

'LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE TORIES ATTACK'

## 1. THE TORIES' ATTACK

Local government cuts did not start with the Thatcher government. It was the 1974-9 Labour government which dramatically reversed the expansion of local authority spending and services characteristic of the early '70s.

In 1975-6 local authority spending was 15.5% of national income; by 1978-9 it was down to 12.8%, the same percentage as 1982-3. Big cuts by right-wing Labour councils, and big rate rises by more left-wing ones (like Lambeth), had already started long before the Tories took office in May 1979.

The present Tory government, however, is concerned not only to cut expenditure but also to beat down nonconformist councils. Thus:

1. It has continued and sharpened the Wilson-Callaghan policy of cutting central government money for local councils. In 1975-6, central government grant accounted for 66.5% of local authority spending. By 1978-9 it was down to 60.8%. For 1984-5 it is scheduled to be 52%.

According to the Guardian (21.10.83):

"The severity of this regime is compounded by the way the Government has fixed the spending targets. Low-spending councils were told in August that they could spend 3 per cent more in cash in 1984-5 than their budgets this year. After allowing for inflation, this means that they are being asked for a difficult but achievable squeeze.

"The highest-spending councils have been told, however, that they must spend 6 per cent less in cash next year. After allowing for inflation, this implies a real terms cut of 11 or 12 per cent.

"It is privately admitted in Whitehall that cuts of this magnitude are totally unrealistic in a single year. Mr Jenkin's new penalty system, however, will ensure that councils failing to achieve them will be severely punished".

2. The Tories have specifically targeted 'high-spending', Labour-controlled, inner-city authorities. These authorities have suffered disproportionately in the grant cuts. In addition the Government has acquired, and is acquiring, further direct powers to penalise them.

In 1984-5 the following penalties will apply:

Government target overspent by:	Penalty 1984-5	Penalty 1983-4
1%	2p on rates	1p on rates
2%	6p on rates	2p on rates
3%	14p on rates	7p on rates
4%	23p on rates	12p on rates
Each further 1%	A further 9p	A further 5p.

Councils have three sources of income: charges (rents, etc.), central government grant, and rates. Rates are a property tax levied on occupiers. Each property has a 'rateable value' corresponding to a notional rent, and estimated every so many years by a central government valuer. The council can then fix a 'rate' of so many pence in the pound on those rateable values.

The Tory scheme means that central government fixes a target level of spending for each authority. For each amount that the authority spends over that target level, the government withdraws an amount of central government grant equivalent to so many pence on the authority's rates.

To get an idea of the effect, suppose we have an 'overspending' council with a rate of about 150p in the pound. Suppose it wants to take an item of expenditure which would amount to an extra 1% on its spending. If rates cover half of its budget, that means a 2% - or 3p - increase in the rates. But then the

council loses the equivalent of a 5p rate (this year) or a 9p rate (next year) in central government grant. So in fact it has to raise the rates by 8p (this year) or 12p (next year). To offset the Tories' demanded 11% real cut, it has to raise rates by 132p (next year).

The GLC is 53% over its target expenditure (1983-4), so it gets no central government grant anyway and cannot be further penalised in this way. Greenwich is 21% over, Southwark 17%, Lambeth 10%, Islington 9%.

The Government is now seeking to introduce powers which, as from 1985-6, will enable it directly to instruct individual councils to cut their rates. It has had such powers in Scotland since 1982. In July this year, for example, four authorities, including Lothian region and Glasgow district, were ordered to make rate cuts totalling £19 million.

3. Other Government measures to restrict councils in specific areas include legislation restricting Direct Labour Organisations, and the anti-union laws, which make union-labour-only clauses in council contracts unlawful.

4. The Government plans to abolish the Greater London Council and the metropolitan authorities as from 1986-7. Their functions will be transferred partly to lower-tier councils, and partly to a variety of specialist boards with representatives from these lower-tier councils.

The May 1985 local elections will be cancelled, and for 1985-6 the authorities will be run by a special transitional arrangement. For the first three years central government will have direct control over the budgets, rates, and staff numbers under the new arrangements.

## 2. LABOUR AND THE LOCAL AUTHORITY CUTS

The official Labour Party leadership line on these measures has been predictable: to protest; to talk vaguely about resistance and fighting back; but explicitly to exclude confrontation with central government, and thus to leave Labour councils in the role of humane (or not-so-humane) administrators of the Tory measures.

The leadership of the TUC and the local authority unions in particular has gone along with this.

More interesting has been the record of the Labour left in local government.

The late '70s and early '80s saw a whole stream of Labour leftists displacing right-wingers in Labour council seats. Many of these leftists, typefied by Ken Livingstone, were markedly to the left of the traditional Tribune Labour Left mould.

This new left, however, has failed the rest of the class struggle. That, it seems to me, is the necessary conclusion from a serious examination of the record.

A convenient starting point is summer 1978, when the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory (the initial sponsor of SO) was launched. The SCLV platform included the call to 'freeze rents and rates'. A wide range of Labour leftists signed it without complaint. Some - like Ted Knight in Lambeth - had already levied big rate rises, but if pressed would presumably have replied that these were just a very short-term expedient.

As late as January 1979, Mike Davis, soon to become one of the theorists of the rate-rises strategy, could write in SO:

"Already, some London boroughs are choosing to raise rates in order to maintain services. But... socialist councillors' first task is to mount a massive campaign with all working class and community organisations... A refusal to pay interest charges, together with a big campaign of agitation, could force the government either to step in with the necessary finance or face serious industrial action from trade unionists".

In June 1979 SO called a 225-strong conference in London on Labour and local government. A document for the conference signed by 35 councillors, including Ted

Kirght, Val Veness, and Ken Livingstone, stated that, "Rate rises can only be a stop-gap measure".

An amendment from Workers' Action, proposing instead immediate organisation for a fight against central government, was lost by a two-to-one majority. In the next issue of SO Mike Davis theorised the rate-rise line: "We opposed rate rises as the solution. But we also argued that if rate rises were used as a means... of buying time to prepare popular resistance, they could be defended..."

Among those most vocal preaching this line was Ted Knight, leader of Lambeth council, and the most prominent 'local government leftist' of that period. Rate rises, he argued, were the only serious way to fight for a policy of 'no cuts'.

What did he 'buy time' for?

A few weeks later, at the beginning of July, he ordered a 4½% package of cuts in Lambeth.

