LONDON LABOUR
BRIEFING
40p
No 66 DEC 10 - JAN 14 1987



PHOTO: Sarah Saunders, Wandsworth Photo Co-op

Crisis in the DHSS

November saw a series of rolling strikes in the DHSS by CPSA and SCPS members, centring on a number of hard pressed inner city offices in South London.

By Howard Fuller
SCPS

These strikes are a reflection of the crisis developing in the DHSS, as unemployment and poverty have increased under the Tories to the point where resources allocated to benefit offices have been far outstripped by demand.

This has brought considerable hardship to a large number of claimants who have had to wait weeks for their benefit payments. Civil Service trade unions have been demanding extra staff to deal with the huge backlog of work that has resulted. But DHSS management see the solution as *decreasing* the staff!

Chris MacDonald (manager of the DHSS London South region) has proposed transferring claims to offices outside London, and turning London offices into Emergency offices only, run by a mere handful of staff.

His argument is based on the difficulty of recruiting and retaining staff in London offices (the DHSS has a very high turnover) in recent years. He argues further that there is a "poor quality" of staff in London and the DHSS would be able to recruit a "higher standard" in outlying areas.

This is of course exactly the opposite to what is required in Inner City areas! The CPSA and SCPS correctly argue that there should be a huge increase in the number of staff and new offices opened to deal with the problem, otherwise claimants would have their access to the benefit system severely restricted.

Twenty-seven offices across London took action against these proposals, culminating in a lively picket of DHSS headquarters at the Elephant and Castle. But this can only represent the beginning of a concerted effort by the Civil Service

Continued on back page

SAVE LONDON'S TRANSPORT SYSTEM!

By Maria Eagle
Capital Transport Campaign

After two years of Government control, Londoners now have the worst level of service on the buses in London Transport history.

Overcrowding and destaffing on the tubes is causing major problems with safety and security and the workers in all London Regional Transport divisions and subsidiaries are facing the worst assault on their jobs, wages and conditions in living memory.

Yet public transport comes low on Labour's political agenda even though millions of people depend on it absolutely for their mobility.

CAPITAL, an organisation of transport users and workers, believes this to be shortsighted and it is something activists must strive to change before the election. The GLC proved the popular appeal of boosting public transport as well as the good sense of cutting fares and improving services.

Public transport in London is now a business. Making profits is the aim. LRT comply with enthusiasm when ordered to cut revenue support. It has been cut in half (to £95 million). Additionally £27 million allegedly "not needed" was given back to the government. Meanwhile, LRT are increasing fares and slashing services whilst using the threat of tendering and privatisation to sack workers and lower their wages and conditions.

There are bus cuts every three or four months. 80% of route mileage is now one person operated. Some fares have increased by over 50%. LRT are 1,000 drivers short so services are deliberately not run. Things are set to worsen.

On the tube a 65% increase in passengers has resulted in only a 3% increase in services. The Circle, District, East London and Metropolitan lines have lost guards whilst 65 stations have lost station staff. (London Underground Limited are just removing staff from 75 more stations.)

Apart from straight job losses (3,880 in the last year), tendering and privatisation are the main threats to workers. With over 60 bus routes and most support services now tendered out, the downward pressure on wages and conditions is huge.

The bus engineers and inside staff, catering workers and the builders all have simmering disputes any of which could blow open into a wider conflict.

LRT Builders, the direct labour building and maintenance section of LRT have just announced 470 jobs losses out of the remaining workforce of 800. This would leave just a quarter of the workforce of a year ago. The workers are fighting this virtual shutdown and will ballot for action in January. Claims that management handed back £3 million of work won through tendering have been admitted by LRT.

In their annual pay negotiations this year, bus workers were faced with the prospect of wage cuts of up to £40 a week, the first time management have proposed a cut for over 50 years. They were fought off this year by the threat of all out action, still a powerful one, but the pressure next year will be even greater.

