

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE HOUSING FINANCE ACT

by Leslie Sklair

Apart from the Industrial Relations Act no legislation of the Heath government of 1970-74 provoked such widespread and organised opposition within the labour movement as the Housing Finance Act (HFA). Literally thousands of marches, demonstrations, pickets and meetings were held in which hundreds of thousands of people took part. Millions of leaflets were distributed all over the country and large numbers of organisations were set up to coordinate the opposition. Hundreds of Labour councillors, by initially refusing to implement the Act, laid themselves open to surcharges and disqualification from public office. Even when all but a very few Labour councils capitulated to one or other of the battery of central government threats, up to one hundred thousand local authority tenants continued the struggle against the Act by refusing at one time or another to pay the increases imposed under it. In a few places, tenants went on total rent strike. The opposition continued throughout the whole life of the Housing Finance Act, and there can be no doubt that it was almost totally rejected by the labour movement in England and Wales, and in Scotland which had its own similar but not identical Finance Act.

Although the Industrial Relations Act attracted a vast and regular amount of national mass media coverage, in comparison the HFA rarely achieved this type of publicity. The reasons for this apparent neglect are not hard to find: in a press and broadcasting system obsessed with "the power of the unions" a withholding of labour by 5,000 workers in one place will inevitably receive far more coverage than a withholding of rent by 100 tenants in each of 50 places. Most of the activity against the Act took place outside London (particularly in Lancashire, Yorkshire, the Midlands, South Wales, and the West of Scotland); and a great deal of the struggle was borne by relatively independent tenants' organisations and not simply directed by political parties, left sectarian groups, or unions. These three ingredients—many small protests, located mainly in the provinces, and relatively autonomous working class activity—are difficult to blend into the national mass media pudding of a sheeplike working class led by the nose into radical adventures by an extremist trade union movement, revolutionary left, or even Labour Party.

In the odd cases where the fight against the Act did attract significant coverage in the national newspapers and on radio and television, namely

in Clay Cross and, to a lesser extent, in Clydebank, the attention was focussed on councillors defying the law of the land and neither the housing issues involved nor the position of the tenants received more than the scantiest mention. On the other hand, local papers throughout the country did report what was going on both where the local council was opposing the Act and where local tenants were **organising** against it. However, with these exceptions, tenants fighting the Act (which very often meant fighting their local Labour council responsible for implementing it) in one part of the **country**, could get practically no information from their local or national media about events and organisation in the rest of the country.

The main elements in the struggle against the Act were the Government and the state apparatus at its disposal, the Labour Party and Labour groups in control of local authorities, the rest of the labour movement, and the organised tenants. An examination of the role of each of these and how they impinged on one another, will allow us to draw some political lessons not only about the problems of the "parliamentary road to socialism" but also what is commonly if unhappily labelled "the prospects of revolutionary change" in Britain.

I

In July 1971 the Heath government introduced a White Paper, *Fair Deal for Housing* in which it stated with unusual clarity its intentions to raise the rents of local authority and private tenants by Act of Parliament. Those who could not afford the new so-called "Fair rents" would be eligible for a six-monthly means tested national rebate scheme. The general idea was to make the **better-off** council tenants provide the funds for rebates for less well-off tenants and to phase out direct Exchequer subsidies to council housing altogether. In short, local authorities were being compelled to charge rents which would start to make a profit for their housing account. This is not the place to enter into a detailed argument about the merits (if any) and the demerits of the **Act**,² though it is important to note the *political* point of the proposed changes in Housing Finance as agreed by both its proponents and its opponents. Like so many of the measures brought in by the Heath government, the Housing Finance Act was a direct attack on the living standards of the moderately well-off, employed working class. The myth of the over-subsidised council tenant, long a key part of Tory ideology, was to play a central role in this connection. In *Fair Deal for Housing* the point was put as follows: "Many taxpayers who pay their share of Exchequer housing subsidies (and all taxpayers do), and many ratepayers who meet the cost of rate fund contributions, are poorer and worse housed than the council tenants whom they **subsidise**."³ This is true to some extent although it obscures two vital facts. First, council tenants, of course, pay taxes and rates themselves;

second, never mentioned in the White Paper and very rarely mentioned in Tory propaganda, subsidies to owner-occupiers in the form of tax relief on mortgage interest repayments were generally higher than those to council tenants.⁴ Moreover, as the Conservatives know well enough, council tenants are important in at least two ways for the Labour Party. A significant section of hard-core Labour Party and Trade Union local leadership comes from council estates up and down the country, and in many places Labour's electoral success depends on getting out the council house voters. Many traditionally Labour controlled local authorities, especially in the North of England, Scotland and Wales appear to owe at least some of their invulnerability to their policy of low council rents and so the prospect of being compelled to raise and perhaps double rents under the Housing Finance Act was hardly greeted with much enthusiasm by them.

The Conservative Government clearly realised that the Act might well founder in the face of concerted opposition and, indeed, was obviously in no position to implement its directives without the collaboration of Labour controlled local authorities, willing or otherwise. 1971-2 were catastrophic years for Conservatives in local elections; Nearly three thousand Tory councillors had been defeated at the polls all over Britain and control of most of the major cities, and with it of most of the country's public housing stock, had passed into Labour hands.' The scene was set, therefore, for a major confrontation—and this is reflected in the Section of the Housing Finance Act where the provisions for defaulting councils appear.

The process whereby central government puts pressure on local authorities to implement legislation is not exactly fixed, though there are some traditional methods available. In this case, the procedure was set down in discrete stages. First, if there was reason to believe that the L.A. was failing in its statutory obligations under the Act, the Secretary of State for the Environment would make formal inquiries of the offending council, and if these inquiries indicated default, the non-implementing council would be informed of the intention to place a default order on it. The council would be given one month to make representations in its defence and failing this, a default order would be made with or without the evidence of a public inquiry as the Environment Secretary decided. It is notable that the Rent Act of 1957 had made a public inquiry obligatory in these circumstances and one may speculate that the Government in 1972, conscious that council rents had been creeping up in recent years, wished to prevent the knowledge of some surprisingly high council rents being widely exposed in public inquiries all over the country. In Scotland, however, where rent levels were generally rather lower than elsewhere, public inquiries were widely used in 1972 and 1973.⁶

Sanctions and penalties were of two types, and not mutually exclusive. The operation of the council itself might be taken over by a Housing Commissioner with potential total control over all housing matters; or

the government could apply the administrative withdrawal of subsidies which would effectively paralyse the building programme of the council. Then there were the additional *personal* penalties on individual councillors—the surcharges that can be (and have been) levied on councillors by the District Auditor, to make up the amount of the uncollected rent increases. Any councillor who became liable to a surcharge of £500 or more would automatically be disqualified from holding public office for five years. A further threat, always lurking in the background, was the ancient writ of *mandamus* by which a Divisional Court could compel councillors to obey the law on pain of being found in contempt of court.

Section 95 of the Housing Finance Act effectively combined the carrot with the stick. The penalties for individual councillors were very real and there was little doubt that the Tories were prepared to do what was necessary to compel obedience. Nevertheless, the processes involved and the mix of tactics used by the Government gave ample opportunity for token resistance from some councils and for substantial though in the last resort merely delaying resistance from others. The government, therefore, appeared to be planning different routes for different types of LAs and the councillors could choose where to jump off the bus. The forty-five Labour councils who maintained their refusal to implement the Bill when it became an Act on July 27th 1972 not only had to withstand pressures from the Government. They were also at the centre of a struggle within the Labour Party.

II

That the leadership of the Labour Party generally operates in terms of the ideology of Labourism—the belief that parliamentary and constitutionalist methods alone will gradually bring about socialism⁸—is clearly borne out by the official attitudes to the fight against the H.F.A. to be found in the *Report* of the 1972 Party Conference. In a rather self-congratulatory vein Conference was told that the campaign against the Housing Finance Bill "produced the longest Committee Stage fight in history.. . an unprecedented 57 sittings, including seven which lasted all through the night" and which achieved "a confused retreat by the Government on important aspects of the Bill."⁹ In preference to a resolution composed by 68 delegates which contained clear instructions on non-implementation, another was passed, moved by the A.U.E.W., which declared that Conference "supports local campaigns of tenants, trades councils and Labour Parties to spearhead the campaign against the Act." This part of the resolution was sufficiently vague to deserve the endorsement of the N.E.C. in contrast to another clause in which the N.E.C. was instructed to secure a policy of "retrospectively relieving of any councillors who suffer any penalty through their action" in the struggle against the Act. The debate around

this makes instructive reading: Frank Allaun, speaking on behalf of the Executive, was careful to transmit instructions for the N.E.C. that no such commitment could be made to defaulting councillors. With this reservation the resolution was carried but many delegates complained about this procedure and the Chairman, Tony Benn, considered that the point was important enough to call for a re-vote the next day when, uncharacteristically the N.E.C. recommendation was decisively defeated by 4,174,000 votes to 1,000,000 and the commitment to defaulting councillors became a Conference decision.¹⁰ The struggle against the H.F.A., therefore, was one in which the Labour Party and its affiliated trade unions went part of the way towards breaching the principle of "constitutionalism" as understood by the N.E.C., the Tories, and most of the British press. In its traditionally ambivalent manner the Labour Party could not quite bring itself to recommend wholeheartedly that councillors be instructed not to implement the Act although those who might suffer due to their refusal to implement were to be retrospectively indemnified of any penalties.

More or less the same thing happened in 1973, but by this time it was not non-implementing councillors in the abstract but Clay Cross councillors in the flesh who were the objects of the resolution. It was resolved that "Conference deplors the lack of initiative shown by the National Executive Committee in failing to defend the Clay Cross Council in its fight against the Housing Finance Act" and, again, that on "the election of a Labour Government all penalties, financial or otherwise, should be removed retrospectively from councillors who have courageously refused to implement the Housing Finance Act 1972."¹¹

In taking these decisions the Labour Party Conferences of 1972 and 1973 were substantially rejecting the strategy of the Party leadership over how best to fight the Act. Although the Conference had taken the point that the Party could not simply order councillors not to implement there was obviously a majority view that the Party could do more to encourage and support those who had already decided not to implement and to ensure that they did not capitulate out of a sense of isolation. The Party hierarchy, on the other hand, clearly considered non-implementation to be a totally misconceived way of opposing the Act which should be discouraged in no uncertain terms.

The contest between implementors and non-implementors within the Labour Party, however, had been largely won and lost by the time Annual Conference convened in October 1972. By a combination of warnings about the serious consequences of non-implementation and suggestions of the attractive possibilities of constructive opposition while implementing, the Party hierarchy prevailed. In May 1972 the Shadow minister of the Environment, Mr. Crosland, presented the case in a strong statement couched in uncharacteristically militarist terms: "Advice to Labour Groups—Exploit the Birmingham Salient". This referred to a Committee

Stage amendment which established that, in some cases, the first rent increase (for those councils which had not raised their rents in April 1972) on the road to so-called "fair rents" need not be as much as the £1.00 originally laid down in the Bill. Where the local authority could show that 2% of its rents would be brought "substantially" above the "fair rent" level on the impositions of the full increase then the Secretary of State for the Environment might permit a smaller increase. Birmingham, through this loophole, had managed to get a reduction—Crosland's statement suggested 35p. as the likely average rise; it turned out to be, in fact, 55p. (By the end of August Tribune was celebrating the fact that already 32 councils had won reductions ranging from 2p. to 65p.: that is, tenants in these areas would be paying 98p. to 35p. extra on their rents instead of £1.) The cost of indulging in this exercise, of course, was to start the machinery of the Housing Finance Act in motion—instruct officials to work out "fair rents", set the local plans for the means-tested national rebate scheme going, and generally to try to get the best possible deal for one's tenants within the Act. "It is still a thoroughly bad and reactionary Bill" said Crosland, but, he concluded "my advice to Labour Groups is clear. Don't talk about defying the law—that is not only wrong in principle, it's not even the best thing for your tenants. Use the law to protect your tenants. Exploit the salient which Birmingham has opened up."¹²

This advice came at a particularly sensitive time, for during May 1972 a group of prominent Labour councillors and aldermen (apparently circulating around Sir Ron Ironmonger, leader of Sheffield City Council) had arranged a meeting to coordinate opposition to the Act. On June 10th 233 delegates from 87 ruling Labour groups came to Sheffield to confer under the joint sponsorship of the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council and the City Labour Group.

