

Reclaim London



Communist Party of Britain

(Marxist-Leninist)

I n t r o d u c t i o n

The London Labour movement has a great responsibility. Too many (57) of London's 83 parliamentary seats are currently held by Thatcherites. The outcome of the next General Election could hang on how many of these constituencies embrace Labour.

Thatcher has done her best to transform London over the last decade, to fit her vision of what the metropolis should be, and to make it her stronghold. She has wreaked great damage on the city's industries, services — and its people. Many of the ideas and attitudes which have done most to hold back the labour movement's response to Thatcher have also had their strongest expression in the capital — despite its

centuries-old tradition of being the leadership of Britain's organised workers.

But her success has been partial, and there is a growing feeling that it is time for a change. We cannot miss the opportunity. We need to revitalise our organisations, re-examine our priorities, and re-commit ourselves to the struggle for progress. We must reclaim London for the labour movement to make it the prosperous, civilised city it should be.

We call on all workers concerned for the future of Britain to seek to understand the changes that have swept our capital and its labour movement, so that within the chaos and decay we can chart a way forward once more.

February 1990

London under pressure

For ten years London has been in social and economic turmoil — a turmoil embraced, and accelerated by Thatcher in her quest to destroy working class community and organisation.

The Docklands

Very few Londoners have visited the Docklands recently, yet it epitomises Thatcher's approach to London. A Thatcher paradise in microcosm, the Docklands is a former hive of trade and industry laid waste by capitalism and then turned over to just one basic activity, financial and property speculation, which is subsidised by the state in the form of lavish tax favours, and protected from the 'burden' of accountability to local planning procedures by the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC), an unelected quango of Thatcher appointees.

The result is that the Docklands has attracted billions of pounds of speculative money. 15,000 overpriced so-called

'yuppie' homes have mushroomed up, to be followed by huge new office blocks that will soon dominate the London skyline. But extravagant promises to local residents, made to quieten their mounting protest, have been blithely ignored, and no one is sure whether the new homes or office blocks will be filled.

Now, even Tory supporters admit that the Docklands is a disaster. Freed from the 'burden' of planning, it has descended into chaos. The Docklands Light Railway has earned itself the nickname 'toytown', unable to meet a fraction of the demand for transport, so now the developers themselves are having to fork out to subsidise the transport system. The LDDC itself is in a financial crisis.

Ad-men and PR consultants have been hired at exorbitant cost to save the Docklands' image, its reputation as a boom area mocked, as one by one its swaggering property speculators get their fingers burnt.

And this, remember, was supposed to be the Thatcherite model for the rest of the country.

Employment

The Docklands, pretender for the title of 'global financial centre', highlights the big difference between London and the rest of the country under Thatcher.

London has been the centre of Thatcher's financial counter-revolution. Starting with her first and most crucial act — the abolition of exchange controls in November 1979, it continued with the lifting of credit controls, and accelerated into the 'Big Bang' of October 1986. It has transformed the London economy.

Big Bang alone brought an estimated £4 billion of investment into the capital. With it came an unprecedented boost in demand for goods from huge office blocks, complete with latest computer equipment, down to lifts, chairs and tables. The demand for a wide range of labour also rose. Money dealers, computer boffins, typists and cooks, heating and ventilation staff, accountants and ad men — all were suddenly in short supply. In Thatcher's first nine years financial and business services employment in the South East

soared by 400,000, or by over 50%, and for a short period the capital's economy grew rapidly, reaching a convenient peak during the 1987 General Election.

Yet the financial services explosion has, if anything, exacerbated London's problems. As financial speculation let rip, the city entered an inflationary spiral as house prices and the earnings of many City workers soared.

While tax cuts filled the coffers of the very rich, the worst paid 10% of Londoners actually saw their income fall. In 1986 a quarter of London's workers were earning below £6,500 — an indication of the high proportion of London's workers now employed in sweated trades old and new, including the rag trade, hotels and catering, and office cleaning. A growing number of citizens found themselves unable to afford decent housing.

Now, as in the Docklands, a bust follows the speculative boom, and London's jobs outlook is grim. A record number of companies now plan to relocate away from the London of high rents, rates and salaries that they themselves created, while underneath the financial services froth the destruction

of London's manufacturing base has accelerated — between 1978 and 1986 over one-third (260,000) manufacturing jobs disappeared from the metropolis.

