Disability politics in a time of capitalist crisis: could history repeat itself?

written by Chris Ford | May 28, 2012

A RECENT ARTICLE in the *British Observer* by Ian Birrell discussed an ominous development that has historical connotations. “The demonization of the disabled is a sign of the times” outlined how more and more British disabled people are being increasingly subjected to bullying and hate crime.[1]

This rising incidence of disability harassment has followed austerity-driven measures by the British Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government to cut disability benefit payments. In tandem with these moves, the right-wing tabloid press has engaged in a vicious anti-disability campaign targeting so-called disability benefit fraudsters or as they colloquially label them “scroungers.” Birrell’s article set out to measure the impact that this sustained campaign has had on the life of one man, Peter Greener. Greener lives with multiple sclerosis, in the English city of Hebburn. He was the subject of a recent campaign of torment and abuse by his neighbor involving, among other things, name-calling and object throwing. The neighbor’s campaign climaxed in his anonymously calling a benefit fraud hotline in an attempt to discredit Greener but the neighbor’s actions backfired when welfare officials found that he was not a fraudster. Subsequently, Greener’s torment ended when the neighbor was arrested and jailed for his hate crime.[2]

Birrell though goes into detail as to how Greener’s case is not an isolated one, particularly during the current crisis of capitalism that is the European Sovereign Debt crisis. He outlines how the reported level of disability harassment has increased in Britain, the result of an implicit campaign by both the UK right and its media allies to discredit all disabled welfare claimants.[3] I would argue that this represents a renewed campaign to label disabled people as a “burden” to society, a view that is gaining renewed currency as governments throughout Europe and the world seek to slash social expenditure in this time of crisis. I am aware as a New Zealander of the detrimental impact of economic and social reforms, particularly on disabled people, in my own country.

Indeed, eugenic ideas are making a comeback as the New Right and neoliberal forces that have colonized financial and political institutions such as the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) demanding stringent austerity measures to arrest the global crisis. Eugenics, a pseudo-science first developed by Francis Galton (a half-cousin of the evolutionist Charles Darwin) postulated that disabled people and others deemed to be unproductive such as those living with health conditions, alcoholism, and drug addiction, were not to be permitted to reproduce for fear that their moral and/or physical failings would be transmitted to any offspring.[4] These eugenic notions soon gained a foothold throughout the Western world as changes to capitalist production modes began to see disabled people, in Marxian terms, deemed surplus labor. The late British disability theorist Vic Finkelstein noted, within this context, how disabled people had been treated as more employable under agrarian systems of production, but when the Industrial Revolution arrived, new mechanized mass production techniques effectively excluded impaired people from the workplace.[5] Consequently, more disabled people were expelled from the mainstream of society to its margins throughout the industrialized world. In order to deal with the increasing number of economically displaced disabled and mentally ill people and to prevent their breeding, mass institutions arose throughout the Western world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Consignment to these institutions constituted a death sentence for many people who had the misfortune to live in them. Those fortunate enough to still reside in the community had to depend on their families and/or charity dispensed by the bourgeoisie, the churches and other charitable

organizations.

This situation lasted until the evolution of the modern Keynesian Welfare State during the period 1935-1973. Many social democratic Western governments (including those in the United States, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom) designed benefit systems as a means of maintaining the economic and social exclusion of disabled people in order to protect the comparatively better paying jobs of able-bodied people during what became known as "Long Boom."[6] Still, the quality of life of disabled people did improve marginally thanks to the availability of income transfers from government. However, the emergence of the Disability Rights Movement (DRM) in the late 1960s and early 1970s challenged the notion that disabled people were unemployable. The DRM's rhetoric around the right to work is being uplifted by an increasing number of governments (especially in Britain, New Zealand and Europe) to justify their renewed attacks on disability welfare rights.

But is there a real dichotomy between the right of disabled people to receive welfare and the right to employment?

American disability activist and academic Marta Russell outlines how governments (beginning with the U.S. Clinton Administration), began to expound a "you can't have it both ways" mentality during the 1990s in terms of demanding both the right to receive benefits and employment.[7] This was at a time when both Third Way Clintonian Democrats and neo-liberal Congressional Republicans in the United States worked together to further restrict eligibility to social security payments, including for disabled people. Similarly in Britain, the Blair Labour Government began its attack on disability welfare payments soon after coming to office in 1997 when it severely tightened eligibility for the Incapacity Benefit.[8] In 1998, the National-New Zealand First Coalition Government in New Zealand abolished the sickness benefit and merged it with the unemployment benefit. This consequently led to some disabled people and those with long term health conditions being subjected to work testing requirements.[9] This policy was reversed by the Labour-Alliance Coalition Government upon its election in 1999.[10] These New Right/neo-liberal moves were all made possible by the overturning of the Keynesian Social Democratic/Welfare State consensus following the global Oil Shock and associated economic crises of the mid-1970s.

