

'THE IMPORTANT THING IS TO KEEP FIGHTING, AND TO FIGHT WITH CARE, LOVE, RESPECT, AND A PASSION FOR JUSTICE'



Last April, BASW proved social work activism is not dead with its Boot Out Austerity walk. Six months on, their blisters fully healed, BASW chair **Guy Shennan** and social work lecturer **Dr Peter Unwin**, who took part in the walk, reflect on the journey travelled and the lessons learned

Austerity has been with us in the UK for almost a decade now. In February's issue of *Professional Social Work* we wrote an article drawing attention to the effects it was having on service users and carers across the UK – and upon the ability of social workers to carry out their jobs effectively. We highlighted how austerity policies meant a diminishing stock of resources, staff and community services. We said social workers and service users were in this together and should join forces in a common cause to call for a more socially just alternative.

We have always believed austerity to be a political choice, not an economic necessity, which had the effect of making the poor pay for the mistakes of the rich. But we were also detecting a growing shift away from a belief in austerity policies across a significant part of the public and body politic, which we wanted to be part of, as social workers and as a professional association.

BASW did respond to these socially unjust policies, in particular through the Boot Out Austerity walk, designed to draw attention to the devastating impact of economic cuts in the tradition of the great protest marches of the 20th century, from Jarrow onwards. The 100-mile walk took place in April and was a joint initiative with the Social Workers Union

and the Social Workers and Service Users Against Austerity alliance. It started from BASW's new head office in Birmingham and ended at our 2017 annual general meeting venue in Liverpool. It called for an end to austerity and was also a tangible demonstration that BASW was engaged in this issue, that we wanted to listen to the experiences of our members and others at street level, and to bond together in the sort of fellowship that is sadly often hard to find or create in the modern workplace.

As we walked, we realised another outcome was being achieved – we were drawing the attention of our fellow social workers to the need for a more poverty-aware social work practice.

We believe the walk was a resounding success. Austerity measures are, of course, still in place: it would have been hubristic in the extreme for a group of social workers to believe a protest march would bring them to an end.

But the political climate is quite different now than at the time of our previous article, and it is not hubris to believe that Boot Out Austerity played its own small part in bringing this about. The walk began the day after Prime Minister Theresa May called the General Election, and in hindsight it is clear that we were part of a wider movement that has since opened up new possibilities. These gradually started to show during the election

campaign and have been obvious for all to see since election day on 8 June. Being opposed to austerity is no longer seen as extreme, or economically naive but is now a mainstream view. Austerity measures no longer command majority support in the House of Commons.

In our social work world too, we believe our Boot Out Austerity walk contributed to a sense of possibility, that social workers today can engage in collective social action, that social workers can and should focus on poverty and can make a difference. The messages of support we received told us many within the profession found our action inspiring, and this inspiration has been spreading around the world.

So what was it about the walk that contributed to its success?

Over 100 walkers joined us for at least part



of the way, and a hard core of eight blistered stalwarts walked the full 100 miles. The average age of this core group was around 60, the reason for which might simply have been that those who are older are more likely to be retired or working part-time, hence have more time available to walk. It might also have reflected a heritage of having developed careers when social work was very much a champion of social change and social justice.

The younger walkers who joined us brought new perspectives, younger limbs and less troublesome feet than their older counterparts. We had great support from and debates with social work students determined to make a difference in their own careers. We took inspiration from each other and the welcomes we received from hard-pressed social work teams were fantastic.

We had lots of encouraging support on the streets too, often at the same time learning about the effects of austerity when people, having heard what we were doing, told us their stories. A typical example was a young mother with a small child in a pram who got into conversation with one of the walkers. She explained how she had a disabled child and keeps getting her care reassessed, which always results in having less care. She added that every time she sees her social worker he looks like he's going to burst into tears, and that she feels sorry for him. We had many such conversations where people indicated their support for what we were doing due to the impact cuts to services and benefits was having on them.

We were also spurred on by messages of support which came from further afield. One memorable such moment was during a morning rally in Wolverhampton when the walker who was about to read out a poem on Guy's smartphone suddenly found it obscured by an incoming call from the chief social worker in Northern Ireland, whose words of encouragement were then relayed to the assembled walkers as one of the rally's impromptu speeches. Eclipsing that though was a telephone call to the walkers, as we marched along the canal between Stoke and Sandbach, from none other than Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who wished to express his solidarity with social workers and with our cause, just a few days after the General Election had been called.

We received tremendous practical support on our walk too, being hosted along the route by BASW and SWU colleagues, church halls, budget hotels

and pub landlords. Communicating what we were doing and learning as we walked was essential for our aims, and we were supported by a vibrant website and twitter feed, with lots of filming being transmitted live to enable people elsewhere to see and hear what was going on. We held rallies before setting off each morning and meetings each evening, and these were a wonderful mixture of



political and professional speeches and debate, poems and songs. We addressed issues across adult and children's social work services, including benefit sanctions and food banks, working conditions and staff turnover.

Each of us had our highlights from the walk – whether the young woman behind the bar reading out to us from George Orwell's similar journey to Wigan Pier 80 years previously; the rousing choruses of our *Boot Out Austerity Blues* anthem in a garden centre; the mechanical dinosaur marching behind us in Sandbach; singing *You'll Never Walk Alone* in the van on the way to the final morning's rally; placing a copy of Mary O'Hara's *Austerity Bites* in the little free library in a community garden, a gift from the Boot Out Austerity walkers to the people of Runcorn; hearing the testimonies from service users and carers at a Liverpool day centre at risk of closure; being serenaded by the Liverpool Socialist Singers on the final mile; feeling part of a unified 'one BASW'.

Since the walk, its impact has been felt in numerous ways. A successful emergency motion at the BASW AGM, inspired by the walk, called on BASW to contribute to register to vote campaigns, to which Boot Out

Austerity added its voice. The knowledge gained from our interactions was used to inform BASW's election manifesto, with ending austerity named as its number one priority. Since the election, BASW and SWU have established an Austerity Action Group and commissioned a Campaign Action Pack which will be launched in Manchester at the end of November, for the use of anyone inspired to take action against austerity.

The film *Austerity Fight*, about the resistance to austerity across all public services and featuring Boot Out Austerity, was premiered at the East End Film Festival in June and showings are being arranged across the UK. We have also attracted international interest and support. At the International Federation of Social Workers' Europe Conference in Iceland, colleagues from Romania and the Netherlands spoke of being inspired by our actions, and in September the professional association and trade union for social workers in New Zealand led a protest march, organised as a direct result of Boot Out Austerity.

We hope you too were inspired by our walk. Social action is core to social work and the fellowship that arises from acting in common cause is good for our wellbeing. We look forward to seeing more action developing locally, closer partnerships with our service users and carers and, eventually, an end to



austerity. We will end with the final words on the walk, which came from Rick Burgess, of Disabled People Against Cuts, in the last speech of our arrival rally at Liverpool's Pier Head, after which no more needed to be said: "The important thing is to keep fighting, and to fight with care, love, respect, and a passion for justice".

To find out more about BASW's continuing austerity campaigning, visit the website www.boot-out-austerity.co.uk or contact Guy at chair@basw.co.uk