

Fighting the Cuts - the Lambeth Experience

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INTRODUCTION

The election of the Tory government in May 1979, committed to the pursuit of monetarist policy, and especially, to a major reduction in public expenditure, presented an immediate political problem for the labour movement in general, and for Labour local authorities in particular, because of the immediate effects of the cut in the 1979/80 Rate Support Grant,¹ the amount by which central government funds the local authority.

For the Communist Party the cuts question faced it with the need to develop a strategic approach to the formation of an anti-cuts, anti-Tory campaign. However, a unique feature of the cuts campaign is that they are generally located in the community and are considerably bound up with local government. The cuts also focused attention on what one might call the 'reproductive services' — health, housing, education, social services etc. — an attack on working people in the community, where organisation and cohesion are less developed than they are at the point of production, the workplace. And since local government is a locus for the reproductive services we need to look more closely at local government, its relationship to the community, the forms of political action that can be taken, the location of areas of struggle and what alliances need to be developed between the sections of our community. Yet it is precisely in this area of struggle that Marxists, including our Party, have failed to effectively assess the 'new' reality and to develop a unifying strategy.

This article is an attempt to consider some of these problems in the context of a left-wing led Labour Council in Lambeth and in the context of the development of Lambeth's Fightback Campaign. However, this article is very much a process of thinking aloud: it is not intended to be a definitive statement.

In this article, therefore, I want to consider three things:

- local government: its relationship to central government, its internal struggles and its relationship to the community
- the development of the Fightback Campaign and the strategic problems it posed
- arising from the Lambeth experience, some problems which the Party had to consider.

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT: THE EMINENCE GRISE

The political practice of the Left within the community often gives the impression that in local government there is a freedom of action which implies a high degree of autonomy. In fact the opposite is the case, as recent developments have emphasised.

The installation of the present Conservative government was bound to bring conflict with a leftwing-led council like Lambeth, whose needs, as an inner city area of urban decay, required greater spending, not less. But the cut in the Rate Support Grant underlined a further point: that the parameters of local government are quite clearly defined and that the control of central government is exercised, on the one hand, legislatively, through the Local Government Acts, and on the other, fiscally. And Heseltine, the Environment Minister, has made it clear that the government will try to use both legislation and central government grant aid to control local authorities.

Fiscal control of local authorities by central government is stringent. Firstly, local authorities can only spend on those services actually stipulated by legislation. Secondly, any borrowing from the City money-markets can only be made on central government authority. Thirdly, over half of local government expenditure is derived from central government grant aid through the Rate Support Grant. The RSG for 1980/81 has been cut by some 5% for Lambeth; this is the equivalent of a 6.7p loss on the rates. But if we take into account the cuts in RSG for 1979/80 and the normal expected increase, the estimated loss in rate for Lambeth is around 15.7p (£5.8m).

It must also be remembered that a local authority has no control over the precept on the rates exercised by items of specific revenue (police, law courts, education etc). In the case of Lambeth, the increase in precept in 1980/81 is expected to be 23% for the ILEA and GLC and 20% for the police.

Added to these limitations is the matter of local government employee wage settlements, which are negotiated nationally and over which the local authority has no control.

Finally, interest rates on loans: these are an enormous burden on the expenditure of a local authority, and, as Ted Knight² states later, are a serious inhibitor of independent political action. The rise in the Minimum Lending Rate alone added £1.4m to Lambeth's costs in 1979/80.

It is clear, therefore, that those Labour Councils, especially those of the inner city areas, where a critical situation now exists, elected on a mandate to expand their services, now find themselves in great financial and political difficulties.

The Government, moreover, has threatened to enhance its control by the use of legislation. Heseltine proposes to redefine the way in which the RSG is determined:

'although RSG has a complex method of calculation, it may be more simply regarded as a means of determining how much local expenditure is obtained from the Rate, and how much is paid for by taxation. The Needs element allocation is made at the start of the financial year (calculated during the previous autumn), with adjustment made halfway through the year — the Increase Order. Lambeth, a high need area, previously did well government expenditure and in order to control rate rises the government is proposing to amend the RSG arrangements if a council exceeds a "national uniform rate" (£1.19 or £1.31 in 80/81) its Secretary of State for the Environment (if the Local Government, Planning and Land Bill now before Parliament is passed) may "claw back" the excess rate by deduction from the RSG.'³

Despite considerable opposition from the Tory controlled Association of County Councils, the Association of District Councils and the Association of Metropolitan Authorities, and opposition from the Tory backbench, Heseltine has confirmed⁴ his intention of

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proceeding with the Local Government Bill and with implementing the penalty clauses. Most commentators agree that this will hit Labour authorities only, and in particular, those Labour Councils in the areas of greatest social need (Newcastle, Sheffield, Manchester, the London Boroughs of Islington, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Haringey and Lambeth).