A revolt by the rank and file of the Lambeth Labour Parties forced Knight to revoke these cuts and launch a campaign of agitation. Despite the council's record, this campaign got an excellent response, with demonstrations, days of strike action, and two well-attended national conferences.

But the political basis of the campaign was shaky from the start. Socialist Organiser in November 1980 commented on the statement drafted for the first national conference:

"The statement hinges the whole cuts fight on a general strike by council workers in January 1981. The unvoiced let-out clause is that if the unions do not meet this arbitrary deadline, then the Labour councils will go ahead, include cuts and rate rises in next spring's budgets - and claim they have no alternative".

And so it proved. In April 1980 Lambeth went for a 49% rate rise and a £1.60 rent rise. In April 1981, panicking in the face of working-class anger against the rate rises, they went for 10% cuts.

These first short cycle of events contained many of the essential elements which were to recur later.

A leftist group 'took power' in the established structures of local government, without a clear perspective without a prior mass campaign on the basis of that perspective. In Lambeth this feature was especially marked: Knight's 'base' was essentially nothing more than a personal power position within a not-very-left-wing council Labour group.

Unclear as to their perspectives, the leftists went for rate rises as a way of 'buying time' and in the meantime hoped for another force to launch the desired struggle. When that other force - the industrial 'big battalions' - failed to turn out on schedule, the leftists opted for 'doing the best they could' within the existing structures.

This capitulation had a demoralising effect on the whole Lambeth labour movement and especially the left. Asked in 1981 to speak at a Socialist Organiser day school on the role of Marxist councillors, one of the very few councillors in Lambeth who opposed the rate rises replied bitterly, "The role of Marxist councillors these days seems to be making cuts".

In the course of 1979-80, Ted Knight had re-established strong connections with the degenerate 'Marxists' of the 'Workers Revolutionary Party', who cynically provided a 'theoretical' justification for the capitulations. (This was later extended to the launching of the WRP-connected 'Labour Herald'. At the Labour Party special conference at Wembley in early 1981, 'Labour Herald' sellers could be observed making their support for rate rises their main selling pitch). And as the leftist councillors adapted themselves to the limits of established local government, so in turn other leftists adapted themselves to the limits of the councillors.

In the summer of 1980 a substantial grouping of such leftists hived off from Socialist Organiser to launch London Labour Briefing.

In Lothian, a 'no cuts' declaration by the regional Labour council met a fate similar to Lambeth's. The key role, there, however, was played by the trade union bureaucracy. At the crucial moment, a special TUC delegation went up from London to tell the councillors that they must back down. The councillors were helpless, in the end, essentially because their efforts at arousing working-class industrial action had been channelled through the local trade union officials, rather than by a direct appeal to the rank and file. When the officials told them to capitulate, they were stranded.

Here again, the leftist councillors had been guilty of a sort of 'adventurism'. They had 'seized power' without serious political preparation in terms of mass agitation, and without being part of an organised socialist force which spanned both Labour Party and trade unions. They had been bewitched by 'leftist' victories within the narrow confines of Labour Party committee rooms which actually represented very little. And so they did not seize the power. The power seized them.

## 5. BASTIONS AND FORTRESSES

With the election of a left-wing Labour GLC in May 1981, however, new opportunities seemed to have opened up.

London Labour Briefing thought so. Its exuberant 'special victory issue' declared, "London's ours", and in it Ken Livingstone wrote:

"No-one will be left in any doubt that the GLC is now a campaigning organisation and a bastion of power for the labour movement in a national context".

There was some difference from Lambeth and Lothian. The adoption of a left-wing manifesto and left-wing candidates for the GLC had been the product of a definite organised effort, around LLB. There was some sort of strategy, the next stage being the creation of a phalanx of left-Labour borough councils in London in May 1982. (And in May 1982 LLB could indeed hail 'Fortress Islington').

The GLC manifesto declared boldly:

"A Labour GLC and Inner London Education Authority will resist any cuts and demand that the Tory government provides the necessary finance to maintain and improve all council services. Understanding that the Tory government does not listen to pleas but only responds to pressure, a Labour GLC and ILEA will appeal to the Labour and trade union movement to take action, including industrial action, to support its stand.

"Mass opposition to Tory policies led by a Labour GLC could become the focal point of a national campaign against the cuts, for an immediate General Election and a Labour Government".

The new GLC Labour leader, Ken Livingstone, was asked by SO; would the Labour GLC be prepared to be the first to take on the Tories, instead of hiding behind the claim that only several councils together could mount successful resistance?

"Yes", he replied. "Having set our policies, and having got a solid bloc within the GLC Labour group that isn't prepared to compromise on them, we have no alternative but to lead".

But once again the left had allowed itself to be intoxicated by phrases and symbols. Whatever words assiduous left-wingers in the manifesto drafting parties had managed to slip through, the Labour movement in London was not committed to a serious fight. Worse: the left had failed to fight within the movement for a hard commitment, preferring instead to have 'power' on the basis of half a commitment.

Livingstone stressed (SO, 4.4.81) that the GLC policies were "something like the Alternative Economic Strategy. Not in any sense revolutionary - because the Labour Party isn't at that stage".

But this idea of a half-way stage, radical but "not in any sense revolutionary", was as delusory in local government politics as it is in national politics.

We commented in Socialist Organiser:

"Pursued by goggle-eyed Fleet Street reporters who demanded to know whether he was really a Marxist, Livingstone replied that he had never read Marx and preferred to be called a 'radical'...

"The Labour Left's policies have not just failed for lack of energetic people. They have failed because they are based on no clear theoretical understanding...

"What is to stop the current Labour programme becoming equally utopian? What is to stop the GLC Labour Left ending up like the Camden Labour Left (of which Ken Livingstone is also part) - who approved cuts for the sake of making a compromise with the Labour Right and thus stopping the Labour Right doing a deal with the Tories?

"The Camden council left's compromise... was based on an over-emphasis on 'getting something done' in the council chambers and corridors, at the expense of a broader political view... The same over-emphasis could be fatal for the Labour GLC...

"The point is that a broad left which focuses on assembling forces for the immediate fight against the right wing, and which plays down theoretical precision, is not enough - at least not on its own.

"We also need an organised left wing which focuses on political and theoretical clarity, which sets out to educate as well as to organise..."

#### 4. ISLINGTON

The GLC elections in May 1981 were followed by a concerted effort, organised around LLB, to secure left borough councils in London after the elections in May 1982. The effort was fairly successful - most so in Islington, which since May 1982 has been probably the most left wing council in the country ('Fortress Islington', for LLB).

