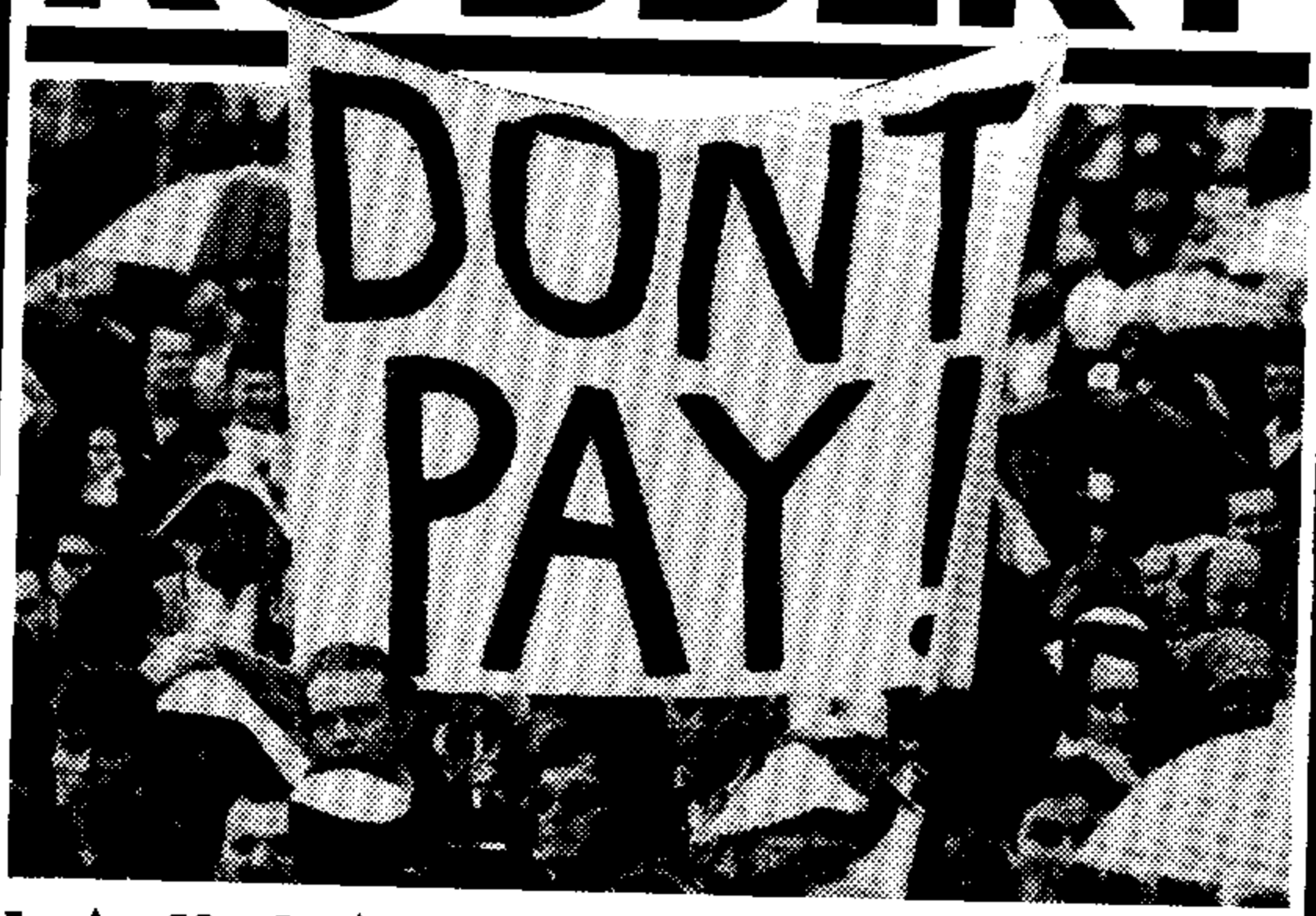
THE GREAT POLL TAX ROBBERY



WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO FIGHT IT

A *WORKERS POWER* PAMPHLET 50P

We need a workers' government

THE POLL TAX is only the latest in a series of vicious attacks that the Tories have directed at our class.

Since 1979 they have brought in laws to shackle our unions. They have deliberately set out to smash the printers, miners, seafarers and dockers who fought to save their jobs, conditions and communities. They have thrown millions onto the dole queue and pushed school-leavers onto slave labour "training" schemes. They have carried out massive cuts in the health service and education.

They have let public transport fall into dangerous ruin and have allowed the destruction of our environment to reach unprecedented levels. They have sold off key industries to their rich friends in the City. They have cut taxes for the rich while the burden of the growing economic crisis falls more heavily on the rest of us through mortgage rises, benefit cuts and inflation.

But now the Tories are in trouble. There are serious divisions in the cabinet and a very real loss of confidence in Thatcher as prime minister. A substantial section of the bosses themselves disagree with Thatcher's hostility to Europe.

The Poll Tax is definitely a major reason for the Tories' growing unpopularity. But Thatcher and her cronies have staked far too much on the Poll Tax to back down now without a fight. Time and again they have tried to soften the blow to retain support. This is the reason for the extra £1 billion plus sweetener pledged at the last Tory conference, and for setting the Poll Tax at a lower rate for the introductory year. Tory MPs continue to panic about the effect the Tax will have in undermining their support in the constituencies.

Over the last six months working class people have for the first time in years begun to see an end in sight for Thatcher and her friends.

But what sort of government should the working class aim to put in the Tories' place? Most people will say; a Labour government. Labour's lead in the polls without doubt testifies to the hope, held by millions of workers, that Kinnock will do away with the Poll Tax and reverse the whole barrage of Tory attacks.

Labour: a bosses' party

But at present Labour is doing everything it can to damp down these hopes. Even on the issue of the Poll Tax itself Labour does not begin to provide a response in tune with the interests of the working class. Initially Labour promised to replace the Poll Tax with two local taxes; one based on property value, the other on income. Now this has been withdrawn for fear of upsetting the middle class voters.

