




**Michael Meacher MP, Ken Coates
and Walt Greendale**



**TASK FORCE
AGAINST
POVERTY, LOW PAY &
UNEMPLOYMENT**

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Task Force Against Low Pay

Michael Meacher

Robert Paterson is a kitchen porter. I met him on the picket line outside Oldham and District General Hospital at the last one-day stoppage just over a week ago. After working 38 hours, including all day Saturday and all day Sunday, and after benefiting from a 25 per cent bonus derived from other health service workers' redundancies, he takes home, after stoppages, precisely £58.90 a week.

When I raised this in the House of Commons with the Tory Minister for Social Services, Norman Fowler, during the debate last week on the health service dispute, his reply was roundly to condemn the industrial action being taken. Fowler gets £550 a week.

If I were to give a single reason why I am standing for the treasurership it's not just that the finances of the Labour Party are still in a parlous state — though they are. Nor even that there is a need, although there is, to intensify the campaign to ensure that nuclear disarmament, Common Market withdrawal and the full-employment alternative strategy are fought for, put strongly to the electorate and implemented.

Rather, the single most important reason for campaigning now is to launch a task force against poverty, low pay and unemployment.

The Falklands crisis, after all, has shown the way. If three-quarters of the British fleet, an army of 25,000 men and squadrons of fighter planes can be mobilised, despatched and transferred 8,000 miles ready for military assault in the most appalling conditions, all within a matter of a few weeks, then mounting a massive campaign against unemployment and poverty in *this* country is well within our capability.

It means, of course, suspending some of the normal rules. But so does the Falklands operation. Private ownership rights, which we were always taught were sacrosanct, have suddenly been wholly over-ridden "in the national interest". Cash limits on public expenditure, which we had previously been constantly assured were immovable, suddenly become highly flexible.

As Government Ministers have regularly intoned, "It is impossible to estimate accurately the total cost of operations in the Falklands, but it can be said with certainty that it will not interfere with the Government's overall economic strategy".

Well, in that case, if the Government can shell out £1,000 million (or will it be £2,000 million eventually?) on the Falklands without damage to its economic objectives, it can certainly spend an equivalent sum on the health service in *this* country to *save* people's lives without economic disaster.

Meeting the health service workers' full 12 per cent claim would cost £870 million, less than half of the likely final cost of the Falklands imbroglio.

If the Government is quite prepared to wind down its NATO commitments, as indeed it is now saying, to keep its hold on tiny islands half the world away in the South Atlantic, then we can certainly wind down our NATO commitments for infinitely more important objectives like a decent NHS, adequate housing, a proper education system and the abolition of poverty.

Equally, if the Government can abruptly put private ownership rights in abeyance by requisitioning the *Canberra*, *Atlantic Conveyor*, *QE2* and a host of smaller ships even before terms of compensation have been agreed with the owners, why can't it requisition private hospital beds when there are long waiting lists for NHS hospitals?

Why can't it requisition empty houses or second homes where poor families are badly housed or homeless? Why can't it requisition companies where private enterprise collapses and closure is threatened and jobs will otherwise be lost?

The fact is of course these things can be done, and Margaret Thatcher as so often has shown how. She has faced down American impatience and anger at her own unyielding line, she has virtually hi-jacked the press, she has publicly reprimanded the BBC when it deviated even slightly from her purposes. And to override all political opposition she has set up an inner cabinet stacked to ensure a majority for her own views.

If she can stamp on existing institutions and pressure countries wholesale, both at home and abroad, even against their own long-term interests over matters utterly peripheral to Britain, how much more could determined political leadership raise embattled banners on behalf of the British people themselves to rescue them from their present oppression?

In 1981 full-time female nurses — the great majority of nurses are women — earned on average £99.70 a week before stoppages, which is less than two-thirds of national average earnings. There are even 200,000 full-time nurses today earning below the Family Income Supplement poverty line.

For all these the Government is now proposing an increase of £5-£6 a week, depending on overtime worked. By comparison, judges, already on £673 a week in 1981, have just been awarded an extra £144 a week, while top civil servants on £689 a week last year have been given an additional £119 a week. Both groups, already paid princely salaries, have now been awarded pay *increases* that are in excess of the total new *annual* salary proposed for nurses.

There are other strong reasons for putting the focus squarely on low pay, poverty and unemployment now. Not only is inflation savaging low-paid workers and actually cutting back low living standards even further, but the reductions in the social wage also hit them hardest. Escalating

rents, huge increases in bus and tube fares, and cutbacks in or even withdrawal of basic social services are devastating poor families.

