

ST. PANCRAS 1960: When Tenants came out in their thousands

Last month, we looked at the state of housing in contemporary Britain and touched on just some of the problems that face most people trying to find and keep a decent place in which to live. This month, we continue on the same general theme of housing, but from a different angle: this time by reporting on the events that took place in the North London borough of St Pancras in the years 1959 and 1960.

Our purpose in covering this story now is to help focus attention on the fact that it is around such issues as inadequate and poor housing, lack of facilities on large council estates, high rents as well as homelessness that large numbers of people can be drawn into struggle against the economic and political system that thrives on the Holy Trinity of Rent, Interest and Profit.

It also serves to help us introduce some thoughts on the issue of the Poll Tax. By drawing on some of the lessons learnt during 1960 in St Pancras, it is then possible to point out things that need to be emphasised and pitfalls to be avoided if any future campaigns on this issue are to have any hope of success.

UNITING THE MANY

The events in St Pancras, like much of the history of the struggles of the working class, are not just of historical interest. Nearly 30 years later, there are many lessons that can be learned from them. For example, about power, both the power of the state, seen in this context in the form of the District Auditor who can surcharge councillors and equally as important, the power of the working class when it is organised and on the move, and knowing what it wants.

This is perhaps one of the main points to be emphasised here - that in any mass struggle it is essential that not only are those who are directly affected at the centre of any campaign, but also that they are present in large numbers. This certainly was so in the case of the St Pancras rent campaigns.

Briefly, the background to the events of 1960 lay in the decision of the newly-elected Tory Council in St Pancras in July of the previous year, to introduce massive rent increases for its 7,000 council tenants. Not surprisingly, in an area that had a long tradition of struggle on the housing front, in the many small factories and also on many wider issues, tenants soon began to organise resistance.

Within a very short time, 35 tenants' associations from all the major estates had formed themselves into the St Pancras Borough Council United Tenants Association, soon to be popularly referred to as St Pancras UTA. Its members quickly threw themselves into action where it mattered, among the council tenants themselves. Loud-speaker cars regularly visited every estate, thousands of leaflets were given out, and the issues were clearly and consistently explained on the door.

As a result, the tenants began to show their support for the UTA and its campaign in their thousands. Two huge demonstrations marched to the Town Hall in September, while one month later over 6,000 protested outside the Tory Party headquarters in Smith Square.

THE RENT STRIKE

Following these massive shows of support, the UTA called a meeting of 165 tenant delegates. This agreed overwhelmingly to organise a really effective campaign that included calling on the tenants to refuse to pay any rent increase. This campaign was to continue well into the following year.

At every meeting of the Borough Council, tenants were ejected from the public gallery. On one occasion, women pelted the councillors with eggs while others chained themselves to the seats. As a result, the Council was forced to bar the public from the public gallery; such as the momentum and intensity of the campaign that questions about it began to be raised in Parliament.

During the early part of the summer, the Council decided to take to court all those tenants who had stopped paying rent altogether. As a result it issued 23 Court Orders. Realising that it could not fight all these at the same time, the UTA persuaded most of these to pay off a few shillings, thus leaving two tenants, Don Cook and Arthur Rowe around whom the struggle was to be concentrated.

Following further moves by the Council about future rent increases, the UTA then decided to urge all tenants to withhold all payment of rent. This led to a new wave of action following which a further 250 notices to quit were handed out.

It was against this background that the whole issue was to come to a head.

EVICITION

On the evening of 27th August, 1960, barricades went up to defend Don Cook in his flat in Kennistoun House in Leighton Road and Arthur Rowe at Silverdale on the Regents Park Estate. The result of this action was electrifying. More and more support began to build up. Demonstrations, thousands strong marched to the besieged flats and volunteered for picket duty. In addition, even more tenants began to withhold their rent, forcing the Council to issue over a further 500 notices to quit.

Finally, in the early morning of September 22nd, 28 County Court bailiffs aided by 400 police, smashed their way into the two blocks of flats. Despite the efforts of the tenants in the battles that followed, both Cook and Rowe were evicted from their homes.

This action by the authorities made a tremendous impression on those involved. The same morning, the council painters went on strike in sympathy with the tenants. Over 200 railwaymen from the nearby Camden goods depot stopped work soon to be followed by construction workers on the huge Shell-Mex site on the South Bank and elsewhere. That afternoon, over a thousand strikers marched to Kennistoun House to show their support. That evening, they were joined by thousands of tenants who then marched down to St Pancras Town Hall in Euston Road. Here, they were met by over 800 police who, without warning, charged into the crowds, wielding batons with the result that many people were injured and over sixty arrests made.