Labour's proposed replacement for the Poll Tax is far from clear. But one thing is certain – Labour has no intention of introducing a straightforward tax on wealth. It has no intention of making the rich pay for restoring the damage they have done over the last ten years.

In 1973, a year before the last Labour government took office, Dennis Healey promised just such a wealth tax. In his words, *"We will squeeze the rich till the pips squeak"*. Labour's 1974 election manifesto promised *"an irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families"*.

Labour in Power

But once in power, Labour's radical policies were quickly shelved. The wealth tax never appeared. Similar promises of rent freezes and price controls were never fulfilled. Instead of hitting the pockets of the rich, Wilson and later Callaghan tried to force the working class to pay the price of Britain's economic crisis. Using the Party's links with the trade unions a policy of pay restraint was imposed. Real wages fell by 7% in the year 1976-77 alone!

In 1976 a massive package of cuts in spending on essential services of £1.6 billion was pushed through. In the five years of Labour rule to 1979, unemployment rocketed from around half a million to three times that figure. And this was from a Labour Party whose election manifesto was miles to the left of that peddled by Kinnock today!

Labour in power did not flinch from using the same repressive methods of dealing with working class resistance that the Tories use today. In the dispute at Grunwicks for union recognition the police thugs of the Special Patrol Group were unleashed against the pickets. And in exactly the same way as the Tories have used troops to break the ambulance dispute, so Labour in 1977 brought in the army to scab on the firefighters' strike. Despite all their left wing rhetoric, in power Labour bowed to the dictates of the financiers and the IMF. They carried out a vicious assault on our class which paved the way for Thatcher's attacks. In this, Labour acted as a bosses' party.

By its ritual use of the word "socialism" and by various empty promises in its constitution the Labour Party proclaims itself a workers' party. Despite Kinnocks attempts to minimise the Party's links with the organised working class Labour remains a party funded by the trade unions.

But it is a party that acts at all times in the strategic interests of the capitalists. It is a workers' party with pro-capitalist policies and a pro-capitalist leadership. That is why it repeatedly betrays workers' interests, struggles and aspirations.

Millions of workers continue to identify with Labour. They see it as their vehicle for fighting back against capitalism's onslaught on their wages, conditions, jobs and social services. Because of this the minority of class fighters who see through Labour and are outraged by its betrayals cannot simply ignore

the Labour Party. So despite the Party's record and failure to really fight the Tax we must demand that it fights for the interests of our class.

If we fail to do this, we would be letting the careerists, bureaucrats and professional politicians off the hook. That is why, right now, we demand that Labour supports non-payment and campaigns for non-implementation of the Poll Tax. We demand that the Labour Party organises a mass demonstration and calls for a general strike on 2 April 1990, when the Tax is introduced. We insist that Labour councils should break the Tory laws and refuse to implement and administer the Tax. They should stop all prosecutions for non-registration and for non-payment of rates and rent. They should cut all local payments to the police and launch massive programmes of house building and local works. They should call for mass strike action if the Tories try to overturn their decisions and appoint unelected commissioners in their place.

Break with the bosses!

If Labour wins the next election, then the whole working class should launch a campaign to force them to take *real* steps against the bosses' monopoly of wealth and power. The Tax must be scrapped at once and replaced with a swingeing charge on all unearned income – a wealth tax. A massive programme of public works should be undertaken to solve the housing, transport, education and health crises – all paid for out of the bosses' pockets and carried through under workers' control.

All industries privatised by the Tories, all businesses declaring redundancies and all the banks, building societies and financial institutions should be immediately nationalised, without compensation and under workers' democratic control. The whole arsenal of Tory anti-union laws should be unconditionally scrapped.

Of course a Kinnock government would resist taking such steps. As in the 1974-79 period, the working class will have to be ready to fight *against* Labour simply to defend our living standards.

But even if a Labour government tried to implement policies that struck at the financiers and industrialists, that would not be the end of the story. Real power in our society rests outside Parliament. It lies in the boardrooms of the multinational companies, with the faceless senior civil servants behind the closed doors of Whitehall, with the privileged, pampered and reactionary judges, with the police and army chiefs. None of these are elected, but their decisions determine the way our society is run.

In his book *Spycatcher*, which Thatcher tried to ban, former MI5 man Peter Wright tells of the attempts made by the security services to undermine the last Labour government. Prime Minister Harold Wilson was, in Wright's words "bugged and burgled" by MI5 officers seeking to discredit him. And this was with a Labour government that represented no challenge to the bosses at all. Can

anybody seriously imagine that the capitalists would sit back in silence and watch an elected government remove their wealth and power without a fight? The people of Chile discovered to their cost that the bosses are quite prepared to do away with democracy if they find it necessary. Since the overthrow of the democratically elected Socialist Party led government in 1973, the Chilean workers and peasants have been subjected to a brutal military dictatorship.

Real change in our society will not come about as a result of putting a cross in a box on polling day. To carry out a real and irreversible transfer of wealth and power from the capitalists to the working class we first have to break the main obstacle to our struggle and the main defence that the bosses have: their state apparatus. Instead of a government that relies on the bosses' army, police, civil servants and judiciary, we need a *workers' govemment* based on, and accountable to, democratic, fighting organisations of the working class.

When we fight for councils of action it is not only because they are vital for the effective co-ordination of the action that we need to defeat the Poll Tax and all of the Tories' generalised attacks on our class. Such bodies, comprised of democratically elected and recallable delegates from every workplace, community and labour movement organisation would also be the very beginnings of the working class organising its *own* power, against the capitalists and their state.

In organising workers' defence against the bailiffs we can lay the basis for an independent workers' militia that could take on and break the bosses' police and army, backed of course by the action of millions of workers. A workers' government could not survive without smashing the bosses' state – dissolving the armed forces, police, judiciary, the upper echelons of the civil service and concentrating all power in the hands of a national council of action. In short, a *workers' revolution* is the only way to guarantee an end to the bosses' constant attacks on our living standards and basic rights, and the beginning of a democratically planned economy designed to put human need before profit.

