

Socialist Organiser

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Illusions of **POWER**



The local government left 1979-85



Occupation of Hackney Council Chamber, May 25 1985. Photo: John Chapman

Ratecapping What went wrong?

Hilda Kean, who resigned as leader of Hackney council when the council decided to knuckle under to the Tories, analyses the ratecapping battle.

A recall Labour Party local government conference was held in Sheffield last summer before it was known which councils would be ratecapped, and we discussed a national policy there.

A very good policy was passed at the Labour Party conference last autumn.

It emphasised non-compliance with the Rates Act and the need to defeat it in its first year.

The problem was not the policy but how it was implemented.

There was just no support from Neil Kinnock for the policy that was agreed at Labour Party conference.

As soon as the list of rate-capped authorities was announced, it was clear that it would be very difficult to have total unity. Apart from political differences, there were also real differences in their economic situation between councils like Basildon and Thamesdown, and those like Hackney and Lambeth.

Then there were councils and councillors who saw themselves very much in the traditional mould of Labour local government — just looking towards protest and

publicity campaigns — and a minority who have seen ourselves as campaigning in a different way, not within the framework simply of the council chamber.

There were lots of reasons for the campaign petering out.

The first thing, of course, was the miners' strike. The decisive phase of the campaign against rate-capping took place after the defeat of the miners' strike.

The particular tactic adopted by the councils also led to problems — the tactic led to problems — the tactic of not setting a rate, or rather deferring a rate.

Hackney Labour Party had the view — and I agreed — that we should go for a deficit budget, a policy of no cuts, no rent increases, and no rate increases above the level of inflation. That would have brought things to a head very early on.

However, we dropped that in the interests of unity and under considerable pressure from London Bridge and the Hackney Joint Shop Stewards' Committee.

We argued that the 'no rate' tactic was very ambiguous, and unfortunately that has proved to be true. Many councils only agreed to defer making a rate; they did not

say that it would be impossible to make a rate until the rate support grant was returned to the borough, which was what we did in Hackney.

'Deferring' was done on the basis of legal advice — which was thus allowed to dominate and determine the political tactics.

The Government did not intervene as it had done last year in Liverpool, but rather stood back and let the district auditor and the courts entangle councils.

The courts were unwilling to get involved, and therefore councils were trying to maintain momentum where there was no open and obvious intervention against them.

There were then two possibilities. One was to up the ante — which had to be done through motions in the council chamber, since it was difficult to get trade unionists to take industrial action when there were no cuts taking place. The other — which I argued for — was simply to stand firm.

People here in Hackney are angry rather than demoralised. We believe that the right wing has to take responsibility for the cuts they have pushed through, and be seen to be doing this by the people of Hackney.

There is not a mood of despondency or



Demonstration in Liverpool, 1984. Photo: John Smith, IFL.

demoralisation. Everybody is committed to continuing the fight against the cuts, be it inside the council chamber or outside.

Reselection has been discussed now so that next year none of the right wing councillors will be selected.

Unless there are large-scale resignations in the councils that were rate-capped this year, you will have essentially the same councillors going into a campaign next year. I'm not sure at present what particular tactics one would talk about in future campaigns. It seems to me that the major problem will be a great deal of cynicism amongst working class organisations, including trade unions, about the councils' willingness to engage in any serious campaign against the government's policies.

There needs to be an assessment, particularly in the local Labour Parties, of what particular tactics you employ. What I am worried about is a basically syndicalist response to the situation, saying "Well, councils always let people down, there's no role for the councillors. Everything should be left to the unions." Although I can understand why people would feel

that way, I don't think that is the most constructive way forward.

I think that as socialists, we have to discuss how to build up an alliance between different sections of the community, including socialist councillors, and the Labour Party, for future campaigns.

The collapse on rate-capping is quite significant in relation to what is happening in the Labour Party nationally.

While on ideological issues, councillors like Ken Livingstone have taken a progressive stand, when it has come to key economic and financial questions, there has been a real absence of left strategy.

For example, you look at the GLC's campaign against abolition, it has not centred on a close working with the unions, nor did their campaign against rate-capping. It was centred far more on propaganda aimed at the population of London in general rather than at the labour movement bodies that are capable of organising people in trade union action.

You cannot take a socialist stand in relation to issues like women's oppression or racism without at the same time taking on

board the economic factors that materially affect people's lives.

How can the GLC on the one hand make all this propagand about having a GLC Women's Committee and supposedly take notice of the interests of women in London while at the same time it draws back from the fight for adequate resources for such facilities?

That is to miseducate people about the nature of women's oppression, which is seen on the level of ideas in people's heads rather than the economic way in which women are discriminated against.

Most councillors, in the campaign against rate-capping, have not seen their role going beyond the traditional role of councillors in the council chamber, despite the left rhetoric that has been put about.

They have reinforced Kinnock's position by saying that when it comes to a crunch, when it comes to a question of illegality, that you just act in an extremely traditional way, albeit that you have women's committees and anti-racist committees and so on.

What should the left be doing now? There have recently been calls for left regroupment.

I believe there is a need for the left to organise on a broad basis, with differing currents on the left working together far more closely.

The left has in recent years tended to focus on internal Labour Party issues which are seen by many non-activists as totally esoteric, rather than concentrating on the type of organisation you actually need to carry out policies.

There is also a strong tendency for the left to regard the passing of motions by GCs as the be-all and end-all, rather than looking at how to organise on the basis of those policies within the wider community.

Any regroupment that takes place in the Labour Party left has to look at those wider issues of how you make links outside the Labour Party.

• Hilda Kean was talking to Mick O'Sullivan. From Socialist Organiser June 12 1985, slightly abridged.

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Illusions of power



Ken Livingstone greets Her Majesty at the opening of the Thames Barrier, May 1984

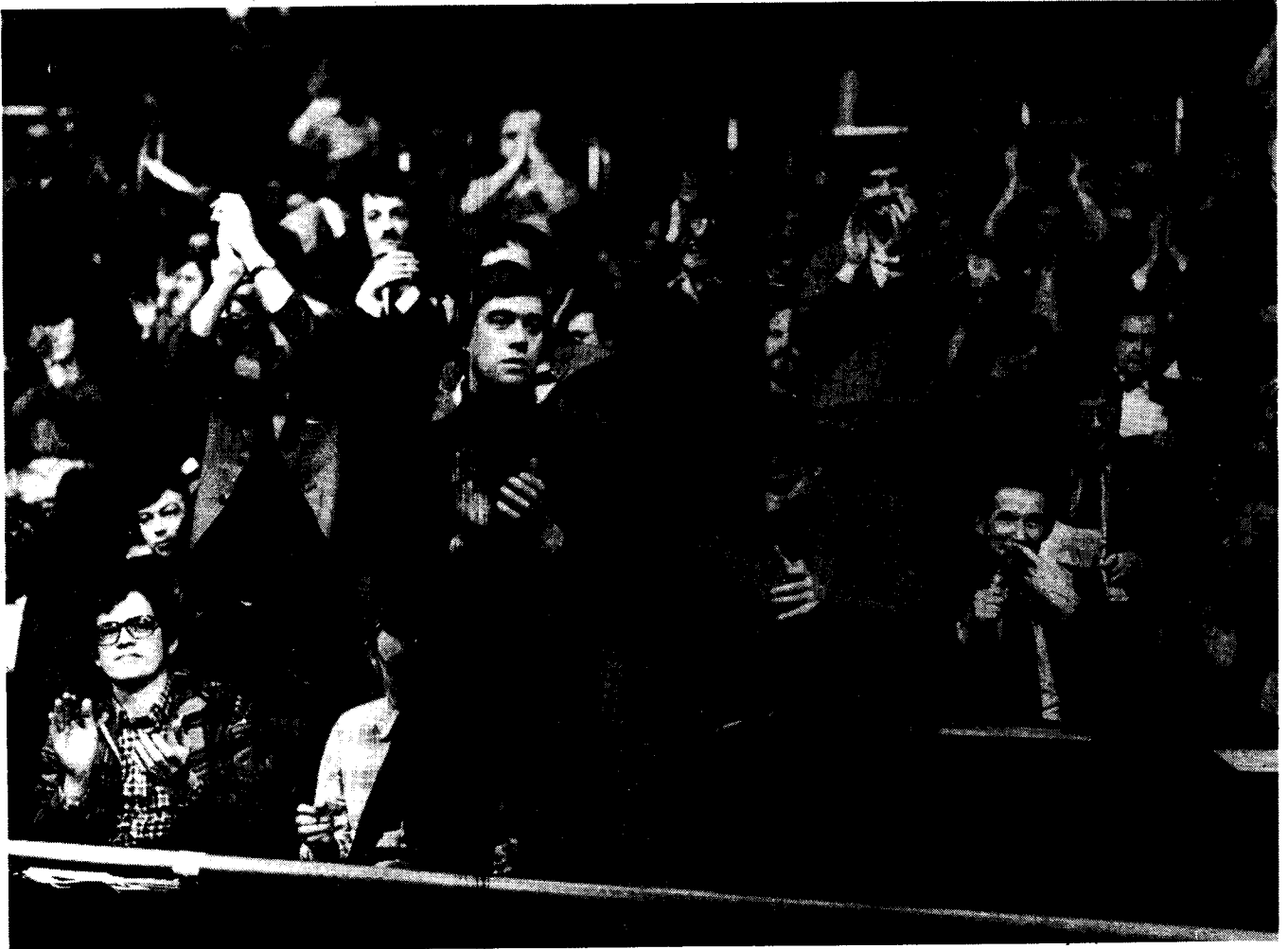
“Having shown first that everyone is a philosopher, though in his own way and unconsciously, since even in the slightest manifestation of any intellectual activity whatever... there is contained a specific conception of the world, one then moves onto the second level, which is that of awareness and criticism.

That is to say, one proceeds to the question — is it better to ‘think’ without having a critical awareness, in a disjointed and episodic way? In other words, is it better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment...?

Or, on the other hand, is it better to work out consciously and critically one’s own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labours of one’s own brain, choose one’s sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world, be one’s own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one’s personality?”

Antonio Gramsci, ‘Prison Notebooks’, p.323-4.

By Mick O’Sullivan (UCATT and London Bridge shop stewards’ committee, in personal capacity) and Martin Thomas



Labour Party special conference, January 1981 – an ovation as new rules are passed for leadership selection. Photo: Andrew Wiard,

The new Labour left

The turmoil of the late 1960s and early '70s massively increased the numbers of the far left in Britain. While the organised Marxist groups grew, none of them was able to unite a majority of the new leftists round a coherent programme. Moreover, the faults of the organised groups – sectarian tactics, political instability – helped to scatter the new left.

Many activists joined an organised group and then left; others confined their activity to broader campaigns and movements.

From the early or mid-'70s these leftists joined the Labour Party in increasing numbers.

While they have never been a homogeneous grouping, the new Labour leftists are marked off from the traditional Tribunate Labour left.

With experience gained from movements outside of the Labour Party such as the women's movement, and ideas heavily influenced by Marxism, they wanted to breathe life into the party other than at election time. They brought the issues of women's, gay and black oppression, and the question of Ireland, sharply into the mainstream labour movement for the first time

for decades. And this 'new left' saw the working class, rather than parliament, as the focus of politics (though, as we shall see, over time it has moved away from this working class focus).

Such politics could not remain static. Either the new leftists were going to be assembled round a serious Marxist orientation, or they would be shaped by events and beaten down to conformity.

The routines and structures of the Labour Party – as of the trade unions, in which most of them were also active – pushed them towards piecemeal campaigning, 'power politics', reformism. A lot of activity – inevitably – centred around organisational reforms in the Labour Party and contests to replace right-wingers by left-wingers. Such a focus militated against political clarification or differentiation within the Left.

Yet for some years it all seemed to work. From 1979 to early 1982, at least, the Labour Party moved steadily leftwards.

Three-and-a-half years on, Neil Kinnock has unravelled many of the gains. He has, however temporarily, restored 'order' to the Labour Party.

His success is one link in a whole chain of defeats suffered by the movement. Under these blows, the left itself is fragmenting, and many have moved towards the Party centre.

While industrial defeats like the steelworkers' and the miners' have helped provide stability for Kinnock, the cogwheel that has geared so many of the Labour new left into convergence with Kinnock has been the local government experience.

The new leftists who entered local government have failed the test of the class struggle; and in so doing they have begun to transform themselves from socialists into tame radicals, and to teach others to transform themselves likewise.

The story is by no means finished. Large sections of the Left still want to fight. The formation of a coherent Marxist force always proceeds through struggles, setbacks, demarcations in which parts of what was previously the 'left' hive off to the right. But the experience can be put to good account only if we learn the lessons, rigorously and unflinchingly. The purpose of this survey is to help in that process.

Local government

In 1974 the Tory government replaced the previous variegated structure of local government in Britain by a system of fewer and larger authorities. Council bureaucracies became more powerful, under the slogan of 'corporate management'. Payment for councillors was introduced. Local government became a much more professional, big-business operation.

This was a logical sequel of the rapid expansion of local government over the 20th century and especially since World War 2. The local authority workforce had risen from 1.4 million in 1945 to 2.5 million in the mid '70s. Over the 1960s local authority spending had risen 170% while gross national product rose only 80%.

The current system has two main tiers. Scotland has nine regional councils (e.g. Lothian, Strathclyde) and below them 53 district councils (e.g. Edinburgh, Glasgow). The regional councils run transport, police, fire services, education, and social services. The districts run housing and waste collection.

In England and Wales there are 54 councils roughly corresponding to Scottish regions — metropolitan authorities (e.g. Merseyside, South Yorkshire, Greater London) or counties. Below them come 401 district councils (e.g. Liverpool, Sheffield, London boroughs).

In the metropolitan areas the division of functions is different from in Scotland. The district councils are much more important, running education and social services as well as housing and waste collection. The metropolitan councils are left with transport, police and fire.

Outside the metropolitan areas — in the English 'shires' and in Wales — the division is similar to Scotland.

Complicated

London is different again. The GLC does not run police, nor (since summer 1984) transport; they are directly controlled by central government. The London boroughs run housing, social services, waste collection, and — in outer London — education. Inner London education is run neither by the boroughs, nor by the GLC, but by the Inner London Education Authority, made up of councillors appointed by the GLC and the boroughs.

The system for elections is complicated. Some authorities are elected for four-year periods; others have elections for one-third of their seats in three years out of every four. The result is that there are local government elections of some sort in May of every year.

Local government is financed partly by central government grant,

partly by rates (a local property tax), and partly by rents and other charges received by the councils. Education is by far the largest item of local government revenue spending; housing dominates capital spending. Debt charges are a major item of revenue spending, averaging 15 to 20% of the total and more in some authorities.

When the Labour government began cutting central government grant after 1975, some Labour councils compensated by raising the rates. In April 1979, Islington, Brent, Camden and Lambeth all levied big increases, up to 40%.

But overall, between 1974-5 and 1978-9, average domestic rates paid in England and Wales increased by 2.6% less than the general Retail Price Index. Not until Thatcher's class-war government moved into action against the councils did rate increases begin to explode. Between 1978-9 and 1982-3, average domestic rates paid went up 42% more than the Retail Price Index — and much faster in some areas.

The Tories' aim was not only to save central government money, but to bring down local government expenditure and local government workforces.

Their success with this has been limited. Local authority spending in 1982-3 was 12.8% of gross domestic product — the same percentage as in 1978-9. The local authority workforce, in March 1983, was just 4.1% smaller than it had been in March 1979 (in full-time-equivalent terms). Compared with manufacturing industry, local government is relatively unscathed.

The Tories have repeatedly run into problems with their plans for local government. The Local Government and Land Bill of 1979 had to be completely rewritten before it could be got through Parliament. A proposal to make councils call referendums over rate rises had to be dropped altogether. A Bill to enable central government to remove the GLC and met authorities, and run their functions directly, from April 1985, was defeated in the House of Lords and had to be abandoned.

Measures put into law, like council house sales, have often failed to produce the results the Tories hoped for.

The government has put a lot of effort into pressurising councils to privatise. But only 18 councils out of 318 who replied to a 'Local Government Chronicle' survey in mid-'84 had privatised waste collection, though 99 had considered it.

Only three had privatised road-sweeping, six toilet-cleaning, and four part or all of their school-

cleaning.

This year the Tories are introducing a law to make competitive tendering compulsory for a whole range of specific services — waste collection, cleaning of buildings, vehicle maintenance, catering services. The Secretary of State will have power to set aside the results of the tendering.

Not many of the Tories' difficulties, unfortunately, can be attributed to Labour councils' resistance. State spending is central to modern capitalism's processes of self-reproduction, and cannot be easily cut even by the most vicious government. *Central* government spending, after all, rose between 1978-9 and 1982-3 from 32.5% to 37.2% of gdp.

Problems

Over many of its measures, the Tory government has run into problems with Tory councils.

Complacency would be foolish. Cuts which are marginal in terms of total spending are often cruel in terms of particular services. Over the last ten years, the life-blood has been dripping away from local authorities.

The Tories see the future of local services as 'Americanisation', with little labour directly employed and councils just coordinating the different sub-contractors running a range of cut-down services.

Yet local government still is — and certainly was in 1979 — a powerful force.

2.9 million workers, including part-timers, are employed in local government.

Often the council's is the largest single workforce in a district, and the backbone of organised labour there. It is difficult to see how UCATT, for example, could survive without the council DLOs. Two of Britain's five biggest unions, NUPE and NALGO, are heavily based in local government.

The inner cities — the heartland of Labour support — have the greatest concentration of local authority workers, of 'new left' councillors, and of the most militant CLPs. Beside them stand tenants on the estates, the unemployed and the youth, all living on the front line of Thatcher's Britain.

Enormous power could be mobilised by a determined leadership in local government. Yet it never has been organised. The riots of 1981, which were completely outside the labour movement, were the nearest we have come to the

inner cities being mobilised.

Instead of mobilising, councils have gone for doing the best they can within the Tories' limits. In the

one area where the new left's words can be translated into direct action, they have been administrators, not fighters. A few councils have gone to

the brink — and then retreated, keeping their powder dry for better days.

By the test of the class struggle, the local government left has failed.

Promise and retreat

Something of a local government left had begun to emerge in the early '70s, talking about 'participation' and 'the community'.

In Socialist Organiser of March 1979, Mike Ward (now Ken Livingstone's deputy at the GLC) reflected on the experience of one of these, Wandsworth. It had fallen to the Tories in the 1978 elections.

"The Labour Group rejected all cuts. Building programmes were maintained, no staff were sacked, no posts frozen, no social service charges increased — in fact, many were reduced or abolished, and all means tests went, too.

"Wandsworth was short of facilities for the mentally ill and mentally handicapped. It was short of day centres for the elderly, and above all of nurseries. Building of all these was stepped up... A programme of factory building, and assistance to worker cooperatives, was established to try to reduce local unemployment.

"And in both 1977 and 1978, the rates went up by 25%..."

Why the defeat? Ward cited two lessons: the need "to campaign continuously and publicly", and the fact that "rate-raising as a 'means of building socialism' can only go so far: valuable gains can be made, and services improved. But in the end you are relieving poverty by taxing the poor".

Labour councils, he concluded, must instead look towards "a confrontation with the government and the financial institutions".

Very soon after the Tories' general election victory in May 1979, they announced a 3% cut in councils' money. Clearly there would be more to come.

Stronger

The case against rate rises became stronger. At the best of times rates are a tax which hits sections of the badly-off harder than the wealthy. The poor spend a bigger proportion of their income on housing than the rich, and rates are a tax on housing.

Rate rebates are supposed to equalise, but like every means-test system they are seriously faulty.

Middle-class people and small shopkeepers also suffer badly from rate rises. Socialists are not the champions of small shopkeepers: but for Labour to try to load the brunt of the economic crisis onto these middle-class people would be stupid and dangerous.

Under the new Tory regime,



A ghetto for Bengalis in London's East End, created by GLC housing policies. Photo: Laurence Sparham, IFL.

rate rises would not even pay for improvements. At best they would compensate for the cuts in central government money, and thus allow services to be maintained. They would in effect be an alternative, less hateful, form of cut.

Instead of bringing the tremendous forces in local government to the fore of the fight against the Tories, a rate-rise policy would leave Labour councils trying to work the Tory system as benevolently as possible.

Spectrum

Such were the arguments deployed by supporters of Workers' Action (the majority in SO) when a broad spectrum of the London Labour left met on June 16 1979 to debate local government strategy.

But the majority of the conference — including Mike Ward! — recoiled from an immediate fight.

All the arguments which were to be duplicated in countless wards, CLPs, trade union branches and cuts conferences over the next few years came out in the June 1979 debate.

Some people — notably Keith Veness and Ken Livingstone — argued flatly that rate rises were progressive because they redistributed income. Others were more cautious. Mike Davis, of the 'Chartist' group said that rate rises were no solution, but could be justified as a measure to gain time and prepare for struggle at a future, better date.

Shock

That the gist of the matter was the left recoiling from struggle was confirmed spectacularly three weeks later. Ted Knight, who had been prominent in the June conference arguing for rate rises as a way of combatting cuts, pushed a 4½% cuts package through Lambeth council.

Rate rises had been a preparation not for a fight but for cuts.

Many on the rate-rise left were shocked. Ken Livingstone, then a left oppositionist within Camden council and the GLC, commented: "After all the posturing as Marxist Lambeth, already the right wing councillors here say we'll do no more than Lambeth. The real tragedy is that Ted [Knight] has given a cover for every right winger to put through cuts".

A special conference of the borough's four CLPs rejected the cuts and also the alternative of a supplementary rate. 'Lambeth Fightback' was formed by the Trades Council. Knight bowed to the pressure and deftly converted himself from a cutter to a leader of the fight against the cuts (though the council still refused to implement a maternity/paternity deal already negotiated with NALGO).

Lambeth became a national focus against the government's attack on councils. Street meetings, door-to-door leafletting, workplace meetings, a London-wide demonstration, all began to mobilise a mass movement. Despite the council's shady record, the response was tremendous.

But what was this mobilisation about? What was its purpose? Against cuts and the Tory government. But what about the rates?

Despite the Lambeth Labour Parties' position, Knight made his view quite clear at a London Labour Party conference on the cuts on September 22.

Jenny Morris reported in Socialist Organiser: "Knight used the same

arguments [as the right wing] for refusing to follow the example of Poplar in 1921. The Town Hall unions won't stand for empty wage packets, he told the conference. His answer was rate increases rather than cuts".

As many other council leaders would do later, Knight used the trade union card against the Left. The mechanism is simple enough.

The councillors devise schemes to buy their way out of trouble through rate rises, and then appeal to narrow trade-unionism among the leaders of the council workers. Rate rises will buy secure jobs for their members; the cost will be diffused over wide sections of the middle class and working class, as well as businesses.

The council leaders' determination to raise the rates, and the use of the unions to justify this, made the mobilisation in Lambeth a hollow shell, a protest cut off from any serious agitation for industrial action or council defiance. Only gestures and rhetoric distinguished Lambeth from the other boroughs which without the same glitter made the same rate rises as 'Marxist' Lambeth.

The potential was there for a fight: 60,000 had demonstrated in work time on November 28. But in April 1980 Knight pushed through a 49.4% rate rise and £1.50 rent rise.

Lothian Regional Council had also organised a big campaign against cuts. There, the council was committed by a Regional Labour Party aggregate in January 1980 to no rate rise, too.

The trade union factor was again crucial in getting a 40-odd per cent rate rise on budget day.

Collapse

The Labour Left had not been able to develop any alternative leadership in the unions, based on the rank and file. And so it collapsed.

