CAMDEN LABOUR BRIEFING

Next CAMDEN LABOUR BRIEFING meeting
Tuesday 31st October - 8pm Town Hall
After conference -
what next for the left in the Party?
Speaker: Angie Birtill (conference delegate)
And discussion on the left in Camden.

ANTI-POLL TAX COUNCILLORS VINDICATED

At a special disciplinary hearing of the Camden Labour Group/ Local Government Committee Executive held on Monday 25 September, it was decided by 22 votes to 20 that no action be taken against Councillors Angie Birtill and Adrian States who had voted against the implementation of the Poll Tax on 17 July 1989. Over two hundred letters of support were received and the meeting itself was lobbied by around a 100 local people. Both argued that the Poll Tax was unacceptable, and that socialists must campaign against the implementation of the Poll Tax. Ex-council leader Phil Turner, speaking in their defence, said that they were the only two councillors doing anything against the Poll Tax.

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LOCAL ANTI-POLL TAX CAMPAIGN SUCCESS

Nearly 20 000 people in Camden have not returned their Poll Tax registration forms. That is 20% of those expected to register. This must be attributed, to a large extent, to the high profile of the "Camden Stop the Poll Tax Campaign". Mass leafleting is followed by local meetings of between 50 and 120. The average household now pays £774 a year in rates. The Poll Tax will be about £600 per person! Mass non-payment is now a reality in Scotland. A third of those expected to pay the Tax in Glasgow have not yet done so, six month after the deadline.

Holborn & St Pancras CLP and the Labour Group have opposed the Poll Tax, yet they have done nothing to campaign against it. Now the GMC has disaffiliated from the local campaign without even suggesting an alternative activity for Party members. The Labour Group, despite promises of implementing the Tax fairly, has sent out Electoral Registration forms and notifications of changes to Housing Benefits at the same time as the Poll Tax forms. Tax canvassers have used intimidatory tactics. Instead of refusing to co-operate with the Poll Tax and leaving it up to the Chief Executive to implement it, the Labour Group is acting as the bailiffs for the Tory Government.

Fred Leplat (Somers Town LP and Camden Stop The Poll Tax)

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SUPPORT THE BOILER WORKERS

The 40 Camden boiler workers came out on strike on Monday 2 in defence of their jobs and conditions. Everything points to the Council closing down the section and putting the work out to private contractrors. On August 25, the Council issued a 90 day notice terminating all agreements. The section then took strike action, but returned to work on the advice of NUPE officials. On the 29 September, the Council refused to discuss a union proposal to increase productivity and negotiations broke down. Last year, the Council cut the Boiler Section from 81 to 40 people. Now, their proposals would mean a further cut down to 24 workers. Their negotiating tactics (lies, 90 day notice) are designed to smash the union NUPE. During the massive cuts two years ago, the Labour Group had a priviledged relations with NUPE as it co-operated with the cuts. This had not protected NUPE members from atacks on conditions, and they are now the target of an anti-union attack from the Labour Group.

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The Labour government-in-waiting — and the left opposition

This year's Labour Conference embraced nuclear weapons, nuclear power, anti-trade union laws, and market forces. At the same time it dumped Ken Livingstone off the NEC and (worst of all) began the process of severing the Party's historic links with the trade unions.

The whole shebang was aimed more at pleasing the Tory media and reassuring the ruling class than expressing the aspirations and meeting the needs of Labour's supporters on the ground.

Worse is promised for next year.

In the CLPs, there has been an undeniable swing to the right in which the LCC apparatchiks have played a significant role. Through their bogus themes of "Party democracy" and "modernisation" they have cynically exploited the demoralisation generated by three straight Thatcher victories.

However, their success would have been unthinkable without the trade union block vote, which in Brighton was wielded ruthlessly on behalf of the leadership. Kinnock's claim that Conference "spontaneously" endorsed his reactionary leadership is a calculated lie. Nuclear weapons and anti-trade union laws have become Party policy courtesy of a right wing block made up of the GMB, AEU, EETPU, NUPE, and USDAW. Against this the vacillating "leftism" of the TGWU and MSF was of no consequence.

