



Austerity economics don't add up

A UNISON Scotland report on
public services and the economy

October 2014

Introduction

UNISON Scotland launches this report as the process gets under way for scrutinising the Scottish Government draft budget for 2015-16. Our message to politicians of all parties is that austerity economics don't add up and that they should put fairness and tackling inequality at the heart of economic policy.

This report also comes during Challenge Poverty Week, following the STUC's important A Just Scotland conference and on the eve of the 18 October march and rally, with its call for Decent Work and Dignified Lives.

We support the STUC in saying that creating decent work and providing dignity for those who cannot work is at the heart of the battle against austerity and tackling inequality. It makes economic sense and this report demonstrates why.

Austerity isn't working

'Austerity' policies are harming the economy, have created a cost of living crisis and are putting our public services under intense pressure.

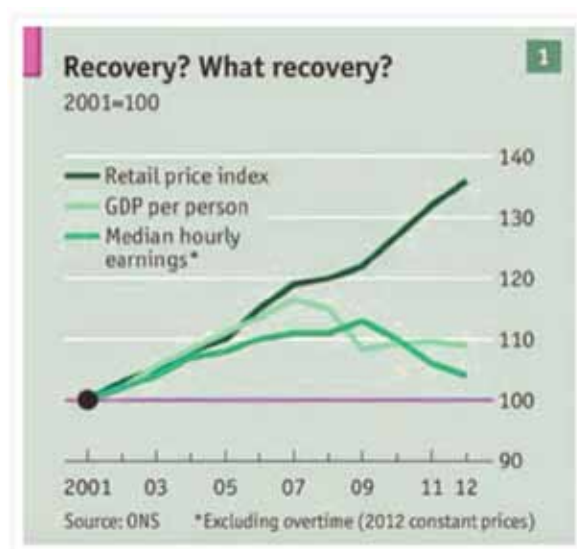
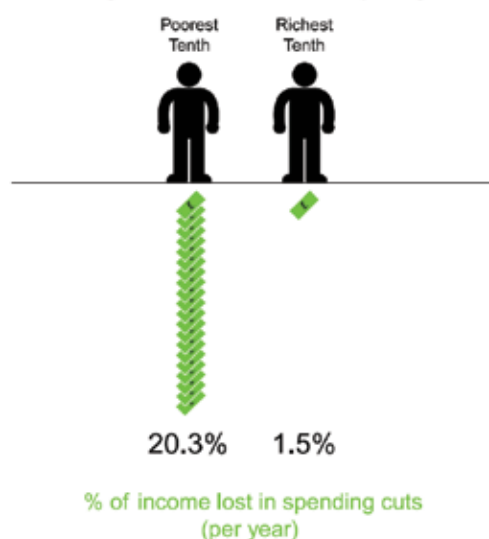
The UK Con Dem Coalition Government says austerity is necessary to cut public sector debt. But their cuts killed off an emerging recovery in 2010, their policies have increased the debt and the economy has taken much longer than after previous recessions¹ to climb into the current very weak recovery.

Chancellor George Osborne wants us to believe the recovery is robust and happened thanks to his cuts. But people can see that's not true in the way everyone easily sees through Tory claims that 'we're all in this together' or that the NHS is safe in their hands.

The Oxfam infographic² below shows that it's those at the bottom rung of the ladder, those who need most support, who are hardest hit.

Austerity was introduced for ideological reasons – to justify brutal public spending cuts. And the results are very clear. The assault on pay and conditions is harming families, particularly the most vulnerable. The cost of living squeeze while the price of essentials soars and welfare benefits are slashed, has seen the value of average workers' pay fall by more than £2,000 a year since 2010.

Figure 4: Percentage of income lost as a result of spending cuts



As our cover highlights, the rich keep laughing their way to the bank, as thousands of families on the lowest incomes queue for very different banks. Last year in Scotland 71,428 people, including 22,387 children needed to use Trussell Trust food banks³, up 400% in three years.

