

# Social Rights are Human Rights – but the UK System is Rigged

Social Rights Are Human Rights

BUT THE UK SYSTEM IS RIGGED

by Paul Hunt

with a Foreword by Paul Mason



Introducing a report  
by Paul Hunt with  
a Foreword  
by Paul Mason

PUBLISHED BY THE CENTRE FOR WELFARE REFORM

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Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms that belong to everyone. They are based on shared values like fairness, dignity and equality.

They matter because human rights relate to people and issues we all care about - people in care, survivors of domestic abuse, decent work, safe homes, and vibrant communities.

They are not just abstract principles. They are protected by international and national law.

We can use human rights in our struggles for social justice.

We can use them to shape our workplaces, schools, hospitals, housing policy, social security, transport system, environment and communities.



# What are social rights?

When discussing human rights in this country, we usually think of rights like the prohibition against torture and freedom of speech.

These extremely important rights are protected by the Human Rights Act. We must robustly defend this Act.

But the Human Rights Act is almost silent about workers' and social rights.

Workers' rights include the rights to decent work and to form and join a trade union.

The historic role of the trade union movement is to defend workers' rights.

## Social rights include the rights to:

- An adequate standard of living
- Affordable housing
- Food
- Education
- An equitable health system
- Social security based on respect, not on sanctions.

Workers' rights and social rights are vitally important. They are closely connected and reinforce each other. But workers' rights and social rights

are not the same thing. This leaflet focuses on social rights because they are almost unknown in this country.

**“As the progressive left fightback unfolds in Europe, the idea of social rights has gained traction.”**

Quote from the Foreword by Paul Mason



## Social rights are especially vital to the disadvantaged

**The UK has voluntarily accepted legally binding international obligations to promote and protect social rights. And the British government supports these human rights in the United Nations. But it does not currently support explicit social rights at home.**

At home, social rights are largely invisible.

Social rights are important to everyone, but they are especially vital to disadvantaged individuals and communities.

After all, how many well-off people

are compelled to rely on food banks?

Or live with mould and vermin infestation because landlords do not properly maintain their homes?

These are everyday problems – social rights problems – for many disadvantaged people in the UK.

# Social rights improve lives

People and communities use social rights to improve their everyday lives.

In **Leith**, tenants have used the right to adequate housing to secure real improvements in their housing conditions.

In **Belfast**, unemployed people have used the right to social security to reverse punitive sanctions.

In **York**, residents have put social rights at the heart of the new declaration making York the UK's first human rights city.

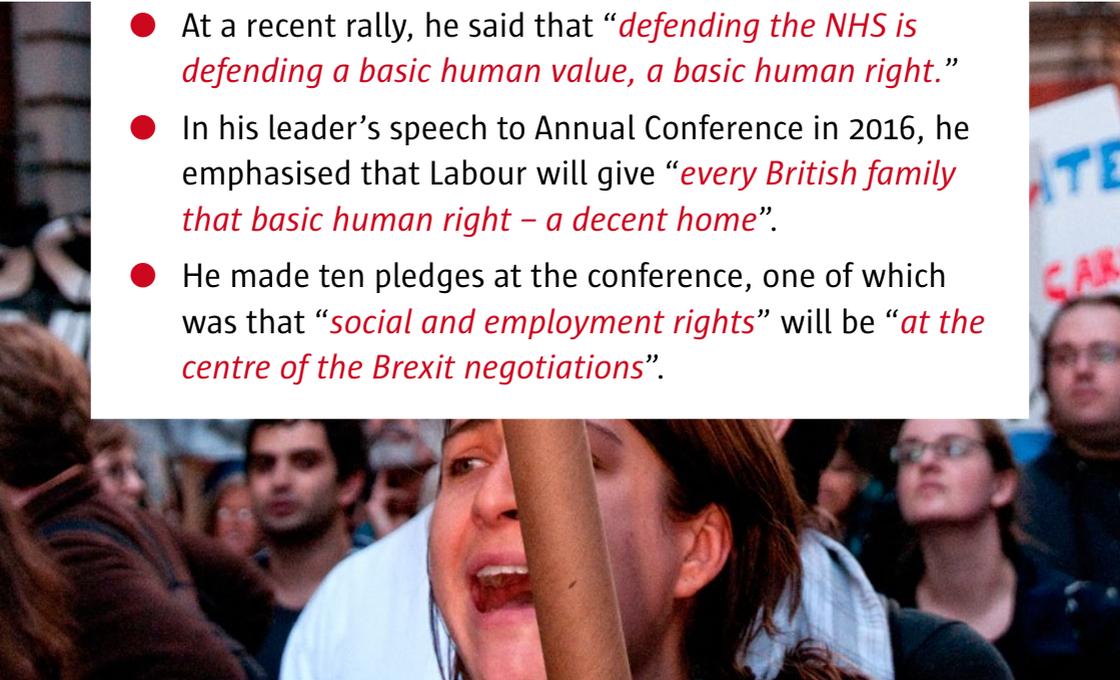
In **Italy**, the right to health has explicitly shaped health policies and contributed to health gains.

