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Merseyside under the hammer

Merseyside enjoys a special place in Britain's history and culture.

Will it now become famous as the region ravaged by the depression of the eighties?

Just two years ago I wondered whether Liverpool was a city of harder times to come (*Marxism Today*, November, 1978). It was. It is. It will be. Parts of this city, it is no exaggeration to say, are the European equivalents of the shanty towns of Rio de Janeiro, Lima and Santiago.

The tenants of one bulldozed Corporation tenement were moved into newly built and nearby terraced houses. Planted in the middle of a stable, respectable working class neighbourhood, it was soon christened 'the Giro Estate'. The truth is that the city centre is now encordoned by a belt of pre-war tenements and post-war maisonettes, most of whose tenants are on 'the giro'.

This goes far to explaining why the shop and office areas of the city are so heavily patrolled by the police at night. It will account, too, for the fact that minor events in the tenement courtyards generate a chorus of wailing sirens and a Task Force Transit van. These areas are not patrolled. They are under surveillance. Times were always tough in these parts but rarely mean-minded. Now they are both.

A clutch of tenements directly overlook the University. Back in September the Business School (appropriately for this city, on its last legs) ran a conference on 'The Image of Merseyside'. The debate at this gathering of entrepreneurs, senior managers and councillors reached stunning levels of intellectual brilliance. The chairman of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, ex-RAF, stumbled over a speech which began by reminding the audience of how King John once visited Liverpool. . .

An ex-military manager sang the praises of the Scouse worker: 'Back in my army days I dealt with Liverpooldians. They were a

grumbling, bolshie lot. But by God when you'd got them with you they'd work like blazes. And they're still the same. Properly motivated, they're the best workers in the world!' And so it went as the colonialists picked at the problem of the natives living a half-life on the giro. Two nations? Two planets.

Unemployment

The natives, meanwhile, are wondering what has hit them. Over the city as a whole, real unemployment runs in excess of 20% and rises by the month. The young are now the hardest hit. At the end of last August there were just 49 jobs on offer for the 13,505 youngsters drawing dole on Merseyside.

A recent study of one part of inner Liverpool, housing large numbers of black people, commissioned by the Department of Employment, found 45% of the 16 to 19 years age group out of work. Furthermore, such was the irregularity of work for those employed that the study concluded that unemployment was a feature of everyday life for 90% of them. This does not mean, of course, that this way of life will suddenly end at the age of 20. On the contrary, the implication is that it will continue. The figures speak for themselves: almost exactly half of the total unemployed males on Merseyside in 1979 were aged between 16 and 29. Of the unemployed women 73% fell into this age group.

As in the 1920s and 1930s, there are growth points in the UK economy. In those decades, growth and growth potential industries were south of the Birmingham parallel. Now they are south of the Milton Keynes parallel. Firms that fall in and around the electronics sector employ fewer than 4000 people in the whole of Merseyside.

Mersey side's three largest industries are food and drink, chemicals, and vehicles, in that order. All three have been cutting their workforces since the mid 70s and will, without any doubt at all, continue to do so through the 1980s. The government's management of the recession has simply speeded-up the process of contraction.

Taking into account the fact that the vehicle and food industries are embarked on a long-term process of substituting machinery for labour, that factory closures are permanent losses of productive capacity and that many other lost jobs will not be replaced, it is plain enough that any general economic recovery could only have a marginal impact on Merseyside. The outlook is exceedingly bleak and there is no reason for thinking that things will get better after they have got worse.

During the 1950s, and at an increased rate in the 1960s and early 70s, Liverpool's population declined dramatically as people emigrated over the city's frontier to the new and expanding old towns around the city perimeter. The new and expanding industries were parked in the same places: the children of dockers and seamen moved out and became factory workers. But the growth industries of the last 30 years are now the declining industries of the 1980s. There is no point any more in looking for a new house with a garden and a secure job in Runcorn, Ellesmere Port, Skelmersdale, Kirkby, Huyton.

The environment of decline

The economic decline that high unemployment speaks of, is reflected in the built environment. Dereliction takes so many forms. Residents become desensitised to the narrow stone-setted streets now deserted



by houses. To scarecrow lampposts that someone forgot to fell. To mortar-less, wind-eroded gable ends advertising livery stables and long forgotten ships' chandlers. All constant reminders of a once people-packed city now literally gone to seed. Scavenged by dandelions and thistles, tracks of land now await the Inner City Partnership's wagon loads of top-soil, grass seed and lollipop trees. Add in a string of windmills and Everton Heights would be fully converted to its pastoral past in the early nineteenth century.

