

Class war in the Blitz

50 years ago this year Nazi Germany surrendered to the Allied armies. The "great national effort" to defeat Hitler had never stopped working-class people fighting against their rulers. Here Ray Challinor describes war-time events the Establishment will ignore in their official commemorations.

ON SEPTEMBER 7 1940, the Conway Hall in London was packed. John McGovern MP had just started to speak. He told his audience that the war was not a struggle between Democracy and Dictatorship. It was a capitalist-imperialist war, a fight of have-empires against have-not-empires. At that moment, the air-raid sirens wailed. Then the anti-aircraft guns opened up. German bombs started dropping.

For fifty-three days, virtually continuously, day and night, the Luftwaffe pounded London.

Ordinary people's lives were suddenly disrupted. The normal difficulties experienced by working-class families became immeasurably greater. Food shops opened less; their queues grew longer. Getting to school could be both dangerous for children and stressful for the parents. Trying to go to work could be hazardous: it could involve long hours of standing in vain at a bus stop, exposed to bomb and bullet, waiting for a bus that may have been cancelled or re-routed because of enemy action. And, of course, after arriving at work, there was no guarantee of getting home again. Bomb craters, fires, streets cordoned off, no transport — these were a few of the possible obstacles to be surmounted.

Nor would home necessarily be a secure refuge. Many of the worst raids happened at night. Once the air-raid warning had sounded, families would scurry off to whatever shelter they could find. Public protection remained exceedingly inadequate. Despite many building workers being unemployed, few deep underground shelters had

been built. Admittedly, there were a greater number of brick-built shelters, situated above ground in the highway, that afforded a little protection from flying debris for persons trapped by a surprise attack. Most people, however, either had to make do within a flimsy Anderson shelter, which they dug themselves in the back garden, or crouch beneath kitchen tables. Popular pressure, an illegal campaign largely led by the left, forced the authorities to keep the tube stations permanently open. Thousands bedded each night on the platforms. Others, less fortunate, spent their nights sleeping under railway arches or in sunken warehouses. One of the most notorious of these was at Tilbury, where up to 14,000 people regularly dosed down, despite being disturbed by hawkers selling their wares and prostitutes plying their trade. On the Isle of Dogs, an American journalist found 3,000 people with only eight vile-smelling improvised toilets.¹

But Britain was a class-divided society. Not everyone had to endure these hardships. The American journalist, already mentioned, went from the Isle of Dogs to the Dorchester Hotel. There he discovered the management had converted the cellars into expensive luxury shelters. Nine peers slept there each night. One of them was Lord Halifax, the foreign secretary. Throughout the night, he stayed well-supplied by a waiter with his favourite brand of whisky.² Their wives and lady friends tended to frequent part of the subterranean complex that had been turned into a games room. Other wealthy people arranged for their own private shelters to be built. The most expensive belonged to Mrs. E.M. Rawcroft, 31-year-old millionairess, the daughter of Sir Edward Wills of Imperial Tobacco. Built in the garden of her mansion at Torbay, Devon, it cost £24,000 and never needed to be used. Costing a small fraction of this, yet still a sign of gross extravagance, was the Soviet ambassador's refuge from aerial attack — a mere £1,600. It aroused the socialist wrath of the *New Leader*: undiplomatically the editor reminded readers of Maisky's counter-revolutionary past in Tsarist Russia as a member of the Black Hundreds, of the fact that he only joined the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution had been victorious, and he suggested Maisky's London shelter symbolised his privileged position that differentiated the Stalinist bureaucracy from the working class, both in Britain and the Soviet Union.³

Still greater safety than any shelter, however deep, however well protected, could provide, would be secured by adopting a simple expedient: sail away on a magic carpet of money to the peace and tranquility of the United States. In his diary, Chips Channon, the heir to the Guinness fortune, described the scene at Euston station where he, along with other affluent parents, bade farewell to their offspring, as they boarded the boat train and began the journey to the New World: "There were a queue of Rolls Royces and liveried servants and mountains of trunks. It seemed that everyone we knew was there." Clive Ponting, in his book on 1940, gives an impressive list of those leav-

ing this emerald isle, set in a silver sea, for safer climes. All sections of high society were represented: Lord Mountbatten sent his wife and children, cabinet minister Duff Cooper his son. John Julius Norwich, city magnates like the four Rothschild families and Sir Charles Hambro dispatched their children. There were even individuals who gained political fame — or should it be notoriety? — in a time yet to come: Paul Channon, destined to be Mrs Thatcher's Minister of Transport; Jeremy Thorpe, to lead the Liberal Party; and Shirley Williams, to become a Labour cabinet minister. An estimated total of 17,000 children left this country. The intelligence services confidentially confided to the government that a million parents would have availed themselves of the opportunity to send their children abroad, given the opportunity — or, rather, they should have said, the money.⁴

