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# BRIEFING

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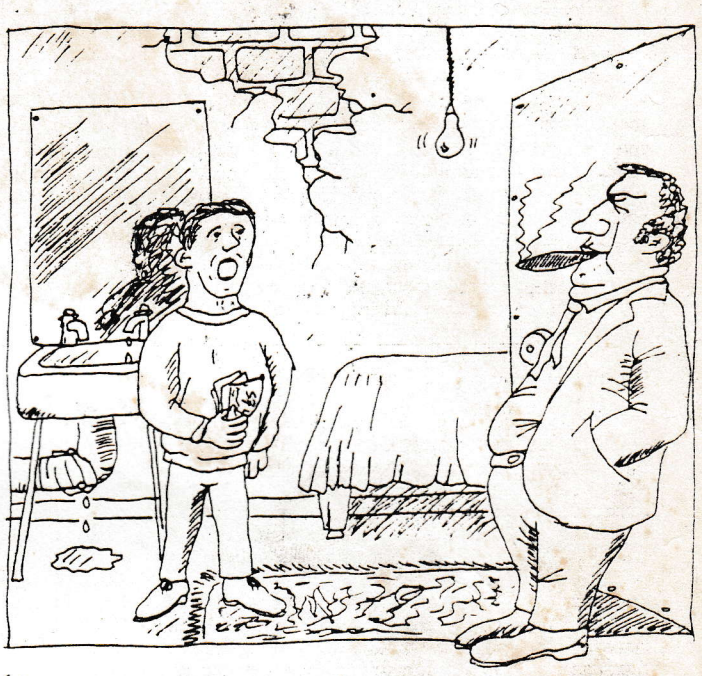
## UNFAIR RENTS !

By Dave Parks, Exeter CLP

Rents in Exeter being charged by private landlords are unacceptably high, especially when one remembers about the relatively low house prices in Exeter. They have been rising rapidly over the last few years and are in many cases now at least double an acceptable rent. This situation cannot be tolerated by socialists and action can and must be taken on this issue. There is a facility for both individual tenants and the Council to get a legal maximum rent or "fair rent" set on properties. The Council should use this facility and at the same time make sure that tenants whose cases are not taken up by the Council have full knowledge of their rights and the procedure for protecting their interests.

A "fair rent" is determined by the Rent Officer who acts independently of local and central government. It is determined on the basis of the "age, character, locality and state of repair of a dwelling" and the quantity and quality of any furniture provided whilst disregarding the value due to any local shortage of similar accommodation. It is assumed also that a landlord will make a "reasonable" profit charging a fair rent. Any tenant (or landlord) can ask for a fair rent to be "registered" by the Rent Officer. Such a process should take less than two months and once the fair rent has been registered it is binding, even if there is a change of tenant, for two years after which the landlord may ask for a new fair rent to be registered. The Local Council may also ask the Rent Officer to consider the rent being paid by any tenant and if s/he decides that the rent is too high s/he will determine a fair rent.

There was a case recently in Exeter where the tenants of a five-bedroomed house asked for a fair rent to be registered. The rent went down from £25 a week per room to £10.66 a week per room. This is a reduction of about £3700 a year for the house. This case shows the excessive profits being made by the landlord and how drastically the setting of a fair rent can improve the living standards of those in low paid jobs. It also shows that, assuming that all the occupants of the house are in receipt of rent rebate or allowance, the Government via the Council is wasting between £2000 and £3000 a year in cases like this if the Council fails to ask the Rent Officer to set a fair rent. Rich landlords are also effectively being given between £2000 and £3000 a year via the Council and the tenant. This kind of simultaneous exploitation of tenants and free handouts cannot be tolerated by Socialists. Besides the Tories are permanently complaining of having to "waste" money on welfare, hospitals etc., so surely even they cannot justify free handouts to landlords. Socialists must demand that only reasonable rents are charged. It is total hypocrisy for the Government to cut benefits and rebates to the low paid and unemployed, as the Fowler Social Security Green Paper recommends, when they are giving huge handouts to rich landlords. This shows how the Government defends the class interests of the rich.



'BUT I CAN'T AFFORD £25·00 A WEEK RENT - I ONLY EARN £60·00.'

'DON'T WORRY, I BELIEVE THE COUNCIL WILL HELP ME... ER, I MEAN YOU!'

It may be asked: why should the Council ask for fair rents on behalf of dissatisfied tenants? A number of points should be made on this. Firstly, although in theory landlords "agree" a rent with their tenants, it is fairly obvious that in cases where accommodation is in short supply, prospective tenants are in no position to barter. Either you accept the high rent or remain/become homeless. Secondly, many tenants, having only other high rents to compare their rents with don't realise that they are being ripped off. Thirdly, even if they do realise that they are being ripped off, they often don't know of the existence of the fair rent procedures. Fourthly, they wrongly believe that if they do ask for a fair rent to be set they will be evicted. Fifthly, since the Tory Housing Act 1980 many tenants have Protected Shorthold Tenancies for the period of one year; in that case the landlord can evict them at the end of that period.

Generally, most tenants are either too unaware of their rights or do not have proper security of tenure (in the case of short-hold tenants) or just do not want to upset their good relations with landlords by having a fair rent set. It is quite common for landlords to threaten eviction or to withhold services or even to intimidate using physical violence when tenants ask for a fair rent to be set.

(contd. over)

# Editorial

The publication of this, the October Briefing, coincides with the start of both the political season and the academic year. Devon Labour Briefing has been in existence since July 1984 and has consistently stressed the need for a socialist analysis of British politics to be backed up with action. This Briefing in particular calls for action on a wide range of issues where it is not enough just to pass resolutions and then sit back.

