ROBBING PETER TO PAY PAUL?

(Supplement to the December 1988 issue of Camden Labour Briefing).

Labour councillors who voted for cuts, are now beginning to realise that if you reduce the workforce, the services to the people who elected them, will suffer. The cuts are biting and efforts are being made to pump a little more money into certain salary levels to attract staff back to Camden.

There are severe shortages that include Environmental Health Officers, Legal and Housing Officers, Social Workers, Occupational Therapists and Building Department Officers. It seems that it is only when the council is threatened with court action or when legal proceedings result in Tory judges finding against Camden for not fulfilling statutory obligations, as in the appauling neglect of the Homeless Persons Section, that Labour Group officers decide to act.

But throwing money at the ever increasing problems that beset Camden, poses some fundamental issues. Who are being further robbed of service care in order that vacancies can be filled? Committee Chairs are being noticeably coy about giving a precise answer. Certainly it will mean the sacrifice of not filling vacancies in some areas to finance higher wages elsewhere. Yet is it just a matter of money? Camden Council is known to be a bad employer - witness the way that they are constantly attacking the Town Hall Trade Unions to weaken and demoralise them such as expecting admin. assistants in the Building Department to take on extra duties and responsibilities for the same pay. Why should anyone want to start a job in Camden under such conditions? And because of Camden's neglect, it is falling behind many London boroughs, both Labour and Tory, in the provision of services.

A further worrying trend is the way that the Direct Labour Organisation has been allowed to dwindle in size. For instance, in the Building Department, a workforce of 546 at April 1987 that included bricklayers and carpenters to plumbers and painters, has been reduced to 349 a year later. A total of 181 have left after being "persuaded" to take voluntary redundancy/early retirement. And over a short period of four months from December 1987 to March 1988, an exodus of 235 left the Department, for one reason or the other. So much for NUPE's hopes that by co-operating with the council, the cuts would be cushioned! And of the remaining workers, some must find contracts in neighbouring Haringey as repair orders within Camden have halved from a record 2,000 a year ago. And at what price? Council estates are crying out for repair work but orders from the Housing Department have been stopped. This at a time when the threat from Compulsory Competitive Tendering is looming near.

Instead of protecting these jobs and services, as promised in the 1986 Manifesto, the cuts councillors are steering a further course of hardship next year when the council will be faced with an expenditure reduction of £17 million to £27 million. When will they stop putting the knife in deeper and stand by the Working Class who up till now have kept them in office?

Councillor Adrian States.