It is worth noting that only two London Boroughs (Camden and Barking) attended this meeting in spite of the fact that the London Labour Party had in March 1972 already committed itself against implementation. Instead of organising this non-implementation the Executive Committee of the London Labour Party permitted the issue to be diffused to such an extent that, by the time a special conference had been arranged on the issue, several Labour councils had already decided to implement. The Labour Party opposition in London, therefore, was hopelessly fragmented. The mood of the Sheffield meeting may be gauged from the resolution which was carried by 74 votes to 1, with 5 abstentions: "That this meeting expresses its firm view that the labour movement shall not take any steps which may lead to the implementation of the Bill. In order to effectively carry into effect this political principle, it resolves to set up a working party to formulate a plan of campaign to be first submitted to a recalled conference, with a view to it being placed in front of the party conference on 8th July 1972."¹³ The proposer was Alderman Bill Sefton, leader of

Liverpool City Council. Strongly supporting the resolution, Councillor Stan Yapp, leader of Birmingham City Council, criticised the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party for refusing to provide the addresses of Labour Group leaders when requested.

So, Birmingham, Liverpool and Sheffield Labour groups supported by over seventy others, both big and small, in the middle of June seemed all set for a firm stand against implementation. A recall conference was arranged for July 1st to enable proposals to be finalised which could be put before a Labour Party Consultative Conference on Education and Housing scheduled for July 8th in London. In order to expedite this a Working Party (set up from the June 10th meeting) met on June 24th and passed the following resolution, to be put before the July 1st reconvened conference: "This conference is unanimous in its opposition to the Housing Finance Bill and agrees that the government be warned that implementation of the Bill could lead to the total breakdown of local government. Consequently a deputation to be elected, led by the Leader of the Party, and consisting of local government members and a representative of the N.E.C., to meet the Prime Minister and appropriate ministers of state and inform them accordingly." This resolution indicates a defeat for those militant councillors who wanted an early confrontation to force the government to withdraw the Bill in the face of a show of Labour local authority strength. A deputation to the Prime Minister (which, in the event, Heath politely declined) was hardly likely to make any difference to anyone. The most likely immediate cause of this appears to have been a private meeting between Harold Wilson and the leaders of Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool City Councils and the rest of the dozen largest Labour **LAs** shortly before the meeting of the working group at which Mr. Wilson indicated that the Labour Party could not campaign nationally for non-implementation. A report of this somewhat predictable encounter apparently was sufficient to swing the majority of the city authorities at Sheffield on June 24th out of the collision course. Meanwhile, the delegates to the special Labour Party Local Government Consultative Conference on July 10th had previously been issued with a background document on the dire consequences of failure to implement the Bill when it became law. It was quite clear that the Labour Party machine was not encouraging non-implementation, to say the least. The recall conference of the Sheffield group on July 1st and another meeting of the working party (to wind up the business) confirmed this trend.

How, then, was the Labour left so easily outmanoeuvred? This question—which may be legitimately asked about many campaigns in the labour movement—has no simple answer. What stands out glaringly, however, in this case is the organisation, or rather the lack of it, of the non-implementors. Although the most famous non-implementor was Clay Cross, the first local authority to express its intentions by voting against the Bill

was the tiny urban district council of Halstead, near Braintree in Essex. As early as July 1971 Councillor Bob Dixey had won a majority (with the casting vote of the chairman) for a proposal which would prohibit council officers from taking any steps to implement the Bill. This, of course, was a preemptive move against the *Fair Deal for Housing* White Paper, and it was followed by regular monthly votes which confirmed non-implementation, with the chairman's casting vote. At the end of November 1972, under the pressure of a default order, Halstead implemented.

From the very beginning of the opposition to the Bill in Halstead Bob Dixey saw the necessity to broaden the struggle into a national campaign and from the summer of 1971 more or less single-handedly he tried to do this. The council sent letters to about 1,000 LAs (all except the rural district councils) informing them of Halstead's initiative in the campaign. About three hundred acknowledgements were received but no concrete offers to help—which was not entirely surprising as the letters went from Town Clerk to Town Clerk.

Not until Clay Cross joined Halstead in declaring against implementation early in 1972 was Dixey's isolation overcome but, although the domestic situation against the Bill was far more solid than in Halstead, the facilities that Clay Cross could offer for a national campaign were similarly limited. Approaches to Transport House elicited some sympathy from individuals but no formal offers of help were given mainly because the Party was split on the best means of opposing the Act. In these circumstances non-implementors were naturally at a disadvantage against those who wanted to oppose the Act "legally".

One of the basic problems was publicity. Throughout 1972 *Tribune*, *Morning Star* and *Labour Weekly* ran fairly regular features and news reports of what was happening, but bearing in mind their very limited circulation none of them could provide an effective organizational lead for either councils or tenants. Dixey was given a free advertisement in *Tribune*, and *Labour Weekly* took up his suggestion that a register of non-implementing councils be published. However, the response to these attempts to organise resistance was meagre.

For a moment it appeared that the breakthrough had come when, in May, the London Borough of Camden by a small but apparently reliable, majority pledged itself to a policy of non-implementation. Camden, with 22,000 council tenancies, and a large and progressive political machine, could have organised a national campaign against the Bill. In spite of the gentle proddings of a few leftist councillors (who gave up trying to organise themselves after one or two attempts) Camden did not make any effort to take up the mantle of leadership of the struggle being rather desperately offered by Bob Dixey and even, to some extent, by Clay Cross. The summer was slipping away, the Bill was to be law by September or October, and Clay Cross and Dixey were still trying to organise the country!

The events at the Annual Conference of Urban District Councils Association in June 1972 were similarly depressing for the non-implementors. Halstead and Clay Cross were to fight for a non-implementation resolution in this national forum of the smaller local authorities. Unfortunately, due to some unforeseen gremlin, the invitations that Transport House claimed to have sent to Halstead and Clay Cross for the pre-Conference Labour Groups meeting, were never received. When the motion was raised the next day the other Labour Groups, confused by the surprising absence of these two prominent elements the night before and unprepared for this important debate, responded to the plea to uphold the law and rejected the policy of non-implementation. (This debate, incidentally, contains some classic contributions on the subject of council tenants, their Jaguar cars, and their £100 per week incomes.)¹⁴

The conclusion is inescapable that **noone** with the requisite facilities accepted the responsibility to organise resistance to the Bill and, as a result, much of the available energy simply drained away.

Therefore, even before the Bill became law at the end of August 1972 the militant councils and councillors had been effectively isolated within the official Labour Party, although within the labour movement as a whole they quickly attained the status of heroes if rather distant ones. For while the infantry of the PLP were tramping night and day through the lobbies of Westminster it was the local councillors voting for non-implementation of the Act who were, as one delegate to Conference in 1972 put it, "in the front line."¹⁵ They can be divided into three groups—those who never implemented (Clay Cross, Bedwas and Machen), those who held out into 1973 (Conisborough, Biggleswade and Camden in England; Merthyr in Wales; Clydebank, Cumbernauld, Denny, Saltcoats, Whitburn, Alloa, Barrhead, Midlothian and Cowdenbeath in Scotland); and the remaining thirty two implemented after October 1972 but before January 1973.

III

Bedwas and Machen has a population of 12,600, 1,700 council tenancies; 11 Labour councillors and 1 independent; Clay Cross has a population of 10,000, 1,400 council tenancies, and 11 Labour councillors. The Clay Cross story is, by now, reasonably **well-known**.¹⁶ For over ten years this electorally secure Labour council has taken a progressive stand on all the issues within its power and even on some beyond its power. An excellent record on old people's and children's welfare has been reinforced by a policy of municipalisation of all private rented accommodation in Clay Cross, and by a consistently positive attitude towards the problems of its own lower paid workers. Indeed, the council defied not only the Housing Finance Act but also the Pay Board in this latter connection. The framework within which all this rests is the commitment of the Labour group,

which captured the council in **1960** from the Independents, to put housing at the top of its list of priorities. In this it was strikingly **successful**—having pulled down slums and built more houses per **1000** population than any other council in Derbyshire in the period since **1960**. Rents were kept down by subsidy from the rates (as much as **17%** in **1969-70** as compared to a national average of 3%). However, as the Clay Cross councillors were quick to point out, this is quite insignificant when compared both to tax subsidies for owner occupiers and the vast amounts of interest the council has to repay to those from whom it borrows its money. The Housing Finance Act clearly represented the death of this low rent policy, the foundation of the "Clay Cross road to socialism", and so the council saw no alternative but to **oppose** it to the bitter end.

The key to why the ten men and one woman (and, incidentally, the second and third 'elevens' waiting in reserve) refused to implement in face of the battery of threats, penalties and legal harassment to which the government of the day subjected them lies in the local Labour Party. When the Labour group started to plan in the early sixties to rebuild Clay Cross along socialist lines they made it quite clear to the more lukewarm members of the council that they would have to adopt the majority line or resign. Some councillors did in fact resign (others were expelled) and at least two ex-Labour councillors stood in the strong but unsuccessful Residents Association challenge in the **1970** council elections. However much this might offend some notions of pluralism, it clearly got results: solidarity and unity of the eleven councillors, the constituency Labour Party, and large numbers of ordinary people in Clay Cross were the notable features of its resistance to the Act. This was, of course, in stark contrast to most of the other places where there was resistance to the Act—the most notable feature in these cases was often the serious split within the Labour group and CLP. In fact, in some cases Labour councillors were actually threatened with expulsion from Labour groups for opposing the Act or voting not to implement (for example in Rhondda and Pontypridd in Wales; St. Helens, Hull, Kirkby, Dudley, Waltham Forest and Hammersmith in England)—though, typically, there is no evidence to suggest that any implementor was threatened in this way.

The main difference between the excessively publicised Clay Cross and the massively ignored **Bedwas** and **Machen** (politically similar in many ways) is the fact that by December **1972** a Housing Commissioner had already been appointed in **Bedwas** and **Machen** and, apparently without interference from the council, was collecting the increased rents by February. So although the council had not implemented it had not actually tried to prevent the Act from working. When the Housing Commissioner was sent into **Clay Cross** in October **1973** the council refused even to let him have a room in the council offices and there were plaintive stories in the regional press of poor Mr. **Skillington** having to buy cups and a teapot

from the local Woolworths. So while **Bedwas** and **Machen** was fighting on only one front—contesting through the available machinery the dictates of the local Rent Scrutiny Board, **Clay Cross** was fighting on three fronts—in the courts, against the Housing Commissioner by obstructing his attempts to raise the rents, and by mobilising the local population. That this implied no lack of courage on the part of the councillors involved is clear, for the **Bedwas** and **Machen** group were being urged as late as September 1973 by the Housing Commissioner to implement the Act with hints that if they did so the penalties they had already incurred could be waived. It was a clear political strategy, not a willingness to make sacrifices for their constituents, which was lacking. There is no evidence that the councillors thought through the consequences of their actions to the point where their resistance could actually prevent the Act being implemented and the rents being raised. This is also true for many of the other councils which were compelled to capitulate and implement the Act. The following brief examples will put this beyond doubt.

Of the non-implementors who lasted into 1973, the London Borough of **Camden**, **Merthyr** in Wales, and **Clydebank** in Scotland provoked the three main types of strategies which the government had at its disposal to force local authorities to implement the Act. These were (a) withholding of subsidies; (b) appointment of a Housing Commissioner; and (c) use of the courts.

One of the main weaknesses of the Labour groups' initiative—the **Sheffield** conferences of summer 1972—was the virtual collapse of resistance in London shortly before. Of the 21 Labour boroughs in London, by May 1972 only four were actively resisting implementation and of these only **Camden** and **Hackney** looked at all likely to defy the **Bill** when it became law. Rather impressively, **Camden** issued a half-page advertisement in the *London Evening Standard* at the beginning of May detailing the reasons why it would not implement. The Labour group, acting with the three constituency Labour Parties in the borough and many other groups of the local labour movement set up a broadly-based **Camden** Action Committee against the Housing Finance Act, which campaigned throughout the summer and distributed tens of thousands of leaflets. In spite of a resolution from the council asking the government to send in a Housing Commissioner the majority for non-implementation (30 to 26 in August, and 28 to 20 in November) was only reversed by the threat of the loss of £8 million of subsidies which would have effectively paralysed the slum clearance and building programmes of **Camden**. Rather than take the electorally if not legally disastrous move of compensating for this loss by massive rate increases (which tenants would have been liable to pay in any case) or refusing to pay GLC precepts as proposed by some left-wing councillors, the council decided to implement by 46-15 in January 1973. It was all very predictable—the crushing nature of the subsidies

weapon had been discussed all through the campaign, it could certainly have come as no great surprise to the councillors⁷—and the more or less "constitutional" although illegal resistance of Camden council approached its end with an air of inevitability. Once again, the courage and sincerity of many councillors is not in dispute (their potential surcharges were probably in the region of £500,000), although their lack of a long-term political strategy made many rather cynical about the real point of their opposition.

