

When organised mass action defeated the Tories

Liverpool city council's historic victory over the Thatcher government

"Two unlovely black eyes" declared the Daily Mail. It was condemning Thatcher's environment secretary Patrick Jenkin for his retreat over extra funding for Liverpool. It wrote: "The Trotskyites and others of the hard left who run Liverpool have had the best of the fight with him in their threat to defy the law on that city's overspending." That headline was just one of the reactions to

the Militant-led Liverpool city council's success in securing funding worth £60 million from the Thatcher government on 9 July 1984. Socialist Party member TONY MULHEARN, one of the leaders of that epic struggle and one of the 47 councillors, who were surcharged and disqualified from office in revenge for their humiliation of the Tories, writes.

The victory which secured the extra funding enabled the council to carry out its electoral programme. This included the building of 5,000 houses, opening six new sports centres, creating 2,000 jobs and refusing to carry out £10 million-worth of cuts. These cuts had been the legacy of the Liberal/Tory alliance which had ruled Liverpool for the previous 20 years, with a short interregnum of Labour rule.

This victory was particularly significant as, like now, it occurred at a time of national and global capitalist upheaval. An additional factor now is the mind-boggling revelations about the greedy bankers stuffing their pockets with gold.

The latest fat-cat payouts dwarf even those paid out last year: Barclays' Rich Ricci, for instance, picks up a tasty package worth £44 million, Bob Diamond picks up £27 million, and that loot is not the biggest.

Against these figures, the frame-up against the 47 by the district auditor, who charged them with losing the Liverpool rate payers £106,000 was truly grotesque.

The passage of time has not diminished the achievements of the 47, nor undermined the importance of the struggle. In spite of the distortions of establishment spokespersons, aided and abetted by the lies of right wing parliamentarians and trade union leaders, the record of the 47 remains stubbornly intact.

The Liverpool struggle had as its background the Thatcher government's dislike of local government or, more precisely, Thatcher's antipathy to locally provided public



Tony Mulhearn (right) photo Dave Sinclair

services, an outlook shared by the present millionaires' cabinet. The Tories' programme, when they were elected in 1979, included using the device of the block grant system which penalised local authorities that exceeded government's prescribed spending limits; for every £1 breach of expenditure, £2 would be lost in rate support grant.

Initially, all Labour-controlled local authorities had agreed to support a campaign against this policy. Amongst the leaders of this campaign, it is incredible to recall, were David Blunkett and Ken Livingstone.

So, the government's policies meant that in order to balance the books a local authority would either have to increase the rates, sometimes massively, to compensate for Tory cuts, or savagely cut back on jobs and services. Again history repeats itself, now on a more savage level.

The Liverpool District Labour Party's policy was to reject both of these options and instead to carry out its electoral promises. In the elections of 1983 a key component of the party's electoral programme was "No rate or rent increases to compensate for Tory cuts."

The massive financial crisis which the 47 inherited was seen as a reason for the implementation of the electoral programme rather than, as is usually the case in British politics, a reason to retreat.

But the victory was not achieved merely by slick negotiation between the councillors and Patrick Jenkin. He was conscious of the magnificent electoral support, as well as the physical support, shown by the great demonstrations that marched through the city in support of the council's policies.

The demonstration on budget day in March 1984, when a one-day strike took place, was supported by 30,000 local authority workers. 50,000 marched through the city in support of the council's proposed deficit budget.

The support for the council was based on concrete changes, for the better, to people's lives. Moreover, the spin-off effect of the city's housing programme on employment had been publicly recognised by building companies who are not usually friends of Labour. In the three years from April 1983 to May 1985 it was estimated that 6,489 jobs had been generated in the private sector as a result of the house-building programme.

Also the Liverpool 47 attracted the highest Labour vote in history. Higher than any election since the war, even though the population of the city had declined from 700,000 in 1945 to 460,000 in 1983. While the turnout for local elections in previous years had ranged from 11% to 20%, the turnout between 1983 and 1987 was 45% to 55%. A clear mes-

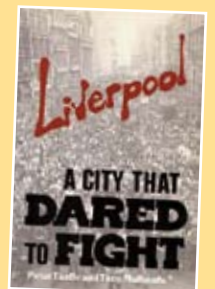
sage that if policies which correspond to the needs and aspirations of the working class are implemented, then the support will be forthcoming.

