

# Workfare- a blast from the past?

Contemporary work conditionality  
for the unemployed in historical  
perspective

# Workfare in the new millennium

- May 2011: the **Mandatory Work Activity** scheme requires JSA claimants to undertake a month's full time work.
- August 2012: announced **mandatory pilot** scheme for young people (18-24 years) in London to take 13 week work placements.
- **Workfare** seen as a radical departure in British labour market policy.

# Heeding the lessons of history?

- Policy makers and social theorists both paid little attention to the lessons of history.
- Seek to make a distinctive contribution to the debate by undertaking **historical review** of workfare in inter-war Britain.
- Both periods characterised by **economic crisis** (including near collapse of banking system) and ascendancy of **economic liberalism**.

# 'Secret History': British Labour Camps

- 1929 - 1938 @ **190,000** men admitted to British labour camps (Croucher, 1987).
- Targeted: **young men** demoralised by long-term unemployment (6 months in 'distressed areas') and whom were deemed a danger to the morale of ordinary training centres.
- Most camps located in remote **rural areas**.
- 1934 Unemployment Act made attendance compulsory but was never implemented: local unemployment officers **coerced** individuals to attend by threatening loss of benefit.

# Experiences of the labour camps

- Training: 12 week course of tough, **manual labour** (tree felling, breaking rocks)
- *'They had us digging trenches. We would dig it down one day then the next day another group would fill it in'. (Mr Grant in Colledge, 1989: 19).*
- **Atmosphere of the prison or barrack square:** roll-calls, camp manager (military) and a team of 'gangsters' worked directly with the men who were marched to work.
- By late 1930s **1 in 3** quit or were discharged (poor food, bullying, suicides). **Benefits stopped.**
- Just **1 in 5** trainees obtained work (Hannington, 1976).

# Conclusions

- MWA resuscitates a **heritage** of compelling the long-term unemployed to work for their benefit.
- Workfare flourishes in times of **economic crisis** especially where **economic liberalism** and unemployment is seen as a **behavioural problem**.
- Promoted as a means of developing the **habits of work**. But little evidence that individuals lost the habits of work: most returned to employment when economic conditions improved.

# Conclusions (2)

- Contemporary conceptualisations of workfare focus on its **compulsive / punitive** function.
- Wacquant (2009) views it as part of '**double regulation of the poor**'. Harsh social policies (workfare) and penal policies (prison-fare) work to control marginal populations.
- A lack of historical focus: **exaggeration of degree of change**. Great Depression and economic liberalism led to brutal labour camps and burgeoning male prison population (Up 60% 1918-1933).
- **Welfare Reform Debate:** *'He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past'* (Orwell, 1949).