

Is the ILO definition of unemployment a capitalist conspiracy?

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Conspiracy theories abound in 2005. I'm not generally convinced by such theories. But, to my surprise, I have found that a conspiracy by statisticians seemed to provide the most credible interpretation of what has happened to unemployment statistics in recent decades. It appears as if there has been a conspiracy at national and international levels to measure unemployment in ways that boost the status of capitalism and capitalist policies. The methods of measurement that have come to dominate have helped make high levels of unemployment seem inevitable, are blind to the causes of unemployment and blind to investigation of solutions to unemployment.

Some readers who already see the world as dominated by capitalist values may think that I was naïve in ever believing otherwise. But I ask for the indulgence of such readers. We can learn from the ways in which statisticians and government have collaborated to 'externalise' the problems of unemployment. Government often treat the scale of unemployment as belonging to factors, such as globalisation, that are outside the control of any government. In this way governments almost manage to put the level of unemployment outside the realm of political debate.

The International Labour Office criteria for the definition of unemployment provide the centrepiece of the conspiracy. These criteria define unemployment in terms of seeking employment. In other words unemployment is a condition found among the population. At first sight that seems unobjectionable. How can anybody be unemployed if they are not looking for employment?

One feature of this definition is that it puts the onus of getting unemployment upon the individual. If individuals are unemployed, it is implied, it is their own fault. One recognised problem is that the definition does not deal with the so-called 'discouraged workers' who are not looking for employment because they do not believe that suitable jobs are available (see Hussmans et al 1990 p107-8). Eurostat and the OECD publish

statistics for discouraged workers. According to the OECD there were more than two million discouraged workers in Japan in 2000.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that individuals should have the right to work for the benefit of the community which they belong to. Islam recognises a right to work and an ethical-moral component of work that can include contributing to the community. The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam of 1990 states that “Work is a right guaranteed by the State and the Society for each person with capability to work (http://www.humanrights.harvard.edu/documents/regionaldocs/cairo_dec.htm). The Catholic church teaches that “The obligation to earn one's bread presumes the right to do so. A society that denies this right cannot be justified, nor can it attain social peace” (Centesimus Annus, 1991, para 43.). The former Soviet Union managed to achieve full employment by insisting that everyone should work. The UN-HABITAT Human Settlements Programme has a Charter of Human Rights that specifies that male and female citizens have the right to work through worthy employment with sufficient resources to guarantee the quality of their lives.

It is difficult to imagine any objection of principle to the right to work, and there is nothing untoward in treating the provision of employment as a social or governmental responsibility. But the ILO criteria condition us to think that getting work is predominantly an individual rather than an organizational responsibility.

The ILO criteria conflict with the way unemployment has traditionally been defined in Britain. The term unemployment was actually invented in Britain. It came into use in 1886 when the Board of Trade asked the trade unions to provide monthly statistics of the number of their members who were not in employment (see Garside, 1980). From this beginning the British definition of *insured* unemployment developed. The implicit argument is that payments should be made in order to secure the income of individuals against the risk of becoming unemployed. This conception of unemployment survives today in what we now call claimant unemployment – as measured by the count of recipients of Job Seekers Allowance. The underlying assumption is not that there is a right to work, but that there should be a system for insuring individuals against not having work.

The origins of the ILO criteria

The ILO criteria recognise neither the right to work nor systems of insured unemployment. So where did the ILO criteria come from?

Of course they came from the USA. When the existence of mass unemployment in the USA became evident in the 1930s the US government decided it needed to count them. Hence the idea of a labour force survey to count the unemployed. And hence a few years later the original 'New Deal'. Only a proportion of the US population were insured against unemployment and the obvious way of defining unemployment was in terms of the numbers seeking work (see discussion in Chapter 7 of Anderson, 1988).

Unemployment in the US has been measured for more than sixty years by the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS) that counts the numbers seeking work in almost exactly the same way as the ILO criteria. The CPS first estimated the unemployment rate in 1948 (at 3.8%) and has been conducted continuously ever since. When the time came for an international standard the CPS provided a model.

