The United Tenants Action Committee

The United Tenants Action Committee was formed early in 1968 to fight the Tory GLC rent rises of 70% to be phased over 3 increases. At the end of December 1967 some members of the International Socialist Group who had previous experience in small, but militant, private tenants' organisations, drafted a leaflet about the increases: 20,000 copies were printed.

During January and February 1968 the whole resources of the International Socialist Group in London were used to distribute them round estates. This organisation did not continue to involve itself with GLC tenants or with the United Tenants Action Committee, but its initial effort was invaluable. The leaflets were distributed in the name of the GLC Tenants' Action Committee, which became the United Tenants' Action Committee. This was the leaflet:

STOP RENT RISES

Rent Rises

GLC rents go up:
5/- in the £ in October 1968
5/- in the £ in October 1969
4/- in the £ in October 1970
In other words a £4 rent goes up to £6 16s. 0d.

Less Repairs

Money spent on repairs is to be cut by *one quarter*. Tenants will have to pay for their own decorating.

Means Test Rebate

A few tenants will be offered a rent rebate, but only if they pass a *means test*.

Wage Restraint

While rents go up:
Prices increase
Short-time work means smaller pay packets
Unemployment is highest for years
Wage restraint goes on.

Why GLC Rents Rise

Most of your rent goes in interest charges.
Moneylenders took:
13/8 in the £ in 1965/6
14/5 in the £ in 1966/67

15/5 in the £ in 1967/68 (estimate).
Each year the moneylenders take more.
This is what you are paying for.

You Can Stop The Rises

Join your Tenants' Association
If there is none form one
Get your neighbours and friends to join
Bring your trade union into the fight
Don't rely on other people to fight your battle.

TENANTS ORGANISE NOW: FIGHT THESE INCREASES

In each area the name of a local contact was stamped onto the leaflet, the idea being to arrange local meetings at which people who had responded to the leaflets could take over.

There was also a leaflet called 'Not a Penny on The Rent'. This gave background details of the rent increases and of past rent strikes — thousands of copies of this were sold round the estates throughout the campaign.

Labour Government — Wage Freeze: Tory GLC — Rent Rises

The Labour Government of 1964 took office already committed to an incomes policy. In 1965 a White Paper was published, with the agreement of the CBI and the TUC, which was a policy for productivity, prices and incomes. The National Board for Prices and Incomes was set up to implement this policy, again with the support of the Unions and employers. Any increase or proposed increase in pay or prices could be referred to this board by the Government.

In July 1966 the Government ordered a complete wage freeze for six months while prices were forced up by 'deflationary' increases in taxation. At the end of these six months, in 1967, pay increases were only granted to exceptional cases. For 1968 and 1969 there was an overall ceiling of 3½% a year for exceptional cases, but higher increases were possible if part of a productivity agreement or a reconstruction of a pay structure, which would lead to greater efficiency.

This policy was a total failure — it was defeated by working class struggle, and it is important to see the fight over rents against this background. In 1967, when all increases in wages were only supposed to be to exceptional cases, wages rose by about 6%. In 1968 and 1969 when there was supposed to be a ceiling of 3½%, there was a rise in weekly earnings of about 8%. As price increases were going up by 3% a year, anyone who got less than that in a wage increase would take a drop in living standards. At the end of 1967 the Government devalued the pound. This meant price rises on all imported goods, but the Government stated; 'Pay increases based on a rise in the cost of living....should not be conceded'.

During 1967 and 1968 several pay settlements were as high as 10-20%. By 1969 and 1970 the upsurge of strikes was two or three times that of

previous years. This was, at least in part, due to the fact that pay increases were immediately swallowed up by price increases, therefore leading to pay more demands and strikes. These strikes were mostly unofficial and mostly successful.

Against this background the Tories won the GLC Election in April 1967 and pledged themselves to increasing the rents. The increases were announced in December 1967, due to be put into effect in October 1968. The Government was fighting to make the wage freeze effective. The outcry that met the proposed rent increases led to the Government referring them to The Prices and Incomes Board which cut them drastically in May 1968; the cuts were confirmed by Prices and Incomes Act in June. Thus some of the steam was taken out of the situation, but not enough. Protest continued and organisation and agitation increased. Many thousands of tenants refused to pay the increase in October 1968 in spite of Labour Party condemnation of rent strikes (the only effective weapon a tenant has). By 1969 the attack on the wages front was making itself felt, and the tenants solidarity was not shaken. In April the Tory Greenwood cancelled the increase due for October 1969. The tenants rightly felt this was a terrific victory which it was. The problem of the 1968 increase which was being withheld remained. In view of the successful attack on the wages front and the divisory effect of the Labour leaders' strategy, many people paid up and others looked for a way out in a court action against the GLC.