Briefing has established itself as a forum for socialist debate and has campaigned tirelessly for issues which the Labour Party has taken up in word but not in deed. In fact, great pressure, in the form of articles and resolutions, has had to be put on Exeter Labour Party even to get socialist issues debated.

The resolutions passed by Exeter City Council regarding the Nuclear Free Zone and Anti Apartheid issues are two cases where practical measures must now replace empty rhetoric, as our articles clearly demonstrate. Similarly, the problem of high rents being subsidised by the government can only be solved by the Council using its' power to limit extortionate rents and make tennants aware of their rights.

Finally, Devon Labour Briefing appeals to students who are not yet active in local politics to support this publication and add their weight to the struggle for socialism. The forthcoming Day School promises to provide a great opportunity to widen the debates covered by Briefing in the South West and should add up to an exciting meeting of the theoretical and the practical. A socialist analysis of today's problems must be presented at every possible opportunity by campaigning inside the Labour Party and forging links between the Labour Party and other progressive groups. Only a socialist transformation can halt the capitalist cisis. We must come to terms with the real nature of capitalist exploitation and be prepared to ditch any notions of reform and comprimise in favour of real socialist policies.

## unfair rents CONTINUED

What can Exeter City Council do? It could refer all new cases received by the Rebate Department of rents over a certain limit, say £20, to the Rent Officer and publicly announce this so as to discourage rents over this limit. It could randomly select a fraction of claims over a certain lower limit. It could occasionally include a guide to tenants rights in cheques or correspondence sent out to claimants of rebates and allowances.

If such a campaign against high rents were to put too much additional work on the Council then perhaps it should employ more staff. If the Council can afford £20,000 for a new mayoral car then surely it can afford one or two more staff in the rebate department. I'm sure this would be welcomed by claimants in Exeter. If the Council cannot afford this then it should demand more money from central government for staff, pointing out that this will save the government money overall. It would only take 4 or 5 houses such as the one mentioned earlier to cover the cost of one extra employee.

Could a campaign affect the quantity and quality of rented accommodation? I think that landlords will continue to make large profits on rented housing and so the quantity and quality of accommodation would not significantly decrease.

# Is Exeter a Nuclear Free Zone ?

Following the passing of a resolution by Exeter City Council concerning the stationing of nuclear weapons in Exeter, there has been much debate on the question of whether Exeter can be regarded as a Nuclear Free Zone or not. Some recent letters from Exeter councillors have shed more light on this debate.

The basic argument for regarding Exeter as an NFZ is that the resolution passed (see below) was based on part of the Manchester model resolution. Therefore, if Manchester is an NFZ, then so is Exeter. On this the case is rested. This argument, so far as it goes, makes logical sense. But it runs into difficulties if we examine the differences between Manchester and Exeter.

Firstly, Exeter has not been publicly declared an NFZ. On this both Labour and Liberal councillors agree. In a letter to Ray Vail, Labour councillor Phil Bialyk writes:

'Exeter has not, as yet, been declared a'Nuclear Free Zone' however a resolution was passed at the Council Meeting held on 16 October 1984 which read as follows:-

"That this Council notes the refusal of the Ministry of Defence to confirm or deny that Nuclear Weapons are to be stored at the Royal Navy Supply Depot at Countess Wear, and calls upon H.M. Government to refrain from permitting the positioning or manufacture of Nuclear Weapons of any kind within the boundaries of our City in peacetime and that this Council further declares that it will not make available for Civil Defence training for Nuclear War any City Council employee who objects to this on the grounds of conscience".'

Liberal councillor Mark Macnair, writing to Roy Anderson, goes further:

'If Mr. Churchward or yourself believes that Exeter has been declared a Nuclear Free Zone, then I am afraid you have been misled. We passed a motion requesting HMG not to store Nuclear weapons in Exeter, and exempting Council employees from civil defence training if they conscientiously objected. This modest motion is a far cry from a NFZ, and should not be interpreted as such.'

Secondly, Manchester has produced leaflets, posters, T-shirts, postcards, signposts, exhibitions, and renamed streets etc. explaining issues such as the Civil Defence confidence trick and the nonsense of Nuclear Deterrence. Exeter has not done this. In other words, the difference between Manchester and Exeter is that the people of Manchester know that the resolution has been passed, the people of Exeter do not.

The passing of resolutions is meaningless unless acted upon. If only coucillors and a few CND activists have knowledge of this resolution then it is not worth the paper it is written on. Until such time as the people of Exeter are made fully aware of NFZ issues, Exeter cannot be regarded, in any practical sense, as a NFZ.

Neil Todd,
Exeter CLP

# PEANUTS ENVY?

It is astonishing that Exeter GMC has refused to request the Labour Club to remove sexist material from behind the bar. The alleged reason for this is that the Labour Club is independent of the Labour Party and that the GMC should not interfere with precisely the thing which encourages people to come to the Club at all. If this is true then it reflects a sad state of attitudes in Exeter CLP.

It is already the policy of both the CLP and the Club Committee not to use sexist material behind the bar for sale or display. If only they would stick to this policy. It is anomolous for the Club to sell peanuts which gradually reveal a woman's body whilst the Party campaigns for Women's Rights and Women's votes. It is ridiculous nowadays to expect people not to be offended by such material and not to be discouraged from coming to the bar. It is unfortunate that the Labour Party's policy on Women cannot be given effective expression in one of the most public places of the Party in Exeter by the exclusion of this material. Moreover its display only perpetuates the very sexist attitudes the Labour Party is supposed to be campaigning against. Bulldozing a motion requesting its removal from the bar out of the GMC will not stop the campaign to get rid of it.