Many European countries besides Britain have insurance based statistics. The USA itself has an extensive system of insurance based statistics that support the production of unemployment estimates at state and local levels – see the Bureau of Labor Statistics website at <http://www.bls.gov/> and the discussion in Adams et al (2005). But the 13th International Conference of Labour Statisticians adopted the seeking work criterion of the CPS in 1982 presumably because it could be applied in any country.

The adoption of CPS criteria gives the ILO criteria for the definition of unemployment a number of distinctive features. One aspect is independence from national insurance or other state schemes associated with unemployment. The typical labour force survey, like that in the UK, does not use the word unemployment. The crucial question in the UK Labour Force Survey is "*Thinking of the 4 weeks ending on Sunday. Were you looking for any kind of paid work at any time in those four weeks?*"

In avoiding the term unemployment the ILO criteria aim to produce statistics that are independent of national insurance or other systems that give benefits to the unemployed, and in doing so, use the term 'unemployment' in a variety of different contexts.

But the striving for independence makes comparison with other datasets difficult or impossible. ILO unemployment statistics are not reconcilable, to take a close-to-home example, with claimant unemployment statistics in the UK.

Dependence on national labour force surveys also limits the uses that can be made of ILO unemployment statistics. Local unemployment statistics are not available in any useful detail. Unemployment is in effect defined as a national problem to be dealt with at a national level. Governments are not encouraged to think about unemployment problems separately from matters such as the balance of payments and the exchange rate.

Poor survey design

Another feature of the ILO criteria is that they do not include any attempt to identify the factors that lead to unemployment. The portrayal of unemployment as a condition is associated with treating it as a private problem rather than as a matter of public health. There is no need to investigate the cause.

Basically this is poor survey design. How bad a design can be illustrated by making an analogy with a hypothetical survey of incidence of the common cold. For most sufferers getting a cold is just an occasional complaint. In the same way most people who become unemployed are not unemployed for long. There are strong seasonal patterns in unemployment just as there are in having a cold. But the standard ILO manual on labour force surveys (Hussmans et al.1990) has nothing to say about duration of unemployment, and treats seasonality only as an aspect of employment and economic activity, not as a characteristic of unemployment.

It is to be expected that a survey of the common cold would ask people when they last suffered from a cold in order to get information relevant to catching a cold. It is unlikely that the survey would be limited to those who had colds on the day the survey was conducted. In a professionally conducted survey it is unlikely that respondents would first be asked 'Do you feel healthy?', and if they answered 'Yes', discarded from the sample! But that is the pattern of the ILO/LFS questionnaire as far as unemployment is concerned. Questions on unemployment are addressed only to those who are unemployed on the day the survey is conducted.

One result is that the ILO statistics fail to produce comprehensive statistics on short-term unemployment. ILO statistics record only *uncompleted* spells of unemployment. ILO/LFS unemployment statistics in the UK and in other countries cover those who are unemployed on the date of the survey and became unemployed within the four weeks prior to the date of the survey, but not those who had left unemployment within the four prior weeks. ILO statistics are subject to what is called 'length-biased sampling' (the phrase comes from Kiefer, 1988). The ILO In effect fails to recognise spells of unemployment that endure for periods of less than four weeks.