In SO, by this time, the rate-rise issue was no longer an ideological disagreement, but the index of a radical division in orientations. Many of the pro-rate-rise minority quit SO in early 1980. Some dropped into individual activism. Some — like Ken Livingstone — continued to contribute to SO. The majority of the 'Chartist' group faded away, producing a discussion magazine geared to the LCC/Marxism Today milieu. The more revolutionary-spirited 'Chartist' minority launched London Labour Briefing.

Briefing no.1, in February 1980, made its main aim clear: the selection and the election (in May 1981) of a left-wing GLC. Round this project it managed to group a large readership.

But on the Labour Left overall the argument was gaining ground that an immediate fight was, after all, necessary.

The battle for Labour Party democracy was at its height. Labour was riding high in the opinion polls. The Labour Left was confident.

At the June 1979 conference the Workers' Action motion against rate



Lambeth demonstration against cuts, February 1981. Photo: Andrew Wiard.

rises had been defeated by two-to-one. At a similar conference in July 1980 called by Briefing, a similar motion from Louise Christian failed only narrowly.

Penalties

When Lambeth called two national cuts conferences in November 1980 and January 1981, big majorities voted for no rate rise. By autumn 1981, the Tories were introducing a system of grant penalties for councils making big rate rises. Tribune came out against rate rises; so did Labour Herald, just launched by Knight and Livingstone; so, even, did Briefing.

Yet this majority among activists for a confrontation did not manage to compel any council to follow its way of thinking.

The November 1980 conference called for no cuts, no rate rises, and no council house sales. Lambeth council, which had been part of convening the conference, made a supplementary rate and continued to sell council houses.

When questioned by Socialist Organiser, Ted Knight explained: "The conference was a platform from which guidelines were drawn. They also called on the TUC to prepare a general strike. That's fine, but I don't necessarily think that we are guided by every resolution that was passed..."

He refused even to say unequivocally that Lambeth would make no cuts in April 1980. "We could take the stand that we would make no cuts. But it requires more than one council taking that decision. You're not suggesting that we should take a decision now that the council should go bankrupt... We'll have to make an evaluation. We'll have to consult the trade unions".

In fact, Lambeth, panicked by the wave of tenants' meetings angry at its supplementary rate, made 10% cuts in April 1980.

Knight used the trade-union card again, having persuaded most of the

manual workers' leaders in Lambeth that limited cuts were better than the risks of a confrontation. And in the conferences he also used the trade-union card in a different way.

On September 27 1980 SO noted that "The statement [for the November conference] 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... include cuts and rate rises in next spring's budget".

This device has been used again and again. Leftists call for an all-out fight by the whole working class. Given the nature of the official leadership, this does not happen. (Ron Keating, then assistant general secretary of NUPE, spoke at the November Lambeth conference, strongly supporting business as usual with rate rises to protect members' jobs. "My members are not going to be kamikaze pilots"). The leftists then use the absence of an across-the-board fight to argue that they can do nothing on their own.

Better

But now the left looked for something better from the new GLC.

Livingstone's election as GLC leader in May 1981, coming a few months after the national victory over Labour Party democracy at Wembley, seemed to offer a new beginning. Briefing exclaimed triumphantly: "London's ours!"

As far back as March 1979 Livingstone — then a one-man band — had been trying to get the left to take the GLC election seriously. In Socialist Organiser he complained that "The left has given no thought to the impending GLC elections... those who have a commitment to a socialist GLC need to start organising now".

The emergence of Briefing meant that a large section of the new left was swung behind Livingstone's project. And not only that. The Briefing

left did more than just work with Livingstone. They took his project as their own. Their 'Marxism' served to rationalise the left-GLC project as 'a struggle for power', but not to challenge its limitations in reality.

A number of left-wingers had been elected, particularly in marginals and where the previous councillor was not standing again. The GLC manifesto had declared: "A Labour GLC and ILEA 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 this stand."

Livingstone backed this up. "Wherever there is an industrial dispute in London, we shall go down and support it... We'll use the whole structure of the GLC to support grade unionists in struggle throughout London... and work with the trade unions to try to bring this government down ahead of its time."

The Labour GLC would lead the struggle, he pledged, rather than waiting until someone else had mobilised the whole working class. "We've formed a Briefing group, analogous to the Tribune group in Parliament, and a majority in the next Labour group has been attending it." Accountability would be strengthened. "There will be no U-turns".

The new left wanted to turn outwards, opening up the structures to a whole range of different pressure groups. And initially, as the above statements testify, they saw the working class as central. The GLC was to be an adjunct to workers' struggles.

But in concrete detail the GLC manifesto contained nothing more radical than cheap fares. The majority of the GLC Labour group was at best old-style centre-left. Livingstone's election as leader was mostly due to successful politicking with this centre-left. Amid the general excitement, Socialist Organiser warned:

"40-odd Labour men and women on the GLC can never beat the Tories without an organised mass campaign behind them. Many of the left GLC candidates have already supported climbdowns from left manifestos on borough councils... Socialist Organiser says: Organise the Left in the Labour Party on a clear fighting policy, to mobilise support behind the Labour GLC when it fights the Tories, and to lead independently if it wavers or cops out".

We noted that Livingstone had defined himself as part of a broad Labour left current which "may not be ideologically perfect" but has "a strong commitment to make sure [the policies] are implemented", in contrast to "some more theoretical tendencies".

"Better", we commented, "someone who doesn't read Marx but who starts a real fight against the Tories and the right wing, than a Marxist for whom each book leads only to

the next book and never to action...

"But is theory so useless? Or is it just mis-used?"

"The Labour Left's policies have not failed for lack of energetic people. They have failed because they are based on no clear theoretical understanding of capitalist society and the conservative forces within it. Efforts to get the capitalist state to legislate harmony and justice are bound to end in farce.

"What is to stop the current London Labour programme becoming equally utopian? What is to stop the GLC Labour Left ending up like the Camden Council 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 chamber and the corridors, at the expense of a broader political view... The same over-emphasis could be fatal for the Labour GLC".

These warnings were proven justified with eerie rapidity. A 15% pay demand by London Transport underground crews began to cause trouble less than a month after the GLC election. The NUR's right-wing general secretary, Sid Weighell, undoubtedly used the issue to do as much damage as possible to the left-wing GLC. But the basic fact was that the newly-elected council went against the very direct interests of London workers by not awarding the pay rise. (15% was not a wild or ridiculous demand; inflation was then around 12%, and the GLC offered 8%).

The GLC looked at the issue as administrators, not from a class standpoint. To meet the NUR pay claim, said Livingstone, "would require a supplementary rate and lead to some grant losses".

Meanwhile ILEA was reneging on the Labour promise to cut school meal prices. Because of the fear of surcharge the Labour group split, providing a majority for the status quo.

The political impact of these

climbdowns, however, was thoroughly confused by other events at the same time. Fascinated and horrified, the media were running a huge campaign against 'Red Ken'.

On July 21 Livingstone welcomed the mother of one of the H-Block hunger strikers to County Hall, and declared support for their cause. He rejected an invitation to the Royal Wedding and called for the abolition of the monarchy. On August 18 he made a speech to a gay group, supporting gay rights and declaring that basically "everyone is bisexual".

The same month, Livingstone declared: "There can be no doubt that we are now entering the final phase of the struggle against the Tories".

In the meantime, however, Lothian Regional Council was coming eyeball-to-eyeball with the Tories for the second time. And Livingstone did nothing to put the GLC on the line together with Lothian.

The Tories had introduced legislation for Scotland giving them the power directly to order cuts. Using this, they lopped £47 million off Lothian. The council could not make up for it with a rate rise, even if they wanted to: the cut was made in the middle of a financial year, and mid-year supplementary rates had always been illegal in Scotland.

The council promised defiance. Shop stewards voted for strike action. But once again the official trade union leadership sabotaged the struggle. Alistair MacRae, a local official and also a leading figure in NUPE nationally, was to the fore. It was better, he insisted, to have cuts and keep Labour in office than to risk defiance — which, in the event of defeat, would mean a Tory takeover.

On September 1 the councillors collapsed. In their panic, they initial-cut three times as much as the Tories ordered, sacking 900 teachers! The rout of the Left was complete when the council met again to cancel some of the panic decisions and make more measured cuts. Jimmy Burnett, one of the most left-wing councillors, who in 1979-80 had signed an SO appeal for 'no cuts, no rate rises' explained that he would be voting



Anti-cuts demo against Islington's SDP council



The bathroom of a council flat

for the second cuts package.

If those cuts were not adopted, he explained, a bigger Tory package would go through. "I wouldn't underestimate the ability of working people to understand the position of pragmatic realism..."

At the May 1982 elections, Labour was voted out in Lothian and replaced by a Tory administration.

The next big test marked the end of a whole period. Lord Denning ruled the GLC's cheap fares illegal, and the Law Lords backed him up.

There could not have been a clearer issue on which to take on the Tories. As Jeremy Corbyn explained in SO: "Denning... shows that the Tory establishment was quite prepared to use extra-parliamentary means to defeat socialist measures... We must warn the whole Establishment that if it is 'illegal' for democratically elected councils to keep their pledges to the electorate, then... we must look outside the courts, parliament and council chambers for support..."

The unions, though not militant, did mumble about action rather than telling the council to knuckle under. The Labour Left, despite the demor-

alising Duke-of-York affairs in Lambeth and Lothian, was still strong.

But on January 12 the GLC voted to obey the courts and raise the fares again.

Livingstone came out formally for defiance. But he did not fight for it.

As on the rates issue in March 1985, he used a technique described by Roy Shaw, centre-left former leader of Camden council, as follows: "His ploy was to put forward an outrageous proposition, knowing full well that it would not be accepted — not really believing it himself..."

"Sometimes he did it so blatantly than in speaking to the motion he would say: I full appreciate that there may well be members here who cannot support this motion, people who can't risk surcharge. He was more or less saying: for heaven's sake don't vote for this. And of course it would be defeated..." (Quoted in John Carvel, 'Citizen Ken', p.65-6).

And so the council could take a safe line while the council leader retained his left credentials.

Briefing, in an agonised and contorted editorial, came out behind

Livingstone: the GLC had not had the "power" to defeat the Tories, so for the time being "The task is to stay in office and add to our power by winning, first, the borough elections..."

Socialist Organiser commented: "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..."

This collapse closed a whole period. As Carvel puts it "on or about January 12 1982, Livingstone's GLC went legit".

The Left was demoralised and demobilised. Simultaneously, the right and centre-left began to regain their grip on the Labour Party, and the Tories seized the political initiative with the Falklands war.

By 1983 Livingstone was giving a very different account of the GLC, "The GLC has a very limited range of responsibilities and powers, and nothing that the Labour GLC does challenges the structure. 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... We're not in a position of being able to initiate, because we aren't in a position to mobilise the sort of forces required... without the trade unions mobilised behind the Labour Party locally or nationally, there's a very limited amount you can do..." (Socialist Organiser, 16.6.83).

Graham Bash of Briefing made a similar valuation: "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... Have not important gains – however limited – been made for the labour movement by the role of the Left in the GLC, in Sheffield, and in Islington?"

Confronting the Tories? "If we've got the strength to do that, we should do it. But if we haven't the strength... Rate increases... are something imposed on us to the extent

that we lack strength". (SO 6.1.83).

The focus on class struggle and on the working class was ditched. Now the GLC would operate within Tory limits, but justify itself by the gestures it could make on Ireland, on gay rights, on women's rights, and so on.

Some valuable things were done in that direction. GLC funding to voluntary groups rose from £6 million in 1980 to over £50 million in 1984. Campaigns were run on racism, on the police, and encouraging women to sign on as unemployed and claim benefit.

In substance, however, an attempt at socialist politics was abandoned in favour of radical-liberal politics. And in time – especially after the Tories' second election victory in 1983, with a promise to abolish the GLC – even the radical-liberal politics were played down in favour of simply defending and sustaining the GLC as such.

The Queen was invited to open the Thames Barrier. The GLC free-sheet decorated its masthead with a crown and its front page with a huge picture of the monarch. Livingstone assured the press that the royal para-

site was a very nice person.

When the IRA exploded a nail-bomb in Chelsea in October 1981, Livingstone had condemned the action, but insisted that the IRA were not just 'criminals' and that the only answer was to get Britain out and reunify Ireland. Two years later, in December 1983, the IRA bombed Harrods. Livingstone seconded a Tory motion of condemnation, hoping that the police would catch those responsible, without any attempt at all to insist on the necessary political context.

Partly thanks to the continued media barrage about 'Red Ken' and the 'Marxist GLC', but more decisively because the new Labour Left had now been put into reverse gear, the GLC and Livingstone got away with all this with their left reputations intact.

The London Labour Party annual conference in March 1982 – after the fiascos on the tube workers' pay, on school meals, and on fares – was "low-key". Nigel Williamson reported in Socialist Organiser that "large-scale recriminations were not heard..."

Why did they fail?

Why did all the promises and good intentions of the new left come to naught in this way?

Some were duped by (or even went in for) left-faking: resounding campaigns for general militant action which left crucial practical conclusions undefined and thus collapsed when it came to the decisive moment.

The continual round of meetings and discussions on the administration of the council – with permanent officials, with other councillors, and with council trade union leaders – provided a norm, a routine, which destroyed an overview. It led many into "pragmatic realism" – "getting something done" in the corridors and committee-rooms.

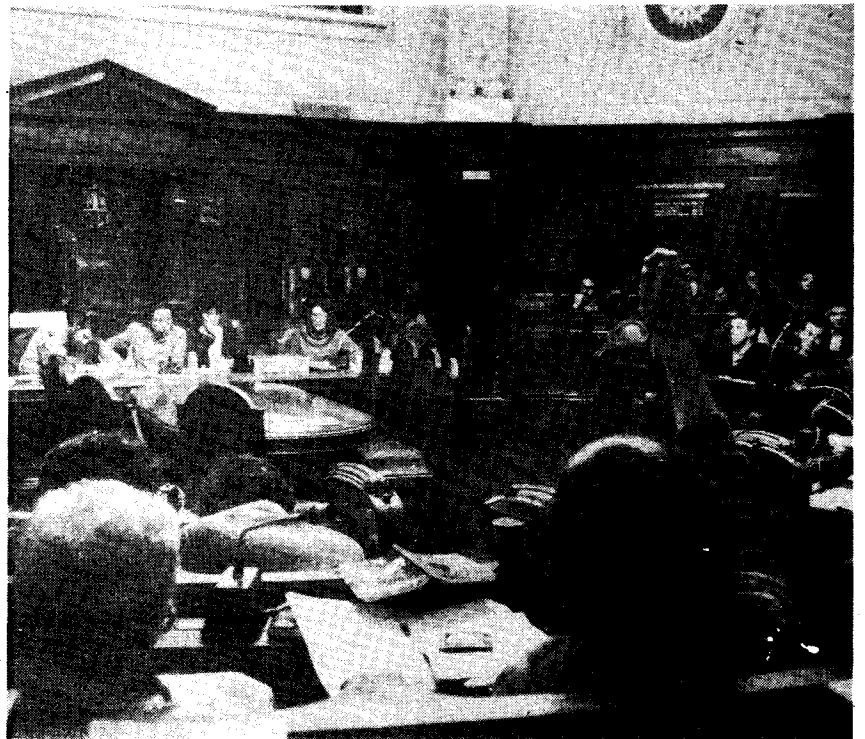
When the trade-union officials – predictably – tried to sabotage campaigns, the Labour left had no cohesive sister-grouping in the trade unions to provide an alternative leadership.

A serious fight back in the vast arena of local government – toe to toe with the government, involving trade unionists, Labour Parties, tenants – needed a coherent political leadership.

But the new leftists were where they were precisely because they hoped to skip, or had given up on, the painful task of demarcating, educating, ideologically clarifying, and organising such a coherent group of Marxists.

Disillusioned – sometimes very understandably so – with the organised Marxist groups, they had opted to be 'non-aligned' activists in the Labour Party in order to find a broader arena and 'get something done' without sectarian disputations.

But those who do not build an 'alignment' themselves, consciously,



Is there real power in the council chamber?

will find themselves willy nilly pulled behind *someone else's* 'alignment'.

Many of the new left, taking the claims by the WRP and SWP to be 'Leninist' as good coin, had concluded that Leninism – 'vanguardism' – was inherently bureaucratic. They hoped instead to opt for no 'vanguard'. The pressures of political life lined them up behind a very bureaucratic 'vanguard' indeed – the local government machine.

The new left rejected traditional reformism. But they also rejected the task of working out and organising around a sharp, comprehensive

alternative. Ken Livingstone's philosophy, as he explained it in an interview with Socialist Organiser in April 1981, was fairly typical.

"The problem isn't so much what your notional policies are, but whether you'll fight to implement them.

"The policies of the independent Tribune people who provide the majority of the London Labour Party may not be ideologically perfect, but they have a strong commitment to make sure they're implemented – while some more theoretical tendencies are unwilling

to take on the leadership of the Labour Party at any level...

"You can't jump from the Callaghan government to a perfect revolutionary position. You've got to go through a spectrum of left wing opinion".

In other words, he wanted something halfway between reformism and clear-cut revolutionary politics.

With such a half-way perspective, council leaders were easy prey when the routines and norms and pressures of the local government machine started narrowing their vision.

A fighting perspective depended on trade union action. Labour leftists who were individuals, not part of a coherent grouping which operated both in the Labour Party and the unions, thus found themselves shackled to and confined by the existing trade union leadership, which was often conservative.

Councillors who did not have a coherent alternative to the council leaders' politics were dragged in behind the leaders. Ordinary Labour activists who had no worked-out alternative to the councillors' politics were pulled along behind them.

At every stage, the logic of 'getting something done' or 'holding on to what we've got' - for example, sticking to council office at the price of capitulation in struggle - won out.

The local government left 'party-within-a-party' is not a Stalinist monolith. It embraces doubters, grumblers, semi-oppositionists at every level. But it educates, disciplines, organises its members - essentially, pulling them from half-formed revolutionary ideas towards reformism.

Local government, historically, has had the same corrupting effect on Labour activists as trade union bureaucracy has had on industrial activists. And the experience of the Labour Party new left has close parallels with that of militant trade-unionists in the mid-'70s.

In the '60s and early '70s, as rank and file struggles went outside the control of the union bureaucracy, militancy without any clear-cut political dimension was sufficient to win. When the flood tide receded, the stewards were not equipped to fight against the bureaucracy and found that the left leaders they had elected were now their jailers.

The great wave of industrial struggle in 1972-4 which crippled the Tory government found no alternative to the Tories but the miserable official Labourism of Wilson. In 1975-6, when the left trade union leaders called on workers to make sacrifices in the economic crisis, the stewards were ill-equipped to put forward a political alternative.

It was not all mechanically determined in advance.

In every case, the left councils went into office with no perspective for fighting, or at best 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.

Two possibilities then existed.

The inadequacy could have been remedied - no doubt gradually and falteringly - through the enlightening effects of experience and discussion. Struggles could have led to greater confidence and clarity, and that confidence and clarity to more successful struggles. Over time a large segment of the new left could have become an educating, organising, inspiring force capable of substantially transforming the whole labour movement.

In fact what happened, mostly, is that the inadequacy became a spreading infection. The left, having got into council positions, adapted itself to the limits of the established structures (because it had no clear idea of how to fight them), and then became a force trying to educate the rest of the labour movement to accept those limits.

We - those who argued for a fighting policy - 'lost the argument'. It was not because the rate-raisers and administrators had the better of us intellectually. As chronicled above, the broad conferences which debated the issues between June 1979 and January 1981 showed a steady shift towards our views.

But so long as the rate-raisers and administrators kept the upper hand, the defeats caused by their wrong policy became a factor in sustaining their position. The fighting policy could 'win the argument' only when the mood was confident; and the defeats destroyed confidence.

A decisive factor in the outcome - as usually in such matters - was the role of the 'ideologists', the people who came into the whole business with strategic ideas more or less worked out in advance.

The SCLV and SO were an attempt to reassemble the new Labour left round a class-struggle programme. The founding statement of the SCLV in July 1978 declared that we aimed to organise militants so that they would be able to "reinvigorate the labour movement, shake it up, radically rearm it and organise it for a struggle against capitalism".

By the time of the election in May 1979 the SCLV had grouped a sizeable number of activists around it, particularly in London. Four CLPs affiliated. During the election campaign it issued leaflets on trade union rights, racism, jobs, housing, women and Ireland, which were used both by individuals and by sympathetic CLPs. 30,000 SCLV leaflets were put out in Hackney North.

After the Tories' victory the SCLV/SO came under strain. Many people were daunted by Thatcher's triumph and pessimistic about the possibilities for immediate struggle.

With Labour in opposition, a struggle developed around reforming structures and contesting official positions. The SO majority saw the importance of this struggle and threw our weight into it (we initiated the broad-left alliance of the Rank and File Mobilising Committee for Labour Democracy, in 1980). Others submerged themselves in it, forgetting broader politics.

And increasing numbers of the new left became councillors, or

acquired more prominent positions within councils. There was a pressure on them to become administrators rather than fighters.

Throughout the second half of 1979, the battle between different perspectives was fought out in SO, principally around the issue of rate rises. In early 1980 a large section finally hived off from SO.

On their behalf, Mike Davis and Geoff Bender argued that "The conception of the SCLV as a broad alliance of tendencies and individuals... rather than a revolutionary sect... has been rejected... Many leading SCLV activists seem to be motivated by the view that we're... a finished revolutionary grouping imbued with the idea that it has all the political answers while the rest of the left wanders about clueless, waiting for us to rope them in..."

But a revolutionary grouping can develop usefully - never mind about being 'finished' - only if it tries to formulate and fight for its ideas as precisely as possible. That does not mean rejecting dialogue, or supposing that you possess all wisdom: SO carried open debate on rate rises and on many other issues.

But, we pointed out, "Mike Davis and his co-thinkers [were] - certainly in effect, if not intentionally - trying to appeal to the general, more or less confused and more or less passive broad left" against any attempt to hold SO to a clear class-struggle policy. That approach could only pull people backwards politically, not forwards.

And so it proved. The organised core of those who hived off gathered round Briefing. Their philosophy was clearly expressed in a polemic over the GLC fares climbdown in 1982.

"I accept", wrote Chris Knight of Briefing, "[that] the editorial [in Briefing] was not half hard enough on Ken Livingstone... [But] what I think you inadequately understand is that we are engaged in a struggle not just for propaganda points, but for power.

"It is the realities of power which are the problem, not 'incorrect ideas' in Ken Livingstone's (or anyone else's) head.

"If we had full state power in our hands, we wouldn't have to make difficult choices between almost equally unsatisfactory alternatives... To the extent that we lack full power, however, things aren't so easy..."

"The only circumstances in which it would be right to disengage would be those in which we would have *more* power out of office than in..."

"It is obvious that the disengagement tactic presupposes a very high state of class consciousness in the population.

"The moment of disengagement then becomes a signal for massive, near-insurrectionary, upheavals... It would have been nice if that had been the case this spring in connection with the Fares Fair fight, but unfortunately, it wasn't." (SO, 18.3.82).

In other words: so long as left councillors can do even marginally positive things in office (and that's practically always), that office gives

them a bit of 'power' which should be cherished and preserved. You can confront the government — that is, run the risk of losing office — only when the situation is ripe for a full revolutionary struggle for power.

The practical conclusion is much the same as the most ordinary municipal reformism: do the best you can within the system. The shortcomings of that reformism are acknowledged — but are attributed to "not 'incorrect ideas' in Ken Livingstone's head" but insufficient quantities of 'power'. The answer is not to dispute the "ideas in Ken Livingstone's head" but to get more power, i.e. in practice, more municipal offices for the left.