Unemployment, especially in the inner city areas, remains high. National and local services such as education, health, local government and transport are all trying to shed staff. And now the financial companies are joining them in their staffing 'retrenchment', while Thatcher tries to force the civil service to join the retreat from London to 'cheaper' areas. In other words, for all the sound and fury of the last decade, London's crisis is deepening.

Housing

One obvious sign of this crisis is housing. The decade-long attempt to find individual ways out of essentially collective problems — in the case of housing, through wider home ownership and council house sales — has made London the capital of homelessness. And rampant housing inflation, presented to us for years as an exciting boom, has left many Londoners strug-

gling to keep up with their mortgage. In 1988 the average London household was spending over half its income on debt repayments.

Meanwhile, the fundamentals have been neglected. Under Thatcher, capital expenditure by local authorities on housing in London has been cut by nearly two-thirds, and public-sector house building has been brought down from a 1970 peak of 29,000 new dwellings a year to just 3,000. Private house building rose under Thatcher but failed to fill the gap left by public-sector funding cuts, and is now in rapid decline again. Council house sales have simply accelerated the rundown, with 22% of London's total housing stock (many of them privately owned) classed as being in a state of disrepair.

Transport

The same attempt to impose private solutions on public problems has made the capital's transport a chief cause of misery and stress for its citizens. Even Thatcher's closest supporters say that her transport policy is mad, as the

London of the early 1990s faces an intractable transport crisis. The continuing exodus of industry and people from London, the rise of the City and the commuter, and the closure of thousands of local workplaces, have all combined to force London's workers to travel much further to get to work — on average, three times further than the national average.

Thatcher's response has been to abolish London's regional planning authority, the GLC, and to withdraw public funds. Between 1983 and 1987 tube passenger mileage jumped by 43% but government revenue support was nearly halved and the number of maintenance staff was cut by a half, from 12,200 to 6,320. In British Rail's Network South East, and on the buses, it is a similar picture: funding has been slashed, services are worse, and more expensive. And all she can offer is more of the same.

In desperation, growing numbers of workers are turning to the motor car. A majority of London households now have one car, and nearly a fifth have two. But the roads were not designed for such traffic levels, and at peak

periods traffic speeds have slowed to a crawl — to slower than a horse-drawn carriage.

Local Government

The cynical and destructive genius of Thatcherism is, however, probably best shown in its attack on local government. A Goebbels-like propaganda campaign about 'overspending' and 'profligate' local councils was used to hide the truth. Central Government was pulling the financial lifeline on local government services, and using its control of the purse strings to encourage the so-called 'ratepayers' revolt'.

When Thatcher came to power, 61p in every pound of local government spending came from central government coffers. By 1989 it was down to 43p. London boroughs' total spending support from central government had been cut by 37%.

The response of many Labour boroughs was to try and protect services and staff by resorting to high rate rises and creative accounting. But as Thatcher legislated each new

manoeuvre into legal oblivion a group of councils went for bust, spending money they were not receiving and pinning their hopes on a Labour general election victory to get them out of the financial hole they were digging for themselves.

With Thatcher's re-election in 1987, this vain posture of being the political opposition collapsed in humiliation, and in the last two years overall spending cuts of up to 20% have been implemented in many of these boroughs. Local government's long phoney war with Thatcherism is now over, and the services we associate with civilised urban life are now in jeopardy.

Indeed, the whole concept of local government is being mocked as locally elected councillors find, increasingly, that the only lawful thing they can do is take orders from a Thatcherite central administration.

Future shock

But Thatcher is not satisfied. The combination of rising rates and visibly deteriorating services, especially in hard

pressed Labour-controlled councils, is precisely the political pincer she has been plotting for a decade. She wants to centralise control and, if possible, to get us to blame Labour for her destruction and chaos. She has plenty more in the pipeline designed to achieve her aim.

With the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority in April 1990, for example, school will fight school for precious resources — and the resources themselves will start drying up. Millions of pounds previously raised from City and Westminster rates to fund other councils' education budgets will disappear and councils will be forced to choose between cuts in education or cuts elsewhere. Indeed, in all likelihood, they will be forced to make painful cuts and to seek more funds from the local populace in the form of rates or the poll tax.

The uniform business rate will double the blow. Rates paid by retailers and office users will double or treble, but this time central government will take the proceeds for itself. Only a portion of the funds will be handed back to local councils. On current

estimates, when the new rating system is finally introduced inner London boroughs will have seen their total income reduced by another £1 billion.