But yet again the 'local government left' settled for a posture of general defiance, rather than a hard-headed fighting strategy.

Islington had previously been the seat of the most hardened old-style right-wing Labour municipal corruption. New applicants to join the Labour Party were told that it was 'full up'. Nevertheless, new members did join, and eventually ousted the right wing after a battle through the 1970s. In the process, practically all the left-wing activists in the borough were drawn into the Labour Party. It culminated in the majority of the Labour councillors, and all three of the borough's Labour MPs, going over to the SDP. The Islington Labour Left was by no means incapable of fighting - so far as its politics permitted.

The 51 Labour councillors who swept the SDP out in May 1982 were almost all leftists, many of them leading figures in campaigns, trade unions, and tenants' organisations in the borough. A good many of them would consider themselves revolutionaries - a fair number quite close to SO.

But in the debate on the council manifesto, the 'no rate rise'/confrontation strategy (moved by SO supporters) had been defeated. The manifesto eventually said (and this is not to caricature it) that Labour would not make cuts; that Labour did not like big rate rises; and if it came to the crunch, well then, there would be a problem, wouldn't there?

In July 1982 a joint meeting of the council Labour group and of the Local Government Committee (the joint committee for council affairs of the constituency Labour Parties within the borough) voted for a 'no rate rise' motion put by an SO supporter. Over the following months we struggled hard to build an effective confrontation strategy on the basis of that vote. It was soon clear, however, that most of the people who had voted for the motion did so as a gesture, and in reality saw rate rises as inevitable. In spring 1983 the local Labour Parties voted overwhelmingly to reject our confrontation strategy and support a 29.8% rate rise.

Council leader Margaret Hodge stressed:

"The strategy we recommend is for this year only. What we do in future years will depend on which party is in government. We feel we can recommend a rate for

this year, but the return of a Labour Government will be critical for our future, as people democratically elected to implement a socialist manifesto. With a Tory Government returned, we may have to consider other strategies".

With a Tory government returned, however, in fact the Labour councillors have retreated into a defensive, cowed posture, with no strategy at all. Stands like the council's refusal to delete union-labour-only clauses from its contracts have been dropped. The council leadership talks about the need to concentrate on the council's 'respectable' achievements in areas like housing and play down issues like gay rights.

Among the dozens of leftists elected to the council in May 1982, by spring 1983 only two would still argue with conviction against rate rises. The council has become a school in reformism for the Islington new left.

It would be false, however, to think of the retreats as being imposed on the local labour movement by a bureaucratic elite. The discussion on the 1983-4 budget was pretty democratic. We were not suppressed. We lost the argument.

Nor is it a matter of the local Labour Party members being resolution-mongers rather than campaigners. Not so. If they see their way clear politically, the Islington Labour Parties are well capable of campaigning, as they did for example around the NHS pay dispute.

The problem is the lack of ideological clarity running through the whole labour movement, including the left.

## 5. THE GLC AND BRIEFING: 'STRIKING THE FLAG'

Meanwhile, within a year of the May 1981 election, the Labour GLC's fighting stance had already crumbled.

Two episodes were crucial: the GLC coming out against London Transport workers demanding a wage rise, and the GLC voting for a budget which included the fare increases ordered by the Law Lords.

Again, the most serious thing was perhaps not the council's capitulation to the Tories. It was the capitulation of whole sections of the Labour Left to the council. Capitulating councillors can be dealt with. A moral collapse by a big chunk of the Left weakens the labour movement much more fatally.

Socialist Organiser wrote an open letter to London Labour Briefing:

"Against your own better judgment, you are now again allowing your policy to be decided for you by those who are - however reluctantly - trapped in local government administration. This is no way to build and sustain a serious Labour Left.

"You talk about doing better next time, in a different fight later. But if the GLC left will not fight for its major manifesto plank, what will it fight for? Comrades, the class struggle is always now. The struggle now is decisive for organising and training a serious Left that can secure the socialist future.

"Pass up that struggle, strike your flag in deference to the established leaders who are refusing to give a militant lead, confine yourself now to talk of what you will do in another fight in the future, and unavoidably you contribute to perpetuating the vacuum of militant political leadership in the labour movement".

## 6. THE POLITICS OF GESTURE

Speaking to Socialist Organiser in June 1983, Ken Livingstone struck a very different note from in 1981.

"The GLC has a very limited range of responsibilities and powers, and nothing that the Labour GLC does challenges the structure of society. It raises issues, it promotes campaigns, it makes small shifts in wealth - they're all things that a Thatcher government could live with if the truth were told...

"Local government is not going to bring down central government. It never has

been a possibility. At the end of the day you run into the problem that if you openly try and challenge the law, your officers won't carry out your instructions...

"There's a very limited amount you can do".

Likewise, Graham Bash of London Labour Briefing, questioned by SO (6.1.83) on his balance-sheet of the GLC, argued that:

"The GLC campaign has been a success. The GLC is generally seen to be under the control of the left. Ken Livingstone's role on the Irish issue, for example, has been absolutely crucial".

Ken Livingstone's willingness to speak out on issues like Ireland and gay rights does him credit, and is of benefit to the left. But it is radical-liberal politics, not socialist politics. In its heyday the Liberal Party had a fair number of radical mavericks prepared to speak out on such issues. It makes little sense to condemn such radicals bitterly for not being Marxists, or to deny the positive effects of their assaults on the establishment. It makes even less sense to accept such activities as a substitute for socialist politics.

The labour movement should not accept responsibility for running the bourgeois structures of local government on the basis that by doing so it gets a chance to make a few radical gestures. For the movement to do so is to renounce socialist, class-struggle aims in favour of radical liberalism.

Moreover, the logic that led from the concept of the GLC as "a bastion of power for the labour movement" to the concept of it being essentially powerless but a good platform for political gestures, leads further still. From the gestures justifying the councillors' existence, the next step is for the councillors' existence to justify dropping the gestures. This logic can be seen operating in the GLC's decision to invite Royalty to open the Thames Barrier, for example.

## 7. THE LEFT COUNCILS AND COUNCIL WORKERS

Some of the radical-liberal stances taken are courageous and deserving of full support. But some are not.

The local government left's strategy, logically spelled out, is one of local councils creating a string of 'fortresses' or 'bastions of power', eventually to be crowned by an AES-type left Labour government, which will erode the power of capitalism in favour of 'popular planning'.

