

Resisting New Labour's 'hard labour'

Alex Law & Gerry Mooney

Few readers of Variant will be unaware of New Labour's welfare 'reform' and public sector 'modernisation' agendas. Since 1997 the restructuring of welfare and public services has been a central component of the government's political project. Welfare reform was viewed by Blair and is presently by Brown as contributing to a neoliberal vision of the UK as a modern, lean, flexible and competitive economy. Much has been written about the many and varied forms that privatisation has taken, of the contracting-out of public services, of Public Private Partnerships/ Public Finance Initiatives (PFI/PPP), and of the increasing encroachment and indeed take-over by the private sector in the delivery of many key 'heartland' public and social services. In contrast, there has been much less concern with how these reforms are impacting on the workers involved in delivering services. Our concern here is to draw attention to some of the many ways in which welfare workers are being adversely affected by the restructuring of the welfare state and, more importantly, how they are resisting New Labour in new and significant ways.

Welfare Workers on the Frontline

Our focus is on workers in what we call the 'welfare industry' – that is, workers who are involved in diverse ways in both the production and delivery of social and welfare policy and practice. In short, 'welfare industry' is not just an umbrella label for those six million or so workers employed in what's left of the welfare state in the UK – such as NHS workers, teachers, university workers, social workers and care workers – but it also includes important sections of the civil service, in areas of criminal justice and public administration. Beyond a narrow focus on the traditional institutions of the welfare state, the notion of a 'welfare industry' also encompasses non-state sectors, chiefly the voluntary sector and private provision. Speaking of a welfare industry also helps to focus attention on the specific way that welfare functions are being further industrialised and degraded using technological systems, such as call centres, and centralised managerial commands and targets to restructure the welfare labour process. This has involved the flexible intensification of worker effort during working time. Work time has also been elongated in a variety of ways with the loss of 'porous time' and breathing space in both worker-worker and worker-user social interactions. Additional duties have been imposed on welfare workers, especially administrative burdens, creating tensions with their core duty for the care and well-being of welfare users. That this is having morbid consequences is amply testified by the

scores of deaths¹ in British hospitals as a result of the managerialist obsession with cost-cutting and targets.

Many workers in the welfare industry deliver services to some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. However, what is also significant is that such workers, themselves often low waged, are central to the delivery and maintenance of public services, in the process supporting other disadvantaged groups, including those who struggle to survive on what the state provides through benefits. Public sector workers, and in particular those involved in the welfare sectors, are not simply delivering services, administering benefits and managing poor people. They are also tasked with the delivery and implementation of government social policy initiatives, such as workfare/work activation programmes which force those in poverty into low paid employment and vulnerable forms of work. 'Work', understood as paid employment, underpins New Labour's vision. Public services are central to achieving the goals that this vision generates. Public servants are therefore critical to delivering not only services but also central to implementing New Labour's political and ideological objectives.

Work, Work, Work! - The World of New Labour

'Work' lies at the heart of the entire New Labour project. With Gordon Brown's new found 'Protestant ethic' being rather self-consciously aligned to the 'spirit of neoliberal capitalism', work is seen as the most morally elevating means through which poverty can be alleviated. Work represents the 'best' form of welfare! Work is central to 'social inclusion'. Work is salvational; its morally uplifting properties enables the 'socially excluded' to be transformed into model citizens, exercising the opportunity to make choices and consume as part of 'respectable' or 'mainstream' society. However, at the very time when New Labour has sought to valorise work as a central dimension of daily life and personal existence, what is going on in the workplace, the site where society's ills are going to be cured, has, with a few honourable exceptions, been neglected across large swathes of academic, media and political discourse. This, despite the fact that much welfare work is carried out in full view of the public. In the meantime, waged work has not stopped being an exploitative social relation. For many groups of workers in the welfare industry things have, if anything, deteriorated in the last decade. But this also throws up its own contradictions as it rubs up against certain limits to how far services can be degraded, not least the permanent tension between the depreciating nature of the welfare labour process and the end product of enhancing the capacities of welfare users.

Public sector workers and the services they help to provide have undergone profound changes in recent decades. To name only some of the more obvious forms that this has taken: Privatisation, Marketisation, Contracting-out, Outsourcing, Profit centres, Competitive tendering, PPP/PFI, 'Best value', Managerialism, Targets, League tables, Performance indicators, Audits.

