

Politicising poll tax

Anarchist Workers Group

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On March 31st 1990 one of the largest protest marches of the Thatcher era turned into one of Britain's biggest political riots ever. The varied responses to the riot provide us with a good insight into the problems of the 'poll tax revolt' itself.

The Establishment politicians, Labour and Tory alike, were unequivocal in their condemnations of the violence. Steve Nally and Tommy Sheridan, the leaders of the All Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federation were, however, equivocal in the extreme. They went on TV to denounce those who fought the police and threatened to 'name names'. The Anarchist Workers Group responded immediately by submitting a motion to Nally's local anti-poll tax group in Lambeth which demanded that the Federation leaders retract their statements and declare unconditional defence of the rioters. Although the motion was narrowly lost on The chair's casting vote, the State itself soon validated our view that there can be no fence sitting on the question of working class violence. The Crown Prosecution Service set up a special unit to process the 500 plus cases. The Metropolitan Police launched 'Operation Carnaby', its largest ever investigation, involving 125 officers and a subsequent series of dawn raids. An Old Bailey judge instructed TV and newspaper companies to hand over to the police all photographs and film of the riot and magistrates have been dispensing prison sentences and heavy fines for normally minor public order offences. The riot and the ruthless criminalisation of those arrested has once again exposed not only the iron fist of the British State, but also the deep-rooted labourism of the British left. As the Federation leaders unapologetically admitted, the only contingency plans in the event of violence had been made in conjunction with Scotland Yard and not in preparation for repelling a police attack. Yet in the last ten years the right to picket and demonstrate has been systematically eroded by anti union and public order legislation. Thus it has become absolutely necessary that in any large scale political confrontation with the State, workers must be prepared to physically defend their demonstrations against an increasingly militarised police force.

Although the Militant leadership of the All-Britain Federation saw the riot as damaging to 'their' campaign, political consensus outside Britain viewed the violence as more damaging to the Government. In Australia the Liberal state government of New South Wales immediately ditched its own plans for a poll tax. "They would go berserk here" declared George Buckworth, a NSW Liberal politician.¹ As soon as trading commenced on the world financial markets two days after the riot, foreign investors gave their verdict. Both the value of sterling and British share prices fell immediately leading business analysts to draw the inevitable conclusion that the riot had shaken confidence in Britain's political stability.

"The pound suffered in Far Eastern trading as news of the poll tax riots was digested" announced the Independent² while, according to the Guardian "The fragility of the pound was underlined by the response to the clashes between police and demonstrators, which were shown on prime time television in the United States."³

Rather than take an uncompromising stand in defence of working class violence, the Anti-Poll Tax Federation was forced onto the defensive through its fear of alienating middle class opinion and the patronage of a few sympathetic MPs and councillors. Steve Nally may have been painting an accurate picture of British labourism when he said "wanton violence will play

¹ The Times 3 4.90

² The Independent 3.4.90

³ The Guardian 3.4.90

no part in helping ordinary families to join in”⁴ but unless the workers’ movement recognises the need for combative methods of class struggle, including physical force, then it will never be capable of advancing class interests.

Unfortunately, from our perspective, some of the problems of the campaign were standing on the platform in Trafalgar Square that day. Labour MP George Calloway, whose party has done so much to destroy resistance to the tax, told the rally “If the bailiffs come to my home they’d better bring the SAS and their canine friends”.⁵ By the end of the afternoon he had apparently altered his views: “these lunatics, anarchists and other extremists principally from the Socialist Workers Party were out for a rumble the whole time, and now they’ve got it, and if they didn’t exist, the Tories would have to invent them.”⁶

Joan Twelves, head of Lambeth Council, also spoke despite the fact that she, like every other council leader, is actually implementing the poll tax, prosecuting non-payers and making cuts in council services. A booklet sent out with all Lambeth poll tax bills even boasts “In its efforts to keep the poll tax as low as possible Lambeth Council has reduced its budget by nearly £20 million this year through good housekeeping and efficiency savings.”⁷ A few days before the demo, Councillor Twelves had herself employed hundreds of riot police to protect her council’s charge setting meeting from the Lambeth community. The AWG has always argued that the campaign must draw the battle lines between council workers and working class residents on the one side and town hall bureaucrats on the other. As far as we are concerned ‘socialism in one borough’ has stood discredited ever since the Militant led Liverpool City Council delivered 30,000 redundancy notices to its own workforce in 1985. The reality of the ‘fight’ against rate capping was that the Tories only had to use the ‘surcharge’ provisions against Lambeth and Liverpool councillors. Every other ‘municipal socialist’ council surrendered peacefully. Since then every ‘left’ council has followed the methods of Labour’s Stonefrost Committee: creative accounting, selling and leasing back assets, job freezes etc. In this way they have shed jobs and eroded services without provoking any serious fightback. Our approach to Labour Councils is, therefore, quite straightforward. The requirement that councils compile and maintain the poll tax register, collect the tax, and prosecute non-payers is a statutory obligation. Thus Labour left-wingers cannot possibly fight the poll tax as councillors, or else they will be removed from office. The demands we make of councillors flow from this analysis. Workers must place demands on councillors as bosses, not as allies. If individual councillors are really opposed to the tax we say that they should resign. Every councillor who has complied in any way with implementation must be kicked out of the campaign. Furthermore, Labour councillors who are implementing the community charge must be made to feel as unwelcome and unsafe in working class communities as the snoopers and bailiffs they employ. Our concern, unlike that of the left, is to expose the sham autonomy of municipal councils and demonstrate that local authorities are no more use as vehicles for defending workers’ interests than the central State machine itself.