In 2012-13, a total of 480,000 working age adults in Scotland were living in relative poverty, more than half in homes where at least one adult was working (classed as in-work poverty). Nearly one in five children - 180,000 - were in relative poverty, 59% in a home with at least one adult working. Charities warn of a scale of poverty and adversity unheard of since Victorian times⁴.

Meanwhile the wealth of the richest 1,000 people in Britain doubled to £519 billion since 2009, about two and a half times the annual deficit⁵. Oxfam estimates that the richest three families in Scotland own more wealth than the poorest 20% put together. Such inequality hurts the economy and the £6 billion cuts in Scotland are also harming services that we all rely on daily. Our The Cuts Don't Work report⁶ shows that key Scottish services, already under immense pressure, face further deep cuts in the next few years.

Most people are having to seriously tighten their belts, with too many under severe financial stress, perhaps struggling on zero hour contracts or only able to find part-time jobs when they want to work full-time. Yet the services they need and the benefits many rely on are being cut back.

Austerity is damaging people's lives and health, hitting low-paid women hard, causing misery, risking a lost generation of young people who can't find work, and creating greater levels of income inequality, which is bad for the economy, for those on the lowest incomes and for society in general.

It doesn't have to be like this. Decisions have been made at every level of government - local authority, Holyrood and Westminster – not to provide adequate funding for public services and to hold down public sector pay.

Councils have borne the brunt of the cuts, losing 40,000 posts, with the resultant pressures on essential services and staff. UNISON Scotland opposes the council tax freeze and is disappointed that the Scottish Government has chosen not to use the full range of revenue raising powers at its disposal.

UNISON Scotland is campaigning for an end to austerity and for A Fairer Scotland. We believe, with the STUC and others, that There is a Better Way⁷. Pages 11 and 12 detail our alternative proposals.

Politicians of all parties - in Government and in opposition, in Edinburgh and in London and in other towns and cities - must put fairness and tackling inequality at the heart of economic policy.

French economist Thomas Piketty, author of the surprise best-selling book *Capital*, said:

"..the speed at which the inequality gap is growing is getting faster and faster. You have to ask what does this mean for ordinary people, who are not billionaires and who never will be billionaires."

"Well, I think it means a deterioration in the first instance of the economic wellbeing of the collective, in other words the degradation of the public sector."

The Guardian, 13 April 2014

Austerity economics don't add up

Not only has George Osborne increased the debt, the Coalition is borrowing more in five years than the last Labour Government did in thirteen. The deep cuts, including slashing welfare, contributed to the drastically slow progress in emerging from recession, the longest peacetime slump of the last 100 years.

As The Herald noted in a July 2014 editorial⁸ as the Coalition celebrated GDP returning to where it was before the 2008 financial crash:

"..the smug ministerial grins..are somewhat premature. This recovery has been a long time coming, longer than was necessary, and has some significant weaknesses..Conservative Party plans to gouge another £12 billion out of social security do not bode well..