A revolutionary party

The mass of working class people will not be won to this revolutionary perspective overnight or automatically. The influence of the bosses ideas as conveyed by the Labour Party, and by the daily barage of reactionary ideas in the media, is very strong.

To combat these ideas and to put forward a revolutionary perspective in every struggle we need a new political party for the working class. Not an electoralist party that puts all its trust in the bosses' parliament. But a revolutionary workers' *combat* party, that takes its place in all workers' struggles and strives to lead them to victory. The experience of the last decade shows that there is no way Labour can be transformed into the kind of party we need.

Workers Power is fighting to build a revolutionary party. Alongside our comrades around the world in the League For a Revolutionary Communist

International (LRCI), we want to build such parties in every country on the globe.

If you are outraged by the Poll Tax and want to end the inhumanity of the capitalist system, if you want to see all our struggles directed towards the goal of overthrowing capitalism and the construction of a genuinely socialist society – join our fight.

Join Workers Power!

The left and the Poll Tax: why argue?

NO PARTIES OR organisations in the labour movement support the Poll Tax. Opposition to it is unanimous and should provide the basis for one of the biggest united campaigns against the Tories that has ever been seen. Workers Power is solidly in favour of such united action. But the truth is that we are far from achieving it. The reason for this is that there are many different views inside the labour movement on how to resist the Poll Tax. To point this out is not, as many workers might at first think, an exercise in squabbling and point scoring when we should be uniting. Quite the reverse, sorting out how to fight the Poll Tax is vital if the campaign against it is to be successful, if real unity in action is to be achieved.

In our opinion many of the views expressed by the parties and organisations of the labour movement are wrong. Worse, they are dangerous because they could very well pave the way for the defeat, not of the Tax itself, but of the campaign to stop it. When you are on the road if somebody gives you the wrong directions and there is a danger that your bus or car ends up driving over a cliff as a result you wouldn't thank someone else, who knew the right directions, for keeping quiet. It is the same in politics. If you know the right direction for a campaign then part of your job is warning people against taking the wrong one.

"Communists" against mass action

There are two "Communist Parties" in Britain. Neither of them fight for genuinely communist policies that could beat the Poll Tax.

The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) have concentrated on building what they call "broad-based campaigns". These are primarily aimed at involving the church, trade union bureaucrats and even the anti-working class non-entities of the Liberal Democrats. The idea is to draw support from the "widest possible layers" in society. But these campaigns like the *Stop It* campaign in Scotland or the *Lord Mayor's Campaign* in Coventry rarely attract a significant number of working class people, unlike the local APTUs. After all, they do not aim to involve most of us in any direct action whatsoever.

Instead they concentrate on lobbying and organising vacuous publicity stunts to convince people of the unfairness of the Poll Tax. But if they were to call for mass non-payment, non-implementation or strike action, these campaigns would scare off middle class supporters at whom they are aimed. And if they denounced council leaders who have spent a fortune implementing the Tax, and

who have prosecuted working class people for failing to register, those very same council leaders might even withdraw their backing from the campaign! So they concentrate on passive protest. Suffice to say the Tories can safely ignore the CPGB's "broad" campaigns. Anti-Poll Tax activists who are determined to fight should do the same – ignore them.

The Communist Party of Britain (CPB) have more of a left wing gloss. They have got involved in some APTUs. Their newspaper the *Morning Star* has conducted a campaign against the Tax, and they still have some support in industry. However the CPB supports a variation of the CPGB's campaign not an alternative to it.

The success of *Militant* in organising APTUs committed to mass non-payment has led the CPB to denounce such bodies in a classic Stalinist fashion. Without saying what they object to in the APTUs' policies, without praising their efforts in organising non-payment on a collective basis, the CPB say that the APTUs are "open to manipulation by the ultra-left". What they really mean by this silly accusation is that the APTUs, in their majority, do favour mass action. The CPB, for all their huff and puff against the CPGB, do not.

Instead they call on assorted dignitaries, such as politicians, pop stars, actors, union leaders and bishops to refuse to pay. They argue for building Committees of 100 made up of such characters who are to withhold payment as a symbolic act of defiance. These committees of completely unaccountable and unreliable middle class people are counterposed by the CPB to the masses and to mass action. The committees will, the CPB tell us, "give leadership to the Scottish people generally".

In reality such stunts would only attract attention away from the need to build mass involvement in the campaign. Why focus on those who can afford to pay when there are millions who cannot, and who are desperate to find a way of preventing the Tax ever coming into effect? Thankfully *Committees of 100* have not caught on. The Scottish people were capable of refusing to pay the Tax in their hundreds of thousands without having to wait for the priests and pop stars north of the border to give them a lead. As the campaign against the Tax grows in England and Wales we should oppose proposals from the CPB to set up Committees of 100 as they would simply be a diversion from a real mass-based campaign.

The CPB and the CPGB do have influence in the trade unions, particularly in the Scottish TUC. But they have not used this to co-ordinate strike action or boycotts to even delay never mind prevent the Tax being brought in. In fact both "Communist" Parties are unwilling to challenge the bureaucrats that run our unions. Their own members have leading positions in the trade union movement, like Ken Gill of the MSF and George Bolton of the Scottish NUM. Any challenge to the trade union bureaucracy and any call for the massive strength of the labour movement to be used to defy the law will meet with their staunch opposition. The CPGB and CPB alike will be *obstacles* in our struggle to beat the Poll Tax.

Militant: half a strategy

Supporters of the *Militant* have thrown themselves into the campaign against the Poll Tax. Under their influence, anti-Poll Tax Unions (APTUs) have been set up across Britain. The overwhelming majority reject the passive tactics of the Labour leadership and are committed to an illegal campaign of defiance, particularly mass non-payment. The almost exclusive attention *Militant* have devoted to this issue has won them respect in the anti-Poll Tax groups.

But for all their hard work in the campaign *Militant* still fails to advance a strategy that can actually defeat the Poll Tax.

Take the issue of non-registration. Both in Scotland in 1988 and now in England and Wales hundreds upon hundreds of thousands initially failed to register. In Scotland the number of prosecutions for non-registration has been insignificant – in fact most local authorities in Britain have been forced to register people from confidential records held by the civil service, from the electoral roll and even from anti-Poll Tax petitions handed in at the Town Hall!

