Lewisham LABOUR
BRIEFING

VOLUME 2 - No. 2 SUMMER 1989

Debate: Should we stand for the Council?

Councillors Should be Shop Stewards for the Community

Is there a role for socialists in local government? More specifically, is there a role where the left is in a minority on the Council?

We believe there is a role for socialists in the Council, and that this role can be identified by differentiating between a perspective which sees Councillors a business managers of local services or an alternative which we could liken to being shop stewards of the local community.

As socialists, our aim is to transform society. Given the collapse of the struggle against ratecapping, and the consequences of the 1987 General Election defeat, the question of whether there is still a point in socialists standing for the Council is a difficult one.

An outline of an answer we believe is that:

Firstly, Councillors have an important role in supporting external struggles such as those against the Poll Tax and Rail Link. Their public position offers an opportunity to make propaganda for, faciliatate building support and give leadership to such campaigns. This work is not an adjunct to debates in the Labour Group or Council Chamber but is an inseparable part of being a Councillor. as, of course, is dealing with peoples problems and trying to get answers from Council Officers - like shop stewards dealing with union members' complaints.

The focus of activity for Lewisham's socialist Councillors cannot exclusively be the Town Hall. We should be listening to reports from the picket line, the advice surgery, from demonstrations and meetings where our councillorsare supporting struggles in the community against sexism, racism, cuts and closures. These issues should be taken into the Council chamber just as we argue

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Next Meeting

What's Our Strategy for
LEWISHAM COUNCIL 1990?
SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 3RD
5.00-7.00pm
Lewisham Labour Club
Limes Grove

for the Parliamentary Labour Party to do the same - to unite all our work in the labour movement and the community.

The kind of Labour Party branches we want to create are militant, vibrant, always looking to the community, turning themselves out to the day to day struggles going on and bringing these back to the political arena of the Labour Party as well as trying to offer political ideas, solutions, discussion and dialogue.

These are really the only kinds of branches it is worth considering Council candidates in - so that Councillors can be using their position as an integral part of the struggle to change society - like shop stewards of the community.

Within this framework we don't believe Councillors should vote themselves out of the Labour Group at every available opportunity - rather they should use their vote tactically. Of course, it is more than possible that the leadership will try to expel socialists from the Labour Group and the Labour Party over the next few years. We do, however, believe that the framework outlined here is the only way forward and for Councillors to support this struggle within andbeyond the Party is in the best and most militant tradition.

Jon Rogers & Mark Sapsford

Your Views

A straw poll of a cross section of active Party members, some of whom are Council workers, showed a surprising (well, it surprised me!) level of support for standing Labour Councillors next year. Years of Tory attacks and Labour sell-outs don't seem to have destroyed the belief that there is a role for socialists as elected representatives of local people. Here's what was said to the questions * Should we stand Labour candidates for the Council? and if yes, * What should their priorities be?

+ "Yes - but only if they're truly accountable to their local ward and the people who elected them" - Party activist & Council worker

+ "Hither Green, my own ward, should definitely stand left Councillors next time. Three years hard work with community groups & tenants has been based on them believing we'll put their interests before that of the Council and Labour Group when necessary; and that we'll stick to our manifesto promises. But I don't think Labour Councillors should stand where they don't have the support of their branch." - Councillor

+ "My gut reaction is yes....but I haven't really thought it through." New member and Council worker

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Writeback!

Thanks to those who made donations following our last issue. Please send donations (payable to Labour Briefing) and especially articles and letters by end of September to:
Lesley Lee
8, Harvard Rd,
London SE13 6SF

+ "Councillors should stand to be shop stewards for the local community." Active Party member

+ "Yes, and they should concentrate on housing and social services" - Party member

+ "The reason socialists should stand for the Council is to maintain the fight against both the Tories and the reactionary policies of the Labour leadership on all fronts - rent rises on a Council estate in Lewisham are as important as the struggle for a socialist incomes policy" - active Party member

+ "Left Councillors have had a rough ride over recent years with threats of expulsion for arguing for policies which keep faith with election manifedsos and voting against policies which lead to unacceptable cuts in services. The situation for 1990 and beyond is even bleaker, especially with the introduction of poll tax. The continuation of the fight for services which actually meet the needs of local people needs Left Councillors who have the strong support of their wards and strong links with the local community." - Labour Councillor