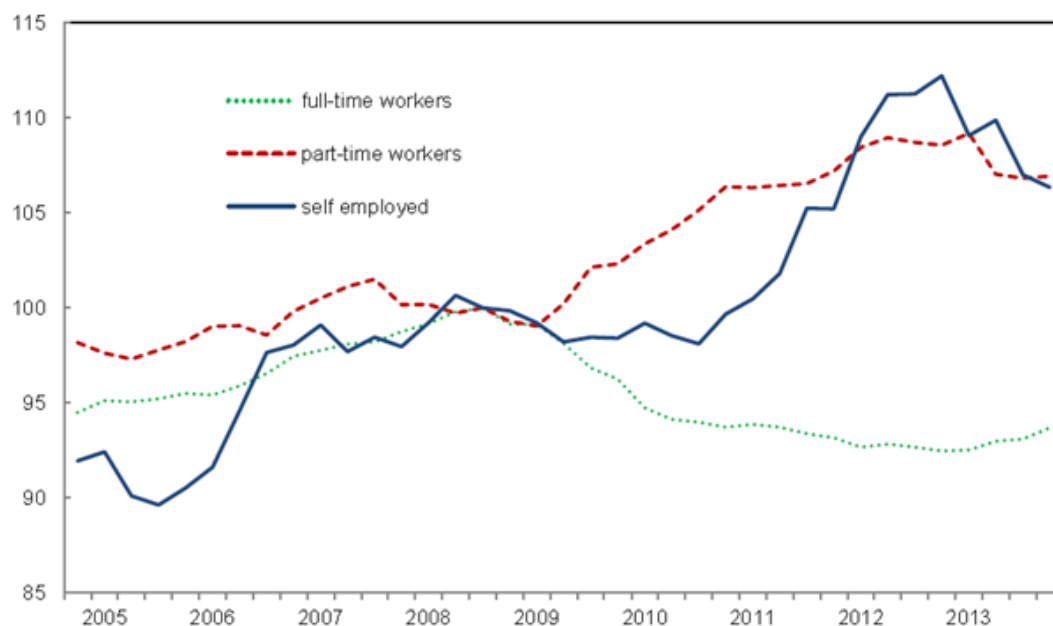
"Frances O'Grady, general secretary of the TUC, makes a fair point when she says economic growth is being driven by low pay and low productivity.

"While employment rates are up, more people than ever are working part-time because they cannot find full-time work. Those who class themselves as self-employed to avoid the professional setback of a period of unemployment are often earning a tiny fraction of what they were.

"So the boom times have not returned, no matter what the latest macro-economic indicators may say."

The Herald

Figure 2: Trends in full, part time and self-employment January 2004 – December 2013



Source: ONS Labour Market Statistics, Scotland, June 2014
Notes: October 2007 – September 2007 = 100

From Fraser of Allander Institute Economic Commentary⁹ (June 2014 Fig 2, p42)

Although more people are self-employed, the average median UK income from self-employment has fallen by 22% since 2008/9. STUC Assistant Secretary Stephen Boyd¹⁰ noted that the post-recession self-employed are “working less hours, earning less money, paying less tax and contributing significantly to the rising cost of in-work benefits”. Other labour market concerns he highlights include “stubbornly high” youth unemployment¹¹/low employment and the quality of new jobs being created, e.g. an estimated 120,000 zero hours contract jobs in Scotland.

These are just some of the problems:

 DEBT	• Public debt rising, when reducing it was claimed justification for austerity • Low pay, low productivity • Recovery slower than previous recessions, here and abroad • Cost of living crisis - made worse by energy companies' profiteering
 HUMAN COST	• Human cost for those struggling financially – including that disabled people are among those hardest hit by benefit cuts and unfair sanctions/bedroom tax • Increasing numbers of jobs, particularly in social care, are insecure, part-time/zero hours contracts
 CUTS	• The economy needs investment not cuts • A £120 bn tax gap – massive civil service jobs cut at HMRC, while too many big companies (e.g. Vodafone, Google and Amazon) pay little or sometimes no tax • Low investment in research and development
 INEQUALITY	• Inequality gap increasing and rising levels of in-work poverty • High youth unemployment, risking a 'lost generation' • Focus on short-term profits not long-term sustainability • Risk of another financial crisis as causes not tackled properly
 PRESSURE	• Funding pressures in local government made worse by council tax freeze • Cuts to many budgets where preventive spending would reduce future costs • Risk of interest rate rise pushing millions into financial difficulties

As the Scottish Government's State of the Economy Report Aug 14 notes¹²: “Real wages are still well below pre-crisis levels and have yet to see any significant upward movement. Unemployment and underemployment remain elevated with a large number of people looking for work or seeking to work longer hours than they are currently.”

“All my utilities keep going up but my wages haven't, leaving less to spend on food but prices in the supermarket are increasing too.

“I dread interest rates going up, as they eventually will, as that will put more pressure on when my mortgage goes up.”

