

WORKING AGAINST THE LEFT IN MANCHESTER

For some ten years I've been employed by Manchester's Labour led Council. When I first started, the old guard were in power and apart from a short break, had been for many years. Then following an internal coup the left wing faction took over. This was part of a series of changes which saw other councils like Lambeth, Liverpool, Sheffield and Brent etc. move to the left. The new Manchester administration made all sorts of promises to the 'voters' and its own employees alike encapsulated in the slogan "Defending Jobs - Improving Services" to be found on all its letterheads, billboards and transport. In fact the slogan is about all that's left and a few enterprising rebels have managed to get rid of that remaining insult to their intelligence in some places. So what is the reality behind the glossy facade?

Well I remember when the Left first took over that major cuts were made in the provision of house improvement grants. This seemed to go unnoticed by most people not directly affected, perhaps because both the Council and its more extreme left critics were fixated on council housing. The fact that some of the poorest workers actually lived in areas of high owner occupation in the inner city and were seriously affected by these cuts was ignored.

the primary responsibility for the increasing cut-backs in local authority finance lies with the Tory government. But the deliberate intention of the Council's political strategy has been to focus workers opposition to these cut-backs on the Council itself rather than relying on their own autonomous organisation and activity. The Tories may well regard such councils, in narrow party political terms, as an obstacle to their complete control of economic and social policy, but in practice such councils function as a useful safety valve for the frustrations generated by the government's attacks on workers. The division of labour between the Tory central government with its absolute majority in Parliament and strong local Labour councils opposed to them but legally and financially dependant on central government, has had the hidden benefit to British capitalism as a whole of disorientating and diffusing opposition.

This is best illustrated by the role of the trade unions. At national level they have been marginalised by the Tories, being squeezed out of many of their former positions as junior managers of capital. Locally, in Labour Council areas the opposite has happened. The already close relationship between the Labour Party and the Unions has become ever closer. This has been just



Certainly more workers were employed at first which was good news for the growing unemployed, although this wasn't matched by the supposed major improvements in services. The Council went out of its way to integrate numerous constituencies into the umbrella of Council organisations through a myriad of special committees and new units. These deal with trade union consultation, tenant consultation, equal opportunities (including race, women, gays, the disabled), anti-nuclear issues, energy policy and more. The actual expenditure on these ventures has been low but the political capital substantial. The policy has been quite successful despite the efforts of the local right wing press to embarrass the Council at every opportunity.

Of course the Council are right when they say that

as much the case with non-affiliated unions like the white collar NALGO as with the other unions.

The disastrous result of all this has been a more than usually heavy smothering of any tentative moves by workers to oppose the present massive round of cut-backs in jobs and services.

All the unions in Manchester managed to persuade their members, with dire threats of massive compulsory redundancies and the like, to accept cooperation with the Council's cut-backs. Thus the majority agreed on general terms on cooperation, but inevitably, as the effects of the cut-backs have become apparent in practice, groups of workers have become disgruntled and started to organise a fight back. In each case the union, from its paid officials to local shop stewards, have gone out of their way to stop disputes altogether or, where that has proven impossible, to at least contain

them. All the old recipes have been used - accusations of not going through the correct procedures, being undemocratic, threats of isolation, being misled by political hotheads (the unpopular SWP being useful in this respect), upsetting the officials' behind the scenes negotiations, etc. etc. A few examples of this process will illustrate my point.

In my own workplace we were threatened with a 50% reduction in the number of jobs and pressure for more 'flexibility'. We got together in a meeting of both NALGO and NUPE members and decided to oppose the cuts, draw up a list of demands and lobby the Housing Committee during work time and in the sensitive period just before the local elections. The meeting was the best attended for ages and there was a confident mood amongst the majority which pulled along the few waverers. The meeting in fact decided to seek the support of the unions but to get on and organise the action ourselves. Unfortunately after this promising, if cautious, start things just went downhill. The NUPE steward (a Labour Party activist), called a separate meeting of some of her members and persuaded them to back off from the lobby. Those of us in NALGO, for our sins, reaffirmed our action despite this set-back, and decided to call on individual NUPE members to join us. The NALGO convenor had refused to call an emergency meeting of all the stewards to discuss our demands but when he realised we were going ahead anyway he was down like a shot with a delegation to heavy us. Initially they tried to get our steward to just call the whole thing off. When he refused to do that the convenor addressed the NALGO members themselves. By a series of threats and pleadings and a promise to get our steward a hearing at Committee, and despite my vocal opposition, the majority backed down and agreed to call off the lobby. In fact that last promise turned out to be false and the convenor subsequently managed to head off all further attempts to do anything. The result of this experience was that a few people saw the need to stick to our guns in any future action and organise ourselves but unfortunately others just became demoralised.