In **Spain**, a grassroots movement has successfully used the right to adequate housing in its struggle to secure more social housing.

**Around the world**, there is growing evidence that social rights are emancipatory and transformative. They make us rights holders, not service users.

## Jeremy Corbyn explicitly affirms social rights

- At a recent rally, he said that “*defending the NHS is defending a basic human value, a basic human right.*”
- In his leader’s speech to Annual Conference in 2016, he emphasised that Labour will give “*every British family that basic human right – a decent home*”.
- He made ten pledges at the conference, one of which was that “*social and employment rights*” will be “*at the centre of the Brexit negotiations*”.



# Extracts from **Social Rights** are **Human Rights**

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“Social rights are not the preserve of lawyers and other technocrats. They are not just about going to court. Explicit social rights have the power to dignify and emancipate individuals and communities. They can shape policies and practice. There is evidence of their positive impact. Why not use them?”

“Human rights are versatile and can play a variety of roles in the struggle for social justice. For

example, they can be inspirational, insurrectional (e.g. during apartheid), operational, or judicial. ... The operational approach ensures that human rights shape laws, regulations, policies, programmes, practices, and grassroots initiatives. If this ‘shaping’ is participatory and bottom-up, it can be transformative and emancipatory.”

“The Labour Party Manifesto and social rights share the common goal of placing the dignity and well-being of individuals and communities at the centre of social policy. They reinforce each other.”

“Social rights establish a culture of accountability for social policies. ... In the UK, accountability for social rights is very weak, which is one reason why our governments have been able to get away with an especially pernicious form of austerity. We urgently need to establish accessible and effective forms of accountability for social rights. ... In this way, accountability for social rights would help ensure that the manifesto’s policies are delivering for disadvantaged individuals and communities.”

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## The way forward

**A central message of the Labour Party campaign leading up to the June 2017 general election was that the system is rigged in favour of the few.**

The Labour Party Manifesto, *For the Many not the Few*, explains how the system is rigged and what can be done about it.

The manifesto's bold social policies – and its promise to introduce a 20-point plan for workers' rights – are among its strongest features.

The Centre for Welfare Reform has published *Social Rights are Human Rights – but the UK System is Rigged*, which adds a new, complementary dimension to this vital discussion.

*Social Rights are Human Rights* shows how the UK *human rights system* is rigged.

It is rigged in the sense that it promotes and protects some human

rights, but not others.

It privileges some human rights, but neglects social rights.

Neglected rights for neglected people.

*Social Rights are Human Rights* provides real-life case studies which show how social rights can help us resist austerity and build a fairer society for the many.

It explains how explicit social rights would strengthen and reinforce the manifesto's progressive social policies.

It sets out how we can advance social rights in the UK.

The crucial first step is to name social rights, talk about them, and take them seriously.

# MORE INFORMATION



*“Social Rights are Human Rights – but the UK System is Rigged* explains what social rights are, why they are especially important to disadvantaged individuals and communities, and why they are so little known in the United Kingdom. It gives real-life examples from Leith, Belfast, York and elsewhere demonstrating the roles that social rights can play.

As we resist austerity and prepare for a transformative change in British politics, we need to expand the tools at our disposal.

Social rights are not a panacea, but this report, which outlines both the concept and its application, is a useful starting point if we want to expand our debates about strategy and tactics, learning from successful social movements beyond Britain’s borders.” From the Foreword to the report by Paul Mason

## THE REPORT

*Social Rights are Human Rights – but the UK System is Rigged* by Paul Hunt is published by The Centre for Welfare Reform.

Download a copy from [www.bit.ly/socialrights-humanrights](http://www.bit.ly/socialrights-humanrights)

## THE CENTRE FOR WELFARE REFORM



The Centre for Welfare Reform is an independent research and development network. Its aim is to transform the current welfare state so that it supports citizenship, family and community.

To find out more go to: [www.centreforwelfarereform.org](http://www.centreforwelfarereform.org)

## PAUL HUNT



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## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON SOCIAL RIGHTS

Just Fair: [www.just-fair.co.uk/publications](http://www.just-fair.co.uk/publications)

Participation and the Practice of Rights: [www.pprproject.org/about-ppr](http://www.pprproject.org/about-ppr)

Scottish Human Rights Commission: [www.bit.ly/economic-social-cultural-rights](http://www.bit.ly/economic-social-cultural-rights)