In Merthyr Tydfil (population 55,000 with about 6,000 council tenancies) a Housing Commissioner was appointed in December 1972, by which time potential surcharges of over £4,000 had accrued to each Labour councillor. After some months of meetings, demonstrations, and attempts to galvanise the Welsh labour movement, the council agreed to implement the Act in March 1973 and thereby "resume full control of its housing affairs." This, of course, was a grand euphemism—the Housing Finance Act meant that local authorities had largely lost control of their housing affairs to central government. Merthyr council offered as a major factor in their defeat on this issue the reason that fewer than 2% of their tenants had responded to the call to withhold the rent increase. I shall examine the implications of this when I go on to discuss the tenants' role in the struggle against the Act, but let it suffice to say that tenants are more liable to withhold rent from a Labour council whom they are confident will not evict them than from a Housing Commissioner drafted especially to extract higher rents from them. The Commissioner broke the resistance of both the council and the tenants in Merthyr.

Clydebank differed from Camden and Merthyr in having an influential and militant Communist minority (the composition of the council during the period was 15 Labour, 3 Communist, 2 SNP and 1 independent). It differed, even more fundamentally from Camden and Merthyr, in being prepared to resist not only the Government (in the person of the Secretary of State for Scotland, Gordon Campbell) but also the Courts. It is appropriate to locate what happened in Clydebank over the Act within the context of the UCS affair and the meaning this had for the labour movement and the local political structure. Mass action had been seen to have had a real effect on a very unpromising situation and, irrespective of the actual eventual outcome of the work-in, it had undeniably thrown up popular political leaders (notably Jimmy Reid) and new forms of political organisation. It is not at all clear if Clydebank council expected to fight the attempt to have their rents raised for them in the same way—though the Labour group spokeswoman, Betty Brown, was quoted as saying that "We aren't answerable to the Court of Session but to the people". In the event although several local (and at least one large national) demonstrations were organised in conjunction with Trades Councils, individual unions and tenants associations, the main focus of the struggle was clearly in the courts rather than in the streets. After being ordered by the Court of

Session to implement the Act in January 1973 and having been fined £5,000 for refusing to do so, the council had a clear choice—either to fight the court order through other courts or elsewhere, or to pay up. They chose the latter, in the excessively optimistic hope that they would then be left alone. This, of course proved a vain hope, for as soon as the fine had been paid Gordon Campbell asked the Court of Session for a final decree against the council and, anticipating an even larger fine, on March 6th Clydebank voted unanimously to implement the provisions of the Housing (Financial Provision) Scotland Act. (Their instinct on this was quite correct for when they refused to implement the second stage of the increases in the following winter they were fined £20,000).

The logic of paying the fines and then implementing can suggest only a lack of forward planning on the part of the group of non-implementors in Clydebank and, as well as being much more costly than the opposition in Camden and Merthyr, it displays a similar lack of clarity about the real aims of the campaign.¹⁸

It is harsh but true to say that this political confusion is somewhat less characteristic of those councils whose resistance was brief. For some, refusal to implement was used as a lever to win concessions on the amount of the rent rise—Mansfield, for example, pledged that they would implement only if the Government reduced the increase from £1 to 40p, although they settled for 95p in the face of some subtle threats after two months resistance. Doncaster asked for a 75p increase and settled for 90p.

In Scotland about ten and in Wales four non-implementors waited to be found in default and implemented, claiming that their resistance had been worthwhile because it had "frozen" rents for the duration of the struggle.

The question will inevitably arise of what those hundreds of councillors who voted against implementation were actually trying to do. Many undoubtedly detested the Act and all it stood for but we cannot rule out the possibility that some of them, who were in no way opposed in principle to raising council rents, might quietly have welcomed an Act which absolved them of the responsibility for unpopular rent rises. Indeed, much of the Labour Party propaganda against the Act was concerned with its undemocratic nature in undermining local autonomy. Seen from this perspective the ease with which sometime non-implementors implemented the Act and the inability of scores of minority groups of non-implementors to do anything at all about its operation by Labour councils becomes a little more understandable.

The Labour groups in local government, therefore, acted in terms of Labourism, but not quite in the same way as the PLP at Westminster. Their version of parliamentarism was to rely primarily on what could be achieved in the council chamber; their version of constitutionalism was to refuse to implement until they were challenged, one way or another and sooner or later, by the Government. I do not believe that councillors went

into the fight against the H.F.A. with their minds made up about what they were and what they were not prepared to do to prevent the Act being implemented. Clearly, most councillors would be worried about the consequences of "breaking the law" and many councillors no doubt felt unhappy to have to rely on extra-parliamentary methods to sustain their opposition. Nevertheless, the campaign against the Act had to be "unparliamentary" and "unconstitutional" if it was to be effective, and most people realised this, in spite of all the "Birmingham-Newcastle amendment" propaganda. However reluctant the leadership of the Labour Party nationally and locally might have been to fight the Act effectively there was obviously a strong feeling in the labour movement that this was one of those bad laws which had to be opposed. While the Party Conference could exert only indirect and belated pressure on the PLP and the NEC to fight the Act, labour movement militants up and down the country could exert direct and timely pressure on Labour councils not to implement, and they did this with a certain degree of success. To understand how this pressure worked it is necessary to sketch briefly the structure of the British labour movement.

IV

It is often said that the best insurance the ruling class possesses lies within the labour movement. As long as the left continues to fragment (the argument goes) and as long as there are several embryo "revolutionary parties" being built, there appears to be little for the ruling class to worry about. The composition of the labour movement in the 1970's—all the way from T.U.C. peers to those whose main aim is to destroy the Labour Party—would tend to confirm this rough view. Although there are cases, famous cases, where almost all sections of the left are prepared to bury differences and unite in common cause (invariably for short periods over very specific issues like the jailing of the dockers in 1972 or the miners strike in 1973) in general this does not happen. The struggle against the Housing Finance Act is an instructive example of how the formal conditions for a unified campaign prove inadequate to cope with the concrete and often very predictable problems that arise.

The British labour movement is made up of mass organisations and sectarian groups. During elections the Labour Party can mobilise large numbers of people who will work extremely hard for candidates that many of them would disagree with on fundamental issues. Most of these party workers then disappear only to reappear as the next election draws near. Similarly during disputes, large numbers of union members, who rarely if ever attend ordinary branch meetings, will devote themselves to the arduous and nowadays risky business of picketing. Between elections and between strikes, however, rank and file unionists and ward members

(often of course, the same people) are extremely difficult to mobilise. I cannot here go into the large question of why this is so, although explanations in terms of the nature of mass organisations and the history and structure of working class leadership are clearly rather more reliable than psychologistic complaints about the apathy of the common people, who in any case on certain occasions have been anything but apathetic.

The sectarian left, on the other hand, is a collection of groups with relatively few members who can be and are mobilised more or less all the time, and who are involved in several campaigns simultaneously. I use the term "sectarian" in its dictionary sense to indicate a group with a common philosophy and *not* in the sense of "politically divisive". There could, of course, be a sectarian organisation of the left with a "mass" base but there never has been in Britain. A major decision that has to be taken by each of these groups concerns priorities. Given a chronic shortage of manpower and money it is not surprising, and perhaps not even reprehensible, that decisions about priorities rest as much on actual returns as on any other single factor. This emphasis on returns, mainly in the form of recruitment into the organisation, and sales of papers, helped to create an impression among tenants that they were being used for "political purposes" by militants whose opposition to the Housing Finance Act was purely instrumental.

The Communist Party and the International Socialists, as the most active sectarian organisations involved in the campaign—indeed there was hardly a rally or a march or a demonstration in any centre of significant resistance where *Morning Star* and *Socialist Worker* sellers were not in persistent evidence—attracted some hostile criticism in this respect.

There were two typical forms of organisations in most places against the Act. Either Joint Action Committees or similar bodies under a variety of titles were set up, or Federations of Tenants Associations were formed. In either case, members of the sectarian left tended to act in a co-ordinated fashion while members of the Labour Party, trades unions, or independent TAs acted in a more isolated, less organised manner. In this lay the roots of many of the problems that were to arise.

To simplify, but not to mislead seriously, once it became clear probably by October and definitely by December 1972 that the resistance by Labour councils was not going to prevent the general implementation of the Housing Finance Act, the strategy of the left was to render the Act inoperable, with the tacit collaboration of Labour councils where possible, but in direct confrontation with them if necessary. The gradual rejection of this militant posture and the adoption of the alternative *strategy*—constructive opposition within the law *à la* Crosland—by the vast majority of Labour councillors made it inevitable that the labour movement would be divided on a fundamental issue. Clearly, these two strategies demanded different tactics. To render the Act inoperable the most immediate weapon

available was the rent strike, which could take the form of a total rent and rate **strike** indefinitely or for a specified period or, more usually, a withholding of the increase in rent due to the Act. For those who wanted to oppose within the law the most popular tactic was for the council, sometimes with tenants' associations and the local Labour Party to make representations to the Rent Scrutiny Board to ensure that the "fair rents" for the area were **fixed as low as possible.**¹⁹

Local trade union support for the various campaigns against the Act all round the country was to some extent inhibited by the attitude of the national organisation. The T.U.C. generally restricted itself to technical arguments with the Government over the actual consequences of the H.F.A. and verbal support for non-implementors. As Vic Feather put it in a letter to all affiliated organisations in August 1972: "The General Council wish to express their support for those authorities which decide, in the light of the hardship the Bill will impose on their tenants, not to discharge the responsibilities laid on them in Parts V and VI of the Bill. . . it is of course on the Council that legal responsibility in relation to the Act will ultimately **devolve.**"²⁰ So, like the Labour Party, while not exactly encouraging non-implementation, the T.U.C. held out some vague hope to non-implementors that help from the mass organisations of labour might be forthcoming.

The Welsh Council of Labour issued a rather more direct call from a conference convened in Cardiff by the N.U.M. (South Wales Area) in July 1972, where it was decided "that Labour councillors be advised to refuse to implement the Housing Finance Bill when it becomes an Act," but even here "it was recognised that the Conference could do no more than recommend to Groups the action they should take."²¹

With the T.U.C. unwilling to mobilise trade unionists to fight the H.F.A. the task of organising locally fell on the Trades Councils and individual union branches. In scores of towns unionists (particularly but by no means exclusively from the N.U.M. and A.U.E.W.) joined with non-implementing councillors and tenants in marches and demonstrations against the Act, and in Corby (June 1972), Liverpool, and Dundee (October 1972) thousands joined in official stoppages in support of **non-implementation.**²² However, with very few exceptions, when the councils capitulated *official* union support for opposition to the Act beyond verbal behaviour tended to lapse and the fight against the implementing councils **was** carried on by militants who, although often members and sometimes even "representatives" of unions on joint bodies, had no real mandate for anything. In spite of promises and optimistic sounds, these people could usually deliver nothing in the way of concrete support for tenants. As we shall see later, even threats of eviction and the actual jailing of tenants refusing to pay off withheld arrears elicited no more than token opposition from the organised trade union movement. In all of this it would be foolish to ignore the fact

that in this period unionists were primarily concerned with the struggle against the Industrial Relations Act.

Sections of the mass organisations of the labour movement, **therefore**—the Labour Party and the Trade Unions were involved in a militant campaign against the Act, which tapered off around November—December 1972 as previously defaulting Labour Councils began to implement the hated legislation with surprisingly few difficulties. The sectarian **left**—principally the Communist Party and the International Socialists, plus the then Socialist Labour League, International Marxist Group and some other groups in odd places—having been released from their disconcerting commitments to support non-implementing Labour "heroes" around this time, tried to take up the political leadership of the various tenants struggles and began to try to seize the initiative created by the rent strikes and to turn it to more general ends.

It is easy to argue that this outcome was a foregone conclusion, directly predictable from the Labourist perspective of the mass organisations of the labour movement. I do not think that the evidence quite bears this interpretation, for although it is true that Labourism prevailed it did not do so without a struggle and the points at which the Labour Left, for example, failed to consolidate their position can be identified. The **non**-implementors started to organise nationally too late, their organisation was too fragile, and they did not capitalise on the support which existed in the labour movement as a whole. These failings were not simply practical, but neither were they exclusively matters of principle. The failure, however, to mobilise popular support was particularly serious due to the frail nature of the tenants movement.