St Pancras tenants en route to the Town Hall

PUBLIC ORDER ACT

Subsequently, the authorities showed how worried they were by the intensity and wide level of support the tenants had, by invoking the Public Order Act, banning all demonstrations in St Pancras for three months and sending many of those arrested to prison.

It is, of course, impossible to cover at all adequately all the events of this period in such a short account. Neither is it possible to do more than just mention the aftermath, one in which the Labour Party, after making many promises about how they would bring down the rents and remove the hated means test, swept into office in the 1962 borough elections and then proceeded to renege and carry out what the secretary of the UTA was later to describe as "an outright betrayal of the people of St Pancras".

It had been common knowledge well before the election that if a new Labour Council did carry out its pre-election promises on housing there was a strong possibility of the councillors being surcharged by the District Auditor who was, of course, appointed by the government.

Instead of setting out to mobilise the people of the borough to back them up, the Labour group meekly accepted the advice of one of the Labour Party's legal experts, Sir Frank Soskice and refused to bring the rents down.

THE POLL TAX

If the government can get away with it, this new tax will be introduced firstly in Scotland next April and in the rest of Britain in the following year. People from many quarters and for various reasons are now increasingly voicing their dissatisfaction with it. Already some have taken steps which they believe will ensure that they can get out of having to pay: for example, in parts of Glasgow it has been estimated that the number of names on the electoral register has already gone down by over 15%.

LESSONS FROM ST PANCRAS

It is with this in mind, and also with recognition of the fact that only a strong and effective campaign outside the House of Commons will have any chance of stopping the Poll Tax, that it is worth asking the question whether the lessons learned from the events in St Pancras have a relevance now.

Clearly the answer is yes, on at least two fronts. Firstly, with respect to any involvement by the Labour Party. As always it is essential to be on guard against those who go around preaching their pessimistic view that nothing can be done until we have a Labour government in office, one which will repeat the Poll Tax legislation.

Also, there is the added danger of letting the Labour Party gain control of any campaigns.

(It is important to make the distinction between members of groups within the Labour Party who want to take part in the campaign and letting them hijack the leadership.) Up in Scotland, they have stated their opposition to the Poll Tax and their wish to lead resistance to it, but with the rider that any campaign has to keep within the law. Perhaps it is relevant here to quote again the secretary of the St Pancras UTA, writing in 1967, when among the conclusions he drew from what had happened seven years earlier (and borne out by what happened after the evictions) he noted that "many of those who pose as friends of the working people are, in fact, the very enemies that are holding back their struggles."

Finally, perhaps the most important aspect from 1960 is on the need to involve as many people as possible in mass struggles. Struggles around housing are essentially community issues, which involve people where they live, and involve whole families. In the events of St Pancras, as in the experiences gained during the miners' defence of their communities in 1984 and 1985, we can see, as Mao Zedong said: "The people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history."

LET THEM COME

During the course of the struggle, many of the events that took place were put to song and became part of the modern folk tradition. We reprint here some verses from the song 'Let Them Come' which is sung to the tune of 'Let Him Go, Let Him Tarry'.

It was early Monday morning as I walked down Leighton Road, The pavement was all crowded and the traffic had been slowed, I asked an old man standing there what the fuss was all about, The bailiff's men were coming to throw young Don Cook out.

CHORUS: Let them come, let them try it, we are ready they shall see,

The pickets they are posted and you can count on me.

So it's shoulder boys to shoulder, if you see the bailiffs about, Let's keep the tenants in their flats but kick the Tories out.

Don Cook is our leader with him we'll stand or fall, For an injury to one of us is an injury to all, If they break down his barricade and throw him on the street Then every tenant in the land is at his landlord's feet.

Arthur Rowe at Silverdale is with him in the fight The pickets they are posted and watching day and night, Barbed wire and pianos are drawn across the stairs, A rocket is the signal if trouble should appear.

Rent, Interest and Profit, the trinity of greed; Should councils build as landlords, or should they build for need? Today it's Hatfield, Stepney, St Pancras, Bethnal Green, Tomorrow it may be your houses inbetween.

Do you live on someone else's back? Are you a parasite? If the answer's no, a roof above your head is yours by right, But in this land of freedom, money talks it's true, Some have plenty, some have none - borther, which are you?