how much you earn). There is also the issue of directing public funds (via grants) to private-for-profit businesses. Any one of these outcomes is reason enough to reject the privatisation of community or public services.

The alternative to the market is often presented as the state. However state-run services are also deeply problematic. They provide us with services we need but are given in relationships of subservience or dependence. It is no wonder that state-run services are so unpopular, with most of the population of the UK preferring service cuts to tax increases.⁸ While the services we have are a direct result of the pressure we have been able to exert as antagonistic social movements, this pressure has been channelled into the creation of services that follow the logic of the state and serve the needs of capitalism. Our confrontation with capital is over the imposition of waged labour and the form this labour takes. But our struggle with the state is over the overall management of our lives, in particular the management of our own material reproduction.

Cuts to services are not the end of the state's management of our lives, just a reconfiguration. With the move from community-run to either Council or private childcare

⁸“Nearly three quarters of voters – including most Labour voters – say that the government's priority should be to cut spending rather than increase taxes” Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/jun/21/budget-2010-guardian-icm-poll>

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we lose something essential: control. The only childcare services parents (and to some extent workers) have any control over in a meaningful way are community nurseries. Committees of parents and staff manage them, and parents are encouraged to be involved at a decision-making and organisation level. In contrast, the Council appoints staff who manage Council run nurseries while private nurseries may ‘involve’ parents but they usually do so in order to reduce their costs. Privatisation undermines one of our most important gains from the struggles of the 60s and 70s: community run services that we manage for our own material reproduction but that have financial resources provided by the state. This is why the slow decline of funding and the latest attack on community nurseries is so important. They are the last of the childcare services we have any control over in Hackney.

Privatisation plays another important role beyond the redirecting of public funds to private companies and removing public or community control from services. Privatisation is also a state-led project of producing a new social subject: a rational, market-driven neo-liberal individual. Privatisation of community services introduces the functioning of the market and the logic of profit to areas of social life that had previously been structured differently. Importantly the aim is not just to wring profit from what were once public services, but to change the way people interact with each other and change their expectations of the state. In this context the privatisation of nurseries can be seen as an attempt to produce the parent as a rational ‘market actor’. Mum and Dad as entrepreneurs, who weigh up their options, calculate what will best deliver the outcomes they desire and act individually to achieve

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that end. The end result of the project of ‘marketisation’ is the creation of a social subject who is judged (and judges) on their ability to meet their own needs (either through directly paying for them or providing them on their own) and make good on their ambitions and aspirations. To be sure, privatisation is not the only mechanism through which the neo-liberal subject is produced. It is however a process which has the immediate effect of reorganising the material conditions of our reproduction and creating a measure of productivity, profitability and efficiency.

Outside the Laboratory

Hackney was always something of a laboratory for the previous New Labour government, and the Learning Trust is a perfect case in point. However it is not just in Hackney that these cuts to care are taking place. Across the UK, at a borough level and at a University level, childcare services are facing declining funding and further cuts. At least 20 universities are cutting childcare services⁹, many other Councils are reducing funding, rents are being increased¹⁰ and central Government is looking to decrease childcare funding streams. In addition, the Government is reducing and number of specific benefits including Child Benefit. Specific grants and services for children are also

⁹Nursery world, <http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/923379/Full-scale-university-nursery-cuts-exposed-Unison/>

¹⁰Nursery world, <http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/923379/Full-scale-university-nursery-cuts-exposed-Unison/>

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being cut, including grants for improving or building new buildings¹¹, and grants for the creation of playgrounds.

As other observers have pointed out,¹² the difference between New Labour and the ConDem's is a difference of degree. It is clear that had New Labour won the election they too would be embarking on cuts to the social wage. In fact the cuts in Hackney were announced prior to the ConDem's austerity budget, and are taking place as part of the broader historical tendency of neo-liberalism. Clearly cuts to nurseries need to be stopped, and sufficient funding restored in the short term. In the longer term there needs to be a conversation at both a community level and a national level about how we want our children to be cared for, outside of the logic of the market and beyond just making it possible for women to re-enter the waged workforce in greater numbers. Before we can begin this conversation, we need to understand why these cuts are happening now, and what they mean.

The neo-liberal project has developed along two axes in rich countries like Britain – holding down or winding back the wage and introducing the market as the basis for all social relations. However the difference between the current cuts in the UK and the cuts implemented in the earlier phases of neo-liberalism both here and elsewhere is twofold. Firstly capitalism has no need to increase the paid labour force in the UK not at least until wages have

¹¹<http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/bulletin/NurseryWorldUpdate/article/1032984/?DCMP=EMC-CONNurseryWorldUpdate>

¹²see Richard Seymour, http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/the_axemans_jazz_why_cuts_why_now_and_how_to_stop_them/ and Tony Wood, <http://newleftreview.org/?page=article&view=2830>

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been drastically reduced. If anything, the total number of those available for waged work needs to be reduced to make sure that the numbers of unemployed do not grow excessively and that an entire generation of workers is not lost. Secondly, there is a need to ensure that there is not a reproductive crisis in the working class (this is expressed by Prime Minister David Cameron as the desire to ‘fix Broken Britain’). The government needs to find a way to reduce state expenditure on the social wage without significantly undermining the continuity of care and continued reproduction of the working class.