Furthermore, in place of sterile arguments about incomes policy which so discredited previous Governments, there is a desperate need for the Labour movement to transcend internal party differences, by making the restoration of employment and the abolition of poverty absolutely central goals on which the nation's whole resources will be single-mindedly pitted.

After three years of Tory Government, official figures show that no fewer than one in seven of the whole population now live in families wholly dependent on means-tested state benefits — a staggering eight million people.

The tax system has now become so distorted that most of these now have to pay income tax, while the rich at the top bear an even smaller proportion of the tax burden. Those who go to the assistance of the low-paid caught in the poverty trap like the nurses, as the miners have done, are threatened by Tebbit's law over sympathy action.

What is now needed is a task force within the trade union movement to mobilise a campaign against poverty, low pay and unemployment with the same unyielding drive as Thatcher has shown over the Falklands. I intend to make this the central plank of my platform, and to lose no opportunity to bring this to the forefront of the nation's attention over the months ahead.

Organising the Task Force

Ken Coates

The proposal for a task force against low pay, poverty and unemployment has been cogently put forward by Michael Meacher. It could not be more timely.

The fact that three million people are now unemployed, and that the proportion of long term unemployed within that simple statistic increases month by month, has implications which the Labour Party is bound to examine. Mass unemployment has, and is intended to have, a catastrophic knock-on effect for employed workers. As their own jobs become more vulnerable and insecure, and as they see their neighbours forced in to the dole queues, those workers who remain employed experience a persistent erosion of their standards of life. Inflation continues remorselessly. But their bargaining power shrinks and shrinks.

This is particularly true for legions of young workers, for women workers in all those sectors of the economy which are ill-organised and most greedily exploited, and for black workers and other unprotected minorities. We must face facts: unemployment has been and will

continue to be used as a weapon to reduce wages, and even more significantly to shrink expectations.

Some years ago I was involved in an enquiry into the extent of poverty in a small area in Nottingham. The St. Ann's district housed 30,000 people in varying degrees of deprivation, and some real patches of squalor. Bill Silburn and I worked among these people for several years, with a WEA group which consisted of a number of middle-class people from the caring social services (probation officers, teachers) and a number of professional workers (accountants, journalists). The results of our enquiries were published in a Penguin book, and widely diffused on television. Charles Parker joined us to make a radio programme with the people we had interviewed. We found a substantial part of the population living at or below the poverty line, and their stories were sometimes moving, often harrowing. But what our report did not make clear was the effect of the enquiry on those people who conducted it. All of them became passionately convinced of the need for a profound social change. Our member who was an accountant became the secretary of the Russell Foundation and the Institute for Workers' Control. Some of our probation officers were elected as Councillors. No one was unaffected by the experience they had been through, and all became activists in one campaign or another.

It struck me, when reading Michael Meacher's appeal, that in a way our present Labour Party is like a large scale model of that WEA group of which I am speaking. To a large extent the Party activists today include white-collar professionals from the education, health and welfare services, school teachers and social workers, with a diminishing representation from the older blue-collar working class. The present generation of Labour Party members owes a great deal to the events of 1968, which taught students and young people that social change was possible as well as necessary. Having been present during those days at an explosion of new hope, that generation has remained and will remain radical. But in my own Labour Party I have watched many of our hard-core trade union stalwarts drift away, not because of the boring speeches made by young ideologues but because of the sheer irrelevance of Labour Government policies to their needs. I well remember the NUPE steward in Rushcliffe for whom the last straw was a decision to increase the television licence fee. He felt that the low-paid had once again been hit on the head. For Labour Governments, while welfare has been given a certain kind of priority, poverty has been less of a concern than inflation.

It seems to me that Michael Meacher now offers us a way of harnessing all the skill and social concern of Labour Party members to a rebirth of socialist commitment among all those millions of people whose interests go virtually unrepresented in modern England. Should we not create a *real* task force? If 26,000 people can be sent to the South Atlantic, no expense spared, can we not recruit our own 26,000 to seek out and speak with low paid families and their organisations, and begin

the work of linking them together to secure effective political representation? Can we not mobilise a sustained campaign against poverty and low pay, and for the restoration of full employment, in which the trade unions can rediscover their political muscle alongside Party activists and other helpful groups of specialists?

