THE POLICE CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE- Join the Lobby of the Labour Group on Feb. 23rd

On January 22nd the initial meeting of the Police Consultative Committee in Camden was picketed by NALGO, Camden Printworkers, City AA, Camden Council for Community Relations, Camden Unemployed, Black Workers Group, King's Cross Women's Centre, gay and lesbian groups, and Briefing. In probably the largest gathering of concerned groups since rate-capping, approximately 150 people met outside the Camden Centre, to be joined by some 50 police who 'consulted the community' by shoving people around while escorting councillors, community 'representatives' and their fellow officers into the meeting. Among those who crossed the picket line were Labour councillors Ken Hulme, Ben Griffiths, Alan Rippington, Janet Pope, Barbara Hughes, Robert Latham, Mary Cane, and Tony Dykes.

It's unclear who called the police. It could have been the police themselves who wanted to make sure that, for their purposes, the meeting would go uninterrupted; or it could have been one of the councillors (it would not have been the first time that the Labour group has called the police to deal with a demonstrative public). In any case, an attempt was made to arrest a black woman, but the police were quickly surrounded, and they had little choice but to let her go.

Particularly provocative was Councillor Ken Hulme in his attempt to break through what was an official NALGO picket line. So extreme was his behavior that it prompted one person, who had never encountered this rambo of the right, to mistake Hulme for a member of the National Front. In his mindless attempt to get into the meeting, it's reported that Hulme assaulted four women on the picket line, to which women responded by chanting throughout the evening, 'Ken Hulme abuses women.' As though in a haze of valium, Hulme did not appear to be conscious enough to know what they were talking about.

Only a fraction calmer was Councillor Robert Latham, who, brandishing his 'soft centre' briefcase, screamed that he was carrying out the manifesto. This sound and fury, in fact, signified nothing. Not only had the manifesto stated that Camden would participate in the Consultative Committee on a trial basis- that year having ended in December, up to which time the Committee had not held a meeting- but the basis on which it was included in the manifesto was both questionable and controversial (both GC's, LGC, Borough Conference, and community groups were against participation). It's quite likely that it was only upon hearing that Councillor Adrian States, vice chair of the Police Sub-committee, was planning to raise the issue again, that the meeting was suddenly arranged even though NALGO had said they would not service it- a legitimate position since the proposed position of Clerk to the Committee, though working in the Town Hall, would be paid by, and accountable to, the Home Office and not the Council.

Given Camden's schizophrenic attitude towards trade unions (last year they passed a resolution, moved by Hulme, saying that t.u.'s should not be present at group meetings when there's a dispute against one or more councillors- since rarely a day goes by when there isn't a dispute of some kind, this would have meant that t.u.'s would have had to declare themselves politically impotent before they would be allowed to attend another group meeting. Fortunately, there was enough pressure from the party to force the group to change their policy), perhaps the actions of these councillors isn't all that surprising. Yet here were councillors attempting to walk over the very people who supported them during rate-capping, and who they will need in any fight against privitisation, just so they could attend a meeting that would allow them to indulge in the cosmetics of consultation.

Once the collaboraters got through the picket line- the blind leading the blind through an aisle formed by the police- there wasn't much to do, so it was decided that we should leave the police to stroke their truncheons while we moved inside to put our views to the meeting. After all, if the police were going to knock us around they might as well do it in full view of the Committee. Once inside, a woman remarked, 'Surprise, surprise, there's not a single black person on the committee.' It was, of course, true. There were also precious few women, no disabled people, and it was apparent that the number of police officers, not counting those in plainclothes, were only slightly outnumbered by Labour councillors. Barbara Hughes told us that Westminster(!) had set up a Consultative Committee and that the ethnic minorities in that borough were very satisfied with it. Picking up on this elementary error in logic- 40,000 frenchmen- a woman in the back shouted, 'Yes, Barbara, so it must obviously be right for the people of Camden.

Another woman said, with reference to the advertisement for the Consultative Committee that appeared in the local papers last December, 'Where's the creche you promised? Where's the access for the disabled?' A black comrade held up a placard- 'Who killed Cynthia Jarrett? Who shot Cherry Groce?'- adding, 'These are the real questions that this committee won't answer.' At which time another woman shouted, 'And who raped Jackie Berkeley?' Whenever anyone on the committee attempted to say something, someone in the gallery had something better, and more intelligent, to say. It was reminiscent of the rate-capping meetings that had taken place next door.