This rather humdrum policy is given a mystical revolutionary glow by being dubbed a "struggle for power", to be followed at some future — always future — moment by the full revolutionary battle on the streets.

A similar strange blend of ultra-leftism with un-militant immediate conclusions was promoted from November 1980 by the Workers Revolutionary Party.

WRP

While stridently demanding general strikes, soviets (under the name 'community councils'), etc., they also dropped their opposition to councils raising rates and selling houses. They endorsed what Ted Knight did in Lambeth.

The WRP denounced those, like SO, who called for a more militant line in Lambeth, as 'revisionists' if not secret Tory agents.

"The revisionists want the Tory commissioners in Lambeth. They are now calling for rent and rate strikes in the borough with the aim of deliberately destabilising the council and forcing it into bankruptcy..."

"In other words, behind their fake 'left' words and their talk of a 'militant stand' against the Tories, they are in fact hellbent on getting Labour out of Lambeth and the Tories in" (Newline, 19.1.81).

The WRP, stars of stage, screen and libel courts, had decided that

they wanted to get back into mainstream Labour politics. Principle never being a problem, they were prepared to support the right wing — in this case Knight and his rate rises — in order to do it.

They renewed their links with Knight — who had been a leading member of the WRP's predecessor groups in the '50s and early '60s, when they were a serious tendency, albeit sectarian and politically primitive. From that base the WRP made new connections, for example with Ken Livingstone. They broadly supported Livingstone's policy at the GLC until March 1985.

The WRP used its considerable and difficult-to-explain wealth to cement this alliance.

In September 1981 Knight and Livingstone launched Labour Herald. Put together by an associate of the WRP, Steven Miller, this was also printed by the WRP press on terms favourable enough to enable the full-colour paper to survive with no visible network of sellers.

The WRP's ranting, thankfully, made relatively little impact. But there were also much more sophisticated arguments to bolster a new municipal reformism.

Cynthia Cockburn coined the phrase 'the local state' in a very influential book of that title published in 1977. It was an interesting and highly critical study of Lambeth council in the mid-'70s (the pre-Knight regime). "The [council] leadership", it concluded, "is inexorably caught up in the procedures of the state and the management of the economy".

Everything the council did, even the apparently beneficial services, was part of the process of capitalist reproduction. Everything was 'the local state'. The implication was that "the council structure presents a zero-sum game: to achieve significant change in policy one must be in power; once in power one is by definition part of an apparatus of state and a manager of public affairs..."

This sweeping conclusion, like some other too-tidy analyses of the all-embracing nature of the modern capitalist state, leads to a choice of either no activity beyond the most localised, temporary, unstructured

forms of working-class struggle, or getting involved in 'the state'. And so the ultra-radicalism tends to turn itself inside out: you get involved in administering the state and trying to modify its forms and methods, because there is very little else you can do beyond the most marginal activity.

Arguments of a similar sort seem to have rallied a lot of left-wing intellectuals behind the GLC, including people who considered that *joining the Labour Party* was wrong because reformist.

They persuaded themselves that the GLC's funding of women's groups, or its rather small-scale attempts through a municipal bank the GLC's funding of women's groups, or its rather small-scale attempts through a municipal bank (the Greater London Enterprise Board) to save jobs and to encourage equal opportunities and 'enterprise planning', opened up revolutionary new dimensions in politics, different from fuddy-duddy Labourism. In fact none of these GLC policies went outside the bounds of radical liberalism.

The editors of Briefing were sincere about their talk of revolution. Their arguments, however, could easily be adapted by others to the purposes of straightforward careerism.

Ken, Livingstone has certainly graduated from the school of Briefing to a very un-mystical view of 'the struggle for power'. Running for parliamentary selection, he blandly told Brent East Labour Party that he wanted a safe parliamentary seat as a good base for an attempt to become prime minister.

Briefing's theories also helped to reconcile some of the better GLC left wingers to the game of power politics. Valerie Wise explained to 'Time Out' (May 30 1985): "That is one thing no-one can take away from Ken Livingstone: he gave us the power and let this happen..."

Career

Another rationalisation of careerism was constructed by adapting, in decayed form, ideas from the women's movement. "The personal is political" — therefore a woman, for example, could shamelessly preach careerism for herself as encapsulating the cause of womankind. Confront the government and risk penalties? Women with children could not do such a thing, therefore to propose it was an anti-feminist move by childless males.

And so on. In the US, the decay of the late-'60s radicalisation produced the 'me-generation': people who were no longer willing to dedicate themselves to the revolution, and instead dedicated themselves to themselves. In Italy, a similar sort of decay was expressed, among middle-class leftists, with the slogan 'we won't wait until the revolution'. In Britain, local government politics has been allowed to become the framework for the same thing.



Social services strike, Southwark, 1978

The new municipal socialism

In moving from the half-revolutionary politics they started off with, the new local government left have not arrived back at traditional Labour reformism, unmodified.

A new 'municipal socialism' has been developed, argued most coherently by Sheffield City Council leader David Blunkett.

One of the new left's most telling arguments against the old guard councils was that they rested on and were governed by the council bureaucracy. There was no accountability, and access to council politics was restricted to a few interest groups, usually the leaders of the council trade unions.

In the run-up to the 1982 London borough elections London Labour Briefing carried many articles on this subject. For example, Peter Tatchell wrote about a determination to replace the old right-wingers "with councillors who will do what ordinary working people want them to do".

Lucas

Blunkett generalises: social democratic programmes have been "essentially confined to extending central state control over the economy, and so increasing its productivity and efficiency... social expenditure follow[s] as a by-product, an affordable benevolence out of successful economic regeneration" ('Building from the Bottom', by Blunkett and Geoff Green, p.5).

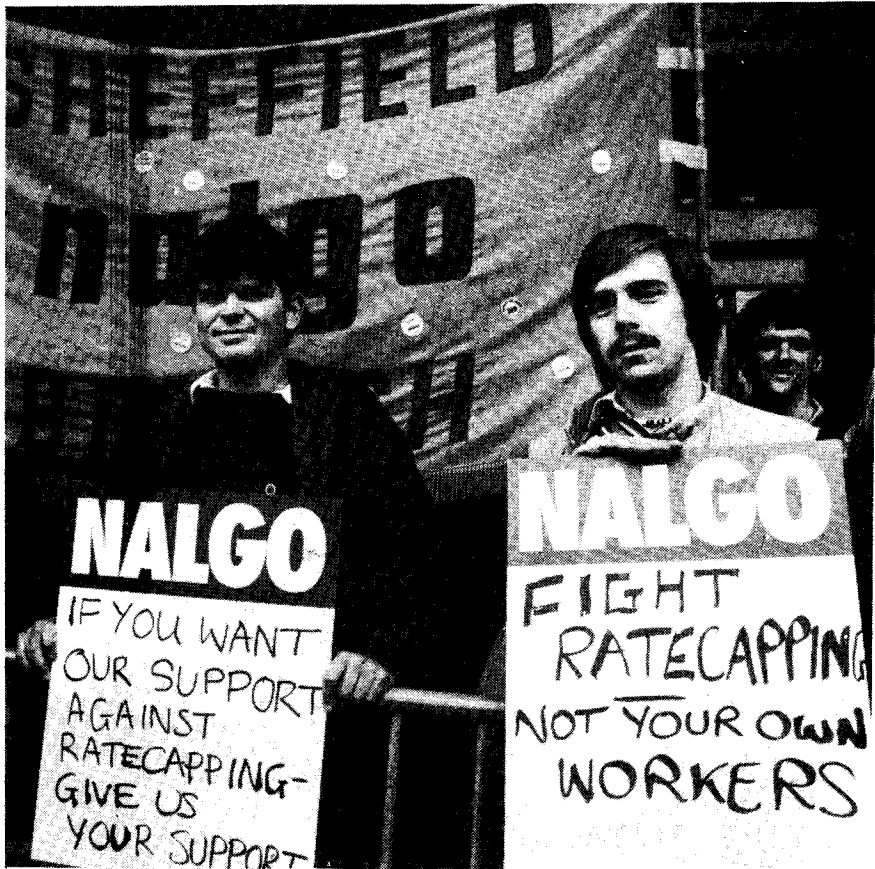
"Our alternative owes something to the popular planning ideas developed by shop stewards in Lucas Aerospace". Council finance should be used to influence the local economy: "the emphasis should be on reforming (by planning agreements or otherwise)... working conditions"

Local authorities should be "model employers", with industrial democracy. Council services should be decentralised and put under community control.

All this might "create an administration which might prefigure a wider socialist society".

Here, the new municipal socialism has become something completely removed from the class struggle — a matter of showing that "local socialist initiatives can establish in a community setting an alternative set of values to those of the Thatcher Government". Direct struggle is even ruled out in the short term: "we must improve our services before we can defend them".

Such politics — in Sheffield and elsewhere — do not produce what they promise. Sheffield NALGO has found the City Council a lot less than a 'model employer'. The ratecapping battle showed the limits of new promises of accountability: one council



Labour Party conference 1984: Sheffield NALGO strikers lobby delegates. Photo: John Smith, IFL.

after another, and Sheffield among them, defied Labour Party decisions to set a rate.

This is logical. For if services must be "improved" before they can be "defended", then in a period of economic crisis the council must somehow find ways to get better services out of its workforce with the same or fewer resources. If the council's activity is about creating local experiments in socialist values, then those projects are more important than crude trade-union interests.

The GLC since 1982 has operated on a similar philosophy to Blunkett, but with more ventures intended to promote feminist and anti-racist values.

It has done much that is useful and genuinely imaginative. It is not true, however, that the GLC has been creating some new and more radical form of socialism.

For example, "the GLC's radical attack on racial and sexual inequality at work" has, as its major thrust, "borrowed a model from the United States" (John Carr, *New Socialist*, July 1985).

In the US, some 300,000 companies, covering a third of the US workforce, have their policies on equality and positive discrimination for women and blacks checked as a condition for getting Federal government contracts. The GLC, with con-

siderably less muscle, is trying to use its buying power to the same effect.

Fine as far as it goes; but no-one thinks that US federal governments have been blazing new paths in socialist politics!

The US also has black mayors, feminist mayors (and in one town, an all-lesbian/gay local council). All that without any hint of socialism.

Municipal patronage for oppressed or badly-off groups is not specially socialist. It is not even a break from the Tammany Hall model of municipal politics.

Tammany Hall, after all, originated in a radical movement. The infant Democratic Party was about the less-privileged of New York organising, through a party machine, to oust the established gentry who ran the city and the state. Then the Democratic Party became the means for the numerous but generally poor Irish immigrants to get a grip on local government.

Many aspects of the new municipal reformism seem colourful and bold. That says more about the drabness of mainstream British Labourism (and Liberalism) in recent decades than about anything else. It is certainly no good reason for the labour movement to accept that municipal reformism as a substitute for genuine working-class socialism.

January 1982 to July 1985

The GLC's capitulation over cheap fares in spring 1982 was a watershed. As the Falklands war, and then the Tories' big election victory of May 1983, followed, confrontation became a very remote item on the local government left's agenda.

In May 1982, however, the left scored sizeable victories in the London borough elections. People round Briefing had been following up their 1980-1 campaign to get leftists into GLC seats with a drive to secure left borough councils. They were fairly successful – most so in Islington, hailed in Briefing of June 1982 as 'Fortress Islington'.

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. In 1981-2 the majority of the Labour councillors went over to the SDP, giving the borough the first-ever SDP council in Britain.

The Islington Labour Left was by no means just a bunch of resolution-passers and committee-room politicians. They campaigned against the SDP council's cuts and, for example, in 1982, for the NHS workers.

The Labour councillors who won a 51-to-1 majority over the SDP in May 1982 were almost all 'new leftists', many of them leading figures in campaigns, trade unions, and tenants' associations in the borough. A good many of them would consider themselves revolutionaries.

The new council started off by repealing the SDP cuts, flying the Red Flag over the Town Hall, and placing a bust of Lenin outside the council chamber. To its eternal credit it took a bold and public position in favour of lesbian and gay rights.

Problems

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 local Labour meeting voted for a 'no rate rise' motion put by an SO supporter. Over the following months Islington SO people struggled hard to build an effective confrontation strategy on the basis of that vote. It was soon clear, however, that most of those 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 for a 29.8% rate rise. It was a "strategy for this year only", explained council leader Margaret Hodge. *Next time* it might be different.

After the Tories' May '83 victory, however, Islington Labour council retreated into a defensive, cowed posture with no strategy at all.

Issues like gay rights were played down in favour of concentrating on the council's 'respectable' achievements. In 1984 two women's centres wishing to set up in Islington, and a feminist bookshop wishing to open a cafe, found the council pedantic and obstructive about planning regulations.

State

That same year, Islington's building works department had to strike to stop the council reverting from a flat-rate pay system already introduced in place of the old bonus system in line with Labour's manifesto. The council said that the workers had not delivered sufficient productivity improvements; Islington had limited resources, and could not afford to spend too much on relatively well-paid building workers.

Just a few months later the council sat out a long strike by some of its lowest-paid employees, the nursery workers, who were demanding improved pay and staffing.

At each retreat, some councillors did object. But there was no consistent left wing. By 1984 a brief survey of the controversial issues over two years' life of the council would show only *one* councillor out of 51 – Pat Longman, an SO supporter – who had been on the left every time.

The council had been an effective school in reformism for the Islington new left. And not only for the councillors. The activity and militancy of the Islington Labour Parties declined drastically. In May 1985 'Fortress Islington' was one of the rate-capped authorities which went back on its promises to struggle and set a legal rate. Elsewhere this retreat could be accomplished only by councillors defying Labour Party mandates and facing stormy demonstrations. In Islington, the dejected, low-key Labour Parties voted to approve the retreat in advance.

The next step forward for the local government left came when the May 1983 elections in Liverpool showed a massive swing to Labour, ousting the previous Liberal administration.

Here, unlike anywhere else, the leading role in the local Labour Party and in the council Labour group belonged to an organised Marxist

tendency, 'Militant'.

Militant was also strong in the local trade unions, and the leading force in the major City Council manual workers' union, the GMBU.

The Liberals had deliberately run down the council's reserves, and the city's financial situation was dire. The council raised the demand for the return of the £120 million taken from them in central government grant since 1979.

A campaign was launched in November 1983, linking this demand with other issues like the NGA dispute.

The council's policy was no cuts – and no rate rises to compensate for government cuts. This helped to galvanise the council joint trade union committee away from looking to rate rises to protect jobs – and the rate rise necessary would be huge anyway.

So the campaign united the Labour Party and trade unions, and reached out into broader sections of the working class.

Individual cases give the flavour of the campaign – like a DLO worker, near retiring age, who had given up union activism many years before out of disillusion with the official leadership, but now became a steward again because he believed that this time the leadership meant business.

The campaign was by no means entirely Militant's work. A large part was also played by non-Militant left-wingers such as the City Council NALGO leadership and the activists in the local TGWU unemployed branches.

On March 29, budget day, there was a near general strike in Liverpool and 25,000 marched to the City Hall. The campaign had broken out of the circles of labour movement activists to far wider layers of workers.

Labour put an 'unbalanced' budget. Six Labour right-wingers scabbed and refused to vote for it. Neither Labour's nor any other budget could win a majority. The council found itself unable to set a rate – an unprecedented and unplanned outcome.

High

The mass campaign continued vigorously up to the May 1984 election, when one-third of the council seats were to be contested. The Labour-affiliated council unions played a direct and active part in turning out a Labour vote, and NALGO turned its 'Our city, our fight' campaign outwards to the community.

On election day there was an exceptionally high turnout, and Labour did well. A survey by the University of Liverpool showed that 80% of council workers had voted, 75%

for Labour. It also showed that they were ready to 'go over the top' with a local general strike and a rent and rates strike.

Simultaneously, the great miners' strike was fundamentally changing the whole spirit of the labour movement. As with the GLC fares issue in early 1982, the moment was exceptionally favourable for a fight.

The government was anxious to avoid any sort of second front alongside the miners. It had told British Rail to give its unions an improved offer, and it went for a compromise in Liverpool.

Militant, as the strongest coherent political force in Liverpool, had a choice: to go for a fight, or to take the best compromise they could get.

Militant's reasoning and motivation was different from the mainstream local government left. Still, its basic ideology biased it towards compromise.

Militant has a very mechanistic version of Marxism, according to which iron laws of history drive the working class ever onwards towards Marxist politics. The job of the organised Marxists (i.e. Militant) in the meantime is to make propaganda (usually of a timeless and general sort) and to build their own following.

Cautious

Two elements in this outlook incline Militant towards caution in immediate struggles. Victory is inevitable in the long term: so why take risks now? If the situation is favourable now, it will certainly be more favourable in the future. The really big struggles are always 'to come'.

And what about positions, prestige, opportunities to make general propaganda? Militant's ideology tells it not to risk such acquisitions for the sake of 'ephemeral' struggles.

So they decided for compromise.

After the May elections the campaign was scaled down. Labour now had a majority for its unbalanced budget, but made no attempt to put it through the council. Its policy underwent a subtle change, from no rate rises to compensate for government cuts to no massive rate rises.

After long negotiations between the council and the Tories, a deal was finally announced in July: some extra government funding, on various pretexts, and a 17% rate rise. Militant hailed this as "a 95% victory". But to a large extent they had only put off the council's financial problems to the next year. And they had missed the chance to open a second front for the miners.

But Liverpool's achievement certainly looked good. It was the first time since 1979 that a Labour council had defied the Tories and come out of it with even limited gains rather than a collapse.

A number of other left council leaders, particularly Ted Knight and Margaret Hodge, latched onto this, and proposed refusal to set a rate as a strategy against the 'ratecapping' — legal ceilings on rate levies — due to be enforced by the Tories from April 1985.

Looking at the Liverpool exper-

ience, they ignored the mass campaign before May and the miners' strike, and saw only the failure to set a rate and the subsequent negotiations. If all the rate-capped authorities should refuse to set a rate in April 1985, they concluded, then they would be able to bring the government to the negotiating table.

Even better, this was a way of defying the government without the risks of clear-cut illegality and all-out confrontation. Liverpool had not broken the law. Not setting a rate could represent a half-way house between capitulation and a fight. At a certain stage it would lead councils into illegality; but that bridge could be crossed when it was reached.

The option of doing in 1985 what Liverpool had intended to do in 1984, and making an unbalanced budget which would immediately open up confrontation with the government, was not seriously considered by any authority except Hackney.

A Labour local government conference in July 1984 enthusiastically approved the no-rate option, which, it said, should be placed within a "principled framework of non-compliance until the government had restored the rate support grant".

As Hilda Kean reported to Hackney Labour Party: "There was support shown for the actions of Liverpool council, in particular the work they had taken in building a campaign with the unions. I feel that much of the positive thinking at the conference was a result of the impact that Liverpool has had on the government; comrades realised that if we as a united labour movement put up a fight against the government's policies then we can win".

And — on the other side of the question — the old rate-rise strategy was out anyway, because it was now illegal.

Council trade unionists who had previously backed rate rises as a way to buy job security became alarmed. Indications were that if the councils complied with rate-capping, then there would be considerable redundancies.

At the end of July the councils issued figures. Islington said it would have to cut 750 staff to comply with the rate-cap; Haringey, 1200; Sheffield "up to 2500"; ILEA, 5000.

Spur

These threats of redundancies became the spur to the formation of the London-wide shop stewards' committee London Bridge, discussed below.

There was a well-supported one-day strike on November 7. In the New Year, 1985, the campaign continued to build up — though rumours began to filter out that some councils might find ways to make ends meet within the rate-cap, and in February the council leaders quietly decided that they would 'defer' setting a rate, which was probably less risky legally than clearly deciding to set no rate.

The argument for this softer line — one that would be employed time and again — was the need to maintain the unity of the rate-capped councils. If Labour went for a clear-cut line,

then some councils would defect.

While Labour Parties, London Bridge, and trade unions elsewhere were 'consulted', it was clear that — for all the new left's talk of new democratic approaches — the council leaders were in sole control of the campaign. The rank and file were a stage army to be marched on and off by the council leaders — rallied outside the Town Halls on March 7, told to go home when the council leaders decided it was time to set a rate.

Shield

However, for the first time outside Liverpool since August 1981, the left councils were conducting a struggle. When Neil Kinnock, at a Labour local government conference in Birmingham at the start of February, called on councils to stay legal and in office at all costs — "better a dented shield than no shield at all" — Ted Knight denounced Kinnock's words as "totally inadequate and out of touch with the rank and file".

On January 19 there was a special London Labour Party conference on rate-capping. (Of the 18 rate-capped authorities, two were the GLC and ILEA, and nine were London boroughs). Hackney argued for unbalanced budgets rather than setting no rate, and was heavily defeated. An amendment calling for recognition for London Bridge appeared to be passed on a show of hands, but the NUPE delegation demanded a card vote and got it defeated.

The leadership was for once moving in the direction of a fight, but the rank and file of the labour movement had no real control over it. When the leadership began to backtrack, we would be helpless.

In contrast to Liverpool in early 1984, the London councils' campaign was geared more to general publicity than to a working-class orientation. Their advertising campaign used pictures of two leading Tory 'wets', Francis Pym and Edward Heath, with the heading 'Are the critics of rate-capping left-wing extremists?'

The cross-class approach was borrowed from the GLC's anti-abolition campaign. The councils' effort was always geared to threatening the government with a supposed broad cross-class alliance, rather than with working-class action. It was rather like a first-year kid who is fed up with the fourth-year bully and tries to get bigger children to protect him. The local government heroes got as far as muttering a few insults before turning tail and running home to mum.

The council trade unionists, however, had been running their own campaign, and that was a different matter. Throughout London every council workplace was visited at least once. The unions' message was a different one: 'Support the councillors while they support us. They may give in, but we can't. Whether against the council or against the government, we must fight to protect our jobs and be ready to strike in support of others'.

On March 7 there was a major

turnout in the London boroughs to support the councils' stand as they voted to defer a rate. Eight London boroughs, plus Thamesdown, Sheffield, Leicester, and non-ratecapped Manchester and Sheffield, voted to defer.

Despite everything, the campaign had gone beyond the activists and mobilised wide layers of the working class community. But the same weekend the campaign started to go downhill.

Unlike the districts and boroughs, the metropolitan counties, the GLC, and ILEA, had a legal obligation to make a rate by March 10.

It looked as if the 'no rate' motion would lose in the GLC because of Labour right-wingers defying the whip. But then on Friday March 1 the GLC Labour group received a legal opinion indicating otherwise.

The GLC Tories could, without risk of penalty, put their own budget which Labour right-wingers would refuse to support, and then abstain on all legal Labour budgets. In that way, a determined core of Labour councillors — even if they were a minority of the full council — could force 'no rate'.

Ken Livingstone responded typically. Formally he argued for the no rate policy. But at the same time he undermined it. He denounced the borough councils for deciding to 'defer' rather than to go clearly into illegality. (He said that he had only just found out about this line, decided some weeks earlier). He stressed the risks in the GLC going illegal, thus lining up moderates to vote for legality. And he produced a scheme for financial juggling to allow a legal rate with no cuts.

The GLC Labour group voted, on Mike Ward's motion, to go for a legal rate. Livingstone voted with the minority, although in fact he had been the main architect of Ward's majority. On March 10, after all sorts of council-chamber chaos, a coalition of Tories and Labour right-wingers eventually passed a modified version of Ward's budget, at slightly lower than the maximum legal rate.