In the face of these wide-ranging assaults, activists should support local groups campaigning to save bus routes, support the pensioners when they campaign for their pass, urge Councils to take a greater interest and give support to workers fighting for their jobs and conditions, but we can do more.

Within the Labour Party, we should push for public transport to become a greater priority. It is hard to envisage it sinking any lower. It was the last item on the agenda at Conference and the policy statement, described as "woefully weak" by the TGWU, was only a draft.

Since then the transport portfolio has been dropped from the shadow cabinet. Unless the priority is increased, the prospect of an incoming Labour government reviving public transport is not great.

We owe it to those who rely on public transport, and they are the people for whom Labour traditionally fights, to make it an issue, both in London and in the Party nationally.

For further details of the Capital Transport Campaign, write to Headland House, 308 Grays Inn Road, London WC1, phone 833 3719.

LABOUR—TAKE THE POWER!

Hammersmith & Fulham

Charity stunts while services suffer

A bourgeois Christian reading the local papers would have nothing but praise for Hammersmith and Fulham Council.

Dominating the headlines are the laudable selfless activities of the Labour Mayor "our Joan" and her charity appeal to send disadvantaged children to Disneyland.

By Ian Harrison
Hammersmith & Fulham council



PHOTO: David Bruce

Back-sliding by Labour Leader Gordon Prentice

A fireworks party, a fashion show and the bi-partisan spectacle of councillors abseiling down the Town Hall add to the fun and raise hundreds of pounds for charity.

But the other side of the Council, 6 months after the election, is experienced every day by thousands of working class people trying to get a Council flat, repairs or social services help — and being told they have to wait.

Limited growth

The waiting is a backlog from 8 years of Tory-Liberal cuts but, instead of recognising the crisis measures needed, the new Labour leaders of the Borough have voted for limited growth until the election of a Labour government, and the easing of restrictions on local authority spending.

Hammersmith & Fulham *Briefing* group have voted to support the Labour councillors who refused to go to committees and cut back on commitments. The left is quite clearly opposed to the Group policy of expenditure restraint and supports the efforts of those who have resigned from committees to reverse cuts in growth on front-line services.

Some comrades on the left chose not to resign, hoping to be in a stronger position to oppose cuts as chairs or vice-chairs of committees. But cuts in growth are now being imposed, despite back-handers from the Group leadership of limited extra allocations as rewards to those who stayed on.

The debate on resignation tactics is now over. Those on the left who chose not to resign or attacked the resignations in the local Tory press should now join with the majority of the left in seeking to reverse cuts on specific items rather than being dragged into the trap of serving the right's purpose by attacking those comrades who did resign.

Marginalised

If we are marginalised, it will not be because we resigned — holding office without power is of little value — but because our former allies vote against us when we try to reverse cuts. Hopefully they will not do this but will put tactical differences aside and help build a campaign in the parties and the Labour Group for the sort of policies *Briefing* stands for on the whole range of issues where the parties are drifting rightwards. This means support not just for the left in the Labour Group but also for black comrades trying to establish black sections, and *Militant* comrades threatened with expulsion.

It is time we realised that the agenda has been set by the right for too long. Our agenda is not the charity ball and the pat excuses. Our concern is the struggle of the oppressed to gain what is rightfully theirs here and now.

Unite

By starting to hold regular meetings and to produce a local newsletter Hammersmith and Fulham *Briefing* Group hopes to unite those comrades who agree on this political perspective in a campaign for radical socalist policies in opposition to the Kinnockite policies of the Group leadership and the present right-wing majority in the Hammersmith and Fulham parties.

Once more from Hammersmith & Fulham

Dear comrade,

As you will be aware the argument among Hammersmith & Fulham *Briefing* supporters about the tactics to be pursued by councillors has become somewhat acrimonious and distinctly uncomradely of late, and has spilled over into the pages of *Briefing* itself.

There are a number of reasons for this, and both sides must take their share of the blame. But the resignations that precipitated this crisis happened nearly two months ago and it has been clear for some time that neither side is going to convince the other of the correctness of its tactics. Only time will tell.

