

**NOT A PENNY
ON THE
RENTS
1970**

1/-

UNITED TENANTS ACTION COMMITTEE 1970

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A. FIGHTING THE LEGAL WAY

Court Case. Elks and Beavers

The thing which most people know about the struggle of GLC tenants is that they fought a court case and lost it.

On January 13th, 1970, three Court of Appeal judges ruled that the GLC's 1968 rent increase was legally imposed.

A clause on the back of the rent book which allows the council to increase the tenants' rents at their whim was upheld as valid. As a result there was no need for the council to follow the procedure laid down by the Government's 1968 Prices and Incomes Act.

But the judges had to scratch around quite hard in the law books to find authority to back their judgment up. In the end the only authority they could find was a Canadian case which went back to the time of Charles II, and concerned the payment of rent consisting of two elks and two black beavers. On this slender authority the court of appeal put the stamp of legality on the GLC's 1968 rent increase, and ordered the eviction of four families of rent rebels by March 14th, 1970. So much for the law.

When the campaign against the GLC's rent increase began, thousands of people were prepared to withhold the increase. At that time no-one was leaning on any legal crutches. When October 1968 came people withheld the increase mainly because they thought it was unjust at a time of wage freeze. That was all. The legal bit came in much later, when the GLC started sending out threatening letters, and Anthony Greenwood cancelled the 1969 increase.

Deep in their hearts people know that you do not win battles of this kind by going to court. The history of rent struggles is full of examples. Every time in the past that tenants have tried to attack council rent schemes in court they have failed. In 1935 Mr. Jenkinson, a tenant of the Leeds Corporation, refused to pay a rent increase and tried to justify his actions in court. He failed. In 1955 tenants in Cardiff tried to attack the Corporation's differential rent scheme in court and failed. In 1957 tenants in Hampstead and Reading did the same and each time they failed. One of these tenants objected to having his rent increased when the housing revenue account showed a profit. Thirteen years later he is still paying off the court costs. He is over 70 years old.

At the opposite pole, attacks made against "low rents" by ratepayers and property interests have also failed. Housing laws have all been passed for the convenience of council administrations and not of tenants or ratepayers. The bureaucrats of Whitehall and the Law Courts could never let their mates down in the Town Halls.

Even if we had won this case against the GLC it would not have made any difference in the long run. If the GLC had made a mistake in 1968 with the legal formalities they would never have repeated it in 1970.

At best the court case would have delayed the time when tenants have got to rely on their own strength. Action Committee speakers have said time and again that the battle against rent rises will never be won by solicitors and barristers. It will only be won by the actions of tenants themselves. That is something which every one now knows. If there had been 20,000 people demonstrating outside the Law Courts on January 12th maybe we would have won the case, but if we had 20,000 prepared to demonstrate there would have been no need to have fought a court case at all.

B. THE RENTS GO UP AND UP AND UP

On Thursday, November 27th, 1969, the GLC announced the next rent increase for 1970. It will take effect from March 2nd, 1970, and will be 7s. 6d. average, 10s. maximum, just like the 1968 increases. Also, charges will all go up. The only flats that may not be affected are the extremely old ones. Exactly the same thing is happening all over the country, wherever there are council flats. The Government has reached an agreement with all councils allowing rents to be increased by this amount. This agreement has now been given the sanction of law in the Rent (Control of Increase) Act, 1969, which lasts until 1971.

"Fair Rents"

Horace Cutler, Chairman of the GLC Housing Committee, stated to the Institute of Housing Managers on November 6th that the GLC must win the battle to increase rents to an economic level within the next five years. According to the GLC's latest proposals this means minimum rents of £10-£12 for a two-bedroom flat, which means an increase of 100-300% over a period of four years for many thousands of tenants. Mr. Cutler has also said that he wants to bring the rent of council tenants up to the level of private tenants. Private tenants have made many millionaires out of landlords.

The original plan announced by the GLC in 1967 was a 70% increase over two years (three instalments). This original 70% is already being paid by some GLC tenants. These are tenants who get a transfer into a new flat. Whenever a flat or house becomes empty the GLC re-lets it at a price including a 70% increase which the tenant must accept when he or she accepts the tenancy.

What is happening today is more than just rent rises; it is a direct attack on everything that has been fought for and won by our parents and grandparents. Mr. Cutler stated in the *Mirror Magazine* on November 15th:

"Are council houses really necessary any longer? In my opinion, no. I believe that Local Authorities should get out of housing altogether. Other people can do the job much better."

