

Social security, ‘shirkers’ and sanctions: unsettling the ‘common sense’

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‘The coroner said that when David Clapson died he had no food in his stomach. Clapson’s benefits had been stopped as a result of missing one meeting at the jobcentre. He was diabetic, and without the £71.70 a week from his Jobseekers’ Allowance he couldn’t afford to eat or put credit on his electricity card to keep the fridge where he kept his insulin working. Three weeks later Clapson died from diabetic ketoacidosis, caused by a severe lack of insulin. A pile of CVs was found next to his bed.’¹

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on my recent involvement within an organisation known as Unite Community, the community arm of the UK’S largest trade union, Unite. The setting up of Unite Community in December 2011 in itself was a measure of the times we live in, as it was a direct response to the consequences of the austerity programme of the Coalition Government. It is a great initiative, which has undertaken some impressive work and has considerable potential.

The reflections here are intended to reinforce the value of such work by arguing for a more strategic approach to it. I have chosen to illustrate my point with a focus on the campaign on the question of benefit sanctions, one of the most draconian measures implemented by the Coalition Government.

Background to Unite Community

Unite Community aims to unionise and embrace people ‘being pushed to the margins of society’², especially unemployed people. Unite also welcomes others not in formal paid employment, including volunteers, students, carers and retired people. Community membership, Unite states, ‘places organising and activism at the centre of local communities; it provides a structure through which people can use their political voices to campaign for change’.³ It is part of a growing interest in ‘community unionism’ or ‘community organising’ by trade unions in the UK.⁴ Unite appointed regional co-ordinators to support its community arm; it has set up branches in many parts of Britain and encouraged the opening of community support centres staffed by volunteers. In my own area of the North East, Yorkshire and Humberside region, for example, there are now three such centres with others in the pipeline.

Membership of Unite Community costs 50p per week, although if affordability is a problem, local Unite industrial branches would usually sponsor members experiencing such difficulty. Apart from community support, activism and campaigning, individual Unite Community membership includes access to education and training, free legal advice, advice on a range of other matters, including debt and discounts of various kinds.

In many areas, a core of volunteer activists has emerged and branch members are often an interesting mix of people seeking work and retired members, often from different socio-economic backgrounds. The latter can offer the advantage of continuity when unemployed members do eventually find paid work. Activists are also offered training by Unite and given support by branch members and the regional co-ordinators. Expenses are also available for activities such as advice work and training courses.

Welfare rights advice has been an impressive feature of the support offered in some of the branches, which have also provided advocacy and tribunal representation. Such work is supported by Unite with good quality training and access to advice from an experienced welfare rights worker within a regional branch. Apart from welfare rights, support activity has included linking up with other organisations such as local foodbanks and clothing and furniture stores. In one branch, for example, two women members who had researched local needs set up the 'Socialist Clothing Bank'. Education and training are also available in some centres. For instance, one centre offers English language classes and also has 'a radical library'.

A final feature of Unite Community's work is campaigning, which is often informed by the issues thrown up by support work and perceived local needs, as well as national priorities identified by the union. Campaigning has focused on issues such as local cuts, the bedroom tax, work capability assessments, workfare and benefit sanctions. Links are frequently made with other organisations, especially trade unions and other campaigning groups, offering support, including modest donations for their activities and invitations to speak at local branch meetings to raise awareness. Unite Community has backed various campaigns, including industrial struggles, the anti-cuts demonstrations organised by the People's Assembly, protests against the treatment of workers in fast-food outlets and the recent successful campaign against Sports Direct's treatment of its workforce.

Having sketched out the background to Unite Community, I would now like to reflect on some campaigning aspects of the union's work in which I have been involved. In doing so, I hope it will prompt some thought and discussion, not only on my part, but also for others in the union and for activists in other organisations involved in similar activities.

Campaigning work revisited

Benefit sanctions

A key component of Unite Community's work has rightly been focused on questions of social security, with a particular emphasis on the issue of benefit sanctions. Unemployed people, especially those in receipt of Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA) and Employment Support Allowance in the Work Related Activity Group, have been subjected to extremely harsh measures if they have been deemed not to be following the conditions attached to their benefits. Although ostensibly these conditions are aimed at encouraging people to return to work, the tough treatment and stigma of the benefits sanctions regime also carries a disciplinary message to those currently in work, which can be precarious work with low wages. Sanctions can be imposed from 4 weeks up to three years, depending on the nature of a claimant's perceived transgression of the benefit rules.

In an overview of the sanctions regime, David Webster has pointed to several flaws with the system.⁵

- While the government claims sanctions are used as a last resort, a quarter of claimants have been sanctioned since 2014, often for trivial reasons
- Decisions to sanction are secret administrative decisions, whereas people who appear in the criminal courts are entitled to legal representation
- Claimants are sometimes not informed that they have been sanctioned
- Financial penalties involved are more severe than the tariff of fines available to magistrates' courts
- While hardship payments are available, they don't appear to work effectively
- The appeal rate success against sanctions is high, but only one in five affected actually appeal
- The social harm caused by sanctions is significant: 'worsened health, hunger and resort to food banks, damage to family relationships, debt, homelessness and increased crime'
- Despite government claims that sanctions encourage people back into work, there is no evidence from the UK to support this
- Despite increasing evidence of problems, the government has so far resisted a Comprehensive Review of benefit sanctions.

