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National Claimants Federation

The Federation of Claimants Unions and Unwaged Organisations

c/o Swindon Unemployed Movement, 37a Regent Street, Swindon, Wilts.

An open letter to everyone in Anti Poll Tax Organisations

Dear Friends

October 1991

As a national network of unwaged/unemployed people, we have been fighting for 20 years against attacks being made on claimants - benefit cuts, DSS harassment, snoopers, Actively Seeking Work rules and so on. At our recent conferences the poll tax has dominated our discussions, and we have resolved to air some of our views.

Since our conference in 1987 we have called for and supported mass non-payment, and community based self-organised campaigns. This is now a reality and we salute the inspiring efforts of the anti poll tax movement. The strength of the non-payment movement has forced the government to announce the abolition of the poll tax. This is a great victory. But the poll tax is supposed to stagger on until 1993 - and so our struggle must continue to win an amnesty for all non-payers and all poll tax prisoners.

It's important to realise that the poll tax is not only aimed at making the rich richer, and putting the burden of payment onto the majority. The Tories' objective is to concentrate more power into the hands of central government. They want to force Councils to slash local services, institute privatisation and make massive redundancies in the Council Workforce. Most community provision would be done away with and people would be isolated individuals only having access to the services they could afford to pay for. The Tories' new Council Tax still has this aim.

Claimants' Experience

For claimants and everyone on low incomes the poll tax is not a new problem, but an extra burden, the last straw. Every day we face bills - gas, electric, water, rent, till recently rates (also unfair), and the threat of debt in general. Some go unpaid - late payment, and non-payment where possible, is the norm for millions of people - and we may be confronted with 'reminders', threats, cut-offs, court cases, evictions and bailiffs. Unwaged parents, usually women, especially work hard to keep households together. All working class people can face these problems, including those in jobs (eg mortgage repossession).

Claimants Fighting Back

Our activity in our Claimants Unions and other unwaged groups has many parallels with the anti poll tax movement. The mass refusal to pay poll tax is not the first **Can't Pay**

Won't Pay campaign we have been involved in.

We have opposed gas and electricity cut-offs, fought for free or reduced travel fares, campaigned for free access to good quality local services and facilities (eg meals on wheels, adult education, libraries, nurseries, sports facilities, community centres including our own unemployed/unwaged centres). Many of these are now under threat.

In our organisation too, we mirror much of the experience of the anti poll tax movement. Through our autonomous groups - federated nationally - we aim to empower claimants by passing on information and encouraging self-organisation and resistance. While not being a mass movement or 'single issue' campaign, Claimants Groups have had significant influence over 2 decades.

Taking It Further -

For discussion in your anti poll tax group

The anti poll tax movement can help to re-establish solidarity and a fighting spirit in our communities for the benefit of us all.

The anti poll tax movement :

1) should have minimum demands : All poll tax debts must be written off. Any alternative proposals must - have a 100% rebate for those on low incomes - be strongly linked to ability to pay, with the rich paying substantially more - be acceptable to people - be based on local decision-making and accountability.

2) should seek to make the problems faced by million of us such as gas and electric bills and debts, rent arrears, mortgage arrears, and many other debts into collective not individual issues. We should spread the **CAN'T PAY WON'T PAY** principle. Through our networks of local groups and street co-ordinators we can spread resistance to debt enforcement against working class people. We can stop evictions and gas/electricity cut-offs. Bailiffs and sheriff officers should be driven out of all our communities.

This generalisation is already starting to happen. In London the Haringey Solidarity Network, backed by Tottenham Against the Poll Tax, is seeking to create a

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network based in the local community and local workplaces which can support positive initiatives and campaigns and local people's self-organisation and self-activity. In April 1991 the Lothian Anti Poll Tax Action network mobilised 20 people at short notice to blockade a Council house against a threatened eviction. In Edinburgh anti poll tax activists have resisted sheriff officer poindings for debts other than the poll tax. A north London house re-possession by bailiffs was prevented by a mass mobilisation through the local anti poll tax street network. Basic needs such as food, housing, clothing, public transport, etc. should be freely available to all, and we should build up our strength to enforce this right through a collective refusal to pay.

3) should actively participate in resistance to cuts in services. Community-based anti poll tax unions are in a good position to mobilise opposition to cuts including supporting strikes and occupations. Also, by doing this, the danger of the working class splitting into poll tax payers and poll tax non-payers - each blaming the other for Tory crimes - is lessened.

4) should participate in and initiate resistance to attacks on any particular section of our communities - this includes resistance to racist attacks, to violence against women, to anti-gay assaults, etc.. (The anti poll tax movement in Scotland played a major role in street mobilisations against the fascist British National Party in Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow in 1990.)

5) should support workers in their struggles for better wages and conditions, for more control over their work, against victimisation, redundancies and other employers' attacks.

6) should encourage workers to question the nature of their jobs, and to challenge and boycott intrinsically oppressive work. We could extend our call to boycott all poll tax work to areas such as the implementation of service cuts, cutting off people's gas and electricity, processing and carrying out evictions, spying on, harrasing and stopping benefits to claimants, and other socially non-useful work.

We Call For:

1) The anti poll tax groups to develop and generalise community organisation and solidarity and, through the already existing networks of local groups and street co-ordinators, defend residents facing evictions, fuel cut-offs, harrasment from bailliffs/sheriff officers, etc..

2) Claimants and unwaged people in the anti poll tax movement to consider joining or setting up Claimants Unions/Unwaged groups, to build a strong movement in a situation where all benefits are threatened, where unemployment is increasing, and where the dole queues are used to undermine workers' collective organisation and power.

Anti Poll Tax Information For Claimants

Leaflets on Claimants and the Poll Tax - the legal situation and how not to pay - from Lothian Claimants Union (leaflet covering Scottish law) and from Swindon Unemployed Movement (covering English law).

Hassle

Hassle, the news-sheet of the National Claimants Federation, covers news of claimants fight back against cheap labour schemes, Restart, snoopers and all the other government attacks. Available from Swindon Unemployed Movement (please send donation).

Claimants Conference

Unwaged people interested in becoming involved in the claimants' movement are invited to attend the next National Claimants Federation conference, in London on 7th December 1991. The venue is Crouch Hill Recreation Centre, Crouch Hill, London N19 - for details tel. 071 837 8078 (Barnsbury Claimants Union) or 081 802 9804 (Tottenham Claimants Union).

National Claimants Federation

Regional Contacts

South West - Plymouth Claimants Union, PO Box 21, Plymouth, Devon.

South Coast - Brighton Unemployed Union, Prior House, 6 Tilbury Place, Carlton Hill, Brighton. Tel. 0273 671213.

London and South East - Tottenham Claimants Union, c/o 72 West Green Rd., London N15. Tel. 081 802 9804.

North - Leeds Claimants Union, Hyde Park Priory, 158 Hyde Park Rd., Leeds. Tel. 0532 753160.

Scotland - Lothian Claimants Union, c/o EUWC, 103 Broughton St., Edinburgh. Tel. 031 557 0718.

National contact address and publications co-ordinators : Swindon Unemployed Movement, 37a Regent St., Swindon, Wilts.. Tel. 0793 615773