Tomorrow's London

Now the GLC have brought out a new plan, much more sinister than any straightforward rent-rise plan. This plan is embodied in a report called

"Tomorrow's London". This makes it quite clear that if they have their way *your* future will be right outside London. It states that in future London will contain an even larger number of people whose incomes will enable them to have more money to spend and more free time in which to spend it, thanks to a shorter working week and a higher standard of living. These are the people for whom the GLC are planning the future of London. Does it sound like you? Are your wages going up? Is the price of food, clothes or rent going down? The answer to that is NO. Most families now have to have the wife working as well as the husband in order to make ends meet, and there certainly isn't money to burn.

When they do build new schemes the housing will be so expensive that only city merchants on fat salaries and expense accounts will be able to afford them. What the City has done at the Barbican (rents £10 to £20 per week) the GLC will do at St. Katharine's Dock, Covent Garden site and elsewhere.

The recently published plans for St. Katharine's Dock show that the GLC have bought the land for £1,800,000 and have given Taylor-Woodrow a 125-year lease at a ground rent of £165,000 per year. The GLC itself is going to spend £3 million on housing and schools but there will only be 300 new council homes, the rest will be private development flats. Taylor-Woodrow will spend £18 million on the private sector. This site will include sauna baths, squash courts, night clubs, and London's largest hotel. Is this how you want the 25-acre site to be used?

Here is what the GLC says: "People who at present might spend their time and money on watching television, playing bingo, or going to a football match, might develop a penchant for playing golf, sailing, or BARBEQUE PARTIES ON THEIR TERRACES. . . . Tomorrow's people will demand room for their books, record players, SKIS, and changes of clothing."

So what is going to happen? Already the population of London is dropping—90,000 more people leave the London area each year than come to live in it. The GLC intend to "assist" this "natural" process and help you to move out of London. There are several ways in which they can "help". One method they are already trying—that is to price tenants out of London altogether. Anyone who has illusions about barbeque parties or skis can think again. Factories and industry are encouraged to move out of London, too, so the workers will move with them.

The policy of deporting people out of London is stated clearly at the end of the section on finance where the report says, "We are well aware that there is, in the long run, no feasible alternative to the simplest solution . . . *more dwellings, and fewer households to compete for them.*" That, friends, means that someone has got to go.

Means Test Rebate

The council says that their fair-rent scheme is the answer to the housing problem. This means £10-£12 minimum rents, which no-one can

afford; so they suggest a means-test rebate for *all* tenants, public and private.

A rent rebate lasts for six months only. You may still have to pay more rent. You cannot get a rebate unless you go through a means test. This means filling in a form, in which you must set out every penny you or your wife earns, including part-time jobs, and all details of your savings. Nothing is sacred any more. The council can use any means they like to check your information. They can go to your boss, the bank, the post office, or the police. If you make a mistake they can put you into debt for the full amount of any rebate given to you. Already councils keep secret files on tenants. This will simply make it worse.

Once you get a rebate any change in your job, your earnings, or the number of people living with you must be reported to the council immediately. They keep tabs on you all the time.

Deficit on Housing Revenue Account

The GLC say that the main reason why the rents have to go up is because there is an enormous deficit on the Housing Revenue Account. After the 1969 increase was stopped by Greenwood, the GLC estimated that the housing account would be £6,725,000 in deficit as a result — that was last April. By early November both Cutler and Plummer were quoted in the newspapers as saying that this year's deficit would be £8,000,000.

Is There a Real Deficit?

The answer to this is NO. Since the Tories came to power they have lumped all the empty and partially completed dwellings on to the Housing Revenue Account with the occupied dwellings. Naturally unoccupied dwellings create a deficit on the Housing Revenue Account, and this is what Cutler wants tenants to pay for. In fact about 100,000 houses, and 50,000 GLC flats currently show a profit (GLC Minutes, 1968, p. 631-2). Since the war it has taken new buildings only about 15 years before they show a profit (GLC Minutes, 1970, p. 22). So the GLC is making a profit on over half of its tenants.