Local government worker

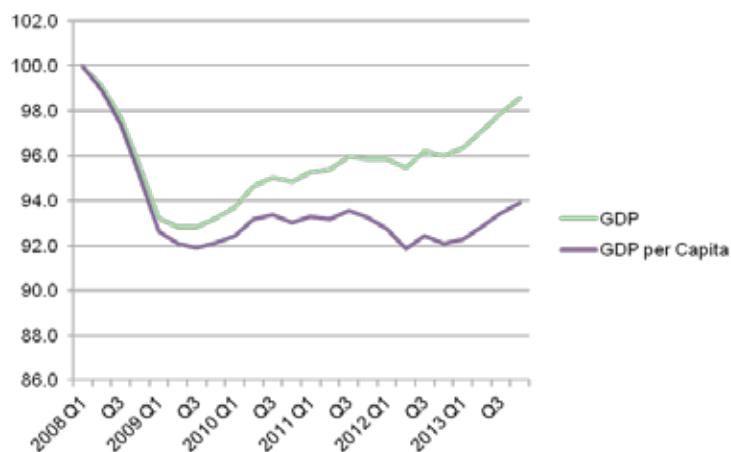
“I think about every penny I spend. I look at the cost of everything. I think things will get worse. The financial stress is horrendous.”

Hospital cleaner, West of Scotland

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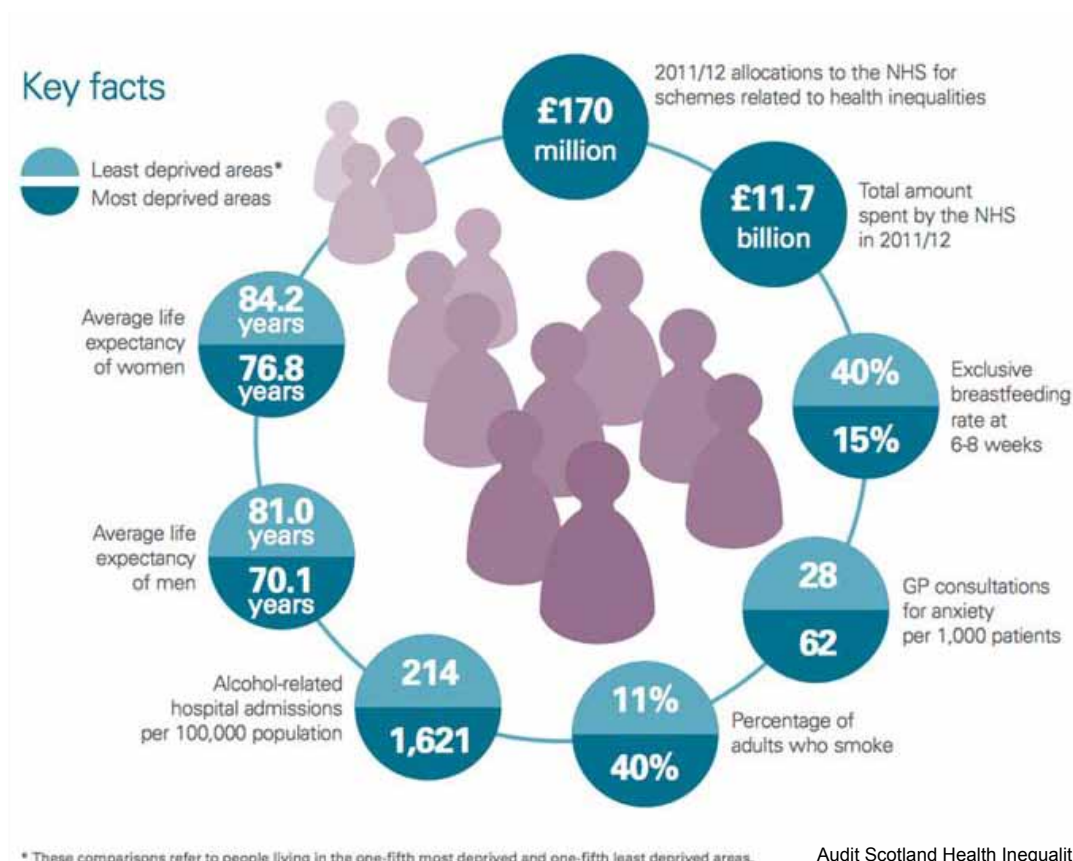
Growth may be going up but that is largely down to increased UK population. The amount of wealth produced per person (GDP per capita) has remained remarkably flat and after almost four years of spending cuts is still 6% lower than when the recession struck.

