



How Gramsci's ideas can help us in campaigning against benefit sanctions

by

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Benefit sanctions have had devastating consequences, [including death](#). They have often been applied to the [most vulnerable](#), but have also been linked to [poor health, worsening family relations, debt, homelessness and crime](#). Nor is there much evidence in the UK that [they work](#). But, through Universal Credit, they will remain *and* be extended to those working and previously receiving tax credits. This policy is known as 'in-work conditionality', i.e., unless claimants can justify working a certain number of hours or not pursuing better paid jobs, they could also be penalised. [Trials of the policy have already highlighted its potentially damaging impact](#).

Campaigning against sanctions has understandably often focused on policy and its impact, however, to understand the drivers of such policies, we also need to consider popular attitudes towards claimants. An unlikely figure whose work might help us in this regard is the former Italian communist leader and political theorist, [Antonio Gramsci \(1891-1936\)](#).

Common sense and benefit sanctions

Gramsci's great contribution was, following Lenin, to develop the concept of hegemony, outlined in his *Prison Notebooks*. He used it to understand how the ruling class maintains its power and the need for subordinate groups to forge alliances in order to change the balance of forces to transform society. While control of the economy was key, Gramsci also understood that 'leadership' in the political and ideological spheres was necessary in securing hegemony.

[Hall and O'Shea draw on Gramsci's idea of common sense](#) to understand 'common-sense neoliberalism', including popular negative attitudes towards social security claimants. Like Gramsci, they see common sense less as practical wisdom but more as a framework of meaning for people. It is distilled over time from multiple influences, relies on simplified, often contradictory, ideas to understand the world and is expressed in everyday language. For example, the idea of the 'benefit scrounger' is often invoked but without much reflection or evidence to support it.

Such attitudes are also amplified by politicians to justify benefit reforms [while tax cuts go to the rich](#). In a speech, [George Osborne referred to 'the shift worker'](#), leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning, who looks up at the blinds of their next door neighbour sleeping

off a life on benefits'. Following the speech, [government research](#) revealed that over a four year period four out of five claimants spent three quarters of their time *off* benefits.

While Hall and O'Shea observe that common sense is often socially conservative, it is not irredeemably so. Gramsci states that it contains a 'healthy nucleus' or 'good sense'. For example, in their research into *Sun* readers' comments at the time of social security reforms, Hall and O'Shea report not only stereotypes about claimants but also progressive elements. While claimants are referred to as 'lazy' and 'living in luxury', there are comments that those on tax credits are also in work, and that cuts to disability benefits are 'cruel'. It is this kind of terrain that can be built upon by the left, they suggest.

From common sense to good sense

The union I am a member of, [Unite Community](#), includes and supports unemployed people. In some parts of the union, help is often given with welfare rights and there may also be discussions about unemployment and the nature of the social security system. This is not necessarily straightforward as claimants may have internalised some of the stereotypes which abound about them. Some may also regard themselves as 'more deserving' than others and so on. Common sense, then, can work in harmful and contradictory ways and [alternative explanations](#) need to be gently posed. Opportunities may also present themselves for challenging the views of non-claimants, whether at home, at work or in the community. Consciousness-raising can be difficult work, so it is important that it is undertaken skilfully and in a spirit of dialogue and in a way which does not seek to *impose* an alternative view. In saying this, however, pragmatic judgements about what is achievable, especially in relation to the intransigent, may have to be made.

We might be encouraged by a YouGov poll cited by Hall and O'Shea. It reported that respondents thought that 41 per cent of the welfare budget on average went to unemployed people, whereas the actual figure was only 3 per cent. 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 must be cut to counteract the deficit. Hall and O'Shea comment on the instability of common sense because 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 and *can* shift.

Anti-sanctions campaigning as a war of position

As well consciousness-raising, there is also a need for a wider political strategy. In complex societies, Gramsci observed, the state is surrounded by a powerful system of 'earth works and fortresses' of organisations in civil society which influence the nature of the state. Gramsci was referring to the private realm here such as voluntary associations and political parties when not in office. If power is to change hands, then any successful counter-hegemonic project would need to dismantle those earthworks and fortresses, to influence civil society, to form alliances, to shift the balance of forces. He called this strategy 'a war of position'.

Although Gramsci was a revolutionary, his strategy might also inform more contemporary politics and Labour's struggle against neoliberalism and, indeed, anti-sanctions campaigning.

My own branch of Unite Community has formed a sanctions working group with a brief to support local claimants but also to counter the dominant narrative on social security and to build alliances with local groups. We have, for instance, made links with church-related organisations such as an anti-poverty project, which includes a food aid network. In collaboration with the project, we have published a food aid guide which takes an anti-sanctions stance. We have also produced a campaigning leaflet for outreach work, which challenges stereotypes about claimants and points to the state benefits that accrue to the rich through subsidies, tax cuts and tax avoidance. There are also plans for media training and further campaigning.

At a broader political level, we have devised a model motion to go to local trades councils and constituency Labour parties. It asks Labour to prioritise a relentless fight against sanctions by backing 'an urgent, vigorous and high profile campaign' against them. It calls for a challenge to popular stereotypes about claimants and to promote an anti-sanctions culture. It further asks Labour to challenge the dominant narrative wherever possible, including in the media, and [to contrast the situation of claimants with the preferential treatment for the rich](#). Finally, it calls upon Labour MPs and their allies to demand an end sanctions at every available opportunity.

Anti-sanctions campaigning is not just important in its own right but can also play its role in the emerging counter-hegemony to neoliberalism. Both require an understanding of common-sense neoliberalism and the adoption of a political strategy of the kind once advocated by Gramsci.

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