Edmonds finished Conference with a frighteningly dishonest plea for an end to the block vote (which he had used without compunction all week to squash democratic debate).

But Bill Jordan let the cat out of the bag: the block vote has to be kept for the time being as a guarantee of "stability". "I won't give it up," he said on TV, then corrected himself, "*my union* won't give it up until we're satisfied the long-term future of the Party is safe."

What all this means is that the block vote — and the links with the trade union that are so vital both to Labour's bedrock identity and its capacity to become an instrument of socialist advance — will be retained in its present, undemocratic form until the Party's leaders are convinced that the left has been *permanently* locked out. That can only happen through the structural termination of any real membership rights and powers in the CLPs or the unions.

The aim of the leadership is to turn Labour into something like the US Democratic Party: a vehicle for professional politicians, with no formal links to the organised working class, a passive, atomised membership shielded from radical influences, and a "socialism" from which the establishment has nothing to fear.

Again and again at Brighton front benchers were at pains to dampen down working class expectations of the next Labour government. On health, public services, jobs, wages, democratic rights, disarmament, the message was clear: vote for us and nothing much will change!

The character of the Labour government in waiting took on a grisly clarity during the week. It will be anti-union, authoritarian, subservient to the US, and reactionary on social issues.

In this context, the commitment to retain Tory union laws takes on a new and sinister light.

The leadership was frightened by the "summer of discontent" (which helped buoy them in the polls). They know the election of a Labour government could well result in an industrial and social explosion as workers take action to recoup ground lost since 1979. They therefore want to keep Tory anti-union law not simply to placate "public opinion" (which is largely favourable to trade unionism) but because they have every intention of using it. Let's just hope they don't view Trident the same way.

For this reason (as well as others) a socialist presence in the Labour Party is vital. While it is understandable that people should react to the dismal proceedings in Brighton by abandoning membership of or active participation in the Labour Party this would be a tragic mistake — for the left and for the whole working class.

In the run up to the General Election we have to work hard to maintain pressure on the leadership within the Party and to use that pressure to expose — to Party members, trade unionists, and the wider public — the real nature of Labour's programme and the real intentions of its leadership.

Only by doing this will we be in any position to strike back after a Labour victory — which in itself will depend on our efforts. Despite Labour's welcome opinion poll progress, the road to the General Election will be a rough one, with plenty of policy pot-holes (notably economic) over which Kinnock and his team could stumble badly.

But simply enjoining socialists to "stay in and fight" will not be enough. Nor will Ken Livingstone's embarrassing attempt to worm his way back into favour with god-knows-whom by calling on us to "unite" behind current policies and leadership.

Instead, it's worth looking closely at two relative successes for the left at Conference: the struggles led by Black Sections and the Labour Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

Both these campaigns are based in powerful social movements with supporters far beyond the confines of the Labour Party. They have made themselves into effective conduits for these social movements into the Labour Party through years of positive, non- sectarian campaigning. Both have maintained basic principles while working in the broadest possible alliances. Both have taken their arguments — often in hostile circumstances — to the base of the Party and the trade unions.

They have expanded their agendas and responded creatively to popular concerns (Section 28, apartheid, the police). They have adopted militant *public* tactics. They have lobbied union leaders and MPs but have been prepared when necessary to confront the leadership rather than "negotiate" with it in secret.

Of course, the left as a whole cannot simply reproduce the tactics employed by these single-constituency pressure groups. Building alliances around a comprehensive socialist programme with tactics and leadership to match will be much more difficult.

Nonetheless we should bear in mind what Tony Benn said at the end of Conference: "The left's base is too narrow. We need to win the arguments for socialism amongst a broad layer of people outside as well as inside the Party. There is no mechanistic solution to a political problem."