Formation of Tenants Associations

When the leaflets came through the doors in January and February 1968 many tenants had already begun to discuss forming Tenants' Associations. The embryonic tenants' association was already there. All it needed was the leaflet and an initial meeting and the fight was on. The Secretary of a Hackney estate described how she and her husband were approached by other tenants on their estate to form a tenants association. This was before the leaflet came through their door. The Chairman of Trowbridge Estate, Hackney, reports how the seeds of his tenants' association were sown by a chance conversation he had one day with another man as they surveyed their partly built estate. It was about the lack of amenities for the tenants and their children. He says: 'From this the seeds of a tenants association were sown. How to cultivate them, we had little idea. The GLC did it for us. The announcement of the 70% rent increase. The roots began to take. Then suddenly one sunny Sunday morning members from the Gascoyne Tenants' Association (Hackney) flooded the estate with leaflets, convening a meeting; from this the roots had now firmly taken. A 19-member committee was formed'.

The committees were usually formed by calling volunteers from the audience. From these volunteers were filled the offices of Chairmen, Secretary and Treasurer and the committee set to work to canvass and organise the estate.

In many areas district committees were set up e.g. the Hackney Tenants Federation. As the struggle developed this provided a means of uniting locally with tenants of the Borough Council whose rents were going up under the Hackney Council as opposed to the GLC. The district committees and the Action Committee itself organised the leafleting of estates that had no tenants associations. Mass leafleting or motorcades took place usually on Sundays and the leaflets would call a meeting at which tenants from organised estate spoke and set up a committee.

The Action Committee itself was not rigid about membership — anyone was welcome, and not until near the end of the campaign was any particular voting organised. Although it was called a committee, there was actually only one very short-lived attempt to have any bureaucratic type of committee. For most of its life the Action Committee had a Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, News Editor and News Business Manager. These titles denoted permanent responsibilities, and the people who held them simply answered for those responsibilities in the general meeting every week. Other responsibilities of a less permanent nature were also delegated to individuals — such as organising a motorcade or a dance to raise funds. Towards the end of the campaign when attention was turned to the legal situation, a fund was set up which required a certain number of signatures — this led to the Legal Fund Committee.

The Action Committee held weekly meetings. To these meetings came people from affiliated estates and tenants from un-affiliated estates were welcomed. There was a mailing list of member-estates who were sent minutes of meetings, and notification of the next meeting each week. The estates themselves had committees, often quite large. These committees met regularly, usually once a week, and there would be a general meeting about once a month on an estate. If there was a crisis such as a threat of eviction, an emergency meeting would be called. At the general meetings on the estates the policy for that estate would be discussed and decided. Usually a speaker or speakers from other estates would be invited so that people could get some idea of what was happening elsewhere. Sometimes speakers from the GLC were invited to answer for various bad aspects of life on an estate, such as failure to do repairs, lack of play space, lack of general amenities or structural deficiencies.

It was on the estates that the real decisions were made and where the power lay. This power was put to more use than rents. Many victories were claimed by organised tenants association such as getting a play-street shut off for the children after a sit-in lasting a day, or pressure successfully brought to get repairs done. A great deal of work fell to the members of estate committees — carrying out decisions made at meetings, keeping a check on different problems such as repairs, organising demonstrations, attending Action Committee meetings etc.

Many estates had their own news-sheets which were usually put out by the committee. On top of this, the Action Committee itself had the 'News'. This started as a 4-page news-sheet which came out monthly. As the struggle grew this became larger and had one section for Borough tenants and one for GLC tenants. At its height it had a circulation of 20,000 and came out fortnightly. This paper aimed to be a means of communication between tenants, and estate committees would buy enough for all their membership which made distribution easier than door-to-door selling. The articles and cartoons in the news were all done by tenants where possible. This meant either taking articles from estate newsletters or persuading people to write articles. The latter was often difficult because people don't think they are any good at writing, but in actual fact once they do write about something they have experienced, it is unquestionably better than an article written at 'second hand'.

It was always important that the Chairman of the Action Committee had support from the estates and, in the absence of any committee, that he represented what the tenants wanted. During the course of the campaign the Chairman changed three times.