It is long overdue for us to put this episode behind us — the two groups will have to work out their own strategies and test them in practice. In the meantime there is urgent work to be done on issues that we *can* all agree on. Our dissarray has given the right a field day, and they have not been slow to take their chance! Already there are moves within the Fulham Party to expel GC members who sell *Militant*. Although I have profound disagreements with both the politics and the organisational methods of *Militant* we should be under no illusions as to the threat that this poses to the left in Fulham CLP.

The campaign to save the West London Hospital is another area where we all agree, as is the campaign to get the council to appoint a Nuclear Free Zones officer. In short, there is no shortage of issues within the borough where we can agree to take united action — and where urgent action is needed.

The issues raised in this debate *are* important — but they are issues of tactics. The real problem is that we did not have this debate *before* comrades stood as councillors — then perhaps we could have presented a more united front (so to speak!) when the issues came to a head. Perhaps the biggest lesson is for comrades who are councillors in other boroughs — you must debate and discuss these issues as early as possible, comrades.

The issues faced by comrades in Hammersmith & Fulham are not unique to our borough — a Kinnock tendency council leadership and a hostile central government. Neither is the resulting split a result of some peculiar psychological deficiency on the part of the left in Hammersmith & Fulham! It reflects to a large extent the fragmentation and disarray of the left on a national level.

I would appeal to all the comrades on the left in Hammersmith & Fulham to make an effort to start working together again. This is not to say that we should not discuss our differences, but that they should not be allowed to push out all the other possibilities of fighting back.

Alan Lenton

Hammersmith & Fulham Briefing resolution

Hammersmith and Fulham *Briefing* Group fully endorses the decision by five councillors to resign from positions on the Council and in the Labour Group in protest against the Group decision on allocations to individual committees.

While *Briefing* regrets the fact that other comrades did not also resign as they had threatened to do if the full budget was not agreed, *Briefing* does not condemn comrades for failing to resign from positions on committees which have been given what they had asked for.

On the other hand it does condemn comrades who have retained or taken on positions on committees and have then cut the spending programme for 1987/88 by rephasing certain items of expenditure.

The *Briefing* Group calls on councillors who claim to be *Briefing* supporters and other councillors who claim to be on the left to give full support to any efforts designed to restore budgets in 1987/88 to the levels which were originally requested or to restore the budgets on individual items to the levels originally agreed by the committees.

End of Year Report from Hammersmith & Fulham Labour Briefing

Hammersmith & Fulham *Briefing* has been meeting regularly since early Spring this year, often with two meetings a month, and more than sixty different comrades have attended. Notices, distributed at GCs and published in *Briefing* have attracted comrades from other parts of London. An active core of some 12 comrades now sell *Labour Briefing* regularly and one of the next discussions we are to have is how best to organise the potentially large sales team we can muster.

By Steve Cowan
Hammersmith & Fulham Labour Briefing

Our supporters hold key positions in the Labour Group, LGC, wards, Socialist Societies and on Management Committees. It is no exaggeration to claim that the *Briefing* current is identified as the sole challenger to the extreme right in the Fulham CLP as well as to the group that clings to office in the Hammersmith CLP. In the next years *Briefing* intends to organise to make gains in a number of wards as well as on the LGC.

Patronage

Campaigning work in the area indubitably begins with one or more *Briefing* supporters, as our comrades are not ossified in the structures of patronage and position seeking within the CLP machinery nor within the Labour Group.

Evidence of this has been the readiness of some supporters to resign from Labour Group positions on a point of principle. This action can not be taken to indicate a strategy of withdrawal from working within the Labour Group, as some comrades remain in leading positions, but has re-opened a number of serious lines for debate.

Next year

Next year we will consider how to develop from the successful **Save West London Hospital** campaign. With several marginal and target seats in West London *Briefing* supporters will be leading health service campaigns. Our supporters set up the branch of the Socialist Health Association, which meets at least monthly and which has made several valuable interventions in local health issues.