V

Tenants' associations are **particularly** transient affairs—the unwritten history of the British working class has several relatively spontaneous outbursts in which tenants come together, act, then melt away leaving no enduring organisation. The most famous of these is probably the massive rent strike during the First World War in Glasgow when housewives and munitions workers joined together to resist rent rises imposed by the Glasgow Property Owners in January and April 1915. Tenants' groups sprang up all over Glasgow and elsewhere in Scotland to fight these rises and such pressure was sustained that the Government was forced to pass the first Rent Restriction Act. There is, however, no evidence that these militant and successful tenants' associations built on their successes by trying to improve their housing situation in general, or even stayed in existence. Much the same can be said about the tenants struggles in the East End of London in the 1930s and those up and down the country after 1945.²³

The National Association of Tenants and Residents (NATR) was founded in 1948 on the initiative of the Communist Party to organise people nationally on the basis of their housing situation. As the name suggests NATR does not concern itself exclusively with council tenants although the majority of its several hundred affiliated associations contain local authority tenants and between 1971 and 1974 its main energies went into opposing the Housing Finance Act.

To say that NATR is communist-inspired is not to say that all the people and organisations active within it are themselves inspired by or even sympathetic to the Communist Party. The fact of the matter is that those in the tenants movement who wished to have a national forum could either join NATR or try to construct an alternative. It was not until September 1973 that an alternative was attempted, on the initiative of the International Socialists—the National Tenants Action Committee—by which time the rent strikes were in their last stages.²⁴ For the most part, the national tenants campaign against the Housing Finance Bill and then the Act, such as it was, focussed around the activities of the NATR.

The first serious move in the campaign was a National Conference called by NATR for the end of **July** 1972 in London to decide tactics. Strategy, in general terms, was plain—help elect a Labour government pledged to Socialist policies and the Housing Finance Act would be repealed. The main tactic proposed by the platform was that of pressure on Labour councillors to vote against implementation and to lobby Labour MPs to oppose the legislation in Parliament. There were no platform proposals on rent strikes and very real tension developed between the floor and the organisers.²⁵ The result, predictably, was that apart from a continuing commitment that the tenants' movement should support the non-implementation campaign, little was done to organise tenants' resistance to the rent increases which would inevitably come in the autumn. This was all the more significant since the local authority non-implementation campaign was crumbling fast and most activists realised this. To complicate matters further for NATR, their lack of decisive action was reinforced by the fact that some affiliated **TAs** did not appear to want a rent strike and, in any case, the resources of the national organisation were probably insufficient for this purpose.

A national rally in Trafalgar Square on the Sunday before the rent rises came into force (Oct 2nd 1972) was the main concrete consequence of **NATR's** efforts over the summer and although this attracted perhaps 3,000 people and tenants' associations from all over England, Scotland and Wales, the demand for a national rent strike against the increases was not met by the only tenants' organisation in a position even to consider this on a national scale, although scores of **affiliated TAs** went ahead on their own initiative. The limited facilities and mobilising power of NATR were split between the support of that small and rapidly diminishing band of

non-implementing councils and tenants facing rent rises up and down the land. But money, manpower and materials to coordinate rent strikes were in short supply. The paradox, of course, was that non-implementing heroes were transformed almost overnight, once they had voted to implement, into nothing much better than the collectors of the increased rents and the potential evictors of those tenants who had taken their fighting speeches about unjustified rent rises and anti-working class legislation seriously.

If the national tenants campaign had never really got off the ground, the story was quite different in scores of council estates. The fact that **noone** had been able to organise a national rent strike did not stop the tenants of at least eighty local authorities from drawing the conclusion that the only way left to fight the Housing Finance Act was to withhold the rents imposed by it.

In this brief account I can only begin to indicate the events which occurred in the main centres of tenants' resistance, but before doing this it is worth looking at one interesting fact that emerges from an analysis of the relationship between the activities of the tenants and the activities of their councils. Clearly, it would be a near-impossible task to document what went on in hundreds of Labour controlled local authorities during 1972-4. Nevertheless, we can look at the rather more manageable group of forty-five Labour councils which actually refused to implement the Act as contrasted with those whose resistance was confined to the Bill.

In over two thirds of the forty-five places where the council refused to implement the Act there is no evidence of any rent-striking; in only a dozen or so places, therefore, where the council resisted did the tenants organise and carry through withholding of rents—in Salford, Mansfield, Clay Cross, **Camden**; **Bedwas** and Machen, Merthyr, Pontardawe and Ystradgynlais; and several places in **Scotland**.³⁶

These facts can be interpreted in at least two ways. First, one could argue that about a third is quite a high rent strike proportion in the circumstances—given much evidence about the dangers and difficulties of withholding rent. However, when we consider that at least eighty separate rent strikes took place in this period (1972-3)—to put it in a different perspective, 80 per cent of the rent strikes occurred in places where the Labour council implemented the Act in good time—another interpretation of the facts suggests itself. Strange though it may appear, it looks almost as if tenants' militancy, as measured by the will to withhold rent, is rather more likely to manifest itself where the council quietly implements than where it puts up a fight. A glance at the exceptions to this tentative rule makes it even more plausible. The main thread that runs through the stories of most of our exceptions is that of independent tenants' organisation, separate from and sometimes antagonistic to their councils (e.g. in **Camden**, Mansfield and Pontardawe).

Although it cannot yet be decisively documented, the perspective of

most of the tenant organisations in the places where the councils resisted implementation (and indeed in many other places) was restricted to support of the council and to an excessively optimistic reliance on what could be achieved in the council chamber. This perspective was not only shared by the Trade Unions and the Labour Party as such but, in a negative sense, was transmitted by them through the Labour councillors to the tenants. By this I mean that, in the absence of any other strategy made credible by the *organisation* of the labour movement, the tenants of fighting councillors were inevitably confused as to how they too could fight—aside from the necessary but clearly ritual performance of duties like marching, rallying, booing district auditors, and signing petitions. It is a most significant fact that in the report from the place where the council went furthest in defying the law—Clay Cross—there is no mention of any active Tenants Association as distinct from the widespread public support for the council,

In the struggle against the Housing Finance Act councillors were given a unique opportunity to test their powers of leadership not in committees but on the housing estates—with a few notable exceptions those who even tried it out found it much too difficult and returned gratefully to the committee rooms. Not only were the tenants in many places deprived of their popular leaders but in too many cases they were forced to fight against them²¹

A rent strike is a very complex phenomenon. It has a pre-history, a set of precipitating factors, an organisational and an ideological structure, a case history, and an outcome. In a forthcoming study I hope to look at the rent strikes in response to the Housing Finance Act in these terms but here I can only select a few cases to illustrate briefly what happened.

The typical rent strike—insofar as there was one—involved people who had had some previous experience in a housing campaign, perhaps on another estate, and many tenants leaders, though by no means all of them, were already playing an active part in the life of the labour movement in their locality. The history of previous rent strikes had their effects in many places, for example in Hackney, **Camden**, Brent, Stockport, Chadderton, Liverpool and in the West of Scotland. The influence of previous struggles varies from place to place and, of course, according to the success, failure or otherwise of the struggle. In London, for example, the great rent battles of the United Tenants Action Committee (UTAC) in the late 1960s meant that both a relatively experienced, though to some extent discredited leadership, as well as a large body of tenants who had been on lengthy rent strikes were **present**.²⁸ Similarly, in Liverpool, the 1969 rent increases had precipitated a rent strike which lasted six months and had won a small concession—a reduction of 12½p (2/6d) in the rent—and this experience had shown what was **possible**.²⁹ In both these cases, however, though in London rather more than in Liverpool, damaging political

differences had developed in the tenants' movement (or rather between various elements trying to prevail within the tenants' movement).

The precipitating factors in the 1972-3 rent strikes were, clearly, the rent increases imposed under the Housing Finance Act. But it is also clear that there was much more to it than that in many places. Time after time the evidence from the tenants' associations relates actual 'fair' rents levels (which, with rates, heating and other charges often meant doubled or trebled rents) to the *conditions* of the estates. The argument was not so much that the rents in themselves were so high in relation to housing costs in the private sector—although the campaign to inform tenants that almost all their rent went back to the financial institutions in interest payments was generally rather effective—but that the accommodation and environment of some local authority estates was not worth any rent. The reasons for the deterioration of council housing and the delapidation of estates cannot be discussed here, whatever the causes, but some tenants felt deeply and bitterly about the conditions in which they had to live and for which they were now being asked to pay more and more each half-year. Indeed, in several cases, small groups of tenants during the period fought rent strikes over the maintenance and repairs issue (often euphemistically termed 'modernisation') in apparent isolation from the struggle against the Housing Finance Act.³⁰ The precipitating factors in the rent strikes, therefore, were not only the rent rises but also a worsening of repairs and maintenance on the estates.

With one or two notable exceptions, the level of organisation of the rent strikes was, however enthusiastic, flimsy. Tenants' associations appear to be of two types. First, there are those TAs whose leadership has never altered except through death or change of address, and whose activities are almost exclusively of a routinised social character. They organise clubs for young and old, they run extremely lucrative bars for the adults on the estate to pay for Xmas treats for pensioners and the rule is invariably 'no politics' which boils down to endorsing the current views of the centre to right wing of the local Labour Party or, occasionally, the local Conservative Party. The second type of TA is what might be termed 'issue-oriented'. It tends to spring up around a particular grievance (e.g. rents, maintenance, motorway proposals), fights a brief though intense campaign, and quickly disappears, leaving just enough trace so that the next campaign need not start entirely from scratch. The continuity, such as it is, is often provided by local 'politicals', some imported for the purpose, others recruited during a period of activity. A rapid review of the blossoming literature by and on the literally thousands of 'community groups' that have flourished in the last five years or so attest to the perceived potential of tenants' associations for what is supposed to be the current revolution in community politics.

Where these two types of TAs met—in Tenants' Federations, in Coordinating Committees, in Joint Action Groups, etc.—there were bound

to be differences in style, in organisation and, above all, in ideology. Whether the leaders of long-standing TAs were unwilling to risk their reputations as staunch citizens in the adventure of a rent strike or whether they were willing to advise their members to withhold the increase, the ultimate goal was usually to elect a Labour government which would repeal the Act and, hopefully, rescind the increases. For many of the TAs founded in 1972, in direct response to the Housing Finance Act and the way that it highlighted all that was wrong with housing in Britain, the election of a Labour government was only a **first** step. For a growing number of activists in the labour movement it was the whole system of housing for profit, irrespective of whether the profit was collected through private or municipal channels for the financiers, that was the root cause of the perennially manufactured 'housing crisis'. The struggle against the Housing Finance Act presented a perfect opportunity to disseminate this idea and to penetrate deeply into the working class to organise militant action around it. A summary of a few case histories of rent strikes around the country will indicate how this was done and with what success.

VI

The largest, best organised and longest-lasting rent strikes in England took place in two towns bordering large cities—Kirkby on the outskirts of Liverpool, and Dudley on the fringe of Birmingham.³¹ The Labour councils in both implemented, albeit grudgingly, as soon as the Bill became law and in each a few militant councillors continued to fight the Act and its consequences alongside the tenants. In terms of tenants organisation, too, there were important similarities. In each town coalitions of estate tenants associations were formed in the late summer of 1972—the Kirkby Unfair Rents Coordinating Committee brought together Liverpool Corporation overspill tenants from Southdene, Northwood and Westvale estates and the Kirkby Council tenants from the massive, newer, Tower Hill estate. The Dudley Tenants Association (DTA) tried to co-ordinate the efforts of thirty separate TA Committees, but with a management committee of thirty members, many of whom were totally inexperienced in TA work, the weekly meetings were bound to be difficult. In Kirkby the Liverpool Corporation tenants began by withholding the increase and support for this action soon dwindled, whereas on Tower Hill estate a tactic of total rent and rate strike was adopted and was carried on by several hundred tenants for over a year. In Dudley, the DTA organised around 15,000 tenants withholding their 80p increases at the end of 1972. During 1973, partly in response to the success the local Labour Party was having in recruiting tenants' leaders, a rival Dudley Tenants and Rate-payers Association (DTRA) (sometimes referred to as the Dudley Socialist Tenants and Ratepayers Association), based mainly on the Sedgley,

Pensnett and Gornal estates, took over leadership of the more militant tenants. In October 1973, when the DTA finally felt that it could no longer withstand the pressure being exerted on it by the Labour council to end the rent strikes, it recommended that tenants should start paying the increases (an extra 54p had now been added to the original 80p) and paying off their arrears of nearly 5300,000, and so the D(S)TRPA became the only tenants' organisation in Dudley willing to carry on the rent strike. A letter from a Dudley councillor to the *County Express* in November 1973 indicated that 2,000 tenants were then withholding the increase and another 2,000 were not paying off their arrears.