ILEA, where Labour, and specifically the left, had a stronger position than on the GLC, had already voted for the maximum legal rate.

The political realities behind all this became clear in the following few weeks. Livingstone publicly dismissed the 'no rate' policy (which several councils were still trying to carry through) as sham heroics; turned on John McDonnell, who had led a GLC minority fighting seriously for no rate, and got him replaced as GLC deputy leader by Ward; and announced his personal break with the hard left and reconciliation with Neil Kinnock.

The weakening of the rate-capped councils' position went hand in hand with a weakening of the miners' strike. If the miners had been able to look forward confidently to a really strong stand by the councils, then surely they would have continued their strike at least a few weeks longer.

But they saw the signals that indicated a large measure of gesture and token in the councils' defiance. So

on March 3 they voted to return to work. And that in turn weakened the councils.

One after another, council leaderships found accounting tricks or previously un-noticed reserves to enable them to squeeze through with a legal rate. In Sheffield, Haringey, and Hackney, notably, right-wing and soft-left councillors defied Labour Party decisions to set legal rates. By early June every council had collapsed except Lambeth and Liverpool.

On June 14 Liverpool set an unbalanced budget. On June 27 both Lambeth and Liverpool were served with warnings of surcharge. On July 3 Lambeth — its precarious Labour Left majority destroyed by the resignation of a councillor — set a legal rate.

Liverpool's campaign, up to June 14, had been much more low-key than in 1984. General opinion was



Demonstration to save the GLC, November 1984. Photo: Andrew Ward.

that since the City Council had not set its rate until July 1984, it could delay until July in 1985, too, without legal problems. There was no mood of impending confrontation.

The Militant-influenced council leadership had not conducted themselves as if they were preparing for a showdown with the Tories.

In general Militant's local government philosophy has been different from that of the London left, or even of Blunkett in Sheffield.

The mainstream local government left places great emphasis on popular participation, decentralisation, community links and accountability. As we have seen, much of this rhetoric is just rhetoric, and a perspective which hopes to run experiments in municipal socialism in abstraction from the class struggle cannot hope to make it much more than rhetoric.

Militant, however, does not even have the rhetoric. It runs the council with methods of fairly traditional Labour machine politics, and quite secretly: no-one outside a tiny circle knows much about the council finances.

In London, and to some extent elsewhere, the left councils have put great emphasis on special schemes for

women and blacks. None of that for Militant: the achievements that Liverpool council boasts about are old-style bread-and-butter working-class measures, like more houses built and lots of new workers taken on in the parks department.

But more than that: the council has been extremely heavy-handed. Although it has been modified slightly in recent years, Militant's general line on specially oppressed groups like women and blacks is that they should not concern themselves with their special oppression but instead just merge themselves into the general bread-and-butter working-class struggle.

So when the council appointed a Militant sympathiser, Sampson Bond, to its senior race relations job, in preference to other candidates who seemed technically better qualified and more sensitive to specific black concerns, many black groups in Liverpool were outraged. The continuing dispute has put the council at loggerheads not only with the black groups but also with NALGO.

At the same time, heavy-handed tactics by Militant supporters on the City Council joint shop stewards' committee gave some unions led by the Communist Party an excuse to hivel off from the committee.

As a result of its own political decisions, therefore, Liverpool City Council came into the financial year 1985-6 with a weaker position than in 1984-5.

In June, the council leadership's initial recommendation was for a 20% rate rise, which might just have allowed Liverpool to scrape through the year legally. The unions rejected that.

But now Liverpool is set for clear confrontation. Quite aside from the question of surcharges, the council will run out of money in the autumn at latest.

Whatever the discontent with Militant's specific policies, there is little doubt that the Liverpool labour movement will rally massively to the council against the Tories when it comes to the crunch. The City Council shop stewards have pledged themselves to strike action.

And even if a fight in 1984 would have been on better ground, Liverpool can win. If the council keeps its nerve, the Tories can defeat it only if they can put in administrators over the council's head and get council employees to work for, and tenants to pay rent to, those administrators.

Edinburgh council is also set for a possible confrontation. As with Lothian in 1981, it has been instructed by the government to cut spending. (What particularly offends the Tories is the council's rent-freeze policy). If it holds firm, it is likely to suffer not only loss of central government grant, but also court action.

To organise support now for Liverpool and Edinburgh is vital. But to look back at the problems of the last six years is not quibbling or sectarian. If we are to mobilise the labour movement effectively — in support of Liverpool and Edinburgh, or over next year's rate-cap and abolition of metropolitan authorities — then we must learn the lessons of past failures to mobilise.

Labour councils and their workers

Local authority workers have not traditionally been as militant and organised as in major manufacturing industries. The method of payment, the nature of the job, and the general lack of economic power all held them back.

But in 1969 a 'revolt of the low-paid' began which involved local authority workers. London dustmen, for example, used flying pickets.

This revolt from below was to continue through the early '70s. Trade union organisation began to be built — but also to become bureaucratised.

A whole negotiating structure and industrial relations procedures were built up, quite distant from the shop floor. This system has its effects today, with left councils trying (to their credit) to put through equal opportunities policies, and doing so without much real success in getting the message through the shop floor.

The relations between stewards and Labour councils often represent a microcosm of those between TUC leaders and a Labour government: patronage, collaboration. In many cases the independence of the unions has been seriously eroded.

Deploy

These relations, as we have seen, were used by left councils, for example Lambeth, to deploy the unions against Labour left-wingers who opposed rate rises.

Local conditions vary. In the London boroughs full-time officials play next-to-no part in the local negotiations. In Sheffield, on the other hand, full-time officials play the major role. In Liverpool you have a system somewhere in the middle.

White collar workers are mainly organised by NALGO; Direct Labour Organisations by UCATT, EETPU, and TGWU; and manuals by NUPE, TGWU and GMBU.

Teachers are organised by the NUT and NAS/UWT; fire service workers by the FBU.

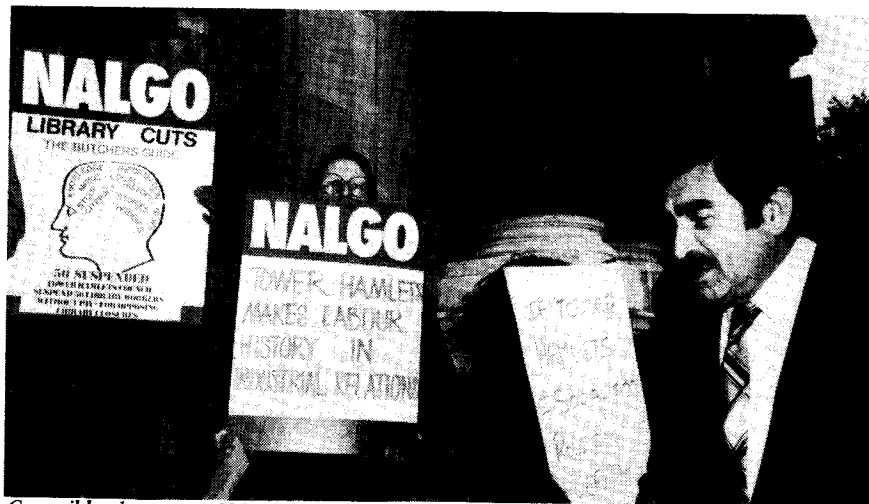
Often these different union groups will have no joint committee developing a common strategy. Extensive systems of shop stewards or similar workplace representatives are however widespread.

The left councils' record in relation to their own workforces has been atrocious.

Islington, as we have seen, ran major disputes with its building works department and its nursery workers. Sheffield fought a big battle with NALGO.

Many left councils were viciously hostile to the residential care workers during their national dispute in 1983.

In 1979 Camden council did make a separate settlement with its manual



Council leader crosses NALGO picket line in Tower Hamlets. Photo: Andrew Wiard.

workers on their £60/35 hours 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 continue to do just that.

The GLC's failures in relation to its own workforce extend well beyond its confrontation with the underground workers in 1981.

Many of its DLO workers have to operate under one of the harshest work-study schemes operated by a Labour authority. The council's commitment to harmonisation of wages has not been honoured; a £4 differential on London weighting still remains.

The GLC has not ended low pay among its employees. Shop stewards have been refused time off with pay to attend meetings of the London Bridge committee.

The GLC's excuse, time and again, is the threat of legal action.

The council's failure to develop an alliance with its blue-collar and lower paid white-collar staff has implications for its approach to the senior officials. When the councillors have conflicts with the top officials, they have no chance of mobilising the lower-grade workers on their side. Instead they have tried to solve the problem by creating more £20,000 a year jobs and filling them with socialists — in other words, creating their own parallel bureaucracy.

There was a certain amount of hostility and tension between the council and the GLC union leaderships from the start.

The two biggest unions within the GLC are the FBU (but obviously the fire service is somewhat separate from the rest of the GLC) and, for the white collar workers, the GLC Staff Association.

The union leaderships, fairly conservative, were suspicious of the left-wing councillors. The councillors, for their part, were cynical about what

the unions were capable of delivering. Each side's attitude reinforced the other.

The council did little to change things for the workforce, except over certain issues like equal opportunities where councillors' political credibility and careers were at stake. Still, if the unions had put pressure on the council, undoubtedly they would have found a lot of good intentions among the councillors and they would have achieved a lot. But they didn't.

The problems of the workforce did not become visible in the political arena. The low-paid workers who had swept and cleaned up after the Tories and their beanos at County Hall went on, with very little change, to sweep and clean up after the left-wingers had wine and dined labour movement dignitaries.

The local government left's strategy, logically spelled out, is one of councils creating a string of socialist bastions, eventually to be crowned by an Alternative-Economic-Strategy 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). But the important thing for this industrial action to do (in the strategy) is to promote the creation of the socialist bastions — to bring down Tory governments, sustain Labour governments, support 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.

The logic is as follows. Until the industrial big battalions sweep away capitalism, 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 special oppressed groups, are more deserving claimants for these resources than reasonably well-waged (and often white male) council workers. Therefore, oppose the council workers.

In rejecting this approach we do not argue that the defining criterion of a socialist council is large pay-outs to its employees – municipal patronage directed not to the private contractors whom a Tory administration would favour but to the workers instead.

Some Labour councils, and not just left-wing ones, have dispensed a fair amount of patronage to their workforces. Such relations, as we have noted, often formed the basis of a councillors/trade-union alliance in favour of rate rises.

The problem is not where to distribute administrative benevolence, but whether the councillors should be administrators (fundamentally) or fighters.

If the councillors act fundamentally as administrators, then they are just 'the local state' – pursuing general capitalist state policy with this or that benevolent twist. If they act as fighters, then they have to act as part of the overall class struggle – as delegates only technically separated off from the rank and file of the labour movement.

The self-education of the working class comes principally through 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.

But the GLC, as we have seen, soon gave up on its unions, regarding them as a dead weight or a nuisance. The council's campaign against abolition paid much more attention to the bishops, the Lords, and the Tory 'wets' than to the workers whose jobs were at risk.

Campaign

In late summer of 1983, the GLC unions, including the FBU, did get together to form 'Democracy for London', a committee to campaign against abolition.

It called a demonstration in January 1984. For the first time County Hall closed completely. The Staff Association balloted its members and they voted overwhelmingly for action.

But on the demonstration – in contrast to Liverpool's protests in that same period – there were very few manual workers, the vast majority being white collar workers and ILEA teachers.

The next protest was Democracy Week, called by the TUC. This time the Staff Association stayed at work and NALGO (a more militant minority union at County Hall) came out. The Staff Association left the Democracy For London campaign, and it began to become more a focus for the militants within County Hall unions.

Also in early 1984, Lambeth and Hackney shop stewards began to meet on a regular basis. Between July and September this developed into a united trade union committee covering all the rate-capped London boroughs – 'London Bridge'.

This was based directly on shop stewards' committees, with a delegate structure. It quickly took a bigger role than 'Democracy for London' in the fight against ratecapping and abolition.

London Bridge turned the November 7 1984 strike and demonstration, originally called for by DFL, into a powerful protest against ratecapping.

Unfortunately the organisation of the rally was in the hands of County Hall union full-timers. The politicians were to the fore, the shop stewards' speaker way down the list.

The irony was that, while Ken Livingstone talked to the rally about "fighting them on the beaches", Westminster's Tory council had served a writ on the GLC against the secondment of stewards to staff DFL. The council was in a state of panic, even to the point of not letting the demonstration organisers have portable toilets for fear of legal action.

The GLC withdrew the seconded stewards. This, combined with increasing opposition from the union full-timers, wrecked the emerging GLC stewards' organisation. When a conference for County Hall stewards was called on January 23 1985, attempts to turn it into a decision-

making body led the chair to close it down.

London Bridge has had weaknesses too: especially its refusal to fight within the official union structures, leading to such results as NUPE's successful move to block support to London Bridge from the London Labour Party.

Nevertheless, at the time of writing in July 1985, London Bridge remains a stronger stewards' organisation than London local authority workers have ever had before. It has links with Liverpool City Council's strong joint shop stewards committee, and also with Sheffield, where stewards' organisation was considerably strengthened during the ratecapping fight despite the council's final sell-out.

Umbrella

What has been achieved under the umbrella of even the very limited campaign run by the councils between July 1984 and March 1985 shows what could have been done if even a few left-wing councils had staged a serious fight earlier.

The collapse of the councils' 'no rate' stance has caused some demoralisation among local authority trade unionists – but not the destruction of the organisation built up during the campaign. Given a fighting policy local authority workers can and will be a major force in supporting Liverpool and Edinburgh, resisting privatisation, and fighting next year's rate-cap and abolition.



March against GLC abolition, January 24 1984. Photo: Andrew Moore



There is no Chinese Wall between the Labour Party and trade unions. Photo: 'Republican Worker'.

Stay in the fight!

John O'Mahony argues against drawing defeatist conclusions from the disappointments of the rate-cap fight

THE BITTER experience of Labour in government in 1964-70 and in 1974-9 pushed many activists away from reformism and towards revolutionary socialism.

Now the experience of taking responsibility for the local government left 'in power' has pushed and sucked activists back to reformism, binding many former leftists to the new Labour establishment around Neil Kinnock.

That is a setback for the left and indeed a tragedy, which SO has fought for the last six years to avert or minimise.

The debacle of the local government left also contain the seeds of a subsidiary tragedy. It may propel a new wave of militants in revulsion away from the Labour Party and towards sectarianism of the sort peddled by the Socialist Workers Party.

The SWP says nothing can ever be done in the Labour Party, and seizes on setbacks like the political collapse of the local government left to 'prove' it.

If this shift to sectarianism happens, it will be another cycle in a linked series of tragedies and defeats that the working class has suffered in the last two decades. Opportunism, and rampant self-serving careerism such as Ken Livingstone's, breeds sectarianism; sectarianism is sterile and therefore breeds new opportunists; opportunism again breeds sectarianism... and so on.

In fact a large part of the wave of left wing activists who followed Ted Knight

and Ken Livingstone in their zig-zags after 1979 are former sectarian revolutionaries of the SWP or WRP (or their predecessors). Disoriented, they moved into the Labour Party without a serious and coherent perspective, retaining only general left ideas and prejudices. They were sucked into the system; some will revert to sectarianism.

The current moves in the other direction too. Both the WRP and the SWP have a central core of people who moved in the early (WRP) or late (SWP) 1960s from illusions (of different sorts) in the Labour Party to sectarian rejection of it. In both cases they chose to try to build a 'revolutionary party' apart from and artificially counterposed to the historically-evolved and historically-rooted mass party of the British working class.

Truths

Thus they forgot, if they ever knew, some of the basic truths that Marxists have gathered from the experience of the European labour movement in the last 70 years. The lesson of history, right back to the foundation of the Communist International in 1919-20, says that wherever there is a long-traditioned and powerful working class movement, it is only possible to go beyond that to a mass working-class movement on a higher level by winning a majority of the old working-class party (the Italian and French Communist Parties

were formed in that way out of the old Socialist Parties), or at least a very big minority (as was done in Germany).

Where, as in Britain, the revolutionaries failed to win most or a large part of the old mass workers' movement to their politics, they remained more or less impotent sects.

At the core of the 'projects' of organisations like the SWP is the implicit commitment to building their own mass labour movement from the ground up, side by side with the one the workers have created over many, many decades of struggle.

The sectarians sustain themselves on fantasies. Thus they make an artificial distinction between the reformist Labour Party and the (non-reformist?) unions. In reality it is not like that. It was not in the Constituency Labour Parties — which voted 83% for Tony Benn as deputy leader in 1981 — but in the trade unions that the first big blows were dealt to the serious left in the early 1980s. The Labour Party and the trade unions are closely linked together, and any severing of the links in the immediate period ahead will not be to the benefit of revolutionary socialism. The reality is that the Labour Party is the only working-class alternative to the Tories right now, and class-conscious workers know it. Militants who turn away from Labour now in disgust towards building a 'purer' movement are turning to the work of constructing a 'revolutionary party' that is nothing but a political white elephant — useless to the working class.

Consider what role the sectarians — the

more rational sectarians of the SWP, not the more bizarre groups — have played during the crucial battles in the Labour Party, the political wing of the trade unions, in the last six years.

We have fought to smash the right wing and scour the movement clean of all their works and legacies. We made the party uninhabitable for the Liberals and pale-pink Tories of the SDP. We have had to fight a long and hard battle against the attempt to drive Militant out of the Labour Party, and that fight continues.

Sidelines

What have the sectarian revolutionaries been doing? Standing on the sidelines, telling the Labour Left to give up, enticing a few tired souls, fainthearts who take refuge in 'hard man' postures, and others to get out and abandon the field to the right wing and soft left.

The lesson of the avoidable defeats and setbacks that the local government left has recently suffered is not that Marxists should do what the right wing and soft left want, and get out of the trade unions' political wing, the Labour Party, leaving it to the reformists. The soft left and the careerists could do what they did because the Marxists were not numerous enough

and well-organised enough in the key place at the crucial time.

There was nothing inevitable in 1979 and after about the dominance of people like Ken Livingstone and Ted Knight on the Labour 'new left'. The local government structures, rhythms and routines remoulded some of the would-be serious lefts, including the ex-revolutionaries among them, because they did not have a Marxist organisation able to work out a common, binding, revolutionary-socialist line, through collective deliberation.

The sectarians are negative fetishists. They have the same awe of the Parliaments and council chambers of bourgeois democracy as the reformists have, only where the reformists revere they feel superstitious fear and panic.

In fact, as Lenin argued rightly in 'Left Wing Communism', a serious revolutionary organisation has to learn to function in the trade unions, in Parliament, and in many other terrains. He pointed out that the most revolutionary party in history knew how to use even the miserable quasi-parliament of the Tsar, and if it hadn't there probably would not have been a workers' revolution in Russia.

It is the aimlessness, the lack of political culture and perspectives, and the lack of a

Marxist organisation, that allow the structures of the local or central state to remould and reshape those who set out to use them for change. The official machinery of the trade unions domesticates many militants in the same way.

The articles reprinted in this magazine show how clearly SO grasped and understood the issues and the alternatives that the left faced in 1979 and afterwards. But we were not strong enough to determine what happened. If the serious people among the sectarians who spent the years of those struggles trying to entice a few people to quit the Labour Party had instead been where they should have been, fighting for socialist politics in the existing mass political labour movement, then our combined forces might have been strong enough to have controlled or seriously affected what happened.

Right now there is no other way forward for the labour movement but to go through another experience of would-be-reformist Labour government. Layers of the Left who set out after 1979 to change the Labour Party have now recoiled in face of the difficulties and, in horror that Thatcher has been a beneficiary of the turmoil in the Labour Party, they want to give Kinnock a chance. They are frightened by the opposition and by the long travail involved in winning the working class and the labour movement to working-class socialism.

Many of them will turn left again — though of course the wretched Livingstones won't, and that's all for the good — as it becomes clear, whoever wins the next election, that Kinnock doesn't have any answers. It will again become clear that there is no alternative to continuing the struggle to change the labour movement into a movement adjusted to the job of overthrowing capitalism and making a socialist Britain.

Just as the hidden programme implied in the sectarians' refusal to fight to transform the existing movement is that they will build their own parallel labour movement, so again there is a hidden implication in their message to the Labour Left now: give up, because the setbacks for the left prove that the left can't win. The logical — obviously undesired — implication is that we should give up on socialism as well as giving up on winning the working-class movement for socialism.

Re-founding

For the job of remaking — renovating, or as Tony Benn puts it 're-founding' — the existing conservative many-millioned labour movement is a work of immense scope and duration. It is only a few degrees removed in its scope, and in the power and strength of the bourgeois forces outside and inside the labour movement who must be overcome for it to be done, from the task of the socialist revolution itself. When the serious left has won the existing mass working-class movement (or a large enough section of it) for socialism, then the socialist revolution will not be far away! Only the socialist transformation of society is of greater scope than the socialist transformation and reorganisation of the long-established mass British labour movement.

Yet there is no other road to socialist revolution than the remaking of the existing working-class movement. Layers of youth, ethnic-minority militants, women activists, etc. may from time to time



Don't leave the existing political labour movement to Neil Kinnock! Photo: John Harris.



Clay Cross: a Labour council that led a mass struggle. Photo: Eric Harrison.

appear outside the structures of the labour movement. But there is no ground for believing that a new militant mass labour movement can come into existence side by side with the existing one — separate from it or counterpose to it.

On the contrary: most of the living, militant, rejuvenating forces, from the shop stewards' movement of the '60s and '70s to the present Bennite left, have appeared within the structures of the existing mass movement. In so far as there is powerful political opposition to that movement in the working class, it is to the right of the movement and under direct bourgeois political and ideological domination.

The idea that any force, whether the relatively tiny SWP or even a much bigger 'revolutionary' party can compete with the Labour Party from outside in the period ahead, is ludicrous. Therefore, the notion that defeats and setbacks for the left prove that we should abandon the fight in the Labour Party is not too distant from the analogous conclusion that defeats for the working class should make us give up on socialism. The working class has been defeated again and again: in pitched battles like the Spanish Civil War; by way of the peaceful surrender of its leaders to the fascists as in Germany in 1933; by way of straightforward sell-out of magnificent but politically headless movements like the ten-million-strong French general strike of 1968. To those who give up in despair, socialists explain that it is an immense historical work to win socialism, requiring long-sustained battles and manoeuvres of the working class against capitalism.

Cajole

In relation to the Labour Party too, the same basic arguments apply — all proportions granted. The forces against us in the Labour Party in the last period could call on the whole of bourgeois society, from the gutter press upwards. They could call on the trade union leaders. They could flatter, bribe and cajole our prominent people. They could turn the political apathy and passivity of most workers — an inbuilt feature of capitalism in normal times — to their advantage. They could profit from our lack of a sizeable non-sectarian Marxist organisation.

Therefore give up on the fight to change the movement? Just as well give up on the fight for socialism.

They are actually and literally the same thing. To give up on the struggle to change the mass political labour movement and decide to leave it to Kinnock is to give up on the fight for socialism — socialism in the here and now, socialism as based on the only working class we have got.

Elephant

Building a little white-elephant sectarian propaganda party on the sidelines (albeit one that is uncritically 'Labour' in elections, like the SWP) is no compensation, and cannot offset or conceal the logic

of the SWP's position, however much its leaders and militants may deny that logic.

The lesson from the left's recent setbacks is that we must organise a Marxist left in the Labour Party and the trade unions — a movement that knows how to immerse itself in the living struggles of the working class and of its labour movement without losing its political, ideological and historical identity; a movement which is sure of its own Marxist identity and therefore does not have to use it as a sectarian fetish; a movement which can keep faith with its revolutionary socialist politics without turning its back on the working class and its existing organisations.