With a crop of Labour controlled and hung councils elected in the area since May, progress ought to be made on peace campaigning. Are Hounslow, Ealing, Brent, Hammersmith and Hillingdon Nuclear Free Zones? Will they co-ordinate their library services to establish a powerful base for peace publications? Will these Borough Councils lead an inquiry into nuclear trains in their areas?

Deterioration

The deterioration in public transport, especially buses, since the end of the GLC is felt throughout the borough. *Briefing* will be contacting transport workers unions and commuter groups to raise questions about the incompetence and politics of the present right wing mangement of LRT.

Briefing will also raise the thorny issue of how we in the relatively safe Labour Seats of Fulham and Hammersmith can assist adjacent CLPs where much ground still has to be made from the Tories, challenging the mind-boggling parochialism of both Fulham and Hammersmith CLPs. For some it would appear that international solidarity stops at the boundaries of the old Borough Councils.

Prospects

The prospects for a thriving *Briefing* supporters group in Hammersmith and Fulham are good. Our next meeting will be at the Town Hall, King Street, Hammersmith on December 18th, at 7.30pm. Comrades from other parts of London are always more than welcome. At the meeting there will be reports from the CLP Women's Section and from the newly formed Hammersmith & Fulham Labour Party Black Section.

Gill provokes anti-apartheid storm

The East London anti-apartheid conference on November 1st was disrupted by three supporters of the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group, protesting at Ken Gill, General Secretary of TASS, being invited to speak.

By Ian Millichap
Hackney North CLP

TASS has withdrawn funding for David Kitson's post at Ruskin College despite promising while he was imprisoned in South Africa that it would fund the post for life. The reason for the TASS action was Kitson's refusal to disassociate himself from the City of London AA whose campaigning led to his release.

Stewards eventually seized the 3 people by their arms and legs and marched them off to the back of the hall where the arguing continued throughout Ken Gill's speech.

Many people were shocked at the unnecessary violence used but all appeals for the conference to vote on hearing a speaker form the City of London AA were turned down — it would interfere with the busy timetable.

Ironically, in the final session, following continued pressure, the conference organisers gave in and — with half the delegates having left — allowed a vote, which they won.



PHOTO: Paul Mattson/Frame

Nelson Mandela's 68th birthday picket, South Africa House.

The remainder of the sessions were dominated by speakers, allowing little debate, discussion, or working out strategy to build anti-apartheid in East London.

But direct links were debated; and Dianne Abbott, saying apartheid's days were numbered in the face of the people's struggle, also pointed out how Black youth in Britain identify with the struggle of Black youth in South Africa.

The anti-apartheid movement cannot fight apartheid without confronting racism in this country.

Travellers: no apartheid solutions!

Cramped, overcrowded, and polluted by petrol fumes, the Westway travellers site is a disgraceful monument to state and Council racism.

Between and beneath slip roads of the M41 and A40 motorways, the site has 20 bays, each supposedly for one family. Each bay has a facility block with a toilet, shower, and a sink unit for washing and kitchen useage alike. The sewerage system is inadequate, and often flows back and floods. Only eight showers are currently working.

But the site never has less than 40 families. Twenty-four people live on one particular plot: 67 under-15s live on the site, surrounded by concrete and pollution, slip roads and 10 foot high grey walls. The constant thunder of trains adds to the relentless roar of the traffic.

There is no outside play space except the concrete around the caravans. Large amounts of lead dust accumulate and are reflected in the dangerously high levels in the children's blood.

Since 1982, when Hammersmith and Fulham Council declared the site unfit for human habitation, there have only been cosmetic improvements. The Tories has hoped to use the racist Caravan Sites Act (1968) to keep all travellers out of the Borough. The Act places a duty on local authorities to provide adequate accommodation for gypsies

By Ian Harrison
Councillor, ex-chair Housing, Hammersmith & Fulham

residing in, or resorting to, their area, after which the Secretary of State for the Environment "designates" the authority.