'The pattern emerging of those likely to be penalised so far, is of Labour Councils with a tradition of high spending on items such as housing, education and social services because they are in inner city areas of high social need.

Authorities in this position could hardly avoid breaking general guidelines because the general limits were set without considering the prevailing local rate or the extreme difficulties faced by some authorities.¹⁵

The implications of this point will be discussed later, but one thing we should be clear about is that in the present 'climate of economy' (as Heseltine phrases it) the only way a Labour authority can try to disentangle itself from central government and not to implement cuts is an ever increasing rates bill and, ultimately, a confrontation with central government.

CONTROL WITHIN THE LOCAL AUTHORITY

I want now to shift attention from the control of local by central government to the question of who exercises power *within* local government.

By the mid-70s, and especially following the publication of Cynthia Cockburn's book, *The Local State*, there was a growing awareness on the Left of the erosion of the role and influence of the elected representative, the councillor, and the elevation and enhancement of the role of the top officials of the Town Hall. It is my view that, in general, a central failure of Labour authorities has been the failure to understand and to counter the political effects of the revolution begun by the Maud and Bains Reports in the late 60s, which had encouraged the development of corporate management systems in the Town Halls, 'professionalising' and replacing the old, more loose structure of the Town Clerk and the Departmental system by a Chief Executive and Directorates, and strengthening the control of the authority by a Board of Directors. Labour authorities, lacking a rigorous theory of the state and its administrations, in general had failed to mount any form of attack on the control of the local authority by the officers. Councillors and Leaders were part-time and could not effectively counter the effects of the continuity of the Chief Executive and Board of Directors. In their six weekly cycle of meetings, councillors were faced with massive agendas with which they were quite unequipped to cope. The illusion that councillors made real decisions was sustained by possible 'alternative' course of action that had been filtered up through the officer-structure in anonymous reports. Yet the Labour Party's *Local Government Handbook, a Guide to Councillors*, repeated the abstract and naive formulation:

'Councillors are essentially local politicians elected to take responsibility for the administration of local services. The permanent staff of local authorities . . . exists to provide those services and plan for their provision in the light of the political direction given by the elected members' (p23).

One of the first acts of the newly-elected and leftwing led Labour Council⁶ in Lambeth was the attempt to restructure the local authority so that effective control was in the hands of the elected councillors. The Labour Group set up a Special Review Committee in August/September 1978 and issued a Green Paper for consultation

with the community. Bryn Davies, Chairman of the Special Review Committee and Deputy Leader of the Council, began his introduction by saying that:

'This "Green Paper" seeks the views of local people on how their local authority should be organised and run. Comments are also invited from the Council's 9,000 employees, their trade unions members of the Council and local organisations.

Outside the Town Hall a view often expressed is that the Council is run by a hierarchy of paid officials and not by the 64 elected members. The new Council intends to ensure that this is not the case.'

This awareness of the dynamics of local government and the attempt to harness the involvement and support of the community it served was an important characteristic of the left-wing Council.

After an abysmally brief period of consultation the final report of the Special Review Committee made a number of recommendations on the structure of the authority, designed to shift the source of effective decision-making from the permanent strata of Officers to the body of 64 elected members. Among the recommendations, the most important in this respect were new reporting procedures (crucial for identifying the passage of feasibility studies and other policy documents through the layers of the officer-structure), a commitment to develop a 'Code of Practice on Open Government and Participation', and, most notable, the abolition of the Board of Directors. The recommendations were implemented.

Their effectiveness

How effective were these measures to establish control? This is not an easy question to answer, as the matter is an ongoing situation and another review of the effectiveness of the decisions taken is long overdue. Another problem is that the attempt to re-structure has been overshadowed by the defiance of the government cuts, and the consequential problems. Nevertheless, I posed the question to Councillor Bill Bowring who expresses quite a common view in some sections of the Left. His reply:

'I don't think it's possible for a Council's method of working to be fundamentally changed because a local authority works in terms of capitalism. Councillors are in this peculiar dual position of representing working-class people but also of running the local state which is part of the central state. I don't think you're going to be able to change the way the local state operates within capitalism.'

I asked Ted Knight, Leader of the Council, the same question, mentioning also the objectives of the Special Review. His response indicated a view of the local authority that was more fluid, more

'The Rates Support Grant (RSG) is a payment from central government to local authorities. In the autumn of each year the local authority makes its budget for the next fiscal year: we can call this the 'estimated relevant expenditure'. Part of this estimate are items of specific revenue which the local authority is bound to collect for the funding of the police, magistrates courts, probation and aftercare etc. Central government makes a percentage grant of the estimate: recently this has been 61%. When the items of specific revenue are deducted the remainder is the RSG.

