

Drugs: rot, or do-it-yourself action!

By Sue Hamilton

WHILE heroin and crack are the big killers, there is, in my experience, a real problem of inappropriate usage of cannabis on housing estates in England. The problem is bigger than a simple matter of illegality. Many people are not too hostile to cannabis, from Clinton who, while he swore he never inhaled, felt able to associate himself with such a tame sub-culture, through to sections of the police who want cannabis to be legalised.

But on estates which I know about, dope, in the hands of young people, is a big problem. I have seen ten year olds in terrible straits, having a bung for breakfast and being as high as kites, not mellowing out and relaxing as adults do. Those kids get the munchies, as adults do, and to eat they rob. Then as they are coming down they have nothing to look forward to and angrily anticipate a boring afternoon. They go on the rob to get £5 for an afternoon bung and so the cycle recharges.

On the estate I know best, the main dealer to the kids is one of their mothers. The kids are a nuisance to everyone around them. They get through small windows to steal a TV. They get into bother by skipping school. They become regulars at the police station.

The police I know through my job treat these children as scum. Once I heard the police on the local radio asking for information about a well-known gangster: the police were the only ones not to know — they pretended — where he was. He was driving his red BMW convertible around the estate looking for the kids who had pulled off a particularly nasty burglary. He found them and gave them a real pasting. The police kept away to give the grown-up gangster the time and space to knock hell out of his juvenile under studies.

This type of decline very quickly gets to dramatic proportions. Neighbours are not so afraid of children and just will not tolerate pre-teenagers causing havoc. They expect the police or social services to sort them out. There is no political organisation with tentacles extended on to the estates to

provide a different framework for their action, a different way to view the problem. At a national level, the Labour Party calls for a "moral majority" to form up behind the police and to treat the kids and their parents as simply criminals.

There is a conspiracy of politeness which prevents people from speaking against the conventional wisdom of the state. The police say they cannot do anything because the criminal justice system is too soft on juvenile offenders. Social services say that taking children into care is both too expensive and counter-productive. No doubt within their own terms of reference both are telling the truth, but neither offers a real way forward to people living next to persistent offenders on an estate where it is not safe to go out. Nor do they offer any-

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thing better to young people who are being drawn onto the nightmare carousel of drugs and theft.

Similar problems on council estates in Ireland have led recently to an upsurge of grass-roots community action against heroin pushers and users. Sinn Fein has been central to this movement.

For Sinn Fein, everything is ultimately grist to the mill of their nationalism and the Provisional IRA military campaign. While this should never be lost sight of, Sinn Fein has struck a chord both north and south of the border with their community politics.

Sinn Fein councillors take up individual problems, and Sinn Fein has been in the leadership of mobilising tenants on housing estates against the people who are supplying their children with drugs. Their paper *An Phoblacht* carries a weekly column about the drugs campaigns, and a nar-

rative recounting the effects of heroin addiction on one family... the mother is pleased when her son goes to jail where, she assumes, probably wrongly, that he is safe.

The campaigns are more developed than any in England which have been publicised. They demand proper policing against the dealers and adequate detox facilities. The campaign activists — and the campaigns do seem to have genuine grassroots support, much broader than Sinn Fein — have to contend with bad press and hostile policing. The media insist that the drive of the activists is to revel in physically evicting dealers, and to find an excuse to provoke the police.

This conflict is like many others which have erupted as the state has withdrawn, leaving working class communities to make a choice between no choices. What are people to do? The police are not going to stop dealers. Social services and health authority drying-out provision is inadequate, and anyway many people do not want to stop using. Life is bleak enough.

Estates are left to fend for themselves. People are genuinely terrified for their children, who might fall prey to street corner dealers, and themselves go in fear of a mugging. Where people call for something other than harsher law enforcement and a more punitive criminal justice system as the answer to their problem, then that is of great credit to the leadership.

The gut instinct of workers, on these matters and in circumstances like these, is not libertarian. I'm not at all sure it should be.

As far as the community organisations in England are concerned there is yet to be a voice heard which goes beyond demanding a stronger state, albeit with diversionary activities for young people. Until there is, then the Irish experience is a model to look towards. It seems to me that do-it-yourself activity against creeping death is a hell of a lot better than for working-class people pushed to the margins of society to rot passively.

I have seen too many of them in that condition on north of England housing estates!