The attitude of the left towards the anti poll tax campaign has been one of cheer leading rather than political leadership. The chant of “No Poll Tax” has become more of a left-wing mantra than a political strategy. This reflects the large, almost mystical, element of hope in the left’s assessment that this struggle could be “the big one”. Yet all the indications are that opposition to

⁴ Militant 6.4.90

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Sunday Correspondent 1.4.90

⁷ Lambeth Budget and Poll Tax 1990–1991

the poll tax contains the same combination of political problems that have beset the working class movement for the last 10 – 15 years: the influence of labourism; the new realism of the union bureaucrats; the myth of municipal socialism; obedience to the rule of law; and so on. Although the high levels of non-payment may well force the Tories to modify the poll tax, and eventually may contribute to a Labour election victory, this in itself does little to rectify the problems facing the working class.

At the end of the day the vast majority of non-payers will probably be “can’t pay” rather than “won’t pay”. Their experience will not be of collective struggle but the same individual experience of poverty which forces hundreds of thousands to default on rent, rates, fuel bills and mortgage payments each year. In Lambeth alone, a 1988 report showed that out of a total of 101,994 households, there were 40,000 in rent arrears of over 4 weeks, while a further £20 million was owed in rate arrears.⁸ It is estimated that mortgage default is responsible for 10% of the homelessness in the South East. In February the Department of Social Security itself estimated that 850,000 claimants would fall into serious community charge arrears.

The existence of an income related taxation, system is perfectly compatible with cuts.

The task of revolutionaries in such campaign is not to make a political virtue out of an economic necessity (inability to pay) but to politicise the movement. Opposition to the poll tax is wide-ranging, which is why it is vital to assert the primacy of working class interests. One of the most basic political questions raised by the poll tax is “what is the alternative?” The only answer provided by the left is to “get the Tories out” and to “vote Labour”. Yet most of the anti-Tory consensus on the poll tax favours some kind of “progressive taxation system”. This raises a second unavoidable question “can British capitalism provide for working class needs?” Unlike the left we take independent working class requirements as our starting point. As British capitalism began its long period of decline in the late 1960’s successive governments have been unable, whatever their taxation policies to satisfy working class needs. Thus while the poll tax hits the working class hardest; an alternative based on taxing the wealthy will inevitably face ruling class resistance in the form investment strikes, capital flight, withholding of credit and pressure from civil servants, the Bank of England, etc. Therefore as anarchists we believe that any campaign which leaves intact workers’ illusions in the Labour Party, and in the neutrality of the British state, is not a successful campaign. The real danger of building what is, in effect, the unofficial wing of Labour’s election campaign is that the struggle could be so easily derailed at its highest point precisely by the announcement of a general election. What must be built is a movement capable of fighting for the services we need, regardless of who holds government office and ultimately against a system incapable of guaranteeing social provision. Capitalism in crisis can survive without a poll tax, but it cannot survive without attacking working class living standards. The existence of an income related taxation system is perfectly compatible with cuts as both Tory and Labour administrations proved before the poll tax. If socialists cannot even attempt to put the anti-poll tax campaign on an anti-capitalist footing then they are demonstrating their irrelevance to the revolutionary project.

⁸ A profile of Lambeth: to assess the impact of the poll tax.
Centre for Inner City studies at Goldsmith’s College 1988

“Pay No Poll Tax, Vote Broad Left”

One of the most striking characteristics of the anti-poll tax campaign has been the absence of serious attempt to organise non-implementation. Non-payment is much easier to argue for because it will tend to take place regardless of whether a campaign exists or not. Non-implementation by contrast raises the problem of the union bureaucracy and their stranglehold over most organised workers. The left has made little headway in its efforts to win NALGO and CPSA, the two main unions concerned with implementation, over to a non-co-operation standpoint. In the CPSA the Militant dominated Broad Left placed all its hopes on victory in the national executive elections, hopes which in 1990 were dashed on the rocks of another electoral disaster. To date the only Broad Left initiative on the poll tax has been a “Pay No Poll Tax: Vote Broad Left” election leaflet. Suffice to say, no attempt has been made to build an unofficial campaign since the elections.