The existence of two Britains could not be illustrated better than by the fact that canine lives were more valued than most children's. The *Scottish Daily Express* announced that the aristocrats of Scotland's dog kingdom had been evacuated to the United States and the colonies. Not wanting to run the risk of rare strains being wiped out in air raids, many famous prize winners

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In the Dorchester Hotel,
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shelters."*

and most of the older pedigree stock left "for the duration of hostilities."⁵

Evacuees from working-class homes did not receive such cossetted treatment. Dispatched to country areas, they were often unwelcome visitors, interlopers overstraining already inadequate facilities. Not only did the influx aggravate existing education and housing problems, it brought in individuals not adjusted to their new habitat. Some of the new arrivals, of course, came from problem families. In his novel, *Put Out More Flags*, Evelyn Waugh has a cunning character who traipses some disreputable, dirty and delinquent evacuees from house to rural house, threatening to billet them on the unfortunate occupants unless he is given an inducement to do otherwise. It was a way, to put it in legal parlance, of gaining money by menaces. Yet, even well-behaved evacuees could constitute a threat: coming from unhealthy city slums, they might spread disease.

The tensions engendered quickly aroused conflict. In September 1939, a Tory MP complained about the verminous evacuees from Glasgow arriving in his constituency. This immediately evoked a furious outburst from George Buchanan, the Labour M.P. for the

Gorbals: "You are taking the fathers to fight, yet you come here and make villainous, slanderous statements about their children." The ILP Member for Glasgow Camlachie, Campbell Stephens, then joined in, providing instances of the shabby treatment often meted out to evacuees. He cited the example of 150 mothers and children, dumped in a cold village hall and given straw or dirty mattresses to sleep on. Only two toilets were provided. Yet nearby was the Duke of Argyll's castle virtually empty.⁶

The authorities found themselves assailed from all sides. The rural recipients, clamorously complaining, demanded the evacuees' removal. Equally the evacuees themselves were often unhappy, not adjusted to their new environment and without the money for the train fares to visit their parents. The parents grumbled because they did not have the time or money to visit their offspring, as well as about their treatment. When in the first months of the war the massive air raids that were expected failed to materialise, the majority of evacuees started trickling home. As a result, most children had returned to the danger zones when, by the autumn of 1940, the German air raids began in earnest.

In some official quarters, the onset of the blitz in the autumn of 1940 occasioned signs of panic. Hurriedly, fresh evacuation plans were devised. One of these was to move children from London to Brighton. This was rather as if the British generals in the Crimean war had ordered the cavalry from their barracks and to gallop in the direction of Balaclava... for their own safety! Dr. R.D. Worrall, Brighton's Medical Officer of Health, on his own initiative, produced a leaflet denouncing this lunatic move. The leaflet stated that the evacuation only increased the danger to children since Brighton was "in the front line". For his troubles, Dr. Worrall — who, incidentally, was a pioneer of British Trotskyism — was fined £100 under a defence regulation and dismissed from his post as Medical Officer of Health. But then, for officialdom, two embarrassing things happened. First, Churchill, on a well-publicised visit to Brighton, used the same phrase as Worrall, boasting that he had come "to the front line". The other was that tragically a German bomb exploded in a cinema during a children's matinée, killing many of the evacuees. Dr. Worrall was reinstated and his fine reduced to £5.⁷

At another southern city — Portsmouth — morale seems to have plumbed the depths. Ordinary people's depression grew as they became accustomed to seeing the affluent leaving the city each night, not wanting to experience the dangers of the bombing. Their exit was made more conspicuous by the fact that only one road connected Portsmouth to the mainland. However, attacks did not happen simply at night. Often solitary German aircraft, largely for nuisance value, would fly over to disrupt the city's economic activity. In order to lessen the impact of these irritating intruders, the authorities refused to open the air raid shelters unless the threat was consid-

ered to be a serious risk. But their judgement could be flawed. On one occasion, a solitary aircraft appearance proved to be merely the prelude to a full-scale raid. In terror, people ran to the shelters. These remained closed. Crowds clamoured to break open the locks as the police, under orders to keep the shelters closed, baton-charged the anxious multitude. A riot ensued. As a consequence, many were injured and two men killed. Later, a protest meeting was held. A resolution was passed condemning police violence and calling for all shelters, both public and private, to be kept open. Captain R.E.B. Beaumont, Tory Member for Portsmouth Central, led a protest delegation to the Home Office."