Rates

Any deficit on the housing account comes out of the rates. Until 1956 a certain contribution to housing *had* to be made from the rates wherever a Government grant was received. The Tory Government changed that. Since Tories were elected to the GLC to do their best for ratepayers, they have consistently planned to eliminate any contribution to the housing account from the rates. This is what they mean by "fair rents" — that council tenants carry all the burden of debt charges, new building, the high price of land, repairs, maintenance, etc., without any assistance from the rates. It really boils down to whether housing is considered a social need, like most other things that are subsidised or paid for out of the rates and taxes, or whether you consider it to be a chaotic free-for-all, making fat profits for builders, landowners, and money lenders.

Table 1

GLC HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT 1970/71

Income		Expenditure	
Rents	62%	Moneylenders	66%
Government	17%	Repairs	16%
Rates	16%	Bureaucracy	10%
Other sources	5%	Other items	8%

Source: GLC Minutes, 1970, p. 16.

C. WHERE RENTS GO

1. Builders — Harry Hyams

In October 1954, Gabriel & Harrison, a property dealer in London, sold a bomb damaged site in Grafton Street, W.1, to 26-year-old estate agent Harry Hyams for £59,000. A week later the Government decided that building licences would no longer be needed. Harrison phoned Hyams to buy the property back. In one week the property had risen to £100,000, a 70% increase. The property was then developed as an office block, giving a profit of £530,000 and is now let to an American company, Union Carbide, at a rent of 30s. per square foot. Harry Hyams who made a profit of £530,000 pays no rates on the site as he is only a ground landlord and not the occupier.

Harry Hyams has made one of the biggest fortunes out of the property business. His home in Wiltshire, Ramsbury Manor, cost well over half a million pounds, and with its priceless furniture, pictures, collection of Georgian silver, guard dogs, security men and Rolls-Royce, number HJH 1, in the driveways it makes the Beatles' houses look like prefabs. Hyams' personal fortune is now close to £30 million. He is the son of a bookmaker. In 1945, at the age of 17, he joined a firm of estate agents to learn the business. In 1959 he was ready to go it alone. He bought a run-down property company, Oldham Estate, and used this as a springboard to launch a series of deals that sent Oldham Estates' capital rocketing upwards.

Table 2

VALUE OF OLDHAM ESTATES' PROPERTY

1959	£22,328
1960	£152,163
1961	£6,482,579
1962	£7,571,645
1963	£11,829,602
1964	£23,364,503
1965	£31,597,748
1966	£38,978,403
1967	£48,201,053
1968	£71,962,808
1969	£100,000,000

Source: Oliver Marriott, 'The Property Boom'.

His method was very simple. Buy some old buildings; pull them down; put up a new one, usually an office block; keep it empty for as long as possible while rents rise (meanwhile paying no rates on it because it's empty); then sell a lease for an enormous profit. The building contractors employed by Hyams were usually George Wimpey who also own 40% of the company. Other finance came from the Westminster Bank and the Co-operative Insurance Company who took 10% of the share capital in return. Therefore, the Co-op own 10% of Centre Point.

Centre Point

Hyams blocks are dotted all over London, but the most profitable single building ever promoted in this country, Centre Point, is his biggest.

It is an office block at the junction of Charing Cross Road and Oxford Street. This is how it was built. The LCC, as it then was, wanted to build a roundabout but could not afford to buy the property around the cross-road. So through an introduction made by Lord Goodman (solicitor to Harold Wilson) a deal was made between Hyams and the LCC whereby in return for getting the land for its roundabout (which has never been built) Hyams got planning permission to build Centre Point. Of course the people who sold their land to Hyams had no idea that he had permission to build a skyscraper and some of them sold at ridiculously low prices. By March 1962 Hyams had bought all the property in the area, given the LCC the bits they wanted, and signed a lease for 150 years at a rent of £18,500 per year. This was Harry's biggest stroke for the rent was FIXED. The normal provision to revise rents that is usually present in all LCC contracts was MISSING. The total cost of building Centre Point was five million. In 1966, when it was finished, it was worth eleven million. Now after carefully keeping it empty for three years its value is more like nineteen million. Profit: fourteen million pounds.

You pay rates — he doesn't.

You are faced with rent increases — his rent is fixed.

Nine million people live in slums. Nearly two out of every ten households live below poverty level. Ten thousand families are homeless. Cathy come to Centre Point!

2. Landowners

Next come the landowners and property speculators, from whom councils have to buy the land. The council now pays up to £150,000 per acre or more for building land. In Covent Gardens they will pay over £1 million an acre. Between 1961 and 1965 the cost of land per dwelling rose from £450 to £650. The price paid by the GLC for housing land jumped from £8 million in 1965-6 to £14 million in 1968-9.

