

Liverpool 1983-87

The council that fought Thatcher

THE LABOUR council leaders proposing the cuts budget in Liverpool council can feel a spectre haunting them. With a socialist leadership, a previous Labour council in the city, from 1983 to 1987, had stood up to a Tory government and won extra money from Margaret Thatcher's axe-wielding cabinet. **Tony Mulhearn**, a leading member of the Liverpool 47, the councillors who took this heroic stand, compares the struggle and lasting gains of that council with the betrayal and cuts offered by Labour today.

AFTER 20 years of slashing jobs, of privatising and cutting services, Liverpool's ruling parties - New Labour and the Liberal Democrats, with almost identical free-market policies, have decided to inflict a catastrophe on the local authority workforce. 1,500 will lose their jobs, the already high number of families without a wage-earner will grow. Despite Labour council leader Joe Anderson's pledge to protect the poor, public services will suffer and already are suffering.

Labour is the majority party but a key component of Anderson's strategy to deal with the cuts is to form an alliance with the arch-proponents of privatisation and cuts, the Lib Dems. In 1987 the House of Lords backed Thatcher's district auditor's decision to remove the 47 fighting Liverpool Labour councillors from office. Since then, the city council's workforce has been reduced from 30,000 to fewer than 10,000.

The spectacle of a Labour leader going into an alliance with the local Lib Dems, a party which is part of a national coalition with the millionaire Tory cabinet, shows catastrophic abdication of leadership by a Labour party which was elected by the city's working families to protect them from the Tory onslaught.

Council leader Joe Anderson detailed how the council intends to make £91 million of savings over the coming year. It aims to cut half its senior management posts, saving £4.5 million, and to reduce budg-

ets for children's services and adult social care. It 'hopes' it can reduce predicted job losses from 1,500 to about 1,200. Anderson claimed the council had tried to protect front-line services but the scale of the cuts meant that 'real pain' would be felt in some communities.

Funding for voluntary groups has been cut by £18 million, almost 50%. The council says savings in this area were necessary to protect 'life and death' essential services to the most vulnerable. 'There is no alternative' claims the Labour leader.

But there is always an alternative to supine capitulation and that is to fight - to form a coalition with the organised labour movement and community organisations, instead of a coalition with the capitalist parties and their allies. This fighting policy, following the example of the Liverpool 47 councillors, would show Cameron's Tories they have a battle on their hands.

In 1983, the incoming Labour council inherited a catastrophic financial situation. The outgoing Liberal-Tory alliance deliberately underspent throughout the 1970s to try to maintain electoral support; in one year they actually cut household rates.

They wooed their natural Tory-voting base by increasing rents, terminating the housebuilding programme and shedding thousands of jobs, plus making cuts in other sectors. Liberal council leader Trevor Jones could claim he presided over



One of the many mass demos in support of the council.

photo the Socialist

the lowest rate increases in Liverpool's history and was knighted by Thatcher for services rendered.

An angry Liverpool working class kicked out this Liberal-Tory alliance and returned Labour to power in 1983 on a clear, fighting socialist programme. The brave 47 Liverpool Labour councillors refused to cut jobs and services and defied Thatcher, mobilising support from the council workforce and from local people.

We won an extra £60 million from the government in 1984 and gained six new nurseries, and five colleges. Over 5,000 council houses were built. Time has not diminished the achievements of the 47, nor undermined the importance of the struggle. The record of the 47 remains stubbornly intact.

Today Joe Anderson, however, tells council workers that the 47 were responsible for Labour's decline in the city. That is a complete falsehood. The 47 received magnificent support from the council workforce and the wider trade union movement and at the ballot box. If some leadership was shown in this present crisis then the council could win that support again.

Anderson and Co say: 'We have no choice.' But there is a choice. The

mass movement built by the 47 did not drop from the sky. It was developed with the Liverpool District Labour Party (DLP) hammering out a clear policy which included: opposition to cuts, no rent increases, cancelling redundancies, creating jobs, expanding social services, campaigning to retrieve the millions which the Thatcher government had cut from the city's grants, and linking this programme to the need for a socialist society.

Democracy

THIS DREW the local authority trade unions, the Labour Party Young Socialists, the women's organisations and others into the decision-making process through the DLP. At that time the DLP democratically determined council policy and Labour councillors were constitutionally bound to carry it out!

A 'trade union and labour movement organising committee' was created, representing all sections of the working class with the 47 providing the cutting edge. This committee organised the mass rallies and demonstrations which were so important in the Liverpool campaign. This body also participated in the electoral campaign which delivered the

highest Labour votes since 1945.

There were many high points of the campaign: one was on 7 March 1985, when a mini-general strike involving 30,000 council workers and 10,000 dockers, plus other sections of workers took place with a demonstration of some 50,000 marching through Liverpool opposing the Thatcher government's policies.

That mass campaign was born out of the social conditions in Liverpool, which had seen 65% of its industrial base collapse in the decade before the 47 were elected. Mass participation in the movement was also the antidote to the hostile forces of capitalism: the Murdoch/Maxwell Press, ITV and the BBC, the local press, the pulpit, with Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock and the national trade union bureaucrats underpinning the establishment's crazed campaign against the 47.

Joe Anderson's recent 'demonstration' against the cuts may confuse sections of the population for a while and temporarily deflect hostility away from him and his allies. But as the cuts bite there will be greater focus on Labour's role locally, with a corresponding call for a fighting leadership basing themselves on the policy, programme and campaigning activity of the 47.

A strategy to beat the cuts

IN AN open letter last December, a group of the 47 suggested to Liverpool's present-day Labour leader Joe Anderson and his allies that they follow the example of the 1983-87 Militant-inspired council and set a 'needs budget'. This would protect temporarily council workers' jobs and services provided or supported by the council.

Joe Anderson's response was to tell us to live in 'the real world' and accept that nothing could be done other than for him to carry out the cuts while crying bucketfuls of tears! But our letter raised important questions such as a strategy to oppose the Con-Dem onslaught.

"The first step should be to use the council's budget reserve, reported in the Liverpool Echo as £80 million, to maintain current funding levels in areas which the Con-Dem alliance is cutting. This would buy time for more decisive measures to defeat the cuts.

"Then, as we did in 1983-87, you should work out how much is required to fund existing council services in 2011 and pass a budget in line with inflation. This would no doubt produce a shortfall in the council's income.

"The amount of the shortfall

could be identified, say £50 million. A campaign could then be launched to oppose the cuts with the specific demand that £50 million be restored to Liverpool city council as a means of defending jobs and services.

"You could call for all local authorities to embrace the same strategy and for support from the local authority trade unions and the wider labour movement, in concert with community organisations which are planning to resist any cuts in their own localities.

"If Liverpool makes a courageous stand, this could act as a beacon to other local authorities and campaigning organisations to join the campaign. If a number of the main local authorities adopted this strategy of refusing to cut jobs and services to compensate for Tory cuts, backed up by a campaign of mass demonstrations and industrial action, the Tories would be compelled to retreat.

"We call on the Labour group to totally reject the cuts and to join, not with the Lib Dems, but with the trade union and labour movement in defending the mass of Liverpool's working people."

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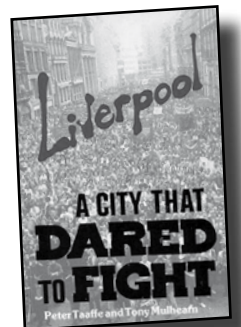
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