Ultimately though, these moves to stem the rising number of disability (and other benefit) claimants had failed by the mid-2000s. In New Zealand the proportion of working-age people claiming the three main disability-related benefits—namely, Invalids, Sickness, and Accident Compensation—increased from 1 percent in the early 1970s to reach 5 percent by 2002.[11] This same trend was mirrored throughout the Western world. This was due to factors that the mainly non-disabled policymaking elite consisting of New Right-influenced politicians, bureaucrats, and academics failed to (or more precisely did not want to) understand. In this sense, policymakers either did not or would not take account of the complex needs that disabled people have: the fact that for some people their health conditions fluctuate; that the rising number of disabled and mentally ill people being released from institutions into community living required an independent income; and above all, the historic discrimination practiced against disabled people within labor markets.

And it is this continuing rise in the number of disabled people on welfare (despite all the restrictive measures already taken) that is driving many Western governments, especially those in Britain and New Zealand, to consider taking even more drastic measures against them. New Right governments are using the pretext of the economic crisis that began with the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and has now extended into the Eurozone Sovereign Debt Crisis of 2011/12 to initiate a new war of attrition against disabled people and other disadvantaged communities. This is the result of the ruling elites of Europe and the West having been panicked into yet again seeking to reduce the role and size of the state. These moves have been driven by corporate lobbyists who, in the wake of

the financial crisis, have successfully sought to make ordinary people pay for their excesses by persuading governments to bail them out through governments introducing regressive tax increases and service cuts. In New Zealand, for example, the right wing National-led government bailed out major finance company South Canterbury Finance in 2010 to the tune of $NZ 1 billion.[12] In Britain, Conservative Chancellor George Osborne has stated that his government aims to cut income tax, and to achieve this aim he increased the regressive Value Added Tax (VAT-consumption tax) in late 2010. [13]

Ominously then, both the "trickle down" theory and the neo-classical requirement for governments to arrive at fiscal balance have seen governments mount renewed attacks on welfare systems. These attacks have focused on all benefit classes. For disabled people, the consequences of the changes that are either being proposed or are in the process of being implemented by various governments are dire. In the UK, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government has proposed changes to further restrict eligibility for Disability Living Allowance and other related benefits. Disturbingly, the Coalition Government (as did the previous Labour Government) has contracted out the process of determining disability benefit eligibility to a French multinational company, Atos. The anecdotal stories emerging from the British testing process have been harrowing with many disabled people being subjected to the most grossly medicalized tests possible and consequently denied benefits.[14] This has led to many disabled people becoming impoverished at a time when jobs are scarce in the UK. In some cases, the outcomes have been tragic with some disabled and mentally ill people committing suicide as a consequence of these dehumanizing policies. However, British ministers continue to downplay the nature of the changes by stressing that most disabled people have nothing to fear when the reality is that they do.

These moves stand to be imitated by New Zealand's right-wing National Government. During 2009/10, a Welfare Working Group recommended replacing the existing disability related benefits (excluding Accident Compensation) with one single Jobseeker Support payment which would cover most non-retirement based benefit recipients.[15] During the November 2011 election campaign, the National Government announced its response that outlined the creation of three new benefits—Jobseeker Support, Sole Parent Support, and Supported Living Payment. Jobseeker Support will include current sickness benefit recipients, and this is where many disabled people are expected to be placed due to strict work testing requirements.[16] This could well be the case as the author has informally spoken to disability advocates who expect the Government to introduce UK-style "Fit Note" assessment tests which will see thousands of disabled people "exited" from the higher paying Invalids Benefit. This would be done in line with the Government's aim of shifting 46 000 people off benefits overall. This will come at a time when, as in the UK, many disabled New Zealanders will have little hope of finding suitable, well paid work, given the ongoing recession. Therefore, the New Zealand disability community stands to suffer in much the same way as Britain's has.