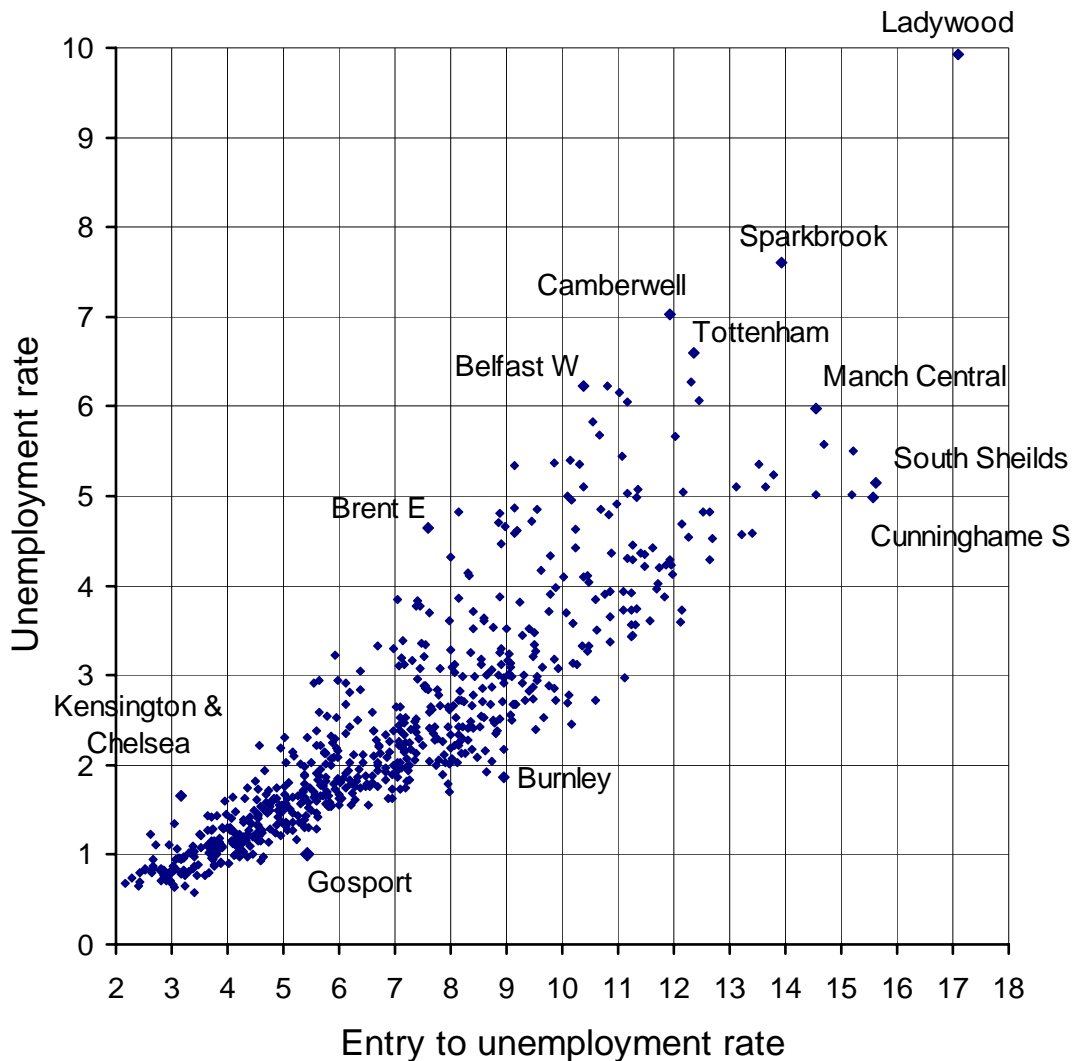
This limitation is not crucial for statistics for unemployment of more a month's duration. But OECD regularly publishes statistics for member countries for unemployment of less than a month. These statistics are mostly based upon uncompleted spells of unemployment, must surely be the most misleading set of statistics published by any international organization. The fact of the matter is that no-one knows the scale of completed spells of unemployment of less than four weeks. The only available statistics on such short-term unemployment come from systems of insured unemployment that record the number of entrants to unemployment. Adams et al (2005) includes a time series for claimant unemployment of less than four weeks.

Entry Rates and Unemployment Rates

The practical consequences of the ILO failure to recognise entry to unemployment is to limit the availability of data relevant to the causes of unemployment. Some of the implication can be illustrated with an example of the use of statistics for claimant unemployment (that have been produced and published for more than twenty years). Statistics for the 659 UK parliamentary constituency areas (PCAs) in 2004 show a 90% correlation between entry to unemployment and the unemployment rate.