Industrial struggle does play a role in this strategy. Indeed, local government leftists sometimes give it an exaggerated role (to draw the conclusion that there is nothing much they can do unless the industrial 'big battalions' move first). The point, however, is that industrial action is seen as important in this strategy only to the extent that it promotes the creation of the 'bastions of power' - bringing down Tory governments, sustaining Labour governments, supporting councils and their initiatives, etc.

Industrial action that does not fit into this schedule can be, and sometimes is, regarded with hostility - as primitive trade-unionism disrupting the more important political fight for socialism. Left Labour councils' attitudes to their own workers - for example, the attitude of Haringey council to the recent NALGO dispute there, and the attitude of most left Labour councils to the residential care workers' dispute - illustrate this.

The logic is as follows. Until the industrial big battalions sweep away the Tory government, the Labour councils have to operate within limited resources. They should use those limited resources as best they can to the benefit of the working class. But under-fives, or old people, are more deserving claimants for these resources than reasonably well-waged council workers. Therefore, oppose the council workers.

In 1979 Camden council did make a separate settlement with its workers on their £60/35 hour claim. Ken Livingstone asked in SO, "Should Labour councils



surrender their rights to negotiate wages to Tory-controlled national bodies?" But the left Labour councils have continued to do just that.

And in July 1981, as mentioned above, the GLC came into direct conflict with LT underground workers over their pay claim. SO commented (11.7.81):

"The Left council has chosen to administer London Transport for the 'general good' /i.e. by cutting fares/ and to cut loose from the interests of the tube workers who say that such improvements should not be at their expense...

"Have Ken Livingstone and all the rest done a political about-turn? Have they swung to the right?

"No. They are no different from what they were when they were elected. The Manifesto contains many good policies, many pro-working-class measures, and a statement of the GLC's intention to take on the Tories. But the fact that it could all disappear like this when the tube workers' claim came up reveals a lack of a clear set of principles behind it.

"The issue is the same in essence as that involved in the decision of Lambeth, Camden, etc. to go for rate increases which cut living standards as a supposed way round a confrontation: the same choice is involved of administering an area as benevolently as possible within the limits and terms set by the Tory government. Choosing to be administrators, the Left are set on the road to ceasing to be militants".

Here the local government left strategy comes into direct opposition to class-struggle socialism. Socialism cannot be won by building up Labour bastions within capitalism, but only by the revolutionary overthrow of the profit system. The preparation for that overthrow comes principally through the self-education of the working class in struggle, not through the enlightening efforts of left-wing municipal administrators. The self-mobilisation of the working class cannot, and must not, be subordinated to the pre-determined schedules of a 'political' elite.

Trying to be 'bastions of power for the labour movement' within the limits granted them by the established arrangements, the GLC and other left councils have gone in heavily for local AESs, council aid to cooperatives, and decentralisation of services.

The practical effects of the 'local AESs' as regards jobs are minimal. Islington council has proudly plastered the borough with posters claiming to have created 125 jobs. A sign above the town hall entrance informs us that there are nearly 20,000 unemployed in Islington! The GLC's claim is even more derisory - 500 jobs created in the whole area.

This practical criterion is not all-important. Marxists have always argued that the immediate material gains of a struggle are not as important as the political gains, in terms of self-confidence, organisation, and awareness of the working class. No such gains have come from the local AESs. On the contrary.

The GLC's 'Greater London Enterprise Board' is based on a naive, ill-defined push for more 'worker involvement in management'. They deplore the fact that in this respect, "British industry is backward... compared even with countries such as Japan (!)... lags far behind European industry. The GLEB concept of Enterprise Planning attempts to remedy some of these deficiencies by offering employers an incentive to enter into joint planning with their employees..."

It also, of course, offers employees an incentive to enter into joint planning with their employers - to cooperate in redundancies and wage cuts for the sake of saving some jobs with GLC aid - or to become employers themselves, through a cooperative, and make their own redundancies and wage cuts.

In a recent polemic in Socialist Review, GLC officials John Palmer and Hilary Wainwright offer as their best example of how the GLC jobs strategy can work, Lee Coopers in Romford, where 140 women were sacked... but 10 of them formed a co-op with GLC help. That's a claimed success. The admitted failures include the Third Sector co-op in Willesden. This co-op was formed with less than a third of



the previous workforce when the previous owners, GEC, wanted to close down. It then collapsed in a welter of corruption.

To improve services in their 'bastions' or 'fortresses' of socialism, the left councils have gone for decentralisation. Done within a strictly limited budget, this is likely to lead the councils into conflict with the unions.

Decentralisation is desirable. (For that matter, co-ops are not always to be condemned out of hand). But the left councils propose it, not as a part of a programme for improved services which has as its centre a serious class struggle for more resources, but as an alternative to that struggle. Some leftists explicitly define decentralisation as a preliminary to the fight against central government: the existing services, they say, are so bad that no-one will defend them; therefore, they must be improved first before we can confront the Tories. For the council workers, this generally comes down to the message: you must work harder if your jobs are to be saved. Not a very socialist message.

In contrast to their frequent impatience with their lower-paid workers, the left councils have been very respectful to their top-paid permanent officials. Their usual way of dealing with them is to create more £20,000-a-year jobs and fill them with socialists. Unless these new socialist officials are put onto the high salary scales, the councillors explain, they won't have the necessary authority. The irony of paying people £20,000 a year to promote socialism, and this at a time when the councils are being far from generous to their lower-paid workers, seems to escape them. Essentially the leftist councillors are applying an attitude to the top officials of 'if you can't beat them, join them' - and dragging a lot of socialist academics and intellectuals into that attitude with them.

Nowhere has a left council sought to develop a joint campaign of agitation with the council unions against the power of the senior officials - for measures of workers' control within the council departments, for equalisation of wages, etc.

The left councils have also developed a virtual new bureaucracy on the fringes of the labour movement: law centres, unemployed centres, permanently-staffed community groups of one sort or another. On the basis of these, a 'community politics' has developed which largely consists of these paid officials talking to each other. To have the paid officials is desirable, just as it is desirable for trade unions to have paid officials. But a struggle against bureaucratisation is necessary too, just as in the trade unions.

## 8. THE BALANCE-SHEET OF THE LEFT COUNCILS

The left councils have done many useful things. In Islington, for example, the council has made important stands on Ireland and on gay rights (though the council leadership is now trying to play down the latter). Its record in relation to the council workers, though not brilliant, is much better than that of its SDP predecessor.

It has involved tenants, quite successfully, in planning rehabilitation work on their estates. It has frozen rents. It has maintained services.