In Scotland, GDP per head since devolution in 1999 at 1.4% per annum is less than half the growth (3% per annum) in the 14 years before devolution, with most of that relative decline accounted for by the onset of the financial crisis¹³.



Things are set to get worse for families and for public services. Our report *The Cuts Don't Work*¹⁴ looked at the pressure on the Scottish budget and showed that 60% of the revenue cuts are still to come. Already 50,000 public service jobs have been lost, the highest proportion from local government, with a further 60,000 forecast to go. Councils have a major role in economic regeneration, as well as in direct support for those families worst affected by the cuts, yet, once more, the poorest areas are hardest hit by cuts¹⁵.

A new poverty study that found rising deprivation called for government action and highlighted the impact of service cutbacks. The use of many services such as libraries, sports centres, museums, galleries, dentists and opticians, has declined since 1999, primarily due to reduced availability, cost or inadequacy. Professor Glen Bramley, from Heriot-Watt University, said: "It is worrying that, in the 21st century, more than 40 per cent of households who want to use meals on wheels, evening classes, museums, youth clubs, citizens' advice or special transport cannot do so due to unavailability, unaffordability or inadequacy."¹⁶



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Health inequalities are also wide and increasing, as UNISON Scotland's July 2014 report shows¹⁷, with cancer and heart disease more than twice as prevalent in poorer areas as in the least deprived parts. The Audit Scotland infographic on page 6 shows some key facts, including on life expectancy, which overall is lower than in most Western European countries.

Reducing health inequalities is one of the greatest challenges we face. They are caused by the unfair distribution of income, wealth and power and cannot be tackled by just focusing on health services. It requires adopting a clear goal of reducing the gap between the richest and the rest, the gap that is currently growing.

In August, the Bank of England halved its forecast for wage growth from 2.5% to 1.25% as figures showed pay growth at a record low. Real average earnings aren't expected to return to their 2009-10 levels until 2018-19. RPI inflation is forecast in the next few years to be around 3% per annum, so for today's wages to have the same buying power in 2018, they would have to increase by around 16%.

With cuts to benefits hitting hard, independent forecasts suggest up to 100,000 more children could be pushed into poverty by 2020. This is scandalous in one of the richest countries in the world. We should be investing in our children and their future. Instead, another crash may be a real possibility without major changes.

The STUC said in March that the Office for Budget Responsibility's Economic and Fiscal Outlook 2014 "does not paint a picture of a fairer and more equal economy or one more resilient to systemic crises. It does however closely resemble the model which collapsed so spectacularly in autumn 2008."¹⁸

Austerity is hurting internationally too. Nobel prize winning experts, including Professor Joseph Stiglitz, said in August that austerity has been dire for the economy right across the Eurozone¹⁹.

In an article entitled 'Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%'²⁰ Mr Stiglitz said:

"Some people look at income inequality and shrug their shoulders. So what if this person gains and that person loses? What matters, they argue, is not how the pie is divided but the size of the pie. That argument is fundamentally wrong. An economy in which most citizens are doing worse year after year—an economy like America's—is not likely to do well over the long haul..."

Oxfam looked in Sept 2013 at European austerity programmes and reported²¹ that they dismantled the mechanisms that reduce inequality and enable equitable growth.

