

**PANEL DISCUSSION ON THE THEME
“PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC CRISIS”**

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Good afternoon. It is a pleasure to be here, amongst such distinguished company. I am Peter Purton, and I work for the TUC in London, where I am responsible for disability policy as well as equality for LGBT people.

In Britain, we share with the Government a vision of a world in which disabled people become equal citizens with everyone else. One central element to achieving that distant goal has been the objective of winning equality in employment for disabled people of working age.

By that we mean – and it is important to emphasise this – not just work, but decent work. It means an end to discrimination in recruitment, and an end to discrimination in access to career development. These have been required by law since 1995: putting them into practice has been more of a challenge, and disabled people continue to face discrimination in all areas of life. But the employment rate for disabled people has risen from about 40% to 50%, compared with 80% for the population in general.

The trade unions in Britain, therefore, were extremely concerned that with the beginning of recession, this progress would be halted, and that there was a danger that it would be thrown into reverse.

That danger remains, but the positive news is that the evidence so far suggests it has not happened yet – something that makes the impact of this recession quite different from previous recessions.

According to national statistics, disabled people have not suffered worse than non-disabled people from the increase in unemployment.

This is not a cause for complacency. Analysts – who were also surprised by this evidence – suggest that there may be several reasons. Perhaps the most significant reason is that when the statistics were collected, the sectors that had been hit the hardest – such as manufacturing and banking – had been areas where the employment rate of disabled people had been very low to start with.

We know that a disproportionately high number of disabled people work in the public sector, which has grown in size, but we also know that all political parties have committed to reducing employment in the public sector in 2010 and after, to reduce the state deficit. In Britain, therefore, we fear the risk of a significant impact on disabled people's employment has been delayed, but not prevented.

However, unlike in the past, this is not a necessary outcome.

We have worked closely with Government from the start of the recession to try to prevent the reversal of the positive gains that have been made. The steps being taken are important ways to reduce the impact of the recession on disabled workers. For example:

1. A critical task is to ensure that employers are aware that they must not unfairly select disabled employees for redundancy. This is against the law. But it is also bad practice, and bad for business. The Government, the unions and the third sector have been promoting the business case for the employment of disabled people over many years, and there is evidence that many employers – in both the public and private sectors – have understood the message. It has not been so well understood by many smaller employers, and Government aims to target this sector. Raising this awareness is the single most important way to prevent disproportionate misery.
2. A small but important sector of the economy is represented by organisations that provide subsidised employment for severely disabled workers who would be unlikely to find work in open employment. To help these organisations survive the economic crisis, we have urged Government to make maximum use of the state's procurement power, to the

full extent possible in law, to provide work for these enterprises. Where this has not happened, disabled workers have lost their jobs in areas of the country where they cannot easily find alternative employment.

3. The overall disability employment rate conceals many variations according to type of impairment, and in particular, employment rates for workers with mental health issues, or with learning difficulties, have remained extremely low (under 20%). The Government has worked with voluntary sector organisations representing these groups to organise training and information campaigns designed to impact on this deep-rooted discrimination. The unions fully support these campaigns.

Where the disabled person is one of the 50% without work before the recession, or one of those who has now lost their job, they do not have a level playing field with their non-disabled neighbours. The evidence is that it takes longer, and is more difficult, for disabled workers to return to the labour market. Government resources are being put into training and skills programmes to make it easier for unemployed disabled people, along with the long-term unemployed in general, to find new jobs. This is of great importance, because alongside employer prejudices, discrimination for too many people from birth means that a disproportionate number of disabled people have not obtained educational qualifications, and the provision of training to enhance their skills is vital to enabling them to achieve their full potential.

In addition, the unions have campaigned for many years for the Government to change the law that allows employers to ask job applicants about a disability. For example, many employers admit that they will refuse to consider applicants who reveal they have had a mental health issue in the past, even though doing so is illegal. Now, the Government has stated that it will introduce such a clause into new equality legislation currently being considered in Parliament.

The Global Jobs Pact adopted by the ILO establishes important principles that are relevant to the employment of disabled people and can help to end widespread discrimination and exclusion from work. If the Pact is put into practice by states, employers and trade unions, it can help ensure that the impact of unemployment is not borne unfairly by disabled workers, and that the

solutions to economic crisis are carried through in such a way as to ensure that previous bad practices are replaced by a different and better future.

I will conclude with some of the steps that must be taken to help bring about this outcome.

- First, the starting point is recognition that disabled people face many barriers that prevent their full inclusion in society, and that exclusion from work for those who are able to work, with or without adjustments being made, continues to prevent disabled people achieving effective equality. Their continued exclusion is bad for the economy and prevents an inclusive society. This understanding is vital if the position after recovery is to be better than in the past.
- Second, the Decent Work agenda that lies at the heart of the Global Jobs Pact must determine the approach taken by governments and employers in their programmes for recovery from the economic crisis.
- “Decent work” means that inclusion in work must not mean confinement to the lowest paid, most exploited jobs. The false concept that some disabled people are only capable to carrying out menial work must be challenged effectively, and proper skills training made available where needed to disabled workers who are unemployed to qualify them to apply for the best jobs.
- Finally, measures need to be in place to ensure that employers, when recruiting new workers, do not discriminate against disabled workers for fear of possible extra costs or reduced productivity. Evidence confirms that such fears are misguided. A large proportion of disabled workers do not bring any additional costs, nor are they any less productive. Many disabled workers bring with them untapped talent or the benefit of years of experience. Even where it is necessary for the employer to make adjustments (for example, to the workplace or to the job requirements), the final balance sheet is beneficial for everyone concerned. In Britain, state support is available anyway to assist employers with necessary adjustment costs, and the budget is being doubled.

Our experience suggests that the measures need to be both educational, and legal.

Governments prefer the approach of persuading employers to do the right thing, but disabled

people and their representatives, such as trade unions, also need to have a way to enforce their rights.

Thank you.