The consequences of these 'reforms' for welfare workers has been far-reaching. Workers now fear that the loss of a contract will lead to redundancies or a wage cut or both. Private companies attack collective bargaining and place constraints on effective trade union organisation. Against employer and government hostility to collective organisation is their preference for exercising

'control at a distance' to advance the project for the individualisation and atomisation of the workforce. This works through pseudo-market mechanisms, performance related pay, increased pressures to 'self-manage', a greater emphasis on 'emotional' skills wage and qualities, regrading and reclassification, casualisation, increased workplace regulation, and inspection, and flexibility in its various guises. In the process, work intensification and extensification is advanced, in some cases to breaking point. Job devaluation, a declining sense of personal worth and job insecurity leads to increasing levels of workplace stress and related illnesses. Alongside deskilling and the loss of autonomy there is also employer-led demands for reskilling and upskilling, often leading to 'qualification inflation' and therefore a loss of market value for credentials, directly contradicting claims that engagement in lifelong learning will equip workers with the human capital so as to make them into highly marketable assets. And then there are the growing numbers of cases of the substitution of labour through the use of new technologies and ICTs (Information and Communications Technologies), from NHS call centres to online educational packages.

New Labour's social policy agenda demands 'more and more' from public sector workers as they struggle to meet the bewildering myriad of targets and strategies that have been deployed since 1997. As Fairbrother and Poynter argue: "State employees are increasingly entreated to take on tasks that their occupation previously did not require – teachers are engaged in health promotion activities, university lecturers are encouraged to ensure the employability of their graduates and doctors are called upon to advise on healthy life styles rather than specifically treating illnesses....In this sense, the social and moral dimensions of the customer-oriented approach have been deployed to reform the relationships between professionals and their various publics and erode the monopolies of skill and discretion over decision-making and job content that professional staff traditionally exercised."²

Market modes of delivery along with aggressive and pervasive managerialism are restricting the 'space' that many welfare professionals once enjoyed to provide the services and support that service users require, resulting in a significant deskilling of work tasks. Routinisation and work degradation is contributing to what Richard Sennett calls "the spectre of uselessness" that is now gripping increasing numbers of professional workers in the welfare industry.³

Work intensification under New Labour has led to millions of workers facing increasing demands on their work time. Successive and multiple policy measures – 'initiative-itis' – has led to already hard pressed workers undertaking additional responsibilities. In some local authority nurseries, for instance, nurses find themselves taking on additional tasks to meet newly implemented nursery curriculum targets, regular inspections and workplace audits. Such examples prove that New Labour has today made satire seem superfluous, since these very same low-paid, over-worked female workers are also expected to play a strategic role in 'helping' young unemployed mothers back into the labour force – often in low paid childcare work! The story here is all too often one of more-and-more for less-and-less pay. In other areas of the public sector, for example in the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), maintaining service provision against a background of large scale redundancies has been achieved only by fewer-and-fewer workers doing

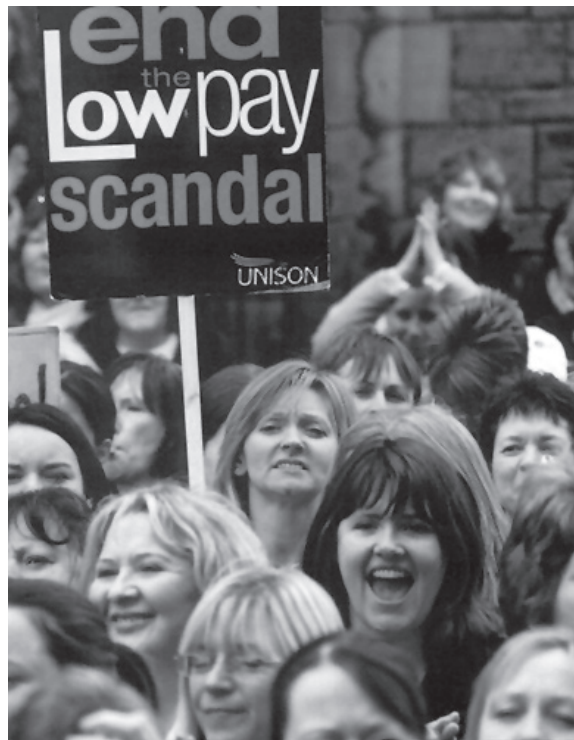


more and more. The DWP has struggled to achieve the same level of service provision with less and less of a workforce.