Sudden loud explosions, the result of anti-aircraft fire, caused people to rush to Bethnal Green underground station and resulted in the worst civilian disaster of the blitz. A woman with a baby, it seems, apparently slipped on the badly-lit winding staircase. Those following piled on top of her, within a minute creating a mass of dying humanity. All told, 173 lives were lost — 27 men, 84 women and 62 children. An official inquiry was held, but the Home Secretary kept its findings secret. A bland and unilluminating explanation was provided to Parliament: "The effective cause of the disaster was that a number of people lost their self control at a particularly unfortunate time and place." But survivors dispute that there had been any panic. They pointed to the narrow entrance to the stair-well, a hazard that local people had, months before, drawn to the attention of the Home Office. It may be that the authorities, opposed to the occupancy of underground shelters anyway, felt no compulsion to make entry easier. Even so, it left the local populace with a smouldering hatred. In 1993, a commemorative plaque was unveiled at the station's entrance. The *Sunday Observer*, giving many facts about the tragedy, headlined the article "Bitterness lingers at worst civilian disaster of the war". Until then, the Home Office had kept the cause and extent of the disaster secret. One of the survivors, Mrs Faull, recalled how the government sought to stifle protest: "My father went to 10 Downing Street with a petition. He was marched off by soldiers with bayonets."

The bombing also served to draw attention to other grievances festering away in British society. Opposed to sexual discrimination, Campbell Stephens complained in Parliament about the big difference in compensation awarded to men and women. A man totally disabled by enemy action received 32 shillings and sixpence a week whereas a women worker only got 22 shillings and sixpence. Even worse, he argued, was the treatment of the totally disabled, housewives and old persons, who received nothing whatsoever. In official eyes, they made no economic contribution to society and hence their loss of limbs merited no compensation.¹⁰

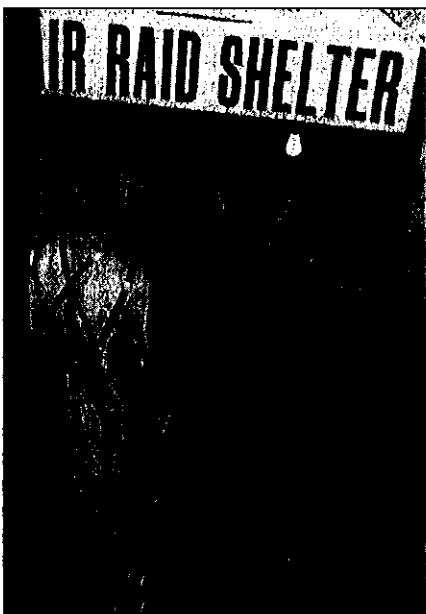
The plight of old people in air raids was liable to be dire. They had never been included in any evacuation plans. Yet, in air raids their reduced mobility made it more



Working-class children were evacuated to often cold welcomes in Britain's rural areas. The children of the rich went to the USA.



A campaign led by the left forced the government to open Tube stations as shelters



The rich had their own luxury shelters

difficult to reach the security of shelters. The blind, deaf and senile may easily be terrified, disorientated and unable to comprehend what is happening. Fortunately for many with these handicaps, they lived in working-class areas, where a strong community spirit and tradition of mutual help existed.