Well, I'm still not completely convinced - and there's a lot of other questions still to address, such as where will the socialist candidates come from, what should the campaign priorities be, etc....which leads us, entirely by chance, into a plug for the meeting in Lewisham on local government this year:

Lesley Lee

Sunday September 3rd, 5.00-7.00pm,
Lewisham Labour Club, Limes Grove,
"Strategy for Lewisham Council 1990"

Strike News

Please find below details of the NUJ strike at Pergamon Press, where two Briefing supporters are amongst the 23 on strike

On Wednesday May 24th, 23 members of the Pergamon Press NUJ chapel were sacked for staging a one-day strike.

The strike was the culmination of a 5-month dispute which started when the company sacked an NUJ member without going through any agreed procedures.

When the NUJ put the sacking into dispute we were told that the sacked member had no right to be represented by the union because the NUJ was recognised only in the Journals Production Department. This meant that two-thirds of the chapel, the members working in the Books Editorial and Marketing Departments, were effectively derecognised and denied the right to union representation.

The NUJ waited for 5 months before calling the chapel out on strike. During those 5 months, every possible avenue for securing a resolution to the dispute was explored and exhausted. The General Secretary, Harry Conroy, tried to intervene in the dispute, as did the local MP for Oxford East, Andrew Smith. All to no avail. At one point negotiations with the Managing Director of Pergamon Press brought us within touching distance of an agreeement. Then suddenly he disappeared. The union never heard from him again, and our dispute was put in the hands of powers greater than himself, based at Maxwell's headquarters in London. They told us that there was nothing to negotiate and reiterated an earlier threat that we would all be sacked if we went on strike.

The chapel was then faced with the choice of giving in to Maxwell's union-bashing or go on strike and be sacked. We chose - overwhelmingly - to go on strike. Not because we wanted to make some heroic gesture, but because we felt that our most basic right to collective organisation was being challenged, and we had no choice but to defend it.

We are now on indefinite strike to secure reinstatement for all sacked members, recognition for the union throughout the company, and compensation for our sacked member.

PERGAMON NUJ CHAPEL

In a decade which has seen escalating attacks on the trade union movement as a whole, during which period individual unions have been picked off one by one, our decision to stand firm in the face of bully-boy tactics has implications even beyond the publishing industry. But we cannot win alone.

WAYS IN WHICH YOU CAN HELP

1. Get your Trade Union/Labour Party/Student Union to pass a resolution supporting the strike, and write to Robert Maxwell (Pergamon Press, Headington Hill Hall, Oxford, OX3 0BW). Send us a copy.

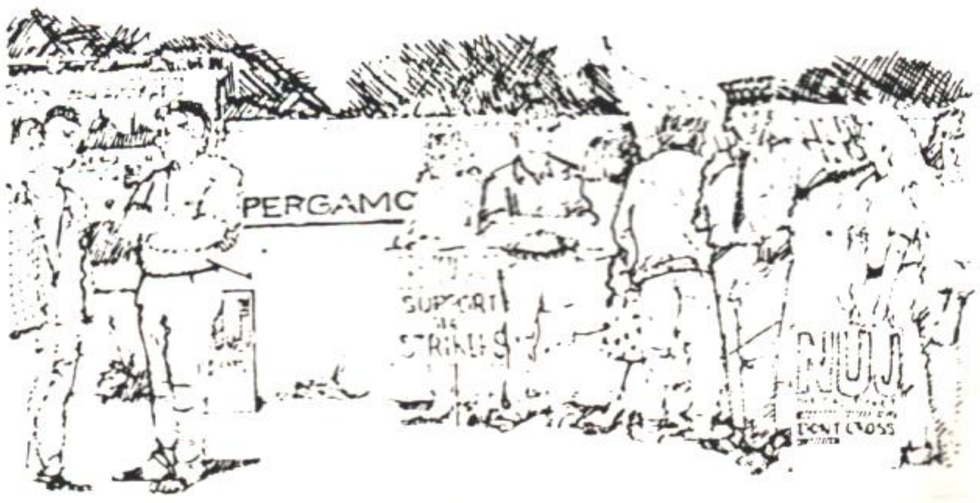
2. Send messages of support to the chapel.