It is important to recognise, however, the unevenness of reform and modernisation (and worker unrest and resistance) that exists across different sectors, for instance in relation to the use of PPP/PFI or the vastly different levels of contracting out and redundancies. This awareness, however, does not detract from the point that public sector work in the UK is a world that has undergone far reaching change, change that has all too frequently been detrimental to and at the cost of the workers delivering public services. Managerialism and the drive to restructure and intensify work while curtailing wages and worsening conditions is a self-contradictory process that relies on the emotional, intellectual and bodily creativity of the labour that it attempts to dominate through managerialist regimes and controls held at a distance. Degrading the work process also invites resistance at the point of welfare production in ways that cannot be captured by even the most strenuous supervisory regime. Workers may elect to mechanically follow orders to protect themselves from managerial opprobrium. In which case, the affective embodied side of worker interaction with user groups like patients, clients or student, suffers. Measuring output in the form of targets and internal audits gives little indication that worker commitment has been withdrawn and disaffection increased. So long as boxes are ticked and numbers are massaged then managers are protected and the embodied nature of the welfare labour process becomes a matter of mutual indifference.

The changing nature of public sector work is part and parcel of New Labour's Third Way/Neo-Liberal reconstruction of the idea of the 'public' itself, a process that crucially involves blurring the boundaries between public and private forms of provision. This involves a shift towards the privatisation of public goods and services and the greater involvement of the private sector in 'public' service provision. Neither should we forget that much welfare work, particularly caring work, is dependent on unpaid forms of labour in the private realms of family, household and community, overwhelmingly carried out by women, many of whom are also providing paid labour in public and welfare services outside the home.

Co-existing with the emphasis on paid work this there is also an attempt to reconstruct the ideal citizen both as a *citizen* and a *consumer*.⁴ Here the overarching context is one of consumerism and the extension of 'choice'. Under Blair and Brown 'consumer choice' had something of an occult quality about it - the more fervently it was invoked



the less its ideological magic worked! To quote Blair:

"In reality, I believe that people do want choice, in public services as in other services. But anyway, choice isn't an end in itself. It is one important mechanism to ensure that citizens can indeed secure good schools and health services in their communities. Choice puts the levers in the hands of parents and patients so that they as citizens and consumers can be a driving force for improvement in their public services. We are proposing to put an entirely different dynamic in place to drive our public services; one where the service will be driven not by the government or by the manager but by the user – the patient, the parent, the pupil and the law-abiding citizen."⁵

The promotion of choice reflects a desire to reconstruct the role of the state, no longer always and everywhere the provider of services – except at times as a last resort – but as an 'enabler' and regulator of services provided by other 'partners' and 'stakeholders'. In repeated speeches and announcements the emphasis on choice at the heart of New Labour's project contained a sometimes implied and sometimes explicit threat of dire consequences for public sector workers. Public sector workers often exist as an 'absent presence' in political discourse. It is noticeable, for instance, that Blair's 'belief' about 'people' wanting 'choice' that other 'people', namely welfare workers, are curiously absent at a denotative level while they are clearly present at the connotative level. Implicit in this comment is a stark warning to public sector workers that they have to become more customer focused, and this requires far reaching changes in the working lives of those concerned.

It is well understood that New Labour views public sector workers as an outdated obstacle to modernisation and reform, therefore undermining social policy objectives. At Labour's Spring Conference in Cardiff in February 2002, Blair drew a distinction between 'reformers' and 'wreckers', the latter category referred to public sector workers and unions who were resisting 'modernisation'. Speaking to the British Venture Capital Association in London in 1999, Blair also talked of the bearing "the scars on my back" from trying to reform welfare. This was followed up at the Labour Party Conference in 1999, where Blair made his now infamous "forces of conservatism" speech in which he identified some groups of education and health professionals as holding back the government's reform programme. And again in 1999 Blair attacked what he saw as a "culture of excuses" among school teachers who were resistant to aspects of his reform agenda. Such views played a significant role in helping to ferment the growing disillusionment with New Labour among public sector workers, fuelling continuing and growing resistance.⁶