A key factor in both the Tower Hill Unfair Rents Action Group (THURAG) and in the D(S)TRPA was the involvement of the International Socialists, in person in Tower Hill and rather more distantly in Dudley. The acknowledged and popular spokesman of THURAG, Tony Boyle, had joined IS as a result of his experiences in a local industrial dispute. His own political contacts, especially with militants in the Merseyside labour movement, were to prove invaluable for the tenant struggle, although, as we shall see, he and Tower Hill could not bridge the gulf between the promises people offered as representatives and what they could deliver as delegates. It would be quite wrong to imply that through Boyle, IS organised the rent strike in **Kirkby**, for there were active members of the Communist Party, the Labour Party, and no party prominent in the leadership of THURAG: indeed Boyle and Maurice Lee, a member of the CP (who worked together very closely and effectively) were to some extent mavericks who were being threatened with disciplinary action from their respective political groups for their semi-autonomous activities on Tower Hill. It is probable that the solidarity achieved by the tenants was in no small measure due to the fact that Boyle, Lee and others in the leadership consistently put the interests of the tenants before the interests of the IS, CP, or any other organisation. Similarly in Dudley, although IS were helping (e.g. in the printing of a tenants' paper *Dudley Tenant and Ratepayer*, through S W Litho) there is no evidence to suggest that in any sense the International Socialists were running the rent strikes. Nevertheless, in both **Kirkby** and Dudley some of the local tenants' leaders were either members of or influenced by the IS and they were providing the sort of leadership to large numbers of tenants which the Labour Party was patently unwilling or unable to provide. Time after time tenants complained that it was only during election campaigns that the Labour councillors took any notice of them and appeared in any way to consider their problems. In Dudley, for example, Councillor Phipps (now M.P. for Dudley West) produced proposals for 'Tenant Participation in the Dudley District' just before the local elections. When Labour had successfully defended its position in these elections the proposals were apparently allowed to fade away and the DTA settled for five coopted

voting members on the Housing and Estates Committee. For an **organisa-tion** which had just been running one of the largest rent strikes in recent British history this was not much of a victory!

The ways in which the respective Labour councils went about breaking up the rent strikes in **Kirkby** and **Dudley** were rather different and largely mirrored the ways in which the tenant organisations themselves differed. By the time **Kirkby** council were considering their first moves against **Tower Hill**, in the middle of November **1972**, the tenants there had already achieved a notable success locally. At the beginning of October, twenty-four men from the **Birds Eye** frozen food factory in **Kirkby** had taken a day off to attend a rents' demonstration in **Liverpool** and were subsequently suspended—the two shop stewards in their number were actually sacked. On learning about this the **Kirkby** tenants mounted a massive picket at the factory gates and, by means of a well-organised brigade of mothers with prams, succeeded in stopping production and forcing the **Birds Eye** chairman to reinstate the workers. This tenant-worker solidarity had both positive and negative effects for the tenants' campaign. Positively, it created something of a stir in **Merseyside** by demonstrating that the tenants, on **Tower Hill** at least, were prepared to take direct action to achieve their goals, and were capable of doing so. Negatively, the euphoria that the **Birds Eye** incident helped to spread in **Tower Hill** raised tenants' expectations of potential union support to an unrealistic level. However, when the first hint of eviction notices came from the council, to seven tenants whom the council claimed had already been in serious arrears before the rent strike, **THURAG** already felt strong enough for a **pre-emptive** show of force. One rush hour, hundreds of tenants blocked the main roads which run alongside the estate (important feeders to the **West Lancs** motorway) and effectively paralysed traffic in and out of the town. Just before Christmas **1972** the council decided to send out warning letters to the rent strikers, whose numbers had declined from about **1,500** to between **550** and **800**, and by **March 1973** the council, no doubt themselves under close scrutiny from the district auditor over their fast mounting arrears, began to get tough. At a meeting of the housing committee from which tenants had been ejected violently by the police, it was announced that court orders would be used to collect rents from the strikers. All through the spring and the summer the tenants returned all correspondence from the courts and the council collectively with 'on rent strike' written across. By November the *Sunday Telegraph* was reporting that tenants were now in contempt of court by refusing to attend court hearings and that they had undertakings from supporters in the docks and factories of **Merseyside** that eviction or imprisonment would be met with industrial action. By the beginning of December those in the forefront of the rent strike at **Tower Hill** were preparing to resist evictions. Clearly everything now depended on the promises of industrial action and the hope

that, as in the case of the Pentonville dockers, mass protest would force the Heath government once again to discover some way in which political prisoners could be released. In the event winter 1973 was not summer 1972, with Christmas near, a new miners' strike looming, widespread prophecies of doom circulating from all the mass media, probably a certain amount of resentment against people who had been paying no rent or rates for over a year, and finally a measure of unwillingness from the Labour and Communist Party dominated Merseyside labour movement to take such drastic steps to salvage what might well have appeared as an IS initiative—mass industrial action was not forthcoming. In all, seven Tower Hill tenants were imprisoned before THURAG agreed to start discussing with the council how to end the strike on December 18th. A dignified settlement was reached and the tenants agreed to pay off their arrears (up to a maximum of £1 per week). Neither the development of solidarity and political education on the estate and outside it, nor the disillusionment of the end of the rent strike can be measured, but anyone who considers the Tower Hill rent strike a failure betrays a sad lack of perspective on the possibilities of mass action in contemporary Britain.

In Dudley the council began to break the rent strike by trying to incorporate as many of the tenants' leaders as it could into the local Labour Party. The timing of this coincided with the run-up to the 1973 council elections when the Labour Party were rather worried that they might lose seats to tenants' candidates. A certain amount of accommodation between the council leadership and some of the tenants' leaders (for example, the threatened slate of tenants' candidates did not materialise) probably accounts for the apparent reluctance of the council to take definite action against the thousands of rent strikers and for the rather remarkable fact that in October of 1973 the Dudley West constituency Labour Party actually resolved that the Labour group on the council should ask for a housing commissioner to be appointed to clear up the mess. One tenant who was already in the Labour Party was Mrs. Beatrice Jones who resigned at this time before they had the chance to expel her, to continue to lead the DTA and threaten to stand against Labour in the next council elections. With the final collapse at the end of October of DTA's will to maintain their rent strike, Dudley council began to send notices to quit to tenants in arrears. When these notices expired (from late November) the rent strikers had their rent books withdrawn and replaced by buff coloured occupiers cards which formally meant that the council were no longer accepting any rents from defaulting tenants, and that money collected would be classed as 'occupancy costs'. Rent books would be returned when all arrears had been paid off, and with this inspired piece of psychological warfare the back of the rent strike was effectively broken.

The main differences between THURAG and D(S)TRPA were in the form and the level of organisation. In Tower Hill, the estate was cohesive

and although only between a quarter and a half of the tenants were on total rent and rates strike for more than a few months the general level of support for the rent strike was very high, as was the consequent mobilisation. The estate was organised into block committees, flying pickets against evictions were set up, and weekly open meetings were consistently held. Names, addresses and telephone numbers of the block stewards were circulated and a regular and very informative newsheet was produced. In Dudley none of these conditions, except weekly meetings, was very much in evidence. One must not forget two key factors: the D(S)TRPA was operating in a much larger town and for many estates; the Dudley strike consisted in withholding increases, with some tenants paying the first increase and refusing to pay the second or vice versa, whereas in Tower Hill everyone in the hard core of two to three hundred was on total rent and rates strike. For the Tower Hill tenants, therefore, the rent strike was a total commitment. For the Dudley tenants it could not be much more than a protest, however important it was to the people involved. There is no clearer indication of this than that Tower Hill tenants were prepared to go to jail, and did so, while the Dudley tenants never conceived their situation in these terms.

With few exceptions, Dudley rather than Kirkby was the pattern of rent strikes in 1972-3. The events in Bolton, for example, were typical. The council (then 52 Labour members to 40 Conservatives, with over 14,000 council dwellings and a total population of 154,000) had won a reduction of 30p on the October 1972 average increase from the Secretary for the Environment, which meant that the newly formed Bolton and District Tenants' Federation were organising a rent strike to withhold an average of 70p per week. The Federation, whose spokesman Neil Duffield appeared to have some access to the columns of the *Bolton Evening News*, coordinated the activities of at least seven local TAs. Typically, a few Labour councillors were sympathetic and even helpful to the tenants but they made a point of disassociating themselves firmly from rent strikes. About 500 tenants were withholding the increases in October 1972, particularly on the large Brightmet estate, but the campaign suffered a serious setback at the end of October when not one union official responded to an invitation from the Tenants Federation to a meeting to discuss the local fight against the HFA. Some individual branch members did turn up but Duffield was realistic enough to point out the crucial difference between those who were and those who were not authorised to speak for the unions. During November and December, while the numbers withholding in Bolton declined, the Federation sent contingents to rents demonstrations in Manchester and Clay cross, and at least one meeting in Bolton was addressed by the chairman of the Oldham and District Tenants' Association. Duffield spoke of a North-West regional organisation against the Housing Finance Act, and rent strikers from Liverpool, Kirkby,

Manchester, **Bolton** and **Bootle** were certainly involved in this initiative which resulted in one regional conference in Manchester early in 1973 organised by IS and was the forerunner of the National Tenants Action Committee formed in September 1973.

Meanwhile, the situation in **Bolton** took a critical turn in March 1973 when council officials, apparently over the head of Councillor Urmston, chairman of the Housing Committee, started proceedings for the bailiffs to seize the furniture of the five remaining withholders ('rent rebels' as they were generally called). A march and demonstration in support of the tenants which attracted 200 people, including contingents from **Kirkby**, **Manchester** and **Oldham**, plus Councillor Urmston and three other **Bolton** councillors, persuaded the council to call off the bailiffs and the stickers were duly removed from the furniture. Duffield claimed this as a victory but Urmston made it perfectly clear that it was the choice of bailiffs and not action against the rent rebels to which he objected. Attachment of earnings emerged as the solution to the problem. The definitive break came in April when, having sat through a five-hour housing committee meeting, Duffield was refused permission by Urmston to speak in defence of another tenant under notice of eviction for withholding. In a letter printed soon after in the local paper Duffield criticised the Labour group for obstructing the rent strike and for refusing to join with the tenants against the Act—he wouldn't be voting Labour again, he said.

In July **Bolton** Corporation was appealing to the government for a reduction on the statutory **50p** a week increase—the Housing Finance Act was rolling along in **Bolton**, and the **Bolton** and District Tenants' Federation, while not entirely forgotten, lapsed.

Oldham (and particularly the estates in **Fitton Hill** and nearby **Royton** and **Chadderton**) was another centre of resistance in the North West. Again, it was not until September-October 1972 that the **Oldham** and District Association of Tenants and Residents began to organise the local campaign. The Central Committee of the Association, covering a broad spectrum of political affiliations from Conservative tenants' leaders to Communists, adopted a 'no politics' position which, in the event, meant that each political tendency felt free to work for itself. Certainly the mood of the tenants was militant—the *Oldham Evening Chronicle* carried a lurid report of a march supported by about 3,000 people at which women spat on placards containing the names of the 31 implementing councillors, which were placed in a coffin along with the rent increase notices and born away to the strains of a dirge played by a lone piper of the **Oldham** Scottish Pipe Band. In all, somewhere between 3,650 and 5,500 (out of about 16,500) tenants refused to pay some or all of their rents for the first few weeks of the increase.

The attitude of the council, on which there was a Labour majority of sixteen, was typical in that although no-one spoke in defence of rent

strikes there was clearly a feeling of anxiety in the Labour group over the possible repercussions of evictions. So much so that in February 1973 the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Housing Committee instructed an official to call personally on a tenant to **apologise** for a letter 'mistakenly' sent to a withholder threatening eviction. This was 'caused by a computer error' and all allegations of victimisation were strenuously **denied**.³³ By this time there were between 1,500 and 2,000 tenants withholding and, although cracks were beginning to appear in the Central Committee and it was becoming increasingly obvious that union **support** (with the partial exception of the AUEW) would not materialise, it was nevertheless also clear that a substantial hard core of tenants were determined to fight the HFA and defend their rent strike. In March, using a threat from the District Auditor as an excuse, the council agreed reluctantly to act against the withholders and this resolution **culminated** in 400 summonses being sent out for recovery of arrears in September. Proceedings in the County Court for attachment of earnings were under way when, in December, with the end of the rent strike in Tower Hill, the **Oldham** and District tenants accepted the inevitability of their situation and called off their rent strike.