Figure 1 Unemployment rates and entry rates in 2004 parliamentary constituency areas of the UK

Unemployment rates and entry rates in 2004 parliamentary constituency areas of the UK



Such a high correlation might be thought of as unsurprising. But the scale of variation and the high correlation is clearly relevant to labour market policy. and, it appears, conflicts with the Government's current labour market policy. Over the past decade policy has focused on welfare to work. The Labour Government proudly boasts of its New Deal policies. These efforts to reduce unemployment are commendable. But these policies focus on

exits from unemployment and ignore the major influence on the scale of unemployment indicated in the chart – that is people becoming unemployed. The Government has nothing to say about the wide variation at a regional and local level in the scale of entry to unemployment. The Office for National Statistics does not produce information that helps to explain this wide variation.

The conspiracy in the UK

Why has evidence like that shown in the Chart been ignored?

The putative conspiracy in Britain is exceptionally well documented. The conspirators were Professor David Bartholomew, Professor Peter Moore, and Professor Fred Smith, Paul Allin, and Peter Stibbard. The first three of these are former presidents of the Royal Statistical Society. The first four comprised the members of the Royal Statistics Society (RSS) working party on the measurement of unemployment in the UK that reported in 1995 (Working Party, 1995). Peter Stibbard at that time was head of statistics at the Employment Department who gave his full cooperation to the RSS Working Party.

At the time the RSS Report was a bold step and was widely welcomed. For the first time in decades the RSS had produced a report that was of genuine public interest and was aiming to fulfill the promise of the RSS Charter going back to its roots in reporting on facts about society. I personally valued the contribution of the report to public debate, and the Report provided a major stimulus for me to make unemployment statistics the focus of my research for the next ten years. But in retrospect the Report displays many shortcomings and can be seen as having created as many problems as it solved.

The stated aim of the Report was to raise the question of how unemployment should be measured. The Report describes the production processes of the claimant count and those of the Labour Force Survey but did not discuss the significance of the ‘seeking work’ criterion of the ILO definition nor the historical importance of unemployment insurance. The view of the Working Party (and that of many other statisticians?) appears to be that it is not necessary to define an entity in order to measure it. The Report actually postulated, in characteristic statistical style, the existence of a ‘true’ measure of unemployment (p 366), but did not specify the nature of a true measure beyond suggesting that it

would move smoothly. In effect the Report asserted that unemployment is how it is measured.

Measures of both ILO and claimant unemployment are in principle subject to empirical verification. It would be possible to test alternative measures of unemployment. Does the measure of unemployment change in accordance with the availability of jobs? But the Working Party did not attempt any empirical investigation. If you believe in conspiracy theories you might think that was because it was obvious even at that time that claimant unemployment was more responsive to changes in employment than ILO unemployment.

The controversy about claimant unemployment statistics

In the RSS discussion on the Working Party Report Peter Stibbard described the abuse levelled at government statisticians over claimant unemployment statistics. Stibbard reported that it was stated in the House of Commons that “if the Department of Employment statisticians were a football team, they would be banned for bringing their profession into disrepute” (p 405). The Report of the Working Party defended the claimant count by including a chart showing the SAUCCC series – Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Consistent with Current Coverage. The SAUCCC series retrospectively give the claimant unemployment level according to current rules of entitlement to receive benefit. The SAUCCC series was made available rather than published by the ONS and has never been the subject of wide public discussion. But the Working Party included a chart showing SAUCCC over the period 1971 to 1994 that appears to show that the effect of changes entitlement to unemployment benefit were only a minor influence on the recorded level of unemployment.

So why have changes in entitlement to unemployment benefit become notorious as an example of the fiddling of statistics for political purposes? Why were the claimant count and the Department of Employment statistician subjected to such virulent criticism?

The reason for the controversy over unemployment statistics became apparent only a year or so *after* the publication of the RSS Report. What had been happening filtered into the public arena

through a study by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. The Sheffield Hallam team set out to investigate what happened to unemployment when mines were closed. They found that the level of claimant unemployment was little changed. What was happening was that local unemployment offices had been encouraging claimants to switch from unemployment benefit to sickness benefit (see Beatty et al 1997).