Meanwhile major property companies which own large chunks of land in London and elsewhere continue to make big profits. The most profitable business in postwar Britain has been property speculation and development. Because of the enormous profits to be made out of buying and selling land and developing it, particularly for offices, prices of land

have rocketed. The value of property shares on the Stock Exchange gives some idea of the boom. In 1958 the total value of quoted companies on the Stock Exchange was £103 million; by 1962 the value of property shares had risen to £800 million. Since 1962 the total value of property shares on the Stock Exchange has dropped, but despite the falling-off in the total value individual property companies continue to make big profits. Detailed figures are given in our earlier publication, *Not A Penny on the Rent*.

3. The Moneylender

Out of every £1 of rent paid by GLC tenants a proportion goes towards the profits being made by the owners of land and by the big construction companies who build council flats. This can be seen from Table 3.

But by far the biggest whack goes to the moneylenders—the people who lend the councils the money to pay the landowners and builders. These are the big insurance companies, banks, large trade unions, and even tenants' associations with a bit of cash to put down on a deposit account. Moneylending is part and parcel of the system. To that extent we are all involved in it to some extent, e.g. when we put money in the Post Office. But for the big boys, like the insurance companies, it is a full-time and profitable business. They are the ones who dictate the terms and keep the system going. They are in it for profit.

There are people who keep crying out for the government to do something about the moneylenders. But it seems to us that this is pie-in-the-sky. The government, whether it be Labour or Communist, is as much a part of the system as moneylending. They cannot, therefore, dismantle moneylending without pulling the whole rotten edifice, including themselves, down with it. What government is going to do that? But what they can do for the time being is to divert more of our national wealth to housing and to things that we want rather than to white elephant projects like Concorde and things our governors want. But they will not do that if they keep getting our rent money each week on the nail.

Table 3

AVERAGE COST OF BUILDING GLC HOMES, 1964-69

1964	£4,870	1967	£6,110
1965	£5,980	1968	£5,670
1966	£6,080	1969	£6,510

increase 1964 to 1969: 34%

Source: GLC Minutes, 1970, p. 16.

Current rates of borrowing are about 10%. With the increase in council house building since 1964 the proportion of rent which goes to pay the moneylenders has been increasing. Recent Government measures have attempted to peg the rate of interest at 4% on new homes; but it

does not alter the overall picture, because it only applies to homes built since 1967, and housing is normally financed over 60 years.

Each year the moneylenders take a bigger and bigger proportion of the rent paid by GLC tenants. In 1966-7 they took 15s. 9d. in every £1 rent paid and in 1969-70 the figure is 18/3d.

Table 4
GLC DEBT CHARGES

Actual Debt	Interest	Rent Income	Proportion of £1 to Moneylenders
1966-7	£21,481,746	£25,871,766	15/9
1967-8	£24,384,546	£29,304,987	15/10
1968-9 (estimate)	£27,914,000	£33,450,000	16/10
1969-70 (estimate)	£31,951,000	£35,070,000	18/3

Source: GLC Housing Revenue Estimates

D. POLITICAL PARTIES

The majority party at County Hall is, of course, the Tory Party, and it is obviously their ideas which most influence the policies of the GLC. The Labour Party opposition have stated their all-out opposition to the rent rises. As the April 9th elections come up, they are now promising to cancel the 1970 increase, if the District Auditor will allow them; but if they cannot they say there will be no increase for GLC tenants in 1971.

The Labour leaders do not miss any opportunity to collect our votes. "Vote for us and then do as we tell you" is their slogan. Labour at County Hall say they are against rent rises. Labour at Tower Hamlets, however, have just put rents up 5s. and plan another 5s. per week very soon. From 1968/69 no increase could go on any council rent unless approved of by Labour Minister Tony Greenwood under the Prices and Incomes Act. During that time he allowed over 700 councils to increase their rents. His power to stop rent rises was demonstrated when he stopped the GLC's 1969 increases. Now he has given every council in the land a free hand to raise rents by 10s. maximum in 1970-1.

