

WHAT IS RATE-CAPPING?

SINCE 1979 the Government has continuously attacked council spending. It has greatly cut the grants it makes towards local spending. It introduced a complex system of estimating each council's spending needs. Spending above a 'threshold' caused the rate of grant entitlement to be reduced. When this didn't work, it introduced an additional set of arbitrary targets which trigger further grant penalties when exceeded. These penalties have been made more severe each year.

Despite all these attacks, many councils are still determined to provide the services they were elected to support. That is why the Government is now resorting to its 'final solution'.

THE RATE-CAPPING BILL

THE BILL proposes to give the Government powers to select 'over-spenders' and impose maximum levels of spending and rates. These levels will be far below what is needed to keep services going. It would be illegal for those councils to exceed their limits. A similar 'reserve' power is also proposed which could extend these limits to all councils.

If the Bill is passed, the first rate-caps will be applied in 1985. A hit list of about 20 councils is

being selected for the first wave. Most are in the poorest, most deprived inner city areas. Top of the list is Hackney - the poorest Borough in Britain.

The Government claims that these councils are an 'irresponsible minority'. Yet they have been forced to spend more because central government has put its policies of mass unemployment and high defence spending before helping the country's poorest areas.

THE SCOTTISH EXPERIENCE

Selective rate-capping is already law in Scotland. Four councils were capped in 1983: Lothian, Glasgow, Kirkcaldy and Stirling. The effect in each case was massive spending cuts. Lothian's cuts totalled £12 million, including:

- ★ 382 teaching posts lost;
- ★ 272 home helps lost, together with 45 other social work staff;
- ★ 10% bus fare increases and cuts in concessionary schemes.

The lesson is clear. Rate-capping has nothing to do with 'protecting the ratepayer' or stimulating economic recovery. It is an all-out assault on local services to ordinary people in the community.

'These proposals represent the most serious threat ever to local democracy.' - Ian McCallam, Chairman, Association of District Councils (Conservative controlled).

PRIVATISATION

IF RATE-CAPPING SUCCEEDS it will encourage even more privatisation. The Government could force more services out to tender, as it has forced the NHS to tender for cleaning and domestic services. Or councils may look to private firms to cut costs by paying lower wages, cutting holiday and sick leave entitlement, forcing up workrates and doing a worse quality job.

Many Tory councils have already handed services over to private contractors. The government is forcing councils to put most of their housing repairs and highway maintenance out to

tender. But a lot of the experience of private contractors shows that they can cost more money and provide a much inferior service.

Citywise recently published plans being made by Conservatives on Notts. County Council. If they win the 1985 elections they will consider privatising many areas, including:

- ★ School cleaning, and cleaning in other Council buildings.
- ★ School meals, and other catering.
- ★ Professional services like architects' and legal work.

Their plans make no mention of what will happen to present council workers, or the effect on quality of service, working conditions or wage levels.

THE THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

SEVERAL Government Ministers have recently started to threaten democracy itself. The Chancellor Nigel Lawson has suggested bringing back a separate vote for businessmen. He has also questioned whether people should be allowed to vote if they don't pay the full rates themselves. This could take the vote away from virtually all pensioners, single parent families, the unemployed, and low income families. It could also take the vote away from all women who are not the head of household paying the rates. It would take us back to the last century.

Some have gone further. A leading Tory thinker Roger Scruton, writing in *The Times* recently, proposed the replacement of all elected councils with boards of 'responsible citizens of substance'. This may seem far-fetched, but it has already happened - in London's Docklands where local councils have had many of their planning powers taken away and handed over to a Development Corporation appointed by the Secretary of State. Earlier plans for jobs, houses, schools, hospitals, etc for local people have been ditched, and replaced by the interests of private business developers.

SOME GOVERNMENT LIES EXPOSED

LIE NO.1 The government says that local spending is out of control.

THE TRUTH. In real terms (allowing for inflation) total council spending fell by over 3% between 1978 and 1983. Over the same period central government spending rose by 20% - mostly because of increases in unemployment benefit and defence spending!

LIE NO.2. The government says that councils have put up the rates.

THE TRUTH. It is the government which has forced up the rates by cutting the Rate Support Grant it gives to local councils. In 1977/78, government grants covered 66% of council spending. By 1983/84 this was down to 53%.

LIE NO.3. The government says that rate increases hit jobs.