There are many lessons to be learnt from the South Atlantic task force. Not only did it follow through political priorities without inhibition for costs, it also revealed a complex of planning arts. What research in the Falklands Islands did it engender? How was the land spied out? A variety of de-centralised initiatives had to be developed in order to find out what to do and where to go, where to avoid and what to hit. If we recruit our own 26,000 they will similarly need to spy out every local community, and every low paid enterprise, in order to report on proper target areas. They can help local councils and trade unions to identify the unused resources which can be drafted to meet unmet needs. And their work can be co-ordinated with the work of Members of Parliament, who probe for the answers to Parliamentary questions, to councillors who represent the areas which have been reduced by the monetarist offensive, to trade union leaders who explore what can be done within their own resources, and to the national and local press, where this campaign can begin to give voice to a million suppressed complaints.

Mrs Thatcher tells us that the South Atlantic war was for security, freedom and justice. We know how little security is offered to those low-paid workers who stand on the health service picket lines, with pay slips of less than £60 a week. We know how little freedom is enjoyed by the unemployed or the workers who are sweated in the wages council industries. As for justice, a recent Court case brought six girls in their late 'teens into the dock for stealing 200 or so pairs of knickers from the factory in which they worked. All were fined £75 or more for this theft. In the course of the investigation, it was learnt that their weekly wages amounted to just over £20. This was for a 40-hour week, for which they ought to have been paid £66.80 a week, which is the appropriate minimum wage for industries using woven materials. But the firm went bust, and the girls could not recoup their losses. Of course, they still had to pay their fines. Low pay means crass exploitation, and mass unemployment means that the most blatant injustice is a daily fact of modern life.

If we seek to reopen the minimum wage argument, which seems absolutely crucial to the development of a lively movement among low-paid workers, we should consider whether we could obtain support for a minimum of £3 an hour, which would protect home-workers, casual employees, and innumerable women workers at the same time that it facilitated moves towards work-sharing and other protective practices. A task force which was armed with such a weapon as well as all the apparatus of trade union and welfare lobbying, could really achieve an effect.

I would hope that such a task force could become a mass movement, to help bring real security, freedom and justice to the forgotten people of Britain, whose crying needs have up to now found too few advocates.

Priority: Low Pay

Walt Greendale

Today the problem of poverty and low pay affects millions of people. If you stand on the picket lines in the health service dispute, or even talk to workers in the low paid public services, you meet case after case of genuine bitter hardship. Imagine what it is like to maintain a family on £60 a week or less. You shop in the same supermarkets as your neighbours, who may easily have twice the amount of income available to you. You find that the social wage is constantly cut back. You find also that your work-mates are kept under pressure by the fear that they will lose even the pitiful wages that they have at the moment. Unemployment, in short, pushes its direct victims below any tolerable minimum standards, and at the same time drags down innumerable indirect victims. Hardship and deprivation are now more widespread than at any time in the memory of the majority of us who make up today's Labour movement.

If we can send a task force to defend two barren islands, why can we not send a task force against unemployment, low pay and poverty? The Labour movement could recruit volunteers to canvass a political solution to joblessness, and to help make contact with the victims of poverty wages. We could use the different agencies which have already come into being to make sure that the victims of unemployment got their full rights: but we could also do a great deal more than that. Unemployment is a problem of matching resources to needs. There are many resources available in society which are not being properly used. Already trade unions have begun to play their part in developing local and area plans and co-operatives which could enable us to get many thousands of people back to work if resources were made available. Local enterprise boards could merge resources to create new opportunities, marrying unemployed workers to disused factories, to idle machinery, to areas of real need. A task force involving members of the main unions, activists in local Parties (many of these already work in the social welfare agencies and have a lot of experience which could be useful), local councillors and other specialist helpers could identify the nature of each potential for recovery town by town, zone by zone. It could also prepare a workable strategy for recovery when the circumstances become ripe. Of course, a task force needs some other tools. Some of these can be invented quite easily. For instance, among a million people who are long term

unemployed, how many would like to resume an education? All kinds of educational institutions are providing lectures to small audiences and could easily open their doors to all the unemployed who wished to take advantage of their facilities. All that needs to be changed to facilitate this are some out of date rules. There will be many similar possibilities that jump to people's minds when they start to discuss this problem.

But above all, the fight against poverty, low pay and unemployment needs a new approach. It seems to me that we should aim to negotiate a minimum rate in all industries of £100 per week. This could be justified as an amount which was socially acceptable as a fair minimum. But needless to say, there are many millions of people who get by on far less than this. Whole categories of workers, especially women, people who work in their homes, and casual employees are normally paid far less than this minimum if it were translated into an hourly rate. But if labour could unite its political and industrial forces to struggle for such a minimum, this would be understood by everyone who is trying to struggle by on poverty wages. If Labour could set up its own task force, and go out to the chilly areas of monetarist Britain, braving all the icebergs and the arctic winds, we would get a warm response from the people. The low paid millions would once again have a reason for voting Labour. Even more important, Labour would have come home to its own people, and be strengthened by their aspirations.