In practice the Act established a racist quota system — "designated" local authorities have draconian powers to remove from their area any gypsies encamped on an unauthorised site, criminalising the travellers in the process. Without designation Councils have to go through lengthier civil proceedings as they do for evictions of unauthorised occupants of Council housing.

Nil provision

Hammersmith Tories wanted designation with nil provision. They would not then have needed to provide a site — but they would have instant eviction powers against any travellers entering the Borough. The whole Borough would have become a no-go area for travellers.

To the consternation of the Tories the DOE refused nil provision, rejected the arguments that there was no alternative to the Westway site and instructed the Borough to find another site. The Tories feared above all else the loss of "designation" which would have ended their draconian eviction powers, but by deliberate stalling they managed to hang on until the local elections without having to take any action.



PHOTO: Terry Suddaly

The Westway site

After the Labour victory in May the Council's official policy changed. The Manifesto made clear we would provide an alternative site within the Borough and the travellers were entitled to expect the new Council to move quickly. Unfortunately the new regime's attitude has proved little better than that of the Tories.

The Planning Committee has to identify a suitable site, in consultation with the travellers, and then give planning permission. However, the Chair of Planning refused to agree to a working party when the Housing Committee asked for this in June.

Not until September, four months after the election, was the Director of Planning instructed to prepare a committee report on possible alternative sites. Even then, despite promises, there was no report to either the October or November Planning Committees.

It actually took a written threat to ask the DOE to withdraw designation before leading councillors agreed to meet the travellers and set up a working party to find an alternative site. One travellers' leader who spent years taking the Tories to court said after a meeting with the Council leader "We got more out of the Tories than we're getting out of this lot."

The travellers' anger eventually forced leading councillors to go to the Westway site, where one councillor was heard to comment "I wouldn't mind spending a holiday in one of those (caravans)!"

If the councillors expected the travellers to be impressed it could only be on account of their total ignorance of the travellers' own concerns; yet they made no attempt to talk to travellers but spent their time talking to their own officers.

New site

The Council leader has now given an undertaking that the Council will find (not provide) a new travellers' site, wait for it... within eighteen months! The Planning Department has suggested the possibility of a joint site with Brent — in Brent. The travellers have not been consulted about this and will completely oppose it.

Such regional "solutions" take the Caravan Sites Act to its logical conclusion: not just racist quotas to restrict the number of travellers in certain areas but "townships" outside established residential areas. Any travellers seeking to move out of a township would face instant harassment and eviction. All that's missing are the Pass Laws...

For no other section of society would we tolerate such appalling living conditions and over-crowding. The Travellers on Westway pay rent and rates to Hammersmtih Council and get precious little in return. Many, there for years, have seen children grow up and be forced to share their parents' pitch because the Council fails to make extra provision.

The travellers' children attend local schools; the site residents are registered with local doctors and hospitals; they use local recreational facilities and youth clubs; they rely on local contacts for employment, mainly in tarmac-ing and roofing, scrap metal work and in Portobello Market.

If equal oportunities are to mean anything, Hammersmith must stop prevaricating and provide sites, according to need, now — not in eighteen months time.

There should be no sharing with other Boroughs. Neighbouring Tory Kensington and Chelsea, "designated" on the basis of "sharing" Westway, should be forced to provide their own site.

Full and genuine consultation with the travellers themselves must begin immediately and there must be no imposed or apartheid regional solutions.

When the racists start to protest we must face up to them. One third of published racist literature received by the CRE is aimed against travellers. As an anti-racist Council we must campaign to dispel public ignorance and fears and stand up for what is one of the most repressed minorities in Britain today.

Travellers: eviction looms

***"Brent travelling towards anarchy"* read a huge banner, as a hysterical mob of Boysonite "ratepayers" once again packed the gallery for the latest round of Brent's travellers' saga.**

But this time Labour Group policy of non-eviction before sites were provided had been overturned in favour of evicting all but 30 caravans.

A group of travellers, on time but last in the queue, were thus excluded from the meeting. Calm, polite and patient, they contrasted sharply with the antics of their "civilised" opponents — "travelling pestilence" one Tory called them.