The recent furore regarding illegal questions appearing on registration forms gave a further example of the mess that councils have got themselves into trying to register the entire adult population. A well-organised campaign of mass non-registration could have struck an early blow to the Tories' plans.

But *Militant* opposed this form of struggle. They argued that non-registration would leave people open to fines and that instead, after some delaying tactics, APTUs should encourage people to register and concentrate on winning support for mass non-payment. They ruled out in advance the tremendous effect that hundreds of thousands boycotting the registration process in an organised way could have had. The Tories and their willing helpers in Labour-run local authorities would have had nightmares trying to prosecute masses of people. *Militant* could have used their influence to make this a reality. Instead they have concentrated almost exclusively on the slogan of mass non-payment.

It is true of course that non-payment will be an essential part of the campaign if it is to succeed. But *Militant* have elevated it to the centre of their strategy. Article after article in their newspaper has stated that "mass non-payment will beat the Poll Tax". Yet there is no guarantee that non-payment, on its own, will stop the Tax from being implemented.

If we succeed in getting millions to refuse to pay, the Tories and local councils will concentrate on docking the Poll Tax direct from our wages and benefits. Employers in Scotland have already said they are willing to do this and have even threatened victimisation against known non-payers in their workplaces. We need tactics to deal with this, that is to say, we need strikes in the civil service, local government and the Post Office, and in all workplaces where the Tax is deducted at source. Such action can thwart attempts to undermine non-payment.

In the Scottish campaign, where non-payment has been the main focus due

to *Militant's* leadership, numbers of non-payers have so far held up at around one million. But as the threatening letters begin to pile up and as the TV commercials get even more frequent the danger exists that more and more people, from the isolation of their homes, will come under pressure to pay. Unless a dramatic new element is introduced into the campaign, numbers of non-payers will begin to fall.

Lately, *Militant* have begun to concentrate more on the role of workplace struggle. To their credit they have approached unions at key workplaces seeking to obtain affiliations to anti-Poll Tax unions and federations. They are calling for "trade union action" against the Tax.

Nevertheless what sort of trade union action they have in mind is hard to discover. They still will not come out and state openly that it is strike action that we need to win. For example, when we look at their strategy for defeating the Poll Tax presented to the founding conference of the All-British Federation of Anti-Poll Tax Unions in November 1989 *Militant* failed even to recommend direct action by local government workers to boycott collection. They concentrated on demanding that local authorities refuse to implement the Tax. Vague references to "harnessing the strength of the organised labour movement" cannot excuse this omission.

The one form of industrial action *Militant* are specific about is their call for one day strikes. They have argued:

"The local authority unions should prepare the ground for a one day strike against the Poll Tax by linking with other groups of workers and local anti-Poll Tax unions. The STUC have the responsibility to call and lead a one day strike against the Poll Tax." (*Militant International Review*, Summer 1988)

They have now extended this call to a one day general strike throughout Britain.

We are certainly not against one day strikes, provided we make clear that their value lies in their role as demonstrations, mass and militant protest actions against the Tax. But, unlike *Militant* we do not present such limited actions as the way to win. A one day local government strike will show the depth of feeling that exists against the Poll Tax and help build the solidarity of the workers against it. It will not permanently block the implementation of the Tax though; nor will it win the reinstatement of those workers victimised for their refusal to co-operate with the implementation of the Tax. Nor will a one day general strike smash the Poll Tax altogether. The day after such an action the Poll Tax legislation will still be in one piece and the implementation of it will be carried on. Only if such a one day general strike is part of a strategy for marshalling the forces for an indefinite general strike to smash the Tax can it play a really useful role in the campaign. Otherwise, and this is how *Militant* present it because they never mention the indefinite general strike, there is a real danger of spreading the false belief that one day actions will be enough to make the Tories think again. The lesson of every major struggle of the 1980s is that it takes a lot longer than 24 hours of action

to beat the Tories. This must be said loud and clear.

Worse still *Militant* only ever present their calls for one day actions as demands on the official leaders of the labour movement. Of course it is vital to do this. We cannot simply bypass those leaders. But what if they won't respond to such demands? The STUC's passivity shows that this is a real likelihood. We have to face up to the fact that the unions are run by bureaucrats, men and women committed to Neil Kinnock's version of opposing the Poll Tax. Most of these people make a living by avoiding strikes, particularly over political issues that could mean breaking the law. As well as approaching the officials, we need to encourage the establishment of rank and file groups committed to taking strike action against the Tax, against the officials if necessary. But *Militant's* whole strategy is against the idea of rank and file organisation in industry. Instead they support building Broad Lefts to elect left wing officials. But no policy is advanced for holding these officials to account. This is just not good enough.

To develop a movement that could begin to put real pressure on the TUC to act, and that could begin to organise such action itself, if our leaders refuse to do so, we desperately need to build councils of action.

But organs of working class democracy and struggle such as these have no place in Militant's strategy. To revolutionaries they are essential not only to beat the Tax but represent the basis for a challenge to the bosses' whole state. Genuine Trotskyists seek to link today's battles to the struggle for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism by workers' councils and a workers' militia. But for all their supposed "Marxism" *Militant* see things quite differently. Their strategy is based on the fond belief that a Labour government could introduce socialism without the need for a violent confrontation with the bosses' police, army and state apparatus. This reformist strategy has dire consequences for the working class.

In Liverpool in 1984 *Militant* were a key influence in the Labour council which made a stand against the Tory cuts. But they kept the main struggle in the council chamber, and refused to build a council of workers' delegates that could have organised a general strike in the city. The city council backed down, and a massive rate rise together with redundancy notices for council workers then followed.

Socialist Worker: twisting and tailing

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) was, for a long time, like a mirror image of *Militant*. When the campaign against the Tax first got underway they steered well clear of the APTUs and justified this on the grounds that the Poll Tax could only be beaten by action in the workplaces. Back in December 1988 they became disillusioned by the failure of the non-registration campaign in Scotland

and concluded that a campaign based on non-payment was "virtually impossible".