THE TRUTH. The government has never given any evidence to show that rate rises hit jobs. And it agrees that rates are only 1% of industrial costs. Notts. County Council recently looked at unemployment figures in several counties from 1979 to 1983. They found that different increases in rates had no effect on increases in unemployment. In Notts., unemployment increased by 29,000 between May 1979 and September 1981 - when we had the lowest rate of any Shire County. Since the big rate rise in September 1981, the increase in unemployment has been only 9,000. The evidence shows that the main causes of mass unemployment are central government policies, not local policies.

ABOLITION

NOT CONTENT with the rate-capping handcuff, the Government is trying to bulldoze through another major constitutional attack. It intends to abolish the Greater London Council and all the Metropolitan County Councils (Tyne & Wear, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside and West Midlands). 18 million people will lose their right to a democratically elected government for their metropolitan areas. London will become the only European capital without a city government.

The Tories claim that abolition will save ratepayers' money and end unnecessary duplication of services. In fact every independent report published so far shows that abolition will cost

money. Councils will be replaced by a bureaucratic mess of unelected boards and joint arrangements.

The real reason is to do away with those councils which have offered the most resistance to Government policies. The GLC and the 'Mets' have become centres of political opposition, developing successful new alternatives, for example in the fields of job creation and cheap bus fares.

Abolition will destroy a whole tier of Labour-controlled government, and deny people the right to vote for local policies. It will increase central government control and open the way for more privatisation. It is an attack on democracy itself. If these councils are abolished, democratic control of other councils will also be threatened.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- ★ Write to your MP at the House of Commons urging them to oppose the Government's policy.
- ★ Press the City and County Councils to support a local campaign.
- ★ Get the issue discussed in your trade union, voluntary group, or political party.
- ★ Support the events in the Week of Action (see details on front page).

ANY FIGHTBACK against rate-capping needs to involve the workers within public services and the users of those services, as well as councillors. For example:

- ★ In Glasgow and Newcastle, joint shop stewards committees have been formed to co-ordinate action across all sections of the workforce.
- ★ In Sheffield, the campaign is going out to local areas and involving tenants associations and community groups. The Council has set up a special campaign office. A detailed briefing for activists has been widely circulated. It is also realised that some services do not have the full support of either the users or the workers, so they are looking at ways to improve these

services for all concerned. However, more traditional methods can also be used in City and County wide campaigns, e.g. posters, leaflets, badges, stickers, local meetings, workplace meetings, etc, aimed at:

- ★ showing who's really to blame;
- ★ highlighting the real work and value of local services;
- ★ countering the myths of central government.

Local councillors should be fully involved in the campaign and give all possible financial and practical support to a local campaign against rate-capping. Trade unions and councillors should work together with voluntary organisations to discuss the true nature of the crisis facing us, and to organise a campaign strategy.

CITYWISE
SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

DEFEND LOCAL DEMOCRACY

SAVE OUR LOCAL SERVICES

DEMOCRACY WEEK MARCH 26-30

MON Mar 26: 12.30-1.30, County Hall.
Meeting for local government workers. Speakers: Dennis Pettitt, Leader of the County Council; Betty Higgins, Leader of the City Council; Patrick Quinn, East Midlands TUC.

MON MAR 26: 7.30pm, International Community Centre, 61B Mansfield Rd. Public meeting. Speakers: Betty Higgins, Leader of the City Council; John McGuigan, NUPE.

THURS MAR 29: DEMOCRACY DAY.
National demonstration in London.
NUPE is organising coaches (tel: 603522).
NALGO is organising a train (tel 810405).

A NATIONAL WEEK OF ACTION is planned at the end of March to defend local services against central government attacks. This has been organised by the TUC in association with local authorities and community groups. March 29th is DEMOCRACY DAY with a major demonstration in London.

New laws are being pushed through Parliament this year which threaten the future of local democracy. If the government gets its way, local councils will be forced to make massive cuts in education, social services, public transport, housing, and many other areas. In some cases,

services built up over decades could disappear altogether.

The government is stepping up its attack on several fronts:

- ★ Every year the grant it gives to local councils is cut - forcing a choice between putting up rates or cutting services.

- ★ Councils are being forced to put work out for tender to private contractors, even though privatisation has proved a dismal failure in many areas.