Then there is the poll tax. Thatcherite ideologues have long argued that the financial structure of local government encourages 'profligate' (ie Labour) councils: local elections are merely 'auctions' where local politicians promise to outspend each other using other people's money (from business rates and central government rate support grants).

The poll tax is designed to turn this on its head. By placing the burden of local council spending firmly on local

residents' shoulders, and by withdrawing central funds at the same time, the aim is to turn local elections into a new type of auction — as to which party will cut services the most to keep the hated poll tax down.

Thus, the Thatcherites intend to use the increasing desperation of the populace to get them to vote against each other — and for Thatcher.

The tragedy is that so many in the London labour movement, especially in the councils most dangerously threatened, have done so much to play into her hands. To find the reasons, we have to look at political developments within the London labour movement itself.

The challenge from the 'left'

Just as a London economy mesmerised by financial services began to veer off at a tangent, so has its labour movement.

It could not have survived the Thatcherite onslaught unscathed, and it hasn't. An atmosphere of decay and inexorable decline seeped from the closed factories of industrial centres like Park Royal into sparsely attended and inquorate union meetings, and a good part of the labour movement's political and organisational backbone disappeared. A loss of momentum, perspective and direction soon followed, and as the attacks and setbacks multiplied, thousands of workers who had previously played their part, small and large, in the organisations of the labour movement became demoralised or confused. They opted out, retreating into 'private life'.

At the same time, many of those remaining active rightly saw it as necessary to take up new demands such as the campaign for unilateral nuclear disarmament, for women's rights, and to 'fight all cuts'. But as traditional labour strongholds retreated, old yardsticks of political judgement seemed to lose their

validity, and a new type of 'leftism' emerged to fill the political vacuum. Labour's 'London factor' was born.

As the decade unfolded, these slogans of the early 80s slowly turned into shibboleths and a significant section of the London labour movement ventured down a political dead end. Unilateral nuclear disarmament became fixed as an eternal 'principle' regardless of the shifting sands of the struggle for peace. The determination to 'fight all cuts' imperceptibly merged into over-ambitious schemes of 'municipal socialism', pioneered by the GLC, and vainly perpetuated by some local councils after its abolition.

Demands that the labour movement pay due attention to the needs of different sections within it slowly turned into an ideology in its own right, denying the role of class, and elevating US-style 'minorities' and 'disadvantaged' groups into exclusive pride of political place. For some, trade unions were seen as little more than a platform in the struggle for 'equal opportunities', and the basic task of organising the London working class into unions lay neglected.

The irony is that there is nothing new

to the left's 'new' ideas. They are simply an extension of the programme of old Labour 'right wingers' like Jay and Crosland, who back in the 1950s and 1960s were fighting to get Labour to drop its socialist trappings. The real aim of socialism was 'equality', they argued. In the wake of the post-war nationalisations and the welfare state, Labour's main tasks had been achieved anyway, and therefore rhetoric about class and state power should be dropped, they declared. The task now was to mop up the edges by concentrating reforms on those with special need.

Equating socialism with equality was a clever piece of intellectual trickery. For once the idea of socialism was gutted of its class content, 'inequality' rather than capitalism became the enemy.

Inequalities of income, housing and education were all attacked by the Labour equality campaigners and some important reforms were achieved, such as comprehensive education and the extension of council housing. But none attacked the root of inequality, capitalism itself, and the results were always disappointing — prompting campaigners to search for new, more promising

pastures for their efforts.

By the 80s, the focus had turned to sex and race. By this time Thatcher was dismantling all the achievements people like Jay and Crosland had taken for granted, but far from questioning their rejection of class and their emphasis on special interest groups, the equal opportunities campaigners emphasised it. And so, over the decade, the inherently reactionary nature of the politics came to the fore: the more strident, and 'militant', the 'left' became the more divisive its effect was, as the centre of attention turned increasingly to differences of degree within the working class and guns were turned inward on the institutions and organisations of the labour movement itself.

Thus, in some sort of strange logical progression, the idea of 'equality' has been turned on its head, narrowing the labour movement's horizons, and being used to divide rather than unite. Rather than trying to embrace all in struggle against Thatcher, the 'left' demand that first, the labour movement purge itself of its own alleged inequalities. Workers with special skills or better pay are attacked by the 'left' for being an elite

or 'fat cats'; male workers are charged with having a better life than female workers; whites are pilloried for having better positions than blacks.