Webster has also pointed out that particular groups are especially vulnerable to being sanctioned.⁶ Young people in receipt of JSA are twice as likely to be sanctioned as others, while men are nearly 50 per cent more likely to be sanctioned than women. Ethnic minorities in receipt of JSA are also more likely to be sanctioned. Disabled people in receipt of JSA are most at risk of repeat sanctions. Another particular group at risk are those with mental and behavioural health issues who are in receipt of Employment Support Allowance in the Work Related Activity Group. Homeless people are also thought to be vulnerable to sanctioning but there are problems in collecting data for this group.

As the case of David Clapson suggests, there is also the danger that cases of death amongst claimants may be linked to benefit sanctions. Even the Department of Work and Pensions has now admitted that in 10 out of 49 deaths which were reviewed, claimants had had their benefit payments sanctioned at some point. As a news report on the issue stated: 'The figures have caused alarm, as they suggest that claimants who have been sanctioned are far more likely to suffer a death linked to their benefit claim than those who have not been sanctioned'.⁷

The work of welfare rights advisers within Unite Community can also attest to the damage done by such a system, but the union, while helping to prevent and challenge individual sanctions decisions, also works on a wider level to campaign against the sanctions regime. National days of action have been organised, the details and locations of which are determined by the local branches. In my own experience, these kinds of protests typically involve setting up a stall in a central location, collecting signatures on a petition and giving out leaflets. They have tended to engage members of the public and generated publicity about the issue. These are important events in continuing to highlight one of the most

pernicious forms of 'social' policy enacted in the post-war period and in demanding reform. Reflecting on my own experience, however, I sometimes wonder whether campaigning could have more impact in terms of challenging, shifting and mobilising opinion on benefits more decisively.

At one Unite Community conference it was suggested by a speaker from the TUC that mainstream British public opinion could be mobilised on the issue of sanctions, particularly because of the direct impact on children.⁸ While I don't consider that anyone should be subject to such draconian action, it nevertheless remains the case, as we shall see later in this paper, that popular attitudes towards benefit claimants of working age are more hard-line than they have been for some time. My argument is that these attitudes matter because the government depends on them for the continuation of its sanctions policy. If the policy is to be changed for all those affected, the attitudes of the wider public therefore need to shift. Furthermore, as will be argued later in this paper, public opinion does not remain stable; it shifts over time. The question is how can we best facilitate such a change in attitudes?

Questions of theory

Of course, there is a range of possible answers to the question of how to shift public opinion. One possible starting point is to think about questions of theory before developing a strategy. It is important to note here that I am not arguing here for theory for its own sake, but for theory that can relate to and confirm or improve practice.

Theory obviously informs different models of community organising, with the work of Saul Alinsky and Paulo Freire being of particular significance in this area.⁹ While Freire stresses raising awareness of oppression and building people's capacity to change the status quo, Alinsky focuses more on the need to build effective community-led organisations. Again, based on my experience, the broad approach taken by Unite Community is arguably best summarised by David Thomas in his definition of 'community action':

Community action focuses on the organisation of those adversely affected by the decisions, or non-decisions, of public and private bodies and by more general structural characteristics of society. The strategy aims to promote collective action to challenge existing socio-political and economic structures and processes, to explore and explain the power realities of people's situations and, through this twin pronged approach, develop both critical perspectives of the status quo and alternative bases of power and action.¹⁰

Other commentators have also recognised the need to address the specific experiences of different social groups such as those reflected in anti-racist and feminist perspectives.¹¹ Models of community organising may, however, be too broad to encourage critical reflection on the crucial role of popular opinion in maintaining power imbalances.

Antonio Gramsci refreshed the thinking of some on the political left when his work became known to a wider audience in the 1970s following the publication of the main English translation of his work. There are at least two aspects to his approach, the concepts of

'common sense' and what he called 'war of position', which could be helpful when thinking about campaigns against sanctions. Common sense offers insight into popular opinion and war of position might inform questions of strategy. Before exploring these concepts, however, it is useful to set the context by briefly considering some of Gramsci's background.

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937)

Antonio Gramsci was Italian and involved in the socialist and communist movements in the early part of the twentieth century. For part of this period, it looked like a potentially revolutionary situation had opened up in Italy, as workers in the north of the country occupied car factories and began to take control of production through what became known as the Factory Councils. This near revolutionary situation of economic and political crisis passed, however, despite the promising circumstances (from an orthodox Marxist perspective) to be followed by the move towards fascism under Mussolini. By this point, Gramsci was leader of the Italian Communist Party and a member of the Italian parliament, however, he was eventually imprisoned by the fascist regime for most of the remainder of his relatively short life. Whilst incarcerated, he wrote his famous *Prison Notebooks*,¹² the source of most of his well-known political ideas, although the 3000 pages of original notebooks were written sometimes using terms which were designed to obscure their true meaning to evade the prison censors. They were also somewhat fragmentary. The notebooks were eventually smuggled out of prison.

In reflecting on how best to seek the socialist transformation of society, Gramsci developed the notion of hegemony into his own unique understanding of power and how it might be used to challenge the capitalist order. The word hegemony in this context means 'leadership'. Hegemony, then, refers not to straightforward domination but rather to the idea that ruling groups held power in advanced capitalist industrial nations through establishing influence and leadership in economics, ideology and politics. The ruling group have to influence or lead other social groups but also absorb their interests so that they (the ruling group) are seen to rule in the general interest. Once hegemony is secured, which is no easy task, it needs to be continually maintained, especially in the context of crisis and resistance, for example. For Gramsci, hegemony relies not only on consent but also on coercion.

