

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7802>



Britain

Thousands join as Don't Pay campaign gathers steam

- IV Online magazine - 2022 - IV572 - September 2022 -

Publication date: Monday 5 September 2022

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

By next April, the energy price cap in Britain is forecast to go up to as much as £5,500 on average per year. Many households will be left with a choice to make between heating and eating.

Christine Farnish has [recently resigned](#) as a director of the energy regulator Ofgem, saying that she 'could not support' its decision to add thousands of pounds to household bills – and that Ofgem were protecting companies over consumers (surprise surprise). Energy companies and mainstream media outlets have released vacuous posts advising people on how to reduce their energy spending. Ovo Energy has recommended that its customers [cuddle pets for warmth](#) in place of turning on the heating. None of this addresses skyrocketing standing charges, and the fact many people have already taken every step they can to reduce usage. Will we see [more people](#) freeze to death this winter?

No political party has an adequate solution to the crisis. Rishi Sunak's £400 energy discount will be swallowed instantly by October's price rises. And the discount may not even reach those most in need – the cost-of-living support payments for benefits claimants this summer have already hit a stumbling block, with sanctioned claimants [unable to receive the payments](#). Labour's leaders are only suggesting they would [freeze prices](#) until April next year – a useless suggestion since they're not in power, and their other proposed measures would be inadequate to solve the crisis. Now would be a popular time to announce plans for permanent re-nationalisation if they're elected at the next GE. Yet this is something Starmer has repeatedly [ruled out](#).

Campaigns and organisations have taken the lead where politicians have failed, including Don't Pay UK, a grassroots group set up in June 2022 with only a [website](#). The website asks people who pay their energy bills by direct debit to pledge to cancel payments from 1 October to hit energy companies' revenues, forcing action over rising bills.

In July, the campaign made a splash, appearing in large mainstream media outlets like the Daily Mail and Good Morning Britain, as well as spreading through union branches and social movement organisations. Tens of thousands of people signed up to the pledge in the first couple of weeks. The numbers racked up on the website's counter, growing by the minute. The counter now stands at over 110,000 people – and that's only people that pay by direct debit. Tens of thousands more have signed up to support it despite being pay-monthly or pre-payment customers. This week, [a poll by the i newspaper](#) found that more than 70% of the public are aware of campaigns to cancel their direct debit – a tactic mainly being pushed by Don't Pay – with up to 1.7 million people saying they are 'poised' to cancel their direct debit in autumn.

This surge has caused widespread alarm in the energy sector, with Ofgem [coming out](#) to warn people against joining the campaign. Certainly, not paying does carry risks: energy companies can put a 'default' on your credit report (making it hard to get future credit); they can get a warrant to break in and install a pre-payment meter without your permission; they can even disconnect your energy. But these don't all happen within a few weeks of not paying, and there has been a lot of scaremongering. It helps to remember that the consequences are there because the energy suppliers don't want you to stop paying your direct debit – it damages their business model and cashflow. Therefore, not paying collectively has power.

Many people who simply can't pay will have no other choice but to face these consequences. Don't Pay offers them the chance to do this in a crowd, with solidarity, local groups to turn to for mutual aid, and the chance to gain a lobbying voice with the government and energy companies through the leverage of non-payment. Equally, it allows generally better-off direct debit payers to fight collectively for lower prices for everyone, including those on

Thousands join as Don't Pay campaign gathers steam

pre-payment meters who are already 'self-disconnecting' because they can't afford energy.

The campaign has its critics on the left. Some are understandably worried about the risks of debt, and others are concerned that the organisers who started it are not widely visible, which can lead to questions about accountability. There are always difficulties with co-ordinating mass action democratically without existing organisations to work through, and there are always risks to effective collective action. But these problems can be overcome.

Debt advisors, despite understanding the risks, have not been universally opposed to the campaign. There are debt advisors in conversation with Don't Pay: for example, organisers have worked with a debt advisor to produce a [podcast](#) to inform people of the risks of not paying (in England and Wales), so they can make an informed decision about how to participate. A respected industry specialist at Debt Camel has been supportive on social media of the need for informed collective action. Debt advisors know better than most people what the effects of this year's price rises will be if there is no action taken to reduce them: their services are already flooded, with [3.5 million energy accounts](#) already behind on payments.

Though new pledges have slowed slightly this week, Don't Pay has moved into more face-to-face methods of organising to build in local areas and reach people who are not habitually online. Millions of leaflets have been printed and distributed across the UK. I've been leafletting in Manchester, and had an unprecedented response: dozens of passers-by taking leaflets, some saying they've already heard of the campaign, and a diverse range of people asking for piles of leaflets to distribute more widely.

There are now over 250 WhatsApps based on postcodes that have been set up by local people in different postcode areas, with over 5000 organisers in them in total. My local postcode WhatsApp group is active and engaging, and I've already met a load of new people who are working together productively – including some people who haven't done any activism before. I also understand that Don't Pay is currently building towards structures that allow it to act more accountably and collectively.

Even if Don't Pay doesn't reach the million pledges they are aiming for, the potential of the networks it's formed could be massive. Could these groups take part in direct action against debt enforcement across diverse communities? Just as one example, if bailiffs come to fit a prepayment meter, having 20 people in your postcode who could come to peacefully resist would be amazing. This could build on the brilliant work of tenants' unions who carry out [eviction resistance](#) actions, and [anti-raid networks](#) who prevent people from being detained by immigration enforcement.

Even without a strike, the pressure Don't Pay UK has created is driving and shaping a more energised conversation about the cost of living. If the strike goes ahead, the potential is huge.

24 August 2022

Source [rs21](#).

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.