The basic problem of high interest rates, land prices and building costs affects every council, whatever political party they may be. It is this basic truth that is at the root of the matter—this is what needs changing. The result is that either rents go up, or fewer houses are built, or both happen together. Either way the living standards of working people are affected. It is the same whichever political party is in power. In Labour controlled boroughs the number of houses to be built this year has fallen as follows:

Number of houses started by Labour in	1968	1969
Tower Hamlets	952	669
Barking	720	641
Newham	1,393	496
Southwark	3,545	430
Gateshead	1,317	688
Wallsend	298	18
Jarrow	400	87
Worksop	181	6

There were 32 Labour boroughs and county boroughs in England and Wales. In the year ending June 1968 they started 16,197 council houses; in the year ending 1969 they only started 9,184.

This story is the same if not worse with the Tories:

Number of houses built by Tories in	1968	1969
Sunderland	901	8
Kingston on Hull	3,486	934
West Bromwich	763	158
Oldham	1,424	0

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.

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. After the announcement of the 1970 increase she stated on BBC radio that she could never condone rent strikes. 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. Tenants could do what they liked but Labour could not support rent strikes.

E. UNITED TENANTS' ACTION COMMITTEE

At the end of December 1967 some members of the International Socialist group, who had had previous experience in small, but militant, private tenants' organisations, drafted a leaflet about the increases: 200,000 copies were printed. During January and February 1968 the whole resources of the International Socialist Group in London were used to distribute them round the estates. This organisation is no longer involved with the GLC tenants, but, their initial efforts were invaluable. **The leaflets were distributed in the name of the GLC Tenants' Action Committee, which is now the United Tenants' Action Committee. This was the leaflet:**

Initial 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

13/8d. in the £ in 1965/6.

14/5d. in the £ in 1966/7.

15/5d. in the £ in 1967/8 (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.

F. FORMATION OF TENANTS' ASSOCIATIONS

When the leaflets came through the doors, many of the people who are now most active on the Action Committee had already begun to talk about forming a Tenants' Association with other people on their estate. The embryonic tenants' association was already there. All it needed was the leaflet and an initial meeting and the fight was on. The present secretary of a Hackney estate has described how she and her husband were approached by other tenants on their estate to form a tenants' association.

This was before any leaflet came through their door. The chairman of the 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 the tenants' association were sown. How to cultivate them, we had little idea. The Greater London Council 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 Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer and the committee set to work to canvass and organise the estate.

In other areas a similar pattern emerges. People were ready to get organised. But the spur was not always the same. In Poplar two dissatisfied Labour council members and some tenants went round the Lansbury Estate with a loudspeaker. They didn't climb stairs and knock on doors or deliver leaflets. Instead they invited tenants to come down to the van and join the tenants' association. In one morning 400 tenants joined.

However, this kind of thing did not happen all at once. Some places are still not organised. Others are still coming into the fight. On the Hillside Estate the Chairman, who had only lived on the estate a few months, read in a local newspaper of a meeting at which the Secretary of the Hackney Federation was speaking. He says his wife gave him no peace until he went round to see her. He came back with an armful of leaflets, which he distributed round his estate. This was how they got started.

No Politics

The tenants have made it quite clear from the start that they wanted a tenants' fight, not a political one. Political parties either want tenants to come out and vote for them or else to follow their political line. The tenants of London have made it quite clear that the days of that kind of thing are past. The successes of the United Tenants' Action Committee have come about when they have stuck to the issues and avoided politics. "This is stark economics, not politics" was how one leaflet described the issue.

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 every other organisation 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.

Then in November 1968 the GLC pledged that no-one would be evicted; tenants would only be taken to court for debt. 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.

This was the policy with which 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 1950s. 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. Maybe it was pangs of conscience. But in April 1969 in a sudden dramatic announcement, 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. Let's face it, many thousands of GLC tenants have been Labour people all their lives. When Tony Greenwood cancelled the 1969 increases, many people thought the fight was won. The Government had bailed them out. Many paid the increase.

Many tenants having seen a way out through Government action, those who were left started looking for a further way out. The legality issue provided it. From being unjust, the rent increase suddenly became illegal. From that moment on the tenants put the struggle out of their own hands and into the hands of lawyers. We now know the result of that particular way of fighting.

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. During most of that period we have been marking time. If the Labour Party leaders had had their way we would have spent all our energies arguing over futile legalities and becoming more and more despondent and more and more passive. But they had reckoned without Mr. Cutler.

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 could only work if the tenants were kept passive. It would be blown sky-high if Cutler started evictions on such a wide scale.