Working-class dwellings, situated close to factories and other military targets, were more likely to be bombed than middle-class estates, located in the leafy suburbs. Even so, sometimes the latter did receive the unwelcome attention of the Luftwaffe. Then the authorities tended to apply a discriminatory policy. Kingsley Martin, in the *New Statesman*, observed the differential treatment: "People dug out of their shelters in the West End are immediately taken off by taxis to hotels, given hot drinks and warm beds in an underground shelter — so they should be. Some of these people in East London wandered about for 13 hours, having lost all possessions in the world except what they stood up in, and were directed to a series of addresses which involved as much as eight miles walking before they were cared for."¹¹

Newspapers carried headlines like "Homeless East Enders don't know where to go" and "Abandoned us — cry London's homeless". In the capital an estimated 80,000 people had been made homeless by the bombing. Some were forced to sleep at Epping Forest in the open air. Herbert Morrison, the Home Secretary, was exhorted to compile a register of empty dwellings. But he seemed more concerned to retain the men of property's goodwill, not the people's. Some landlords still expected tenants to pay rents — indeed some were even increased — when the houses were unfit for human habitation. In face of official inactivity, the Left called upon direct action: "Take over the shelters and houses of the rich" shouted the *New Leader* headlines.¹² Squatting, though rarely mentioned in the Press, became regarded by many as the answer to homelessness, even to just overcrowding. By 1942, an estimated 40 per cent of Britain's housing stock had been destroyed or damaged. The bad pre-war housing problem had become immeasurably worse.¹³ The temptation to occupy unoccupied dwellings grew greater. Either because its slender resources did not stretch to it or because it did not wish to court the unpopularity that would inevitably accompany a policy of confrontation, the Home Office did not resort to evictions. Squatting was largely overlooked.

The government was worried about the growth of nests of sedition, bands of angry and disaffected individuals who challenged the basic tenets of capitalist society. In particular, the authorities feared what might happen in air raid shelters, where many huddled together, spending many hours when conversations take place unsupervised as well as uncensored. Long boring nights in subterranean blackness might drift along dangerous revolutionary lines. The fears were not entirely groundless. People started taking matters into their own hands. In some places those taking refuge pub-

lished their own magazines, such as the *Hampstead Shelterers' Bulletin*. Partly through these publications, but also through discussions with others elsewhere facing the same problems, a network of contacts throughout London grew up. In November 1940, a conference was held. A total of 79 delegates from 50 shelters decided to form the London Underground Station and Shelterers' Committee. They elected Harry Ratner, a Trotskyist, as chairman, and Alfie Bass, of the Communist Party (later to become well known on television) as secretary.¹⁴

The Committee's immediate task was to protect existing shelters from official incursions. Smarting from the fact that people, by direct action, had illegally occupied underground stations, the authorities wanted gradually to claw them back. They attempted to carry out evictions under the pretext of "clearing the passages and stairs." They also sought to re-establish their authority and regain the initiative by settling any disputes between inmates that might arise. Aware that once this outside interference had secured a foothold there was no saying where it would end, the London Committee set up self-governing local shelter committees where they did not already exist. The inmates themselves democratically formulated the rules. Marshals were elected to enforce them. Order came out of chaos. The squalid scene, already mentioned, that was witnessed by the American journalist at Tilbury had been completely transformed. Tom Harrison, the pioneer of Mass Observation, reported that the community had become self-regulating. He found "laws enforced not by police and wardens (who at first proved helpless in the face of the multitudes), but generated by the shelterers themselves."¹⁵

As what had started out as a random assortment of individuals began to develop a feeling of collective identity and comradeship, they acquired a sense of their own power. People had to be listened to and their demands taken seriously. When they called for improvements to existing shelters, they struck a responsive chord throughout many parts of society. Even *The Times'* correspondent echoed their views: Guy Clutton-Brock said the shelters were "lacking dryness, warmth, satisfactory sanitation arrangements, adequate lighting and ventilation, washing facilities, bunks, canteens, health services, children's corners and, in fact, all those things which, it would appear, could easily have been provided during the last three months, while the greatest evil is overcrowding, which can only be relieved by the provision of additional small communal shelters for which there are plenty of sites available."

Bumbling incompetence appeared to lurk behind official attitudes. The failure to construct sufficient shelters seemed inexcusable: in July 1940 57,000 building workers remained unemployed. Government spokesmen then blamed shortages, bottlenecks that impeded progress. But the public's mood grew increasingly restive, unwilling to be fobbed off by governmental

blarney. An angry audience at a Midlands civil defence conference heard a novel method of overcoming the shortage of cement. E.W. Barnes, the Bishop of Birmingham, bemoaned the fact that in this country the people did not possess the draconian powers Hitler did in Germany. Amid cheers, he told delegates that the Nazi authorities would not tolerate the cement shortage that existed here: they would simply shoot six manufacturers; those who remained alive would then quickly ensure abundant supplies of cement were always available in future.¹⁷