Act Now Against Low Pay

Wageline*

Britain's poorest workers are bearing the brunt of the economic crisis. In addition to the three million officially registered as unemployed, 4½ million of those who still have jobs are facing poverty because of low wages. They are being hard hit by the recession, as overtime earnings are cut back and as the earnings of a second breadwinner in the family are lost. Their tax burden is increasing while their benefits are cut.

What is low pay?

Most people consider themselves low paid for the work they do or in comparison with someone else. But we need to find a level below which everyone would agree wages are unacceptably low.

Wageline believes that in 1981 anyone earning less than £85 a week (before tax) in a full-time job (£2.12 an hour for part-timers) was low paid.

* *Wageline* is the name of a campaign in the Labour Party for a National Minimum Wage. This article is based on information supplied by the Low Pay Unit.

This figure is consistent with official definitions of poverty. A married couple with two children whose gross earnings were less than this would be left with a net income (after taxes and work expenses) lower than the amount they would receive on supplementary benefit. And they would be able to claim Family Income Supplement if they earned less than £82 a week.

The TUC defines low pay as anything less than two-thirds average male earnings; the Royal Commission on the Distribution of Income and Wealth defined it as the earnings of the poorest tenth of male workers. Both definitions give a figure (for 1981/82) of £85 a week.

How many people are affected?

	<i>Including overtime pay</i>	<i>Excluding overtime pay</i>
Men (aged 21 and over)	1.1m (11.3%)	1.7m (16.7%)
Women (aged 18 and over)	2.4m (53.6%)	2.6m (55.4%)

According to these official figures almost 4½ million adult workers worked a full week but were still low paid. The problem is enormous, affecting between a quarter and a third of the adult workforce. As the figures above show, women are hardest hit by low pay despite the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts. But these figures do not include any workers whose earnings were reduced because of sickness or short-time working. And it also excludes part-timers (2¾ million of which were found to be low paid in 1981) and young workers. Homeworkers are also left out of the reckoning.

That the problem is still so large may come as something of a surprise. Many people assume that the low paid have done relatively well in recent years as a result of flat rate pay policies, the Equal Pay Act, Fair Wages laws and so on. But this is not the case. Figures on the earnings of the low paid were first collected in 1886. In that year, the poorest 10 per cent of manual men earned only 68.6 per cent of the average wage. In 1981, the poorest tenth still earned only 69.7 per cent of the average. Despite pay policies, wages councils and a substantial growth of the trade union movement, the relative earnings of the low paid have not improved for almost 100 years. Indeed, the recession combined with Mrs Thatcher's policies are now widening the gap between the richest and poorest.

That is why we must act now. And why we must find a decisive new approach if we are to make any progress in stamping out low wages. *Wageline* believes the approach should be to fight for a national minimum wage.

What is Mrs Thatcher doing for the low paid?

Unlike previous governments, Mrs Thatcher has a positive policy on low pay. She wants to see more of it. And this is one policy in which she is succeeding. How is she going about it?

1. Amnesty for law breaking bosses

One in three firms covered by legal minimum wages set by wages councils were caught illegally underpaying their workers last year. But of the 12,000 employers involved only eight were prosecuted. While the number of bosses fiddling their workers' wages are going up, the number prosecuted are going down. And the government have cut by one-third the number of inspectors to check on the wages — there are now only 119 throughout Britain, and only two in Northern Ireland. Compare with this their approach to social security 'scroungers'.

2. Cheap labour schemes

As well as facing mass unemployment, young people are often used as cheap labour, earning exploitatively low wages. Now the Government are trying to cut young people's wages still further. Firms who take on young workers can get a £15 subsidy *as long as they pay them less than £40 a week*. Firms who can and want to pay more will lose the subsidy. The government have also abolished the 'fair wages' law introduced by the last Labour Government intended to prevent firms undercutting their competitors unfairly by paying low wages.

3. Taxing the poor

Before the last Election, the Tories promised "to cut taxes and take the low paid out of tax altogether". Since 1979, the tax burden has increased dramatically — it is now much higher than at any year under the previous two Labour governments — except for the wealthy few who have received massive tax cuts. The low paid have suffered most; the number of families in the poverty trap has almost doubled. Indeed, a typical family now starts to pay tax on earnings which are £20 *a week* below the official poverty line.