The turn to the workplaces did not mean that the SWP had realised the centrality of mass industrial action, combined with a mass campaign of non-payment, as the way to beat the Poll Tax. On the contrary, their sectarian attitude towards the APTUs, which were dominated by *Militant*, led them to counterpose the workplaces, or more specifically the local government offices where the Poll Tax was to be processed, to community campaigns. In their pamphlet on the Poll Tax written in 1988, they argued:

"Even large numbers organised on a community rather than a workplace basis do not themselves possess the strength to win." (emphasis in original)

And even more emphatically, they argued:

"Community organisation stands in stark contrast to the power of workers organised in the workplaces."

In particular they singled out the 1915 Glasgow rent strike as an example of how community campaigns could not win.

This led the SWP to ignore work on the housing estates, to argue against building a mass campaign of non-payment and to put all of their emphasis on getting NALGO workers to take industrial action against the Tax. They counterposed the action of a handful of local government workers to a mass campaign of defiance linked to the workplaces and through that link strengthening the possibilities for successful strike action, not just by local government workers, but by all workers, to smash the Tax.

The result of this sectarianism was that the SWP got badly mauled in Scotland. With the implementation of the Tax one million workers refused to pay. To an important extent their defiance was co-ordinated by the APTUs. NALGO on the other hand had, at a leadership level, refused to operate a policy of non-cooperation with the administration of the Tax. Not surprisingly therefore, rank and file NALGO workers were reluctant to take action in defiance of their union, as well as their employers, and risk getting sacked, without any promise of support from other workers. In these circumstances the SWP had nothing to say. They could only abstain and observe while *Militant* organised the campaign. Indeed the entire Glasgow SWP district became, in its own words, *"dispirited and demoralised"* with many of its members actually paying the Poll Tax!

"Sadly, because comrades were repeatedly told that non-payment was a diversion and an irrelevance, many of our own comrades have paid the Poll Tax."
Mike Gonzales, Glasgow SWP, November 1989

Faced with this situation, but without a single word of self criticism, the SWP did a U-turn this autumn. Estate sales were started, involvement in APTUs began and all of sudden community based campaigns were alright again. In *Socialist*

Worker an article appeared arguing the exact opposite of what was said in the Poll Tax pamphlet of the previous year. It stated: *"There is no rigid divide between struggles in the workplace and in the community"* and that *"community campaigns can often achieve real victories"* citing . . . the 1915 Glasgow rent strike as an example!

What lies behind these twists and turns is the SWP's inability to advance a coherent strategy for the working class faced with any major attack on it. The best they can do is tail whatever they think happens to be the prevailing mood of the moment. Thus after the failure of non-registration they turned their back on the communities and pinned their hopes on NALGO. Now, with non-payment holding up in Scotland and coming onto the agenda in England and Wales they are eager not to repeat their Glasgow experience and see their members become dispirited and demoralised while *Militant* makes all the gains.

This is not the kind of leadership the working class needs. It creates confusion when clear answers are required. And, in both their community and workplace phase, the SWP, like all others on the left, fail to make the necessary connection between rallying the masses to defiance in the communities and general strike action in the workplaces as the surest way of destroying the Poll Tax.■

Printed and published by Workers Power, BCM 7750, London WC1N 3XX
Cover printed by Oval Printshop (TU), 52 Kennington Oval, London SE11
Cover photo John Harris/IFL

The great Poll Tax robbery

THE POLL TAX is an attack on all workers. Whether they are employed or unemployed, men or women, black or white, lesbians, gay men, members of a trades union, tenants association or even a Sunday football league, all workers rely on council services to provide a decent standard of living.

The middle class will be cushioned from the worst effects of the Poll Tax by their higher incomes and ability to buy private services. The bosses will simply get more caviar on their crackers.

What is the Poll Tax?

The Poll Tax has been invented by the Tories to replace the rates you pay to the local council. It is designed to rob the poor to pay the rich. It will be used to stop local councils providing adequate services for working class people once and for all.

The rates were based on the value of your house or flat. Somebody living in a big detached house or a country mansion paid much more than a family in a council flat.

"The Poll Tax is fair only in the sense that the Black Death was fair: it is indiscriminate, striking at young and old, rich and poor, employed and unemployed alike."
Tory Reform Group, 1987

The Poll Tax means the exact opposite. The amount spent by the local council will be divided up equally between ratepayers. Now a low paid worker on a council estate will pay the same as a millionaire. Some equality!

The Poll Tax is worked out person by person, not house by house. So families with grown up kids or relatives living at home will be paying much more than before.

The Poll Tax is so manifestly unfair that the Tories have had to cook the books with every estimate of what you will have to pay. They have had to provide a "safety net"; bringing the full charge in over a few years to disguise the swindle. But in Scotland the Poll Tax has been in force since April 1989. There the massive inequality of the Poll Tax has been on full show. Those who have fought back or who can't afford to pay have been threatened with bailiffs coming in to sell off their possessions.

In short the Poll Tax is a massive attack on workers' living standards. It lays the burden of paying for local services squarely on the shoulders of the lowest paid.

Who will suffer most?

The low paid, pensioners and the unemployed will be hit the hardest. According to the Low Pay Unit those on low incomes will be paying a huge proportion of their income in Poll Tax compared to those on higher wages. In some inner city areas where the Tax bill is estimated at £530 a year a person earning over £93 a week will get no rebate at all. That means over £10 out of £93 a week gone before you can think about food, rent, mortgages or other bills.

"The average pensioner, living alone and earning £80 a week, will pay 6.7% of his income compared to 1.8% if he were earning £300 a week."
London Evening Standard, November 1989

All households with more than two adults will be hammered by the Poll Tax. This includes many black families living in larger households and on lower pay.

Women will suffer, either as low paid workers or because they stay at home to care for a relative who will also have to pay some or all of the Poll Tax.