The 'equality' of levelling down is slowly nudging the equality of levelling up aside. Even outrage against the crime of unemployment is tempered, as instead the question is asked, 'If there is to be unemployment, why should there be proportionately more black people unemployed than white?'

In short, the 'left' has ended up seizing the banner of equality and lining it up against that of trade unionism, socialism and working class unity.

Multiculturalism

The most reactionary and divisive forms of this new strand of thinking are the concepts of 'multiculturalism' and 'institutional racism'.

Behind both, lies the assumption that the British working class is racist, and that immigrants should not seek to become an integral part of our class. Instead, it is argued, they should demand the right for their 'own' cultures to

flourish in their new homeland, Britain.

No regard is paid to the fact that cultures have their roots in different historical soils and cannot simply be transplanted. And by declaring all cultures to be 'equal', no criticism, reasoned judgement or vision of improvement is allowed: if the Muslim treatment of women is to be declared culturally equal to other traditions, progress itself becomes the enemy of 'equality'.

The doctrine of 'institutional racism' takes the divisive thinking one step further. Normal practices from the use of a telephone to the use of a union rule book can be branded as racist because some black people may find it difficult to use them. A 'refusal to 'reform' becomes 'proof' of racism, and in this way organisations of the working class such as the trade unions and the Labour Party become part of 'the enemy'.

Is Labour a 'sell-out'

In politics, the new 'leftism' has not surprisingly made its mark by its attacks on the Labour Party. Labour is

vilified as a sell-out. Kinnock, it is said, has 'betrayed socialism' and some even go so far as to think that the first task is to get rid of Kinnock, rather than Thatcher.

But the Labour Party has never been a socialist party, and it is impossible therefore for any leader to 'betray' its socialist principles. It is a screwdriver, designed to adjust the system, not an axe to chop it down. Those who complain that Labour's programme is not 'socialist enough' betray their sad belief that if it actually gained power, it would be in a position to introduce socialism.

It would not. But what it can do is to be the instrument of the working class to defeat Thatcher at the next election. Unsatisfied with this noble, if limited task, the 'left' instead choose to flaunt their purity by insisting the Labour Party does a job it was not designed to do.

A wrong response

In some ways the tightening grip of such ideas, especially on some inner London boroughs, is understandable.

London has always been a social, political and cultural melting pot and the rapid decline of the city has intensified its many deep-seated social problems. There are a myriad special needs crying out to be met — from unemployed young people in the inner cities, to a growing elderly population with a need for meals on wheels.

But the acute awareness of these mounting problems does not justify embracing a theory of politics that sees the working class simply as a collection of competing special interest groups. It is an ideology that cannot deliver a way forward even for the people whose special cases it claims to trumpet. And despite its left-wing and militant exterior it is close to Thatcherism.

Both ideologies reflect the disintegration of capitalism in Britain and both embrace it with the politics of fragmentation, homing on what divides rather than what unites. Both turn their back on industry and the British working class. Both reflect a mood of political despair — the underlying belief that if there is to be progress, it is not for the British people as a whole, only sections of it . . . if at all.

R e c l a i m L o n d o n



With the election of Thatcher, London entered a new phase in its history. London's underlying crisis had already been identified by this party. In 1976, three years before her election, in a prophetic pamphlet entitled *London Murder*, we warned that London "is not dying of old age — it is being murdered". "This is part of the political strategy of the ruling class," we continued. "It flows directly from their desire to destroy everything which we have attained hereto — employment, trade unions, education, health and standards of living"

Thatcher embraced this strategy with a vengeance. Indeed, she epitomises it. Under her, the destruction of London's industry has proceeded apace. Public institutions that could be asset stripped have been asset stripped — or left victims of a policy of deliberate neglect. Legislation, designed to make collectivism a no win option, has been introduced with the aim of forcing individuals, by bribery or intimidation, to seek their own individual solution — even if it involved stabbing their fellows in the back.

Only in wartime has the metropolis been dragged through such a bewilderingly rapid period of social, economic and political change. And after ten years, the accumulated political and material damage is great.

But the battle is now on to reclaim London for Londoners, for the working class.

