

Government plans are an attack on council tenants

AS A result of plans set out by the government's housing minister Grant Shapps, new social housing tenants would be offered tenancies with no long term security.

Paul Kershaw

Instead of being offered the prospect of a stable home, people will be offered tenancies that could be as short as two years, starting in 2011. There will be checks on their circumstances and, if their income moves too far from the breadline, they (and any children) will be forced to move out.

Presumably the alternative is supposed to be the private rented sector, which has even less security of tenure; or they could try to get a mortgage if they have a secure job and have saved, at least, a 10% deposit.

Under the coalition plans councils and housing associations will be given the option of charging much higher rents, as much as 80% of the market level. In the same week it emerged that council tenants face a 6.8% rent increase. (This figure is a government guideline. Councils could charge a higher rent).

The government disingenuously claims that increasing social housing rents will generate resources for new housing. But increasing rents will increase the amount of housing benefit claimed as well as increasing rent arrears and evictions. More homelessness will obviously increase housing waiting lists.

The National Housing Federation (NHF) says that in poorer low rent areas the new higher ("afford-

able" in Con-Dem speak) rents will still not be high enough to fund new building. In high rent areas, the rents would be so exorbitant that most tenants would be pushed back onto housing benefit.

The NHF calculates that tenants living in higher value areas, such as the London boroughs of Camden, Hackney and Haringey, would have to earn £54,000 a year "before they could get off housing benefit and be in a position where they could keep the bulk of their additional salary and find themselves better off in work". How many people currently on waiting lists will be able to afford this?

The housing charity Shelter commented that it begins to look like a deliberate attack on the poor and vulnerable.

Housing cuts

THE BOSS of First Choice Homes in Oldham commented: "The issue is people being able to pay. It is all very well as landlords thinking the rise will help our businesses, but will people be able to pay it? We'll try to collect it but I expect arrears to rise."

This happens at the same time as: 63% cuts in funding for house building, cuts in housing benefit and cuts in funding for legal advice for people with housing problems. There are five million on council waiting

- Mortgage lending is at a ten year low. The average UK house price has increased 273% since 1959 in real terms.
- In 2009 the total number of private and social housing amounted to 156,816 (only 39,233 units were social housing), 63% less than the 425,800 houses built in 1968.



Social housing tenants will lose long-term security. photo Paul Mattsson

lists and the figure is rising.

When New Labour flirted with attacking security of tenure for council tenants Liberal Democrat MPs opposed the idea. The Tory manifesto promised to "respect the tenures and rents of social housing tenants."

Trade unions and anti-cuts campaigns must demand that:

- Social landlords should pledge not to evict tenants hit by these changes
- Landlords should pledge not to use the new insecure tenancies
- Housing Associations should pledge not to use the new higher rents, and local authorities should pressure associations to stick to this through all powers available to them (partnering arrangements, planning powers, etc.)
- There should be a massive council house-building programme.

Profiting from the most vulnerable

FRAIL OLD people living in homes run by Southern Cross Healthcare (SCH), Britain's biggest provider of private nursing homes for old people, pay £473 a month on average for the privilege, some pay £2,000. But many SCH homes are substandard and often dangerous - industry watchdog CQC has stuck a 'zero' rating on 19 of them.

Roger Shives

Property dealings by SCH's greedy former private equity owners left it with huge bills that it cannot pay. Trying to buy more and more nursing homes, and making millions for its directors, its owners could not repay expensive loans from other business sharks.

In 2008 its shares lost a quarter of their value. Labour, then in government, let private owners keep control of the nursing homes. Two years later their shares are even lower and the company, desperate to be profitable, spends less and less on the homes and the staff.

Why didn't Labour take these private nursing homes into public ownership when they first showed signs of collapsing? Privatisation of care services puts profit first



and leaves vulnerable people living in shocking conditions.