It has given a lead for the struggle against YTS by paying its own trainees over the odds. It has actively supported the health workers and other workers in struggle.

But for Marxists such records of municipal administration have to be less decisive than the political record in terms of organisation, confidence and awareness of the working class generally, of the labour movement, and specifically of the left in the labour movement.

That political record is bad. An article in LLB by Jan Wallcraft, the woman imprisoned for fares refusal, eloquently describes the dialectics of it:

"I am a working-class housewife... After years of cynicism and confusion about politics... I was attracted to the Labour Party in 1981 by the clear,

progressive, sensible policies of the GLC... It didn't sound like the lies and claptrap I was used to hearing from politicians. So that when the GLC came under attack, I felt that there was something there worth defending, and that I would do whatever was necessary to fight for a cause that was clear, simple, and just, as the fares issue then was.

"Unfortunately, the issue did not remain so simple. By the time the GLC had voted through the Budget approving the fare rises, it was hard to see clearly any more who or what we were fighting. On the one hand, Ken, Dave, Valerie and the rest were campaigning vigorously and wholeheartedly for resistance to the fare rises, and on the other hand, they were allowing themselves to be made responsible for implementing the Law Lords' ruling.

"... To cooperate with injustice, however tactically advisable it may seem at the time, must be self-defeating in the end, because it obscures the issue, and confuses potential supporters. It shows a lack of faith by the elected councillors in the labour movement, and can be seen as a cynical betrayal of the powerless and dispossessed".

Looked at from the angle of the development of the Left, the position is even worse. A whole segment of leftists, who could have become an educating, organising, inspiring force for broader sections of the labour movement, have allowed themselves to be captured by the bourgeois structures of local government.

The problem is politics. In every case, the left councils went into office with no perspective for fighting or at best (in the case of the GLC) with a fudged, half-measures perspective. This political inadequacy was not something imposed on the labour movement from above by this or that clique, but a reflection of the movement's general ideological condition.

But the reflection has become more than a reflection. The inadequacy, rather than being remedied through the enlightening effects of experience and the educational efforts of the most conscious revolutionaries, has become a spreading infection. The left, having got into council positions, has adapted itself to the limits of the established structures (because it had no clear idea of how to fight them), and then become a force trying to educate the rest of the labour movement to accept those limits.

## 9. AN ALTERNATIVE POLICY

In the Islington SO group, in particular, and through the paper, we have developed an alternative perspective. We have argued the issues through in more detail than any other current on the left.

It was summarised as follows in the resolution drafted by us, in consultation with other comrades, for the Islington budget debate:

"This Joint Meeting of the council Labour group and the Labour Parties' joint Local Government Committee agrees the following Programme of Action to resist the Tory Government's attempt to destroy jobs and services in Islington, through their cuts in Rate Support Grant and penalties on Council spending.

"That at the Council meeting on Tuesday March 8 the Labour group shall submit a motion refusing to make a budget at that meeting and demanding that the government restores the full level of Rate Support Grant required to meet the needs of the borough.

"That the Labour Group shall make a 'Statement of Intent' [see below] at the meeting to implement a budget for 1983-4 which fulfills the Party's manifesto and other immediate needs of the borough without increasing the financial burden, through rent or rates, on the people of Islington.

"That the Labour Group calls a Special Meeting of the Council for Tuesday March 29 at which, in the event of the Tories refusing to increase Rate Support Grant, it will submit this statement of intent as the basis of the 1983-4 budget.

"That the Labour Group shall, at the March 8 Council, call a local Labour

Movement Conference to which it will invite delegates from council trade unions, other union branches in the area, local Labour Parties, tenants' associations and community groups. The conference, to be held on March 26, shall be called to win support for the Statement of Intent and its application. This conference shall determine whether and how to proceed with the course of action it outlines.

"Prior to the Labour Movement Conference the Labour group and Local Government Committee shall re-launch the 'Make the Tories Pay' campaign that was begun at the end of 1982 door-to-door canvassing."

"We shall seek to involve the council trade unions in this campaign and produce a further protest letter on the theme, 'We Won't Pay the Tory Surcharge'."

"We shall attempt to organise borough-wide canvassing with this material in order to build support for the March 26 conference."

"The March issue of 'Islington Focus' shall reprint the Labour group's 'Statement of Intent' in full and carry as much supporting material as is possible."

"The Local Government Committee and the Labour group shall press strenuously at the London Regional Conference of the Labour Party for support for our plans, through an emergency resolution declaring London Labour's full support to Islington, through financial aid for our campaign, and appeals for help with mass canvassing."

"The Labour group shall approach Labour groups in other London boroughs and on the GLC to get them to provide assistance to Islington and to follow a similar course of action."

"The Labour group shall appoint a full-time legal adviser, with specialist knowledge of local authority finance and legislation and sympathetic to the campaign, to investigate the various tactics needed to best pursue the course of action decided."

"Plans shall be made for dealing with resistance from senior officers. These plans shall be made in detailed terms which would allow members to assume direct control of all Council affairs, and shall be in hand by the Special Council meeting of March 29."

"Plans shall be made to ensure that consingency funds, lodged with other Labour Authorities or other sympathetic institutions, are in hand by the March 29 Special Council meeting in order to be able to continue paying employees for as long a period as possible after the banks refuse to deal directly with the Council."

This is the Statement of Intent referred to:

"Islington Council's Labour Group plans, together with the labour movement of the borough, to press forward with its plans for improving housing, jobs and services in Islington."

"We intend at a Special Meeting of the Council on March 29 to present a budget for the Council in 1983-4 which will mean:

"1. Keeping up the present level of all our services. That will cost £77.3 million this year."

"2. Improving and expanding some services - by decentralising our housing, repairs and social services, increasing the wages of our lowest-paid workers, increasing support to registered childminders and improving services for the old and disabled, at a cost of £4.2 million."

"3. Freezing council rents."

"We therefore plan to spend a total of £81.5 million on maintaining and improving the Council's services. But that figure has been made artificially high because the government is 'penalising' us for spending money to help the old, the disabled, mothers and the low paid."

"The real cost of the increased services we plan for this year is only £1.6 million, but the government has added a penalty of £2.6 million to the cost... making it  $2\frac{1}{2}$  times as expensive, at £4.4 million."

"The Tories have done the same to our main budget. Without the 'Tory Surcharge' the cost of 'no cuts' would be £71.3 million, not £77.3 million. Another £6 million taken away.