Poor quality bricks and shoddy construction also proved to be a problem. By a piece of skulduggery, the officials of Bradford City Council arranged meetings at times when the four ILP representatives could not attend. The four excluded councillors resolved to use the extra spare time by conducting their own survey of the city's street shelters. When they pronounced many of them sub-standard, the Lord Mayor dismissed it as just alarmist talk. So the ILPers enlisted the assistance of scientists from Bradford Technical College. Their investigation revealed 28 shelters with soft bricks, four with loose bricks, 46 with soft mortar and 13 with structural weaknesses. Two

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things then happened that underlined their findings. First, one of the shelters simply collapsed when there were no Luftwaffe aircraft within 100 miles of Bradford. Second, Professor J.B.S. Haldane, one of Britain's most eminent scientists, visited Yorkshire. He was pictured in the local press crushing a brick taken from a Bradford shelter in the palm of his hand. Bradford's embarrassed Lord Mayor then wrote to the four ILP councillors congratulating them "for substantiating the suggestion that certain shelters in Bradford have been jerry-built."¹⁸

Much worse than shoddy shelters was to have none at all. Regarded as beyond the range of the Luftwaffe, Plymouth's civil defence remained an extremely flimsy, half-hearted affair. Its citizens were quite unprepared when the heavy German raid occurred. Widespread confusion and panic was still gripping the city — the authorities, too shocked, had taken no steps to evacuate the population — as the Luftwaffe delivered four more heavy blows. Completely overwhelmed and under-resourced, the authorities feebly attempted to evacuate women and children in private cars, many of which ran out of petrol thereby clogging the exit roads. Slightly before the final raid,

Whitehall officials arrived to survey the scene. They found many survivors, cold and dazed, sleeping out rough on the moors. Assessing the tragedy in the *Daily Herald*, an angry Richie Calder wrote: "Somebody should be impeached for the cruel chaos which followed the Plymouth blitzes." He suggested that Herbert Morrison and Ernest Bevin, two of the Labour ministers in the coalition government, were suitable candidates.¹⁹

Sleeping out, clad only in a nightie, or a few hastily snatched clothes, was a greater ordeal for the very young and the very old. This especially applied where deprivation and poverty had already undermined bodily well-being. In more northerly cities, accustomed to winter temperatures below freezing-point, a further dimension was added to the suffering. In Glasgow, for example, Dr. Nora I. Wattie, the child welfare officer, reported that infantile mortality had been 93.1 per 1,000 live births in 1938; from January to June 1941 the figure had shot up to a staggering 131.5.²⁰ Doubtless air raids like the one lasting nine hours one night, with one of five hours the following night, helped to push up the numbers of those who died as an indirect consequence of the bombing as well as the casualties of the bombing itself. Terrified families in the Gorbals, huddled in the squares, surrounded by the large tenements, could hear their world crashing down around them. Even the all-clear did not end anxiety: there remained unexploded bombs among the rubble.

To bolster civilian morale, government propaganda boasted that German cities were being bombed, too. In a recent raid on Hamburg, there had been what was termed "a bombers' moon": the full moon completely illuminated the city, allowing the pilots to pick out their targets easily while it kept them hidden, in the inky blackness above, from the enemy anti-aircraft batteries. But, as the *Glasgow Forward* pointed out, exactly the same weather conditions prevailed when Glasgow received its severe poundings. The paper thought it was sure the working men and women of both Glasgow and Hamburg could agree at least on one thing — a resolution to abolish the moon.²¹

In fact, the British people generally were far from wholeheartedly endorsing a vindictive let-the-German-bastards-have-it attitude. The areas that tended to be bloodthirsty were those that had not themselves experienced bombing. An opinion poll that appeared in the *New Chronicle*, of 17 May 1941, reported that 45 per cent of people in inner London wanted reprisal bombing of Germany, whereas 47 per cent did not. By a small majority, the "Noes" had it.

In the destruction of the blitz, three significant attitudes developed among working people.

First, there was the growing sense of community, the feeling of mutual dependence, a new realisation that one another's problems and aspirations were exceedingly similar. In air raid shelters, people's barriers broke down; strangers became friendly with persons they had never dreamt of even

speaking to under normal circumstances. In an emergency, a person you did not know may risk his (or her) life to save yours. No wonder a sense of solidarity, of common purpose, emerged from this baptism of fire.