By Frank Hansen
Brent Councillor



Shepherd's Bush Gazette, 7.11.86

Fryent Way

There was bitter disappointment at Labour's climbdown, particularly for those on the Book Centre. Camped in for the Winter on a good, hard ground site, they would be thrown off, even though there had been little opposition and "trouble" down there.

The sheer irrationality of it all was stunning. We were evicting most of the travellers when they least needed it. The Council which was prepared to go all the way in its anti-racist stand on McGoldrick, had buckled under on an equally important issue.

One reason for this change of policy was new legal advice which contradicted the Glamorgan ruling (authorities cannot evict travellers if the do not provide sites). No one was sure why and how this opinion had been obtained. The official line is that the Director of Law had asked for it. Letting an official undermine Labour Group policy? Well, one section of the Labour Group were not unhappy to find themselves off the Glamorgan hook.

Although the legal advice stressed that we did not have to evict anybody, the Group adopted it as the best course of action. "Best" for whom? The travellers of course!

In any case we weren't "evicting" them, only giving one month notices to quit! But it produces the same result... Confronted with notices travellers will invariably leave before eviction rather than risk vehicles being damaged or impounded.

"Consultant"

Several weeks before, a travellers' "consultant" appeared in post without the Travellers' Sub-committee being informed. Experienced in working with travellers, but largely on behalf of local authorities (i.e. with their interest in mind), his knowledge of Irish travellers seemed limited.

Alarm bells began to ring when he suggested that travellers' children be given plastic bags to help clear the rubbish on Fryent Way — a site contaminated with fibre glass and possibly asbestos. He also advised eviction so that the situation could be "controlled".

Accusations

Opponents of eviction successfully answered a number of accusations

● ***Hadn't we always agreed that some travellers would eventually have to go?*** — Yes, but wrong to move anyone until some provision had been made!

● ***Didn't we care about the children living in filth near a dangerous road?*** — Hypocrisy! So why evict the relatively "safe" Book Centre while 30 stay on the "dangerous" site?!

● ***The travellers are being manipulated to undermine the leadership...*** — Travellers are not naive, and are not about to be manipulated by anybody!

These absurd arguments do little credit to the Brent labour movement. However, agreement on providing a site *is* an achievement to start with — and the struggle will go on.

*Frank has pointed out to us that our headline on his article last month ("The visitors with no place to go") ignored the point of the article, that travellers are **not** visitors any more than other immigrant group; most are settled here. The headline was actually taken from the article, which mentioned that travellers had visited Brent throughout the century (although the full quote was cut in the final version printed).*

Nonetheless, Frank is right that the headline was, at best, ambiguous, and wrong. We apologise - Eds.

Fat cats see red

The intervention of the Labour Party in the City of London local elections has rattled the fat cats so much that there appears to have been an attempt at, shall we day, questionable practices.

By Paula Watson
Westminster South CLP, Labour candidate Portsoken ward, City of London

Portsoken ward, where I am standing, has 300 voters, mostly residential, mostly in council houses. It is one of the more promising areas for Labour.

On Saturday November 14th the agent and I visited the ward to obtain two signtures for my nomination paper. These we got without much difficulty, having first made sure that the nominators were Labour supporters and that they clearly understood that I was standing for the Court of Common Council.

The completed form was delivered to the Town clerk on the following Monday, November 17th. Later that day one of the other candidates phoned the clerk's secretary to find out the details of those standing. This information was given, although the names of nominees should not have been divulged until after the close of nominations at noon on Wednesday November 19th. The candidate concerned then sent an emissary (male) to see both my nominees.

At 11am on the following Wednesday the ward clerk phoned to say that both had written letters to him explaining that they thought I was standing for Parliament not the Common Council and one expressed the wish to withdraw his sponsorship!

After the agent and I had declared categorically that there culd have been no room for misunderstanding, expressed some concern that the names of nominees had been disclosed so early and some surprise that both had written somewhat (suspiciously?) similar letters, the clerk became uncomfortable. Later that day he phoned to say he had, in fact, accepted my nomination, but, of course, should I be elected, the complaint could form the basis for a petition against my return.