"This means the total Tory Surcharge on Islington is £9 million. The government want us to force you, the people of Islington, to pay that difference through higher rent and rates. We refuse to force you to pay this Tory Surcharge. It would be an impossible burden at a time when real wages are falling and unemployment soaring.

"They are cutting back the money they give to Islington and want you to pay. To balance the council's budget after the Tory Surcharge we would have to increase our total rates bill from £40 million last year to over £50 million in 1983. It would mean a 30% rise in rates.

"But the real cost of our extra services, and inflation on existing services, only adds up to £2.5 million, and it should only mean a 4% rise in rates if the Tories paid their share.

"The Tories owe us the £9 million we need to keep the Council's services running. We demand they pay up!

"The Tories will not admit they are trying to rob us. They will accuse your Council of 'overspending' despite the fact that Islington's problems are getting worse. The only thing we can do, if we are not to make you pay the 'Tory Surcharge', is to run an 'unbalanced' council budget in 1983-4.

"The Tories will use this as an excuse to try and take control of the Council away from your elected councillors. They will try to hand the Council over to unelected officials who they will order to carry out their robbery for them by cutting services, slashing jobs, and increasing rents and rates. We will, together with our workers, fight to stop the Tories trampling on democracy in this way.

"The banks will act for the Tories too. They will try to freeze the Council's finances and force all the Borough's services to grind to a halt and leave our workers unpaid. We will fight them too. We will make it our first priority to find ways to continue paying our workers and keep our services running when the attack comes.

"We do not propose to embark on this course of action without consulting and involving those most affected by the fight to stop the Tory Surcharge: the Council's workers, council tenants, and the users of our services. That is why Islington Council's Labour group of councillors is calling together a local Labour Movement Conference on March 26 to win support for our policy of refusing to pay the Tory Surcharge, before we take the final decision."

Such a campaign would have to go together with more general demands:

- \* Denunciation of the burden of interest charges: demand cancellation of the councils' debt burden, interest-free loans from central government, and nationalisation without compensation of the banks and finance institutions. (Interest charges are often 30% or more of councils' current spending).

- \* Denunciation of the inequitable features of the rates system (e.g. the fact that, since housing is a bigger part of the budgets of the poor, it bears more heavily on many low-paid workers than on the well-off). Defend existing local democracy: demand increased powers for local authorities to levy whatever taxes they decide on. Put the burden of taxation onto the wealthy.

- \* Take the whole building industry into public ownership, without compensation and under workers' and community control. Launch a national crash house-building programme.

- \* Workers' and community control of housing and of education.

If the council adopted the policy outlined above, then various things could happen next.

1. Probably the council officers would refuse to implement the 'unbalanced' budget, and would prepare their own rent/rate rises and cuts. Legally they can do

this. The councillors should then call on the council unions and tenants to take action against the rent/rate rises and cuts, following the policy of their elected council rather than unelected officials.

2. If the officials cooperated, the next hurdle would be the banks. Councils depend heavily on short-term borrowing to run their current affairs. It has already happened that the money markets have frozen out, or imposed astronomical interest rates on councils like the GLC and Lambeth for short periods.

Faced with such measures, the council should:

- a) Demonstratively stop payment of outstanding interest charges and precepts.
- b) use all available funds, current incomes, etc. exclusively for paying its workforce.
- c) Call for industrial and rent and rate strikes to demand that the government grants finance.

3. It is unlikely that both the senior officials and the banks would cooperate with an unbalanced budget. If they did, however, the next step would be intervention by the District Auditor, a government official, who could take the council to court and have it removed for financial irresponsibility. The councillors would be disqualified and surcharged, and the running of the council handed over to the officials pending a new election. (Under current law the government cannot send in commissioners).

Again, the council should respond by calling on tenants and workers to fight for the policy of their elected council, against the intervention of the courts and central government.

4. It is logically conceivable, but in practice very unlikely, that the senior officials, the banks, and the District Auditor could all sit back and wait for the council to run out of money on the basis of its unbalanced budget. If so, the council, when it comes close to running out of money, should stop paying interest charges and thus precipitate variant 2, above.

All this discussion of what the council should do in this or that eventuality has its importance. In a sense, however, it is beside the main point.\*

The answer to the question: 'What strategy for councils to fight the cuts?' is: No such strategy is possible. Councils do not have the power to fight the cuts. Local labour movements do. What we can develop is a strategy for local labour movements to fight the cuts, within which councillors can use their position to help the struggle and give a lead.

Labour councillors must see themselves primarily as a part of this labour movement effort, rather than of the municipal machine - as fighters, not administrators. That is the basic principle by which all tactical issues such as rate rises are determined.

Left councillors often say that they would love to lead a fight, but there is no sign of the council unions budging, so what can they do? In fact whenever a council has given a lead for a fight, however faltering, as in Lambeth or Lothian, the working-class response has been excellent. It is the councillors who eventually have been found wanting.

There is, of course, no guarantee that a lead from councillors would bring a

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\* Footnote: A variant would be for the council to declare a huge rate rise but simultaneously declare 'illegally' generous rate rebates so that all ordinary domestic ratepayers and small businesses paid no increase. The result would almost certainly be that the senior council officials would refuse to implement this, and we would be into alternative 1, above; but this gambit does have the advantage of posing the issue more starkly in class terms rather than in the populist/parochial terms of "the people of Islington" (or whatever) against "central government".

response, still less a guarantee that it would bring victory against central government. But it is a thousand times better for the left to remain true to itself and go down fighting, than for the left to take responsibility for those options that exist in the absence of a fight. If the condition of the working class makes a real fighting council impossible, then so be it: it is the job of serious socialists patiently to argue from a minority position to change the condition of the working class, not to make themselves a reflection of it and thus, inevitably, a factor in perpetuating it.

Historically, local government has been a machine for corruption of the labour movement - parallel to, and probably just as important as, the trade union bureaucracy. Just as the shop-floor militant gets drawn into the world of committees and time-off-for-union-duties, then up into officialdom, at each stage getting more and more drawn into the business of managing industrial relations in partnership with the bosses; so the Labour Party activist gets drawn into the municipal structures.

There are differences. Some councillors develop a close relationship with the working class in their wards, but most don't. Their constituency is an aggregate of individual citizens, not the relatively compact body of organised workers which forms the constituency of a trade union representative. Moreover, councillors are employers, or rather they are attached to a bureaucratic apparatus which is an employer. The corrupting effects of the council hierarchies are therefore usually even more devastating than those of the union hierarchies.

