CAMDEN LABOUR BRIEFING

8 March 1988

CARING CUTS 1

CAMDEN MORE TORY THAN THE HIGH COURT

On Monday, 29 Febuary, Camden NALGO won a High Court ruling against their employers, Camden Council, preventing them from carrying out their plans to sack the workforce. Even the judiciary, pillars of the Tory establishment, condemned Camden's heavy-handed tactics as "high confrontation". The judge said the council could have "adopted less draconian measures" and urged them to withdraw their threat to the workforce.

Despite the court ruling, on Wednesday the Director of Housing notified shop stewards of her intention to send out the sacking letters anyway! Letters will go out "congratulating" those people who still have jobs in the new structure, although they will be required to sign the new redeployment contract first.

Those employees who will not have jobs will receive details of 'slotting in' and 'ring fencing' proceedures, and be told that in order to be eligible to apply for their own jobs they must sign the redeployment contract. **This action is in breach of the undertaking Camden gave to the High Court and NALGO are currently pursuing legal action against the Director under contempt of court.**

Victimisation of individual members of staff continues. In one shop alone, staff have been told they cannot take dependents' leave, harassed while at home on sick leave, and told they cannot hold shop meetings to discuss the new proposals.

It seems Camden's blatant disregard for industrial relations and established agreements knows no bounds. They are prepared to defy a High Court order in their efforts to smash trade union organisation in Camden for good. Any commitment to equal opportunities has been disregarded by Camden's 'Labour' administration.

The council leadership were no doubt 'shocked' by the court's decision. *They shouldn't have been.* By sending out the letters they'd ignored their own legal advice, and acted against Hampstead and Highgate CLP who voted that the letters should be withdrawn.

Fran Mason, NALGO Deputy Shop Steward, HPS shop

****

CARING CUTS 2

LIBRARY OCCUPIED AGAINST CLOSURE

50 angry people occupied the St Pancras Reference Library as it was about to finally close on 20th Febuary - victim of Camden's cuts.

Library staff estimate that the Reference Library has 10,000 users per week, and it has always been heavily used by students, particularly from the Third World, as well as by many unemployed people. It also has collections of a regional and national significance. If this facility closes it is clear that NO services are safe.

The occupiers were immediately faced with a bullying management reaction. The Children's and Lending Libraries in the same building were closed to the public under the orders of council leader Dykes. They felt it more important to prevent the reinforcement of our occupation than to allow the public (continued over..

access to their own libraries. Occupiers were locked into the first floor. Management issued threats of personal liability for all expenses incurred.

Despite this, the occupation won strong support and extensive media coverage. With the support of library staff and despite management threats of discipline against any who spoke to the occupiers, several new people were smuggled in to join us.

Management finally evicted the occupiers after four days, fearing the spread of the action to the two threatened branch libraries at Belsize Park and High Holborn. Elderly and less mobile library users at Belsize have let the council know in no uncertain terms that they will take direct action to prevent the loss of the library.

Library staff at the Shaw voted near unanimously to support our occupation, but no complementary industrial action was forthcoming. Wares and Hawkins - respectively Director and Assistant Director of Leisure Services - were able to veil their complete isolation within their own Department by a smokescreen of angry threats.

Kings Cross Labour Party members - slasher Dyke's own ward - played a prominent part in the occupation, and helped to shift the campaign of opposition to library closures to the left. The middle class Public Libraries Users' Group (PLUG) endorsed a much clearer anti-cuts position at its Hampstead mass meeting held whilst the occupation took place.

CARING CUTS 3

REPAIRS SLASHED, RENTS UP

In 1986/7 over £20m was spent on maintenance and decoration of Camden's council housing, and that is excluding the modernisation of a number of council estates. Next year only £11½m will be spent, a 45% cut. If this £9½m cut in the repairs service was reflected in a lower rent to match the lower service, as it should be, *there would be a £5 reduction in rent!*

Instead, the Labour Group decided to raise rents by an average of £3.50 a week. And the council papers contained hints of future large increases. This would allow a steady rise to the level the council will be forced to charge as a result of future changes in the way the government wants councils to set their housing budgets. In other words, the council is preparing to comply with legislation the government hasn't even passed yet.

Council tenants will have to develop a strategy against rent rises and deteriorating maintenance. If Camden's tenants organised a campaign to together not pay the increase, neither the council nor the government could do anything about it. It takes around six months to take any tenant to court for rent arrears. The council and the courts have only the capacity to run about 50 cases a month, and the majority of these are taken up by squatting cases.

It is always in the financial interests of the council to consider squats first, because the council is losing the entire rent and rates and also has to pay for keeping a family in bed and breakfast. The average weekly cost of not gaining possession of a squat is around £330, compared with the £3.50 a council tenant would be with-holding. The council therefore couldn't take action against one medium-sized estate which refused to pay an increase, let alone all its tenants.

The case for a repeat of the 1960 rent strike is there. If tenants are careful in the tactics they use and stand together even in moderate numbers the council doesn't have the legal resources nor the courts sufficient space to be able to defeat the action. The council would then have to meet with its tenants and negotiate a fair rent by consent.

DIARY

12 March: International Women's Day Demo, 11 am, Embankment
14 March: NHS COHSE strike and Day of Action
17 March: FAB public meeting with international speakers, 7.30 pm, ULU, Malet St, WC1
19 March: FAB national demo, 11.30 am, Embankment
8 April: London day of action against Clause 28

NEXT MEETING OF CAMDEN BRIEFING SUPPORTERS:
Monday, 14 March, 8 pm, Camden Town Hall, Euston Rd, NW1

STAYING IN OFFICE MEANS FIGHTING THE TORIES - NOT CAVING IN !