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The key dates

Seven years of 'new left' councils; six years of Tory cuts; repeated promises to fight; and, as yet, a climb-down every time.

From World War 2 through to mid-'70s: very rapid expansion of local government. The local authority workforce increases from 1.4 million to 2.5 million. By 1974-5 local government spending accounts for 15.9% of gross domestic product.

March 1974: Major local government reorganisation, legislated by the 1970-4 Tory government. Authorities made fewer and larger, with more powerful bureaucracies ('corporate management'). Payments to councillors introduced.

1975-6: The IMF puts the screws on the Labour government and minister Anthony Crosland declares: "The party's over". Labour councils start cutting or levying big rate rises.

May 1978: Local elections in London boroughs, Scottish regions, and (for one-third of the seats) in metropolitan districts. The first 'new left' council leaderships — Ted Knight in Lambeth, and a left Labour Group in Lothian Region.

July 1978: Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory launch conference. Platform calls for Labour to 'freeze rents and rates'. Ted Knight, Ken Livingstone and others sign it. It gets sponsorship from four CLPs and a message of support from Arthur Scargill.

May 1979: Tory government elected. In June it cuts central government grant to councils by 3%.

June 16 1979: 225-strong broad conference of London Labour activists on local government finance, organised by SO. Two-to-one majority for rate rises as an answer to the Tory cuts. Ted Knight argues vehemently that those who oppose rate rises are coping out from the fight against cuts.

July 9 1979: Lambeth council announces 4½% cuts. On July 29 the local Labour Parties vote to condemn these cuts. Ted Knight says he will accept the decision. September 14: council Labour group votes to 'reverse cuts'.

Autumn/winter 1979: Campaign against Tory government cuts led by Lambeth council. 10,000 join demonstration called by Lambeth on November 7; 60,000 on march called by Labour Party on November 28. (Both in work time).

November 24 1979: 200-strong SCLV/SO conference reaffirms 'no rate rise' policy after sharp debate. After this many rate-raisers peel away from SO. Some of them launch London

Labour Briefing in February 1980. December 1979: Tories publish Local Government and Land Bill: central government grant system to be changed to try to increase central control; direct labour departments to be restricted. After considerable amendment, a version of this finally becomes law in November 1980.

January 20 1980: Lothian Regional Labour Party aggregate rejects council's proposed 46% rate rises, calls for 'no cuts, no rate rises'.

April 1980: By budget-making both Lothian and Lambeth have capitulated. In Lambeth Ted Knight puts through 49.4% rate rise and £1.50 rent rise.

May 1980: David Blunkett becomes leader of Sheffield City Council: the third 'new left' council.

July 5 1980: Another London Labour activists' conference on local government finance, this time called by Briefing. Over 200 present: 'no rate rise' motion narrowly defeated.

September 1980: Left-wing Labour Party conference introduces mandatory reselection — and passes an emergency motion from Ted Knight for a 'no cuts' fight.

October 1980: Tories introduce 'right to buy' law, forcing local authorities to sell council houses. Lambeth complies immediately; Sheffield complies but 'slowly'; Rochdale, Greenwich, and a few other councils stick out for a while for defiance.

November 1 1980: 599 delegates at national conference called by Lambeth. Majority votes for no cuts, no rent or rate rises, no council house sales.

The central government grant payment due this month does not — as previously usual — contain a top-up element to cover local government pay and interest-rate figures higher than expected.

Lambeth council continues to sell council houses and imposes a supplementary rate: about £50 from the average tenant or householder.

January 1981: Lambeth recall conference, slightly smaller than November's, reaffirms policies. But a backlash against rate rises — initiated by the Tories — has spread to many council estates in Lambeth.

April 1981: Lambeth council, panicked by this backlash, makes 10% cuts.

May 1981: Labour wins majority on Greater London Council. Ken Livingstone elected GLC leader. He promises: "Wherever there is an industrial dispute in London, we shall go down and support it".

July 1981: GLC comes near to industrial dispute with NUR underground workers over pay. (They claim 15%; GLC offers 8%; inflation is currently running around 12%).

ILEA drops plans for cutting

school meal prices because of legal advice that this could lead to surcharge.

August 1981: Lothian is hit under the new Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Scotland Act which gives the government power to order councils directly to cut their spending. Tories cut £47 million from Lothian's grant. Council initially says it will refuse to cut (it cannot raise rates to compensate because supplementary rates are illegal in Scotland). On September 1 it collapses and makes the cuts.

Late 1981: Local Government Finance No.2 Act — to abolish supplementary rates in England and Wales, and introduce a system of grant penalties for 'overspending' councils.

September 1981: Knight and Livingstone launch 'Labour Herald'. In October it comes out for no cuts and no rate rises. Briefing argues for 'majority opposition'. Tribune editor Chris Mullin has called for no rate rises greater than inflation.

In the same month, Lord Denning rules that the GLC's cheap fares are illegal.

January 1982: After the Law Lords have confirmed Denning's ruling, the GLC votes to comply and raise the fares again.

In the same month, trade union and Labour leaders at Bishops Cleeve agree plans to block the internal revolution in the Labour Party and to crank the party towards a witch-hunt of the Left.

May 1982: Labour loses Lothian, but scores victories in London borough elections. Strong 'new left' representation in Islington, Hackney, Southwark, Greenwich, Brent and Camden councils.

July 1982: Islington council Labour group and Labour Parties vote for 'no cuts, no rate rise'.

April 1983: Islington goes for 29.8% rate rise.

May 1983: Elections for one-third of places on metropolitan districts. Labour makes gains in Liverpool, and 'Militant' becomes a major influence on the City Council.

June 1983: Tories win large new majority at general election. Their manifesto includes abolition of the GLC and metropolitan authorities.

July 1983: With further powers under the Local Government and Planning (Scotland) Act 1982, the Tories impose a total of £19 million cuts on four councils — Lothian (now with a Tory minority administration) and Glasgow, Kircaldy and Stirling districts. Glasgow 'fights back' by closing a park in a neighbouring Tory-run district and threatening to postpone the royal opening of an art gallery.

October 1983: White Paper published

Class struggle or collaboration?

A record of the dispute

on abolition of GLC and met authorities.
December 1983: Rates Bill published — to enable Tories to 'cap' individual councils' rates.

April 1984: Liverpool Labour group goes for a budget based on no cuts and no rate rise above inflation. The budget fails to get through the council because Labour right-wingers vote against it.

In May: elections for a third of the places on metropolitan districts, including Liverpool. Labour makes gains in Liverpool; but does not push through its budget. Instead it negotiates with the government, eventually (in July) making a deal on the basis of a 17% rate rise and some extra funds from the government.

Also in May 1984: District council elections in Scotland. Labour wins Edinburgh from Tories; the new council leader is left-winger Alex Wood.

July 1984: Rates Act comes into force. 18 authorities in England and Wales to be 'ratecapped'. Council leaders — notably Ted Knight, and Margaret Hodge of Islington — argue that authorities should respond by refusing to set a rate until the government drops the Rates Act and restores grant cuts. They get backing for this from the Labour local government conference in Sheffield.

Summer 1984: London Transport transferred from GLC to central government control.

November 1984: Abolition Bill published.

December 1984: Alex Wood says that Edinburgh council will defy Tory instructions to cut spending and rates.

February 1985: 'Set-no-rate' watered down — in order to keep weaker councillors in line — to 'defer setting a rate'.

March 1985: The anti-rate-cap campaign opens with a fiasco, as the four rate-capped met authorities (South Yorkshire, Merseyside, GLC, ILEA) all set legal rates. Some 13 councils (including non-ratecapped Liverpool) do however defer their rates, amid militant demonstrations. Over the next 3 months these councils collapse one by one.

June 14 1985: Liverpool sets a budget with no cuts, a 9% rate rise, and a £117 million gap between income and expenditure.

June 27 1985: District auditors issue notices threatening surcharge to councillors in Liverpool and in Lambeth, the one council still setting no rate.

July 1 1985: Government stops central government grant to Edinburgh and warns that it will take court action.

July 3 1985: Lambeth sets a legal rate.

July 1985: Abolition Act due for royal assent this month.

The recent political collapse of much of the local government left in face of the Tory offensive was not inevitable. Other and better things were possible.

If, after the Tories won the general election of June 1979, Labour councillors had refused to carry through any of the cuts that the Tories were decreeing, and instead had used the council chamber as a platform to rouse and organise the local working class into active opposition and defiance of the class-war Tory government, then there was a good chance that they would have made Britain ungovernable. They could have inspired at least sections of the wider Labour and trade union movement to follow Tony Benn's advice and break off all collaboration with the Tories.

If... But was it ever a possibility? Yes, it was possible.

On the 100-year record of Labour in local government, such a role could not reasonably be expected from local councillors. The famous events in Poplar, where a Labour council went to jail to defend local people against a hostile government, took place as long ago as 1921. Clay Cross, in 1972, was the only example of heroic resistance by councillors from recent decades.

But something was new in 1981. The left — including some who called themselves revolutionary socialists — controlled London, Lothian Region, in Scotland, and Sheffield City Council, were also left-wing. The left was, at least in name, a great local government power throughout Britain. More than that, the leaders of the local government left — Knight, Livingstone, Blunkett — promised, threatened and swore that they would resist the Tory government, using local government as a series of fortresses against it. They said they would use local government as a base from which to fight to bring that government down.

In fact, despite the promises and rhetoric, the local government left orientated not towards confrontation but sharply away from it. It opted for a policy of councils 'compensating' for Tory cuts by siphoning

off additional income from their electorates through rate rises.

This was the opposite of a policy of mobilising the local people around the Labour councils to resist all cuts, whether of services or of disposable income. Ultimately it prepared the ground for the Tories to step in with rate-capping.

The main leaders of the local government left had committed themselves to this rate-rise road in 1979. After that it went from one stop-gap to another until the recent political collapse.

The majority of the Labour local government left, as it existed in mid-1979, took that road not without internal differentiation and struggle. The SCLV — the main umbrella organisation of the broad Labour left, set up on Workers' Action initiative at a 200-strong conference in July 1978, and publishing Socialist Organiser from October 1978 — had a clear commitment to class struggle politics. It explicitly opposed Labour in local government passing on central government cuts to working-class people in the form of rate rises.

But immediately after the Tories won the 1979 election a whole range of participants in the SCLV reneged on this 'no rate rise' pledge. At the SO London conference on local government in July 1979 a majority voted for a policy of rate rises and, implicitly, for trying to avoid a confrontation with the government. This triggered a long-running dispute on orientation and policy for the serious left which led to the hiving off from the SCLV and SO of London Labour Briefing, Knight, Livingstone, and others.

This was a very important discussion for the left. All the issues were stated, and class-struggle, mobilising policies were argued for, by SO more or less clearly — when there was still time for the majority of the local government left to orientate towards a fight with the Tories and away from the role that they have in fact played, that of local administrators of Tory policy.

Here we reproduce some of the main statements in that dispute.

Two perspectives

The SCLV/SO platform adopted in July 1978 said 'Freeze rents and rates'. But at a broad London Labour activists' conference called by SO in June 1979, there was sharp debate on rate rises. Report from Workers' Action 23.7.79.

At the conference a division emerged between two perspectives for the labour

movement in the coming period.

On the one side, a perspective of class struggle, which uses the positions of strength already held by the labour movement on local councils and elsewhere to mobilise for a serious fightback against the Tory offensive. On the other side, a perspective which makes preserving positions on councils the priority, by a policy of 'riding the punches' of the Tory

government.

This was most crassly expressed by Chartist Mike Davis with the sage motto, 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush'.

The division emerged around a resolution from *Workers' Action* supporters. It was not a stark proposal for an utterly inflexible commitment never under any circumstances to raise rates. Even a revolutionary group of councillors might have no alternative but to comply, to some degree, with the policies of a central government which it could scarcely hope to overthrow with its own efforts. A stark 'never' to rate rises would be a programme for wholesale withdrawal from local government by the labour movement.

But the resolution did attempt to commit the conference to a repudiation of the role which Labour-controlled councils normally fill, that of tamely participating in the administration of bourgeois society according to the bourgeois norms and the dictates of government, and, where 'necessary', cutting against the grain of working-class interests. It called for a commitment to struggle by left Labour councillors and councils, while realistically taking into account the possibility of defeat.

Yet in the discussion the opponents of the *Workers' Action* resolution insisted on distorting its meaning and caricaturing it. Their arguments were directed not against what it said, but against a position of immediate showdown at all costs and blanket opposition to any rate rises, ever, under any circumstances.

Caricaturing *Workers' Action's* position made it possible for the conference majority to continue to avoid both practical commitment to the struggle and a decision not to struggle. The Chartist tendency reflected the vacillations and contradictions in the conference, obstructing a clear commitment against business-as-usual Labour councillordom, and blocking a start in drawing the practical class-struggle conclusions from premises they share with *Workers' Action*.

Such a commitment meant a *beginning* of the work of organising to draw practical conclusions from general left ideas; the beginning of the necessary polarisation between those who are clear in their own minds that they are going to fight, and those who are only prepared to indulge in left talk.

It is the classic experience that the meaningful dividing line between revolutionaries and vague leftists emerges when it comes to the drawing of such practical conclusions from general 'left politics'.

We were also told that the Labour councils had to look to their commitments to maintain jobs and services (a bird in the hand, etc.) Yes, throughout the country Labour councils will be quite willing to discharge these responsibilities, *in collaboration* with the Tory government and on its terms!

But the left must organise against the Tory government onslaught. The 'bird in the hand' approach to the problem of local councils is a recipe for the most craven compliance with *anything* the

Workers' Action's motion

Workers' Action motion on rate rises to the June 1979 conference

This conference believes that a council's job is not to off-load the present crisis, particularly in local government finance and services, onto the backs of the working class, either through cutting back on jobs or services or through rent and rate rises.

Instead, this conference believes that the best way to meet the crisis is by united action, linking Labour councils, Labour Parties, trade unions and community organisations, to force those responsible to foot the bill. Such action should form an escalating campaign, leading up to industrial action and councils refusing to pay debt charges, with the aim of forcing central government to provide more funds.

The campaign should involve:

1. A fight to commit labour movement organisations to a policy of:

- nationalisation without compensation of the banks and financial institutions;

the removal of the burden of interest charges on local authorities; and the abolition of the cash limits system.

- giving full and automatic support to any local councils, and other labour movement bodies, conducting a fight against cutbacks and rent and rate rises. This support must also be extended to local authority workers fighting to improve their pay and conditions.

3. An immediate move to get local Labour Parties/trade union organisation to call borough-wide conferences, to which should be invited representatives from all the labour movement and community organisations in the particular area. We should campaign to get such conferences to discuss and decide on a joint local campaign, and also to establish labour-movement-based 'Fight the Cuts' committees to coordinate propaganda and action.

government decrees.

In fact the relationship between Labour-controlled councils and the living-standards-cutting Tory government is not something given once and for all. It can be modified tremendously in favour of the working class. It depends on mobilisation, on struggle.

Even if one defiant Labour council could be dealt with easily, could a string of such councils, across London or throughout the country, backed by the power of unions and tenants? (And in fact the last Tory government found it far from easy to deal with one tiny council in Clay Cross).

At the conference it was not a matter of ultra-left fantasies, but of orienting for a struggle, beginning from where we are.

The conference's responsibility was to adopt a class struggle policy that might allow *Socialist Organiser* to rearm the left politically and begin to organise it against the Tory onslaught. To the degree that the left can organise class struggle (including around councils), then a real alternative to the sit-tight 'bird in the hand' approach will manifest itself and 'make sense' to those who want to fight in the working class interest.

At this stage it is necessary to hammer out and demarcate a real left, defined by commitment to class-struggle politics, not to seek to sink the identity of the Marxists in the broader left and that of the broader left in the labour movement.

With Labour-controlled councils it is now either class struggle politics or the role of administrator of capitalist politics and therefore also propagandist for bourgeois ideas.

Councils are subordinate to the national government, but despite this difference in scale all the arguments about the 'responsibility of councils to maintain jobs and services', and therefore not to risk the 'bird in the hand' by clashing with central government, are the self-

same arguments that Harold Wilson and James Callaghan have used to justify their politics — including their cuts.

They too have to be 'responsible', have to reckon with the entrenched power of the state, the City, big business and the IMF. All such things would be major problems for a Parliamentary-based seriously left Labour government. It would *in fact* be a left government only to the degree that it mobilised and fought against those forces.

Logically, the 'bird in the hand' approach to local government cannot be limited to local government. If it is a valid argument at all, it applies also to a national Labour government. If it justifies a policy of acquiescence in local government it justifies Callaghan before the IMF.

In fact Labour local government is and always has been a major school of class-collaborationist politics. The council Labour groups are, after the trade union bureaucracy, probably the most corrupting force in the labour movement. They tie the political labour movement to a soulless municipal administration that has nothing to do with socialism.

Almost everywhere the councillors form dictatorial, undemocratic cliques, with an almost Stalinist 'discipline', which in many areas allows them to play a dominant role in the local Labour Party.

It may not even be too much of an exaggeration to say that the activities of these councils are the opposite of the socialist struggle.

Socialist Organiser has carried articles on transforming this situation with local councils. All the less reason for supporters of *Socialist Organiser* to pretend such a transformation *has already been accomplished*, or to lend justification to the way Labour councils throughout the country will carry out the local implications of Thatcher's policy with talk of the need to be responsible to the 'bird in the hand'.

Cuts without a fight

On July 9 1979 Lambeth announced 4½% cuts. Report from Workers' Action, 21.7.79.

Lambeth Council's Labour Group, meeting on 9th July, voted by 34 to 4 to cut spending on council programmes by 4½%. The cuts include £1 million off social services and £800,000 off housing.

Camden councillor Ken Livingstone told *Workers' Action*: "After all the posturing as 'Marxist Lambeth', already the right wing councillors here say, 'we'll do no more than Lambeth'. The real tragedy is that Ted [Lambeth council leader Ted Knight] has given a cover for every right-winger to put through cuts.

"We've all been sharing the same platforms as Ted. We got no idea he was considering these cuts".

Knight, who was a leading member of a revolutionary Marxist organisation, the Socialist Labour League, in the '50s and early '60s and declares he has not changed his ideas, won the leadership of Lambeth group on a programme of 'no cuts'. He also last year signed the platform of the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory, calling for no cuts and no rate rises.

At the group meeting Mike Bright, chair of Amenity Services, announced that the programme devised a few weeks earlier as the minimum for a Labour authority was in fact 'full of fat,' and that 'comrades ought to be reasonable'.

The local Trades Council was dismissed: 'who are these so-called people?' The local government workers' union NALGO is imposing a 'no cover' policy in response to the council's decision not to fill Town Hall vacancies if it can avoid it. Ted Knight ridiculed NALGO as irrelevant to the Labour struggle because they had not proved capable of resisting the Tory council in neighbouring Wandsworth.

Three councillors and an observer

spoke against the proposed cuts. Bryn Davies, former deputy leader, argued for a supplementary rate rise. If the council was serious about its programme, he said, it should be prepared to justify another rate rise.

Observer Ian Murray from Vauxhall CLP argued:

- That the council should unconditionally support all workers, including the NALGO workers, fighting the Tory cuts;
- That the council should actively use its publicity machine to fight the Conservative government;
- That the councillors should realise they could not go on being the blade of the Tory knife.

Murray argued that the council should face the options of resignation or voluntary liquidation. If any cuts were implemented they should be in the Tory areas.

But Ted Knight heaped scorn on the public sector unions as ineffective. He said that Lambeth council was already sailing too close to the wind on use of its facilities to fight the Tories, and refused to commit himself further. Nothing could be done until the workers had risen up and brought down the Tory government.

He defended the size of the cuts on the grounds that he was planning next year's cuts in advance so as to have a *smooth* downturn in council spending.

Thus the Black Queen has taken the Red Knight in Lambeth. Without a struggle, a fight or even a whimper, Lambeth councillors have given in — and all this in a week when they rejected new maternity and paternity leave proposals as too expensive at a projected £49,000, but voted to create three top jobs to cost £45,000 as 'the minimum required to implement their programme'. What programme?

The Labour group meeting also rejected a proposal to postpone the cuts decisions until the four local Constituency Labour Parties could have their say.



Ted Knight speaks

Norwood CLP has a long-standing policy of opposition to cuts, yet all the Norwood councillors, selected on the basis of being answerable to the General Management Committee's policies, voted for the cuts.

They must be called to account!

Campaign

Norwood CLP already has an anti-cuts meeting planned for July 27th, and has been making contact with the trades council, NALGO, and other unions. The four GMCs are meeting on July 29th. They must instruct the councillors to take a different course:

- Opposition to freezing or vetting of vacancies, and full support for council workers fighting the cuts.

- Use of the council's facilities to campaign against the Tory cuts and the stranglehold of the moneylenders, and to rally local trade unions and community groups for a united fightback.

- Refusal to implement the cuts.

Supplementary rate rises are not the answer, and nor is voluntary liquidation. If Lambeth starts a fight, and links up with other councils and with the trade unions, then the Tories can be forced to retreat.

Solid support from council workers, and a pledge to take industrial action in case of government interference, could make the Tories think twice about intervening against a military Labour council.

Supplementary rate rises might be used to gain time if the council were building a campaign. But for now it seems the campaign must be built despite, and against the council.

Report of Socialist Organiser/SCLV committee discussion on Lambeth, Workers' Action, 21.7.79.

"It's a disaster. Ted Knight got himself national publicity as 'the Marxist' in local government and now he's supporting cuts. The Lambeth cuts will sanction every right-wing Labour council that's making cuts".

Clr Ron Heisler from Hackney summed up the feeling of the first *Socialist Organiser* extended editorial board meeting over the proposed cuts in Lambeth.

The delegates to the EB from Hackney North, CLP and from SO groups in London, Manchester, Coventry, Leicester and Basingstoke decided that the next issue would contain a statement opposing these cuts. It decided to press Lambeth council leader Ted Knight to explain his actions.

The meeting also reaffirmed the position originally taken by the Socialist Cam-

paign for a Labour Victory of opposing both cuts and rate and rent increases by councils trying to offload the pressures from the government. It was realised that this position differed from that adopted at the local government finance conference sponsored by SO in June, which voted against opposing rate rises. But as the mover of the resolution, John O'Mahony, explained: "We have to set a baseline for our propaganda on the issue while at the same time encouraging a wider debate in SO".

Socialist Organiser is to take the initiative in building local anti-cuts conferences and will press the Greater London Regional Council of the Labour Party to name the date for the proposed all-London conference on the cuts.....

Rate rises: a redistribution of wealth?



Red Ken Livingstone. Photo: John Harris.

Ken Livingstone argues the case for rate rises. Interview with Wendy Mustill, Workers' Action, 8.10.79.

The situation in Camden is that the average ratepayer is paying about £6 a week. An optimistic figure is a £2 a week increase [in the 1980-1 budget]. The problem with this view of no rate rises in this borough is that the Left has tried to keep the Labour Group on a basis of no cuts and no staff cuts, and that's the first step.

All over London you've got Labour councillors capitulating and making cuts this year. We've stopped that. There is a limit to how far you can take control of the council at any one time.

This is the first time you've got the Left organising and saying we don't want rate increases, after 70 years of the Left fighting for them as a means of funding local services. In Camden, 75% of that increase comes from the commercial sector. Every time we increase the rate it's a redistribution of wealth to working families.