The charity warned: "With inequality and poverty on the rise, Europe is facing a lost decade. An additional 15 to 25 million people across Europe could face the prospect of living in poverty by 2025 if austerity measures continue.

"Oxfam knows this because it has seen it before. The austerity programmes bear a striking resemblance to the ruinous structural adjustment policies imposed on Latin America, South-East Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. These policies were a failure: a medicine that sought to cure the disease by killing the patient."

A major policy shift is needed, but in the short term, the best boost for the economy and for families in poverty would be to give working people a pay rise, extend the Living Wage, and to uprate benefits to ensure a decent, dignified standard of living for those who rely on them.²²

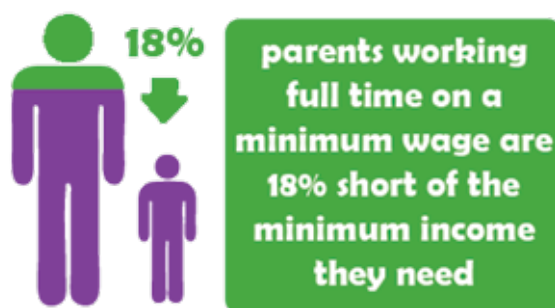
Austerity doesn't pay - for ordinary people

Giving workers a fair pay rise makes sound economic sense – and is the key demand from trade unions in a range of industrial action and other campaigns this autumn and winter.

It is wrong that too much economic thinking sees wages only as a cost and not as a source of demand. Putting more money in people's pockets rebuilds consumer confidence and boosts the economy. But austerity, with its pay freezes and squeezes since the financial crash, has been disastrous for the income levels and spending power of ordinary people. (Meanwhile, of course, the bosses of the UK's top companies are paid an average of 131 times more than their employees!²³)

Scotland and the UK have one of the highest shares of low paid workers in the developed world. One in five earn less than the Living Wage and by international standards we have high levels of income inequality, similar in Scotland to the rest of the UK, particularly if you exclude London. Extreme inequality has seen the top 1-2% boost their income more than the average, while those earning in the bottom 5-10% saw incomes fall further behind²⁴.

The Child Poverty Action Group Scotland reported²⁵ in August that parents working full-time on a minimum wage are 18% short of the minimum income they need (source: CPAG report).



This at a time when, between 2008-2014, inflation rose by 19% and the minimum cost of living by 27-28% - but wages grew by only 9%.

Families on out-of-work benefits receive only 57% (couples) or 60% (lone parents) of the income required to meet basic needs. And the cost of childcare, the most expensive item purchased by many families with small children, is 42% higher than in 2008, up by over twice the official inflation rate.

Poverty pay levels cost taxpayers money both in lost income tax and in subsidising employers through paying out in-work benefits such as housing benefit and working tax credits.

A study²⁶ of UNISON members working for the NHS in the Greater Glasgow and Clyde area found that 48% of the 1700 who responded were experiencing in-work poverty. 'The Cuts Don't Work' report describes some of the stresses and pressures members face at work as cuts hit services and jobs are lost, increasing workloads.

"Once the month's rent and month's council tax is paid we struggle until the next pay day. Never seem to get out of the bit as it all seems to go on electricity/food. There is nothing left for 'treats' for the wee one like days out."

Hospital Domestic

"I have to be very careful about day to day expenses. If it wasn't for my extra hours, I would really struggle."

Hospital cleaner West of Scotland

"We have not had a decent pay rise for years and inflation is still more than our pay rise and we now have to pay more towards our pension."

Nurse, Highlands



<https://twitter.com/unisontweets/status/499514942647984128/photo/1>

In Dishing the dirt, a new UNISON Scotland survey of cleaners' experiences of the cuts²⁷, many described how hard it is to make ends meet. One university cleaner said: "It has got worse in the past three years....the wages don't change but the cost of living just seems to go up and up...how can people live healthily when the healthy foods cost so much and the prices keep going up?" A new Equality and Human Rights Commission report²⁸ on the cleaning sector found that cleaners often face underpayment, mistreatment and abuse. It recommended they should be paid the Living Wage²⁹.