Those on benefits will also suffer. At present they get a full rate rebate. In future they will have to pay 20% of the Poll Tax. With benefits being cut to the bone this still represents a big chunk out of a fortnightly dole cheque. And the Tax will be highest in the areas where the majority of unemployed workers live – the inner cities.

Who needs the Poll Tax?

The bosses need the Poll Tax. It is a key part of the Tories' strategy of shifting wealth from working class people to the employers and the idle rich. As well as this the Tories hope it will finally put an end to councils' ability to provide services that protect our living standards.

Local council spending and services grew massively after the war. The benefits they provided were meagre, the homes they built were bleak, managers and councillors often competed with each other in the corruption stakes. Nevertheless local democracy and council spending were *gains* for the working class.

They allowed workers to pressure local government into spending money on services that went some way to meeting people's needs. Local councils could decide the level of rates they charged employers – the local business rate. This could be set high to make bosses pay for the housing and amenities workers needed.

These were gains Thatcher set her sights on clawing back when she came into office.

The Tories progressively cut the Rate Support Grant, the money paid to

councils from central government. The response of most Labour councils was not to fight back but to cut some services and put rates up to pay for the rest – passing on the Tory attack to workers.

Then the Tories outlawed big rate rises by "ratecapping". Councils which refused to give in to ratecapping found their councillors in the dock, fined heavily and barred from holding office. They abolished a whole tier of local government: the metropolitan councils like Greater Manchester and the GLC.

Now with the Poll Tax they have abolished locally-set rates altogether and replaced the local business rate with a national one. The Uniform Business Rate prevents local councils from taxing the wealth of local employers. It also discriminates in favour of big business over small business.

"Plans for the destruction of local democracy are now complete. The government's tanks are moving into place around every Town Hall . . . Local government is likely to suffer a series of blows from which it will be extremely fortunate to recover."
Financial Times, August 1987

What next?

The highest spending local councils are mostly Labour controlled. They are mainly inner city areas or industrial towns which need the kind of services councils provide: schools, council housing, sports and community centres, home helps etc. They will have the biggest Poll Tax bills. The lowest spending councils are in the leafy Tory shires.

Faced with a crippling increase from the rates to the Poll Tax most people will ask – how can we reduce the Tax? The Tories' answer is simple: *"Stop the council spending too much money. Instead of paying its workers the going rate, cut their wages and remove their conditions of service. Better still privatise as much as possible. Instead of spending all that money repairing council housing sell it off to a private landlord. Evict tenants in arrears at the first opportunity".*

"And if Labour won't do this" say the Tories *"put us in to do the job!".*

If we don't stop the Poll Tax now it will become a powerful lever for the bossesto abolish the services local councils provide to meet the needs of working class families.

Can we stop the Poll Tax?

Yes! Throughout the 1980s the Tories were careful to take on workers section by section. First they beat steel and car workers. Then the miners, the printers, the seafarers, the dockers. Their biggest fear was provoking a generalised fightback.

With the defeat of all these well organised sections of the trade union movement the Tories gained confidence to mount a generalised attack. The Poll Tax is the flagship of that attack.

They are relying on the Labour and trade union leaders to keep protests against the Tax passive and ineffective. They are relying on millions of workers getting angry but sitting at home doing nothing. They are relying on us refusing to break the law even though the law is robbing us and destroying local services.

Their biggest fear is that millions of workers will break out of passivity and mount a generalised fightback against the Poll Tax. Their fear has to be our hope.■

How can we beat the Poll Tax?

THE POLL TAX can only be beaten by mass defiance. This means actively and collectively breaking the law when it comes to registering, paying or collecting the Tax. It means preparing to mobilise workers in the workplace as well as on the estates so that we can use our most powerful weapon against the bosses and their government: mass strike action.

Don't register

Organising non-registration was the way many anti-Poll Tax groups sprang up. For the first time workers were able to demonstrate their collective anger and opposition to the Poll Tax. Non-registration was also a useful way of delaying the implementation of the Tax.

Many workers were angry but did not know whether they would be out on a limb if they failed to send the forms back. Mass returns – and even burning – of registration forms helped overcome this danger of isolation. Such campaigns could strengthen the arguments of those trade unionists who wanted to resist drawing up the register.

The Tories' response was to register people behind their backs and to prosecute the few who still resisted. In England and Wales there are still places where thousands of workers remain unregistered. Here non-registration can still be a useful tactic for initiating a campaign. But the failure of the non-registration campaign so far highlights all the dangers of passive defiance.

Don't pay!

We need a dynamic mass non-payment campaign. In every estate or locality there should be an Anti-Poll Tax Union (APTU) of those committed to refusing to pay the Tax. Already there are thousands of these in Scotland, England and Wales. In Scotland six months after the introduction of the Tax over a third of Glasgow's population, and approaching half a million in the Strathclyde region, were refusing to pay the Tax.

Yet non-payment by its very nature can leave workers passive, isolated and dependent upon their own courage faced with the Tax. The decision whether or not to pay is all too often an individual one. In one ear the Tories' TV message is blaring out "Make it easy on yourself, pay by direct debit". In the other is the threat by Labour, Tory and SNP councils alike to hold "warrant sales" – forcibly selling workers' furniture to pay their Poll Tax debts.

To make sure the non-payment campaign doesn't end up defeated like non-registration all APTUs must organise public, active campaigns of non-payment. Then everybody can see that they are part of a collective body consciously deciding to break the law and defend each other in the process.

Don't collect!

In the past many local anti-Poll Tax groups thought non-registration could stop the Tax. Today many APTUs are led by those who think mass non-payment alone can do the same thing. But this is just as short-sighted. Anti-Poll Tax groups need to combine agitation for non-payment and non-registration with a fight for *workers' action.*

The preparation for the introduction of the Tax, the drawing up and sending out of Tax demands and the overall administration of Tax collection will be handled by council workers. Bills will be delivered by postal workers. Civil servants in the courts and social security offices will be expected to process forms deducting the Tax from workers' incomes at source and sending in the thugs from private firms of bailiffs.

We need to *boycott all work connected with the Tax.*

Unless these tasks are taken on board, the union and council leaders will be able to squander every opportunity for generalised resistance.