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 our 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 his new eviction policy the GLC selected the first of their victims, Mr. and Mrs. Mackelken, of Dagenham. They are a young couple with two young children. Mr. Mackelken is a docker. We think that their story is important. They themselves have now been rehoused in a new flat. They were never evicted. But other tenants are likely to be facing eviction soon. The experience of the Mackelken family should stand them in good stead. This is the Mackelken's story:

Barricades at Dagenham

On the evening of September 25th, 1969, preparations for barricading the Mackelken's into their home were started. Volunteers, working with materials from many sources, set up barricades which would give the bailiffs or their "hired help" 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, some were already resting, and many were being looked at twice to make sure that no bailiffs got in that easily. Tea and bacon sandwiches came out of the kitchen, and the siege was on.

Arrangements made and communication links established with other associations we then began the long wait. Nobody slept much that night except a young fellow known as John from Hackney who got very annoyed the next morning when he found that he was not woken up for his turn on "Stag" because there were so many volunteers awake.

The new arrangements were quite a change in the life of Mrs. Mackelken, as she explains: "The next day is 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."

Since the barricades went up members of the local tenants' association

and others have been doing their stint, keeping a continuous 24-hour watch. Several things have happened.

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 siege the GLC called the eviction off, and offered to rehouse the Mackelkens.

Militancy Pays

When we first started this fight in 1968, many people shook their heads. "You're wasting your time boy," they said. After the court case their reaction has been "I told you so".

But what these people forget is that by our actions we managed to get Tony Greenwood to cancel one lot of increases. Now the Labour Party are offering to cancel another lot, if only we'll go and kiss the ballot paper for them. That would not have happened but for the action of thousands of GLC tenants who withheld the increase. At the same time we defied the threat of eviction in the case of the Mackelkens and got the family rehoused. There are a score of other minor victories, not least the feeling of confidence and self-respect thousands of tenants have acquired.

G. NEW ORGANISATION

The United Tenants' Action Committee organised under two slogans:

- (1) Not a Penny on the Rent.
- (2) No politics.

"Not a Penny on the Rents" is what we are fighting about. "No Politics" deals with the kind of organisation we have. Tenants from every estate have demanded that their organisations are "non-political". In Hackney, for example, it has become almost a rule that meetings should be advertised "tenants speakers only; no politicians". On loudspeaker tours of the estates the thing which gets people out on their balconies and listening is when the call goes out: "This is a tenants' struggle, and will only be won by tenants and not by politicians."

It is clear to us in the Action Committee that the days when people were prepared to come to meetings and be lectured and promised the world by politicians are over. Today there is only one question which people are asking about rent rises and all the rest — "What can we do about them?" Harangues about the moneylenders and the cost of building are pointless if they are only going to be followed up by a plea for a vote. That has not solved anything. Tenants want to discuss what they can do themselves. The way forward has got to come from people who

speak the same language, fellow-tenants, not from professional rabble-rousers or politicians.

It was in accordance with this feeling that it was decided that there would be no professional or political speakers at the Trafalgar Square rally on February 15th. The speakers were all nameless. They were simply GLC tenants, just as the nine faceless men who ran the Port Talbot Steel strike in August 1969 were simply steel workers. This is the only way to keep our representatives from being blown up by the Press and separated from their fellow tenants.

Organising this way does not mean that everyone in the Action Committee has to be a tenant. Far from it. Most of the secretarial work, the publication of the NEWS, legal advice, the tenants' plays, a lot of leafletting, and much besides has been done by non-council tenants. But the organisation and policy have to be firmly under tenants' control. The objectives are set by tenants, not outsiders. The slogan "no politics" means first and foremost having your own independent tenants' organisation. It does not mean, as the intellectual buffoons of the Labour movement seem to think, that we cannot discuss bankers or moneylenders or interest rates, etc. These educated fools say they believe in the working-class; yet they seem unable to step down from their lofty pedestals and listen to what the working-class is saying.

H. RENT STRIKE

At a meeting of the United Tenants' Action Committee on November 30th, 1969, it was decided to campaign for a total rent strike in March 1970. Other people say that only the increase should be withheld.

Whichever policy is followed eventually, the struggle must come to the stage where tenants are threatened with eviction and attempts are made by the council to carry out these threats.

A lot of time has been spent arguing over the merits of these different courses. What should be recognised is that the only difference is the speed with which you reach the final outcome.