I have always believed in expanding services and increasing the rate to do so. Although it's a regressive step and rather a rough measure, it's the only area local councils have got where they can defend and expand their services from their own limited tax base.

And frankly, if you're going to say expand services and not increase the rate, you're making an immediate direct challenge to the state of a revolutionary nature. You're challenging the whole structure of finance

and capital in this country.

If I thought that would work, fine, it would be a tactic worth taking. But no-one can say at the moment that we're in a pre-revolutionary situation. It's just asking Lambeth and Camden to lead their councils to straight defeat.

But isn't there a limit to the amount of rate increases you can force upon working-class people, if the government continues to make cuts each year?

There clearly is going to be a limit reached. But at the moment people are paying no more rates in London than they were paying in 1971 in real terms.

Clearly if we were talking about increases of this size next year, and the next year, then if you mobilise public support around [no cuts, no rent or rate rises] it will become a viable alternative.

It certainly isn't this year, when a lot of Labour councils are struggling to convince people that they're not just wasting their money...

Why didn't we have the argument that taxes shouldn't be raised? That seems to me exactly the same.

If anyone really thinks that under a socialist society, taxes and rates won't increase to massively expand public services, they're in cloud cuckoo land.

A question of tactics

On July 29 1979 a Lambeth Labour Parties Local Government conference called on the council to revoke its cuts. Council leader Ted Knight accepted this decision and started a campaign against cuts. He explained himself in an interview with Socialist Organiser, September 1979.

What's your view of the outcome of the Local Government Conference?

It was my suggestion there should be such a conference, and I believe it gave Labour Party activists a chance to express their view as to the tactical approach we should make in the fight against the Tory government. They have made it very clear that they believe it is now the time to mount a campaign, and the Labour Group will take that into account when it meets in the first weeks of September.

I believe the debate we've been having is not a debate about principles but is a debate about tactics. If the Labour Party members are prepared to say that the situation is now ripe for mounting such a campaign, then we'll do it.

Don't you think there have been some inconsistencies in your attitude to the cuts over the last year? In January there was a declaration against the cuts; in July the Group took the decision for a 4 per cent

cut; and now you're saying you're against the cuts again.

I don't think there's any inconsistency at all. In January we were talking about the situation under a Labour government. We were saying that we would tolerate no cuts and that the government should provide the financial resources, and that was a fight within the labour movement itself, to force the Labour government into action.

Shortly after the Tory election, I indicated that I thought there was a need for a fight against the Tory government's cuts. The question of debate within the labour movement is how do you mobilise that campaign.

It seemed to me and the Labour Group here in Lambeth that there was very little opportunity of mounting that campaign to any successful degree between now and November. In November we are faced with massive cuts which will come in the Rate Support Grant declaration by the Tory government. The Labour Group sought, and I agreed with them, to give ourselves a

breathing space between now and November by reducing the level of expenditure during that period by £3 million, which is less than the amount that is actually going to be cut from Lambeth.

By doing that we thought there was the possibility of a breathing space during which a campaign could be mounted to meet the Tory offensive.

I believe it's a question of tactics, and I think we made it very clear at the conference called by the *Socialist Organiser*, as did the conference itself, that there's no way of walking away from the possibility that there may be cuts or massive rate increases.

How do you see a campaign against the cuts developing concretely?

Irrespective of the decision the Labour Group takes in September, the campaign will be mounted by Lambeth making a call for the support of other boroughs in this situation. We'll be using the campaign originated by the London Labour Party executive, the 'Defend London' campaign, and we'll also be moving towards the declaration of a Day of Action in early November, where Lambeth will be using the trade union resources we have to mount a demonstration and march on Parliament. Hopeful-

ly we'll link up with other boroughs in the same fight and other unions drawn into the public sector struggle.

Then locally, of course, the Labour Parties have already agreed to the proposals I've made for mounting street meetings during the months of September and October, building up to the Day of Action. Following the Day of Action, we'll continue with the exposure of Tory policies, and we will by then know the full brunt of the Tory attack next year. Then the Labour Parties will have to take their decision as to how they proceed from that point.

How do you expect to really get a campaign moving against the cuts when the Group here, and yourself, have already been invol-

ved in one round of cuts?

Well, if we decide to change our minds in September and not to impose the cuts, there should be no problem. But I don't think there was any problem anyway.

What we were doing, and what we would have done, would have been to use the cuts we had made in order to show in real terms what cuts mean. The cuts we suggested were those that did not involve any redundancies or loss of jobs in Lambeth, and didn't damage the services in particular. So that what we were showing in practice was what Tory cuts mean in real terms for people living in Lambeth.

So there's no problem. There was never any decision not to campaign. It is question of tactics. What comrades seem to be doing is to raise the question of cuts into a prin-

ciple. If they pursue that policy, there's really no future.

Don't you think your strategy could be seen as boiling down to postponing a fight into the indefinite future?

I think it could be seen that we didn't believe we were going to win at the moment. That's true. But then very often it is necessary in a struggle to decide when to fight, and it was felt at the time that we took the decision in July that there wasn't a possibility of mounting a major campaign within a matter of a few months.

Since then, things may have helped, such as the Area Health Authority decision [to defy cuts] and others, to show that this may not necessarily be so.

'Fight like Clay Cross!'

At an SCLV fringe meeting at 1979 Labour Party conference Dennis Skinner attacked the common notion that Clay Cross was a disastrous defeat. Report from Workers' Action 8.10.79.

"It was a glorious fight. It was mainly successful. We've got to repeat it".

At the SCLV/Lambeth Against the Cuts meeting on Tuesday evening, Dennis Skinner called for Labour councils to fight the Tories *now* — like Clay Cross fought the last Tory government.

The consequences could be grave, he said. Twenty Clay Cross ex-councillors are still disqualified from public office, ten are undischarged bankrupts.

"But they are not bowed down". They are still active, still fighting, they still think what they did was right.

And it wasn't all a defeat. "The Clay Cross people alone were able to destroy the Housing Finance Act". After that Act was repealed by the Labour minority government, the Tories did not propose reintroducing it in their October 1974 manifesto.

On the cuts fight, Dennis Skinner argued, we can get wider support than Clay Cross did. He told the meeting about how a cut in Water Board expenditure had been defeated under the Labour government.

Many of the steelworkers at Staveley used to believe that cuts meant getting rid of an extra carpet here or an extra person there. "It was an abstract thing". Then they found their jobs were at threat because the Water Board was no longer buying the steel pipes they produced. They protested — and the cuts were reversed.

So "I think it's quite possible to stop these massive cuts in public expenditure.

"I don't accept that the Tories have got any mandate to do anything that upsets my class, the people I was elected to represent". When the Labour government was in, "what authority did the CBI have to mount an investment strike?"

"How many votes did the IMF have? What mandate did the House of Lords have?"

We should reject any idea of the Tories



Dennis Skinner. Photo: Andrew Moore.

having a mandate and take as our guideline "defending and improving the conditions of the working class". "I went to the House of Commons the other day. They're not cutting there. It must be half a million pounds they are spending on the central heating". But the cuts hit the old and the sick hardest.

"There's got to be some action. And I don't say this lightly. Because the consequences for those in the centre of the struggle can be grave", as in Clay Cross.

But "We've never had these problems when the trade unions are really involved. When we marched to Pentonville Jail in 1972 no-one worried about the law".

In any case, "it won't be won in the courts. You won't defeat them by relying on MPs and other bureaucratic groups.

Reliance must be placed on the rank and file". Dennis Skinner warned us against relying on "people who make speeches and then go away and make cuts".

"Have a lobby of Parliament, Ted", he said to Lambeth council leader Ted Knight (the Lambeth Against the Cuts speaker) beside him on the platform. "Have it. But don't expect too much to come of it". "It will be action that will win the day. It will need courageous people in the local authorities".

So "what we want is not one Clay Cross, but countless Clay Crosses, up and down the country".

Lambeth council leader Ted Knight also spoke.

"The coordination has got to be done by us, because Hattersley and Jack Smart and Transport House don't want a fight".

The packed 150-strong meeting on Tuesday evening, 2nd, jointly sponsored by Lambeth Against the Cuts and the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory, was focused on rallying support for councils like Lambeth which are defying the cuts.

A united stand by many Labour authorities is essential, said Ted Knight. After Lambeth's stand, Haringey and Camden, and some councils outside London, have said they will refuse to make cuts.

"The question is how to mobilise support". And that's where we come into conflict with the Labour right wing.

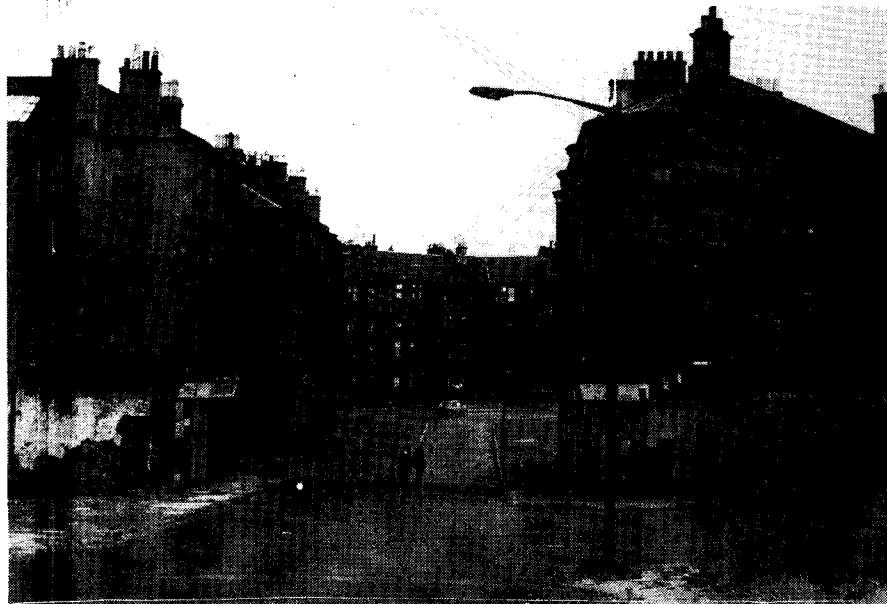
An official Labour demonstration against the cuts has been organised for November 28th, in opposition to the march called by Lambeth for November 7th. They justify it by the fact that November 28th is after the new Rate Support Grant levels are announced.

"That's just it". Hattersley will then try to convince us that it's settled and all we can do is discuss "how to equate the misery".

Ted Knight explained how in July Lambeth council had decided to go for £3 million cuts, and then, in line with the principle of accountability, had reversed them after the local Labour Parties insisted on no cuts.

Now Lambeth is mobilising. The South East Region of the TUC has pledged support for November 7th, so have other union bodies. Lambeth direct labour workers have contacted other direct labour forces throughout London.

Mike Davis spoke from the floor, explaining why the SCLV had chosen to focus on the cuts issue. "Unless a fighting socialist alternative in the Labour Party connects with the class struggle, it is not worthy of the name". Davis called for the maximum turnout for the SCLV's November 24 conference.



Rate rises can be just another form of cut in working-class living standards.

Photo: John Sturrock, Report.

The other platform speaker was Stephen Corbishley (CPSA NEC, in a personal capacity), for the SCLV.

The TUC, he noted, is "committed to a strategy of talking, talking again, and hoping to God that the Tories will carry on talking to them".

We need not just a propaganda campaign, but "a fightback that links up the immediate struggles that are now going on" — and with a political focus, "taking on the banks and finance companies, challenging interest rates and the money transferred to the banks".

The fight against the cuts is "linked into the fight inside the Labour Party. Yes, this could be the end of the Labour Party as we know it. The end of a Labour Party committed to compromise with the

system".

To fight for that outcome, the SCLV is organised, not just around replacing MPs and councillors, but around a definite political platform for an all-round struggle.

The later part of the meeting was marred by a disruptive and point-scoring quarrel on rate rises. Ted Knight, summing up, said, "I'm in favour of rate increases" (a view which the SCLV and *Workers' Action* reject), but he also stated well the basis for unity of the left in the struggle now against the cuts.

"I didn't raise the issue of rate rises. I think we're going out to defeat the government, not to work out how we're going to get round not having defeated the government in January or February".

Underestimating our strength

How did the Left assess what had happened in Lambeth? This statement in *Socialist Organiser* of October 1979 was signed by prominent supporters of rate rises within SO.

We note the decision of Lambeth Council to confront the Tory government by its refusal to carry out any cuts to balance its books.

We wish to warn all SCLV members and supporters that unless this authority is supported to the hilt, the outcome could be a major setback to the labour movement throughout the country. Lambeth Council is now set on course for what in the words of the *Evening Standard* (19.9.79) "could be the bloodiest battle with the government for years".

Lambeth, unlike virtually every authority, has listened to the instructions of its CLPs, and committed itself to an all-out battle against the government from now on.

Criticism

In the past *Socialist Organiser* has printed criticism of Lambeth council leader Ted Knight for even contemplating any form of temporary compromise with the Tories and central government.

In our view, Ted Knight underestimated his own and his supporters' strength. But when comrades such as those now leading Lambeth council feel obliged, under pressure, to make concessions to the superior force of the capitalist state, it is not because they want to: it is because, to the extent that we lack the physical power enabling us to overthrow the whole system of big business, the insurance companies and the state — to that extent all of us are continuously forced to make concessions on the level of practical struggle.

Power

What these events mean in reality is that we are involved in a struggle for power. What the Lambeth comrades need now, therefore, is not pious resolutions or recipes for socialism on paper — what they need is the real power which only all of us through our organisations in the mass movement can provide.

We therefore call on all Labour councils to stand by Lambeth in its fight. Concretely this means:

*Fighting to get all cuts decisions taken this year reversed.

*Where Labour councils refuse to do this, it means fighting for the removal of those councillors who will not stand by Lambeth.

*We call on our supporters on the Greater London Regional Council of the Labour Party, in London Labour Groups and GMCs to instruct all Labour Authorities to emulate Lambeth's stand.

*Fighting for the maximum Labour and trade union support for Lambeth's day of action on November 7th.

Bring down the Tory government!

For a Labour government to take over the banks and insurance companies!

For the full power of London's Labour movement to be mobilised in support of Lambeth council!

Chris Knight, Keith Venness,
Ken Livingstone, Frank Hansen,
Geoff Bender, Patrick Kodikara,
Mike Davis

Struggle not excuses

Pete Firmin responded in Socialist Organiser of November 1979.

IN AN ARTICLE in the October Socialist Organiser — 'Stand by Lambeth Council' — some supporters of the SCLV make statements which I believe need to be discussed further.

Of course it is the duty of socialists to give all possible support to the stand being taken by Lambeth Council — and any other councils — against the cuts. However... Ted Knight did not just 'contemplate' some 'form of temporary compromise with the Tories and central government'. Lambeth Council decided to implement the cuts and only reversed its decision under pressure from the local labour movement.

Criticism of Lambeth council for its decision was fully justified, as is criticism of other Labour councils — be they left or right wing — which refuse to take a stand against the cuts. (Of course, we do not agree with anyone who uses the council's original decision to oppose support *now*).

Support

The comrades seem to be making elaborate excuses for Lambeth council's pro-cuts decision. The excuses are not only elaborate, but positively insulting. The argument is: 'There was nothing else the councillors could do. The pressure was too strong' — as if the councillors did not have the wit or willpower to do anything but passively reflect contending social pressures.

Any serious political activists tries to help *create* or *resist* social pressures, not just respond to them. Those are the standards by which the Lambeth councillors must be judged — and by which, as self-respecting people, they would no doubt wish to be judged.

Of course, concessions have to be made 'on the level of practical struggle', but such concessions are made *in struggle*, when support is lacking for further struggle. For example, a council could decide to refuse to implement the



Anti-cuts demonstration, November 7 1979.

cuts and be beaten back or fail to arouse sufficient support in the local labour movement.

But how could it further the struggle against the cuts, let alone the struggle for the 'overthrow of the whole system of big business', for a council to agree *from the beginning*, without *any* attempt at mobilisation or struggle, to implement the cuts.

Mystify

The comrades appear to say — in some mystified way — that the struggle against the cuts was furthered by implementing them. The comrades would not recognise this conclusion as theirs, but it is the rational thread of the bombast about 'power'.

Then the comrades turn round, after Lambeth council has reversed its decision, to say 'we are involved in a struggle for power', 'what the Lambeth com-

rades need now... is the real power which only all of us through our organisations in the mass movement can provide'.

Obviously the view that one decision against the cuts means a struggle for power (apparently meaning state power) is consistent with the idea that nothing can be done until we can overthrow capitalism. However, it is hardly consistent with reality.

The struggle by councils against the cuts may develop and link up with other battles, so that they broaden into a struggle for power, and this is obviously the direction in which all revolutionaries should strive — but it is the least likely of many possibilities (retreat by the Tories, compromise, the council giving way, etc...)

Certainly we need to organise maximum support in the labour movement for Lambeth's stand against the cuts, but talk of 'giving the councillors the power...' can be misleading. What does this concretely mean? It means that we mobilise maximum support for the council but leave control of the struggle in the hands of the councillors.

Mobilise

We would argue that support should be built, not on the basis of just depending on the councillors to lead the struggle, but independently, so as to be able to continue the struggle if the council backs down or falters.

Mobilisation is needed in support of Lambeth's stand, on November 7 and after, but it must be done without myths and mystifications.

More representative?

The SCLV steering committee had a dispute about rate rises in July 1979. Mike Davis reported in Socialist Organiser, September 1979.

...Near-unanimous agreement was reached in condemning Lambeth Council's decision to make cuts of 4½% following the Tories' £3 million slashing of the rate support grant. It was decided to seek a statement from council leader Ted Knight putting his case, with responses from councillors and local trade unionists.

The meeting also decided to reaffirm the SO/SCLV position of opposition to rent and rate rises agreed at the founding SCLV conference, although a minority argued that the June local government conference decisions were a more representative guide to action...

Representative of what?

The dispute about whether SO's line on rate rises should be determined by SO supporters or by the broad conference of June 1979 raised fundamental issues. Letter from John O'Mahony, SO September 1979.

Mike Davis is less than even-handed in his account (September SO) of the meeting of the Extended Editorial Board (EEB) of the paper held in July. This meeting decided by a large majority to stand by the policies agreed by the first national conference of the SCLV (July 1978) and to continue to oppose rent and rate rises.

Mike manages to state the reasoning of the minority at the EEB; the majority's answer to that reasoning is left out, and only the decision is reported.

Thus the assertion by the minority that the June rent and rates conference sponsored by the SCLV together with a number of London Labour councillors was more representative than the EEB is left unanswered in the report.

Conference

Were the 225 people who attended the London rent and rates conference more representative than the 200 who were at the SCLV's founding conference in July '78? Were they more representative than the delegates from SO groups throughout the country who made up the July '79 EB? Representative of what?

The rent and rates conference was a very broad conference. Many participants were not supporters of SCLV or SO, either formally or even in a general sense.

The fact that it attracted a wider gathering made for its success as a broad conference. But it would be a travesty of democracy if such a gathering (exclusively a London one at that) could determine the line of SO.

The politics of the paper can only be decided by the activists and delegates from sponsoring labour movement bodies who write for SO, finance it and sell it in the labour movement up and down the country. Anything less would be undemocratic, because it would be unrepresentative of the people who make up the tendency around SO and sustain it.

We may choose a relatively loose and non-exclusive organisational and political definition of the tendency — but the definitions exist and the tendency exists.

Any attempt by people who find themselves in a minority within the SCLV to gain a special status for their views by claiming to speak for passive semi-supporters or for occasional participants in events like the rent and rates conference would also be undemocratic. And in practice it would mean claiming control over the activity and political line (through SO) of the militants who do the work of the SCLV and carry the burden of its production.

And why stop at the rent and rates conference? Suppose that SO, together with certain prominent figures, called a broad labour movement conference to discuss economic strategy in face of British capitalism's crisis. A broad conference, truly representative of the labour movement as it is now, would be more likely to adopt the Tribuneite 'alternative economic strategy' than the policies of SO.

According to the reasoning of Mike Davis on the rent and rates conference, SO would then allow itself to be swept along with the views of this 'more representative' conference, abandoning its previous stance.

Of course, on that issue neither Mike nor the others who at the July EEB differed with the SO majority on rent and rates, would propose anything of the sort. They recognise the 'alternative economic strategy' as a nationalist, reformist blind alley, and wouldn't dream of giving up the possibility of changing people's opinions in favour of our policies just because a broad conference agreed with Tribune.

Nobody who takes political ideas seriously or who believes in his own ideas would disarm and abdicate from the political struggle in the labour movement for such a reason.

On an issue like that, Mike Davis and his co-thinkers on the rates question would undoubtedly agree that the SCLV/SO is a distinct — if broad — political tendency with policies and ideas to fight for. A tendency which relates to those who disagree by having full and open discussion, in the pages of SO and elsewhere — but which must be clear on our own policies.

Status

It was for this reason that the EEB reiterated the SCLV position on rate rises.

For Mike or anyone else to propose a special status for the rent and rates conference because they agree with its majority in favouring rate rises is extremely shortsighted. This is no way to build a tendency.

If the political influence of SO is to grow in the labour movement, then it is the activists who will make it grow, and without them it cannot grow. And it is surely common ground in the SCLV that to build and organise widespread support for our policies is a matter of great urgency for the labour movement.

Conference opposes rises

In November 1979 the SCLV/SO conference reaffirmed the 'no rate rise' line after sharp debate. Report in SO, December 1979.

AFTER SHARP debate, a motion opposing rate rises was carried. It was moved by Gordon Brewer (Lothian).

"The question of the rates", he said, "is more and more becoming the dividing line between a campaign against the cuts based on direct action, and a campaign that confines itself to verbal opposition".

Tenants

Rate rises are another form of cut. For council tenants, for example, rate rises are indistinguishable from rent rises. And rate rises as a way of squeezing the middle class are not progressive. "We won't win over people by attacking them".

In any case, rate rises cannot offset the cuts. Without an all-out fightback,

the result will be, not rate rises or cuts, but rate rises and cuts. This is doubly true about Michael Heseltine's recent announcement that the government will take action against councils levying big rate rises.

Rate rises run counter to a fight against the cuts: "It is ludicrous to think you can mobilise people by cutting their living standards". And indeed, the arguments for rate rises "base themselves not on the class-struggle perspective of challenging the capitalist system, but on the existing role of councils, on the alternatives within the existing framework". Rate rises are often "the way right wing and soft left councillors get out of mobilising for a struggle".

Pete Rowlands (West London) agreed that rates are a regressive form of taxation, that "we would not argue that

rate rises are some way of offsetting cuts", and that within the next two years it will become impossible to use rate rises. But, he said, in the short term, "if a council feels incapable of fighting both cuts and rate rises, that position should not be opposed".

Councils opposing rate rises as well as cuts will go down to defeat — just as Clay Cross was "a defeat for our movement". And "we are not in favour of heroic defeats. Better to have a Labour council in Lambeth next year, even if it has to raise rates, than to have Commissioners sent in by the Tories".

Bill Bowring, one of the Lambeth councillors who opposed cuts even in July when the council majority voted for cuts, spoke against rate rises. "It is a question of mobilising the working class as a whole politically against this government".

Labour councillors are not shop stew-

ards, touting for the best deal they can get, he said. They are people who manage the local state. "Are we going to be the agents of the capitalist state in carrying out these cuts" — thus directly opposing the working class?

Rate rises are another form of cut. And "it is nonsense", said Bowring, "to say that it is better to have left Labour councils carrying out cuts or rate rises than to have Tories doing it".