It was all just like the good old days of the 18th century rotten and pocket boroughs.

LABOUR BRIEFING

Next London Editorial Board: Monday January 5th, Camden Town Hall, 6.30pm. Please make sure your *Briefing Group* is represented. All *Briefing* sellers/readers welcome.

HAC dispute explodes in Lewisham:

Let's get back to fighting the Tories!



Reprinted from their strike bulletin, courtesy Lewisham NALGO

Four months ago we stood shoulder to shoulder with Lewisham Labour Group in getting rid of Malcolm Skeggs, who used his position as librarian to send out letters on behalf of the British National Party.

We now find we are embroiled in the most bitter dispute over the Council's adamant refusal to provide screens to staff in the Housing Advisory Centre, who have been subjected to numerous attacks from a minority of the public because of the inadequate housing available in Lewisham (because of Tory cuts).

On November 17th the Council sent out a letter that Murdoch and MacGregor would have been pleased to sign, threatening to send people home for taking limited action in support of HAC workers who have been on official strike for the last 2 months. Five NALGO members were subsequently sent home without pay. Then the majority of the Branch walked out and were promptly "locked out".

The Branch has now voted to take indefinite strike action.

I am forced to conclude that several leading members of the Labour Group (including those that are NALGO members elsewhere) have no understanding or commitment to basic Trade Union principles, and see anyone wishing to oppose or delay their manifesto commitments as "the enemy". It is hoped that the majority of the Group will take note of the decision of the Lewisham Labour Party Local Government Conference and Branches in settling this dispute before it causes untold political damage. We should be uniting to defeat the Tories — not slugging it out on the picket line.

By Ken Terry
Branch Chairperson,
Lewisham NALGO
Eltham & Woolwich CLP
(personal capacity)

Catering workers occupy Hackney Town Hall

Radicalism stops short of £6 a week

In May 1986 a low pay deal was agreed between all the manual unions in Hackney Council and the Council itself. The objective was to bring all low paid Council workers up to a specified minimum of £135.00.

The formula applied was simply to deduct the current rate of pay from this low pay target figure of £135.00 and pay the balance in two equal stages over a period of 2 years. The catering workers were on £120.00, so the deal should have meant £7.50 in the first stage and then £7.50 in the second stage.

However, by the time the Council came to negotiate this deal with the catering workers a National Pay agreement had awarded them an extra £6. In their wisdom the Council decided to include this in the local agreement on low pay! The offer on the table was suddenly £5 first stage, £5 second stage — add the £6 National, and bingo... £135.

Home helps had correctly been brought up to the low pay target, and then received the National Agreement on top — why not catering workers?

On November 3rd, management stated the £5 offer was final. The catering workers, NUPE members, voted unanimously to occupy Hackney Town Hall and a Social Services building.

The Council leadership refused to negotiate while the catering workers were in occupation: in this case it was not a "legitimate form of industrial action". In the same breath they said that the Labour Council would rely on Trade Union action like this if the District Auditor came in. The occupation continued.

By Tom Silverlock
NUPE
(personal capacity)

An emergency Labour Group on Tuesday November 11th was organised with very few Party members knowing about it. The Labour leadership made it plain beforehand that if the Labour Group didn't support them on this one they'd resign.

With a burst of abstentionism by some "leftwingers", only one vote was cast against the leadership's stance. The councillor who voted against was the only one who had bothered to go down to talk to the workers in occupation and the only one to question the leadership's statement. But she was criticised by a member of the NUPE branch committee because she happened to be a supporter of *Militant*.

On Thursday November 13th the leadership decided to go and talk to the occupiers (even though they were still in occupation!!). They said there had been lack of communication between themselves and the unions; and that an officers had said something he shouldn't have (in other words, it's all the responsibility of the officers in charge of negotiations); a disciplinary inquiry would be set up to investigate the officers' handling of the negotiations; and there'd be another meeting the next day.