Time to fight back

Wageline says it is time to fight back to protect the low paid against these attacks on their living standards, attacks which affect all working families to some extent. We believe the best way to do this is for the Labour movement to adopt a new minimum wage target, set at least two-thirds the average male wage. Thatcher's Government would never introduce a national minimum wage — nor would we want a minimum which her Government would find acceptable. But when the next Labour Government is elected, the minimum wage which unions have fought for in negotiations should be given the force of law and applied throughout industry. The minimum wage should be renegotiated every year between unions and employers at a national level, with a body such as ACAS acting as the final arbiter.

"But what about unemployment?"

Many people who want to see something done about low pay are worried

about the effects on unemployment, especially when unemployment is already affecting four million people. But it is a myth to assume that jobs will be protected if workers accept low wages, or that people could 'price themselves' into secure jobs by taking wage cuts. Those who are most vulnerable to unemployment are the already low paid; Government figures show that the average earnings of the unemployed when they were in work were only three-quarters of the average for workers as a whole. Moreover, if the low paid had greater spending power they could buy more of the goods and services produced by other people. It is only in the Grantham grocery shop world of economics in which Mrs Thatcher lives that there is an automatic link between better wages and the loss of jobs. Remember, wages have fallen in the past three years, but unemployment has doubled.

Of course many firms have come to rely on low wages as a subsidy from their workforce and they might find themselves in difficulty if that subsidy were withdrawn. But the greatest difficulties faced by firms today are not high wages but high interest rates, national insurance contributions, rates and low demand for their products. The Government is making all these worse. Wage earners cannot put all this right by accepting wage cuts.

Which are the Unions Organising Low Paid Workers?

In the public sector, the main concentrations of low paid workers are found in areas which are organised by the Civil Service Union, the Civil and Public Services Association, the National Union of Public Employees, the Confederation of Health Service Employees, the Transport and General Workers' Union, and the General and Municipal Workers' Union. These last two unions also organise very large numbers of low paid workers in the private sector. Alongside them, also catering for numbers of workers living on the borderline, are USDAW, the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers and the Banking Insurance Union.

The table overleaf shows the statutory minimum adult rates in a number of Wages' Council industries. These speak for themselves.

Legal Minimum Rates of Pay in Wages Council Industries June 1982

Wages Council	Statutory Minimum Rate £pw	Age Adult Rate Payable	Operative Date
Aerated Waters (E&W)	60.00	18	1.1.82
Aerated Waters (Scot.)	58.00	18	15.9.81
Boot And Shoe Repairing	59.50	20	12.2.82
Button Manufacturing	55.60	18	19.10.81
	55.77		4.10.82(39 hrs)
Clothing Manufacture	57.05	18	1.1.82
Coffin Furniture And Cerement Making	55.77	18	1.12.81(39 hrs)
Cotton Waste Reclamation	54.80	18	26.4.82
Flax And Hemp	55.97	18	20.7.81
General Waste Materials Reclamation	54.00	18	28.7.81
Hairdressing Undertakings: Shampooists (and all other workers)	42.00	20	12.4.82
Operative hairdressers	57.00	20	12.4.82
Hat, Cap & Millinery	54.60	19	1.4.82 (39 hrs)
Lace Finishing	57.20	18	2.8.82
Laundry	61.00	18	20.2.82
Licensed Non-Residential Establishment	60.50	16	15.1.82
Licensed Residential & Licensed Restaurant	61.60	18	6.10.81
Linen & Cotton Handkerchief & Household Goods etc.	57.60	18	19.7.82
Made-up Textiles	51.80	18	1.12.81
Ostrich & Fancy Feather & Artificial Flower	55.00	18	1.1.82
Perambulator And Invalid Carriage	61.00	18	19.4.82
Retail Bespoke Tailoring	61.00	18	31.3.82
Retail Food And Allied Trades	62.00	19	5.4.82
	62.00		3.1.83 (39 hrs)
Retail Trades (Non-Food)	62.10*	19	5.4.82
	62.10		3.1.83 (39 hrs)
Rope, Twine & Net	57.20	18	19.7.82
Sack And Bag	57.00	19	31.5.82
Toy Manufacturing	55.70	18	21.6.82
Unlicensed Places of Refreshment	62.00	18	14.6.82
	62.00		3.1.83 (39 hrs)

*Other workers, skilled assistants £62.50 pw.

Source: Incomes Data Services.

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