CAMDEN LABOUR BRIEFING

CAMDEN'S BUDGET : YET MORE CUTS

After abandoning equal opportunities many months ago, Camden's Labour Group leadership are now set to dismantle what's left. With a one-day strike by Nalgo Social Servicesworkers forcing the Council to retreat on cuts to the most vulnerable, the bearers of the "dented shield" have hit on the idea of closing Wellesley House, the London Women's Centre.

A proposed £100 000 cut would decimate the centre, with 14 women's organisations facing eviction and two workplace nurseries (with 65 places) under threat. It is this last cut which is mobilising the greatest opposition. The Council aim to make the Centre self-financing with support from other boroughs !

At first glance, the borough's 89/90 budget is an anodyne affair, despite featuring the Poll Tax implementation (never fully discussed in either the Labour Group or Parties) and a vacancy rate of 10% (i.e. job cuts) that will leave some services staggering from one disaster to another. Libraries and social work will be the hardest hit. Further down the agenda is the creation of a Direct Services Department - on the model of Tory Wandsworth. In this set-up, managers recruited by South African linked head-hunters with commercial attitudes will effectively undermine direct labour, leading to over 100 manual and admin job losses. The irony of this is that no piece of Tory legislation forces Camden to go down this road, nor has any other Labour Borough attempted to destroy public services wholly on its own iniative.

In spite of a declining service, Council rents are going up by an average of £2.16 a week (higher than the rate of inflation). Seven Labour councillors voted against this and may face disciplinary action. The LCC are clamouring for expulsion from the Group and the Party. Several councillors, who last year consistently opposed cuts and were suspended from the Labour Group as a result, voted for both a rent rise and the budget at the full Council meeting. Although going down on record as opposing cuts, they perceive the lack of activity outside the Council Chamber as a reason for hanging on within it. Their position in the Labour Group assumes a central significance : a case of the procedural tail wagging the political dog ! The logic of this mistake can be followed through, but it is essentially false. No debate on the size of the cuts can obscure the need for socialists in local government to oppose any capitulation or refusal to fight back against the Government.

Padrig Jones
Holborn & St Pancras CLP, Camden Nalgo.

NEXT CAMDEN LABOUR BRIEFING MEETING

MONDAY 20 MARCH, 7.30pm

Swiss Cottage Community Centre,
Winchester Road

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CAMDEN INVESTS IN APARTHEID

Camden Anti-Apartheid was recently going through the register of shares of Shell. This company is high on the Anti-Apartheid Movement's boycott list. What a surprsie it was to find that 316 950 shares with a value of £3.5 million were registered in the name of of the Mayor/Alderman/Burgeress of Camden ! These were a straight investment and not part of a pension fund. Such a large investment could not have taken place without the knowledge of the leader of the Council (Tony Dykes in case you had forgotten). And if it had been done without his knowledge, this is surely a scandal!

CAMDEN KICKS ANTI-POLL TAX CAMPAIGN IN THE TEETH

The first anti-poll tax meeting was held on the 14 March with 120 people attending. This was a success as many local tenants attended and declared their support for the campaign. Although the Mayor is a sponsor of the campaign, and the council chamber was booked through a councillor, the Council has sent a bill for the use of the room ! Sorry, but can't pay, won't pay !

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ON THE AGENDA :

STAND BY SALMAN RUSHDIE !

Discussion introduced by Dave Palmer of Haringey's Reading Matters Bookshop, known for its stand on 'Positive Images' and now organising with other London left bookshops support for Salman Rushdie.

CAMDEN'S BUDGET

What is really in the budget? What does it mean for services and the community? What should our response be to it ?

LABOUR GROUP ELECTIONS

Should the left councillors support anybody ? and if so whom ?

Rushdie:

Labour twisting in the breeze

The latest twists in the Rushdie affair have been disturbing but predictable.

Douglas Hurd, having lectured Muslims in Manchester about the obligations incumbent on "law-abiding" Brits, then turned on Rushdie, snidely claiming the author didn't understand "British institutions". Howe and Thatcher have expresed their general disapproval of *The Satanic Verses*, and clearly a big push is on for some "diplomatic" (i.e. self-serving) solution to the British-Iranian conflict.

Meanwhile publishers Penguin (owned by multinational Pearson Group) are said to have pulped the first run of the paperback edition. The publishing industry and the bourgeois media in general are dithering and preparing the way for a climbdown.

This retreat from Rushdie's defence was inevitable. It's not just that someone in Thatcher's eyrie has finally read his book and discovered that it is far more offensive to the Tory regime than to the tenets of Islam.

It is that defence of the book and the principles of free expression are not in the interests of the class represented by the government. Labour's leaders, as usual, have not been so clear about the interests of the class *they* represent.

Paddy Ashdown took up the cudgels for Rushdie against the Tories, while Kinnock kept his lips buttoned.

The problem with leaving this battle to the likes of Ashdown and the bourgeois liberals pontificating in the "quality" press is twofold.

First, most of these people have a pitiful track record on free speech. Where were they when *Perdition* was effectively banned from the stage? When Sinn Fein was gagged? When Clause 28 was pushed through parliament? Some protested, but these cases never received the kind of outraged advocacy being shown in the Rushdie case.

Second, they refuse to place the current controversy in the context of the grossly racist society which is Thatcher's Britain, 1989. Not only such devotees of literary freedom as the *Sun* and the *Mail* but also Hugo Young in the *Guardian* and others have used the affair as an excuse for racist and inflammatory attacks on Muslims.

It is vital that the labour movement stake out a clear and principled position here — and argue for it forcefully not only in parliament and through the media, but in honest, direct dialogue with the Muslim communities in Britain.

We have to stand up against both racism and censorship, in whatever guises they appear.