The next day the leadership didn't come; but the NUPE full-time officer did, and said the leadership had just made an offer for arbitration. If the catering workers accepted arbitration but continued the dispute, the union would no longer recognise it as official.

With hardly any real moral or financial support from the rest of the unions, this was really the last straw. The catering workers agreed to stop the occupation.

The workers on strike were mainly women. For most of them it was the first time they had been involved in something like this. They must have a bitter resentment towards the local Labour Council and also despair at the lack of support from fellow Trade Unionists. So much for Hackney being a "radical socialist borough"!



South West London Hospital saved!

On Thursday November 27th, the officers of Riverside Health Authority were clearly shocked to find that a meeting which they expected would vote to close the West London Hospital deferred that decision in order to look for help from the Regional Authority and Norman Fowler to save its maternity unit.

At the start of the discussion a public lobby which overflowed into the street cheered as a petition of 30,000 names was presented to the chair.

Les Aldridge
Hammersmith CLP

This success was the result of a popular campaign which received funding from Hammersmith & Fulham Labour council. But without the complete support of all Labour Party members on the Authority a powerful blow to government policy in West London was softened.

Crisis in the DHSS

Continued from front page

Unions to fight for adequate staffing in DHSS offices.

Already plans are being laid for a concerted campaign in the New Year by the Section Executive of both the CPSA and the SCPS, but the brunt of the forthcoming battle will be undertaken by the unions locally who have shown management in no uncertain terms they are prepared to fight back.

One of the positive aspects of the present disputes has been the linking up of Claimants groups with the unions. It's now widely recognised that the faults in the system lie entirely with management whose only concern at present is to indulge in cynical cost-cutting exercises which will only aggrevate the situation further.

It's not only the mainstream of the DHSS that has been affected by Tory attempts to modify the Welfare state. Only last year the Legal Aid section of the DHSS was closed and the work handed over to the Lord Chancellor's Department. But as everyone prepared for their Christmas festivities, the DHSS has begun to plan the closure of yet another vital, if fairly unknown, service — the Resettlement Units for "Down and Outs".

Every Christmas a number of charities open up to give dinner to the thousands of homeless men and women who live on the streets, and yet ignore them for the rest of the year. The DHSS Resettlement Units provide the only national 24 hour emergency and re-habilitation service for Itinerants, and even this under-resourced area has come under Thatcher's axe.

Through a backdoor form of privatisation it is planned to hand over the functions of RUs to the tender mercy of Charity. The national press has largely ignored this threat despite the protests organised by the three main Civil Service Unions over the past 18 months. Many staff at these centres have already been asked to fill in transfer forms in anticipation of closure.

The loss of part of the welfare state to the whims of charity sets a bad precedent for future Thatcher years. This small area of the DHSS must be equally defended by the labour movement as part of a campaign to defend and improve the welfare state as a whole.

Fight for St James not over yet!

The fight to prevent the closure of the 500-bed St James' General Hospital in Balham is not over yet despite the decision by the Wandsworth Health Authority at its meeting on November 27th to press ahead with a total shutdown by 1988.

The meeting was lobbied by around 300 people including hospital workers, local residents and a large contingent of sacked workers from Hangers. A petition of 10,000 signatures was handed in before the meeting but the massive public support for the hospital was of little interest to the majority of DHA members.,

The only argument in favour of the closure was the need to make government imposed cuts on £10m between now and 1994. Local health bosses hope that the shutting of St James would save £5m.

Despite the cowardly acceptance of central government diktat by the majority of Wandsworth DHA members the local Community Health Council has lodged an objection to the closure and there is also the possibility that the Health Authority have broken the law by not carrying out proper consultation. The closure proposal now goes to the Regional Health Authority and the Minister.

In the meantime the fight for St James goes on and while there are still patients and staff in the hospital nobody is giving up.

For more details of the Campaign write to Nurses Home, St James Hospital, Sarsfield Road, London SW12, or phone 582 0534.

By Geoff Martin