Just as the answer in the unions is not to do away with any permanent machinery or system of paid officials, but to fight for the rank and file to exert control, so also in local government the answer is not to leave all the councils to the Tories but to win control over councillors by the local labour movement and to make the councillors fight against the system.

The 1880 programme of the French Workers' Party, in an introduction drafted by Marx, defined the aim of the socialists in relation to universal suffrage as to transform it "from the instrument of deception that it has been up till now, into an instrument of emancipation".

Such should be our attitude to local democracy.

This differentiates us both from the mainstream local government leftists and, at the other pole, from the Socialist Workers' Party.

The SWP has made many criticisms of the left councils - some rather hysterical, some very telling. Even their best criticisms, however, are made sterile by the fact that they are all used to promote the argument that socialists should abstain from the political struggle within the Labour Party (and, increasingly, the struggle within the unions too). Thus the SWP ends up worsening the insufficiency of active Marxist engagement in the labour movement, leaving an even greater vacuum to be filled by the 'municipal socialists'.

Their attitude is no better than that of syndicalists who (very correctly) denounce the shams and corruption of parliamentary politics, but conclude that they should turn their backs on the whole arena and concentrate exclusively on industrial organising. Since the reality of parliamentary politics does not disappear when the syndicalists turn their backs on it, their abstention only strengthens the parliamentary reformists by freeing them of potential opposition. Likewise with the SWP and municipal politics.

Socialist Action has followed a strange hybrid policy - rather servile towards Ken Livingstone, not very different from the SWP in areas like Islington.

## 10. IMMEDIATE PROSPECTS

The immediate prospects are not good. The labour movement generally is in a depressed state, the local government left even more so. There are signs of a serious fight over the 1984-5 budget at present only in Liverpool, and Liverpool may well crumble before the crunch.

So long as this remains so, the job of Marxists must be to prepare for the



future by patiently arguing for a fighting perspective. We will, necessarily, be in a fairly marginalised position - arguing 'from the back of the hall', as it were.

But we should beware of sectarianism. Despite everything said in the previous sections, the local government left is not played out yet. It has not separated off from the general labour movement left to become a crystallised elite, immune to any processes of discussion and struggle within the labour movement. While being very clear in our minds about the seriousness of the issues between us and the local government left, we must put across our arguments in such a way that we are trying to convince the local government left (and the general Labour left, from which it is not much differentiated), rather than just denounce them.

We may be wrong in our estimate on 1984-5. Liverpool may fight. Other councils may. And in 1985-6 the local government left will come into head-on collision with the Tory government: sections of it may well fight.

Meanwhile, councillors are not the only factor in local government. The workforce in this sector remains relatively unscathed by large-scale redundancies, and union organisation within it is often getting stronger - see, for example, the spread of the shop steward system in NALGO.

## 11. S.O. COUNCILLORS

We had one comrade elected as a councillor in the West Midlands in May 1981. Two councillors, one in Leeds, one in Newham, joined the SOA with other supporters of Socialist Press in summer 1981.

In May 1982, two SOA comrades were elected to the council in Islington, an additional one in Newham, and others in Tower Hamlets, Hounslow, Camden, Bradford, and Manchester.

Further SOA comrades were elected to councils in Stoke and in Basingstoke in May 1983. In addition, a number of other councillors have been less committed SO supporters at various times.

It is important to draw an honest balance-sheet. Our experience with SO councillors has not been good. Of those listed above, the two in Newham and the one in Bradford have withdrawn from SO - on the basis of cynicism and demoralisation. Of the others, only the comrades in Basingstoke, Stoke, Tower Hamlets and Hounslow could be described as well-integrated into the overall work of the SOA.

Now no socialist organisation runs like clockwork. In every area of work people get demoralised or cynical, or stick into a routine, from time to time. But closer examination of our experience with councillors suggests that the problems here are not just run-of-the-mill, but deeper. And they are problems of our overall work, not just of whether, when and how we stand councillors.

The best work done by SO comrades on councils - notably in Tower Hamlets and Hounslow - has been where they have focused on local campaigning in their wards, rather than on the council committees. For example, in Tower Hamlets contacts have been established with the Bangladeshi community that we would never have had otherwise.

At first sight it seems paradoxical that this better work has been done on two of the most right-wing Labour councils in London, whereas - despite a lot of effort and central attention - our work in left-wing Islington has been much less productive. Perhaps the issue of creating a left caucus on Islington council explains why. We discussed it many times. The basic problem is that either the left caucus is defined by a clear position on rate rises - in which case it is at most two or three people - or it has a more general left platform, in which case it includes practically the whole Labour group. In Islington, in an overwhelmingly left milieu with very little differentiation, we are fighting ideologically on slippery ground. Sooner or later that vague left will differentiate under pressure of struggles, but until it does revolutionary Marxists within it find it more difficult to get their ideas across clearly than if they appeared in bold contrast to a hard right wing.



## 12. WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS?

Various sectarians, such as Workers Power, have attacked our council work as unprincipled. These attacks are based on untruths and half-truths.

It is a fact, and given the circumstances it is a fairly well known fact, that one of the SO comrades on Islington Council, Alan Clinton, disagrees with the editorial line of SO. More precisely (if I have understood him right), he sympathises with the intention of that line, but considers that the policy is insufficiently worked out to direct an actual fight, and in practice there will be no option but rate rises.

The point, however, is that Alan has always been prepared to respect and vote according to the majority view of the Islington SO group on this. Indeed, one of the positive sides of the experience in Islington is that it shows the value of being part of a structured socialist organisation rather than just an individual socialist activist with no ideological anchor.

That we have not breached principle, however, is not enough. For revolutionaries there is no virtue as such in being a councillor, a civic dignitary. It is simply a position where we say be better-placed to promote revolutionary politics.

Often, however, the position has made our comrades less effective as revolutionaries, not more so.

That a comrade votes in a principled way on dozens of committees is excellent. But if that is a purely individual act, without the local SO group or the SOA nationally knowing the issues and deciding the line - and the fact is that, too often, with many of our councillors, it is a purely individual act - then the political significance is minimal. And the seeds of unprincipled politics are there, however good the individual's intentions.

There are other cases of councillor comrades who do take issues to the SOA and make themselves politically accountable to it, yet remain ineffective as revolutionaries. To be effective as a revolutionary in a position like that of a councillor, it is not sufficient to be integrated into the SOA to the extent that might suffice for a comrade with no special public responsibility. More integration is necessary. That is difficult, very often, for the councillors: they feel they have enough on their hands with council work. But without that greater integration, the game is not worth the candle.