Why should there be a commercial market in 'care' for defenceless old people? Who runs these homes and decides on priorities for the aged? Southern Cross and other private care homes should be taken into public ownership, either within the NHS or as part of a well-financed local authority social services department. Defending public services is clearly a life or death issue.

Fighting cuts: A militant stance is what's needed

IAN PAGE, a former Socialist Party councillor in the south London borough of Lewisham wrote a letter (see below), which was printed in the Evening Standard, criticising the reported actions of Labour councillors from the borough who are attempting to wash their hands of any responsibility for cuts in services.

THE LABOUR councillor introducing last week's cuts package in Lewisham blamed an international crisis and the actions of the coalition government.

He didn't mention that the reductions were part of £60 million cuts agreed by a Labour council and mayor back in March under a Labour government.

Aside from high-profile cuts such as library closures, there are many others that will be invisible to the general public but devastating for those concerned: such as the closure of Opening Doors, a service for the long-term unemployed providing them with access to facilities to move them towards employment; cuts to adult social care, and the cancellation of project work to raise aspirations in areas of intergenerational unemployment. The most vulnerable, isolated people are in no position to organise and highlight their plight.

Councillors could use council reserves and "prudential borrowing" to buy time and build a mass campaign in order to bolster their demand for more money from central government. Through such methods Liverpool council successfully won £60 million back from the Thatcher government. When councillors refuse to do this, unions and the community should coordinate strike action and direct action to defend our services.

Ian Page,
former Socialist Party councillor,
Lewisham.

fastnews

Afghanistan war

SEVERAL THOUSAND protesters marched through central London on 20 November against the escalating war and continuing occupation of Afghanistan by Nato forces.

The demo coincided with a summit in Lisbon, Portugal, of the leaders of Nato's states as they grappled with an exit strategy for their 138,000 troops from war-torn Afghanistan. A war in which the Taliban insurgency is growing and civilian and Nato casualties are rising.

Britain's prime minister David Cameron set a deadline of withdrawing UK troops by 2015 and handing over control of security to Afghanistan's army and police. However, Cameron's sanguine comments contrasted with those of Nato's secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen who insisted that any withdrawal wouldn't be 'calendar based' but 'conditions based'.

Good news

TORY ENTERPRISE minister Lord Young has resigned from the government following the peer's 'you've never had it so good' gaffe. Notwithstanding today's 'great recession' the noble had mimicked the words of Tory prime minister Harold Macmillan, whose 1957 utterance coincided with the high water mark of the post-war capitalist upswing.

With one and a half million jobs being axed and services slashed as a result of the current government's £81 billion of cuts, the ludicrous suggestion from Young that a majority of people were enjoying the halcyon days of capitalism left Cameron with no choice but to let the former Thatcher minister go.

Peer pressure

ANOTHER 52 new peers have been appointed by the coalition government to the House of Lords. 85 new peers have been created since Cameron became PM. The majority of the new ermine-collared intake are Tory and Liberal peers, bringing the total number of state subsidised Lords to 800 - no cuts there then!

Along with the appointment of a number of celebrities, Tory ranks will be swollen by two party donors - Stanley Fink, who has given the party £1.9 million since 2003, and Bob Edmiston, the millionaire car importer who converted a £2 million loan into a donation four years ago.

Millionaire Sir Gulam Noon, who has given Labour more than £700,000 over the last decade, will join the opposition benches. Both Edmiston and Noon were questioned by police back in 2007 over possible 'cash for honours' charges.

Labour's Oona King, who lost her Bethnal Green and Bow parliamentary seat to anti-Iraq war candidate George Galloway in 2005, was also ennobled.

Get real Osborne

HOW DIVORCED from reality is it possible to be? Ask Tory chancellor George Osborne who wrote the following missive in 2006: "Ireland stands as a shining example of the art of the possible in long-term economic policymaking..." "They have freed their markets, developed the skills of their workforce, encouraged enterprise and innovation and created a dynamic economy. They have much to teach us, if only we are willing to learn." Quite.