This was part of a general pattern in areas of high unemployment. Over the period 1981 to 1997 the number of more-than-six-month recipients of sickness benefit in Britain increased by 1.3 millions (Kerrison and Macfarlane, 2000). Claimant unemployment statistics became controversial because they did not correspond with peoples' perception of reality. The main distorting factor involved was not changes in entitlement to unemployment benefit, but the growth of sickness benefit. The growth of sickness benefit (now called incapacity benefit) dwarfed the changes in measured unemployment attributable to changes in the rules.

Peter Stibbard stated that the RSS Working Party had the full support of his Department. But the Report of the Working Party did not mention the growth of sickness benefit although it must have been the biggest single factor affecting the level of claimant and ILO unemployment over the preceding decade.

Was this a conspiracy, or a cock-up? Is it conceivable that the head of statistics at the Department of Employment did not know that employment office staff were being told to encourage claimants for unemployment benefit to switch to other benefits? Is it conceivable that the head of statistics did not know that employment office staff in his department were successfully implementing this policy?

Entry to unemployment

Peter Stibbard included in his contribution to the discussion of the Working Party Report (p 405-407) mention of some of the advantages of the Claimant Count – such as the availability of entry and exit statistics, and reliable statistics on duration. These advantages were not acknowledged in the RSS Report. It would be a fair summary to say the RSS Report did not really compare the Count of Claimants with the ILO unemployment series. Rather it

made a comparison between the Claimant count and the Labour Force Survey.

The comparison was not fairly made. Some of the advantages of the Count that were already expressed in statistics that had long been available in the public domain were not mentioned. Many of the advantages claimed for the LFS relate to the range of possibilities of obtaining unemployment related statistics from the LFS rather than what is actually produced and published on unemployment itself.

The RSS report, for example, had nothing to say about statistics of entry to unemployment. It failed to note that statistics for entry were available from the Count of Claimants, but not from the LFS. It failed to note that the LFS does not accurately measure duration of unemployment. Was this part of a conspiracy? Could it be that these omissions from the Report were attributable to ignorance on the part of the authors of the Report? Was this just a demonstration that a 'working party' selected on great-and-good principles is not a good way of investigating a serious economic and social problem?

The RSS report gave some consideration to the importance of unemployment statistics in informing us of the state of the economy or the situation of the unemployed. The report stressed the advantages of the LFS in "providing a consistent framework for manpower" that, roughly translated, means that the LFS has the advantage of covering the whole adult population. But the report did not give emphasis to the fact that these potential advantages apply only at the national or regional level and that ILO unemployment statistics do not provide much useful information on local unemployment. In summary it can be said the RSS report favoured the ILO measure of unemployment becoming the headline figure, not for reasons associated with statistical needs, but because the ILO series was considered uncontroversial and was an international standard.

The RSS report has been very influential. The report reinforced the role of unemployment series in supporting management of the economy at the national level. The RSS itself has since published a series of papers proposing ways of producing statistics for ILO unemployment on a monthly basis (Bartholomew 1997, Moore 1997, Steel 1997, Harvey and Chung 2000). The ONS has extended the LFS sample and introduced a number of innovations

to support monthly figures. But the ILO series and the Count of Claimants are basically irreconcilable. The LFS persistently underestimates the number of claimants by around 20% (see Orton et al 1998, Jenkins and Laux 1999) – a feature that the ONS avoids discussing.

The concept of full employment

The concept of full employment as well as the concept of unemployment was more or less invented in Britain. William Beveridge's *Full Employment in a Free Society* published in 1944 remains as the most comprehensive single study of unemployment problems in industrial societies. Beveridge's book includes discussion of matters such as wages pressure and the determination of wages and prices, the influence of monopolies and trade associations, balance of trade problems, and the need for international stability. The ideas in this discussion are as central to labour market policy today as they were half a century ago,

Beveridge wrote about the measurement of unemployment, and actually put statistics on what might constitute full employment. Several generations of economists have elaborated on Beveridge's idea of full employment in a theoretical way with concepts such as NAIRU – Non-Accelerating Inflation Rate of Unemployment. But beyond the growth of labour force surveys there has been little progress in the measurement of unemployment. The emphasis given to ILO unemployment and to labour force survey statistics has actually detracted from the relevance of government statistics to the current labour market situation.