In **Sheffield** the campaign against the Housing Finance Act got under way in 1971 with the production of a newsletter on the White Paper by the Sheffield Coordinating Committee for Tenants, Residents and Community Associations—a broad based coalition of city groups with Labour and Communist Party backing. A petition against the Act collected **22,000** signatures (out of a total population of half a million with 76,000 council tenancies) but this proved insufficient to prevent the City Council (with a Labour majority of 60 out of 108 seats) from voting by 53-42 to implement in August. The tenants were able to win a no-eviction pledge in November and, with the help of a joint committee working alongside the Trades and Labour Council, some union money (particularly from AUEW branches) was channeled into the campaign. It is not certain how many tenants were withholding the increase at the end of 1972—probably several hundred withheld for a month or so, but there were signs that not all of the dozen tenants' associations which made up the Coordinating Committee were wholeheartedly in favour of a rent strike. In February the *Sheffield Morning Telegraph* reported a serious split in the Coordinating Committee between "moderates" and "militants" over several issues, but one may speculate that the main issue was the failure of the rent strike and the fact that with the exception of estates like **Birley Moor** where the TA continued to leaflet and hold meetings, many of the **TAs** were quietly allowing the rent strike to lapse. By June 1973 about 150 withholders remained but the council appeared to have no plans for punitive action against them. In fact, in August Sheffield City Council Labour Group narrowly failed (by **40-45**, the latter including a dozen Labour aldermen) to defeat the

implementation of the next **50p** rent rise. The Coordinating Committee once again threatened to withhold the increases, but without much conviction. As in other big cities such as Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds, there were groups of withholders scattered around rather than one centrally coordinated rent strike although, on the other hand, no big city council mounted a concerted campaign to evict or otherwise punish withholders.

In contrast, the councils of some smaller towns in Yorkshire, like Kiveton Park, Hoyland, Barnsley, Knottingley and Wombwell appeared far less prepared to tolerate the actions of their militant tenants. A centre of resistance was Barnsley, where a Joint NUM and Tenants Coordinating Committee was set up in November 1972 to organise the campaign from the miners' lodges and the South Yorkshire Tenants Association. By December Kiveton Park R.D.C. was threatening to evict withholders, who had numbered about 700 (out of 2,500 tenants); Knottingley U.D.C. was threatening to evict one total rent striker and to attach the earnings of those on partial rent strike, and Wombwell U.D.C. had called the police to eject tenants demonstrating in the public gallery against the rent rises. One extraordinary situation was that while the NUM was organising to fight the threatened evictions all 15 councillors in Wombwell (14 Labour and 1 Liberal) were NUM members! Luckily, the resolution of these councillors was never put to the test as the Wombwell tenants decided to withhold the increase for only four weeks, and probably five hundred of them did so. In Hoyland, the council fought a long running battle with Les Levitt, President of the Hoyland TA, who had joined the Labour Party in February 1972 and had been expelled in February 1973. In November 1973 the council finally achieved an attachment order on his earnings.

In these Yorkshire towns, therefore, and in others, thousands of tenants withheld the increases for short periods but any mass support for rent strikes was quickly eroded by the aggressive actions of the Labour councillors whose threats of evictions and court proceedings frightened the tenants into paying up. A comment from a Liverpool tenant is very relevant here—describing a previous rent strike which was met with immediate threats of eviction from the council, she wrote: "what they had not bothered to find out was that this particular heavy rent increase brought forward militancy among responsible tenants who were fed up with continued rent increases without any signs of improvement in conditions."³³

The rent strikes in Wales, typically, began with large numbers withholding for a few months and then consolidating to a small hard core as a result of council threats. In Llantrisant and Llantwit, Neath, and Rhondda, after initially inclining to a no-eviction policy, the councils began to initiate serious legal action against the withholders. Llantrisant and Llantwit's new Labour council had in fact imposed **38p** increase as early as April 1972 in anticipation of the Bill becoming law and the Tenants Action Group, with

the support of five local miners' lodges, had been organising the withholding of this increase by about **2,000** tenants. Communication between this council and its tenants seemed to have been particularly poor. A no-eviction pledge wrung from the council in November by the **750-1,000** tenants still withholding at that time resulted in a campaign to defend the councillors who had taken this step; at the end of January, however, the mood changed dramatically when the hundreds of tenants who had turned up to cheer their no-eviction councillors heard the council unanimously backing a resolution to take legal proceedings against the remaining **600** rent strikers to compel them to pay up **£12,000** in arrears. This apparent change of mind was no doubt keenly associated with the council's own 'fair rent' assessments which would mean that on average the tenants would pay **5p** less—what the rent scrutiny board for the area would decide in its arbitrary wisdom no one could know.³⁴ By March there were less than **100** withholding, and by the beginning of July only Alf Williams, chairman of the local Tenants' and Residents' Association, remained to defend himself against the council's summons.

In Rhondda by November, **60** tenants on one estate received eviction notices—there were perhaps **300** withholding in the whole of Rhondda—but the council quickly and rather ominously assured the tenants that no action would be taken until January. By February **1973** threats of eviction and attachment of earnings had whittled the withholders down to a few dozen and, as elsewhere, isolated and with no real hope of the vague union promises being transformed into action, they were unable to carry on the rent strike.

In an attempt to broaden the base of resistance the South Wales Joint Tenants and Residents and Trades Union Committee Against the Rent Act had succeeded in organising a thousand strong march in Cardiff at the end of October, but was doing little else to encourage either the rent strikers or non-implementing councils. A more restricted and probably more effective organisation was the **Swansea Valley Tenants' Federation**, coordinating the efforts of tenants and unionists in **Swansea**, Pontardawe, Ysnadgynlais, and other places. There were certainly around two thousand tenants on partial rent strike in this area in **October/November** and prospects for trade union support looked good due to the serious involvement of the **Swansea Valley Trades Council** in the campaign. As the local authorities began to make menacing noises about evictions and attachment of earnings against the withholders, the Trades Council called for an emergency meeting of the Glamorgan Federation of Trades Councils to commit the unions to industrial action in defence of tenants threatened with evictions. The response to these suggestions in January **1973** was distinctly unenthusiastic, and it became clear that, despite the efforts of some militants in a few branches, the full weight of the union apparatus in South Wales would not be at the disposal of rent strikers. The **Swansea Tenants Federation**, seeing

the writing on the wall, called off their strike in the middle of January and, with the exceptions of small groups of withholders here and there, the **Swansea** Valley Tenants Federation ceased to function as the organiser of a major rent strike.

In London, organised withholding took place mainly in Barking, **Camden**, Hackney and Greenwich, with more sporadic activities in Wandsworth. In Barking a Joint Action Committee was set up in the autumn of **1972** on the initiative of the local government committee of the Barking Labour Party. This included all eight local **TAs**, unions and trades councils, and Communist and Labour Parties. There seems to have been some degree of cooperation between all parties in Barking, including tenants and councillors for although the 3,000 withholders failed to win a **no- eviction** pledge it was widely understood that the hints from friendly councillors on the subject could be taken as encouragement for the rent strike. Meanwhile, as the months wore on, the numbers withholding slowly shrank, not because of council threats but (in the opinion of the secretary of the Joint Action Committee) because the **TAs** could not keep up the pressure on their members. Eventually in October **1973** the threat of attachment of earnings orders effectively crushed the resistance of most of the 400 remaining withholders. This was the inevitable outcome of the persistent, if mild and veiled, pressure that the council had in fact been exerting from the very beginning.

The situations in **Camden** and Hackney, like that in Dudley, were complicated by the existence of politically hostile groups, each fighting to win the leadership of the tenants. In Hackney the broad-based Hackney United Tenants' Federation (**HUTF**) which included **GLC** and private tenants and delegates from Housing Associations and the homeless, worked very closely with the large group of non-implementors on the council. When Hackney Council implemented the **HFA** on the votes of four Conservative aldermen, the **HUTF** decided on a total rent strike for two weeks as a protest, and about 3,500 tenants, including 20 councillors, took part. As the intention was to withhold this rent till the Act was repealed the **HUTF** fought for and won a no- eviction pledge from the council. In many ways, this very limited rent strike was a symbolic gesture; the main aim of the campaign was propagandist—to highlight the terrible housing problems in Hackney. To this end Bob Darke, the **HUTF** Press Officer, mounted an extensive publicity campaign in North London. The rent strike, however, was not all plain sailing, for **HUTF** was seriously challenged both by those who felt that it was going too far and by those who felt that it was not going nearly far enough. The leaders of some **TAs** who had seen evictions of rent strikers in past struggles with the **GLC**, managed to force Darke's resignation in April **1973**, though there was soon a reconciliation with the **HUTF** executive. A potentially more serious threat came from the left, namely the Hackney United Tenants Action Committee,

a small but vocal remnant of the ~~great~~ rent battles with the GLC in the late 1960s, and the equally important struggle in St. Pancras earlier.

A small allied group under the name of the St. Pancras United Tenants Association (UTA) played a prominent part in **Camden**. The **Camden Action Committee (CAC)**, set up early in 1972 by the three **CLPs** in the borough with the support of the CP, created intense suspicion in the minds of the UTA leadership who campaigned militantly for a separate and *independent* Tenants Federation. At a meeting in June attended by representatives of about twenty organisations, perhaps fifteen of which were **TAs**, the **Camden Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations (CFTRA)**, was formed and at another meeting a week later it began, alongside and often in opposition to the CAC, to organise tenants against the **Act**.³⁵ The distrust of the UTA for the council, the Labour Party, and many other elements in the labour movement was almost complete and they conceived their task as one of constant exposure of actual and potential betrayals of the working class. In these circumstances, the council-organised District Housing Management Committees, on which most council **TAs** in the borough were represented, refused to have anything to do with CFTRA from the very start and so the Federation had an uphill struggle all the way. However, many **TAs** did send delegates to one or more meetings—about 30 **TAs** in all—although most were so put off by the regular sectarian squabbles that at no time were more than ten or so **TAs** actively involved in the campaign and, later, the rent strike. The CAC, whose total strategy was geared to the maintenance of the council's refusal to implement, more or less collapsed when the council implemented, and in March 1973 when the **85p** increase was imposed, and again in October when there was a further **50p** rent rise, CFTRA organised withholding of the increases, particularly in the Gospel Oak and Kentish Town areas, by up to 2,000 tenants. Natural attrition whittled down the figures but CFTRA, having broadened its programme to include problems of the homeless and property speculation, especially rife in the London Borough of **Camden**, in May 1974 was still sufficiently well organised to mount a successful campaign to help persuade the Labour Council to drop its plans for attachment of earnings orders against tenants in arrears. A particularly important factor in **Camden** has been the regular monthly publication of *Camden Tenant*, a tenants' paper.

The Greenwich Tenants and Residents Campaign Committee combined solid tenant backing from the council estates (with up to sixteen **TAs** actively involved), local unionists and a few consistently reliable councillors in an effective campaign which started in the summer of 1972 with a glossy pamphlet publicising the national situation on non-implementation in optimistic terms. A notable feature of the Greenwich campaign was the active support and involvement of students at the local Thames Polytechnic.³⁶ There were probably never more than 1,000 withholders in

Greenwich and less than one hundred by May 1973, nevertheless the relative failure of the rent strike did not prevent the campaign committee, inspired by its tireless coordinator, Bill Jeavons, from organising marches, demonstrations, public meetings, and from supporting many London and national activities against the Act.

Before we leave London it is appropriate to mention the London Cooperative Society Political Committee and its efforts, both financially and organisationally to defeat the HFA. Like many of the Action Committees in London and elsewhere it was almost totally committed to the fight to help councillors withstand the pressures to implement but once this strategy had been rendered obsolete the option of actively mobilising to support rent strikes was not taken up. However, the London organiser, Ron Taylor, did provide facilities for several regular monthly meetings which took place from summer 1973 under the grand title of 'The London and Home Counties Standing Conference for Action Against the Housing Finance Act'. Representatives from Action Committees and Tenants' Federations from Camden, Ealing, Hackney, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Greenwich, Lewisham, Thamesmead and Waltham Forest attended these meetings to report on the activities (and often the inactivity) in their boroughs. The most concrete result of the work of this group was the production of about 50,000 copies of a broadsheet 'Housing Crisis' in the autumn of 1973 but this was at least twelve months too late to make much difference to the campaign against the Act. Perhaps if the rent strikes in London had reached more massive proportions or if large-scale evictions had been threatened the LCS Political Committee might have played a more decisive part in the campaign—as it was, apart from some money and provision of their loudspeaker van, they did not seem prepared to fight actively on behalf of tenants against implementing Labour councils.