- ★ Some Councils will be abolished altogether. In the true spirit of 1984, next year's elections will be cancelled for the Greater London Council and six Metropolitan County Councils. All are Labour controlled. They will be replaced by unelected boards - just like the quangos the government is supposed to be against!

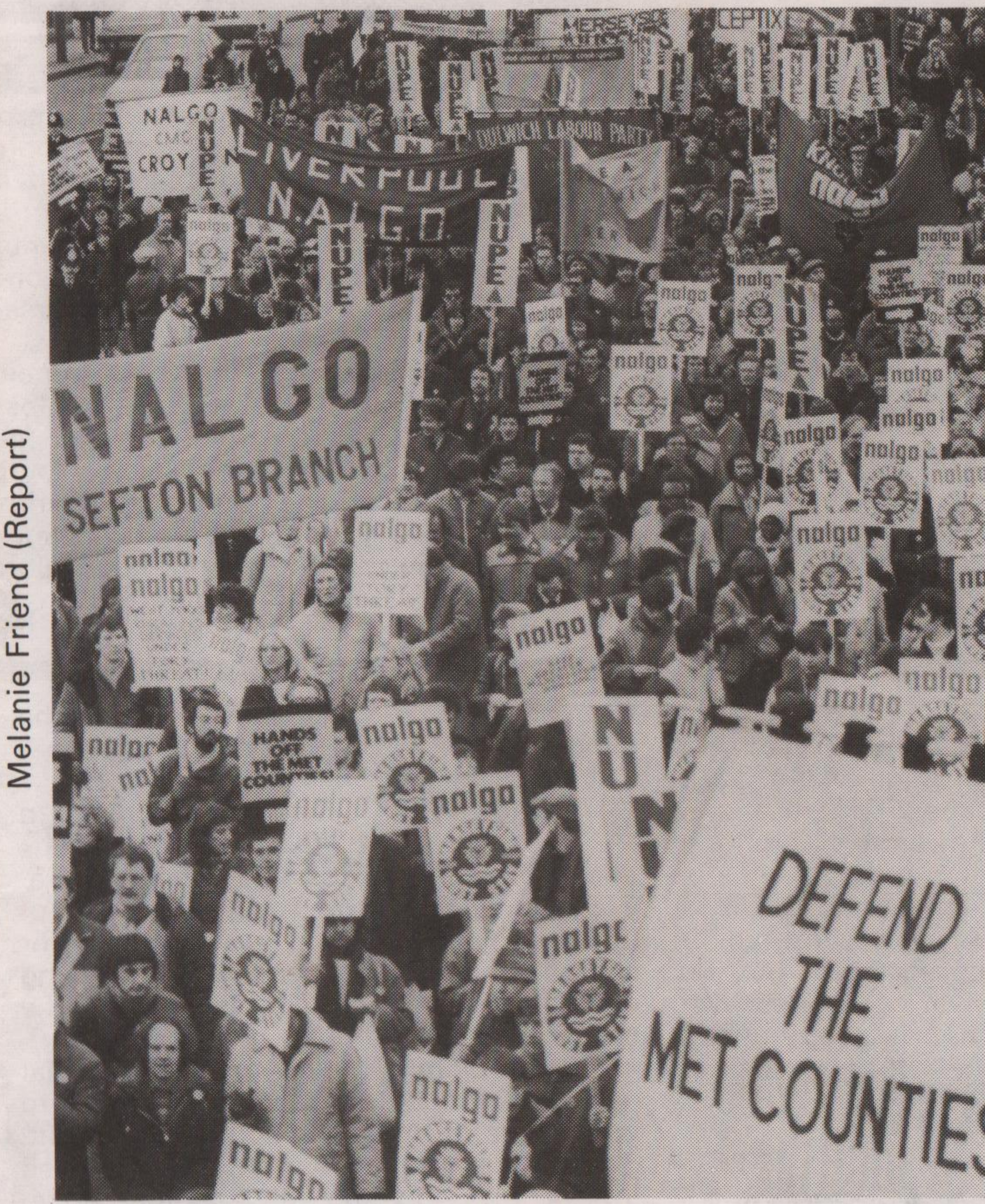
- ★ The Rate-Capping Bill will allow the government to fix maximum levels of spending for each council. It will end the right councils have had since 1601 to set their own rates. If the Bill becomes law, electors will lose the right to choose local spending policies which differ from those of central government.