## 13. STANDING FOR COUNCIL

All our comrades became councillors as a result of a fight in the local labour movement: they fought against existing councillors and were finally faced with the choice of replacing those people or appearing as windbags.

So far, so good. But the result was to reveal a lack of proper proportion and balance in our work.

The comrades who became councillors were those most heavily integrated into the Labour Party. Now in any socialist group there tends to be a differentiation between comrades with different talents. Some are good at integrating themselves into the broad labour movement; some are good at the 'narrower-focus' work of revolutionaries, convincing and recruiting individuals. One crucial task of a socialist organisation is to integrate these diverse talents into a cohesive force, and to help remedy the one-sidedness of each individual. The ideal revolutionary would be equally talented in every field. Most comrades, however, are not ideal revolutionaries. And, in particular, often the comrades most integrated into the broad labour movement are not the most integrated into the SOA.

When the comrades became councillors, that tended to aggravate the differentiation. Those most inclined to prioritise broad labour movement work above specific SO work were drawn into a situation that would accentuate that inclination.

(Verbal proclamations of the importance of specific revolutionary organisa-

are not the same as real integration into the organisations that actually exists. There are many 'private Leninists', often of a somewhat sectarian and rigid bent, who in practice operate entirely as individuals on the basis of broad labour movement routine. All of the councillor comrades who have left the SSOA used to insist on the need not to get too immersed in the Labour Party, etc. etc.; but the fact is that now they are Labour councillors and not organised revolutionaries).

Obviously there was too much differentiation - not enough integration - in our work beforehand. Getting comrades elected as councillors has aggravated that.

In every case where SO comrades have stood for council, it has been discussed in the local group, and usually nationally. But that monitoring needs to be done better. And, given the present problems, we should be cautious about any more SO comrades putting up for council. If the number of councillors outstrips our ability to integrate them into the SOA, then that is self-defeating.

The correspondence about Arthur Bough standing for the council in Stoke illustrates some of the issues:

Letter to Arthur, 4.3.83 (excerpts)

"I'm not sure that this [standing for council] is a good idea...

Standing for council is sometimes an important part of the fight for socialist politics in the LP. But it has to be balanced with other considerations. A basic conditions for standing for council to be wise, it seems to me, is the existence of a strong local group, so that (a) council work does not push out other work, (b) there is some political base for and supervision over the comrade on the council.

I don't think these conditions exist yet in Stoke...

Being a councillor involves dealing with a bureaucracy which could very well run the council without any elected representatives at all. You have to deal with a stream of paperwork and know exactly when to object - or else you quickly find yourself tied into decisions which you never bargained for. Meanwhile your relationship with your 'base' - with the LP ward and even more with the electorate - is much weaker than, for example, a shop steward's in a workplace...

The position generates big pressures towards opportunism - or, alternatively, towards becoming completely alienated and isolated. Also, even those comrades who have done pretty well politically are unhappy with the work pressures on them.

So my recommendation would be to reconsider..."

Reply from Arthur, 5.3.83 (excerpts)

"I have to disagree with your conclusions for the following reasons:

1. There are now 6 SO supporters in Stoke... plus quite a large periphery of sympathisers. There is no shortage of comrades in the group to undertake the very limited number of areas of work available in the area...

2. I have written to you in the past explaining the moves being made to oust the old right wing from the Council... The results are now apparent of the success the left has had in this campaign... We have recruited people to the group and built our periphery by our conscious orientation to the LP and the drive to democratise it, as opposed to the sectarian attitude that prevailed in the past of criticising without being prepared to take on the work of the people we criticised. To revert to that former attitude now would destroy the group and the credibility we have built up...

4. The ward for which I have been selected is a solid left wing ward... In my address I referred openly to the way in which we see the role of councillors not as managers of the local state but as the mouthpiece of the working class... All this is accepted and I see no danger of any accommodation..."

Reply to Arthur, 10.3.83

"Thanks for your letter. I'm convinced..."

With hindsight, I think I was wrong to be convinced. In the mobilisation for September 17, the Stoke SO group proved to be not very much as a hard organised force. What we lack in Stoke is not a broad range of labour movement contacts, such as can be won, or extended, by standing for council, but the work of consolidating the most committed of those contacts into a cohesive group. For the most committed of the comrades to stand for council is to go in the wrong direction.

#### 14. RELATION TO THE WORK OF THE S.O. GROUPS

Immediately, a cautious approach to standing for council will mean that some SO comrades will have to resist strong pressures from local 'left public opinion'. We should not be too frightened of that: left-wingers in Islington who resisted pressure to stand for the council are, understandably, not very popular with the councillors, but their work in the labour movement has not suffered particularly.

But being cautious is not enough. We must look for the roots of the problem. Why is it that in several areas we can find ourselves terribly weak in terms of definite organised forces, yet apparently very strong in terms of the labour movement wanting to put our comrades forward to prominent positions?

The apparent strength is a deception. For a revolutionary to be elected to a council on the Labour ticket - even when that revolutionary has argued his/her politics very openly in the Labour Party, and has got all sorts of radical phrases in the election address - is a million miles different from a councillor being elected on a revolutionary ticket. For revolutionary politics, the sort of support that really counts is hard, organised, ideologically committed support. As regards the vague sort of support indicated in a vote for one of our comrades to be councillor, we must do what we can with it, but we should never rely on it.

The problems that have arisen with our councillors reveal that the whole balance of our activity is wrong. The work of establishing respect and broad support in the broad labour movement is important; but plainly the balance of our activity has been tilted too much in favour of that sort of work, and too little to specifically SO work. Paper sales, educationals, contact visiting, singlejack (one-to-one) propaganda, internal SO organisation - these are the activities that have suffered relative neglect, and to which the emphasis must be switched.

As noted above, the best work done by SO councillors has been when they have turned to local agitation and campaigning in their wards. This is the direction in which we should turn our existing councillors.

In short: we need to redirect resources away from the 'medium-focus' work of labour movement meetings and committees, towards both the 'broad-focus' work of local doorstep, street and factory-gate campaigning, and the 'narrow-focus' work of internal SO organisation and singlejack propaganda.

This simultaneous move to a narrower and to a broader focus is not contradictory. Often the only thing that will sift out the most revolutionary activists from a broad left milieu is a turn to direct struggle, in the community or in a workplace. Also, the 'narrow-focus' work, if it is not to become sterile, needs to constantly renew the circle of contacts on which we operate, and even the best established local labour movement left wing offers only a limited circle.

Martin Thomas. October 1983.