And this is where we come back to the case of Peter Greener. Given the New Right's campaign of hostility towards already marginalized communities, such as disabled people, there could be grave consequences for our survival as a community. The austerity driven political climate has induced a radical shift to the right in many industrialized countries during the last two years. This has come through in recent election results, for example, in Canada, New Zealand, Ireland, Spain, and Portugal where center-right governments were elected or re-elected. In Britain, the Labour Party continues to hold a plurality in most opinion surveys but still the coalition parties (Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) when combined continue to perform well, taking over 50 percent of the vote.[17] Upon closer analysis, it seems that a fearful and insecure majority has increasingly sought to scapegoat minority groups as the cause of the crisis rather than those who actually produced it in the first instance—capitalist bankers and financiers. This has been aided and abetted by populist

media campaigns that have sought to divide and rule populations, such as those waged by the tabloid media against so-called benefit cheats and work-shy people, as is the case in Britain as noted earlier.

In my native New Zealand, I also fear the increased targeting of disabled people as welfare reforms proceed. The corporate New Zealand media have already begun a campaign of demonizing beneficiary groups once again. During 2011, for example, a New Zealand television current affairs program stressed the fact that a single parent of eight children had a subscription television service antenna on her roof.[18] This story generated the usual level of hostility that is reflected towards beneficiaries who are perceived to be living better than many hard working families. This image of the so-called "feckless beneficiary" or "welfare bum" suits the ruling classes and their agenda well as it ignores the fact that in New Zealand benefit rates were severely slashed in 1991. Nonetheless, the New Zealand Government could be preparing to engage in "wolf whistle" politics through the media as the British Government has done in order to further divide working class opinion.

Ultimately, these anti-disability and anti-welfare moves are eugenic in character. While right-wing governments clothe their welfare policies in the language of "compassionate conservatism" and that of the DRM around the right to employment, the reality is different. In fact, one has to have a grasp of Orwellian language to realize that what governments are actually saying to disabled people is unless they work for a living or seek the support of their family, they will die—period. What right-wing governments are seeking to do is to return industrialized societies to the Victorian, neo-classical values of individual choice, responsibility, and self-reliance. This means that disabled people and other excluded groups will have to increasingly (if they are unemployed or underemployed) rely on charity or the family for survival, as the State will no longer provide anything more than temporary support.

Therefore, if Western governments continue on this path, disabled people will begin to experience even shorter life spans. This will be due to unemployed disabled people experiencing more serious health problems. These trends will no doubt be quietly welcomed by right wing governments determined to reduce social security outlays—despite protestations to the contrary on their part. But what is more alarming is that if Europeans become inclined to support far right/neo-fascist parties due to the depressed economic climate, then disabled people (along with other minorities) will be subjected to a second, more ominous threat to their survival—effective mass extermination through so called "passive euthanasia" programs. This is not an in extremis scenario, given that the Nazis established their T4 program for this purpose in the 1930s. And the Nazis softened up public opinion through a mass propaganda campaign claiming that disabled and mentally ill people were a fiscal burden.[19]

However, these campaigns of hate, marginalization, and stigmatization can be halted in their tracks by disabled people themselves. Compared to the Great Depression era of the 1930s, there is one positive in disabled people's favor—the existence of a global Disability Rights Movement. To paraphrase Dylan Thomas, disabled people will not go into that long, good night at all. Disabled people and their supporters/advocates have a role to play in joining the global campaign against austerity and greed. Furthermore, movements, such as the Occupy Movement, have sought to change the nature of the debate from one in which multinational corporations are owed a break to that of ordinary people needing one from austerity. With these factors in mind, the DRM can and should align with other anti-capitalist and progressive forces as well to turn back the tide of anti-welfarism.

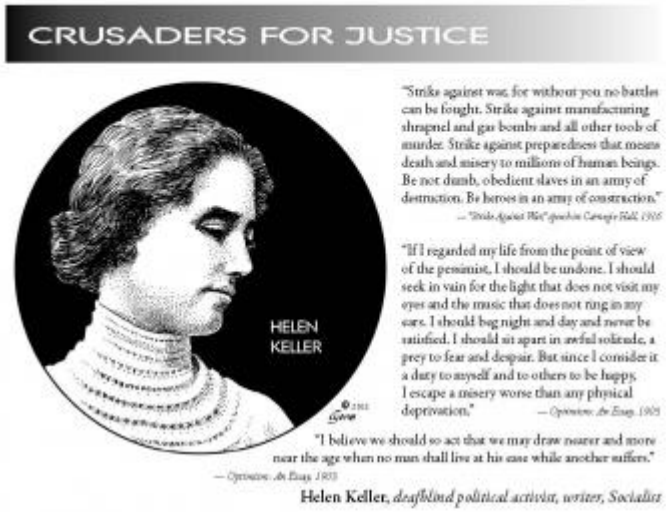
But what arguments can be deployed by the DRM to counter the resurgent neo-liberal right?