NHS workers, cleaners and other low paid staff do essential jobs that we all rely on. They are worth more and deserve more than poverty wages. A public service worker on median pay at the top of the payscale in 2009, earning £27,692, would need to earn £33,395 to have the same buying power in 2014. In reality, their pay is £28,531.



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Although pay has been effectively cut, trade unions have had some successes in extending the Living Wage, now widely supported by public sector employers in Scotland, benefiting thousands of low paid workers. Politicians of all parties deserve credit for this. The next big push is in the community and private sectors, in particular for those on public sector contracts. Our guide³⁰ explains how councils and other public bodies can achieve this through procurement policy.

Women in the UK and Scotland still lose out from a persisting gender pay gap, but the recession has made things worse. The Fawcett Society found³¹ in August that nearly a million women have moved into types of employment that are typically low paid and insecure, with a surge in the number on zero hours contracts or 'self-employed', yet many would prefer secure full-time jobs. They too called for extension of the Living Wage.

There is a better way on pay, here and internationally. Debates about wages and productivity tend to ignore new thinking about wage led growth which suggests that fairer pay has to be the starting point for inclusive, sustainable growth³².

A study³³ for the International Labour Office warned of the dangers of continued austerity policies, saying further reduction of wages as a proportion of national income would only bring more stagnation. Professor Ozlem Onaran and Giorgos Galanis say that "a global wage-led recovery as a way out of the global recession...is economically feasible." This would work both for those countries they conclude are wage-led, including, among the developed countries, the UK, US, Japan and the Euro area) and those they assess as profit-led (Canada and Australia).

UNISON's July 14 research found that every 1% increase in public sector pay would generate £710 to £820 million in increased income tax, National Insurance contributions and expenditure tax receipts, as well as reduced benefit and tax credit expenditure. It would also inject £460 to £880 million of extra value into the economy and create jobs³⁴.

It's time for a pay rise. UNISON Scotland's new report³⁵ on declining levels of pay shows the scale of the impact. Creating decent work and providing dignity for those who cannot work is at the heart of the battle against austerity and tackling inequality.

Trade unions are crucial in this, as argued in a new booklet 'Trade Unions and Economic Inequality'³⁶. Dr Lydia Hayes and Professor Tonia Novitz point out that the decade in which the equality gap in Britain was at its narrowest was the decade in which trade union penetration was at its greatest, with more than 80% of British workers covered by a collective agreement.

They argue that, without trade unions, individual workers are under pressure to simply accept the pay and conditions that an employer presents to them or risk missing out on the chance of a job or being dismissed. Trade unions are important, not just for improved pay and conditions and equality, but also on issues relating to health, discrimination and security at work as well as encouraging wider political engagement in society. They should be at the heart of economic, social and industrial policy.

Austerity economics - there is a better way

There are realistic and practical alternatives to austerity economics that can deliver the kind of inclusive society called for in UNISON's *A Fairer Scotland* and the STUC's *A Just Scotland* publications. These trade union contributions to the independence referendum debate looked at the kind of Scotland we want to see. We have argued throughout for social change to tackle inequalities, poor health and deprivation.

What is needed is the political will to challenge the view that austerity is necessary and to put in place better policies that deliver for working people, whatever the constitutional arrangements.



Lilian Macer

UNISON Scotland Convener Lilian Macer says:

"Public services are used by everyone at each stage of life. We ought to see money spent on them not as a cost, but as an investment. A workforce that cares, cures and educates should be celebrated as an achievement, not constantly under attack as a drain on resources."

"The cleaners, classroom assistants, chefs, nursery workers, nurses, planners, social workers, meat inspectors, care workers and the many other members we represent do vital jobs that support and protect us all. They are worth and deserve decent pay and conditions."