The GLC's 1968 Rent Rise

The Action Committee was not formed to fight a legal battle. It was formed around the idea that the main weapon of the tenants is a rent strike as opposed to the usual organisations whose main aims were to petition, negotiate, and lobby. The Action Committee policy at the beginning was: 1) To withhold the rent increases and pay the old rent: 2) To call a full rent strike with industrial action if anyone was threatened with eviction.

The National Association of Tenants and Residents (NATR) was also active during this rents struggle, but it was the decision of this organisation in September 1967 *not* to set up an Action Committee to fight the pending GLC rent rises that led to the United Tenants Action Committee taking the initiative on its own. NATR is a Labour Party/Communist Party front which is dedicated to gaining membership to carry out its social-democratic policies of lobbying MP's and petitioning Parliament. They opposed the policy of the United Tenants Action Committee in withholding the rent increase. In fact they reflected the Labour Party view — that provided the tenants' struggle is confined to coming out and voting Labour, the Labour leaders will support the tenants' campaign and lead it if they can. However, when the tenants use the only ultimate weapon they have — rent strike — the official Labour leaders' attitude becomes quite clear. When tenants in Sheffield withheld rent increases in 1967, Harold Wilson's Private Secretary wrote to them stating that what they were doing was illegal, and all they could expect would be the full consequences of the law. Similarly, when Mrs. Evelyn Dennington, Labour's GLC Spokesman, appealed to tenants not to organise rent strikes: 'They can only bring untold misery to people and do not achieve victory in the end', she told the Evening Standard on December 7th, 1968. Labour was utterly opposed to the increases, but all they would do would be to beg and implore the GLC to

change their mind until the last moment.

The other organisation marginally involved was the Council-sponsored London Association of Housing Estates which was firmly against rent strikes needless to say.

The Action Committee held its first full meeting in February 1968. In May the P.I.B. recommended that the rent increases be reduced. In July the recommendation became law. On July 25th the Action Committee organised a coffin march to County Hall to return about 30,000 rebate forms. 8,000 tenants marched to demonstrate outside while Princess Margaret and others attended a Banquet inside. On September 22nd there was a rally in Trafalgar Square attended by 15,000 tenants to demonstrate solidarity before starting to withhold the increase on October 1st.

Then in November the GLC pledged that no-one would be evicted; tenants would only be taken to court for debt. This pledge was given to an assembly of 20,000 tenants and Trade Unionists who had marched to County Hall on November 19th. In January 1969 the GLC sent threatening letters to at least 2,000 tenants saying they would take action if they did not pay up. To meet this situation the policy of the Action Committee was changed. A full rent strike would be called if anyone was taken to court.

It was with this policy that 6,000 tenants marched to Tony Greenwood's Hampstead home in February 1969. Tony Greenwood is a veteran demonstrator himself, having marched against Suez and The Bomb in his old left-wing days in the 1950's. Now the tables were turned. Row upon row of helmeted police were there to protect the veteran socialist from the very people he claimed to champion.

The demonstration must have had its effect. In April 1969 Tony Greenwood announced that he would veto the GLC's 1969 rent rise. The Tories immediately accused him of giving in to 'mob demonstrators'.

The strategy of the Labour leaders was quite clear. By making big concessions to the tenants they hoped to contain the growth of the tenants' movement. Old allegiances are slow to die. Many thousands of tenants have been labour people all their lives. When Tony Greenwood cancelled the 1969 increases, many people thought the fight was won.

From that moment on the tenants put the struggle out of their own hands and into the hands of lawyers.

Evict the Rent Rebels

The legal battle took up most of the time and energy of the Action Committee between July 1969 and January 1970. If the Labour Party leaders had their way all the time would have been spent in arguing over futile legalities. But they reckoned without Mr. Cutler, the Chairman of the GLC's Housing Committee.

Suddenly on July 22nd Cutler announced a change of policy. Instead of taking people to court for debt, he would instead evict the remaining

rent rebels unless they paid up. At the time this involved 20,000 people, 6,000 families. The Labour leaders were outraged. Their election strategy of throwing out tit-bits to the tenants so that they wouldn't rock the PIB boat could only work if the tenants were kept passive. It would be blown sky-high if Cutler started large-scale evictions.