Beveridge distinguished frictional, structural and demand deficiency unemployment. Frictional unemployment was conceived as unavoidable unemployment between ending one job and starting another. Frictional unemployment can be assumed to be mostly short term. Claimant Count statistics that record entry to unemployment measure short-term unemployment with accuracy. But the ILO measures failure to recognise the concept of entry to unemployment means that government is not informed about the scale of short-term ILO unemployment.

Beveridge distinguished between demand deficiency and structural unemployment. Beveridge recognised the difficulty of making this distinction. Structural unemployment could be

regarded as a form of demand deficiency unemployment. Making the distinction and identifying appropriate remedies depends upon the availability of regional and local statistics.

ILO statistics could be said to be adequate at a regional level, but not at local level. Over the past few decades there has been persistent growth of inner city unemployment. The main unemployment problem has become intra-regional rather than inter-regional. Survey based statistics, such as those of the LFS, are inadequate for measurement and investigation of relatively finely grained variation unemployment levels that is now evident in every sizable urban area.

Most economists most of the time agree that a level of full unemployment, to be sustainable, should not lead to runaway inflation. That is the idea encapsulated in NAIRU. But there is no justification in assuming that labour market pressures that lead to wage inflation, or labour market vacuums that lead to unemployment are likely to occur equally in all labour markets in all parts of the country. That is why we need geographical detail as well as profile data on the unemployed.

The geographical distribution of unemployment

The concept of full employment, in other words, is inseparable from the geographical distribution of unemployment. Inflationary labour market pressures will be reached first in areas of low unemployment wherever unemployment is unequally distributed geographically. Areas of low unemployment will have achieved full employment or over-full employment while other areas continue to suffer from high unemployment.

This problem has not been widely recognised. The ILO measure is not well suited to measuring unemployment at a local scale. The advent of the ILO measure of unemployment makes geographical variation less likely to be recognised.

The importance of geographical detail is indicated in the table below based on claimant unemployment statistics. The table shows that, though unemployment in the UK has fallen over the past eight years, inequality in the geographical distribution of unemployment has actually increased.

Measured in terms of the average rate for parliamentary constituency areas, statistics for claimant unemployment fell from 5.9 to 2.4% over the period 1996 to 2004. The size of this fall exaggerates the decline of unemployment because entitlement to get unemployment benefit, or Job Seekers Allowance, as it came to be called in this period, was restricted over this period. JSA is commonly described as ‘a system for hassling people off the dole into low paid work by making it tougher to sign on’. But changes over time in entitlement to get benefit do not invalidate comparisons between different areas at the same point of time, and so do not invalidate statistics relating to the geographical distribution of unemployment shown in the table. The geographical distribution of unemployment indicates that the inequality in the distribution of unemployment increased substantially in this eight year period.

Table 1 Falling unemployment but growing inequality

Falling unemployment but growing inequality

Unemployment among the 659 parliamentary constituency areas in the UK 1996 and 2004

	1996	2004
	(percentages)	
Average unemployment rate (population of working age denominators)	5.87	2.39
Measures of inequality/dispersion		
Coefficient of variation	42.4	54.4
Interquartile ratio	63.5	76.3
Gini coefficient	23.4	29.2

Note: All three measures of inequality/dispersion are for unemployment rates
Source: Nomis database

Table 1 shows the distribution of unemployment in 1996 and 2004 according to three standard measures of inequality or dispersion. All three measures are independent of the average levels of unemployment. The *coefficient of variation* is the ratio of

the standard deviation to the mean. The standard deviation is a measure widely used by statisticians that is sensitive to extreme values. The *interquartile ratio* is a measure whose usefulness, and limitations, depends upon its independence from extreme values. The *Gini coefficient* is a measure of inequality widely used by social scientists that takes into account inequalities over the whole range covered by a variable. All three measures show substantial increases in inequality in the geographical distribution of unemployment over the period 1996 to 2004.