For example:	£m
Estimated Relevant Expenditure:	84.00
Total Exchequer Grant at 61%:	51.24
Specific Revenue:	12.00
RSG =	39.24

² Leader of Lambeth Council.

³ Mark Brangwyn, Lambeth Inner City Consultative Group, a trade union and community organisation set up to monitor and participate in the Inner City Partnership Scheme.

⁴ *The Observer*, 16th March 1980.

⁵ *Financial Times*, 5th March 1980.

⁶ The elections of May 1978 returned another Labour Council, but with a victory of the Left over the Right, in terms of leadership.

elected on a mandate to expand their services, now find themselves in great financial and political difficulties.

contradictory⁷ and, in my view, more realistic for strategy in a war of positions.

TK: Well, the objectives of the Special Review Committee flowed from a feeling by Labour Group members and also by Labour Party and trade union activists, that elected members had very little control at all over the policy, and practical implementation of such policy, in the Council. We went about first of all imposing Member-will on the Officer structure and we saw as an obstacle to that the Board of Directors which met on a weekly basis (the Council met every six weeks), and which, in our opinion, basically controlled the flow of information coming to members. Our first act was to abolish that. We then set about making all the areas of Council activity more accessible to direct control by Committees (that is, elected members). We also looked at the problem internally of being able to identify the source of reports for the Council and to follow their procedure through the machinery, and we have taken steps to ensure that the authors of all reports are named and that Committees have access to the authors of original reports.

JR: Do you think that the members of the Labour Majority have effective control?

TK: Well, I believe we do. Our members are exceptionally active in all the spheres of Council activity — I would think that we have more Member participation than anywhere else.

We also have a full-time Chairman of Housing, and also a full-time⁸ Chairman of Social Services, and I myself am full-time Leader of Council, and in this way we think we have actually at least counter-acted the worst aspects of a bureaucratic structure within the Town Hall as far as control is concerned.

THE LAMBETH FIGHTBACK CAMPAIGN

The election of the Tory government on 3rd May 1979, alerted most Labour local authorities to the coming onslaught. At the annual general meeting of a local umbrella group⁹, the Leader of the Council, Ted Knight, said that Lambeth Council would not accept any cuts in Lambeth, but that to make this effective would require strong support from the people of Lambeth.

However, when soon after the Government announced the 2.5% cut in the Rate Support Grant for 1979/80, the Labour Group imposed a 4.5% reduction in budget on all Lambeth's services across the board, making a projected saving of £2.9m. The decision made was immediately disputed in the Trades Council, who sponsored the formation of what came to be known as the Lambeth Fightback Campaign. Meanwhile, the 4.5% cut was also hotly disputed in the Lambeth Constituency Labour Parties, in a huge meeting of NALGO, the largest union in the borough, and the employees of the Council, in many of the community organisations and in the political parties of the Left.

The summer of 1979 was therefore a hectic time for all, including our Party. We raised the cuts question and fought successfully for support for the campaign in all the considerable number of trade union and community organisations in which we worked. In a joint meeting all the Labour Parties took a firm 'no cuts' stand and instructed their Councillors to reverse their previous decision. Coinciding with this developing situation was the sacking of the Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark Area Health Authority who refused to make cuts of £5.5m. A campaign against the health cuts, and the Commissioners that the Health Minister had installed, had

begun to get off the ground, mainly in neighbouring Southwark, but which affected the atmosphere in Lambeth too.

The Fightback Campaign — amidst very large meetings — produced some superb publicity and a very distinctive 'logo'. It was agreed to form a broad-based campaign to fight the cuts and to form a trade union/community movement, and a founding statement to this effect, designed to appeal to as many as possible, was produced and distributed in virtually every part of the borough.

When the Labour group met on September 14th, they were met by a noisy 'no cuts' lobby of over 200 people, and it was at this meeting that they agreed to reverse their decision, reinstate the cut of 4V2%, and initiate a march on Parliament on November 7th.

Building for November 7th filled up the next few weeks for all of the organisations that supported the anti-cuts campaign. The Fightback Campaign produced a very good newspaper which gathered and published information about all cuts, not just those affecting the Council's expenditure. There were street meetings and an exhibition stand every Saturday in Brixton, and the Council itself spent £5,000 on publicity and arrangements for the march. It is probable that every household in Lambeth received some form of publicity and propaganda about the cuts and the march on Parliament.

Wednesday, November 7th, despite the cold and rain, was an undoubted success. On my way to the bakers in the morning before the march, people were asking me about the route and where they could join the march. Not only was the march very big — between 10,000 and 20,000 — it was also representative of the local trade union movement¹⁰ and some (though not sufficient) community organisations¹¹ and many others, such as a colourful band of school students, as well as the Labour Parties, Communist Party, SWP and others.

