

By Cathy Nugent, WSN  
Steering Committee

**F**ROM the back of a battered old bus can be heard raucous laughter. It's Welfare State Network campaigners on their way to another town. Starting on 24 September, 30 of us travelled across Britain, from Hull, through the towns of South Yorkshire, to a lobby of Labour Party Conference in Blackpool.

It was a case of pack up your sense of humour in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile... Or else cry at the terrible contrast between the plight of the working class and what official Labour leaders are doing about it, and shown by the Labour councils of the towns we went through.

Scoffing a buffet put on for the marchers in Doncaster's Mansion House, we saw the "Lady" Mayoress proudly showing off her £90,000 gold chain. Later she invited the "ladies" into her "parlour" to drink "ladies' drinks" (double Bacardis) and view the priceless antiques. That evening's local paper announced £64 million in council cuts.

At another civic reception, in Barnsley, we slipped away to wander the marbled corridors of the huge town hall, built to impress during the 1930s. High on a hill in the centre of the town, it was opened by the Nazi-sympathising Edward, Prince of Wales, while most working-class people were either out of work or scratching around for a living.

It is 1996, but we feel the same kind of resentment Barnsley people must have felt back then. Inside the town hall we see miners' banners displayed like museum exhibits. For Barnsley's burghers, no doubt, the painted slogans "for liberty", "for socialism" are museum pieces — "archaic", "Old Labour" and "strictly for the history books."

The banners clash with ceiling-to-floor glass display cases full of silver platters and other trinkets. See how great our civic masters are! While we live in latter-day slums and put up with £2.50 an hour jobs, our



# Marching for welfare

elected bosses "make savings" in the council budget so that they can continue to deck the halls with shiny treasure.

It did not have to be this way. For years the Labour Party has dominated local government. In areas like Barnsley, despite the presence of Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party, working-class people will continue to vote Labour. For seventeen years Labour said "vote for us, put us in power." But when they got into local government, they said "really we have *no power*", "our hands are tied", "we can do nothing."

Labour councils did not organise a national fight against Tory cuts. Instead they turned against their workforce and local people, cutting jobs and services.

**A**S we approach the election we know for sure Labour will say again "our hands are tied", if now not by a Tory-controlled central government, then by "the rigours of competition" in the world capitalist economy.

Our future is in our own hands. We need to rebuild our movement from the



“ Desperate people cheered us, relieved to hear



# jobs and the e state

ground up, organising around ideals which are "old-fashioned" to the Blairites but still have a deep resonance in working class communities: decent social provision, full employment, industrial rights. The Welfare State Network exists to embody these ideals.

Along the march, we talked to local people — pensioners, school children, nurses, the unemployed and people on low pay. Everyone had a story to tell. Thousands support our cause.

On Saturday the marchers joined up with the demonstration in Liverpool marking a year of the dockers' struggle. We stood side by side with heroic men fighting for their livelihoods, and with hundreds of young ravers, whose total disenchantment with life under the Tories was now finally manifesting itself in support for the basic struggle of our class against theirs.

Bury then Bolton followed the same story, desperate people cheering us on our way, relieved to hear someone saying what Major and Blair won't.

We moved on to Tameside. No greeting from the lord mayor here. Tameside have just cut £30,000 from the local unemployed centre. The local trades council had organised a rally against the Jobseeker's

Allowance, the oppressive, vile legislation that will force the very same unemployed into jobs on poverty wages.

On Tuesday we joined up with pensioners and students to lobby Labour Party conference. The feeling was fantastic. We had marched 175 miles, coast to coast, and here we were giving full vent to our demands on the next Labour government.

We watched Blair's speech in a local pub and our feelings turned to anger as he offered nothing. But we won't give up. We know Britain is rich, we know our demands are just and realistic, and the vast majority of people agree with us.

During the march we had passed through Manchester where it was "Children's Week". In the town hall school students from Hulme had created displays, writing about what they want when Hulme — one of the biggest slum housing estates in Western Europe — is redeveloped. They want grass, trees, open spaces, somewhere to play where they will be safe, swimming pools, youth clubs, and nicer, warmer, drier places to live.

For Tony Blair this is too much to ask. For us, it is not enough. We only want the earth.

## An emergency plan to rebuild the Welfare State

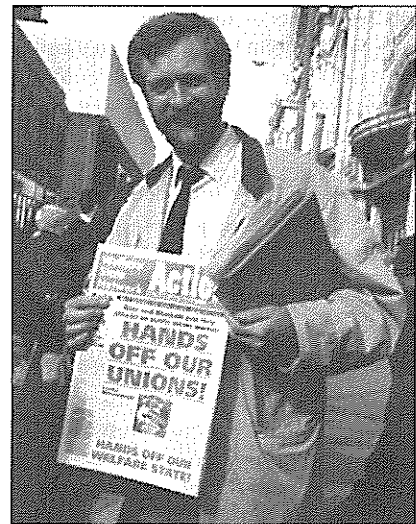
THESE are the demands for a Labour Government that the Welfare State Network will be campaigning around up to, during and after the general election:

- reverse all cuts in all sectors of education
- a building programme to house the homeless
- immediate cash injection for the health service
- raise the state pension, restore the link to average earnings
- create new jobs and introduce a minimum wage of at least £4.26 an hour.

The full text of the Network's Emergency Plan can be obtained from: Welfare State Network, 183 Queen's Crescent, London NW5 4DS.

● **WSN Eve of Budget lobby of Parliament, 2pm, 25th November**

● **"Women and the Welfare State" — WSN conference, 11.30am start, 30th November, ULU, Malet Street, London. Details: 0171-639 5068.**



**"The Welfare State Network is the best campaign in defence of the welfare state. They don't just talk about action; they go out and organise it."**

*Jeremy Corbyn MP,  
speaking at the WSN lobby of  
Labour Party conference*

someone saying what Major and Blair won't. ☹