Looking like Auschwitz raised vertically, deserted alike by their tenants and the corporation, stand the Ugly Sisters glowering over the city. Symbolic of the two block mania of the 're-developing' 1960s, they now look to another development decision.

In Birkenhead, the 'One-Eyed City' over the river, decisions have already been taken. The ironically-named Oak and Eldon Gardens (the nearest blade of cultivated grass was 1/4 mile away in the park), whose shells went up in 19 days in those dynamic days of the early 60s, came down in 30 seconds courtesy of dynamite. Thousands turned out to applaud the spectacle: the best thing the council had done in living memory said watching cynics.

Back on the Liverpool side, in overspill Kirkby, stands Tower Hill. Another monument to high-rise prefabrication and first occupied in the early 1970s, it stands derelict awaiting the shot-firers. Blocks of similar vintage in Liverpool's suburban Netherley look to a similar fate.

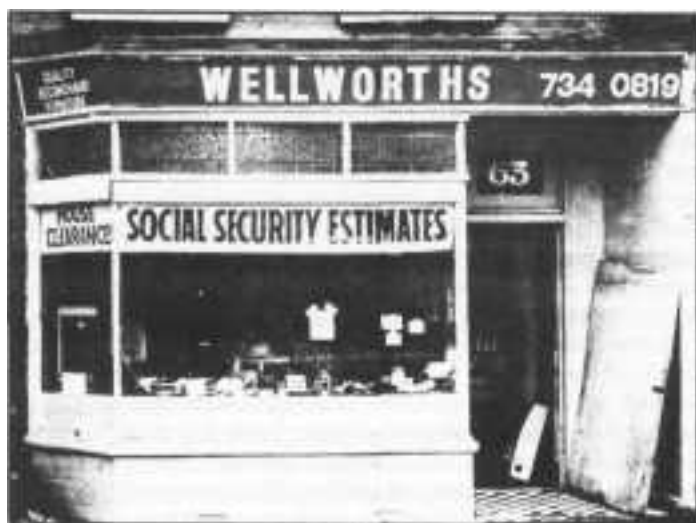
The actual or impending destruction of these squalid, evil barracks, all constructed under the aegis of Labour-controlled councils, is not the outcome of organised rebellion but of spontaneous and collective refusal.

In each and every case the pattern of 'revolt' has been identical. Those most able to find another niche in the housing market did so. Those with minimal choice and opportunity got left behind.

Indigenous knowledge of local housing markets rapidly becomes near perfect via the information exchanges of shops, pubs, doctors' waiting rooms, school gates and works canteens. As the word passed, vacated tenancies became first unlet and then unlettable.

The kids moved in and turned them into adventure playgrounds, refuges for adolescent sexual encounters. In their wake the desperate, squatting homeless. Then the pillagers after electric cable, copper piping and anything else portable and saleable.

The hard-pressed maintenance department, last in the queue, came in with boards and corrugated iron. Housing revenues declined. Interest and capital charges stayed constant. The remaining tenants started to organise and councils were finally obliged to have publicly known policies: total evacuation and then demolition.



Jobs and housing — the link

In no instance of tenant organisation did the Labour Party play an initiating role. The days seem to have gone when someone like Bessie Braddock, despite all her glaring faults, could harrass a visiting Ministry of Housing delegation with a coach-load of pursuing residents singing 'Land of Hope and Tory'.

Community workers played their part in the forming of tenant groups and so did the odd trade unionist. But more important, at least in Tower Hill and the Ugly Sisters, were members of that interesting Liverpool political phenomenon, the libertarian (but non-anarchist) socialist group, Big Flame. Grown out of the student movement of the 1960s, a deliberate decision was taken in the early 1970s to live in Corporation tenancies. With district housing officers desperate for tenants in flats, the move was easy to implement. Handfuls of young people, offering organisational and publicising skills with a minimum of rhetoric, proved convenient catalysts. Labour councillors, no surprise, were resentful: they took to Tory vocabulary and talked darkly of 'subversive elements'.