In spite of its unparalleled record of achievement, the power of the state eventually prevailed. Thatcher's district auditor, supported by the House of Lords, removed the 47 from office, cheered on by the Labour leaders. Neil Kinnock, then Labour leader, and his lieutenant, witchfinder general Peter Kilfoyle, finished the job on behalf of the capitalist state by expelling the majority of the 47 from the Labour Party.

Since then many gallons of ink and newsprint, and speeches by right-wing charlatans have attempted to denigrate the 47's period of office. But the record has been written in concrete and stands as a monument to the socialist achievements of the Liverpool city council of 1983-87.

Liverpool A City that Dared to Fight

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Mass non-payment - how the poll tax was beaten

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The campaign against Thatcher's hated poll tax is an example of how a mass movement can defeat a government. The 18 million people who defied the law and refused to pay the tax, organised through the Anti-Poll Tax Federation, forced the Tories to scrap it and ended Margaret Thatcher's career as prime minister.

The campaign is also an example of the role that can be played by socialists in putting forward a strategy and tactics to win.

The poll tax was a standard charge on rich and poor alike and was levied on each individual over the age of 18, including the unemployed, students and those with no personal income at all, who had been exempt from the poll tax's precursors, the rates. In fact a rich person living in a rural area could end up paying far less than a poor family in a city.

Led by Militant, forerunner of the Socialist Party, mass non-payment was built by community based anti-poll tax unions in cities, towns and

villages across the country. These were linked up nationally into the Anti-Poll Tax Federation.

Militant predicted the anger the tax would cause, and saw the huge potential to build a mass movement. The trade union leaders and the Labour Party leadership opposed the tax verbally, but did nothing to fight it, actively opposing the non-payment campaign. Labour councils ultimately went the whole way and sent bailiffs into working-class people's homes to impound their property and jailed people for not being able to pay.

The tax was introduced in Scotland a year earlier than in England and Wales; perhaps because the Tories had so little support there that they felt free to experiment! But it ignited the anger of Scottish workers, and the method of mass non-payment was tested out.

Militant supporters had to argue against those who said mass non-payment wouldn't work, or would only get working class people in debt. Some advocated non-payment only for a few prominent individuals who 'could afford it'.

On the contrary, only a mass movement would work. In fact mil-



Mass non-payment defeated the poll tax photo S.Gardiner

lions would not be able to afford it and we planned to unite the 'can't payers' with the 'won't payers'. That way an organised campaign could defend people.

Mass demonstrations developed around the rate-setting council meetings. On 31 March 1990, the day before the poll tax was introduced in England and Wales, massive demonstrations were held simultaneously in London and Glasgow involving

a quarter of a million people. When the London demonstration reached Trafalgar Square, police actions provoked a big battle which became known as the 'poll tax riots'.

Some claim it was these big demos which beat the poll tax. They were important, but it was organised mass non-payment which was the real reason for its demise. We kept the confidence of the movement up by discussing and answering every

question, in meetings and in millions of leaflets.

We clogged up the courts by mobilising non-payers to attend their hearings and assisted people by asking questions in court. Court rooms were unable to cope.

We mobilised to stop the bailiffs from seizing property. We organised to stop poll tax jailings - the ultimate sanction.

Hundreds were sent to jail, including many Militant supporters. Terry Fields, a Liverpool MP and Militant member, was sent down for standing in solidarity with his constituents. However, the number of jailings, compared to the millions who refused to pay, was far fewer than would have been if there was no organised campaign.

The government announced in March 1991 that they would be scrapping the tax by 1993. We continued to support people and campaigned for the writing off of the debts. Many were actually secretly dropped by councils at a later date.

This movement showed that working class people can win battles. It also showed the critical role that a party with the right ideas can play in the struggle.