A similar process occurred when another group of housing workers, where lots of staff had left, decided to impose their own work priorities and refuse to answer Councillor inquiries during the election. The convenor and stewards refused to support them and insisted on their working normally until "all the procedures had been gone through".

In both cases the official management were able to sit back and let the Unions do their job for them.

Another more serious dispute arose in the Cleansing Department. Faced with sudden and massive job losses amongst drivers, with the remaining drivers being regularly moved around at a moments notice, one depot went out on strike. They immediately sent out pickets and delegations to other depots and soon the whole department was on all out strike. The unions immediately went into action. Unable to actually stop the strike they set out to isolate it. Their main aim was to ensure the action did not turn into outright opposition to the 'agreed' cuts policy but concentrated on 'bad management' of the IMPLEMENTATION of the cuts. In this way other council workers were more likely to see the dispute as a purely Cleansing issue. A few environmental health officers did get involved but that was all. The strike remained solid for over a week until the union managed to get a slim majority

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In favour of an offer of a few temporary drivers and a few quid for clearing the backlog of rubbish, the strike ended with a lot of recriminations and frustration.

The same process of diversion and isolation has gone into other areas. For instance the opposition to the anti-gay clause 28 of the Local Government Act has been largely focussed on "pressurising" the Council not to implement the clause, rather than going directly to groups of workers on the front line. Much of the opposition has relied on Council funding in one form or another. This has weakened any tendencies towards autonomous organisation and activity essential in dealing with the real effects of prejudice on a day-to-day level.

The council has also had some success in integrating council tenant opposition to the effects of government legislation aimed at breaking up council estates (and in the process some of the material basis of collective action) and increasing housing costs to workers generally. Of course the council is genuinely opposed to the government measures but not necessarily for the same reasons as tenants. Tenant opposition to the Council itself has thus been submerged in an anti-Tory crusade which Labour politicians hope to tap in the next round of elections.

The Council's organisational umbrella which I've described has been in place for several years now. It is firmly rooted with much overlapping of personnel between Council workers in the special units, Councillors, Labour Party activists, tenant association organisers, campaign organisers, Union officials and so on. They provide an extensive informal network for behind the scenes manipulation.

All of this is a formidable barrier to autonomous anti-capitalist activity. But I don't want to paint too gloomy a picture. The influence of the Council and the Trades Unions is not all powerful, their control by no means complete. As their false opposition to the attacks on council workers and other groups of workers fails to deliver the goods and the attacks themselves become more widespread there is a real potential for the emergence of an INDEPENDENT working class movement. In the meantime we must do all in our power to expose the role of the Left Councils, Trade Unions and campaign groups. Even in this task however, we need a lot more communication and cooperation amongst the existing small groups of revolutionary communists and independent militants.

A Council Worker.

(article submitted by 'Subversion')

NALGO - National and Local Government Officers Union.

NUPE - National Union of Public Employees.

P.S. Since writing this there have been further Wildcat strikes in Housing and Recreational Services Departments. The latest dispute is over the staffing of local 'mini-town halls' including longer opening hours during the week and Saturday morning working. The Union/Management deal was rejected at Branch meeting and a boycott of all new posts maintained. Now the branch officials are pursuing a strike ballot of the whole membership, (most of whom are not immediately affected) knowing that the majority won't support a strike at this stage, in order to get their crummy deal accepted. Their apparent militancy is in fact a shabby manoeuvre to get round the growing opposition to their policies of compromise with the Council.

THE MEANING OF ... BRADFORD

AN ADDRESS TO COUNCIL WORKERS

WHAT'S AT STAKE

THOUSANDS OF JOBS DOWN THE DRAIN; COUNCIL HOUSES SOLD; CHILDRENS HOMES SHUT; COUNCIL RENTS UP; LIBRARIES CLOSED; ADVICE CENTRES CUT; COMPULSORY TRANSFERS.