The effects of the Community Charge on workers’ jobs and conditions cannot be underestimated. However, there is a tendency on the left to treat sectional disputes against the conditions of poll tax work as virtual anti-poll tax strikes.

In October 1989 CPSA members in a number of London social security offices took strike action against the use of the form NHB 10 (CC) which supplied councils with information on claimants for registration purposes. Some leftwingers, however, attempted to make the political nature of the strikes more palatable by arguing that DSS offices were too understaffed to take on the extra work. SWP members even argued that the use of the NHB 10 forms was of “dubious legality”. The AWG by contrast argued that it was wrong to base our opposition on technicalities, but instead we had to win workers to action on the principle of non-co-operation of the poll tax and the civil liberties issue of ‘snooping’. Our analysis was again proved correct when the union leadership refused strike pay unless workers confined themselves to demanding sufficient staff for all poll tax work.

Similarly, when cashiers in Greenwich Council’s Housing Department struck for more pay to collect the poll tax, ‘Socialist Worker’ ran the headline “Greenwich shows the way”. Yet the dispute was only ever a glorified regrading strike. When management offered concessions the strikers were prepared to return to collecting the poll tax as usual. Throughout the dispute NALGO allowed strike pay on the condition that regrading rather than refusal to collect remained the objective. The problem with strikes against the effects of the poll tax is that they do not add up to ‘non-collection’. Sectional disputes can be settled section by section, and thus, even a wave of disputes can be demobilised unless they are transformed into a unified political battle against poll tax implementation itself. The very real difficulties of delivering political strike action points to the harsh reality that the labour movement in its present state is unequal to the task of advancing workers’ interests. The All Britain Federation’s Trade Union Conference in Liverpool on June 23rd failed abysmally to address this problem. The conference passed up the opportunity to declare itself for independent organisation and action in the workplace. It is an indication of the weakness of the campaign that it can mobilise 200,000 on a march but shies away from trying to mobilise unofficial strike action under its own authority. Most of the left have, in practice, given up on non-collection and instead appear to be staking everything on spontaneous disputed against wage arrestments and poll tax related cuts. On the issue of wage arrestments it is skilled manual workers who have the economic muscle to halt the flow of profits to the bosses. Yet these workers have largely followed the lefts advice of including a poll tax element in their pay claims, and due to their power many have already settled. Statistically then, it comes as little surprise

that skilled workers are less likely to be non-payers and therefore, less concerned with wage ar-
restments. Equally on the question of cuts, left Labour Councils have ‘post-rate capping’, become
experts in softening the impact of cuts and defusing union opposition to job losses. Though their
powers of creative accountancy will undoubtedly be stretched, it has to be said that while cuts
and protests are inevitable an anti poll tax strike arising from them is not.

By way of contrast to the widespread-eyed euphoria of the SWP and Militant some of the
left have given up altogether. The Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) is one such example.
Without wishing to overstate their negligible importance it is worth examining their views as a
case study in sectarian abstentionism. The RCP have certainly gone against the grain in declaring
“the poll tax is not a class issue”.⁹ According to their analysis, anti-poll tax sentiment is an all class
phenomenon influenced by small businessmen, ‘disgruntled Tory voters’ and rebel conservatives
like Michael Heseltine. They argue that non-payment “has nothing to do with politics”¹⁰ and is
no more of a priority than “campaigns against everything from eye-test charges to dirty drinking
water”¹¹ and if that doesn’t sound very convincing the RCP have their own ‘safety net’ argument
to fall back on. Due to what they call the ‘de politicisation’ of the working class they argue that
“It is now impossible to sustain large-scale support for any leftwing goal”.¹² Instead they have
opted for “promoting our magazine Living Marxism”¹³ and prioritising the struggle against the
pernicious influence of post-modernism within society.

Pessimism of the intellect: pessimism of the will.

The RCP analysis, like the SWP’s ‘downturn’ theory is not without its elements of truth. It is
true that opposition to the poll tax is quite apolitical and non-payment is of an atomised rather
than a collective nature. However, in order to prove that no mass campaign can exist they are
obliged to provide evidence:

“This year the only anti-poll tax events to attract a constituency outside the left’s
own ranks were the town hall demonstrations... and the subsequent march through
London which ended in a riot on 31st March”.¹⁴