Gramsci also believed that if the working class were to achieve power, then they needed to develop a counter-hegemony by challenging capitalist power structures, again at the level of economics, ideas and politics, in alliance with other potentially progressive forces. This would mean, for instance, seriously taking on board the interests of other subordinate groups. He also thought, unlike during the Italy of the 1920s, that people needed to be prepared for the socialist transformation of society and not simply leave the prospect of change to worsening economic conditions in the hope that the proletariat would rise to their inevitable destiny. This is the point at which ideology or ideas become crucial.

In thinking about how to challenge the power of the ruling group, Gramsci also focused on popular ideas in wider society. He observed that people had internalised ideas which were not always their own or consistent with their own interests. He therefore reasoned that it

was necessary to challenge such ideas through raising people's awareness as a pre-condition for revolutionary change.

Common sense

If the aim is to shift popular opinion which is currently hostile towards social security claimants of working age and sanctions in particular, then it is useful to understand the nature of popular opinion in general. Gramsci referred to it as 'spontaneous philosophy', as he suggested that we are all 'philosophers' in that we all need frameworks of meaning within which to understand the world. He saw such spontaneous philosophy or common sense an essential terrain of struggle if society is to be transformed.

The late Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea wrote an invaluable article in which they not only explain clearly what Gramsci means by common sense, but also show how it applies in today's society.¹³ In particular, they look at common-sense attitudes towards social security, which we can build upon when campaigning against sanctions and other aspects of recent reforms. So, what are the key elements within Gramsci's notion of 'common sense'?

Common sense, from a Gramscian perspective, is not practical wisdom. Rather, it refers to the way we draw (sometimes unconsciously) on simplified popular ideas to understand the world. It operates 'without forethought or reflection...giving the illusion of arising from daily experience, reflecting only the realities of daily life'.¹⁴

'Common sense' is expressed in everyday language and in the headlines and ideas of the popular press.¹⁵ The idea of the 'welfare scrounger', for example, is widespread, but is rarely talked about with reference to any considered evidence for its existence.

Hall and O'Shea note that while common sense may not be coherent, it does have a logic and history to it. It is often a response to quite specific problems that arise at particular moments or, as Gramsci suggests, it is 'episodic'. It also tends to be 'socially conservative'. Immigration, for example, is often cited by some as the explanation for our current ills rather than a more complex analysis rooted in the operation of the economy, politics and society.

Common sense, according to Hall and O'Shea, is a mixture of early beliefs, more scientific principles or prejudices across history. These disparate elements become 'slowly settled' in 'truncated forms' into popular philosophy but without leaving 'an inventory of their sources'. For example, as we shall see in the next section, the popular idea of 'the scrounger' has a long history and emerges at times of economic crisis. However, this long history and the contexts in which the term arises are not understood historically.

Hall and O'Shea also point out that common sense has 'content':

It's a compendium of well-tried knowledge, customary beliefs, wise sayings, popular nostrums and prejudices, some of which – like 'a little of what you fancy does you good' – seems eminently sensible, others wildly inaccurate. Its virtue is that it is obvious... it may be persuasive precisely because we think it is a product of Nature rather than of history.¹⁶

Hall and O'Shea give several examples to illustrate the way elements of common sense are brought together, especially emphasising its often contradictory nature:

Many people intuitively favour 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' conception of justice – while at the same time believing that Muslim Sharia Law is a barbarous form of law. Some who depend on benefits to survive believe all other claimants are 'scroungers'. Some who hold that unbridled competition driven by self-interest is the only way to succeed also believe 'we should love our neighbours as ourselves'.¹⁷

But common sense is not irredeemably socially conservative. According to Gramsci, it also contains a 'healthy nucleus' or 'good sense'. This might be reflected in widely perceived injustices such as the idea of corporations avoiding tax, or anger at the banks following the credit crunch. But good sense provides a basis on which the left could develop a popular strategy for radical change – if it takes on board the idea that common sense is a site of political struggle'¹⁸.

Common sense may also result from the interests of different social groups over time, which leave their traces in popular thought. In this way, as Hall and O'Shea suggest, we are able to 'hold contradictory opinions simultaneously, and to take up contradictory subject-positions', which are not always in the self-interest of those that espouse such contradictions, for example, the fact that some unemployed people voted for Thatcher.¹⁹ The ruling group does not necessarily have a monopoly on common sense, but its members may well use it to further their political ends. The way in which politicians have exploited people's perceptions of benefit claimants to justify cuts such as the benefit cap would be a good example.

The question, then, is how can we harness Gramsci's insights into common sense and relate it to social security campaigning work? In order to attempt to answer this question, it is important to ask how common sense informs attitudes towards particular benefit claimants.

Common sense and social security

'idle paupers', 'scroungers' and 'shirkers'

Common sense, as Gramsci suggests, can be historically rooted and today's stereotype of 'the social security scrounger' is no exception. His point that common sense understandings are informed by 'prejudices from all phases of history' and the idea that such views leave an 'infinity of traces' applies particularly well to idea of the benefit 'scrounger'. In a succinct historical review of popular stereotypes about those in poverty, Romano shows how they follow a similar pattern, whether the common sense has been about 'idle paupers', 'scroungers' or, in its most contemporary guise, that of 'shirkers'.²⁰ Such stereotypes are emphasised in the context of economic or social crisis, have involved moralising judgements and subsequent punitive policy shifts.