It was, and remains, difficult for Labour Party ward organisations to organise discontent. They are primarily electoral machines with a built-in tendency to revolve around councillors whose orientation is to the administrative machinery of government. Tenants' organisations, quick to take the point, were fiercely independent and kept the Labour Party at arms length. (They kept Big Flame at arms length too, though for different reasons) In such circumstances local Labour Party organisations acted, where they acted at all, as an arbitration and conciliation service between tenants and councils. Apart from one exceptional occasion in Kirkby, the trade union movement remained preoccupied with the workplace.

Despite the inevitable fact that unemployment runs highest in the areas of the worst dereliction, the two phenomena still wait upon politically organised and thought-about linkage. Lack of employment, rather than low income and its social penalties, continues to be seen on Merseyside as a separate problem. Objectively, this is decidedly odd. There are, for example, obvious connections between labour and housing markets: the situation in the one determines the situation in the other. As the members of the long-term unemployed increase (in 1979, 57% of Merseyside's unemployed males and 42% of females had been out of work for more than six months), then the inner and outer city council estates will certainly contain unemployed ghettos within them.

They already exist and are bound to become larger. The young unemployed, as they form their own families despite a renewing of strictures about 'love on the dole', will move into the cheaper, older

'Many of the quondam drawing rooms have been turned into the shop windows of filthily untidy hucksters shops, where fat, sweaty cheese, and oily pieces of bacon are exposed for sale, surrounded by a hotch-potch of stale sweets, "specked-apples", Epsom salts, hair oil, h'a'penny toys, unwholesome looking potted herrings and many other commodities of a cheap and nasty nature . . . Second-hand shops, exposing for sale furniture almost past firewood use, cracked crocks and discarded utensils, pictures of our Saviour and the Virgin ornately decorated with tinsel ornaments, vermin-infested mattresses . . .'

From a description of a street in the Toxteth district in
The Liverpool Review, 1899



and least well-maintained tenancies. Assuming, that is, they can find them. In August 1980 there were 12,000 people on the council's waiting list in Liverpool. In the year 1979-80 the council completed 550 dwellings, expect optimistically to complete 768 in 1980-81 and then a total of 400 between 1981 and 1985. With targets like that and council house sales expected to run at 500 a year, the growing proportion of the population drawing a low income from the dole can look forward to a very thin time.

THE POLITICS OF BABEL

The residents of these expanding giro estates have a landlord who is on the verge of bankruptcy and who has neither the political imagination nor the political coverage to contemplate the enormity of the problem. Indeed the problem is seen as arithmetical rather than political. It's the dismal bottom line figures on the balance sheet that get the priority.

Things are fiddled with and fudged. The patched resolution of one crisis signposts a lurch to the next. The council chamber is an arena of petty acrimonies, personal vendettas and sloganising. Demoralisation is an endemic disease. The only difference between the parties is in the content of the rhetoric. Medium and longterm planning has gone up the chimney. Crisis management rules supreme.

Labour is the largest single party, but only marginally. Having declined to take control of the council after last years' election, the Liberals took over once again. The political stalemate of Labour or Liberal in marginal control has been a continuing feature of Liverpool politics for the last decade. (See my article in *Marxism Today*, Nov 1978). None of the other constituent districts of Metropolitan Mersey side have this character: Wirral and Sefton are Tory, Knowsley and St Helens, Labour. Outside Liverpool the Liberals are also-rans. The Metropolitan council is Tory-controlled, though confidently expected to return to Labour in this year's elections.

The 1980 Liverpool municipal elections did nothing to resolve the Labour-Liberal impasse. Indeed if anything, they complicated it. Liberals and Labour lost and gained seats from each other, the Liberals ending with a small net gain. There were two significant results. In the one ward where Labour played the Liberals at their own game of 'community politics', it took two seats from the Liberals. More ominously was the loss to the Liberals of all three seats in a bed-rock Labour ward in the heart of the inner city. A ward where only five years ago, Roger O'Hara, a Communist candidate, ran a very good second to Labour. Roger O'Hara, widely known and respected throughout his own community as a fighter and a thorn in the flesh of the Town Hall, had been practising *principled* community politics when many a latter-day Liberal was still swotting for A levels.

The secret of Liberal success, hitherto, was their capture of the old

artisan housing areas around the edge of the inner city, populated largely by working class people buying out their houses from private landlords. While the Liberals had a few successes in some of the suburban Tory-Labour marginals of mixed private and council housing, they had never before made a serious effort in Labour strongholds. And yet the writing had been on the wall for some time. In the first elections to the Metropolitan council in the early 70s, the Labour leader, Bill (now Lord) Sefton, only narrowly won from a tenant candidate in a ward that had been unswervingly Labour since the 1920s.