But the success of the march on Parliament, and the subsequent mobilisation for the big day of action on 28th November initiated by the South Yorkshire campaign, disguised two fundamental problems in Lambeth. The first one was the difficulty of carrying forward the momentum of the November marches, especially with the approach of Christmas; how does one maintain an ongoing campaign in the community? The second problem was the one which divided the Fightback Campaign — the rates question: given that £3m that was apparently being spent was not in the Town Hall (it had been cut at source), that the Council had adopted a 'no cuts' position, that there would be a further reduction in the Rate Support Grant and given, therefore, the growth of a deficit budget, what options were open to the Council and what should the Fightback Campaign's attitude be to the huge rates increase that was on the cards for April 1980? This was a difficult political problem and most of the Left in Lambeth were genuinely unclear, at least initially, about how to proceed.

The rates problem

In December 1979, a document entitled 'What Rate for Lambeth', written by Ted Knight, was published by the Labour Group for discussion in the constituency Labour Parties. The document was mainly an explanation of the financial position facing the Council in 1980/81 and the political decisions that had to be taken. It stated that if the Council was to fully operate a 'no cuts' position, then it had to raise the borough's rates by 56.3%¹².

Given the commitment to a 'no cuts' position the only alternatives were either to increase rates or to take a 'no cuts, no rates increase' position. The 'no rates increase' position was taken by some sections of the Left¹³, and was, surprisingly, passed by the Trades Council. Their argument was that a rates increase was tantamount to making the working class pay for Tory cuts¹⁴ when working class wages and living standards were already being eroded, that the Council should continue its deficit budget and face the consequences and that this

Ted Knight

'Councillors are in this peculiar dual position of representing working-class people but also of running the local state which is part of the central state'.

Part of this attack has taken the form of using fiscal and legislative controls by central government to restrict local authorities, particularly in the inner city areas of high working class density, in their ability to meet the economic and social needs of their electors and to put into effect manifestos on which they were elected.

The blame for the political and fiscal difficulties in which "No Cuts" Councils now find themselves must be laid fairly and squarely at the door of the Tory government.

The question of the increase in rates has divided the views of the people of Lambeth in general and the Left in particular. The central question facing the Fightback Campaign is how to re-unite in a broad-based campaign.

The rates question is not a point of principle but a matter of strategy: at some point, whether in the second half of 1980 or in the early months of 1981, this Council, because of the manipulation of the Rate Support Grant by the Tory government, is set on a collision course with the Government. The outcome will depend on:

- (a) The development of a national movement against the Tories
- (b) the successful mobilisation of the community in Lambeth by the Fightback Campaign and by the Council.

It is clear, therefore, that the failure of the Labour Party National Conference 79 and the conference of Labour Councils in Coventry to effectively back Lambeth, and the — for the moment — absence of a national campaign against the Tories, has resulted in a dangerous isolation of Lambeth.

Finally, it is our assessment that the local movement is also insufficiently developed to sustain an immediate confrontation with central government.

Given these factors, we in the Fightback Campaign consider it unrealistic to ask Lambeth's Labour Councillors to run a deficit budget to the extent of inviting individual surcharges, prison sentences and their replacement in Council by a Commission, District Auditor or Receiver. And, further, such a situation would amount, on the one hand, to the Council consciously abandoning their responsibility to their electors, and on the other, handing control of the borough to unelected officials to pursue a policy of cuts which does not have the support of the working



would be the spur for the formation of a strong national anti-government movement.

There are some very attractive aspects, superficially, in the 'no cuts, no rates increase' position: not least, it is a simple and clear principled stand. And because the complexity of the legal, fiscal and political situation was not easily understood, such a position invited some support, especially as there was a definite anti-Council tone to the way the position was argued.

The Communist Party in Lambeth was committed to the building of a broad-based campaign, and supported the foundation statement. Our approach was a strategic one and we were concerned at how best to build a movement, how to support the Council while it maintained its 'no cuts' stand, and for the Council to defy and confront the government when the movement was able to fight *and to win*. Our approach to the rates question was therefore very different to that of the 'no rates increase' supporters and is summarised by part of the resolution that the Lambeth Communist Party put to the Fightback Campaign in January 1980.

'The election of the Tory government on May 3 1979, has resulted in a sustained, consistent and determined attack on the living standards and jobs of our working people and the services that they consume.

⁷More contradictory in the sense that the local authority is not only 'the local state', not only the organisation of social reproduction, but it is also something won by working people, and an organ of political struggle.