Council workers in particular, facing a possible 750,000 redundancies when the Tax hits home, have a special interest in opposing the Tax. They can refuse to pass on information from housing benefit sections and other departments to the Poll Tax sections.

In answering the threat of unemployment we demand that all those employed in Poll Tax work must be given other useful employment with no loss of pay.

But many other trade unionists can take action. For example, postal workers can do themselves and all workers a favour by refusing to deliver demand Poll Tax bills.

Don't let the bailiffs in!

In Scotland the response to mass non-payment has been for local councils to threaten us with the bailiffs. So called "warrant sales" allow bailiffs to come in and sell your furniture to pay the Tax. Like the rest of the Poll Tax robbery even this is a swindle. The council-paid thugs have been valuing TV sets at £40, three-piece suites at £30 etc. This would virtually empty the home of a working class family to meet a £500 Poll Tax bill.

Fortunately there is a way to stop them. Wherever non-payers are threatened with the bailiffs the whole locality should be mobilised to drive them out. All the big rent struggles of the past have involved this. It will inevitably mean

clashes not just with the court officials but with the police sent in to protect them.

To meet this threat we need organised workers' defence. In every area there should be a workers' defence squad organised, trained and drawn from the sports clubs and community organisations that exist in every working class area. They must be prepared to meet repression with resistance.

Strike against the Poll Tax!

All forms of resistance to the Poll Tax lead inevitably to a clash with the law and the employers. They will prosecute non-payers, try to victimise council or postal workers who refuse to collect and "surcharge" councillors who defy the law.

That is why workers' strike action must be an integral part of the campaign to stop the Tax. Wherever active resistance breaks out we need to fight for solidarity strike action from as many workers as possible.

Some of the greatest rent strikes and local council struggles this century reached their highest and most effective point when organised workers took strike action in their support. Why? Because a strike hits the bosses directly in the pocket. It frees thousands of workers to demonstrate outside the courts or in the estates threatened with bailiffs. It has its own momentum, allowing workers to bring forward and unite other grievances and struggles with the fight against the Poll Tax.

But the Tories have put into place stringent laws against "political" strike action. Workers picketing plants from the same firm can find themselves on the end of a court injunction. How much swifter and more severe would be the bosses' response to strikes against the Poll Tax.

General strike against the Poll Tax!

One of the most futile arguments conducted in the anti-Poll Tax movement has been "which is best: non payment or non collection? workers' action or community action"?

The fact is that whilst they are the *starting point* of resistance, none of the tactics we have outlined alone are sufficient. Non-payment, non-registration, non-implementation by councils and council workers even at their most effective can only bring the struggle to the point where the whole working class has to measure its strength against the Tories.

Every one of these tactics can be sabotaged by using the law: anti-union laws against workers who refuse to implement, surcharges for councillors who do the same, stiff fines and "collection at source" for those who refuse to pay.

This does not mean we should abandon these tactics altogether. But it means fighting with a clear idea of what will be needed once the Tories mobilise their laws, bailiffs and police against illegal acts of resistance. General strike action, which stops the wheels of industry and the flow of profits into the bosses' bank

accounts can bring any capitalist offensive to a halt.

The need for a general strike flows not only from the scale and nature of the attack. By drawing unorganised and organised workers together, public and private sector workers, it is the only sure way of focusing the anger of all those affected by the Tax into effective action.

We don't deny that the balance of class forces in Britain is bad. Each successive defeat of a section of workers has weakened the fighting strength of trade union organisation as a whole. Whilst in many areas of industry trade union membership is being maintained, unofficial union activity is at a low level.

But there are signs of the revival of a fighting spirit. We have seen these signs in the 1989 "summer of discontent", in the AEU 35 hour week strikes, the ambulance dispute and the car workers' struggles. In addition Thatcher's onslaught on the basic fabric of working class life has generated a deeply felt anger amongst whole layers of the working class who remained passive observers of the trade union battles of her first two terms.

The need to turn that anger into action is recognised by every active anti-Poll Tax fighter. And no-one who recognises that need should start by ruling out the general strike. The class struggle doesn't develop in a straight line, step by step. Those who argue that to turn the tide we first have to rebuild the sectional, workplace organisations, and only then worry about the big questions facing workers, ignore the experience of every major class upsurge of the century.

Precisely when the "normal channels" are blocked; when peaceful protest, sectional trade union action or electing a Labour government are not immediate or viable answers to a burning question, workers begin to look to the most radical answers.

But there is nothing spontaneous about the path from this moment to the general strike. That is why even a minority of activists, arguing and organising for the general strike can be decisive.

It's natural enough for many workers to say "Okay the general strike is necessary, even possible, but we can't go around shouting for a general strike every day."

But we can and must prepare the way for a general strike by arguing for it in union conferences, on workers' doorsteps, in the Poll Tax campaigns themselves. Even addressed to the relatively few who will be listening this remains a call to action, not simply a "good idea".

But the moment to launch the call for a general strike, when militants go to their unions and leaflet their workplaces with the call for a strike NOW, does not happen every day. It can and must happen at the crucial moments. When the Poll Tax is introduced in England and Wales on 2 April: when councillors or council workers come under legal attack for non-collection; when whole estates are landed in court for non-payment; when the bailiffs go in.

Unless we raise the level of working class response to meet the growing severity of the Tories' attack the anti-Poll Tax fight will be defeated.

Build councils of action!

To organise and prepare this general strike action it is vital to draw the anger and activity of the local groups into an alliance with organised trade union resistance.

This means an organisation comprised of delegates from every estate and locality, trade union branch and workplace. It should meet regularly, hammer out a strategy to fight, take democratic votes, and stick by majority decisions. Such *councils of action* will provide the organisational base to unite the working class communities with the organised working class in the labour movement. That's where the central strength of the working class lies.

At present the fight to commit trades councils to launching delegate based anti-Poll Tax Federations can be the first steps towards councils of action. But most trades councils represent very few workers. The fact that most do not even take delegates from stewards' committees, let alone tenants' associations, means we need much wider and more representative organisations to forge a united struggle against the Tax.