The problems of Labour

The Labour Party has reaped as it has sown. An ageing set of councillors who learned their politics in the 1940s and precious little since, found themselves hopelessly at sea in a new era of austerity and deepening urban crisis. Lost without an ability to spend, and demoralised when opportunistic encroachment from the Liberals turned out to be more than a flash in the pan, the old guard found their pocket ward organisations crumbling around them. Held together in some notorious cases by elaborate systems of patronage, they could no longer be sustained in the face of declining largesse and a sullen and angry populace.

And so a political vacuum opened up in the Labour Party — to be filled, in the absence of anything more coherent, by Young Socialists equipped with the strident, urgent politics of Militant. Following meekly behind, a mere handful of the intuitively-left old guard, unable to think of anything better. The Militant is heard as Labour's voice because it is the only voice to be heard.

But for all that, the Militant group and its shaky followers is extremely fragile. Sectarian to a fault, its main activity is making platform speeches and waging warfare within the Labour ranks. Its practice, despite the noise, is traditional and remarkably similar to that of the right-wing old guard. Its ambition is to control the machine: Militant makes no attempt at creating a form of politics which goes beyond representative assemblies. So far as Militant is concerned, this is just as well. There could surely be few takers for a politics of sloganising and where humdrum questions of every-day policy must be postponed until the demise of capitalism.

'Impossibilism' is an old tag and long since fallen into disuse. Its revival is overdue, for it fits the Militant perfectly: nothing is possible until capitalism has been put to rout. But since capitalism will be around for a little while longer and people, not surprisingly, would welcome some attention to the problems of today, Militant is fragile here in Liverpool. Its current prominence is a function of a party searching for a new equilibrium. A faction which proposes to postpone today until tomorrow must change, collapse, or be displaced.

It has to be said, however, that beyond dark mutterings there are no indications of any imminent move against the Militant. Neither are there likely to be any in the immediate future. The old right is organisationally and ideologically bankrupt. The non-Militant left has no organisation and only handfuls of isolated individuals have an ideological critique. In the meantime, Militant plus followers control one out of eight Liverpool constituency parties and is a force in three others. Out of 33 Liverpool wards, Militant controls the Labour Party in 10 at most.

At the Metropolitan County level things are slightly different and more encouraging. A policy group has been established and is working on a detailed manifesto akin to the book-length document produced by Greater London's Labour Party. Moves of this nature are more than welcome and undeniably essential: there is a desperate need for radical and practical policies. What previously passed for policy — more of everything — is no longer possible in the medium

term. And anyway, crude spending could not accurately be defined as policy. It was more a case of telling local government officers to devise spending plans which were then monitored by councillors.

The policy documents now being devised are the products, not of councillors, but of handfuls of active rank and file members. As in the House of Commons, so in the Town Hall, there is a sharp division between the Labour Group and the party at large. If, as is true on Merseyside, the devisers of policy have no organic base in the party and no means of committing the Labour Groups to the policies, then manifestoes can only be electoral PR exercises. It would be nice to be able to report that such questions were being extensively discussed. But such things are a million miles away from the thought-world of the old time councillors in this benighted city. And for the Militant it has to be Apocalypse Now.

THE TRADE UNION FRONT

Remarkably, and despite all the battering, there is fight left in the local heartland of the labour movement. Back in the Spring of 1979 the announced closure of the Dunlop tyre plant in Speke, Liverpool, unleashed one of the most imaginative campaigns against closure seen in Britain since the war. Unemployed workers, dubbed 'community pickets', stopped the factory for the duration of the 90 days notice of closure. This freed the workers, drawing lay-off pay, to stage a civil disobedience campaign of sit-downs on strategic roads in the city, token occupations of radio stations, the Adelphi Hotel (local symbol of privilege) and the company's head office in London. Flying pickets, with T&GWU official backing, blockaded Fort Dunlop, the company's main factory in Birmingham, and brought it to a standstill. University students formed a support group, and jointly with the workers, occupied the city centre Job Centre. Wives and women's groups members petitioned in local markets, took a turn on the picket line, picketed the company's annual meeting on the 90th day and commissioned an audit of the social costs of closure.