"We all deserve to live in a society that puts people first, where the economy is run for everyone, not just the well off. A low-carbon economy, prioritising action on climate change, focused on international solidarity, peace and justice, and opposition to nuclear weapons."

Austerity was brought in to pay for bailing out the banks. It has been used to justify slashed public spending and the extremely false 'economy' of increased outsourcing and privatisation³⁷, to pursue an economy for the rich by the rich when government should be putting people first. It is significant that Mark Carney³⁸, Governor of the Bank of England, noted in a recent speech that all the research suggests that "relative equality is good for growth." He praised an inclusive social contract and also recognised that tackling climate change offers great scope for technological progress and economic growth.

We need an active economic and industrial policy aimed at creating full employment, with quality jobs and a Just Transition to a low carbon economy. Work must pay enough to ensure a decent standard of life. We need fair taxation and a crackdown on tax avoidance. Taxes are good value for money. The full range of revenue raising powers should be used for good. Instead of tax cuts, we need to properly fund the public services that are currently so at risk, as highlighted in UNISON's manifesto 'Securing the future of our public services'³⁹. That investment helps to create demand in the economy and maintain communities. We oppose outsourcing and privatisation and PPP/PFI/NPD being used instead of conventional funding for projects like new schools and hospitals.

UNISON's 2014 Budget Response proposals⁴⁰ included a moratorium on further job cuts in the public sector, planned programmes of long-term investment in housing, infrastructure and green energy production, and making tax fair by, for example, tackling the UK tax gap of £32 billion, pursuing tax evasion to raise £90 billion and raising £23 billion annually with a Robin Hood Tax (Financial Transactions Tax).

We want to see an end to the unfair council tax freeze which has cost more than £2.5 billion and benefits the better off most. There must be fair pay rises across the board, helping to restore living standards and eliminate in work poverty. We must ensure equal pay is delivered to end this disgraceful discrimination against women, and we should increase the National Minimum Wage in stages to the Living Wage level and extend the Living Wage to all workers on public service contracts, particularly in social care.

UNISON opposes the bedroom tax and deplores political myth making that unfairly blames poverty on those struggling to make ends meet⁴¹. We condemn the cut of £6 billion to welfare spending in Scotland, most happening this year and next.

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Our July 2014 paper on reducing health inequalities⁴² says this must be a priority for health policy. Progress on this and other targets should be monitored using improved ways of measuring a successful economy and genuinely sustainable growth. These should build on proposals such as Oxfam's Humankind Index⁴³, which aims to measure what makes a good life.

Universal quality affordable childcare would be good for children, for working parents and for the economy and should be a policy priority⁴⁴. Investment in housing⁴⁵, energy efficiency and renewables (where councils and other public bodies could get involved in energy generation⁴⁶) creates jobs, helps tackle fuel poverty and contributes to meeting climate change targets as we move to the necessary low-carbon economy.

Our Public Works campaign highlights the essential role Scotland's public services play in all our lives. We are working with the STUC, People's Assembly and others for an end to austerity. Join us.

"The government's austerity programme does not work; it is unjust, immoral and undemocratic. Alternatives exist. Debts can be dropped. Privatisation can be reversed and common ownership embraced.

"A living wage can begin to combat poverty. Strong trade unions can help redistribute profit. The vast wealth held by corporations and the trillions held by the super rich in tax havens can be tapped.

"Green technology, alternatives to the arms industries, a rebuilt infrastructure including growth in manufacturing are all desperately needed. We are fighting for an alternative future for this generation and for those that come after us."

From the People's Assembly
Founding Statement

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Useful Links:

UNISON Scotland website (www.unison-scotland.org.uk)
 UNISON's Public Works campaign (www.unison-scotland.org.uk/publicworks)
 UNISON's Worth It campaign (www.unison-scotland.org.uk/worthit)
 There is a Better Way (www.thereisabetterway.org)
 Scottish Living Wage campaign (<http://slw.povertyalliance.org/>)
 People's Assembly Scotland (www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk/scotland)



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