

# Interview: lessons of the anti-poll tax movement



The initial slogan of the campaign was 'don't collect, don't pay'.

photo Socialist Party

In 1989 the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher introduced the hated poll tax, first in Scotland to be followed one year later in England and Wales.

After her re-election in 1987 Thatcher confidently declared that the poll tax was to be the 'flagship' of her government. In fact, it turned out to be her Titanic as it collided with the formidable obstacle of working class resistance, with Militant supporters (the forerunner of the Socialist Party) playing a leading role in the struggle.

As soon as Thatcher announced the imposition of the tax, the Militant newspaper denounced it as a general onslaught on the working class, and members of Militant in Scotland and in Britain as a whole began immediately to organise against it. Opposition was organised through anti-poll tax unions that linked up in the All-Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federation.

With mass non-payment by millions of people, huge demonstrations, mass campaigning and resistance, the tax became unworkable. The Tory party was forced to ditch Thatcher, being an electoral liability, in November 1990 and the tax was unceremoniously dumped and replaced by the council tax in 1993.

STEVE SCORE was involved in the anti-poll tax union in Leicester. Here he talks to Sarah Wrack about how the campaign was organised and what we can learn from the struggle.

## What were the first steps for launching the campaign locally?

We had to produce material explaining what the poll tax was, what it would mean for people and what was behind it.

We used facts and figures to explain that a rich person would pay the same as a poor person and that it was also an attack on local government services and part of a process of making cuts.

We organised meetings to discuss the issue. Often they were initiated by Labour Party Young Socialists branches and even Labour Party branches in some cases, but with a view to setting up an anti-poll tax union in the area.

We organised a meeting in Loughborough that nine people came to and the people who came were disappointed in the turnout. But we said to them, "why not form the steering committee and organise another public meeting in a month's time?"

They did that and, next time, on our way to the community centre we thought, 'there's cars and people everywhere, there must be some event going on'. And when we got there we realised it was us! 600 people turned up to an incredibly militant meeting.

There were Tories who got up in the meeting and accused us of be-

ing Marxists and members of the Militant but people in the audience were getting up to say "we don't care what they are, we support what they're saying". So that shows how quickly things can change.

## The poll tax affected a lot more than just one group of workers. What effect did that have and how did it change the tactics you had to use?

We initially had a slogan of 'don't collect, don't pay'. Obviously we were calling on Labour councils not to collect the poll tax - which they ignored.

We also raised the idea in the unions of workers not collecting the tax. But the problem was that the leadership of those unions weren't willing to back action like that so the workers weren't confident.

So the key task then became to convince the broad mass of people that they could do something and that was to not pay. And that was very important because the idea that everyone could take that same action together is what gave people the confidence that they could do it.

All the time though we tried to link the community campaign to an industrial one too so we didn't just have anti-poll tax unions on every estate, we had them in workplaces as well.

## What do you think was shown by the role of the Labour Party at the time?

I think it was a very interesting time because at the beginning of the campaign you had left-wing Labour Party branches who supported non-payment - as amazing as it might seem today. In Leicester, we stood a candidate for the Labour Party on a 'don't pay' platform. We got a 70% swing to Labour and won the council seat.

But within a year or so things had changed completely because the Labour Party leadership refused to back what they called an illegal campaign. And of course on the council level, Labour councils started to implement the poll tax which meant sending the bailiffs in, taking people to court and threatening them with jail.

So amongst the best anti-poll tax activists, the idea that the Labour Party was in any way on their side was completely smashed. And people looked outside the Labour Party for a political alternative.

## Why do you think it was Militant that was able to play a leading role in the campaign?

I think it comes down to having a socialist perspective and a clear idea of strategy and tactics and also rooting what we do in the consciousness

of workers. We were clear that it was necessary to break the law - it was 'better to break the law than break the poor'.

So we weren't tied to the idea that we had to stay within the law as some groups were but we also understood you needed mass action. Some groups advocated a few celebrities not paying the poll tax as if that would win, whereas we knew we needed a mass movement to do it.

And also because we understood how working class people were thinking about things. There were groups who said it didn't matter about not paying the poll tax. They just put forward abstract ideas like 'call a general strike'. We would have been in favour of a general strike but that wasn't going to happen then.

Whereas we did know that millions of people were angry, wouldn't be able to pay the poll tax and that that mood needed to be organised.

## What do you think were the main lessons of the anti-poll tax movement for the anti-cuts campaigns

## springing up around the country today?

Well the number one lesson is that you can win - that a working-class movement can drive back the government and the ruling class. Thatcher was seen as the Iron Lady, the most determined leader of the ruling class, the person who'd taken on the miners and beaten them.

So at that stage you could say there would be a lot of people thinking 'what can we do, how can we beat the government, how can we beat the Tories?' Yet a mass movement resulted not only in the removal of the poll tax but the removal of Margaret Thatcher.

The other lesson is that you need a clear idea of your strategy and your tactics. You need to organise in a detailed way to take the struggle forward at each stage and organise properly. So we're raising now that we need a strategy that takes the unions forward but also linking to local communities and the students and young people as well to have the biggest involvement of people we can get to win.

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