The post-feminist discourse of free-market liberal feminists and the pronouncements about the entrepreneurial or aspirational citizen by all of the major political parties takes centre stage as an organising ideological force within the financial crisis. It is through the discourse of ‘choice’ that women are being encouraged to either move away from waged labour and go back to the home or resume the gendered ‘second shift’ of unpaid work in the home as well as working outside the home for wages. It is through the rhetoric of ‘choice’ that parenthood is being increasingly cast as something that individuals rationally choose to do and in doing so bear all of the moral responsibility (and financial culpability) and therefore should not expect any ‘assistance’ from the state and other ‘tax payers’. The return to the home is not only being proposed to women – men too are being encouraged to consider this option – but only as long as their partners earn more than they do. The idea that life decisions are rational choices made on a cost-benefit analysis pervades current responses to both the paucity of care, the disparity between men and women’s wages and an ever-present desire to escape waged labour.

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It is through the discourse of ‘choice’ that the state can withdraw funding from services without appearing to endanger social reproduction or provoking confrontation. The choice of love, family and community over money and careers is at the heart of post-feminist discourse. This ‘choice’ takes place within the context of a massive economic and political assault on women. From job losses (women make up 65 per cent of all public sector employees) to cuts to pensions and benefits, as well as specific programs dealing with everything from domestic violence to cuts in playground construction – the target is women and especially those women that care for children. So the ‘rational choice’ ends up being not a choice at all but instead a necessity to return to the home to perform unpaid reproductive labour. This rational choice also serves to mobilise the elderly, whose own pensions and benefits are under attack. When families are unable to return one person to the home full time to care for children, the first option taken by most parents in the UK is to turn to their own parents before turning to paid childcare.¹³

The aim of the ConDem’s cuts to government spending is to reduce the social wage, and to return social reproduction to the realm of the unpaid. It is also an attempt to change historical expectations. It is not a return to the 1950s so much as the creation of a voluntaristic morality that serves the same function of relocating people (women for the most part) back into the home to perform unpaid labour. The rational choice of generally lower paid women moving back

¹³The 14 million grandparents in the UK provide an estimated £3.9billion in childcare free of charge. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/oct/06/childcare-grandparents-strike>

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to the home to perform unwaged labour also reinvigorates traditional gender relations with a neo-liberal logic of rational choice. It also further entrenches what has become, over the course of the last 30 years, a dual economy with a minority of well paid professionals at one end (with an even smaller number of the super wealthy above them) and a struggling majority of dual low-income households at the other.

In, Against and Beyond the Social Wage

Among the demands for childcare in the 1960s and 1970s there was the demand for community run and controlled nurseries. Feminists who struggled over questions of childcare and campaigned for community control of nurseries won this demand with varying degrees of success. To be sure, these nurseries have their problems. Like much of the labour involved in providing social services, looking after children is demanding, underpaid and undervalued. People's capacity to care and love is relied upon and it often means that people accept conditions they might not otherwise. The logic of childcare liberate's women's time but only for waged work. To begin to navigate a path of resistance out of the current crisis we need to return to the question of what kind of reproduction we want.

For the nursery campaign in Hackney, this will mean reinvigorating the community nursery sector. Even though it will mean swimming against the neo-liberal tide, community nurseries need to not just be defended

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but expanded - with the state footing the bill. Outside of Hackney, for the various social movements engaged in resisting the ConDems austerity budget the task will be to organise and mobilise around the question of not only childcare provision but also the social wage more generally. At present the lack of an organised feminist movement and the continued lack of engagement by left groups and social movements with the issue of childcare means that this task is as urgent as ever.

The question of work needs be at the centre of all our struggles – waged and unwaged, concerning both conditions and compensation. But this must take place at a general level, across all social provision of services, and not be allowed to become a question of shifting resources from one group of workers to another. And this demand must take place in a broader conversation about care – what is it, where it happens and who does it. It is within this conversation that the question of the social wage can be raised once more from its starting point – as wages for the wageless and wages for reproductive work.

Central to our struggles around social reproduction is the necessity to return to the question of work-time – work-time paid for through wages and work-time unwaged. We cannot allow our reproduction to depend on how much time we have left from waged labour, instead we need to reduce the time we spend at waged work. If reproduction is brought to the centre of our struggles then perhaps the struggle become less a refusal of waged work and more a reduction of the working day so we have the time necessary to participate in our collective social reproduction.

More generally there is an urgent need to refocus anti-cuts campaigns around the question of our material re-

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production and place demands for control at the heart of them. Here, ironically, the David Cameron's rhetoric of mutualism could be used tactically. By starting from the idea of worker and service user alliances, there is a possibility of constructing a social force powerful enough to resist funding cuts and creating alliances that co-manage and co-control public services. By forcing the state to continue to fund our material reproduction and using their rhetoric to push for more control at the same time, we can build a resistance that means this crisis becomes a crisis for capitalism and the state – and not for us.