A STRATEGY OF REALISM AND RESISTANCE

STATEMENT BY MANIFESTO GROUP OF LABOUR COUNCILLORS

INTRODUCTION

Since the General Election defeat a majority of Labour Councillors have been openly committed to a policy of cuts. They have already pushed through a series of measures - without consultation - which have included: a freeze on all vacancies (900 jobs), the ending of temporary contracts (300 jobs), the curtailment of overtime work, and the scrapping of existing trade union agreements.

In addition to these measures, the leadership of the Labour Group are now proposing a 20% cut across-the-board in all Council services. This will mean the loss of around 2000 jobs and a £40 million reduction in expenditure.

The purpose of these cuts, as stated by the leadership, is to 'balance the books' and to 'remain in office' and therefore 'protect front-line services'.

REALISM

We believe that the leadership's approach to the current crisis is both dishonest and totally unrealistic.

It is dishonest because it fails to recognise the scale of the crisis. It is not simply a financial predicament which can be resolved by making cuts. It is a political crisis of an unprecedented scale. The cuts which are being proposed will not be the end of the matter, they will be the beginning of a political onslaught which will continue for the next four years and beyond. The Tories are currently forcing through legislation which comprises a total political, economic and social package aimed directly at the Labour Party's power base in the inner cities. The expenditure cuts are the first stage of this package, and they will be followed by the wholesale privatisation of Council services, the self-financing of Council property, the removal of rent controls in the private sector, the sale of Council estates and land, the establishment of enterprise zones and other centrally controlled initiatives, the complete restructuring of public transport, health and education, the emasculation of trade unions and their membership. This is the scale of the current crisis. And for the Labour Group leadership to ignore this, is not only dishonest, but totally unrealistic.

It is unrealistic because their strategy pretends that the current series of cuts will be enough to both satisfy the Tories and to allow Labour to reassert its authority within Camden. Their strategy will do nothing of the sort. It will turn both the community and the workforce against Labour. It will undermine the support that exists for the Party, and it will make it virtually impossible to mount any serious resistance in the future. In the meantime, the Tories will be demanding even more cuts and even greater economies in both social provision and political control.

Our surrender at this stage of the struggle simply sets a political precedent for the coming four years. In political terms we cannot afford ourselves this luxury, and in social and econmic terms, neither our community nor our workforce can bear the cost of this policy.

The 'books' will not be balanced by the cuts that are being proposed. Next March further cuts will be demanded, the following year, more cuts, and so on. 'Front-line services' are already being cut and it will be practically impossible for the Labour Group to protect them, especially in the context of privatisation and self-financing. 'Office', and the need to remain in power will simply become an excuse for carrying out every cut and demand that the Tories make. It is the complete absence of a political strategy which makes it impossible for us to support the financial strategy that is being proposed by the Group leadership. 'There is no alternative' is being cited as an excuse for not even considering alternatives, and we believe that there is every alternative to the measures and the programme that is being put forward by the Group leadership.

A POLITICAL STRATEGY

Since the General Election we have spoken at dozens of meetings across the length and breadth of the borough. The common component to these meetings has been a willingness on the part of both the workforce and the community to resist the cuts that are being proposed. Campaigns have already been generated within the voluntary sector, within the trade unions, women's groups, black organisations, single-issue groups, the tenants' and community organisations. It is our responsibility as socialists to align ourselves with these campaigns, to bring together these arenas of resistance, and to begin to develop a cohesive and coherent strategy of resistance.

Central to this strategy is the role of the trade unions, and their relationship to the cuts that are currently tabled and the additional measures that are being proposed. We believe that it is both feasible and essential that the workers in Camden should be supported and encouraged at every opportunity, not merely in the immediate sense of defending themselves against the Labour Group's strategy, but in the medium and longer term, in developing policies which will prevent either the Labour Group or the Tory Government imposing their will on the jobs, wages and conditions of our workforce.

The community and their organisations have already shown themselves willing to support such a strategy and to align themselves with those who are in the immediate vanguard of reistance. It is our duty as socialists to join with this movement and to use all the means at our disposal to ensure that the campaign is as broad-based and representative as possible. Our individual positions as Councillors are secondary to these objectives, and it is absurd for the Group to believe that they can manage the crisis in such a way as to protect those who will be at the receiving end of the cuts and the future legislation.

We have never advocated resignation, and we have never advocated handing over control to the Tories, but neither are we prepared to advocate capitulation and surrender. The control exercised by the Group leadership at present is at best marginal and, at worst, counter-productive, and we believe that it is crucial to exercise control on the basis of socialist principles rather than the current policy of control on the basis of remaining in office whatever the political, social, and economic cost.

RESISTANCE

Our primary objective must be to bring together everyone in Camden who is opposed to the cuts and the proposed legislation. We must encourage the development of campaigns across an entire spectrum of the labour movement including the trade unions, women's groups, lesbian and gay organisations, tenants associations, community groups, black organisations and other political parties.

The immediate demand must be an end to the cuts and the defence of jobs and services in Camden. The Labour Group is both unable and unwilling to take on this role and we must recognise this - at no point in any of the documents emanating from the leadership has there been any indication that they are prepared to resist anything that the Tories are proposing. It is therefore our responsibility to take on this task, aligning ourselves against central government and against those in the Labour Party who are prepared to do the Tories' dirty work.

In addition to this, we must build links across the boroughs, supporting parallel campaigns and initiatives, aiming to create a forum whereby all those who are at the forefront of resistance can develop a common strategy of resistance.

We recognise that the process of resistance will continue as long as the Tories remain in power, but it is this recognition that gives us the basis of a political strategy and also the base of support that is needed to develop that strategy. The question that is paramount, both in the immediate and the longer term, is which side are you on?

As far as we are concerned, there can only be one answer to that question.

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