Workers' councils and councils of action were not invented by revolutionary Marxists. From Russia in 1905, Britain in 1926, to Poland and Iran in the last decade, workers have reached for this form of organisation which breaks down routine sectionalism and bureaucracy.

Councils of action can build the type of generalised struggle necessary to defeat the Tax. In the process they can show millions of workers the truth: we have the power not only to defeat Thatcher but to take charge of our own lives, communities and workplaces once and for all.n

Why won't Labour fight?

NEIL KINNOCK says he is against the Poll Tax. His slick publicity department even had him photographed signing a giant petition against it. Yet, when it comes to fighting the Tax Kinnock, and the entire Labour leadership, call on working class people to keep their protests "within the law" and wait patiently until Labour wins the next election. Kinnock believes that the Poll Tax is a vote winner for Labour. By limiting opposition to ineffective protest he hopes to reassure the bosses of his party's responsibility and respect for the rule of law. He hopes that as the election draws near people will remember that he has opposed the Poll Tax and turn to his party in their thousands. To ensure that this strategy can work Labour has made clear its opposition to any mass campaign committed to defiance of the Tax and industrial action against it in the here and now.

This is a recipe for disaster. It means leaving the working class to suffer the brutal consequences of the Tax from today to the election.

Labour's strategy also means actively sabotaging the mass campaigns against the Tax that are fighting today. In Scotland where the mass non-payment campaign was just starting to develop Labour set themselves dead against it. The Scottish Labour Party conference last year affirmed its opposition to the non-payment strategy. As if to show the Labour leaderships contempt for the developing movement of defiance, the Party has expelled Tommy Sheridan, the leader of the Scottish Federation of Anti-Poll Tax Unions! As the struggle hots up, Labour is showing ever more clearly which side it is on: the wrong side.

Just as the Tories and their newspapers have been heaping scorn on the non-payment campaign, trying to rubbish it as being similar to the situation that has always existed under the rates system when a minority simply fell behind with their payments, Donald Dewar, the Scottish Labour leader made the following remark this September: "The non-payers were the poor who could not pay – the people the SNP said they would not try to lead into non-payment." He has sided with the Tories rather than accept that the basis exists for a campaign of mass defiance.

This slavish desire to remain within the law does not just involve encouraging people to register and pay on a national level. It also involves Labour implementing the Tax on a local level.

Labour stresses how expensive the Tax will be to bring in. But Labour councils are spending millions on the computers and administration required to process and send out the registration forms – money that could be spent on desperately needed housing and services. Councils that could be doing all in

their power to obstruct implementation have been sending out notices threatening to prosecute people that have not registered.

David Blunkett, once looked upon as a left winger when he was leader of Sheffield Council, has recently summed up the official Labour Party attitude when faced with criticism of their role in implementing the Tax. He said: "It is the government, not local councils, who should take responsibility". Of course the prime responsibility for the Tax lies with the Tories who are trying to bring it in. But anti-Poll Tax activists should not shrink from denouncing the traitors in local government who are doing the Tories' dirty work for them rather than leading a fight. To those who say that Labour councillors cannot defy the Poll Tax because of the law, we reply that anyone not prepared to put their personal careers on the line for the sake of their working class supporters has no right to represent us in the first place.

Labour's policy can be summed up as register, pay up, stay within the law, vote Labour at the next election. It is a gift to the Tories. Its end result will do nothing to guarantee a Labour victory in the election, let alone stop the Poll Tax. The successful introduction of the Poll Tax will be a defeat for the working class, a defeat that will cost us dear in terms of our living standards and our services. Both will suffer dramatically under the Poll Tax system. We will pay more for worse services. A defeat on such a scale will not rally support for Labour in an election.

Look at the aftermath of the defeat of the miners in in 1984-85. Mass support for the miners existed. By the end of the strike even the churches were condemning Thatcher's intransigence. Kinnock and his friends refused to openly side with the miners in the hope that neutrality would help their electoral chances and in the hope that they could reassure the bosses that they were now responsible capitalist politicians and not prisoners of the unions. Their reward for this treachery was that the demoralisation and demobilisation of the working class that followed the miners' defeat depressed electoral support for Labour and paved the way for Thatcher's third electoral victory.

"It is the government, not local councils, who should take responsibility."
David Blunkett, Labour NEC

The same could easily happen around the Poll Tax. This is especially the case since it will be Labour councils who, in the big working class areas, will be seen as the ones responsible for imposing the Tax, fining non-payers and organising the warrant sales of property stolen by the bailiffs from working class households.

If any Labour supporter is in any doubt that their policy could lead to their fourth defeat, then all they need to do is take a long, hard look at the lessons of the Govan by-election in 1988. Govan should have been a safe bet for Labour. It is exactly the sort of seat they will have to hold onto if they are to stand a chance of winning the next election. The Poll Tax was the key issue in the by-election campaign. Labour, in line with Kinnock's legalist strategy, made clear that the

people of Govan should pay the Poll Tax. The tartan Tories of the Scottish National Party, for their own opportunist reasons (and without doing anything to organise working class people) said to the people of Govan – *don't pay the Poll Tax*. The nationalists won the seat and Labour was humiliated. At a general election a similar pattern could easily emerge. Labour's strategy will have paved the way for demoralisation and will have opened the door to the Tories yet again. The working class must have no truck with such a strategy.

We must fight Kinnock's policy of co-operation with the Poll Tax now, inside and outside the Labour Party. We must defeat it, so that we can get on with defeating the Poll Tax itself.■

The Poll Tax is a fact of life in Scotland. In England and Wales it is set to be introduced in April 1990.

The best way of stopping the bailiffs and warrant sales coming south of the border is to stop the tax dead in its tracks.

Non-payment and non-collection are essential methods of mobilising on the estates and in the unions to defeat Thatcher's plans.

But more than this is needed to win. In this pamphlet Workers Power outlines a strategy of resistance that makes strike action by the organised labour movement central to victory.

- ***Don't pay!***
- ***Don't collect***
- ***Strike against the Poll Tax!***