This is just a crude attempt to make the facts fit the theory. It ignores the packed public
meetings, the well-attended local marches throughout the country, the court pickets and ‘hu-
man blockades’ which have stopped poindings and warrant sales in Scotland. These represent a
significant increase in the level of working class mobilisation which, as Trafalgar Square demon-
strated, contains an explosive mass potential. Shortly after the riot the RCP changed their tune
slightly. After all a ‘middle class revolt’ rarely involves looting sprees in the West End and mort-
gage defaulters seldom fight pitched battles with police. The riot was retrospectively designated
a ‘class issue’ by the RCP but one entirely unconnected with the poll tax. In fact the riot like
the violence at council lobbies was a manifestation of working class anger against the tax. This

⁹ Living Marxism No22 August 1990.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

fact was clear to large sections of demonstrators who cheered on rioters chanting “We Won’t Pay The Poll Tax!” The connection was apparent in a Sunday Correspondent opinion poll to test public reaction to the violence which found that “32 percent thought it was understandable, given the unfairness of the poll tax.”¹⁵ The violence was testimony to the fact that any mass working class demonstration which represents a serious challenge to the state runs the risk of criminalisation and police violence. The 100,000 strong NHS demo organised by the TUC in 1988 was not attacked by the police, unlike the unofficial poll tax march which advocated defence of the law.

The reality is that the riot was one of many ‘points of politicisation’, i.e. points at which working class interests can be pushed to the fore of poll tax opposition. The AWG believes that discontent with the community charge has made people more receptive to anti capitalist arguments. Our experience of active involvement in the campaign coupled with uncompromising political intervention has led us to the conclusion that there is a resonance for our arguments: that Labour is a bosses party, that Labour councils won’t fight, that the law must be broken, that working class violence is justified, that we need to physically defend marches and that we need political strike action to smash the poll tax. The reason that this potential is, as yet, completely unrealised, is due to the opportunism of the mainstream left. The RCP position is little more than a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is served by their complete abstention from a political struggle within the All-Britain Federation.

The poll tax is clearly a taxation system in trouble. Maintaining a register is an administrative nightmare; chasing up non-payers is an expensive, labour intensive business; and initial collection rates were well below their expected targets. Working class resistance, albeit in a passive, atomised and unpoliticised form has undoubtedly been a contributory factor to the situation. The resolution of the problem in the interests of the working class requires that this fragmented resistance is transformed into politically conscious mass action. Unfortunately the All Britain Federation believes that the existing forms of opposition are sufficient in themselves. As Steve Nally argues;

“The poll tax will be beaten when ten million non-payers in England and Wales join the one million not paying in Scotland”.¹⁶

The Federation strategy is in effect to run advice stalls for non-payers and rely on defaulters ‘clogging up’ the magistrates courts. Non-collection, however, has not occurred spontaneously and the Federation has denounced calls for a general strike as utopian. This shows that breaking the law by ignoring a poll tax bill holds much less fear for workers than breaking the laws that prohibit strike action. Yet the Federation’s formal demands of ‘non prosecution’ and ‘non-implementation’ confront such an armoury of legal obstacles that it is more utopian to believe that anything less than mass political strike action is necessary to win. Councils are legally obliged to prosecute non-payers, employers are legally obliged to comply with attachment of earnings orders and DSS local office managers are similarly obliged to process deductions from benefits. Workers who strike to oppose any of these measures are therefore taking illegal political strike action, something which no trade union leader would ever authorise in the present climate. Should one group of workers break the impasse and go on a non implementation strike it would be ludicrous to believe that they could win on their own. Only widespread solidarity

¹⁵ ICM poll, Sunday Correspondent 8.4.90

¹⁶ Militant.

action could prevent the isolation and defeat of such disputes. Yet it is precisely action on this scale which the anti-poll tax campaign refuses to countenance.

As the AWG has repeatedly insisted we need to fight with every weapon at the disposal of our class. This means more than non-payment and refusal to collect but also physical resistance to bailiffs, organised defence of picket lines or demonstration and ultimately generalised strike action. We need a movement which does not confine itself to demanding that Labour councillors and union bureaucrats fight but is prepared to argue for and mobilise unofficial action. Finally we need to arm the campaign politically by breaking illusions in the labour bureaucracy and by fighting not in defence of local government or the rating system but against all capitalist austerity measures and for the social provision we need. Our approach may appear impossible to some, while pessimistic to others. In reality it is neither because it is revolutionary in method. Such an approach must make a sober assessment of all the obstacles in our way, and outline a strategy which can overcome those obstacles. It may prove difficult to win support for our ideas but this is a subjective, political obstacle not an objective impossibility. Our experience of poll tax work has regrettably led us to conclude that most of the British left now constitutes one such obstacle due to its chronic labourism, its demoralisation, its pessimism and its complete disability to equip the campaign with independent working class politics. The poll tax is massively unpopular and the struggle against it must therefore have considerable anti capitalist potential. It would be tragic if the left succeeded in re channelling the deep anger at the poll tax into electoral support for Kinnock's 'capital friendly' Labour Party. Tragic but unsurprising.

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