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If nothing else, the Fowler proposals for reforming the Social Security system show what a pack of bastards the present government are. In response to them, the Labour party and TUC are encouraging us to campaign to defend the Welfare State. Do they take us for complete idiots?

The Fowler proposals are not, as claimed, a fundamental reform of the Welfare State. They merely aim to rationalize it to meet the changed reality of mass unemployment, and deepen the divisions within the working class. So aside from half-hearted efforts to tidy up the accumulated mess of conflicting benefits and regulations, and to end the ‘poverty trap’, they are intended to reduce provision for the ‘poor’. This is being done to increase their dependency, force them to devote their energies to surviving rather than revolting, and frighten the rest of the working class with the threat of the ‘abyss’ of poverty. The poor are to be more visibly separated from the relatively well-off—those with jobs and average wages. These are supposed to form the ‘home-owning, two-car-owning, share-owning democracy’ which the Tories see as a vital bulwark against resistance to the redistribution of wealth back to the ruling class. This much is obvious to anyone with eyes to see.

Less obvious to many who can see this much is that the Welfare State isn’t now, and never was, a ‘genuine gain for the working class’. Even less is it something we should be fighting to defend. The oppressive reality of the Welfare State is all too obvious to those in receipt of its ‘benefits’. The appalling misery of old age on inadequate pensions. The endless bureaucratic swamp of Housing Benefit and public housing provision. The arrogance of the medical and social work priesthoods. The inhuman nightmare of the Social Security system—and so on.

Yet many still think that their experience isn’t a reflection of the nature and function of the Welfare State, but is simply the result of ‘problems’ and deformations which would only take a few reforms to sort out. This sort of misapprehension has been played on by the Labour Party and the left throughout the history of the Welfare State. They present themselves as the Progressive Forces which alone will sort out these ‘problems’ and defend these ‘gains’. This campaign is yet another attempt to mobilise ‘our people’ into voting Labour at the next election.

Today these ‘problems’ are blamed on the Tory cuts and Tory monetarism. We’re not supposed to remember that it was the Wilson/Callaghan governments which started the cuts and first adopted monetarist policies.

The Welfare State is just the contemporary face of the capitalist state. If it offers all kinds of services and financial support—things that we need to survive—it doesn’t do this because we need them, but because capitalism needs us to have them in order for it to survive. We shouldn’t be surprised if capitalism ‘reaches back’ benefits or imposes new conditions for granting them as its priorities change. It is only able to ‘service’ our needs because capitalist society has developed through destroying our opportunities for doing so ourselves.

The modern British Welfare State evolved over many decades as individual capitalists were slowly brought to accept the need to control the wider social conditions within which their profits were produced. Because they need an educated, healthy workforce. Workers who are motivated through a sense of having a stake in society, and are not motivated by the anger generated through complete dispossession and destitution. On the other hand, they need to directly intervene in order to shape and dominate ever greater areas of social life and promote the spread of capitalist social relations to every part of society.
The Beveridge Report was just a high point in the development of the modern capitalist state, in its evolution as a framework within which workers and their dependents were tied to the Welfare State, however welfare is to be doled out. The reality is that 56% of the adult male population were to be involved in a Welfare State. The Beveridge plan was National Insurance against sickness and unemployment based on workers' and employers' contributions. Social Security, then called National Assistance, was intended to be a safety net and thus maintain low pay. The Beveridge plan was to be implemented by 1948. The Beveridge Report was just a high point in the development of the modern capitalist state.

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