If this fact is not faced and accepted by tenants there is no point in even beginning to fight. Therefore our strongest organisation must be around the eventuality of eviction. The Flying Squad is far more important than any number of pretty speeches at meetings.

It may be that only a very small group will put themselves in a position of being evicted. The rest of the tenants, whether paying or just withholding the increase must support them. This support can be organised through the Flying Squad. At the same time we must be prepared to say to anyone facing eviction that we shall accommodate them if they should be evicted. A resolution to this effect was passed by the Action Committee. It is in the attempt to evict that the real confrontation lies. It has been so in every previous rent strike. Everything else is simply leading up to that. It will also be at this time that we will need trade union support, and our question to them is: What are they going to do?

The Law

Many people say that to defend an eviction is to break the law. This may be true. But would trade unions ever be in existence today if people had not been prepared to defy the law. Every trade unionist would stand up and salute the memory of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. They defied the law. So did the men who before them defied the Combination Acts in order to form trade unions. If the people of Glasgow had not been prepared to defy the bailiffs and the courts in 1915 we would never have had the Rent Acts. These are things we must recognise as we prepare for the battle ahead.

General Rent Strike

The possibility exists that GLC tenants will decide to pay the 1970 increase because of a lack of support. Every general has the right to withdraw his troops when he feels that he cannot win. That does not particularly matter provided he can advance at a later date. What does matter is that we are already well organised. We know from the experience of the last two years what kind of tenants' organisations are needed. We are already making contacts with other tenants' organisations in the London area. At a recent conference of tenants held in London, the majority feeling was to go ahead with the organisation of a national conference of tenants. The idea of this would be nothing more or less than to canvass support for a general rent strike to achieve a reduction of, say, £2 per week in rent.

There are about five million council tenants in this country—representing about 16 out of 55 million people. This is a greater number of people than are organised into trade unions (about 9 million). A general rent strike throughout the country is the surest way to show our power.

If we set our sights on this kind of campaign, then we see better the importance of March 2nd for GLC tenants. If it is decided to pay the March increases, people should only do this with a view to getting the money back at a later date when we organise for, say, a £2 reduction in rent. The mere thought of a general strike will send the moneylenders squealing about like little runts. Don't hang back, ORGANISE NOW. Kick all politicians out of your organisation if they cannot be controlled, and we can really get moving everywhere.

NOT A PENNY ON THE RENT.

DIARY OF GLC STRUGGLE

- 1967
- April
September
December
- 1968
- January
 - February
May
 - July
 - July 25th
 - September 22nd
October 1st
November 19th
- 1969
- January
 - February 2nd
 - April
 - April 2nd
 - July 22nd
August
 - September
October
September 25th
November 3rd
 - November 4th
- 1970
- January 12th &
13th
February 26th
- Tories win GLC elections, pledged to increase rents. NATR reject motion to set up an Action Committee to fight pending GLC rent rises.
- GLC announce 70% rent increases spread over two years.
- Publication of first GLC Tenants' Action Committee leaflet urging resistance to rent rises. Publication of *Not a Penny on the Rents*.
- Action Committee holds first full meeting.
- Prices and Incomes Board recommend rent increases reduced to 7s. 6d. a week average; 10s. maximum.
- Prices and Incomes Act 1968 makes PIB's recommendations law.
- 8,000 tenants in coffin march to County Hall return 30,000 rebate forms.
- 15,000 tenants meet in Trafalgar Square.
- Rent withholding starts.
- 20,000 tenants and trade unionists march to County Hall. Cutler, Plummer and Macey give no eviction pledge. Thames TV give full coverage.
- Letters go out to tenants threatening action in two weeks unless they pay up.
- 6,000 tenants demonstrate at Tony Greenwood's Hampstead home. Three arrests made.
- Harry Jackson taken to court for eviction. 100 tenants take over courtroom. GLC withdraws case four weeks later.
- Tony Greenwood cancels GLC's 1969 increase. Accused by Tories of reacting "too easily to demonstrations".
- Cutler announces he will evict 20,000 rent rebels. Writ issued by tenants against GLC. Eviction order against the Mackelkens.
- GLC issue notices to quit and summonses for eviction.
- Mackelkens barricade themselves in at Dagenham.
- 3,000 tenants march to Bow County Court for eviction cases.
- Tenants lose case at Bow.
- Court of Appeal uphold Bow County Court eviction order. Tenant arrested for smashing up County Hall.
- Tenant sentenced to nine months' imprisonment.