⁸Most local authorities have a common parallel structure. On the one hand there are Directors and the Directorates (of Housing, Amenities, Management Services, etc), and on the other are the Council Committees and Chairmen of Housing, Amenities, Social Services etc. The Directors are, of course, full-time and salaried. Ted Knight and the other Chairmen have therefore chosen to work full-time and unpaid.

⁹Lambeth Inner City Consultative Group, 22nd May 1979.

¹⁰The Town Hall unions — NALGO, UCATT, TGWU — and Lambeth NUT, CPSA and the Trades Council.

¹¹Lambeth Neighbourhood Councils, tenants associations, mums and toddlers groups, nurseries, the Methodists and others. groups, nurseries, the Methodists and others.

¹²Based also on a refusal to raise Council rents.

¹³Some elements of the Labour Party, the IMG, 'Socialist Unity', the Workers Party (a recent split from the WRP) and some 'non-aligned'.

¹⁴According to the *Consumers' Guide to Local Government*, about 12% of local government expenditure is provided by the domestic rate payer; the bulk of expenditure is financed by the non-domestic rate payer (business, industry) and by the general tax payer.

people of Lambeth. We therefore have no alternative but to accept the probability of a substantial increase in the domestic rate in April this year, if the movement at that time is still insufficiently developed.'

In spite of the success of the November 7th March it was clear that there was neither the local nor the national movement capable of sustaining an immediate confrontation with central government. It was also clear that the majority of councillors would rather have resigned than lay their heads on the line to risk bankruptcy and prison sentences.

Nevertheless it was crucial that the Fightback Campaign be further developed, its base broadened, the community organisations more effectively involved and that the campaign return to the streets (which it had left at the end of November). The position put by the Party was not accepted and for an interim period the Fightback Campaign took the 'no rates increase' position. In my view, this was a major factor, alongside a loss of momentum after the November marches, in the dispersal of the support that had clearly existed in November. In addition the 'no rates increase' position confirmed what was a latent anti-Council attitude in the Fightback Campaign, pushed a wedge between the Campaign and the Council and failed to win the support of either the trade union branches or the community organisations.

The division over the question of the rates was not particular to the Fightback Campaign itself. In the Labour Group in Council the two positions I have discussed so far were expressed, but there were also other positions, including one which combined a smaller rates increase with Council rent rises, a cut in 'administrative costs' of £0.5m and a 1% reduction in all services' budgets. At the time of writing consultation between the Labour Group and the constituency Labour Parties is continuing, but it looks as if the compromise position decided upon by the Labour Group in February will be implemented

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— namely, a rates increase of 49%, an increase in council rents of £1.50, and a reduction of £1.9m from the programmed capital expenditure in 1980/81 (ie, a cut).

Labour views

I interviewed Councillor Bill Bowring who expresses a minority 'no rates increase' position on the Council. On the problem of the absence of a mass movement locally or nationally on the cuts, he said:

'It is impossible to organise a really big popular campaign on the basis of the sort of policies which are advanced at the moment (ie rate increases). Unless the political principles are very clearly established and fought for, you're not going to be able to generate that kind of support.'

On the rates increase Councillor Bowring said that in his view it was the role of socialist councillors to expose the political forces behind the rates question. 'I don't think its possible to fight except on the basis of exposing these political questions.' He continued:

'Both locally and nationally, getting hold of power and hanging on to it at all costs, me notion of the state being something neutral and something which you can use as an instrument to make changes and that therefore you've got to hold onto it — I think that's untenable in the present crisis because both locally and nationally the state is being used as an instrument of repression, and certainly, locally, the crisis is being taken out on the working class. We have to expose that.'

He argued that the Council should have carried a deficit budget; that Receivers would have been put in by the Council's creditors, and that —

'would not necessarily have been a bad thing, in the sense that it would make it very clear, for a start, how the Council is financed and the fact that an enormous amount of the Council's expenditure goes on servicing these enormous loans. In the second place it would have made clear what the government is about. And in the third place, it would put the ball very much in the trade unions court — the unions would be faced with the question of not only whether they support the Council, but whether and in what way they'd take on the government.'

Councillor Bowring's approach differed a lot from Ted Knight's more strategic approach. I interviewed Ted Knight and his view was as follows:

'Our object, first of all, must be one which mobilises the maximum support, not only at the local level, but at the national level.

Now, if we had adopted the "no cuts, no rates increase" position we would have been bankrupt within a matter of days, and it wouldn't, in actual fact, have been a confrontation with central government, it would in fact have been a situation where the City of London moved in its Receivers and carried out the cuts on behalf of the City in order to protect the interest payments they were not receiving.

The fact is that in Lambeth we have about £35m on immediate, 24 hour and 7 day recall by the City. If we were not going to make rate increases next year but we were to continue spending, then interest charges would not be met, the City would have withdrawn their money from us, made us bankrupt and sent in Receivers. The Receiver would have immediate control over the Council's finances: elected members would have no control at all and we would have been fighting the City of London.