Welfare Workers: Resisting New Labour

Increasing numbers of public sector workers are challenging the government's reforms. In the process they are contesting some of the core

Scottish Nursery Nurses strike. Photos by Duncan Brown are from between March 2004 and November 2006.

ideological assumptions of New Labour. Opposition to New Labour's policies varies considerably across different areas of the public sector and within hierarchically-organised welfare sites, for instance, between different groups of workers in the NHS. However, since the mid- to late-1990s, there has been continual and recurring episodes of industrial action of various kinds involving social workers, teachers, lecturers (both in further and in higher education), nurses, hospital ancillary staff, nursery nurses, home helps and care workers, and local authority librarians among others. Welfare delivery has become a central point of industrial relations disputes across the devolved UK.

Few would have predicted that New Labour's reforms would have met with the levels of resistance from across the public and welfare sectors that have been witnessed since 1997:

Selected Industrial Action in the Welfare Industry 1998-2007

- Library Workers - 1998
- Social Workers - 1998, 2004, 2005
- Care Workers - 1998, 1999, 2000, 2007
- Teachers - 1999
- FE College Lecturers - 2001, 2006
- Local Government Workers - 2001, 2006, 2007
- Hospital Ancillary Staff - 2002
- University Lecturers - 2004, 2006
- Civil Servants (PCS) - 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007
- Nursery Nurses - 2004
- Housing Association Workers - 2006
- School Ancillary Staff - 2006
- NHS Logistics Workers - 2006
- Local Government Workers - 2006, 2007

Highlighted are some of the key disputes and struggles in the 'welfare industries' that have featured since 1997, but this list is by no means exhaustive of all forms or instances of resistance to New Labour's reforms. What is notable is the ways in which groups of workers, once often viewed as 'passive' or unlikely to take action, have found themselves under attack and have organised to fight back and challenge New Labour head on. The case of librarians in Glasgow in 1998 is one example of this, as are strikes among university lecturers and nurses. A particularly important example is the Scotland-wide local authority nursery nurses strike in 2004 which saw around 5,000 mainly female and relatively low paid workers take action to preserve conditions while challenging employer demands for local pay agreements.⁷ In the case of lecturers, nurses, social workers and other 'professionals' – that is, those often classed and sometimes dismissed as middle class, white-collar workers – organising to contest welfare restructuring has also become a permanent feature of working life.

As was widely documented at the time, during its first two years in government New Labour remained committed to the tight public sector spending constraints put in place by the previous Conservative administration. That this did not lead to widespread resentment and anger among public sector workers is largely due to the 'honeymoon' period that Labour enjoyed during the first few years in office, subsequently helped by the easing of public sector spending restrictions from 1999 and after. The promise that New Labour would deliver, however, was soon followed by a growing disillusionment with the New Labour Government among some groups in the public sector workforce, traditionally among Labour's core voters. It was to become increasingly evident that although there would be considerable increases in public expenditure, especially for education and the health service, this would not signal an end to privatisation. Instead it would be accompanied by the increasing penetration of the market (and in some cases also by the voluntary or 'third sector') into heartland areas of public and welfare services provision, moving well beyond the role accorded to the private sector even by the Tories. Pay would increase for public sector workers, that



is for those that were not transferred to private firms through outsourcing. However, the growing pay differentials of the 1980s and 1990s between public and private sector employees was largely unaffected. The public sector has become a central battle ground of New Labour under Blair. It is already shaping up in similar ways to characterise the Brown administration.