Romano notes that in the eighteenth century there was concern about the idea of the 'idle pauper', which was also reflected in British literature of the time. This kind of 'common sense' had a social impact, however. It resulted in a formal distinction being made between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, with the latter meriting punishment. They were held responsible for their condition due to their apparent idleness. Such moral panic was

ultimately reflected in policy changes in the nineteenth century, which saw the end of the Speenhamland system (which guaranteed that the wages of poor labourers would be raised to an agreed level out of parish funds). It was replaced by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, whereby the 'undeserving' were confined to the workhouse. The act also embodied the less eligibility principle, i.e. the condition of someone in the workhouse should be seen as less attractive than that of the poorest worker outside the workhouse.

In the twentieth century, a similar process was reflected in the popular notion of 'the scrounger', which, as Romano points out, became more frequently used from 1976, a time of severe economic crisis and public expenditure cuts. The tabloid newspapers sensationalised such concerns and a kind of 'hysteria' emerged with a particular focus on social security fraud or abuse. Subsequently, as well as austerity measures, there was a huge increase in the prosecution of social security fraud and a tightening of the rules for claiming benefits.

In the more recent past, following the banking crisis and the resulting programme of austerity, we have seen a revival of popular concerns about the social security or 'welfare scrounger'. This was amplified and aided by Channel 4's controversial *Benefits Street* series, which followed the lives of social security claimants in an area of Birmingham. George Osborne reinforced this outlook in a speech contrasting 'the shift worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early the morning' to a neighbour 'sleeping off a life on benefits'.²¹ Such a distinction is also encapsulated in the phrase 'strivers and shirkers'.

Recent reforms to social security have resulted in more emphasis on 'workfare' programmes, in which claimants must attend mandatory programmes and work experience in order to continue receiving benefits - less generous benefits - and a harsh regime of sanctions for claimants not deemed to be sufficiently engaged in job-seeking.

The use of common sense has been key in laying the ideological groundwork for regressive welfare reform in moments of crisis. Such common sense is, however, more complex than is being suggested here. By looking a little further at popular attitudes to benefit claimants, we can see how they form an important basis for the current struggle.

Neoliberalism

Hall and O'Shea's work is worth exploring further as they attempt to unpick the contemporary common sense around social security in the context of neoliberalism. They see the development of social security policy taking place within what they refer to as 'common-sense neoliberalism'. But before exploring this further, it is worth stating what is meant by neoliberalism.

At one level, neoliberalism represents an updating of classical liberalism, i.e. a belief in freedom of individuals, a minimal state and a market economy, which was particularly influential in the nineteenth century. This stands in contrast to the modern, reforming liberalism from the early twentieth century onwards. A useful starting point in defining contemporary neoliberalism is given by Heywood:

Its central pillars are the market and the individual. The principal neo-liberal goal is to 'roll back the frontiers of the state' in the belief that unregulated market capitalism will deliver efficiency, growth and widespread prosperity. In this view the 'dead hand of the state' saps initiative and discourages enterprise; government, however well intentioned, invariably has a damaging effect upon human affairs. This is reflected in a preference for privatisation, economic deregulation, low taxes and anti-welfarism.²²

In a more recent and critical overview of neoliberalism, George Monbiot sees it as being a very powerful and pervasive form of capitalism.²³ He suggests it operates in insidious ways, which prevent us from seeing the connections between its dangerous consequences. For example, he argues it has had 'a major role' in 'the financial crisis of 2007-08, the offshoring of wealth and power...the slow collapse of public health and education, resurgent child poverty, the epidemic of loneliness, the collapse of ecosystems, the rise of Donald Trump.'

He traces the rise of neoliberalism back to work of intellectuals such as Friedrich Hayek, noting that the term was first coined as far back as 1938. It was partly a reaction to the collectivism of social democracy and a fear that the undue influence of the state would lead to totalitarianism. Right wing think tanks, established with the help of millionaires, have helped to spread neoliberal ideas. They influenced politicians, notably Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s. Neoliberal ideas also spread or were imposed internationally through organisations such as the International Monetary Fund and the European Union.

Neoliberalism, Monbiot argues, emphasises the centrality of competition and defines us as consumers rather than citizens. The market – as opposed to a system of rational planning - is seen as the key organising principle for society. Although neoliberalism has also proclaimed freedom as a key virtue, it has resulted in the ability of a minority to enrich themselves but also to impoverish others. As Monbiot puts it, such freedom 'turns out to mean freedom for the pike, not for the minnows'.

The impact of neoliberal ideas has, according to Monbiot, been deeply harmful in a number of other ways:

- Neoliberal ideas are internalised by people whereby the rich are seen as having achieved their status by merit while the poor blame themselves for their failures
- Neoliberalism is also linked to 'epidemics of self-harm, eating disorders, depression, loneliness, performance anxiety and social phobias.'
- While competition and freedom from bureaucracy are proclaimed, many are 'subject to a pettifogging, stifling regime of assessment and monitoring, designed to identify the winners and punish the losers.'
- Under neoliberalism, economic growth has generally slowed but not for the rich
- Privatisation and marketisation has meant that companies delivering public services have effectively been collecting rent from them, charging a lot but investing little
- Interest rate charges by financial services represent a transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich and even within the wealthy

- Corporations delivering public services has also meant the state bearing the risk whilst companies have taken the profits
- Market failures have often meant further opportunities for tax cuts and privatisation.

Neoliberalism has also led to a political crisis, according to Monbiot. Neoliberalism suggests we can empower ourselves by consumer choice but this does not apply to those with little money. As successive governments have been influenced by neoliberalism, real political choice is reduced. Monbiot adds that, in this context, the extreme right appeal to the politically inactive who feel they have no stake in the political establishment.