The result would have been no wages for our 10,500 employees, no services and generally, chaos.

We felt that such a situation would have driven a wedge between us and our local trade unions. In fact, we asked the trade unions what they thought about the position and they told us quite bluntly that they weren't prepared to support any policy which consciously forced them on to the dole queues. And therefore, quite apart from the wedge between us and our workers, we would have lost the support of those people needing our services, and we would have found it very hard to explain our chaotic situation to the local population'.

JR: What national effects do you think such a situation would have produced?

TK: Our situation would have been used by both the Tory government and also by the rightwing of the labour movement to point out what such policies could incur.

There would have been a run for cover by every Labour Council in London and in the country. And at the same time there would have been a major retreat by the public service unions into a defensive situation regarding their own jobs.

We saw that as a political disaster.

JR: It is, nevertheless, a distinct possibility, that, if the movement remains at its present stage of development, Heseltine may well apply the penalty clause to Lambeth in November 1980, when the second half of the Rate Support Grant is due to be paid. How would you view that possibility?

TK: As we see it, if Heseltine pursues his policy of penalties in November, he will be selecting overspending authorities; every inner city authority will be in that position. If we are in the penalty box, willingly or unwillingly, so will a lot of other boroughs, and it's our belief that, faced with that situation — and then it will be a direct Government/Local Authority confrontation — he would have to take on most of the inner city boroughs, and he may have to reconsider his position.

I don't believe he will pursue his policy of penalties: I think he'll have to retreat on it. But if he did, then that certainly is the way in which we can mobilise on a clear platform amongst allies.

JR: When you say "mobilise", I presume you don't just mean local authorities, but you also mean the ordinary person in the street.

TK: That's right, on a very clear platform, but right across London.

JR: How successful have you been in getting support and backing from the

labour movement nationally?

TK: An excellent reception from the rank and file of the labour movement — I've spoken at many meetings up and down the country — but that is not the case with the leaders and the councillors in the main, who have been following the rightwing Parliamentary leadership's position, that is, that everyone is as respectable as the next whether they make cuts or not, which enables the Tories to pick off boroughs one after the other.

The fear of the rightwing of the Labour Party, of course, is that if an independent — and independent of Parliament — movement started outside, that threatens their whole concept of the Parliamentary road to socialism, in the sense that as they see it, the debate takes place and you wait for another election to pull Mrs Thatcher down.

We see our present struggle as making a contribution to the overall defeat of the Tories, and not substituting ourselves for the class struggle in Britain'.

SOME PROBLEMS

1. 'Local Democracy'

In a sense the establishment of the Special Review and the attempted reconstruction of the management and administration of the local authority in Lambeth registered the credibility, certainly of the leadership of the Labour majority, as a left-wing Council, determined to establish its authority as an elected political leadership.

This was important not only to the labour movement and community in Lambeth, but also to management in the Town Hall, who, in general, were told just who was boss. And in a very limited, but nevertheless important, sense, that strengthens the community electorally and enhances the links between the Council and the community (or rather the community in terms of its organisations in particular, because of their greater access to Council affairs).

On the positive side, therefore, there were four important effects of the Special Review:

- (a) it raised the question of management and structure as one which had political implications for 'local democracy'
- (b) it strengthened what Ted Knight called 'Member-will' — that is, the role of the elected body
- (c) it increased the involvement of a larger number of councillors in decision-making and monitoring the effects of decisions
- (d) as a side effect it seems to have developed more leader/councillor dialogue.

However, in my view, the Special Review was, or should have been, only one step along a longer road to greater *popular involvement* in decision-making in local government. The Special Review did not really pose the question of how the community could be involved in local government, partly because that question was not part of the original brief of the Special Review, and partly because the question is

not inherent in the Labour Party's theoretical framework, such as it is. As a result the relationship between a Council and the community it is said to represent was never qualitatively examined, and consequently no debate could develop around the 'statism' of the Council: the Council is still, in the eyes of the population, the producer of services, and the community the consumer. No thought was given to developing at least the idea of the community 'appropriating' the services for itself.

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A major weakness, therefore, is that it is by no means clear that the Special Review was *not* a one-off event: in my view the Special Review itself needs a review and needs to be seen as an 'ongoing process'.¹⁵

In the Party's submission to the Special Review Committee, we stated that we would like to have seen a more formal consultative relationship between the Council and community organisations. There are in Lambeth well over 400 community organisations¹⁶, some of which have developed a considerable degree of skill and sophistication, and which represent a large and varied number of people and social forces.