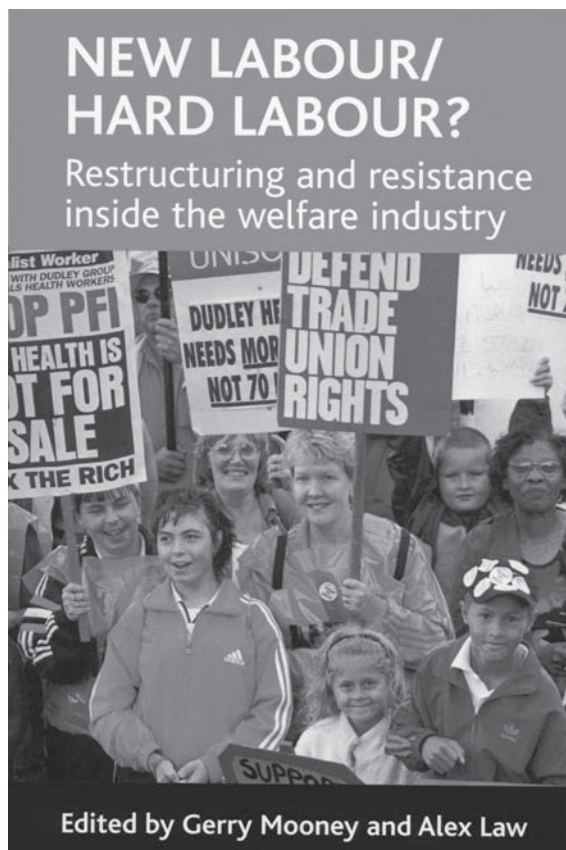
New Labour's celebration of choice and of the consumer-citizen is likely to remain central to the ongoing programme of welfare reforms; not least that such a figure is central to the government's vision of a 'modern' welfare state. The government has sought to legitimate this on the grounds that it will deliver 'better' services and more customer orientated services. Such thinking informs much of the rhetoric that accompanies announcements of 'modernisation'. However, it is clear that under Brown New Labour is seeking to develop this much further, in no small part through its 'personalisation' agenda. Personalisation is now informing important areas of government policy making, taking the emphasis on the individual as consumer to a new level. Perhaps not surprisingly this allows for a greater role for private providers and firms in the development of more personalised services. So, on the one hand, decentralisation and personalisation and, on the other, the further centralisation and concentration of impersonal corporate control over welfare production. This is radically at odds with the demand for 'bottom-up' involvement as advanced over the past two decades by service user movements.

The Re-emergence of 'Political' Trade Unionism?

In many of the disputes that have taken place in recent years the struggle to preserve wages and conditions, and also for better pay and conditions, has at the same time folded into campaigns to protect public services. Public sector workers and trade unions have played a leading role in campaigns against privatisation, against hospital closure, cuts in local services and so on. In organising to defend the integrity of the NHS, for example, or to save hospitals and other amenities up and down the country, workers and other campaigners have sought to make direct links between privatisation and profits from illness and disadvantage, the erosion of services and attacks on workers pay, employment conditions and jobs.

There are a growing number of examples we can use here to illustrate this. The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) run a high profile 'public services not private profit' campaign (<http://pcs.org.uk>) while Unison (www.unison.org.uk) have been at the forefront of contesting PFI/PPP projects. Both have involved non-union members and users groups as well as the wider public. Keep our NHS Public (www.KeepOurNHSpublic.com) brings together NHS workers, unions and the users of NHS services. Defend Council Housing (www.dch.org.uk) has also mobilised tenants and public sector unions in defence of state provision of affordable housing to rent. 'Privatisation', in all its guises, has worked to re-energise debates around health and other public services over the past decade and this has given rise to a large number or more localised campaigns and organisations that fight to prevent hospital closures or reductions in health and other public services.

There is a further dimension to this. As with the Tories, New Labour has inadvertently repoliticised the whole question of welfare and public sector provision in a multitude of ways. One of the most important aspects of this is that the increasing use of PPP/PFI alongside welfare provision by the market, often involving large multinational firms, has brought the question of 'profits from illness' onto centre stage. For-profit forms of provision remain highly unpopular. This has contributed to the re-emergence of political unionism, challenging in the process the 'division' that has existed until the early 1990s at least between a trade union concern only with 'bread and butter'



issues such as pay and conditions and not with more 'political' matters. Such a divide – which was often more apparent than real and which tended to characterise the union bureaucracy more than ordinary members on the ward, the office or the classroom – now looks seriously dated in the face of New Labour's political agenda of the past decade. Trade union leaders have also been driven to question the continuing funding of the Labour Party from members' contributions. We do not have to look far to see union leaders and union-sponsored campaigns making direct links between pay and conditions; of the importance of good quality services for those in need; for a well funded and free at point of delivery NHS and issues of progressive taxation, pensions; and, in not a few instances, between 'cut-backs' and service withdrawals alongside massive expenditure on wars on Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Campaigns for global social justice and for environmental sustainability similarly fold into the opposition to public sector modernisation.