Despite market failures and crises, Monbiot also argues that neoliberalism is able to carry on partly because of its anonymity. For example, its backers are anonymous, the use of the word 'markets' is often code for what corporations and their bosses want and the term neoliberalism, he notes, is avoided by its beneficiaries because it is seen as pejorative. But neoliberalism also continues, he argues, because there is currently a lack of a credible alternative.

Following Monbiot's account, the implications for the work of Unite Community are profound. It is worth giving a few examples. Firstly, there has been an increase in inequality²⁴ and a doubling of poverty over the last 30 years²⁵. Secondly, the loss of traditional manufacturing jobs under neoliberalism and tight trade union regulation has given way to more precarious employment, some poor employment practices and low wages.²⁶ Thirdly, as noted earlier, unemployed people on benefits have been demonised and subjected to draconian rules and cuts, to say nothing of the impact on their psychological and physical health. Fourthly, market failures, especially the banking crisis, have meant austerity cuts in vital services and the loss of decent public sector jobs. The GMB union now estimates that one million public sector jobs have been lost since the Conservatives came to power in 2010.²⁷ Finally, the political crisis identified by Monbiot means that some alienated working class communities have been attracted to the ideas of the populist right, both in Britain and elsewhere. In short, and despite the current conditions of crisis, neoliberalism might be seen as a reassertion of class power that has exercised a strong hold over the contemporary world.

Common-sense neoliberalism and benefit claimants

Like Monbiot, Hall and O'Shea also understand that the idea of the market, where everything is a commodity, has become paramount, and it is this which forms the basis of common-sense neoliberalism. In terms of public expenditure, the emphasis is now on 'value for money' and 'greater efficiency', especially in the wake of the banking crisis and austerity, even though there has been no problem in finding money to throw at the banks (the bailout was equivalent to £19,271 for each person in the UK²⁸). In relation to social security, there has been a shift in the understanding of the concept of 'fairness' so that benefit entitlement, which was once tied to the notion of rights, is now more clearly linked to effort.

The social security reforms of 2012-13 brought in tighter rules for claims of various kinds and less generous payments were also tied to the demonisation of claimants at both state and popular level. Particular stories about claimants living well off benefits were highlighted, as though this was true of everyone receiving them. In such cases, however, the fact that a hefty part of these payments included money paid in rent to profiteering landlords was conveniently overlooked by the media reporting them.²⁹

At the same time, a YouGov poll reported that people interviewed thought that 41 per cent of the welfare budget on average went on people who were unemployed, whereas the actual figure was only 3 per cent.³⁰ There was also a perception that just under a third of the budget was wasted by fraud; however, the real figure was 0.7 per cent. Such views are then tied to market common sense – ‘you can only have what you pay for’ – and that benefits, especially given their allegedly dubious recipients, must be cut to counteract the deficit, which, in any case, was made out to be all ‘Labour’s fault’. Hall and O’Shea comment, however, on the instability of common sense here in that the polling they refer to reveals that when respondents were given the correct figures, they became more sympathetic to claimants. Common sense, it seems, is not always fixed or stable and *can* shift.

Hall and O’Shea also consider some of the common sense in evidence within the online comments section of *The Sun* at the time of the social security reforms. And while it may not be representative, much of it is recognisable as the language of popular stereotypes, whether encountered in the pub, in the media, or on the government front bench in the House of Commons. Some elements may be misinformed and contradictory, others may be seen as ‘good sense’.

There are comments that show how claimants are demonised, including descriptions of them as ‘lazy’ and ‘living in luxury’, while immigrants are seen as those ‘who have never contributed to our economy being given handouts’. Such views, as Hall and O’Shea observe, are in accordance with the view expressed by the government that benefits should not be ‘something for nothing’. Other comments, however, resist this kind of understanding. For example, one contributor notes that many of those receiving benefits work and receive tax credits, thus they can’t be reasonably labelled as ‘shirkers’. Another view attacks the cruelty of the cuts to people with disabilities, thereby also the competitive individualism promoted by the government.

Hall and O’Shea also explore the different aspects that can exist within common sense and that are reflected in the way we think as individuals. One contributor complains, for example, that the minimum wage was held down on Labour’s watch, but also refers to benefit claimants moaning about the low level of social security payments and insists that they should not be spending money beyond food and rent. The contributor further states that there should be a living wage, but a halt to the immigration of Romanians and Bulgarians, who they perceive to be coming for either benefits or jobs. As Hall and O’Shea observe, there is here ‘a patchwork of received ideas not yet reconciled into a coherent perspective’ but also examples of ‘good sense’, such as concern about wage levels, which can be built on by the left. They also see how class anger connects with the populist right via the use of scapegoats, for example.

Considering the work of Hall and O'Shea in some depth is helpful to our purposes. The neoliberal context, with its often contradictory popular ideas around social security, as well as its instability, and its combination of common sense and good sense, gives us potential points of leverage as campaigners. The problem with their work, from the perspective of this paper, is that it needs greater elaboration and application to the reality of campaigning. The next section thus focuses on challenging common sense in the context of the work of Unite Community.

From 'common sense' to 'good sense'

Much of Unite Community's work takes place at a local level on an individual and collective basis, so let us first examine work with individuals before moving on to consider campaigning. Work with individuals takes place particularly in the context of welfare rights advice and support. One Unite Community branch, for instance, runs its activities from a community support centre based near its town centre and includes an excellent welfare rights service. Advice at the centre is open to any member of the public, and once help has been offered, the team there make efforts, if necessary, to raise awareness about the political nature of the position claimants find themselves in. If appropriate, those seeking support are also offered the possibility of Unite Community membership. The offer of membership, however, only comes *after* advice and support have been given. The practice here seems to be exemplary. The work of the centre is widely recognised as highly successful and even something of a model for this type of work.