I do not intend to imply that community organisation at the current juncture can be organs of popular power— that, unfortunately, is not on the agenda right now! And, as Ted Knight hastened to tell me,

¹⁵ Space and time prevent me from a fuller discussion of this item. My treatment is not entirely fair to the Special Review, which, as part of its recommendations, set up a Community Affairs Committee, with full Council Committee status, and whose function it is to manage the development of community organisations. But this could be another article in itself.

¹⁶ Lambeth has developed a system of (non-statutory) *Neighbourhood Councils* since 1971. The NC is normally made up of delegates and individuals from local community organisations, including local tenants and residents associations. For example, Tulse Hill NC, of which I am the chairman, has over 20 affiliated organisations, covers an area of some 20,000 people and spends some £3,500 in grants to affiliated organisations, community newspapers etc. *The Lambeth Inner City Consultative Group*, previously referred to in footnote 3, combines a trade union and community approach to monitor the Inner City Partnership Scheme, a programme initiated by the last government and administered to inner city areas in England by the Department of Environment. *The Lambeth Umbrella Group* keeps a watching brief on a range of community organisations and offers resources and advice. The *Ethnic Minorities Consortium* looks to the interests of blacks in terms of all the Council and central government programmes. These are just a few of the larger organisations.



Lambeth has, comparatively, an extremely *active* community. But if the idea of community involvement (in some early form of local democracy) is to avoid stagnation, then it is going to need attention, detailed thought and money. Most important, for us on the Left, *it must be seen as a valid and crucial area of political work.*

2. The 'Local State'

The term, 'the local state', has gained a lot of currency, particularly since the publication of Cynthia Cockburn's book of the same name. Briefly, it is a view of local government as part of the apparatus of rule of the 'central' state. In the way that Cynthia Cockburn develops the idea, it is certainly seminal. Unfortunately, the concept has stopped germinating and has become part of the arid armoury of the doctrinaire Left.

Some regard local government as the representation locally of the capitalist state, and as a form of 'management' of social problems; and if you belong to the 'Smash the State' Brigade, then that really is the end of the matter. Others regard local government as a distorted, poor but real form of local democracy. Both statements can be both true and untrue, but having made them one has not got very far. In fact, local government is obviously an ambivalent political organisation, as the first two sections of this article have indicated. And because the 'local state' is the basis for the reproductive services the relationship to it of the working people in the community is necessarily ambivalent, both politically and in terms of social relations.

The problem for the Party is threefold. First of all, we need to understand how class struggle is mediated, how it takes different forms and how the site of struggle frequently changes; that, in fact the area of local government, both electorally and in terms of community and trade union struggle is a *site of class struggle*. Secondly, we need to develop an analysis and a theory of the 'local state' and the struggles

the conflict between the political groups inhibited the development of any real role in the Fightback Campaign for the community groups — their presence was almost tokenistic.

that are oriented around it. And thirdly, we need to develop the considerable, appropriate skills in our cadres.

3. Production and Reproduction

The Party has always had a fairly well developed theory of struggle at the point of production, that is, the workplace. This is quite natural, because our intellectual tradition in Marxism has specifically developed and elaborated this theory. More than this, the theory, and resultant political practice, is well-dispersed: if you begin a new job, and join a new union, in a short time you get to know the basic political objectives of your trade union work.

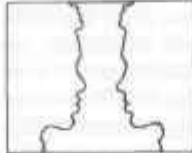
But if you work in a community organisation, can you make sense of your work in the same way? Does your work have a political direction? Yet the community is precisely the point at which the 'welfare' services — housing and ancillary services, health, transport, 'family services' (such as social services when the family breaks down) — exist to reproduce ourselves as workers.

The organisation of the working class at the point of reproduction is an essential pre-requisite to the development of its class consciousness. If community organisations are weak, that is not only because of a (not necessitous) structural weakness (that is, there is no industrial muscle) but also because we have not developed a means of making sense of our work in the community.¹⁷ Without these

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developments the Party is unlikely to be able to activate the alliances described in the *British Road to Socialism*, to counter the economism of the trade union movement and to profit electorally from the work of its cadres.

'Community politics' is nothing new for the Party: we've been working in the community and giving leadership for years. But how far is this recognised? Is it reflected in our votes at municipal elections? The work of individual Communists sometimes effects a personal vote, but the Party as a political collective fails to secure votes. Is it because the branch does not actually work in the community collectively and politically? And is this, in turn, because the Party essentially is not yet able and has failed to provide a theory of work at the point of reproduction?

4. Alliances

Political work in the community is very different from political work in the workplace organisations. The community is particularly sectional and spliced by a multiplicity of interests. Experience can range from the most individualised to the most collective: from isolated single-parents to committee work and mass action. A woman single parent can pass through the whole spectrum, from isolation to a 'mums and toddlers club', and then getting herself involved with a women's group, with an anti-cuts campaign to defend the club from the axe, involving herself as a result with trade unionists, tenants'

The sort of action taking place in factory gate meetings as described by Dave Priscott is difficult to imagine in Lambeth

associations, the Law Centre, and political groups.