New Labour is being challenged 'head on' here: its entire social and economic agenda is under serious dispute and questioning. The challenge here is also to the Third Way project itself and New Labour's neo-liberal underpinnings. Such campaigns frequently bring together the 'producers' and 'consumers' of welfare in ways that are far removed from claims of an unbridgeable gulf between the demands of each. Among New Labour politicians and not a few policy makers and academics, the idea that public service workers may take action to defend both their jobs as well as services to a wide spectrum of UK society including the most impoverished is something that is all too readily ignored or otherwise obscured from view. It also overlooks the point that public sector workers and their families are also themselves consumers of welfare. In another sense the growing campaigns of resistance to New Labour's public sector modernisation and welfare reforms also illustrate that far from being 'passive recipients of welfare', clients and users can and do take action to both defend and to fight for public service provision.

The Shape of Things to Come?

The significance of the struggles that have taken place across the public and welfare sectors since New Labour came to power in 1997 should not be underestimated – though all too often this is exactly what has happened. Against the general downturn in strike activity and in other forms of 'industrial action' during the past twenty or so years, the re-emergence of widespread, large-scale and continuing action in the public sector shows that oft repeated assumptions and claims that workers would no longer struggle or resist in the 'new' conditions of the early twenty first century to be very wide of the mark. This is not to be taken that we are implying that there is a return to the

heavy days of the 1970s and 1980s but simply to counter the general rejection of the capacity of labour to resist that has been a stock in trade for much academic and wider commentary in recent years.

The important point of all of this for us is that contrary to the myriad of assorted 'end of class' or 'death of class' proclamations of the past few decades⁸, public sector workers in the UK today now comprise some of the key sections of the working class. Our image of the working class is constantly changing as the workforce is replenished as more ethnically diverse, with more recognised women workers, and from recent movements of migrant labour. Welfare workers are just as representative of this shift, indeed more so as it employs women in greater proportions and traditionally recruits from abroad to occupy positions in the welfare state that are difficult to fill from the local labour market. Women, migrants and ethnic minority groups are of course often found at the very bottom of the welfare industry hierarchy.

Finally, and against much of the doom and gloom that pervades the discussion and analysis of neo-liberalism and of New Labour there are different ways of thinking about the developments and events which are unfolding and of the potential opportunities for the future. Against neo-liberalism's central drive to corrode and erode social and political solidarity, new forms of struggle and resistance have emerged and are emerging – locally, nationally and multinationally. Certainly this is not undertaken in conditions of their own choosing but in active response to welfare restructuring. Welfare workers and their unions are challenging the fundamental neoliberal premises advanced by New Labour using tried-and-tested forms of action as well as new, imaginative participatory strategies with their allies in the wider social and welfare movements.

Alex Law is Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Abertay Dundee; Gerry Mooney is Senior Lecturer in Social Policy and Staff Tutor, Faculty of Social Sciences at The Open University. They are editors of 'New Labour/Hard Labour? Restructuring and Resistance Inside the Welfare Industry', Policy Press, 2007, available from www.policypress.org.uk

Notes

1. Healthcare Commission (2007) Investigation into outbreaks of *Clostridium difficile* at Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust, London: Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection: http://www.healthcarecommission.org.uk/_db/_documents/Maidstone_and_Tunbridge_Wells_investigation_report_Oct_2007.pdf
2. Fairbrother, P. and Poynter, G. (2001) 'State Restructuring: Managerialism, Marketisation and the Implications for Labour', *Competition and Change*, 5: 311-333, p. 319
3. Sennett, R. (2006) *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, London: Yale University Press.
4. Clarke, J., Newman, J., Smith, N., Vidler, E. and Westmarland, L. (2007) *Creating Citizen-Consumers: Changing Publics and Changing Public Services*, London: Sage.
5. Blair, T. (2004) 'Choice, Excellent and Equality', Speech at Guys and St Thomas' Hospital, London, June 23.
6. See Chapter 1, Mooney and Law (2007) *New Labour/Hard Labour? Restructuring and Resistance inside the Welfare Industry*, Bristol: Policy Press.
7. Mooney, G. and McCafferty, T. (2005) 'Only looking after the weans?' The Scottish Nursery Nurses Strike, 2004', *Critical Social Policy*, 25, 2: 223-239.
8. See Ferguson, I., Lavalette, M. and Mooney, G. (2002) *Rethinking Welfare*, London: Sage.