One powerful counter-argument is offered by Russell who believed that:

> It is discrimination to deny a disabled person who can work an opportunity to do so, but it is not “special” treatment for people who cannot work to be guaranteed a humane standard of living—rather it is a measure of a just civilization that they are decently catered for.[20]

While this statement may not immediately appeal to either politicians or majority public opinion, it is a case that should be made by disability advocates. Another that should be deployed is that any non-disabled person can join the disability community at anytime and require support. Non-disabled people should be encouraged to imagine themselves in this situation with the hope that they visualize the difficulties involved in living with impairment. Above all, the DRM should take up the mantra of the Occupy Movement that it is not ordinary people (such as disabled people) who are responsible for the crisis but rather that corporate capitalism is—and that financial institutions are not being held responsible by governments for it. Subsequently, the DRM should bring the public to realize the consequences of blaming minorities for economic failures as history has already proffered up numerous examples of what this ultimately could lead to—genocide.

In the UK, the mobilization of ordinary disabled people against their government’s proposed welfare changes could be about to bear some fruit. As this article is being written, the UK Cabinet is considering softening some of the harshest changes to the proposed disability benefits regime. On the basis of that pledge, government members of the House of Lords defeated proposed amendments that would have softened the changes in January 2012.[21] This means that the struggle against the UK welfare changes still has some way to run. Overall, the success of any campaign against regressive welfare reform (wherever this occurs) will rely on the waging of political struggles by disabled people themselves and their allies. For successful political struggle to occur, disability activists must be armed with information on the neoliberal agenda around disability. If that happens, then history will not repeat itself for disabled people—leading to people like Peter Greener and other disabled people feeling safer and more valued by their communities.



Footnotes

1. Ian Birrell, "The demonization of the disabled is a sign of the times," *The Observer*, December 4, 2011.
2. *Ibid*.
3. *Ibid*.
4. Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Development* (London: J.M. dent, 1883).
5. Colin Barnes, "The Social Model of Disability: A Sociological Phenomenon Ignored by Sociologists?" in *The Disability Reader: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Tom Shakespeare (London: Continuum, 1998), 73-74. Barnes relates that Finkelstein, through the employment of a Marxist materialist analysis in his book, *Attitudes and Disabled People* (1980), hypothesized that disabled people had not been included within pre-industrial society as the modes and relations of production in existence then did not necessarily exclude impaired people from being a part of the production process. When the Industrial Revolution arrived, this changed as with the rise of mechanization and other more technology-based production modes, disabled people were deemed surplus labor and began to be separated, thereby making the process of medicalization and segregation much easier to achieve. Vic Finkelstein died on November 30, 2011.
6. Chris Ford, "Good-bye to Tiny Tim: An introduction to the politics of disability," *New Zealand Political Review,* Summer 2004, 10-19.
7. Marta Russell, *Beyond Ramps: Disability at the End of the Social Contract*, (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1998), 82.
8. Staff Reporter, "Disabled face cash curbs," *The Guardian Weekly*, December 21, 1997, 9.
9. "No Work—No Wage: How the Community Wage will be implemented," The Jobs Letter

No.77/27, April 1998.
10. “Social Welfare in New Zealand,” Hon. Steve Maharey.
11. Welfare Working Group, *Long Term Benefit Dependency: The Issues: Summary Paper*, (Wellington: Institute of Policy Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, 2010), 10: Institute of Policy Studies.
12. Gordon Campbell, “On the South Canterbury Finance bailout,” September 1, 2010
13. James Chapman and Vicky Barrow, “20 percent VAT rise is here for good: Osborne’s warning as tax rise leaves shoppers bewildered,” *The Daily Mail*, January 5, 2011.
14. Lucy Glennon, “The work capability assessment is a genuine source of anguish,” *The Guardian*, March 2, 2011.
15. “Major welfare reform resets expectations,” Hon. Paula Bennett, November 1, 2011.
16. *Ibid*.
17. Tom Clark, “Cameron’s approval rating outstrips his government’s—poll,” *The Guardian*, December 25, 2011. This poll outlined how the combined scores of the Conservatives (37 percent) and Liberal Democrat (15 percent) when added together constitutes a majority (52 percent) of electoral support for the Coalition.
18. “Beneficiary solo mum defends spending,” 3news.co.nz, November 8. 2011.
19. Ian Cook, “The Holocaust and Disabled People,” October 17, 2008.
20. Russell, 82.
21. Nicholas Watt, “Welfare reform bill delay blocked as Coalition wins vote against amendment,” *The Guardian*, January 17, 2012.