Geoff Bender (Lambeth) said that "none of us is over the moon about the prospect of rate rises", but the question is to have an analysis and strategy rather than posturing.

Capable

We must "unite with material forces capable of defeating the Tories". And the real dividing line is on making cuts or not, not on rate rises. Brewer had said that rate rises were another form of cut — how did he explain Heseltine's promise to penalise councils who raise rates?

Those arguing against rate rises would, said Bender, fail to support Lambeth council against the Tories if Lambeth raises rates. But without rate

rises, Labour councils would go broke.

Dave Spencer (Coventry) disputed Pete Rowlands' assertion that Clay Cross was a defeat. By making a stand, Clay Cross had shown to wide sections of the labour movement that it was possible to defy the government.

Many Labour councils, like Coventry's, are 'anti-cuts' in words — but they "speak with a forked tongue". We should tell them "we don't want them to manage on behalf of the Tory government. We want them to make a stand and mobilise against the Tory government".

Al Crisp (UPW, International Telephones) said that "If councils don't raise rates, they will go bankrupt". That means not paying wages, not providing services. Those opposing rate rises are "walking away from the fight" and refusing to back councils like Lambeth against the Tories.

Martin Thomas (Islington) replied that there is "no question" of us not supporting Lambeth's defiance on the cuts if Lambeth raises rates. "We support any section of the labour movement that fights the Tories. But we also say when we disagree with their policy".

Rate rises *may* be a necessary compromise forced on a local labour move-

ment that has to retreat in struggle. But "if you retreat before you start, you certainly won't win".

If the Tories are not defeated, rate rises will not stop councils going broke. It will be rate rises *and* cuts. Rate rises are not an alternative to cuts, but an alternative to a fight.

Imperfect

Keith Venes (Islington) argued that rates are a form, however imperfect, of redistributive tax and of increasing public expenditure. "We are being asked to vote against increasing public expenditure". And "any form of redistribution of incomes is preferable to no redistribution of income".

Thus the "no rate rise" policy is "abstentionist", it means "sitting on the sidelines", it would "in a certain sense, mark the bankruptcy of the SCLV".

The Lothian motion opposing rate rises was carried by 155 votes to 67. A separate count was made of the voting by labour movement delegates (who had multiple votes: 5 for CLPs and Trades Councils, 2 for trade union branches, etc.): on that count the Lothian motion was carried by 44 to 33.

A strategy for struggle not for budget-making

The resolution

Text of the SCLV/SO conference resolution, November 1979. (From SO, December 1979).

RATE RISES, even when they do hit local capitalists, also hit working-class householders and tenants, and can drive middle-class people into the hands of the Right. Moreover, they are not a way of avoiding cuts: to maintain services by raising the rates would — in many local authorities — require a 50% or 100% rate increase each year, which is not feasible.

At best, rate rises may be a compromise tactic to gain time — forced on the local labour movement where there are

Labour councils who have fought, and who are fighting, to mobilise class action against the cuts. But any serious campaign must start out as a battle to beat both cuts and rate rises.

A policy which starts out with rate rises — like that of many Labour councils — cannot hope to mobilise the necessary class action. For some Labour councils, in fact, rate rises have been a let-out from the fight.

The SCLV therefore reaffirms its opposition to rate rises.

An alternative strategy

Comment by Martin Cook (of the pro-rate-rise minority). SO December '79.

THE AGM of the Workers' Action supporters who had a clear majority for their positions on the day, appeared to be the generation of a hard-line intransigent campaign imbued with the idea that it has all the political answers and that the rest of the left is wandering about without a clue what to next, just waiting for us to corral them in.

The rates issue illustrates a similar mentality. Of course, the conference was quite entitled to pass by more than two to one a resolution condemning rate hikes in principle. Yet no alternative strategy was seriously put forward for the inevitable showdown involving bankruptcy or prison.

One comrade stated that the main

divide in the movement lay not between those prepared or not to fight the cuts, but between us intransigents and those who tactically resorted to raising rates (including Lambeth council which the SCLV claims to support).

The logic of the majority view is either that a mass anti-capitalist movement exists, just waiting for SCLV to give the lead and blow the Tories away, or else that striking a 'holier than thou' stance is more important than giving any practical lead on how limited gains or defensive campaigns can succeed in the here and now. This is the All or Nothing view of socialism, beloved of the Militant tendency.

Response to Martin Cook by Gordon Brewer. SO January 1980.

IN his article in the December issue of Socialist Organiser, Martin Cook discusses several themes of the SCLV conference (including) rate rises.

The motion which was passed at the conference took the position that rate rises are against the interests of the working class and do not amount to a fighting option for Labour councils who want to avoid implementing the Tory cuts. Instead, the motion committed the SCLV to fighting for working class action to stop the cuts in their tracks. Labour councils could be the focus for this fight-back by refusing to implement cuts and to put up the rates.

Martin Cook disagrees with this position. Fair enough. But his presentation of the arguments is way off beam.

For example, he states that one comrade (presumably myself) stated that the main divide in the movement lay not between those prepared or not to fight the cuts, but between intransigents and those who tactically resorted to raising rates — including Lambeth council, which the SCLV claims to support.

Far from making rate rises the absolute divide between those for and against the cuts, the motion explicitly stated that in the case of a Labour council fighting against cuts and failing to get the necessary industrial support, the SCLV would be in favour of putting up rates rather than making cuts.

And one anti-rate-rise speaker spent most of his contribution explaining that it is absurd to say the SCLV does not support Lambeth because the council may resort to rate rises. He explained

that we support the campaign against the cuts, even though we (like the Lambeth Labour Parties and Lambeth Trades Council) disagree with the Lambeth council leadership over the rates — just as we support any group of workers fighting the Tories, even if we do not share all their political views or agree with all their tactical decisions.

What I did say in moving the motion on the rates was that at the present time the question of rate rises is becoming a dividing line between those who want to take on the Tories in action, and those who want to limit themselves to verbal opposition.

For most Labour councils that are putting up the rates have not tried to build a campaign in the local labour movement against cuts and rate rises. They have decided in advance there is no such support, and used this as an excuse to implement rate rises.

Of course, they are engaging in a self-fulfilling prophecy, as they will not get any support if they do not go out and

build it. One of the points of the resolution was to throw the limited resources of the SCLV into building a campaign which would not leave councillors with this excuse.

The effect of comrade Cook's position is merely to paint these councillors with a coat of red gloss, rather than taking our starting point from the needs of the struggle.

Accuracy

But if comrade Cook's presentation of the majority position lacks something in accuracy, how are we to explain his position?

The clue, it seems to me, is in comrade Cook's use of the term 'strategy'. He attacks me and the others who argued against rate rises for not putting forward any alternative strategy for Labour councils that refuse to implement cuts.

In a certain sense this point is correct. We do put forward a strategy based on mobilising the labour movement — but

we do not put forward any strategy based on giving councillors good budget-making advice on how to avoid cutting services, for the simple reason that there is none. There is no way that councils on their own, and within a traditional Labour conception of what councils can do, can stop the cuts.

Comrade Cook wants to give such advice. And as there is none to give, he opts for rate rises.

At the root of his ideas is a failure to challenge the day-to-day practice of reformism, so that those like ourselves who fight for a break from that tradition in calling for a campaign of mobilisation against the Tories are denounced as 'holier than thou' intransigents comparable to the Militant tendency.

It is not a holier-than-thou attitude to put forward demands based on the needs of the struggle and to go out and fight for them. It is thoroughly opportunist to dress up those who are trying to avoid a struggle as politically identical with those who are struggling, except with better tactical wisdom!

For a patient left

By March 1980 SO had effectively split. Mike Davis and Geoff Bender wrote this polemic on behalf of themselves, Jeremy Corbyn, Mark Douglas, Keith Veness, and Pete Rowlands (SO, March 1980).

THE founding conference of the SCLV over 20 months ago brought together over 200 Labour activists who saw the need to organise in the face of the low profile of the 'official left' in the movement to provide a united socialist alternative to the unpalatable choice of Callaghan or Thatcher. Our aim was to group together, on a flexible non-sectarian basis, all the forces inside (and out, in some cases) of the Labour Party prepared to fight for a Labour victory on a clear anti-capitalist and class basis.

Labour lost the election. But the need to develop, clarify and above all unify the growing and revitalised forces on the Labour left is now imperative if we are to defeat both the Tories and the forces of the right in the Labour Party itself. To do this successfully we believe the SCLV needs a relatively open structure capable of forging the widest class unity in action and providing a forum for tendencies and individuals on the left to come together for debate and action.

We believe the conference vote to amend the Hackney resolution which argued for an open alliance, and to reject the West London motion which made the call for the SCLV to be open to those in the Party ready to break with the social-democratic leadership and go forward to the socialist reconstruction of society, means that the SCLV has now detached itself from the conception which originally created the campaign and motivated it up until the Local Government Conference in London in June 1979.

The conception of the SCLV as a broad alliance of tendencies and individuals, as a campaign rather than a revolutionary sect with an outward-looking

approach to involving new people in the paper and campaign activity and with the platform as a guide rather than a catechism has now been rejected.

This conception which enabled us to organise the successful local government conference attended by 230 activists from the London region with representation from 30 CLPs, etc., interventions at the Party and TUC conferences, gain wider sponsorship and created a credible image for the campaign with a potential for growth has now been junked in favour of a more tightly-knit organisation, with a hard-line intransigent face.

The problem is one of confusing a campaign for definite aims — the defeat of the right wing in the Labour Party and the creation of a broad socialist alliance — with the functions of a Marxist tendency which has a wider mandate based on programmatic and strategic considerations for achieving socialism. A campaign is by definition an alliance, and whilst it requires guidelines for its activity, should not be organised or directed by the tighter 'higher-level-of-agreement' prescriptions that bind together a revolutionary tendency.

Many leading SCLV activists seem to be motivated by the view that we're not so much a campaign, more a finished revolutionary grouping imbued with the idea that it has all the political answers while the rest of the left wanders about clueless, waiting for us to rope them in.

We believe that in adopting such a conception, the SCLV is unlikely to attract the many unaligned socialists in the party or outside or involve in the campaign the activists in the Institute for Workers' Control, Independent Labour

Publications, the Labour Coordinating Committee and Tribune supporters, Campaign for Labour Party Democracy workers and the like.

Well before the recall conference it was evident that supporters or Workers' Action were working to change the SCLV into a much harder, tighter, more exclusive set-up. The organisation of the recall conference along narrower lines, for example, the refusal to agree to send open delegate invitations to CLPs and other organisations not sponsoring SCLV, the issue of supporters cards and so on.

Whilst motivated by a desire to cement existing supporters, it had the effect of closing doors to potential supporters. The most damaging decision was the conference rejection of the Hackney proposal that no tendency should have a majority on the Steering Committee, both de jure and de facto: thus marginalising the vital tension and premium on winning others to particular views that gave the campaign strength in its early days.

At the very time that the campaign should be proving itself as a genuine, non-dogmatic alliance of tendencies and individuals and creating a democratic climate capable of attracting Labour Party militants trying to tackle the right, a single — though important — tendency in the SCLV sees fit to assert its own politics.

The conference refused to accept the need (proposed by the Overseas Telephones SO group) for a reworking of the platform along less declamatory lines, making it less of a shopping list of slogans and demands and actually explaining out the aims of the campaign (as the founding statement did) and we have a sectarian 'holier than thou' attitude emerging. The left must be built "around our platform and

politics."

On the fight against cuts the Campaign seems to be accepting the view expressed by a speaker that the main divide in the movement is not between those prepared or not to fight the cuts but between those who believed local councils should follow a policy of bankruptcy by refusing to raise rates and those who raised rates to maintain and expand jobs and services.

On women's oppression, the successful amendment blandly called for the

"restructuring and reorienting of sections of the existing women's movement". Fortunately such patronising arrogance has not at present marred the work of the Women's Fightback campaign though a political rethink away from glib formulas of "for a working class women's movement" is surely necessary.

For a campaign like the SCLV to have any value it must set its sights on the fight against the right wing within our movement and seek to organise on the

left in a patient and non-sectarian manner. Already a number of individual supporters have withdrawn to direct their abilities elsewhere. Can the SCLV return to its original conceptions and recoup the ground that has been lost?

Some of hope so, but the onus is on those the conference elected to reassess their direction before it is too late.

Class struggle or 'power'?

Martin Thomas and John O'Mahony replied for the SO majority. SO, March 1980.

UP until very recently, Mike Davis and his co-thinkers were citing the Women's Fightback campaign as example no. 1 of the SCLV's sectarian turn. Now, they recognise its success in attracting broad interest. But the loss of their prime piece of evidence doesn't disturb their theory!

What about the secondary evidence for the 'sectarian turn'? Campaigns against the Tories and against the witch-hunt in the Labour Party have been agreed unanimously by the SCLV Steering Committee in recent months. Equally unanimously, the SCLV has set about preparing a submission for the Inquiry on Labour Party organisation and supported the Labour Committee on Ireland.

In fact, nearly all the SCLV's recent decisions on campaigning have been unanimous. Not much sign of a sectarian carve-up there.

Disagree

Mike Davis and his co-thinkers disagree with the SCLV's policy against rate rises and that gave rise to the only recent divided vote on SCLV activity, where two comrades — against 18 — opposed an SCLV appeal for no cuts and no rate rises this spring. But the majority policy was not only in the original platform of the SCLV but also endorsed after democratic debate at the SCLV conference last November.

That's democracy, not sectarianism. Moreover, the minority favouring rate rises have had, and still have, full freedom to argue their views, including in the columns of Socialist Organiser.

There's no evidence here that the SCLV is no longer a 'broad alliance'. Not only on rate rises, but also on other issues, critics of SCLV policy have been able to air their views repeatedly in Socialist Organiser. Indeed writing fanciful polemics against supposed sectarian turns now seems to be some comrades' main contribution to the SCLV.

The complaints about conference organisation stand up no better than the rest. How is it sectarian to say that SCLV policy should be decided by people and organisations which support SCLV at least to the minimal extent of taking out a supporter's card or sponsoring the campaign, rather than by anyone who happens to turn up on the day. In any case, the conference arrangements

were — after long discussion — agreed unanimously by the old Steering Committee, including Mike Davis and Geoff Bender!

Did the conference decisions show the majority was junking the original idea of the SCLV? We reaffirmed the SCLV's original platform (with updating amendments, against a move to replace it by an unstated alternative (something that was not made available by its advocates for conference decision one way or the other. And we rejected a resolution from West London which would have effectively scrapped the platform altogether.

Julian Wells from West London was very clear when he moved the resolution whose defeat Mike Davis and Geoff Bender so much regret. The SCLV should be an open organisation for debate, he said. "We want a formulation which would include all the disparate elements who voted for the resolution on party democracy.

"The line should be drawn between us and people like Shirley Williams and Roy Hattersley". Within that broad left spectrum "the LCC has a more coherent and sharply defined view — one that we in West London would agree with fairly closely".

The main issue here is the class struggle, internationalist politics on which the SCLV was founded, versus the Parliamentarian, nationalist politics of the LCC. And to the extent that it is an organisational issue, it is an issue of campaign versus discussion forum, rather than broad alliance versus sect.

Mike Davis and Geoff Bender don't actually agree with most of the political ideas put by Julian Wells. Yet they make themselves spokesmen for them in their letter. The reason for that is that they are indulging — and not very fastidiously — in a dead-end factionalism that refuses to disarm even when events like the development of Women's Fightback show their factionalism to be unfounded. It is the dead-end factionalists who are guilty of 'sectarian arrogance', not the SCLV.

No: Mike Davis's theory about the SCLV's organisational sectarianism does not stand up. What the dispute is actually about is politics. Since the general election, many Labour politicians who were quite tame during the period of Labour government have suddenly been

Socialist Organiser
Paper of the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory

VOTE LABOUR

ONE THING distinguishes the Labour Party from all other parties. It is the mass party of the working class, built by the trade union movement to be its representative in Parliament. It is, accordingly, the party through which the vast majority of workers will express their hatred of the Tories — the representatives of wealth and privilege.

The vast majority of workers will rightly want to vote Labour, not because of Labour's record, but in order to deny the bosses a victory in Parliament.

The Labour government's record is a disgrace. Instead of challenging capitalism, Labour has managed it in the interests of the rich and powerful. Socialism has not been discredited — it was never tried. And the wishes of the Labour Party conference were ignored by the Government.

The SCLV calls on every worker not only to vote for Labour but to campaign for a Labour victory. The fight must be kept up after the election to push the Labour leaders to break with the bosses and bankers. We need leaders that will fight for the working class in government and out. And we need a Labour movement capable of calling the leaders to account.

The fight won't finish with the election. The power to run society does not lie in Parliament, but with the ownership of industry and the organisation of the army, police and state bureaucracy.

That is why we need to fight to create a really socialist movement that will break this power. We need to replace the chaos and anarchy of the profit system with a society run by the working class and democratically planned to meet our needs.

FIGHT FOR SOCIALISM

talking left. Left-wing activity focused on wheeling and dealing around official positions in the labour movement has been given a boost.

There is a tension in the SCLV between that focus and a broader class-struggle perspective, centred on campaigning in the factories and on the streets. The rate rises issue sums it up very well: do we look for alternatives for Labour councillors trying to manage the system or for policies to mobilise anti-Tory mass action.

Rousing

When Lambeth council leader Ted Knight makes rousing speeches against the cuts last June and then a few weeks later gives a lead for every right-wing and fake left council by proposing cuts, do we draw any conclusions? Do we learn any lessons about the real value of the policy of 'rate rises instead of cuts to gain time for a fight', which Lambeth was supposed to be the model for? Do we draw conclusions now when Ted Knight follows up a battle to get the Lambeth labour movement to agree to rate rises by also pushing through rent rises and cuts in growth?

Do we learn the lesson of the need for an independent campaigning policy? Or do we go on fluttering like moths around the illusory light of the 'power' and 'broad labour movement influence' of the Lambeth Labour group?

The SCLV conference gave a majority to the broader class-struggle perspective — against those who wanted to veer away from the SCLV's original politics. It also established a flexible, open struc-

ture in which comrades with a different emphasis and different priorities can work.

Mike Davis and his co-thinkers have not actually been deprived of any valid minority rights.

All their objections come down to the fact that they are not the dominant majority.

There is a curious parallel — with all the necessary qualifications granted — with the protests of the right wing in the Labour Party against the left's majority on the National Executive Committee and the Inquiry; the same protests about the need for a 'broad church', the same assumed concern for anonymous unaffiliated individuals who are going to be put off by the left's extremism, the same wrapping up of political disputes in organisational disputes.

The right wing in the Labour Party is trying to appeal over the heads of the

Labour conference, of the elected NEC, and of Labour activists, to 'public opinion' and to confused and passive Labour voters. They use popular, anti-socialist prejudices. Mike Davis and his co-thinkers are — certainly in effect, if not intentionally — trying to appeal to the general, more or less confused and more or less passive broad left. They use popular anti-revolutionary prejudices, which harm the SCLV as a whole.

Impulse

In fact, though, they will damage themselves more than the SCLV. These comrades are spokesmen for a tendency which is moving strongly to the right and which is governed by a strong impulse to divest itself of its one-time revolutionary politics and to accommodate to the 'Left' establishment and

the 'powerful' individuals like Ted Knight.

It is not coincidental that they are trying to scandalise the SCLV over their imaginary grievances and in so doing present themselves to the broad non-Marxist left as a 'good SCLV'. Their political trajectory is not only away from the positive work that the SCLV is doing — on their own admission, even where they opposed the initiative, as with the women's Fightback campaign. It is away from serious left-wing politics altogether towards reformism.

In Britain in 1980 a refurbished reformism is the last thing the working class needs or can afford to waste time on. It needs a serious, hard-left, Marxist movement, rooted in the broad labour movement, including the Labour Party. That is what the SCLV conference decided to try and build in the working class struggles that are now opening up.

Fight now or wait for the big battalions?

In April 1980 Lambeth made a 49.4% rate rise and a £1.50 rent rise. Ted Knight responded to criticism by a bitter attack on SO. John O'Mahony replied with an open letter in *Socialist Organiser*, May 1980.

Dear Comrade Knight,

I decided to write this open letter when I read your article *Build a wall of unity across London in London Labour Briefings*. It was perhaps due in any case.

From being chair of the July 1978 conference which founded the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory, and an early supporter of *Socialist Organiser*, you have adopted a more and more antagonistic, rancorous and splenetic attitude to us.

You long ago abandoned the position against rent and rate rises adopted without opposition at the July 1978 SCLV conference, and now we find ourselves sharply opposed on this serious question.

You denounce the no rent and no rate rise policy as a 'recipe for political disaster'. *Socialist Organiser* thinks on the contrary, that your policy of rent and rate rises is a policy of disguised cuts of working class living standards, and a back-door form of collaboration with the Tories to implement cuts. It testifies to a grievous misunderstanding on your part of what the responsibilities of serious socialists are right now, be they in a trade union, in the Parliamentary Labour Party, or in control of a Labour council.

Far from being a policy to rally forces behind Labour councils, your policies can only give Heseltine a weapon to split and divide local communities and alienate support from Labour councils.

Whatever our differences, SO will continue to support Lambeth or any other council which fights the Tories, even if only partially or hesitantly, and even if you do it with politics which we think inadequate or seriously wrong-headed.

Since we do not (contrary to the view you attribute to us) think it a matter of principle never in any circumstances to raise rents and rates, the dispute, for now, concerns matters of opinion and political judgement.

We try to win enough support to make our judgement Party policy and to have

your policy rejected, but this is still for us a dispute to be fought by argument and votes in the appropriate labour movement bodies. It is a dispute within the left wing of the London labour movement.

But you don't see it like that. Any left-wing criticism of your policies you present as testifying to a bad faith which makes those on the left who criticise you the same as the right. Your London Labour Briefing article attempts through smear tactics to link the SO left with the right wing. You write:

"A feature of the (London Labour) conference was a unity between right wing spokesmen and those associated with *Socialist Organiser* in a desperate, and at times hysterical endeavour to characterise Lambeth council as a 'cutter'."

"Both groups see the danger of acknowledging that an independent left wing council can defy the Tory government and maintain a policy of refusing to cut any service, or job, or job opportunity."

"Finally they declare Lambeth councillors to be traitors because they have put up council rents. After a three-year rent freeze, and a manifesto commitment limiting such a standstill to a period of wage restraint, Lambeth councillors were faced with a clear risk of surcharge if they refused to make an increase".

The technique you use here has long been a prize exhibit in the black museum of working class history. It is the Stalinist technique dubbed 'the amalgam' by Trotsky in the 1930s when it was used to poison the labour movement against the Trotskyists by 'amalgamating' their politics and criticism of Stalinism with those of the Right, and pretending that Right and revolutionary Left were therefore in some mysterious way identical.

Just *what* has the position of SO to do with the Right? They are unhappy with

rate rises and prefer cuts instead; we oppose cuts and oppose rent and rate rises because we think they are a variety of cuts. What is there in common? Nothing whatsoever!

Except that Ted Knight wants to present himself as being hounded by the Right and resents and fears the criticism of the Left.

Comrade Knight, you spent a considerable part of your life in the Trotskyist movement. (It is no secret, and you have not declined to talk to the capitalist press about it). 23 years ago you were a business manager of *Labour Review** which exposed and helped clear away the mountains of Stalinist lies and "amalgams" which had suffocated the Marxists between the '30s and the '50s.

Many SO readers will find it hard to imagine how effective — for a quarter of a century — the Stalinist system of ideological terrorism based on lies and 'amalgams' was in poisoning the moral, political and intellectual life of the labour movement, and in isolating the Trotskyists. You however must *remember* it. Like everyone who lived through even part of that period as a Marxist, you learned to hate the mendacity, the demagoguery, and the lack of political scruple of those who used the 'amalgam'.