Successful though such an approach might be, we should not, following Monbiot, underestimate the degree to which claimants themselves may have internalised the stigma of a system in which they are demonised by both the state and popular opinion. It may also be the case that some claimants regard themselves as more 'deserving' than others. This may, therefore, take a careful, sensitive approach in offering alternative analysis which gently challenges common sense and picks up on good sense when discussing the status of claimants. Perhaps this kind of practice should be shared more across Unite Community and other organisations involved in this valuable but difficult work. As Gramsci himself might have observed, sympathetic consciousness does not come ready-made because of someone's social class or employment status. Where claimants themselves ultimately take on more good sense than common sense, their influence may spread to others they come into contact with when such matters are discussed.

Another aspect of work at an individual level may occur in the course of activists' daily lives with people who are not claimants, but may be members of the public, state officials or others, including perhaps fellow trade unionists who express common sense views consistent with a neoliberal perspective. Indeed, the size of the task is underlined by the fact that many Labour supporters' views on social security are hardening. Their attitudes towards claimants are more inclined towards blaming them for their own condition. A survey in 2013³¹, for instance, reported that just 16 per cent of Labour supporters in 1987 felt that people would 'learn to stand on their own feet' if the level of social security payments was reduced. By 2011 this figure had risen to 46 per cent.

As Gramsci suggests, common sense may be contradictory. An individual could have a generally negative view of benefit claimants, but at the same time have sympathy for a claimant they know personally. These kinds of contradictions may present opportunities to relate such personal circumstances to the position of claimants more generally; in other words, to move from common sense to good sense.

Whoever activists may engage with at an individual level, it is important that such work is skilfully done in a context of dialogue, and in a way that does not seek to *impose* a particular moral or political view. In saying this, however, pragmatic judgements about what can be achieved, especially in relation to the more intransigent, may have to be made.

In questioning harsh attitudes towards benefit sanctions, the work of Webster, as we have seen, is very useful. I have also included a section entitled 'Resources' at the end of this paper (see page 19), which points to further work by Webster. It also lists and comments on other easily available publications I have found useful and consistent with the idea of challenging common sense and promoting a war of position in relation to questions of social security and sanctions.

War of position

Reflecting on wider political change, Gramsci considered that direct capture of state power was more difficult to achieve in complex societies. He observed that while the state held the monopoly over coercion, capitalist power was also located in the consent given to it by wider society, or what he called 'civil society'. By civil society Gramsci is referring to the 'private'³², to activities and institutions usually outside the government, such as trade unions, voluntary groups, church organisations and so on. Civil society is also the place where resistance or counter-hegemony may develop.

At the time when Lenin and his comrades seized power in Russia, civil society was far less extensive than in more developed societies, so in that case, a more direct assault on the state was possible. Gramsci referred to this as 'a war of manoeuvre'. In more complex societies, he observed, the state is surrounded by a powerful system of 'earth works and fortresses' of organisations in civil society and which influence the nature of the state. If power is to change hands, then any successful counter-hegemonic project would need to dismantle 'the earthworks and fortresses', to influence civil society, to shift the balance of forces. He called this strategy 'a war of position'.³³

Although Gramsci argued his case from the perspective of a revolutionary who was ultimately prepared to go to the barricades, the idea of war of position could be adapted to contemporary circumstances. It could, for instance, relate to shifting further the balance of opinion within the Labour Party and other organisations, forming alliances and linking the democratic demands of various social movements in a struggle for alternatives to neoliberalism. Similarly, then, and indeed as part of such a movement, a war of position may be necessary to move the direction of public opinion just sufficiently to influence state policy on sanctions. But what might this mean in practice?

Anti-sanctions campaigning as a war of position

As Gramsci reminds us, no hegemony is ever complete; it needs to be continually renewed and it needs to be able to deal with resistance. There is always space for resistance. While there is considerable support for sanctions within the current Conservative government, the Conservative Party and wider society, this is not the case for everyone. There are those in civil society who reject the common sense view, whether this be political parties, pressure groups, churches and individual opinion. Bearing in mind what I mentioned earlier about respondents in one survey being willing to change their minds about claimants when presented with the facts, we should be encouraged that the common sense view is not necessarily fixed; good sense prevails in some quarters. This then provides us with a potential point of engagement for a war of position on sanctions. Some reflections on a local experience might assist in opening up possibilities which are consistent with such an approach.

In the example I have in mind, an umbrella group of local churches organised an event following concerns about the impact of the government's social security reforms, especially its harsher elements such as sanctions. In fact, a booklet on sanctions produced by a group of churches was available at the meeting.³⁴ A senior officer from the local authority also spoke about the council's efforts to offset the worst aspects of the reforms. A number of other organisations from local civil society were also represented at the event. Apart from members of the local branch of Unite Community, it also included local welfare rights workers, members of the Labour Party, including a former MP who addressed the meeting, and representatives from local churches and church-sponsored agencies, including an anti-poverty project. There were also two benefit claimants present who talked about their experiences of the social security system. It was a well-attended and encouraging meeting.