Some people in the Labour Party really believe that nobody supports the position that Camden Briefing has been arguing : that the socialists must fight the cuts to defend the working class in Camden . They believe this by closing their eyes and ears to what is actually going on . In the last two weeks there has been not insignificant events that should open their eyes :

* 400 people packed a meeting organised by PLUG to oppose the cuts in libraries,
* the St Pancras Reference library was occupied,
* 200 parents marched to the Town Hall to oppose cuts in playcentres,
* Camden Fights Back held a meeting with 80 people,
* 90 people attended a meeting against the ILEA cuts,
* 5 000 Nalgo members are still refusing to sign the contracts that Camden is trying to impose,
* the Courts have now restrained the council from imposing the new contracts until a High Court hearing,
* every week there are letters in the local press opposing a particular cut, or expressing support for the "Manifesto" councillors.
* some Tenants Associations are so incensed by an increase in rents and a cut in the repair service that they are discussing a rent strike.

These same people also dismiss "Camden Fights Back" for being irrelevant a "Briefing" front. As a matter of fact, representatives from the Trades Council, ILTA, Nalgo, King's Cross Women's Centre, PLUG, the Nurseries Campaign attend the meetings as well as individual members of NUPE, UCATT and the Labour Party. This does represent a cross-section of the sort of people that socialists should gather together to fight the Tory attacks on local government.

What unites those who attend the "Fight Back" meetings is not a hatred of the Labour Party or the Labour Group, but a genuine desire to fight the Tories and defend the gains of the working class in Camden that have been introduced by the Labour Council. However, "Fight Back" does believe that in order to have a chance of winning the fight against the poll tax, clause 28, the opting out of estates, the abolition of the ILEA, etc... it is necessary to make a stand now . Putting off a challenge to the government over the present round of cuts will only strengthen the Tories .

By caving in now to the Tory imposed cuts, the Labour Group is only breeding cynicism amonsgt those that have supported it in the past : the working class and the oppressed . When the Local Government and Housing Bills becomes law, local councils will have lost complete independance and we will see Labour Councils taking poll tax evaders to court, closing down lesbian & gay units and selling off council estates purely to have the glory of remaining in office ! By refusing to fight, the Labour Group is digging its own grave .

Fred Leplat,

CAMDEN "FIGHTS BACK" MEETS ON THURSDAYS AT 6pm AT THEATRO TECNIS, CROWNDALE ROAD, NW1 . ALL LOCAL ORGANISATIONS ARE INVITED TO AFFILIATE AT A COST OF £5 AND SEND DELEGATES OR OBSERVERS. DETAILS c/o CAMDEN NALGO, TOWN HALL.

'LONDON FIGHTS BACK' CONFERENCE: Saturday, 9 April

CAMDEN FAB meets every Tuesday, 7 pm at Kingsway Princeton College, Sidmouth St, off Grays Inn Rd, WC1. All welcome.

REINSTATE THE MANIFESTO COUNCILLORS!

The Labour Group has removed the whip from the 11 'Manifesto' councillors, preventing them from taking part in Labour Group decision making. They have been expelled because they refused to sign standing orders in isolation from a commitment to implement the manifesto.

Labour candidates for the borough elections in May 1986 signed a declaration that they would abide by Group standing orders and rules, AND would agree to implement the manifesto. That manifesto said: **"We are asking people to vote for Labour on the basis of our commitment to maintain services and jobs and to fight for local democracy. A Labour Council elected on this basis will inevitably find itself in direct conflict with the Tory Government's attempts to control our expenditure. The people of Camden should know that by not complying with central Government's attempt to cut services, Labour councillors may face surcharge and disqualification from the Council.....In this context we will continue to defend and improve local services and defend jobs."** Pretty clear, eh?

Since the general election, the majority of the councillors have gone back on their election promise. They have refused to confront the government in the way that they promised. They have betrayed the working class people who voted Labour so that jobs and services could be safeguarded against further attack from central government.

By excluding from the Group the 11 councillors who stuck for their socialist commitment, the way is now paved for the hard right of the remaining 33 councillors to force a leadership takeover at the Group's elections in May. Dykes, Woods and Fitzgerald may well be replaced by Shaw, Hulme and Smyth.

The 11 have not accepted exclusion from the Group, and have appealed to the National Constitutional Committee. Support for them is crucial as part of a broad fightback campaign. The following model resolution can be used for this purpose:-



This (branch) notes with grave concern the decision of Camden Labour Group to withdraw the whip from 11 Labour councillors. These councillors have been expelled from the Group in order to silence their opposition to cuts in jobs and services.

The 11 represent a strong current of opinion within the Labour Party and trade union movement which is opposed to Labour-controlled authorities carrying out Tory cuts, and which is committed to building resistance to Tory attacks on working class communities and on local democracy.

We call upon Camden Labour Group to immediately reinstate the 11 councillors, recognising that they represent a legitimate position which is shared by many others in the Labour movement and should not be witch-hunted for this. Instead the Labour movement should be holding widespread and well-informed debates with its members and local communities on how to build resistance to the unprecedented attacks by central government.

Send copies to Clr R.Sumray, Labour Group Secretary, Camden Town Hall; Greater London Labour Party Regional Executive, 195 Walworth Road, SE17; and the National Constitutional Committee, 150 Walworth Road, SE17

Camden Labour Briefing, 24 Godwin Court, Crowndale Rd, NW1

Tha[illegible] to the Camden New Journal