This is just part of a long list of cuts being made, not only by the Tory scumbags in Bradford, but also by hypocritical LABOUR councils from Manchester and Salford in the North-west to Brent, Camden and Hackney, amongst others, in the South-east.

THE DIFFERENCE IN BRADFORD

Bradford has the distinction of adding to this list the privatisation of a whole range of services. Unlike the Left, we don't think it matters if we are exploited by state or private employers. But the effects of privatisation are even more job losses, poorer wages and conditions and reduced services at higher cost, and are an attempt to further divide us. This is what we oppose.

These measures are being prepared under present and proposed legislation which will begin to affect ALL Councils of whatever political persuasion from next year. Central government intends to bring in privatisation bit by bit over several years to divide and weaken opposition to it. The enthusiasm of Bradford Tories has led them to try everything at once. For the moment other, wetter, Tory Councils will bide their time awaiting the outcome of the 'Battle of Bradford'.

'TEST CASE'

The Tories, Labour and the Unions all recognise Bradford as a 'test case'. But for them the test is how quickly these measures can be introduced NOT whether they will be introduced at all. Both Labour and the Unions accept the 'inevitability' of their introduction. Their vociferous campaigns of opposition, which we are all urged to join, are nothing more than words. They cover up their practical co-operation in the smooth introduction of competitive tendering and privatisation.

CUTS AND PRIVATISATION HAVE TO BE OPPOSED WHETHER CARRIED OUT ENTHUSIASTICALLY BY RIGHT WING TORIES OR RELUCTANTLY BY LEFT WING LABOURITES WITH BIG MAJORITIES OR NARROW ONES

THE ISSUE IS NOT DEMOCRACY BUT CLASS INTERESTS

THE STATE, NATIONAL AND LOCAL IS A CAPITALIST STATE WHICHEVER POLITICAL PARTY ADMINISTERS IT

THE FIGHT BEGINS HERE

Bradford could be a big mistake for the Tories. The real impact of their legislation will be dramatically highlighted for all to see and could galvanise a REAL opposition to their whole programme of anti-working class measures.

This will only happen if workers reject the leadership, organisation and politics of the Labour Party and the Unions.

Recent experiences like the Miners strike, Wapping and the Ferry strike show that no single group of workers can defeat the determined and combined efforts of the employers, the State, the media and the Unions to restructure the economy at our expense.

Nothing will happen this time unless the Bradford workers give a lead by taking all out strike action. But if they allow that action to be controlled by the Labour Party and the Unions they will end up simply adding to the list of recent courageous but inevitable defeats which our class has suffered.

LABOUR DIVIDES US

If the Bradford workers strike their action will be applauded by Labour politicians and Union leaders whilst at the same time they busy themselves ensuring that 'outside' support remains largely symbolic. They will encourage a siege mentality amongst Bradford workers and seek to isolate them from other workers by concentrating on the maverick qualities of Bradford Tories rather than the common factors which unite us. Those of us working for Labour councils which mouth opposition to the cuts will be told to hold our fire and co-operate with our 'friendly' employer. This is a straightforward case of CLASS COLLABORATION with our enemy. The opposition of 'strong' local Labour councils to Tory central government with its absolute majority in Parliament is illusory while councils are legally and financially dependent on central government. This opposition has the hidden benefit to British capitalism as a whole of disorientating and diffusing any real opposition.

A COMMON FIGHT

All council workers must respond to the challenge of Bradford, not simply to defeat Bradford council but to defeat the power behind the council and force the government to pull back from its onslaught on all of us.

That means striking against central and local government irrespective of the political colour of the administration.

It means organising and controlling the strike movement ourselves independently of the Labour Party and the Unions. Action may start off locally and within the Union framework. We must push it outside that framework and beyond our local areas or face defeat. A nationwide strike movement of this kind is possible and would set free vast reservoirs of frustration and anger felt by other sections of the working class who would be encouraged to take up their own demands.

We need to organise now for:

- a national strike of all council workers
- immediate extension of council workers' strikes to other workers in dispute
- regular mass meetings of all strikers irrespective of Union membership
- directly elected strike committees
- working class community links based on opposition to cuts in services, the poll tax, ET etc.,
- a demand for the end of privatisation, job losses and cuts in services

WE MUST BEGIN TO POSE OUR HUMAN NEEDS AGAINST THE NEEDS OF THE MARKET AND THE STATE.

Written by Council workers

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