To conclude this necessarily selective review of rent strikes in 1972-4 let me try to give some indication of the complicated situation in Scotland. There were four separate types of tenants affected by the Housing (Financial Provisions) (Scotland) Act, 1972; local authority tenants, the 77,000 tenants of the Scottish Special Housing Association (SSHA), those in the five New Town Development Corporations, and private tenants. All four were represented in the Scottish Council of Tenants (SCT), a body similar in many respects to NATR, but in this campaign with three important differences. First, the geography of industrial Scotland made the task of organising tenants somewhat more manageable for SCT than NATR; second, the nature of the campaign against implementation by the largest local authorities for extended periods worked both for and against the organisation of the tenants; third, the greater initial contributions of the unions to the campaign, similarly, had positive and negative effects.

I have already drawn attention to the position in Clydebank where the

council went to very great lengths not to implement the Act. When, eventually, the rents were raised, Clydebank tenants did not organise to withhold the increase, though SSHA tenants in Clydebank had already done so with some success. In Glasgow the situation was rather different. There the decision to implement was carried by a minority of Labour councillors (33/41) voting with 25 Tories and so some Labour councillors, along with their tenants, felt let down and quite justified in calling for a rent strike. An unofficial pledge had been extracted from the leader of the Labour group that no withholder would be evicted and, with encouragement from councillors, unionists and tenants leaders, some people began to withhold the 75p increase although the vast majority resigned themselves to it. Tenants Associations in the Castlemilk, Garthamlock, Easterhouse, Govan, Pollock and Yoker areas started to organise partial rent strikes in March 1973. Most of the withholding, however, had ended by the summer, apparently due to the usual combination of subtle victimisation of the tenants by the corporation and political disputes within the labour movement, mainly a consequence of the mutual distrust of the Labour and Communist Parties. In Castlemilk, for example, where the tenants produced their own paper, the rent strike was effectively broken when a corporation official used the fact that a tenant was in arrears (due to withholding) to refuse her permission to move into a new flat. In general, but with some notable exceptions, Glasgow's non-implementing councillors failed to identify themselves in any concrete fashion with the rent strike. It therefore died away. Although the campaign by the most militant local authorities was resumed again in the summer of 1973 with the aim of achieving a rents freeze on the October increases, tenants in Glasgow and in the rest of Scotland were, by this time, thoroughly confused as to the real intentions of their councillors. When all the councils were one by one forced to capitulate for a second time and raise the rents yet again, there is no doubt that this had a further demoralising effect on the tenants and there was little or no organised withholding. This, of course, did not mean that rents were being paid. Glasgow, for example, like most other large cities has a substantial arrears problem—in the period 28/11/72 to 28/5/73 official figures reveal that arrears increased from £541,000 to £856,000, and the numbers of tenants in arrears from 29,000 to 40,000 (out of over 150,000 tenants in all). The difference between arrears and withholding is, to a large extent, organisation and political leadership, and these were precisely the qualities which the Labour Party in Scotland were unable or unwilling to extend to the tenants movement. As elsewhere, once Labour groups were forced to implement, the official Labour Party withdrew and left the tenants and labour movement activists to continue the struggle.³⁷

It is less easy to explain the failure of the unions in Scotland to take decisive action in the light of the fact that the Scottish TUC and many unions (prominently the NUM and AUEW) appeared to be genuinely

prepared to resist the Act. Perhaps if councillors had resisted government pressure or if tenants had been threatened by evictions the unions might have taken industrial action on their behalf, but as it never came to this, we can only speculate. The claims of Clydebank and other councils that sufficient help was not forthcoming from the labour movement to justify continued resistance to the Act does not prove very much for dramatic events, such as the jailing of the dockers and the mass picket of **Saltley** power station in 1972, tend to generate their own momentum. Trade unions and tenants' associations will rarely give concrete pledges in vague situations.

Tenants in SSHA accommodation in various areas withheld increases for short periods as did tenants of the New Towns, for example in Cumbernauld and East **Kilbride** where the Corporations had to take tenants to court to force them to pay up the withheld rent. Private tenants, particularly those of the notorious Western Heritable Company who were attempting to achieve rent increases of up to **1,000%** were also actively organising against the effects of the Act—but this is another story.

With this review of the tenants' response to the HFA I can now briefly turn to the political lessons we can draw from these events.

VII

I will focus on three sets of conclusions—those concerning the relationships between central and local government and their implications for the smooth functioning of the state; the structure of the Labour Party; and the relationship between the mass and the sectarian organisations of the left.

Twentieth century Britain's political democracy is a system based on the management of consent by threat rather than by the use of force. On the few occasions when the labour movement has been sufficiently well-organised and sufficiently determined to call the bluff of those in whose hands the state apparatus rests, this judgement has been more or less confirmed. It is therefore essential for those whom, for want of a more accurate term, we call the ruling class to transform all serious conflicts from struggles over concrete issues into challenges to the rule of law. It was in the 1920s that real problems of legality arose for the first time between centrally elected government and locally elected councils. The revolt of militant Labour groups against the Housing Finance Act was not some unique, unprecedented event, but the continuation of a tradition started in 1921 by the actions and eventual imprisonment of **George Lansbury** and his comrades on the Poplar Borough Council and by the disqualification of poor law relief Boards of Guardians at West Ham and Chester-le-Street in the year of the General Strike for behaviour deliberately intended to benefit the **poor**.³⁸ The timing of elections is such that while one party is in control of central government, another tends to be in control of local

authorities and especially of the administration of large cities. One major consequence of this is that Labour local authorities can find it difficult to obtain the permission of Tory governments, for example in the field of loan sanctions for compulsory purchase orders and council house-building, and Tory councils have run into problems with Labour governments over comprehensive education. It is a massive generalisation but nonetheless generally true to say that while local authorities have very wide formal powers in many of the areas which affect our daily lives, central government can, by its close control of actual funds and by its even closer control of the ability of the LAs to borrow money, effectively neutralize these powers. Before the HFA, local councils had some real though severely limited powers to fix rents for their tenants and the large majority of Labour councillors felt that by taking away this power from popularly elected local representatives (elected, it is true, normally by less than half of the electorate) and giving it to the faceless bureaucrats of (indirectly) government-appointed rent scrutiny boards, one of the last remaining powers of LAs was being eroded if not totally destroyed. It is absolutely certain that in the face of resolute and united opposition from Labour controlled councils, committed to a policy of no-cooperation with any part of the HFA, such as those represented at the Sheffield conferences in the summer of **1972**, the government would have been unable to implement the Act. Attempts to surcharge and/or disqualify thousands of councillors would have led to the breakdown of local government in Scotland and Wales and in the conurbations of England. The government would have been forced to compromise or to seek a fresh mandate in an early general election and, although it is difficult to be sure, I can see no compelling reasons why the result would have been very different from February **1974**. Harold Wilson, like Edward Heath, is not so simple as to believe that the Law works in the abstract without proper reference to the wishes of those whose actions could render it unworkable. Both have permitted retroactive legislation and both have sensibly refused to allow the consequences of ambiguous bad laws to prevail in critical periods. When Mr. Wilson saw the self-selected group of council leaders from some major cities just before the meeting of the working party in Sheffield on June 24th **1972** we may speculate that had he been faced with a determined and fully convinced statement that the Labour groups would not implement and that the Sheffield Conference invited the PLP and the NEC to join them, then he might have acted differently. As it was, all the available evidence (which is not a great deal) suggests that Wilson simply interpreted the half-hearted reports and lukewarm sentiments of his visitors to mean that militant resistance to the Act was crumbling, and that this confirmed his strong suspicions that the risks for the Labour Party of advising all-out opposition to the Act far outweighed the risks of counselling 'opposition within the law'. Neither is it too much to speculate that this outcome

conformed to his own preferences.

What political lessons can we draw from the apparent unwillingness of most Labour councillors to offer more than verbal opposition to reviled laws? In the first place we can conclude that in spite of the fact that the Parliamentary system is based on consent the lengths to which the state goes to compel this consent are considerable. In the field of local authority spending or failure to spend, the key is the rather shadowy figure of the district auditor whose power of surcharge, roundly criticized by various official and unofficial inquiries into local government,³⁹ is the most effective weapon in the armoury of persuasion. That individual councillors be made to pay out of their own pockets for uncollected rents is a remarkable conception but this threat is probably essential to the smooth functioning of a system in which local councils may be elected on pledges to defy the policies of the central government. If one accepts that the pace of social change is determined at the local level as well as at the national level, then this type of constraint on progressive initiatives is bound to have a profound effect.

It is true, of course, that the majority of Labour councillors never had any intention of refusing to implement the Act, and indeed some Labour councils took steps to impose the first, optional increase of 50p in April 1972, before the Bill became law. The second conclusion that we can draw from their unwillingness to oppose the HFA in real terms, therefore, is that in most of the many constituencies where the CLP passed resolutions calling on Labour groups not to implement, the effective control of active party members over their councillors proved to be minimal. This is not the place to begin a discussion on the theory of representatives: let it suffice to say that under the present arrangements democracy in local government actually depends to a great extent on the system of selection and control of councillors. The oddity of selection procedures for Labour councillors and the almost complete absence of effective powers of recall make it practically impossible for a CLP to do anything about a Labour group which reneges on its pledges. The only real sanction available to party activists is to refuse to help at election time at the risk of allowing the Tory opposition to win by default—probably the key factor in the 1970 national Labour defeat—but, as both sides realise, this is a desperate measure and in the long run, by itself, self-defeating.

The most important lesson of the struggles against the HFA for the structure of the Labour Party is therefore, quite unsurprisingly, that without proper democratic controls and particularly the power of regular recall, councillors will generally choose the path of least resistance in controversial situations whether or not this corresponds with the wishes of the people who produced their election victories.⁴⁰

The third set of conclusions concerns the relations between the mass sections and the sectarian sections of the labour movement. It would be

excessively optimistic to expect to find in the story of the HFA the answer to the old question of whether the splits in the labour movement ensure that serious opposition to reactionary legislation occurs at all or whether they ensure that it can never be successful. We can label these views, respectively, the 'conscience of the left' and the 'disunited front' theses; insofar as the struggles of the councillors were concerned the latter thesis seems nearer the truth, insofar as the struggles of the tenants were concerned the former thesis seems nearer the truth. These simple and very fallible judgements, however, conceal some complex realities. As many sincere and courageous Labour councillors suffered from the indignities of self-righteous sectarian abuse as sincere and dedicated Communists (in and out of the CP) suffered from the ignorant criticisms of self-righteous Labour Party hacks. The patience of the sectarian left during the period of **non-implementation**, and their restraint for the most part while the 'Labour heroes' clung on to their mostly feeble majorities, was clearly not enough. Where the sectarian left was most needed, one might almost say where its presence was indispensable, was within the Labour Party, inside the Labour groups and the General Management Committees and the wards. The structure of CLPs is such that it is almost impossible for the rank and file to exercise democratic control over councillors, let alone **MPs**, and so the presence of many more experienced and politically able militants both as councillors and as local party officers could clearly make a difference at this level. In my estimation this would have materially affected the outcome of the struggle to ensure non-implementation of the HFA by local authorities. It might be argued that this strategy has been tried many times before, that its proponents have been expelled from the Labour Party, and that it has failed far more often than it has succeeded. All these objections are true but they are all overcome by the central fact that, if the evidence from CLPs and from the 1972 and **1973** Party conferences is to be believed, then most Labour Party activists thought that **non-implementation** of the HFA was the correct position for the Party. This massive groundswell of opinion and action was not harnessed into effective resistance to the Act precisely because persistent and **well-organised** militants were not available in sufficient numbers to keep up the pressure at the **grass-roots** of the Labour Party, on understandably nervous councillors whose political vision was not always clear. The sectarian left abounds with people who, at one time or another, have tried to accomplish these tasks within the Labour Party and have given up the attempt in frustration, and who leave the Party feeling little but bitter contempt for those who **remain**.⁴¹

With uncertain majorities for non-implementation and difficulties in their **local** parties, many militant councillors could not or would not find much time for the **TAs**. This meant that in many places members of the sectarian left (usually CP and IS activists) had as much and often more

contact with the nuts and bolts of the tenants campaign than the councillors. This naturally led to some confusion and the temptation to expose the weaknesses if not the actual bankruptcy of some councillors' positions was very great indeed. The Labour Party, on the other hand, rarely gives any credit to the sectarian left, and where the sectarian left is actually doing a large part of the work to maintain popular support for the position of a 'militant' Labour council, this is naturally resented a great deal. These tactical alliances, therefore, caused considerable trouble to all sides.