Of course, the content of your smear is modest enough compared with what the Stalinists did. And there is no Lambeth GPU. But in principle it is no different. Nor, I suspect, is it different in intent.

When spleen against your left critics leads you to use this foul and dishonourable technique, then perhaps it is time you took a cool look at where you have arrived at politically now — and at where you are going.

You smear SO, I suggest, because there is a major and increasing contradiction between your projection of yourself (and, perhaps, how you think of yourself), as a man of the revolutionary Left, and the actual political role you now play. You now occupy a position not too far from what we used to call a 'fake left'. Your talk is a great deal more 'left' than your actions.

You feel any challenge to your credib-

ility keenly because you know it to be vulnerable. When you say — on what basis? — that we call you a 'traitor', one wonders if the accusing voice you hear is not inside your own head. We have not called you a traitor. You are seriously failing to be a revolutionary militant, but you are not yet a traitor.

Let us discuss the situation. I want to try to state and define the differences dividing us for two reasons.

In the first place SO cannot go on silently tolerating disloyal attacks such as yours. And in the second place, to define our differences and clear away misunderstandings (if such there be) will help perhaps to prepare unity in action against our common enemies where that is possible.

Chronic

Most of what I have to say implies that you have much in common with SO — if that were not so, there would be no point in the letter.

Our root difference lies in our perspectives for the labour movement and what conclusions serious socialist militants should draw from those perspectives. Britain is in a chronic and accelerating decline. There is no way out under capitalism. In order even to protect itself the working class must fight to put in a workers' government to fight for its interests.

Socialists must strive to orientate the entire labour movement towards the goal of taking control of society away from the incompetent parasites who now dominate and ruin or threaten to ruin our lives — not in the distant future, but in the next period ahead. All the present struggles — including the struggle to kick the Tories out — must be focused (insofar as Marxists can affect their focus) on that perspective. It is a matter of great urgency that the Marxists within the labour movement bind themselves together to help prepare the labour movement for this fight.

"The alternative may very well be a major and historic defeat for the working class of Britain".

The central question now is to break the labour movement from class collaboration; to break it from the dominant reformist commitment to bargaining within the capitalist system on a basis of taking responsibility for the system and being confined to capitalist options within it.

But you, however, see your role and responsibility in Lambeth as only that of being a humane administrator there.

That Lambeth Council has avoided any serious cuts is something to be proud of. But how has it been achieved? By backdoor cuts in living standards!

Council services, plus disposable income, plus government services add up to *one* standard of living for the workers in the area. You act and talk as if they don't. You operate as if your only concern is with the gross council service component of it — even if that is maintained by 'redistributing' net income within one and same living standard to sustain it.

This is myopic and a bureaucratically compartmentalised falsification of reality.

That your view of your 'department's' responsibilities is a humane and a good one does not make a difference to the

utterly inadequate view of the world involved here.

A socialist militant, as distinct from a professional councillor, is concerned with the social overview and the general consequences of what he does to sustain his or her own 'department'. But not you.

In order to avoid the risk of losing your position in Lambeth (as a result of taking on the Tories and being surcharged or disqualified) you pass on the Tory cuts, translated into cuts in income by rent and rate rises. You refuse to stand and fight the Tories now, and instead cling to the power to decide from which area of working class income the siphoning off should take place.

This is the essential truth, even if some redistribution of income to the working class of Lambeth may occur from the high proportion of Lambeth rates raised from business premises.

And of course you know that rate rises are not a way of avoiding indefinitely the choice of cuts or taking on the government.

Instead of preparing for that confrontation, you have turned Lambeth Council into a major school of reformist class collaboration for Lambeth and the London labour movement. You teach 'responsibility', confinement to the parameters and options laid down by the Tory government (until the 'big battalions' of Labour kick the Tories out), to justify and explain the choices you make and advocate within those parameters.

To justify your rate-rise policies, you refer to powers above you — the government — that you dare not take on or challenge at a fundamental level. Isn't this in essence the sort of argument Callaghan used to justify his posture before the IMF?

If the argument holds good for you in Lambeth, confronting the Tory government, why not for Healey and Callaghan and Wilson in the weak and isolated British state, confronted by the IMF?

Wilson and Callaghan might have said that weak Britain could not win against the international capitalist system — and many miseducated reformist workers would agree with them. It is even true that though the workers in Britain could take power, the immediate consequence would be, at least, boycott and sabotage, withdrawal of credit, etc., by international capitalism, and therefore it is true that there could be a possibility of stabilising workers' power only if the anti-capitalist movement spread to countries like France and Germany.

Immediately after taking power, the British workers' state would face a very difficult period.

If we apply your argument about Lambeth — supposedly under the control of the Left and those like you who present themselves as revolutionaries — to Britain as a whole, it is an argument not to take power until the 'big battalions of France and Germany' lead... It is an old argument of the more aware reformists and reactionaries in the labour movement to justify their own passivity and accommodation.

Lambeth alone can't defeat the Tories? No indeed! But you could give a lead that would inspire the general resistance to the Tories. At the least you would be a Clay Cross on a much larger scale; and even to be a Clay Cross on the original scale was no small thing.

In your interview with the Chartist magazine (March-May 1980) you say you hope to avoid cuts on top of the rate rises. You base this on the belief ('perspective') that the labour movement will fight the Tories and drive them from office (and you seem to set a maximum time scale of one year for this — it must happen 'before April 1981').

The clear implication is that if we don't fight, or if we fight and don't win, then you will probably have to cut.

But this is the 'perspective' you had in July 1979 when you cited the fact that the 'big battalions' had not yet moved against the Tories (two months after the election!) to justify capitulation to Heseltine and the imposition of cuts (which were later reversed when the Lambeth Labour Party revolted against and overturned your policy).

Three things are wrong with your 'perspective'.

In the first place, it is a more or less explicit 'declaration of intent' to capitulate and make cuts (on top of rent and rate rises) if the labour movement does not manage to settle with the Tories in a few short months. Now SO also believes the working class will take on the Tories and that we can beat them this time round too. But for a militant in a key position to make his decision on whether to fight (or, as now, manoeuvre), or surrender dependent on a decisive victory by others on his own side within a short time ahead is utterly unserious.

Your 'left' talk about industrial action to bring down the Tories turns out to be an excuse to wait on events. Do you remember NUM President Joe Gormley in 1973 calling for a general strike — when he was trying to convince the miners that they alone should not take on the Tories?

In the second place, it has nothing to do with a Marxist idea of 'perspective' — it is nothing but passive expectation and hope.

Your conception of the role and responsibilities of a militant is remarkably like that of the Militant tendency. For what is to be the role of the leader of Lambeth council in the battle to dislodge the Tories, which you call for? What will be the role of Lambeth Council itself? Is it to be a bastion of left wing and working class strength (which it could be perhaps, but is not now), or is it to be preserved at all costs from possible damage in the struggle?

Rescue

Your vision of the struggle against the Tories is a vision of a purely industrial struggle — to be initiated and waged by others. You hope the industrial struggles of the working class will come to your rescue — and meanwhile 'the Leader' administers Lambeth humanely. And if the rescue does not come in time you will have to consider administering it less humanely by making cuts.

I suspect that this 'syndicalist' (for other people) view of the struggle is probably central to your present outlook. For if you conceived of the struggle as demanding the mobilisation of working class communities, tenants, etc., then you could not blithely raise rents and rates.

In the third and final place, I suspect you do not believe in your own 'perspective'. You do not at all act like a man who takes his own ideas seriously.

If decisive class battles are in the offing, then a serious militant would feel a strong need to find his own role in the struggle, to help develop it — perhaps to spark it: because you know that there are no grounds for confidence that the leaders of the 'big battalions' will lead the working class struggle against the Tories. But your only conclusion from your 'perspective' is that it is a licence to hang on in Lambeth. It is no more than an alibi for time-serving now.

If you really believed in the likelihood of a decisive labour movement clash with the Tory government then you would be less timid in face the government (and feel less need to lash out at the Left). And if you were still a militant, you would not shirk the personal risks (surcharge, disqualification as a councillor, gaol) of confrontation with the government, if that could give a lead to the movement.

Of course one understands the psychological logic of someone switching from the mindless voluntarism of the late-'60s SLL to Militant-style passive 'perspectives'. But the fact remains that either you no longer see any role for yourself in the struggle or else you do not believe in 'the perspective' you enunciate. Which is it?

Before you tried to identify SO with the Right you should have remembered the well-known proverb, 'one does not speak of the rope in the house of the hanged'. For though you need to present yourself as one who is hounded by the Right, in fact you seem to have much better relations with the Right (in Lambeth and in London) than you have with the revolutionary Left. For example, a few minutes of discussion between yourself, pocket calculator in hand, and the Right, sufficed to determine the size of rate increase in Lambeth recently.

Last July — and we have seen what 'perspectives' you had then — when you decided to carry out cuts, you gave a signal to every right wing council in the country to follow suit. Your 'Red Knight' publicity had given you a national standing as a foremost opponent of the Tories and their cuts, and you had a solid base of support.

Yet two months after the election, when the movement was still feeling its way on how to deal with the Tories, when many people looked to Lambeth's 'Red Knight' for a lead, you signalled, loud

and clear: 'Surrender, cut'.

You said the 'big battalions' had not moved to bring down the government, so there was no choice but to surrender. And every right wing council in the country breathed a sigh of relief.

The revolt of the Lambeth Labour Parties soon forced you to rescind the cuts. (In my opinion you do not have a right to the lavish self-praise for 'democratic accountability' which you now give yourself when publicly discussing this episode. A right winger or a Tribunite might have: not someone with your history).

But if one wants the outstanding recent example of leftists helping the Right, and even momentarily politically amalgamating with them (under cover of 'left' flak), then that was surely it, comrade Knight.

It is, I have suggested, this sort of contradiction between what you do and what you say that makes criticism from the left dangerous (and perhaps painful) for you. How unaware are you of the contradiction? The record suggests that you must be aware of it.

Conference

In July 1978 the SCLV conference chaired by you adopted the no rent and rate rise policy, with not one voice of opposition. It must have seemed to everyone present to be your politics too.

At a conference on the cuts called by the SCLV in June 1979, you may have been decisive in persuading the majority to opt for rate rises as the only alternative to cuts. A couple of weeks later you tried to cut, on top of raising the rates.

That you considered cuts an immediate option when you make those 'militant' speeches seems more or less certain. Were you just saying the 'popular thing' at conference to bamboozle people that rate rises were an alternative to cuts — or don't you know from one day to the next what you will do?

Again. In the recent interview with Chartist magazine, you pronounce yourself against rent-increases — about a week before you imposed an average rent increase of about £1.50 a week on the working class tenants of Lambeth Council.

How would you go about arguing that

this is not the record of one who knowingly fakes.

Finally, one of the central things about the role and contradictions I have discussed above is, think, that you necessarily have a purely personalist view of politics now.

A man alone in a very loose social democratic party, you must protect yourself from surcharge, jail, disqualification from public office. What is 'the Leader of Lambeth' if he can no longer be even a councillor?

The Clay Cross councillors took on the Heath government and when the 'first 11' were victimised, a 'second 11' came forward. They were part of a fighting community. Each one could confidently say, 'If I go down, there are others to come after me'. They behaved as great working class fighters, and dealt blows to the government out of all proportion to Clay Cross's size.

But you, comrade Knight, are an individual operating through loose alliances, without a stable political base, and not one of a group of revolutionaries. You cannot think that you are replaceable — or not at any rate with equanimity. You have only the weapons of manoeuvre and manipulation. You are increasingly driven by the contradictions in your position to resort to the arts of the 'fake left' — and to the use of techniques like 'the amalgam'.

Without being part of a serious political organisation, you have advanced to high political office, to a key position in the London labour movement. Faced with the prospect of a fight you feel weak and isolated; faced with capitulation — with betraying your whole political life — you vacillate and try to manoeuvre, and lash out at the revolutionary left.

The name the Marxist movement has given to the type of political course you have chosen is adventurism. It is a process whereby the one-time professional revolutionary can sink into being a professional leader of a safe Labour council.

The point where you find yourself using Stalinist techniques against the revolutionary Left should be the point where you take stock. Events are likely to move fast in the period ahead. You are probably much further along the road to being a professional councillor, and more distant from being a revolutionary, than you know yourself to be.

Fighters or agents

In autumn 1981 support for 'no cuts, no rate rise' ran high, and Tribune came out for confrontation. Response by John O'Mahony: SO 10.9.81 and Briefing, October 1981.

"Sooner or later we have to recognise that we are losing the arguments in favour of maintaining services at the cost of high rents and rates.

"We are losing because Labour voters simply cannot afford to pay any more. In council homes the length of Britain, Labour councils are being blamed for the high rates and rents which are the direct result of Tory policies.

"If the slide is to be halted, Labour must take a stand...

"Not only is Labour losing the battle over cuts, it is also getting most of the

blame for the consequences. Sooner or later there is going to have to be a confrontation..."

CHRIS MULLIN,
Tribune, August 28, 1981

Hunters whose 'strategy' is to grab the large wild beast firmly by the tail and — without making the kill — to settle down to preparing the meal, are not quite as in touch with reality as they need to be.

If the animal has sharp teeth and claws, the hunter is quite likely to become a meal himself.

It was such a strategy that led the local government Left to try to respond to the cuts drive of the most indiscriminately vicious government we have had in Britain for 40 years by trying to just quietly get on with administering local government.

This was a major experience of the Left in the last two years. And it was the major dividing point between London Labour Briefing and Socialist Organiser.

The lessons are vital for the struggle yet to come.

The central truth is that we did not — as some comrades thought we did — have local government 'power'. In a clash with central government over

fundamentals there is no such thing.

Local government is at every point, legally and financially (and, in a cruch, by way of the military/police power of the central state) subordinate to central government. There is not — nor, unless the central state has disintegrated, can there be — such a thing as a 'People's Republic of Lambeth' (or Lothian).

After Thatcher won the 1979 election, we were peacefully able to do in local government only what a Tory government bent on savage cuts would allow us to do.

There were only two choices.

Either to comply with the government, thereby turning Labour-controlled councils into mere agencies for carrying out government-decreed cuts and passing them on to workers and small shopkeepers;

Or, to confront the government.

Labour-controlled councils had the choice of being centres of sabotage, guerrilla warfare and resistance to the government, or of being groups of quislings terrorised by Tory threats, agents working for the Tories against their own people.

That is still the choice now.

Nowhere does Tony Benn's proposal (in Arguments for Democracy) for non-collaboration and 'disengagement' by the labour movement from the institutions of Thatcherism have more direct and immediate relevance than for local government, which has been assigned to the role of the blade of the Tories' axe.

The fatal illusion to avoid at all costs is the belief that Labour local government can continue to go its own sweet way, more or less humanely administering local affairs and ignoring the central government. The beast is alive and has teeth and claws which it is certain to use!

Rent and rate rises were at best a species of evasive action — a manoeuvre which had to be carried out on terrain which remained under the guns of the government and ultimately under its firm control. Confrontation, a challenge to the overall central government control by action aimed to rouse a national struggle, was ruled out by the local government Left.

Slope

Labour local councils found themselves on a slippery slope. The Tories could and did simply siphon off more than was raised through rate rises by cutting the flow of central government support. Having — to take the case of Lambeth — raised rates to avoid confrontation and thereby cut seriously into the living standards of workers in the area — the leaders of the council found that the Tories' big stick was still there. Capitulation followed.

In Tribune of August 28 Chris Mullin accurately summed up the present situation of Labour councils:

"The 1982 election will simply be a competition between two — and possibly three — main parties to see which shall have the honour of administering the cuts decreed by central government. Opposition to cuts is no longer an option. Instead the parties will be reduced to arguing that 'our cuts are more humane than yours'."

But that has, essentially, been the choice for over two years.

It is not mainly a matter of recrimina-

tions. It is a matter of learning the lesson that we are faced with either destroying the Tory government or living under its anti-working class measures — and, in local government, with either using it as a base for operations against them, or with being forced to be their instruments.

It is a matter of learning that for serious socialists the 'option' — i.e. illusion — of 'assuming local power' was no alternative to the only realistic option, of being revolutionary militants.

For in essence the local government rent and rate rise option was a decision to be administrators, humane administrators, not militants concerned with the overall effects of the Tory onslaught.

The delusion that we already had little chunks of 'power' locally and could exercise it, was disorienting.

For even if an armed labour movement held real power in London, as the workers in Paris did for two months in 1871, it would have been necessary — if we were not to repeat the mistake made, according to Karl Marx's analysis, by the Paris workers in 1871 — to go on the offensive against the government of the rest of the country. And Labour councils do not hold state power, even locally.

The rent and rate rise strategy meant turning the left local councils into schools of class collaboration. There was not one of the arguments in support of the rent and rate rise policy that could not be applied to explain and justify 'the need' to cut. Even a cutting Labour council is still preserving some jobs and services, and wouldn't Tory commissioners be even worse.

And every one of the arguments about local government being 'realistic' and 'responsible' faced with the national Thatcher government could be applied and extended to a British Labour government facing the IMF. Indeed, they were so applied by the leaders of the last Labour government, and the same arguments may well serve a Labour government again.

Now we have cuts in Lambeth and Lothian. Both the councillors and the labour movement were softened up for these cuts by all that went before and especially prepared by the pseudo-left rationalisations. The local labour movement could only be turned away from the Labour council by rent and rate rises which cut living standards; and the eventual option of confrontation at the

eleventh hour to stop cuts could only be made more difficult. Inevitably the price of the rate-rise strategy was loss of support from tenants and others who would be decisive in a fight.

The rent and rate rises were, for that reason alone, counterposed right from the start to ever standing up to the Tories. All it needed was for the Tories to tighten the screws, and the rate-raisers did what they had always been doing — cut into workers' standards, this time by 'cuts'.

There was no reason to expect that — to stick to the Lambeth experience — the 'left' talking council leaders could choose to fight in the last ditch, if it got that far. Nobody should have been taken in by Ted Knight, who tried (though he was overruled by the local Labour Party) to impose cuts a mere two months after the Tory victory. Yet Knight's performance is the best measure of the rent and rate rise strategy.

Agents

One, two or many Clay Crosses would have been much better. That was a 'defeat' that shook not the labour movement but the Heath government, and helped force the repeal of the 'Fair Rents' Act.

Now we have a worse starting point than two years ago, because the experience of Lambeth and Lothian must depress the movement to some extent. Yet the fight goes on.

Chris Mullin in Tribune suggests a way forward, and we urge London Labour Briefing to unite with Socialist Organiser and others to fight for it. Even now Labour-controlled town halls can become forts for the resistance to demolition squad Toryism, not seats of its (reluctant) local agents.

Mullin proposes:

*Cast iron Shadow Cabinet guarantees that surcharged councillors will be indemnified by an incoming Labour government.

*Labour Local Government Committees must coordinate a mass refusal by Labour councils to either increase rates and rents unreasonably or slash services.

*If the Tories sent in the commissioners councillors could occupy Town Halls and organise resistance by staff.

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Support Edinburgh and Liverpool!

Liverpool and Edinburgh councils are now moving towards a decisive confrontation with the Tories.

Liverpool has set an unbalanced budget. In line with Liverpool Lab-

Liverpool has set an unbalanced budget. In line with Liverpool Labour's manifesto commitment to no cuts and no massive rate rises, the budget proposes to spend far more than foreseeable income. Only £30 million extra grant from central government, plus restoration of £88 million penalties, could balance it.

Showdown

Council shop stewards are pledged to strike when the government or the banks move decisively against Liverpool. This will at latest be September or October, when the council runs out of money.

Edinburgh is refusing government instructions to cut its rates and raise its rents.

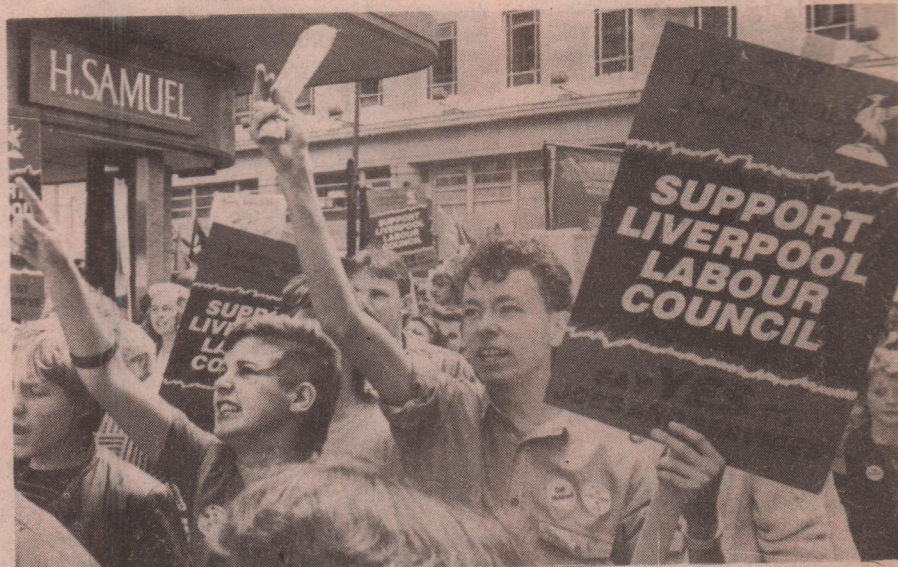
A major showdown is now certain. With mass mobilisation of the labour movement nationally, Liverpool and Edinburgh can win. But they have been left to fight alone by other Labour councils, who after months of loud rhetoric about fighting the government, have capitulated. Until now, the defiance of local government to the Tory Rates Act has proved to be a fiasco.

The struggle to defend the rebel councils must be linked with the broader struggle for local democracy and local services.

As soon as rebel councils are prevented from functioning — by surcharges, by court or government action, or by banks cutting off credit — there must be industrial action from local authority workers.

Trade unionists outside the rebel councils should also fight for solidarity action at whatever time the workers in those councils strike.

In every Labour authority, trade unionists and councillors should



Demonstration to support Liverpool City Council, June 29 1985. Photo: John Smith, IFL.

work out a programme of strike action, trade union occupation of Town Halls and administration of emergency services, and stopping debt payments, to spread the confrontation.

Campaign committees must be built — uniting Labour councils, council trade unions, other local trade unions, Labour Parties, tenants' associations and community groups. Policy should be decided through such committees, and not handed down by council leaders.

Strategy

These campaigns must decide on an overall strategy; and the lessons of past failures show that the necessary strategy is unbalanced budgets, based on no cuts, no rent rises, and no rate rises, followed by strikes, occupations, rent strikes and a block on debt payments when the courts, the government, or the banks stop the council functioning.

And we must demand full restoration of central government grant,

We must demand full restoration of central government grant; continuation of the metropolitan authorities; repeal of the penalties system; the Rates Act and similar legislation in Scotland; and a facility for councils to borrow at low rates of interest so that services are not crippled by payments to moneylenders.

Greenwich Labour Party has proposed that councils be forced not to set a rate for 1986-7 until after the May elections (for London boroughs, Scottish regions, and one-third of the seats on metropolitan districts), so that reselection of councillors can have its full effect on next year's budget. Councillors not prepared to fight must be replaced with new ones who are.

Liverpool and Edinburgh are in the front line against the Tories. Despite the collapse of other councils, it is still possible to mobilise a mass campaign behind them. Every labour movement activist must see that as the priority over the coming weeks.

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