Flying Squad

On the tenants' side things started moving again. Now it was a matter of self-defence. The tenants' answer to Cutler's threat of eviction was the Flying Squad. This was set up by tenants from estates all over London to make sure that no-one would be evicted. This is how it was described in the NEWS:

'The Flying Squad committee have made it quite clear to the Press and all associations that they have no intention of using violence unless the bailiffs or other council employees try a forced entry or use violence against us. In that case our homes will be defended with every possible means. In fact, we would advise the bailiffs to go sick or have the day off. The Flying Squad committee have compiled lists of tenants who are willing to help, and should the threat of eviction come to any estate we would expect every tenant (whether withholding the increase or not) to help their neighbours.'

Soon after Cutler announced this new policy the GLC selected the first of their victims, Mr. & Mrs. Mackelken of Dagenham. They were a young couple with two young children. Mr. Mackelken was a docker. They have since been rehoused in a new flat. They were never evicted. This is their story:

Barricades at Dagenham

On the evening of September 25th 1969, preparations for barricading the Mackelkens into their home were started. Volunteers, working with materials from many sources, set up barricades which would give the bailiffs plenty to get on with. Eight mattresses were supplied for those who might have to spend the night there. Strong posts linked by barbed wire were decorated by notices which were straight to the point: 'Touch this at your own risk'.

Darkness came, and on went the searchlights on the roof so we could see clearly if there were any strange faces. Men and women stood about talking in small groups. Tea and bacon sandwiches came out of the kitchen, and the seige was on.

Arrangements made and communication links established with other associations, the long wait began. Mrs. Mackelken described the situation. 'The next day it really struck me — my children, Ian aged two and Lee 15 months were put with neighbours and with the men standing about, there I was, locking doors, bolting windows and jumping two feet in the air at every noise that I heard'.

On the first Saturday after the barricades went up, a false alarm went up that the bailiffs were coming. Phone calls were made. Within half an hour 200 people turned up ready to defend the Mackelken's home. This gave tremendous encouragement to Mrs. Mackelken.

'Saturday. The day the Flying Squad came out was a GREAT DAY, even though it wasn't the real thing. We were glad that people came out to our prefab, so that our neighbours could see that there were people all over London who could come to our aid should we need them'.

After more than two months of seige the GLC called the eviction off, and offered to rehouse the Mackelkens.

'No Politics'

This was a slogan that was widely used in the struggle. Tenants from every estate demanded that their organisations be 'non-political'. This has been generally mis-understood by people who were not involved. It was first and foremost the way that the organisation and policy was kept under tenants' control. It was also a way of keeping representatives from being blown up by the Press and separated from their fellow tenants. 'Politics' and 'Politicians' have become enemies of the working-class in so far as they are official politics. This is because official 'politics' means voting for a representative every few years and doing nothing yourself about the conditions you are in. It means being told what to do and being sold out time after time by someone whom you never see except when he wants your vote. Harangues about the moneylenders and the cost of building are pointless if they are only going to end up with a plea for a vote. That denies the working class any possibility of struggling themselves in the way that it is thought best at the time. Tenants want to discuss what they can do themselves.

This does not mean that everyone in the Action Committee had to be a tenant. Far from it. Most of the secretarial work, the publication of the NEWS, legal advice, the tenant's plays, a lot of leafleting and much besides was done by non-council tenants. But the organisation and policy were firmly under tenants' control.

The Crisis of Working Class Organisation

The slogan 'No Politics' was a reaction against party politics and a means of protecting the self-activity and independence of this particular struggle. Within the capitalist definition of politics, rents are the business of politics since they are decided by local and national governments. On the other hand, wages, or 'economic' struggles are the business of the Unions who pledge themselves to be non-political. This separation of working-class struggle into 'politics' and 'economics' is a serious crisis. The state does not have that separation — it is involved with both production and consumption. In playing off the working class as 'consumer' e.g. as tenants, against the working class as producer, it

attempts to divide and rule. The Unions in concerning themselves with wage-struggles re-inforce this situation. They concentrate on the working class as workers in production (and in doing so fight to keep workers where they are — selling their labour power in order to survive). The crisis is to find a new form of organisation which can confront the state with the combined force of the working class both in production and out of production i.e. in the community.

The failure of the 'no politics' slogan was that it rejected the separation between politics and economics but could not find any effective way or organising to overcome the separation in practice. The real stumbling block is the Trade Union form of organisation which in its official forms clings tooth and nail to this separation and imposes a straight jacket on every kind of working class struggle. People know that this crisis exists and attempts to deal with it are being made not only in tenants organisations but also in rank and file strike activities. For the crisis to be overcome these tendencies must be developed, concretised, and united in a working-class organisation which will mobilise against the state itself.