As is evident from the chart above the areas of highest unemployment include inner city areas in Belfast, Birmingham, London and Manchester, and include former mining areas in Scotland such as Cunninghame.

Increases in geographical inequality of this importance change the meaning of full employment. The more unequal the geographical distribution of unemployment, the greater will be the pressure in the favoured labour markets relative to the less favoured markets. Governmental actions to maintain stability in the economy will be taken at times when the favoured areas are under pressure. The employment needs of areas with high unemployment are ignored. Increasing equality in the distribution of unemployment has the effect of moving back the full employment goal posts.

Labour market needs of capitalism

You don't have to be a Marxist to appreciate that many organisations are happy with the existence of a reserve army of labour in the economy. A reserve army of labour makes it easier to recruit labour and, it is believed, easier to manage existing labour. Reserve armies also suit international capitalism. If there is a reserve army of labour available in every country of the world, firms can move production of goods and services from one country to another without problems or serious opposition.

The ILO criteria for the definition of unemployment do support the production of internationally comparable statistics. These show, for example, that there are fifty countries in the world with unemployment rates of more than 10%. See <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/socind/-unempl.htm>. But the ILO criteria also appear as if they were designed to make the existence of such reserve armies of labour acceptable and inevitable.

The ILO criteria do not give individual countries information that would enable them to start to make serious investigation of their own unemployment problems. The main problem is that application of the ILO criteria depend upon a labour force survey with a limited sample size that severely limits understanding of local unemployment situations. Though it has to be said that may not be seen as a big problem if the unemployment rate is 20 or 30%. But it is inescapable that it is not possible to be unemployed without becoming unemployed. And it is not possible to investigate the immediate causes of unemployment on the basis of ILO statistics because of the lack of recognition of the concept of entry to unemployment.

Some of the consequences of the ILO inadequacies that are apparent in the UK have been summarised in this article. Labour market policy in the UK has become obsessed with slogans such as 'new deal' and 'welfare to work' as if unemployment were solely a matter of the unemployed making themselves employable. And as a result authorities know little about the causes of unemployment or the factors that are leading to growing inequality in the geographical distribution of unemployment.

The ILO criteria condition users of unemployment statistics into thinking of unemployment as a problem that belongs exclusively to the unemployed. For that reason the ILO definition of unemployment can easily be portrayed as a conspiracy to support capitalism. But, if it is a conspiracy, it has one distinctive feature. It is a conspiracy that has been accomplished largely by professional statisticians.

And it is a conspiracy that can be largely undone by statisticians – by introducing questions on entry to unemployment into the labour force survey – and by properly integrating the LFS with the claimant count system that has such complementary qualities (see Adams et al, 2005). Concern about integration of unemployment statistics has long been expressed in articles in *Radical Statistics* (see Thomas 1997a and 1997b – now available in the archive at <http://www.radstats.org.uk/no066/index.htm>). Suggestions on how to achieve integration are given in the *Statistics and Society* book edited by Dorling and Simpson (see Thomas 1999).

Few of the problems with the LFS have been recognised by the Office for National Statistics (see Pease 1998). And I regret to have

to report that in response to some of the matters raised here (see Thomas 2004) the ONS say that they have other priorities. The other LFS priorities appear to be matters of adding marginal detail to support the production of monthly statistics or more detailed local statistics – precisely the areas in which the claimant count has unassailable supremacy. Ways of making the LFS and the claimant count comparable do not appear to be on the agenda.

Addendum

Many of the points made in this article are supported by statistical evidence that is included here only in highly summarised form. For a more detailed report see Adams, John and Ray Thomas 'Patterns and Trends in Unemployment in Scotland 1985 to 2004' to be published by Scotecon at the Universities of Stirling and Strathclyde. Acknowledgement is made to the Royal Statistical Society for the award of a Champion Fellowship to Ray Thomas that has supported the research for this article. Acknowledgment is made to Scotecon for a grant to John Adams for the 'Patterns and Trends in Unemployment in Scotland 1985 to 2004' study that has also supported the research underlying this article.

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