CAMDEN LABOUR BRIEFING

NEXT YEAR'S BUDGET -

THE CHOICES FOR THE LABOUR GROUP

Labour group discussion on next year's budget has brought out one thing very clearly. Despite the fudge outcome of last year's ratecapping fight, and the financial deals that have enabled the council to survive thus far, the basic issues have not gone away.

After last year's debacle there is clearly no basis for an illegality strategy this year. That leaves no alternative to the various stopgap stratagems of assorted financial wizardry now on offer. These amount to pawning everything that isn't nailed down, including the Town Hall kitchen sink, and indeed the town hall itself.

But the more we go into hock now, the starker will the choice be in two or three years - whatever Government is in power, as the Labour Front Bench are pointedly refusing any promises to restore the Tory cuts in Rate Support Grant.

Sooner or later, the choice will have to be made between the only two real alternatives. Either we stand firm against the cuts, alongside Camden people and the council unions, against the City and any Government that will not give Camden back its money. Or we make cuts, which means attacking Camden people and council employees.

Some may secretly have accepted that the second is the only real alternative. The Left must ensure that it is not.

First a real propaganda offensive must be launched, together with other similarly affected councils, to make the Labour Front Bench spokespeople, Cunningham and Straw, state just what their policy will be on making good Tory cuts.

At the moment the only pledge they have given is that Ratecapping and direct capital controls will go.

But without a pledge to scrap the Tory system of 'clawback' which has robbed Camden of all its Rate Support Grant, this could mean rate increases of up to £7 a week or more.

The irony is that councils like Camden are being penalised for implementing Kinnock's strategy. 'Stay in office at all costs - even a dented shield is better than no shield at all' said the leadership at the time of the ratecapping fight.

But when they are asked to foot the bill for their own strategy, they refuse, and act as if Labour Councils were doing something unspeakably extreme by implementing the leadership's own slogan!

Meanwhile, Hattersley is urging Labour councils to draw up investment and spending plans now to help create the '1m jobs in two years' that Labour promises. Are we meant to sack staff now, and tell them to come back in two years when we can create 'new' jobs for them to count towards Roy's million?

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Second, there must be a halt to all attempts to import Murdoch-style tactics into the council's own industrial relations. The daft motion to exclude trade union observers from Labour Group meetings whenever any group of council workers anywhere is involved in a dispute must be reversed at once, and the self-publicising would-be Rambos responsible for it must be told to keep their mitts off the council's industrial relations.

The council must continue to show itself ready to tackle the appalling managements and procedures that lie at the back of recent disputes, and stick to the strategy of unity of the Labour Group, the unions and the community against the cuts, instead of the suicidal macho 'divide-and-rule' anti-union methods being peddled by some on the right-wing of the group.

Steve Marks (Hampstead & Highgate)

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MONDAY 1st DECEMBER, 8pm

Committee Room 2, Camden Town Hall . All supporters of Camden Labour Briefing welcome . For further details, phone Fred on 387 1361 or Fran on 431 0357