But on the 91st day all but 180 out of 2,400 workers had collected their redundancy cheques despite the fact that weekly mass meetings had voted unanimously to resist. A fortnight after the closure the 180 had dwindled to 120 who still maintained the blockade on the Fort. So effectively that Dunlop's hired a helicopter to fly in computer paper. At this point the company returned to the negotiating table. The pickets were called off after the remaining workers were reinstated on 6 month contracts to clear the factory and offered a joint working party to consider the manufacture of alternative products in a new plant. The latter, predictably, was a fruitless exercise. At the end of the day just one solitary worker saved his job with Dunlop's.

Almost two years and 40,000 Merseyside redundancies later, the inquests continue. And still, though with diminishing frequency, closures are resisted. In January of last year 1000 Meccano workers promptly occupied their factory after being given two days notice of closure, though the occupying force rapidly dwindled to little more than a handful. In March the 500 Massey Ferguson workers occupied their factory for eight weeks and were only shifted when the company threatened the sack and loss of redundancy pay. Even then, out of 290 workers voting, 130 voted to continue the occupation. Bowater workers at Ellesmere Port on the other hand, shouted down Sogat-leader, Bill Keys, when he urged them to fight. Such was the size of the carrot — a top rate of £30,000—that there was an obscene rush for the fool's gold.

The beginnings of a new spirit

Down on the shop-floor the prevailing attitude is that 'it's better to be a coward for five minutes than a dead man all your life'. It's a case of keeping your head down while the shit's flying. The Tory perspective of a good battering producing 'more co-operative attitudes' is as likely

to achieve fruition as Birkenhead's Tranmere Rovers getting into the First Division.

It is plainly evident that senior managements of many large companies operating on Merseyside have no confidence in Tory bludgeoning tactics. Far from taking the recession-given opportunity to be thoroughly unpleasant to the unions, they are taking a much longer view. Bending over backwards to be accommodating and apologetic, and make snide remarks about Thatcherism, they seem eager to divulge all manner of information about their company's operations (in the hushiest of confidence) in order to persuade sceptical trade unionists of the necessity of closure or redundancy. Like Judas Iscariots, it is amazing how many deny voting Tory at the last election.

There are signs, too, that trade unionists are also thinking in terms of a longer view. There is growing talk, especially in the T&GWU, of agreements on technology, disclosure of information, investment and corporate planning. Industrial democracy is making its way back on to the agenda and attempts are being made in several companies to form parallel management groups. The Courtauld shop stewards at the Aintree plant have formed their own intelligence unit and launched their first research briefing notes as a supplement to a new combine newspaper.

Small beginnings these. But all the indications are that a new spirit and a readiness to think of radical departures is taking root. This shows itself, as well, in the lengthy and constructive discussions going on about organising the unemployed. Quite unlike the 1930s, it really does seem as if the trade union movement is poised to do more on this issue than thunder at the government.

That huge 150,000-strong Liverpool demonstration at November's end did Merseyside a power of good. The city is, of course, accustomed to large demonstrations. 4000 turned out in support of Dunlop's in the early Spring of 1979 and the TUC's Day of Action last May produced 12,000. Demonstrations rejuvenate and reinforce the collective impulse. In that sense, but *only* in that sense, the heart of the local labour movement, the trade unions, remains in good shape. The estimated 20,000 Merseyside contribution to the November march confirmed the strength of the collective impulse and contrasts interestingly with the dazed bewilderment on the shop floor. The sectional and economic frustrations receive ready political expression when occasion presents itself. The problem on Merseyside, as elsewhere, is how that collective impulse can get maximum political impact. A question which immediately brings the Labour Party back onto centre stage. . . .

That collective impulse, as yet unfocused around either a coherent programme or organisation, is nevertheless an extremely significant response to Thatcherite policies. And the May march of Liverpool unemployed to London will certainly sharpen it still further.

But who has organised the demonstrations and who is organising the march in May? Not the local Labour Party principally, but the trade unions. Militant, for all its rhetorical thunder, is like a candle to a floodlight when compared with the organising capacity of the trade unions.

And the role of the Communist Party? Not so easy to identify in this historical moment of flux. Its traditional role of exerting ideological influence on the Labour Party indirectly through the trade unions is no longer so readily played. With Militant acting as a well organised and coherent faction within the Labour Party, the Communist Party's role as an important ideological mentor is somewhat diminished. On the other hand, the eddying whims of Militant's ultra-leftist political vulgarities contrasts strikingly with the Communist Party's sober respect for reality. The Party's insistence in this city of promoting broad alliances without looking for a controlling interest, and of tackling today's problems today, means that its members are still listened to with respect.