- ★ Even democracy itself is no longer safe with the Tories. Government Ministers have been calling for a return of the business vote, and even questioning whether the poor should have the right to vote.

Next year the government intends to 'rate-cap' up to 20 councils which they consider to be 'high-spending'. But Liverpool City Council faces the crunch this year. On March 29th, they face the choice of making 5,000 workers redundant or more than doubling the rates. Or they could adopt an illegal budget and force a confrontation with the government.

In Nottingham, neither the City nor the County Council is in the front line - yet. But both are spending well above the government targets and are eating rapidly into their reserves. If the government win against Liverpool, if they succeed in abolishing the GLC and Metropolitan Counties, if they can rate-cap the 'high spenders' - we will be next. Both councils could be forced to make massive cuts in the next two or three years.

In the centre pages we look more closely at some of the City and County services which may be threatened. We speak to workers whose jobs could be in danger - people who take a pride in the important services they provide for the local community.



Melanie Friend (Report)

On January 24th 1984, over 26,000 people marched through London to oppose the abolition of the Greater London Council and the Metropolitan County Councils. DEMOCRACY DAY on March 29th hopes to build on that by involving all councils throughout the country in a campaign against rate-capping.

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SAVE OUR SERVICES

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SCHOOL MEALS

'SCHOOL MEALS are value for money,' says Pat Goring, cook-in-charge at Forest Comprehensive School and a NUPE member. 'You couldn't do a meal at home for the price.'

'Notts. County Council provide a good meals service. We work hard and everything's freshly cooked. The children appreciate the meals. They're not eating a load of rubbish. There's plenty of choice, with equal choice for Asian children.'

'If school meals were cut, we'd all be redundant,' says Pat. 'That's what worries us. A lot of kids won't get a hot dinner. A lot won't get a meal at all.'



John Birdsall

OLD PEOPLE



MAUREEN RICKETT is a Care Assistant and a NUPE steward at Blenheim Old People's Home in Bulwell. Her work involves caring for old people - dressing, washing, toileting, feeding them - trying to do it without taking their independence away.

But many are very confused. When Maureen first went there nine years ago, there were only three 'wheelchair cases'. Now there are 24 out of 54 who need wheelchairs. 'People are living longer,' says Maureen, 'and the older they get the worse they get. Not enough homes are being built to cope with them.'

They operate a system where each member of staff has particular responsibility for five residents - this means they are better looked after. But if there were any further cuts in staff, this would have to go. 'The residents would suffer,' says Maureen. 'If staff are harassed, the residents will be harassed. You couldn't run a home with less care staff.'

LIBRARIES

TORY LINCOLNSHIRE has already started its own form of rate-capping as far as libraries are concerned. An already meagre service has been decimated by a cut of 50%.



If rate-capping takes effect, central government could attempt a repeat performance nationally.

'Hit hardest will be the local and community services, indispensable to the old, the disabled, the very young, and the unemployed.'

'Cuts like these would increase the pressure from the Tory right to scrap the free library service altogether, run those centralised libraries that are left at a profit, and possibly privatise them.'

'What price freedom of information?' - Dave Muddiman, NALGO Libraries convenor for Notts, who works in St Ann's Library.

SCHOOLS



John Birdsall

'ONE OF OUR GREATEST natural resources is our young people. Education is of vital importance and shouldn't be done on a shoestring,' says Linda Jordan, a community teacher at St Ann's Well Infants School and President of Notts NUT.

'Fortunately this administration see education as extremely important and have acted accordingly. But rate-capping and central government control will mean the County's children will end up in larger classes with not enough books or other resources. Even now we are talking in terms of losing more than 250 teacher jobs.'

'What price democracy when it comes to rate-capping?' asks Linda. 'It doesn't matter what the authority feels, we will get a reduction in expenditure which teachers fear.'

FIRE SERVICE

THE FIRE BRIGADE provides immediate assistance to the community 24 hours a day. From the simplest chimney or chip-pan fire to major industrial fires. From a child's head stuck in railings to multiple crashes on motorways. From spillages of petrol to chemical incidents requiring specialist knowledge, training and equipment. In fact any emergency endangering life or property.

Cuts in the fire service would place the community as a whole at greater risk through having a less well-equipped brigade to deal with your emergencies. It would increase the time taken to deal with your call for assistance.