When the non-implementation campaigns collapsed, and with them the hopes of those Labour Party activists who had consistently neglected to join with the tenants, the balance shifted decisively, not so much to the sectarian left but to the many relatively spontaneously organised and relatively independent tenants associations that had emerged to fight the Act in the abstract, and the rent increases in the concrete. If the 'disunited front' had crippled the potential of a mass Labour Party resistance to implementation of the rent rises, then it is equally certain that the organised might of the Labour Party was not available to the tenants in their efforts to withhold these rent increases. This is not to say that no Labour Party members chose to fight with the tenants against implementing Labour councils, for hundreds did so and many resigned or were expelled from the Labour Party over the issue. The 'conscience of the left' was not to be found in the Labour Party but in those who joined forces with the tenants, and the facilities of money, manpower and organisation extended to TAs by the sectarian left were to prove invaluable in many individual cases. In the last analysis, as Kirkby so clearly showed, even in the most extreme circumstances the divisions within the sectarian left and between it and the Labour Party and Trade Unions, could not be overcome on the basis of an initiative largely associated with the sectarian left.

The only political lesson I can draw from this will no doubt be hard to swallow. Before the collapse of the non-implementation campaign the sectarian left would have been infinitely more effective inside the Labour Party than they were outside it; after the collapse they could have done more or less the same excellent work in helping to organise the rent strikes as members of the Labour Party or as members of the one or other of the dozen or so tendencies that took part in movements up and down the country. In the absence of a mass exodus from the Labour Party into ~~one~~ of the other organisations on the left, the conclusion seems inescapable that for struggles such as the one against the Housing Finance Act, the Labour Party is the only vehicle that can be driven to victory. It goes without saying that a Labour Party that could defeat the HFA in this way could also compel a satisfactory housing policy on a Labour Government, and much more besides.

As I have already indicated the available evidence suggests that the

TUC and Trades Councils were responsive to the needs of the national and local leaderships of the Labour Party and vice versa. It followed that when the non-implementation campaign collapsed, official Trades Union support for the campaign against the Act became symbolic rather than practical, if indeed it had ever really been practical at all. Industrial action in defence of councillors and tenants could only have emerged as a consequence of the mass mobilisation of the labour movement and that largely depended on the forces that had already relocated themselves in the sectarian left. Once again we find ourselves back with the need of the Labour Party for those who have rejected it.

The case of Clay Cross, paradoxically, shows just how successful a campaign based on mass mobilisation could be. As Professor Street has convincingly argued the housing commissioner's performance in Clay Cross "was so ineffectual and insignificant that one must assume that he was acting thus under the Department's [of Environment] instructions. . . The Department obviously reached a decision of policy in the light of the Industrial Relations Act contempt cases, and based no doubt on political considerations that it would not utilise its legal powers to have the defaulting councillors imprisoned."⁴² It is idle to speculate whether one hundred Clay Crosses would have made the Government more or less inclined to use its legal powers to the full. The point is that the councillors of Clay Cross with most of the labour movement behind them called the Government's bluff and thus prevented the HFA being implemented in Clay Cross. This was a small victory and it leaves the problems of the relations between the labour movement and the tenants movement unresolved. Much the same may be said about the Labour Government's March 1975 Housing Finance (Special Provisions) Bill which effectively relieves defaulting councillors of the threat of surcharges arising out of the HFA, and terminates the disqualification of those already surcharged.⁴³ What the pressure from the labour movement, the mass organisations no less than the sectarian left, achieved represents an uneasy compromise between parliamentarism and mass action, between constitutionalism and the use of the law for the benefit of the labour movement. At the least it demonstrates that within the Labour Party and the labour movement as a whole, in spite of the strong and persistent tendencies to labourism, there are forces operating to widen and to democratise the struggle for socialism in Britain.

These conclusions will seem obvious to some and a repetition of dangerous illusions to others. It is not impossible that the labour movement will one day be forced to oppose a Housing Act from a Labour Government, but this only makes the pill even harder to swallow. It does not do away with the need of the labour movement for the Labour Party.⁴⁴

NOTES

The idea of "fair rents" was, of course, introduced in the Labour Government's 1965 Rent Act. For a discussion of the difference between Labour and Tory "fair rents" see J. Goudie, *Councils and the Housing Finance Act* (Young Fabian pamphlet 31, 1972), esp. section 2.

Apart from official Conservative propaganda it is difficult to find anyone very enthusiastic about the Act. See, from rather different points of view, NALGO, *Housing, the way ahead* (1973) and Alex Henney, "The Housing Situation in the U.K." *Moorgate and Wall Street*, (Autumn 1974), pp. 61-90.

3. Cmnd. 4728, July 1971, p. 2.

4. This is a notoriously complicated subject but most if not all writers at least agree that the mortgage-holder gets more than the council tenant; see NALGO, *Housing*, pp. 9-10; Henney, "The Housing Situation", p. 69, gives figures of £528m for mortgage interest tax relief in 1974 compared with £423m for council housing subsidies; Frank Allaun claimed in 1971 that each council tenant got £44 subsidy as against £60 for each owner occupier, in Labour Party Conference *Report*, 1971, p. 256.

For the details see *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, 1971, A24659 and 1972, B252989. In these two years Labour won over one hundred cities and boroughs from the Tories.

6. See the interesting paper by O. Hartley, "Local Inquiries and Council House Rents in Scotland, 1958-71", *Policy and Politics*, 2(1973), pp. 63-78.

7. Significantly there is no mention of a Housing Commissioner in the White Paper; he was presumably inserted into the Bill in anticipation of trouble.

8. See specifically John Saville, "The Ideology of Labourism" in R. Benewick et al. (eds) *Knowledge and Belief in Politics* (London, 1973), pp. 213-26 and more generally Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* (second edition).

9. Labour Party Conference *Report* 1972, pp. 87-8.

10. Ibid, pp. 385-6. For the housing debate see p. 134ff.

11. Labour Party Conference *Report* 1973, pp. 207ff. An amendment calling on the NEC to give a clear political lead on non-implementation and retrospective relief for non-implementors was defeated by 4,620,000 to 1,350,000—thus contradicting the substantive resolution! As Edward Short said in his speech, "this presents the NEC with a dreadful dilemma" (Ibid, p. 218).

12. Press release of speech in London, May 13, 1972. For the reasons why this strategy failed even to achieve the limited aims claimed for it see Labour Research Department *Fact Service* (July 29, 1972), pp. 119-20.

13. This and the following details come from the mimeographed minutes of the meetings.

14. See Urban District Councils Association *Annual Meeting and Conference* (1972), pp. 91-106. I have not been able to solve the mystery of the missing invitations.

15. Stan Newens in *Report* 1972, p. 139.

16. During 1972-4 the following papers carried long features on Clay Cross: *Daily Mirror*, *Sheffield Morning Telegraph*, *Guardian Journal*, *Daily Express*, *Ilford Recorder*, *Northern Echo*, *Sunday Telegraph* and *Manchester Evening News*. And there were others. See also the short book by David Skinner and Julia Langdon, *The Story of Clay Cross*, (Nottingham 1974).

17. As is made clear in Conference *Report* 1972, p. 357.

18. It is worth noting that the Executive Committee of the Communist Party did not endorse the decision of the CP councillors to end resistance to the Act.

19. Without a great deal of success as can be judged from the rejection of these

rents by Rent Scrutiny Boards whose decisions from the latter part of 1973 provoked outbursts from Labour and at least two Conservative councils, **Ripon** and **Ilkley**. See *Ripon Gazette*, Oct. 26 and *Sheffield Star*, August 24, 1973.

20. TUC Circular No. 209 (1971-2).
 21. Welsh Council of Labour Circular, July 25, 1972.
 22. I have documentary evidence of union pledges and action against the HFA from about fifty towns and cities in Britain and there are certainly more.
 23. Dave Englander and Steve Schiffers, both at **Warwick** University are presently engaged in research on the development of the tenants movement to the First and the Second World Wars respectively. Bert Moorhouse, Mary Wilson and Chris Chamberlain give some useful background material in their "Rent Strikes—Direct Action and the Working Class", *Socialist Register* 1972, pp. 133-56.
 24. Even then the NTAC Declaration in September 1973 said "This body is not meant to be a rival to NATR but to attempt to do the job that NATR has failed to do: i.e. to coordinate and mutually assist the rent strikes in progress at present."
 25. Amendments on withholding and a national rent strike were passed.
 26. Although there were over 1,100 relevant local authorities at the time (excluding N. Ireland, English parishes and Scottish districts) of which less than 10% experienced rent strikes **and/or** non-implementation, this 10% of councils controlled about **35%** of the country's council housing. For details see *Municipal Year Book* 1973.
 27. Perhaps the prize for the most confusing and confused leadership goes to Councillor **Weall**, Deputy Mayor of Middleton, who said his own withholding was a "purely individual decision—I would never advocate a rent strike to others"! *Manchester Evening News*, Jan. 12, 1973.
 28. See the pamphlet "A History of the United Tenants Action Committee", Communist Unity Association M-L (1974); for the earlier rent **struggles**, Dave Burn, *Rent Strike—St. Pancras* (Pluto Press, 1972); and Moorhouse et al., "Rent Strikes", pp. **138-48**.
 29. Personal **communication** from Mrs. M. Gallimore, **Childwall Valley** (Liverpool).
 30. For example in Deame, **Yorks.** and Oswaldtwistle, **Lancs.** In **Haigh Heights**, Liverpool, a couple successfully sued the Corporation for breach of duty to repair after the corporation had won a possession order for non-payment of rent against them.
 31. The information on these and the other rent strikes to follow comes from local newspapers, personal communications, and pamphlets, broadsheets and leaflets printed by **TAs** and political groups.
 32. Sending notices to quit is a fairly routine matter for many councils in the constant battle to collect arrears. During rent strikes this practice takes on a more menacing aspect than usual.
 33. Personal communication from Mrs. M. Gallimore.
 34. The few Welsh RSB decisions that did emerge caused similar protests to those in **England**.
 35. In these days of declaration of interest I should mention that I was acting secretary of CFTRA at this time, having joined the Labour Party previously in the belief that one could best fight reactionary legislation from within it.
 36. There were many rent strikes in student residences in 1973-4 as part of the NUS campaign for higher grants, but these were not generally linked to the **struggle** against the HFA.
- In July 1973 the Scottish Council of the Labour Party refused even to act as

a sponsor for a **SCT** conference against the Act which already had firm union support

38. See E. **Lansbury**, *Poplarism (ILP, 1924?)*, and the unsympathetic but informative B. Keith-Lucas, "Poplarism", *Public Law (1962)*, pp. **58-80**.
39. See the effective arguments for the abolition of the district auditor's power of surcharge in **Committee** on the Management of Local Government, *Management of Local Government* (HMSO, 1967), vol. 1, pp. **73-5, 82**; Richard Minns, "The Significance of Clay Cross: Another Look at District Audit", *Policy and Politics*, 2(1974), pp. **309-29**, correctly locates the problem in the context of the *ultra vires* system whereby local authorities are only permitted to do what the law specifically says they can do but, unfortunately, he says very **little** about Clay Cross.
40. The Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, the latest in a long line of leftist pressure groups within the Labour Party, is currently pressing for more democratic control over **MPs**.
41. Many people have been expelled from the Labour Party for just such activities. For a recent case see Ken Coates, *The Crisis of British Socialism (Nottingham, 1971)*, *passim*.
42. Harry Street, "The lesson of Clay Cross", *Local Government Chronicle*, May **10, 1974**, p. **457**. Street's interpretation of the failure of the attempt to punish the Clay Cross councillors is much more convincing than Minns' argument to the contrary (see Minns, "Significance", p. **327**).
43. The **story** does not end here. This Bill maintains that the uncollected rents will have to be collected and leaves the **£7,000** already surcharged to Clay Cross untouched.
44. Many people gave me valuable information and advice without which this paper could not have been written and I thank them all very much; in particular Bob **Dixey** of Halstead UDC, the late John Evans of NATR, Bill **Towill** of SCT, **Freda Sklair**, and **all** the tenants who took the time and trouble to answer my questions.