While a local campaign is yet to emerge from this event, it did form the basis of a potential alliance to challenge common sense perceptions, to engage local people via the press and social media, to begin to shift opinion and mobilise *enough* of it to begin to unsettle the dominant point of view. The use of case material would be particularly effective in such a campaign, such as the case of David Clapson cited at the beginning of this paper. What was interesting about the meeting was the mix of people, including what might be termed the voice of 'middle-Britain', not just 'the usual suspects' or activists from the political left. It is only by connecting with such voices that we can win a war of position on sanctions and related issues. I also recognise the hard work, determination and prioritisation that would be involved in building such coalitions, but when approached from the perspective of a 'war of position', such a campaign has considerable potential. The notion of a 'war of position' also helps us to think more strategically and to recognise the importance of the 'earthworks and fortresses' of civil society and the extent to which we may be influencing them.

National campaigning

Campaigning at a local level is of course not enough to challenge a national policy, but it is certainly an important part of a grassroots initiative, which ultimately could feed into a national campaign. A very worthwhile move in this this direction has already been made. In

October 2015, Unite Community called a national conference on fighting for a fair social security system jointly with the civil service union, the Public and Commercial Service union, better known as PCS. The latter represents workers at job centres, some of whom are required - and indeed pressured - to carry out the sanctions policy. It was a well-attended conference; in many ways also a remarkable event, particularly given that two major trade unions engaged with the sanctions policy (albeit from different perspectives) were able to join forces. Both Unite and PCS not only sponsored the conference, but leadership figures from both unions addressed the conference in plenary sessions. That two major unions engaged with industrial struggles at a national level were able to come together and talk about what might be called 'social wage issues' was gratifying, for if questions of social security are to be improved, the support of unions is vital.

Many useful things came out of the conference, including some excellent examples of campaigning undertaken by Unite Community branches, Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), Black Triangle and the Derbyshire Unemployed Workers' Centres.³⁵ The upshot of the conference was to campaign in order to explode myths around social security claimants, to build a coalition to fight for a better welfare safety net and to produce a welfare charter. *The Welfare Charter* has now been published.³⁶ It was also agreed, using the workshops from the conference as a basis, to develop a campaigning guide, which has now also been published and is a really valuable resource.³⁷

Against this background, other developments and possibilities are worth noting. The recent release in of Ken Loach's film, *I, Daniel Blake*, has drawn public attention to the harshness of the social security system in the UK and in particular to the question of sanctions. Ken Loach's appearances on various TV and radio programmes have sparked off interest and debate and can be built upon. Specifically, he has promoted the idea in his media appearances that sanctions represent a policy of 'conscious cruelty' on the part of government. Community showings of Loach's film have and are taking place. The film is an important cultural intervention in the war of position.

One of the advantages of Unite Community is that it is part of the labour movement and therefore has close links to the Labour Party. This provides an opportunity for the Labour Party to reflect the concerns of trade unionists, including those of Unite Community, and indeed of other social movements and sympathetic forces. This has already worked to good effect in that the Labour Party under Ed Miliband agreed to adopt a policy to abolish the Bedroom Tax, which I understand came about partly as a result of campaigning work by Unite Community activists.

The current Labour leadership could also be lobbied to take up the cause of sanctions and other repressive elements of the social security system more forcefully both in parliament, such as during Prime Minister's Question Time, and within the media. Such ideas are a good way of trying to further the war of position in relation to the oppressive nature of the social security regime, to shift the common sense, to move in the direction of more progressive policies and practices such as those outlined in *The Welfare Charter*. Alternative perspectives need to be intellectually coherent and need to be clearly and succinctly expressed and constantly repeated, so that the policy is consistently exposed and

alternatives brought forward. As Gramsci suggested, we should never tire of repeating the arguments for change.³⁸ Again, the use of individual cases rather than over-reliance on cold statistics would also reinforce the critique of current policy and practice and the need for alternatives.

Learning from other struggles: the Sports Direct campaign

A good illustration of a war of position on a non-social security matter that we can learn from has been the recent campaign to expose and address poor working practices at Sports Direct, which was strongly promoted by Unite and supported by Unite Community. Although there is still some way to go, Sports Direct has now started to make concessions, including the minimum wage for all aspects of work, an end to zero-hours contracts for shop workers and an end to the hard-line disciplinary system in their warehouse. The company has also announced an independent inquiry into its working practices.

The success of this campaign demonstrates Unite's ability to form what appeared to be an alliance with *The Guardian* in providing information and exposing what was going on, which then led to publicity in other national and social media outlets. For example, the Sports Direct campaign was well covered on the BBC News, which is an important source of news for many people. Channel 4 also screened an undercover report about conditions at the company's outlets and warehouses. The eventual appearance of the company's founder-owner and majority shareholder, Mike Ashley, at the Business, Innovation and Committee in the House of Commons was also key and involved an alliance of MPs from different parties, who published a highly critical report. As far as benefit sanctions are concerned, it is also worth noting that the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee have produced critical reports on the sanctions regime, which may potentially be very useful in further campaigning.³⁹

The Sports Direct campaign included other important elements. The union organised a petition, held protests outside Sports Direct shops and its warehouse and inside the ground at Newcastle United, owned, of course, by Mike Ashley. The charity War On Want also worked with the campaign and held joint protests. Campaigners never gave up and continued to underline their point with an effective intervention at the Sports Direct annual shareholders meeting. Overall, Unite's campaign showed the importance of influencing public opinion, building alliances, employing a range of tactics and persistence in winning the war of position.