3. Don't handle or buy Pergamon books or journals for the duration of the strike.

4. Money - we need a good regular income in order to continue carrying out the campaigning work necessary to win the strike. Please ask your TU/LP/SU to help (regular donations are much appreciated). Cheques should be made payable to "NUJ Pergamon Press Chapel" and sent to Jim Boumelha (address below) or money can be transferred direct to our account (Lloyds Bank A/C 0117299, sorting code 30-12-51).

It is imperative that this strike is won. Not just because our jobs are at stake but because such failure of the labour movement to protect its rights can only lead to the annihilation of any meaningful employee protection in Pergamon and will also encourage other anti-trade union employers to go on the attack. A victory for us, however, would be a victory for the whole trade union movement.

Please support us in any way you can.



fighting for workers' rights

Printed and published by Pergamon Press NUJ Chapel
c/o 60 Cricket Road, Oxford, OX4 7DQ Tel. 0865 819162

Poll Tax - Where Next?

The poll tax article in the last 'Lewisham Labour Briefing' laid down an excellent basis for campaigning against the tax. I'd like to put forward some ideas for campaigning over the next six months before the demands for payment are made.

Firstly, why are we campaigning against registration? Mainly to establish a layer of people who are prepared to break the law. If we can get - say - 20% or 30% of people to refuse to register, and thus refuse to pay, then along with the thousands who can't afford to pay, we can stop the implementation of the tax.

The Scottish experience shows that in areas where non-registration campaigns were fought (eg Pollockshields in Glasgow) compared to those where simple publicity campaigns were run (eg Govan), as many as 50% of people aren't paying the tax. This brings us to the second reason for the non-registration campaigns - laying the political feeling of collective solidarity amongst people opposed to the tax now so that it will be held throughout the payment period of April/May 1990.

To sustain the campaigns between now and then, we have to break with tradition and use media stunts to get over to people who won't go to public meetings or readily read political leaflets. So the burning of the forms has led to a realisation amongst individuals that there is a collective campaign of people opposed to the poll tax. The Councillors who have burned their forms and the Labour Club have been phoned up by others wanting to join the burnings following the press reports.

We have re-established Saturday stalls in Lewisham High St to regularly get over to people the strength of the local campaign, answer enquiries and provide a focus for those not registering or paying. We need more activities like the picket of Midsummer Computers at Drake House which originated with the voluntary sector NALGO members; the localised public meetings which build up 'street reps' and do draw in new people; and the consistent leafletting and postering that show people they are part of a mass resistance. We now need a regular newsletter going out to the thousand people pledged not to pay in Lewisham.

Our bases in a number of tenants' associations need to be extended, we need more contacts with students at Goldsmiths and SELTEC, and student nurses at the hospitals. Above all, we need to firm up our support in NALGO and the Town Hall unions with a commitment not to work on fining people for non-registration or non-payment by deducting money from housing benefit, salaries, etc.

Our elected representatives have a role to play in using their positions as Councillors or MPs to provide a public stand against the tax, as many have already done. Briefing supporters need to ensure that candidates for next year's Council elections are selected on the basis of 'non-payment' and that the newly selected council candidates become fully involved in the campaign.

We need to build anti-poll tax campaigns in the parts of Lewisham not already covered by the 10 or 12 local groups already affiliated to Lewisham Anti-Poll Tax Union. Has your ward or estate got a campaign? Without a serious base in the community, the campaign will not have a consistent effect across the Borough. And without the community pressure, the local government and DSS trade unions we are asking to take solidarity action in not providing information and not implementing fines will not have the confidence to take action.

Victory in the anti-poll tax campaign is there for the taking. At Lewisham Peoples Day the poll tax unit resorted to cash prize quizzes to get people to fill in forms with their names and addresses on (so they could register them too!). It needs serious work on estates and in unions, with street stalls, meetings, posters in your windows and publicity actions - lets seize the best chance available to defeat the Tories and the 'abide by the law' Kinnock leadership. Without these mass campaigns outside, the Labour Party will never change course.

Kevin Flack

Join Lewisham Anti-Poll Tax Union
Write to PO Box 574, London, SE4 1DL