The Fire Brigade helps everyone. What type of fire brigade do you want when you dial 999? - Mick Knight, Secretary, Notts Fire Brigades Union.



John Birdsall

BUSES

'IF THERE ARE CUTS, it will affect the most unfortunate people,' says Harry Ball, TGWU Branch Secretary of Nottingham



John Birdsall

busworkers. 'Look at the service we provide for OAPs, the disabled, schoolchildren.'

'The working people of this county, men or women, have a fairly cheap form of transport to and from work. If you've got a decent bus service there is contentment between the passenger and busdriver. If there are cuts it strains the contact.'

'One fear is the threat of privatisation. There would be a run down in services - they would only run at the most profitable times. Services like transport should be municipalised,' says Harry, 'so profit can be ploughed back into the undertaking.'

'I like to think I'm giving a service to fellow human beings. I don't like people in high places who don't know the service telling me how things should be done.'

COLLEGES

'EDUCATION has borne the main brunt of the current cuts carried out by the Labour Group on the County Council. And it is Further Education Colleges, the traditional route for working class and black students, that have been singled out for the worst attacks. The cuts are so severe that courses will have to close.'

'The background is the Government reductions in Rate Support Grant and a loss of upto £600,000 on the underfunded Manpower Services Commission Youth Training Scheme. The future looks grim. The Tories will try to force further cuts and I am not certain that the Labour councillors will fight to stop them. The freedom of choice of underprivileged groups in the



field of education will be severely eroded.

'The Government plans to put upto a quarter of F.E. under the control of M.S.C. This could be a real disaster and lead the way to wholesale privatisation and the domination of vocational training by unadulterated employers' power.'

- Julian Atkinson, Regional Secretary of NATFHE and a chemistry lecturer at People's College.



Notts Community Arts Centre

Community Home. 'Many children have no other place to go.'

'If children's homes were cut, more pressure would be put on families to put up with intolerable situations, and women would bear the brunt of it. There would be nowhere to go for children who were abused. The Courts would send more children to borstal-type institutions.'

'But the short sharp shock treatment doesn't work,' says Ann. 'They need the longer term care in children's homes to grow out of offending.'

Ann is also NALGO convenor for Social Services. She says 'it's important for all workers in local authorities to be members of their union, and be active members. But the unions can't fight for services by themselves. Unions and councils have to stand together to fight rate-capping.'

REFUSE

REFUSE COLLECTION in the City was cut from 32 rounds to 26 last year, with a big increase in workload. 'Most crews are picking up 600 to 800 bins a week more,' says Harry Cousins, GMBATU Branch Secretary. 'We've lost 24 men with no replacements. We have to carry 2 or 3 binloads at a time with the 'dinging' system (dustbins are emptied into a big plastic bin to be carried back to the vehicle).'



Work had already been speeded up over the years because there was no increase in labour to cope with extra holidays and shorter hours. 'And most men are 15 years older than when the bonus first started,' says Harry. 'It is playing hell with some of them. If they give them any more work they will have to give up. We can take care of a few of the older men on lighter jobs. But we're at saturation point.'

'Some of the younger ones want privatisation. But they don't know what they're letting themselves in for. I'd do my damndest to oppose it.'

'I can't imagine there could be a further cutback in refuse collection,' says Harry. 'We've reached the limit.'

HOUSING

MICK STOUT is ex-convenor of the City's Housing DLO (Direct Labour Organisation), and is now a UCATT steward working for a private contractor.

'The Government's attitude to DLO's is totally unfair,' he says. 'They can't tender for work in the private sector or outside their area. But any private contractor can tender against the DLO in Nottingham.'



DLOs can't compete because of the conditions they work under such as proper sick pay.

'The lads on DLOs have got to face up to realities,' says Mick. 'They are standing by and watching their jobs go. My belief is that DLOs should be the main employer of building workers. It's the only way for secure employment, reasonable working conditions, and to work as part of the community.'

'The problem in the private sector is that companies are putting in suicidal tenders to win contracts. And they still want a profit. So building workers have to be screwed into the ground with really bad conditions.'

'It's important,' says Mick, 'that all building workers make sure the union is working for them in both private and public sectors.'

CHILDREN'S HOMES

'WE PROVIDE a caring, professional service for children in need,' says Ann Crowder, a residential worker at Hazelwood



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