War of position and the struggle against neoliberalism

It could also be argued that challenging common sense within the strategy of a war of position also applies to other policy areas as well in the struggle against neoliberalism in general. As Hall and O'Shea argue:

Labour must use every policy issue as an opportunity, not only to examine pragmatics, to highlight the underlying principle, slowly building an alternative consensus or 'popular philosophy'...it must engage in a two-way learning process, leading to what Gramsci called 'an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion

becomes understanding'. This may be complicated in the context of a popular cynicism toward the political class in general, but there is no alternative.⁴⁰

Amen to that. Unless common sense neoliberal assumptions are challenged consistently and persistently, and in a credible and skilful way by individual, community and political work, then the vacuum created will continue to be filled by the right. If such views are not to have free rein, however, a sustained project of public education clearly communicated by the trade unions, the Labour Party and others capable of providing leadership. This needs to be combined with a set of credible alternative economic policies which address the economic imbalances and cultural and political divisions exposed so starkly by the outcome of the recent EU Referendum.

Perhaps more community organising of the kind advocated by Unite Community could also be one way of beginning to re-engage with Labour's lost core of support. It is instructive, for example, that the Labour Party has recently established an initiative to train its supporters as community organisers following the work of the Democratic Party in the USA.⁴¹ The results of such a project, however, may not bear fruit immediately as the slow building of community initiatives takes skill, patience and time.

While neoliberalism is showing signs of strain - some commentators have even been moved to declare its end - it is not yet dead. As Monbiot reminds us, its pervasiveness continues with its damaging consequences. His use of a quotation from Stedman-Jones reminds us just how powerful neoliberalism has become: 'it is hard to think of another utopia to have been as fully realised.'⁴² In this context, and in short, Labour and allied progressive forces need to develop what Gramscians would call 'a counter-hegemonic project'.

Concluding remarks

In this paper I have argued that Unite Community's community based activity and community organisation has considerable potential, especially in the current economic, social and political climate. Community support and campaigning are important elements to those bearing the impact of neoliberalism, economic crisis and austerity. Unite Community's work, as we have seen, can also inform national campaigning. Unite Community also provides a potential key ally for Labour in reconnecting with alienated working class communities, especially in the wake of election defeat, low poll ratings, Brexit and the threat from the populist authoritarian right. In fact, a recent report of activity within one Unite Community branch shows how a conscious effort is being made to combat the right through community outreach work.⁴³

Secondly, I have argued that the case for reflecting on questions of practice and to consider the usefulness of relevant theory to inform practice. Drawing on Gramsci's work, the theoretical insights applied here were born out of defeat for the left and the most unpropitious of circumstances for Gramsci personally as he reflected and wrote in a fascist prison. Although our own times are not as extreme as those faced by Gramsci, they are nevertheless challenging for many, politically difficult for the left and increasingly influenced by the authoritarian populism of the right. The value of Gramsci is that he alerts us to the need to engage with the creative possibilities within politics but never fancifully. As Gramsci

declares in an oft used quote from him: 'it is necessary to direct one's attention violently towards the present as it is if one wishes to transform it. Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.'⁴⁴

Finally, in the context of the work of Unite Community and similar organisations, the careful and effective challenging of common sense ideas around social security and sanctions in particular is important in shifting popular thinking and challenging government policy. This is not an easy task but will require not only a challenge to common sense, but having an understanding of the economic and political context, a clear strategy (a war of position), operating at different levels, building an alternative narrative through the media, forging alliances with others, employing a range of tactics and drawing on good resources. Unite's Sports Direct campaign showed us the value of such an approach. Although a campaign on sanctions may be a less sympathetic issue in the public mind, the evidence from You Gov we cited earlier shows that opinions can shift on social security. As has also been argued, the support of wider society is crucial in shifting the prevailing common sense around sanctions, and, hopefully, ultimately loosening the grip of neoliberalism.

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Finally, this paper is dedicated to the memory of Callum Stanland, an inspirational young member of Unite Community and Labour activist, whom I worked alongside and who died far too prematurely at the age of just 22 in 2015.

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Resources

In challenging common sense on issues such as sanctions and campaigning on them from the perspective of a war of position, there is a range of resources we could draw upon. Here I highlight just a few that are consistent with the kind of approach I am advocating. The list is indicative rather than exhaustive.

Class in association with Red Pepper, *Exposing the Myths of Welfare*, 2013:

<http://classonline.org.uk/pubs/item/exposing-the-myths-of-welfare>

This addresses such myths as the suggestion that benefits are too generous, too expensive, and that a huge number of large families are consuming a disproportionate amount of the social security budget. In Gramscian terms, it reverses common sense assumptions about claimants and may even reinforce or promote good sense.

Class in association with Migrants Rights Network, *Changing the Debate on Migration: Brexit Update*, 2016:

http://classonline.org.uk/docs/Changing_the_debate_on_migration_brexit_update.pdf

This includes a section on migrants and their claims on public services, including social security. It notes, for instance, that while the average working-age claim on social security from UK nationals is 4 per cent, it is only 1 per cent for the migrant population.

Unite Community and Public Services Union (PCS), *Fighting for a Fair Social Security System: A Campaigner's Guide*, 2015: <http://barnsleycsc.com/category/social-security-summit/>

This is an excellent resource for campaigning at a local level and beyond. It includes very useful material on how to influence the media, the use of social media, building coalitions, local actions and political lobbying.

D. Webster, 'David Webster (Glasgow University) briefings on benefit sanctions' *Child Poverty Action Group*, 2016: <http://www.cpag.org.uk/david-webster>

Effective campaigning also depends on accurate information based on good research and I would recommend the work of David Webster, which was drawn upon earlier in this paper. Webster is probably the UK's leading expert on sanctions and regularly analyses statistics on the impact of sanctions. He has also given evidence to various bodies, including the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee.

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