If a feeling of the *great us* grew up among people of varying skills and status, there was, secondly, the contrary feeling of *them*, a hatred for those not making sacrifices — indeed, waxing rich — from the misfortunes of others, the black marketeers, the fat cats, those who had positions and influence. The ruling class, who were responsible for the present mess and whose bumbling ineptitude had led to the war, seemed to be largely immune to any of war's ill effects. This widely-held feeling may have been ill-defined. Nevertheless it was strongly held.

Third, through painful experience, people began to understand that they had to do things themselves. No Labour leader would back any agitation. If you occupied an underground station, then it was no use appealing to Labour leaders. A prominent Labour right winger, Herbert Morrison, as Home Secretary, remained responsible for the civil defence fiasco. He was assisted by the darling of the Labour left: Ellen Wilkinson was not merely Morrison's understudy, she also became his lover. No Labour leader ever backed the illegal occupation of underground stations. No Labour leader ever backed illegal squats. Yet they occurred. People were resorting to do-it-yourself politics.

These were the rebellious seeds — nay, revolutionary seeds — that henceforth plagued British capitalism. The impact is revealed in later industrial and political unrest. It also created an attitude of critical hostility which pervaded society, resulting, among other things, in the defeat of Churchill-backed candidates in by-elections held in what had been rock-solid Tory constituencies. ■

Notes

- 1 Andrew Sinclair, *War Like a Wasp: the Lost Decade of the Forties*, London (1989) p.55.
- 2 *Sunday Express*, 8 September 1940. Also, Andrew Sinclair, *ibid*.
- 3 *New Leader*, 7 November 1940 and 3 May 1941.
- 4 Clive Ponting, *1940: Myth and Reality*, London (1990), pp.140-1.
- 5 *Scottish Daily Express*, 4 July 1940.
- 6 *Forward*, 22 September 1939.
- 7 The Pied Piper, *Rats*, Left Book Club (1942), p.88. Also, interview with Dr. Worrall, of Seven Oaks, 12 July 1992. Pied Piper was the *nom-de-plume* of J.P.W. Mallalieu.
- 8 *New Leader*, 7 December 1940.
- 9 *Observer*, 20 February 1993.
- 10 House of Commons, 23 October 1939.
- 11 *New Statesman*, 5 October 1940.
- 12 *New Leader*, 19 September 1940.
- 13 *Plebs*, February 1945.
- 14 *New Leader*, 16, 30 November and 28 December 1940.
- 15 Tom Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz* (1978), pp.118-9.
- 16 *The Times*, 22 December 1940.
- 17 *New Leader*, 7 December 1940.
- 18 *ibid*, 4 April 1941.
- 19 *Daily Herald*, 3 May 1941.
- 20 *New Leader*, 29 November 1941.
- 21 *Forward*, 18 March 1941.

What the British Marxists said about Beveridge

As we were saying...

For fifteen years now, the Tories have been chopping away at the Welfare State constructed after 1945 on the basis of the 1942 Beveridge report. Back in 1942, the Marxists of the Workers' International League [WIL] were already pointing out that any capitalist Welfare State would be unviable, likely to break down with mass unemployment. A WIL circular of 31 December 1942 called on WIL members to put the following motion to their trade union branches.

This branch... condemns the National Council of Labour for its acceptance of the Beveridge plan. These proposals leave the whole root of the problem — the private ownership of the means of

production — untouched; the scheme is unworkable in the event of mass unemployment; the scales of payment are totally inadequate; and the whole cost is to be borne by the workers.

Social Security, now and in the post-war era, can only be guaranteed under a socialist system of society, whereas the Beveridge proposals presuppose the continuance of the capitalist system, and it is clearly stated that the wealth and privilege of the ruling class are to remain untouched.

As a first step towards providing social security for the workers, we demand that the Labour Party and Trade Union leaders wage a campaign not for the Beveridge scheme, but for the following demands

- 1) A guaranteed minimum wage determined by the trade unions to provide an adequate standard of living
- 2) A sliding scale of wages to offset the cost of living
- 3) A sliding scale of hours to absorb the unemployed
- 4) Work or full maintenance
- 5) Adequate compensation for the sick and old-aged
- 6) The nationalisation of the basic industries without compensation and their operation under workers' control.

