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**STEVE MUNBY**  
**Municipal Militancy**


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Christian Woolmar's article on 'Municipal Militancy' (*Marxism Today*, August) refers to the 'Government's extraordinary cave-in to the Liverpool militants'. Based on this assessment he outlines an approach to the coming wider conflict between local democracy and the Thatcher government. I think he's wrong in his estimate of Liverpool and that leads to some dangerous omissions and assumptions about the situation we face.

Let's be clear. Liverpool Council, local authority unions and wide sections of the community at large have clearly shown their opposition to government policies, and a substantial majority of local people believe the city needs more cash from the Government. The Government did, as Woolmar suggests, 'negotiate' and 'budge an inch or two'. Quite how much is still unclear.

The deal comes nowhere near the £30-£70 million which leading councillors were talking about a few months back. It seems to involve £6 million in urban programme money from central government, but there is no evidence that this has been finalised. There is to be a rate rise of 17% and 'creative financing'. But where is the other



£40 million needed to 'balance the books' coming from? Does it exist?

It may be that Liverpool Labour councillors have belatedly adopted the advice of other left councillors, such as Margaret Hodge, leader of Islington Council. In an interview in the May/June issue of *New Socialist* she told Derek Hatton: 'If I were involved in Liverpool I would go for the most critical areas of growth. I would maximise the financial devices available and . . . go for the rate rise which was necessary to defend it.'

As Woolmar suggests, the six councillors who 'opted out' of the illegal budget strategy before the May elections certainly became irrelevant afterwards, but not for the reason he gives. Quite simply, from May onwards, Labour had a 17 seat majority but made no attempt to introduce their 'illegal budget'. Nor did it try to follow up the previous industrial action and demonstration on March 29 with further actions aimed at putting pressure on the Government. Even the spontaneous protests when Jenkin visited the city as a guest of the council were remarkable for their lack of co-ordination and the absence of rousing speeches from certain familiar figures on the Labour Left.

Woolmar uses the analogy of a game

with a Scoreboard for current relations between central and local government. In Liverpool's case the game was poker. To play poker you need three things — a good head for figures, to be good at bluffing and to keep your opponent (and therefore everyone else) in the dark about your hand. This was what happened in Liverpool, and if the example is followed by other councils it will lead to disaster.

Local people and the trade union movement were treated as a stage army by some councillors, to be moved on and off as they wanted. Now in defending local democracy, the democratic involvement of the community and the labour movement is vital. The nature of the issues at stake should make it an obvious point of principle, but there are other reasons.

Any large scale conflict with the government will inevitably put big strains on alliances, both between different councils and between councils, council workers and the community. A popular movement that has a chance to decide how to fight and what to fight for is more likely to sustain such a struggle and ensure local councils neither opt out or make unacceptable compromises.

To quote David Blunkett (*New Socialist* May/June 84): 'It's no good saying what

would happen if a handful of individuals would only give a better lead, because that's not only paternalistic, it's politically wrong. The real movement for leadership comes from the grassroots.' For that reason the current emphasis on the budget plans of councils for next year is politically misconceived.

Any political strategy based on the financial manoeuvres of a local council, whether refusing to levy a rate, deficit spending, refusal to negotiate etc, will exclude the mass of the people, the grassroots, from playing that leadership role. Instead it gives pride of place to the actions of a relatively small number of councillors and downgrades the importance of industrial and other action by the mass of working people. Some or all of these financial devices may have their uses. But they must remain secondary to the task of mobilising the largest and widest range of forces against the government attacks on the GLC, the metropolitan counties and local government finance.

If not, the coming year may see Labour councils left high and dry, councillors backing off as the deadline for setting a rate approaches and other 'left-wing' councillors turning to Patrick Jenkin or his successor and saying 'get us off the hook!'

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