We know London should be a wonderful place to live, and we are sick of living in a city marked out by deliberate neglect, and decline. There is a massive, and growing, desire for a change, for progress once more. It has shown itself again and again in magnificent struggles — from the unswerving support for ambulance workers, nurses and tube drivers in their struggles for better pay; the teachers and parents of children in the ILEA who did so much to beat off the Thatcherite attack for so long; the workers who fought so hard for jobs and trade union rights at News International's Wapping plant; to entire estates uniting against Thatcher's plans to reintroduce Rachman-style landlordism into council housing.

All these actions are signs that we can create our own kind of society where

human need is put at the centre of Britain's affairs. In place of chaos, decline and asset stripping, we need planned development, investment, improvement. Every aspect of London life — its industry, transport, education, health, roads, social services, housing — needs a new lease of life. But first, we have to break out of the spiral of decline that Thatcherism represents.

That means going back to economic basics. Public services like education, transport, and health, need the goods produced by manufacturing industry, and wealth creation provides the resources we need to fund public investment. London used to be a centre of both — a great civic centre, with much-admired services with a powerful manufacturing base. They need each other and now we have to rebuild both. We will never be prosperous, nor will we be secure as long as Thatcher's policy of putting all of London's eggs in the basket of financial speculation continues.

But the reclamation of London is as much an ideological battle as an economic one. Londoners have allowed the voice of socialism to grow faint.

London cannot be reclaimed if its labour movement is not rebuilt and re-energised: we need to return to political basics too.

Can the London working class regain its vision of collective social advance? Can it accept that young blacks in the inner cities will not find jobs if the destruction of the industrial base continues unchecked; or that there is little point in demanding 'multicultural' schooling if the whole educational structure is being dismantled? No section of the class can build a better life if the central logjam of Thatcher is not broken. The British working class moves forward as one, or it fails to move forward at all.

The divisive politics of what has come to be termed 'left' has to be rejected, and simple but fundamental priorities, like the need for progress, for working class unity and for the defeat of Thatcher, need to be reasserted.

To reclaim its territory, the London labour movement must again speak for the whole London working class. 'Left wing' Labour councils must abandon their grandiose schemes of social engineering. Their job is first and

foremost to administer local services efficiently — to preserve what they can from Thatcher's onslaught, and to turn all the political blame for the inevitable inadequacies of these services on her.

Trade unions, like local councils, are there to serve the people. They cannot do so if trade union branch meetings are ill-attended forums of political posturing. If the members do not come to their branch meeting, ways must be found of taking the branch to the members. If workers are not queuing up to join a union, trade unionists must shrug off arrogant 'take it or leave it' attitudes and learn again how to recruit — if necessary, from scratch.

Those who see this as just a dull 'bureaucratic' grind — a retreat from the really 'political' battles — show they are still missing the point. Local councils and trade unions are limited institutions. But what they can do is involve people in the struggle to improve their own lives. This is a class struggle: getting back to basics is not an attempt to limit the scope of political activity but to extend and deepen it. For until Londoners are drawn back into the struggle for their city, and the mass

decision to opt out and to shrug off responsibility for the state of their capital is turned around, Thatcher's position in Britain will be secure.

Conclusion

London's influence on the nation's political life is disproportionate. It is the country's political, administrative, cultural and commercial centre. More important, it is the nation's largest concentration of workers, and the labour movement's own political capital. It has a tradition of political leadership stretching back over centuries.

Like the absolute monarchs of centuries ago, Thatcher knows she cannot rest easy so long as the capital is not firmly under her sway. She has done her best to tame London, but she has not succeeded. Indeed, no force the British ruling class throws at us will succeed, unless we allow them. That is the stark message of this pamphlet: everything she throws at us would be as nought if we had the clarity and honesty of mind to clear the decks and defeat her.

As a working class we have been ingenious in finding ways not to. Far too many of us have sat back and allowed the nation's political and economic life to become a spectator sport. Many have found it convenient to concentrate fire on false enemies. Many more have not had the guts to oppose the politics of division and dismay for fear of being temporarily unpopular. After ten years of counter-revolutionary onslaught some are even now convincing themselves that it is possible to sink back and relax. After all, hasn't Labour been riding high in the polls?

Yet our history is not one of cowardice, self-delusion or dishonesty. Through all its twist and turns, our tradition is one of collective thought, honest debate and class struggle — for collective progress. If we revive, sustain and develop this tradition, Thatcher's defeat is certain. But without it, we, rather than Thatcher, will be as nought.



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