Though someone in the audience nominated God, Barbara Hughes was somehow elected chair. Tony Dykes nervously tried to convince everyone of his good intentions. He passed around a piece of paper concerning the number of Camden police used at Wapping. Hadn't anyone told Tony about 'operational matters' which Consultative Groups are not allowed to speak about? While Hulme was glumly silent, Latham yelled at the women from King's Cross, 'And who did you go to for protection when you were being attacked? It was the Labour group...' Though everyone was impressed by the power of his voice, it wasn't the most convincing arguement, and I think it's safe to say that none of the women's minds were changed by the force of Latham's blunt, and paternalistic, invective.

A man on the Committee said he represented the elderly in the borough, who were

frightened to walk the streets at night. He was countered by a woman in her late 50's who said that elderly people in Camden were as frightened of the police as anything else. Another woman questioned the man's right to elderly women. Others spoke, including representatives from the Labour Party. A gay man said that the gay community had no faith in, nor respect for, the police, and that, amongst gays, the Committee had no support. Interestingly enough, the clerk made no attempt to minute anything the public said, an interesting point since Barbara Hughes, in a meeting with NALGO, had assured everyone that the community, and not the police, would control the Consultative Committee. In fact, no one gave, nor has anyone ever given, a single good reason why Camden should participate in the Committee. Likewise, there has never been any evidence that any borough's participation has produced positive results.

The meeting lasted around forty minutes, much to the relief of the bewildered Tories, Barbara Hughes, and the police who were still waiting for us outside. After the meeting we spoke to a man from a Tenant's Association who, with the best intentions, had been beguiled into thinking the Committee was an opportunity to discuss important matters with the police. He had no idea he was stepping into a hornet's nest. We had the distinct impression that this would be both his first and last meeting.

Likewise, those with perhaps more political acumen than that particular person had also underestimated the strength of feeling in the community on the subject of the Committee. Many thought only a handful of pickets would show up, forgetting that for oppressed groups policing is a bread and butter issue. While councillors are stuck in the Town Hall, caught in a maze of figures and meetings, they often forget that there is another world outside the council chamber.

Significantly, neither Frank Dobson, MP for Holborn-St Pancras, nor Phil Turner, PPC for Hampstead-Highgate, showed up to attend or protest the meeting. But in an article in the following day's Evening Standard, Dobson was quoted as saying that he has refused to take part in Camden's Committee- so much for the unity that some Holborn-St Pancras councillors claim to have on the subject. Meanwhile, Phil Turner, who voted for participation at his branch meeting, most likely stayed away in order to see which way the wind was blowing- a particular skill that parliamentary candidates seem to cultivate. Back at the Town Hall, Tony Dykes was overheard to say that Thursday evening had been the worst moment in his political 'career'(?); while, Nalgo officers are writing to complain about the councillors behaviour. The following week, the Chief Exec, after claims by Hulme and Hughes that they had been assaulted on the picket line, began disciplinary action against two senior NALGO workers for organising the picket and going against council policy. During the same week, though Holborn-St Pancras voted, at their GC, to continue participating in the Committee, Hampstead-Highgate GC voted to withdraw, a view that was confimed at Borough Conference on January 21st.

So the ball is back in the court of the Labour group. If there is another meeting, it will doubtlessly be picketed by even more people. For the residents of Camden- particularly those who are up against the police- don't get any special pleasure out of sitting

around with police officers who, as the saying goes, keep their iron fists concealed within their velvet gloves whenever it suits them. It was obvious that the police tape recorders were more efficient than the selectively deaf clerk in noting what was being said. Yet the people present were adamant in their desire to have an accountable police service- one that will not harass blacks, gays, lesbians, and working class people. They wanted assurances that plastic bullets and CS gas would never be used in this borough. But they know that none of this can be accomplished through the Consultative Committee. It's very difficult to have a rational conversation with someone who's just hit you over the head. What looked like a marginal issue has become a priority item on the political agenda for the people of Camden. The Labour Party should take notice before it's too late.

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