The important point is that the life of the community under capitalism is nuclear, and the formation of a *specific* political consciousness is difficult, yet increasingly, and especially under progressive local authorities and under the impact of current urban crises, community political action is developing. It is therefore crucial that the Party, through its experiences, develops new forms of community political work, The *British Road to Socialism* and the concept of the broad democratic alliance, in a developed and specific form, offers the only political theory of fusion in this country. It presents the possibility of finding common interest in the sectional consciousness so prevalent in the community and in the trade union movement. It is a theory of unity, but unity on the basis of struggle among autonomous organisations of the working class at the point of production and at the point of reproduction.

The absence of this is illustrated by one of the major weaknesses of the Lambeth Fightback campaign, which was the failure to effectively involve the community organisations. As I have previously mentioned, there are well over 400 of them in Lambeth alone, not counting the political groups and trade union branches, and they tend to involve to a significant extent the new social forces described in the *British Road to Socialism*. Part of this failure can be characterised by the first letter from the Trades Council, which went out to all community organisations, inviting them to attend a foundation meeting for an anti-cuts campaign, and which began 'Dear comrade' and mentioned everything bar Proletarian Internationalism — a letter from one militant socialist to another. Another aspect of this failure is that the conflict between the political groups inhibited the development of any real role in the Fightback Campaign for the community groups — their presence was almost tokenistic. The conflict stressed division rather than unity and obscured the basic political issues by shifting attention to differences of strategy rather

than focusing on the building of a movement. A third point is that the initial commitment to a broad based movement did not take an organisational form and was not accompanied by the appropriate skills. As a result, the number of community groups involved latterly are very few, and the Fightback Campaign is increasingly seen, in my view, as alien: another door locks on the left-wing ghetto.

5. The London Labour Movement

A glance at the differences between the Lambeth Campaign as I have described it and the campaign in South Yorkshire, as described by Dave Priscott in the January *Marxism Today*, shows up fairly self-evident differences in the composition of the respective local labour movements: these differences are almost geo-political.

Sheffield and South Yorkshire elected some 17 Labour MPs during the last election; the area has a sound manufacturing industrial infrastructure, and the movement is characterised by the steel and engineering industries in Sheffield and Rotherham and by the mining industry in Barnsley, Doncaster, Mansfield and other areas. Apart from the effects of the large Asian population in Attercliff, to my knowledge the South Yorkshire area has been characterised by a remarkable political and social stability.

The situation in London, in particular in the inner-city boroughs like Lambeth, is very different. Two major factors have changed the industrial character of London and have affected the nature of the London labour movement. The first is the policy of dispersal,¹⁸ whereby London's industry and (especially skilled) working population were dispersed along four major corridors marked by the points of the compass: the transport infrastructure is now completed and consists of the motorways M3 (South and South West), M4/M5 (West), M1 (North) and M10/M2 (East, North and South East). The second factor was the toll taken by economic recession, which has eradicated a very large number of factories and industrial units in London and produced what now appears to be a permanent pool of unskilled labour. There are, of course, other factors for which I have not accounted, but the important point is that as a result of these changes London's population has fallen substantially, service industries have increased and de-industrialisation seems to be a permanent feature.

The London Borough of Lambeth, formed in 1965, has a population of 260,000. The Council (initially Labour-controlled)¹⁹ is the biggest single employer, followed by the health authority.²⁰ The major unions in the Trades Council are NALGO and the NUT, followed by smaller contingents from APEX, ASTMS, CPSA and NUPE. UCATT is probably the only significant manual union: as opposed to South Yorkshire, the AUEW is virtually non-existent. On the Party's Borough Committee there is not one industrial worker: five are teachers and the other eight are all in the service sector, fairly accurately reflecting the composition of the labour movement in the borough.

The sort of action taking place in factory gate meetings as described by Dave Priscott is difficult to imagine in Lambeth. But it is precisely these difficult and changed situations to which the Party must be able to respond, with new skills, new methods of agitation and an analysis appropriate to the reality. D

¹⁷ Which is not the case in Italy of *Red Bologna*. If we were to be elected to municipal power tomorrow — a purely hypothetical question! — could we govern?

¹⁸ 'Strategy Plan 1968'.

¹⁹ Except for the 1968-71 period when the Tories won control.

²⁰ The Shell head office and the Greater London Council offices are also major employers and illustrate another problem, which is the way in which some employers service the whole of London: their relationship to the borough in which they are situated is extremely tenuous.