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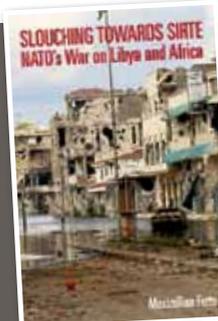
For peace & socialism

Tuesday April 30 2013



Rebalancing our economy

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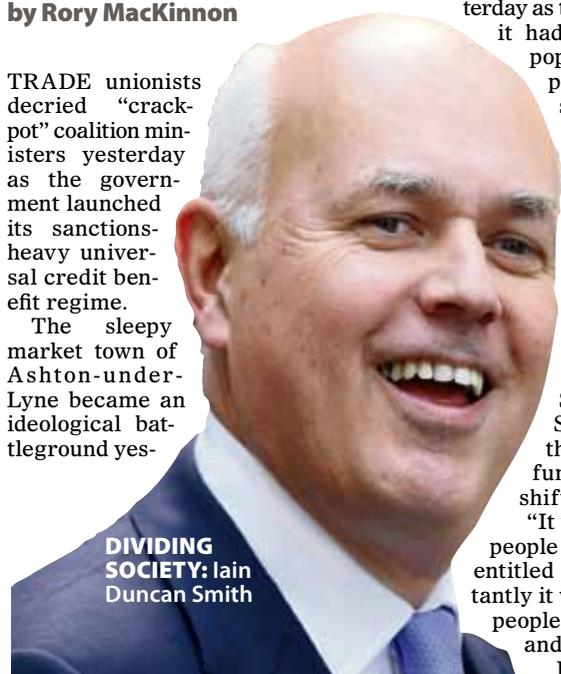
COALITION ROLLS OUT CRACKPOT BENEFITS SCHEME

Ashton-under-Lyne becomes first to test divisive new universal credit

by **Rory MacKinnon**

TRADE unionists decried "crackpot" coalition ministers yesterday as the government launched its sanctions-heavy universal credit benefit regime.

The sleepy market town of Ashton-under-Lyne became an ideological battleground yesterday as the coalition confirmed it had picked the town — population 43,200 — to pilot test the new scheme.



DIVIDING SOCIETY: Iain Duncan Smith

The scheme combines a raft of benefits — from jobseeker's allowance to housing benefit and income support for those on low wages — into a single lump sum paid in arrears each month.

Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith called the rollout the first step towards "a fundamental cultural shift."

"It will make it easier for people claim what they are entitled to, but more importantly it will make it easier for people to move off benefits and into work," he said.

But critics have

"This scheme isn't about strivers — it's setting us against each other only worsen the gap between the haves and have-nots"

— TUC regional secretary Lynn Collins

warned the scheme threatens heavy sanctions for people who are already working.

Those in minimum-waged, part-time jobs of less than 35 hours a week risk losing their benefit unless they attend job interviews with as little as 48 hours' notice.

The regulations can even compel a worker to quit the job they have for one with slightly more hours, on pain

of freezing their benefit.

But the millionaire minister said last year he would also freeze people's benefits if they tried to secure higher wages through industrial action.

"Striking is a choice and in future benefit claimants will have to pay the price for that choice — as under universal credit, we no longer will," he said.

Dozens of demonstrators rallied outside Ashton-under-Lyne's town hall yesterday to protest at the reforms, led by the Unite and PCS unions.

PCS campaigns head Phyllis Opoku-Gyimah told the Morning Star Jobcentre Plus staff were ironically among the 40 per cent of PCS members who would be shunted onto the scheme.

"Our main issues are around the conditionality, the sanctions."

"This isn't about strivers — it's setting us against each other," she said, adding that she had not heard any further threats of strike sanctions.

TUC regional secretary Lynn Col-

lins said the raft of sanctions and hoops would "only worsen the gap between the haves and have-nots."

"This is a crackpot scheme which is designed to cut payments to the most vulnerable people and the working poor," she said.

DWP officials plan to carry out further trials in Oldham, Wigan and Warrington from July, with a national rollout beginning in April next year.

The rollout comes just a week after official figures showed the lowest year-on-year rise in weekly earnings since 2001.

The Office for National Statistics found earnings between December and February were just 1 per cent higher than the same time the year before — and nearly trebled by the rate of inflation.

Meanwhile figures for the same period showed 5.2 people on jobseeker's allowances for every single vacancy across Britain.

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