

Hackney Goes Local. . . . Or Decentralisation for Beginners.

Hackney & Haringey Big Flame groups held a joint meeting in November to discuss the great wave of LOCALISM that is now sweeping through Hackney thanks to the newly elected Labour (left) council. We thought the discussion should get through to comrades & friends who don't find themselves living in a socialist republic (We even offer cut rate tours of the great decentralisation struggles. . . eg Town Hall etc.) If you don't know what decentralisation of services is, you'll pick it up as we go along.

INTRODUCTIONS

M. A. (NALGO) The first thing to say is that dec. is not a new thing but the Labour Party in Hackney has made it the key focus of their programme this year & has held 23 public meetings recently to get the ball rolling - many of them well attended. They want to set up Neighbourhood Centres throughout Hackney which will bring council services closer to the people. One big danger in all this is you'll get people being coopted by the council onto committees & you could also end up with just a new layer of bureaucrats running the show. There's also been disputes between the council & the local unions over the new plans about how much they benefit council workers. Too often dec. looks like 'jobs for the boys'.

M. M. The LP sees dec. as a way of bringing services closer to people in the hope that they'll identify with them more & then defend them against the cuts. It's more likely to produce frustration & the LP, both locally & nationally hasn't got an answer to that. In Islington, the tenants groups have demanded more control over budget decisions etc on the estates. The council has gone for joint estate committees & local managers. The neighbourhood offices also seem to be in conflict with what tenants are struggling for. Dec. will probably make life easier for some people, eg, by having a local office. The real issue for us is the control of power & resources.

M. L. (council worker). In Hackney the council is chipping up sections in The parks department using dec. as an extra card. It makes for de skilling & 'capital intensive' parks. (yes, folks. . . cips). Union organisation is too weak to use dec. to its own advantage, it's probably the same in most t.a's. All the unions can see the danger of their power & organisation being fragmented by decentralisation.

A. N. Surely winning concessions from the council is what it's all about.

You would uncover a greater demand for services & increase the pressure for better services. There's a huge civic centre in Wood Green, having that doesn't mean the unions in that building are more powerful or better organised. The problem for us is . . . will dec. just be a waste of energy better spent elsewhere.

G. F. (Centreprise). If we can build something on our terms that's fine but we could end up just being dragged into LP type politics. The LP seems to think Centreprise is going to give up its independence & become a sort of unofficial neighbourhood centre.

M. (NALGO). The Labour Left is clear about its project. They want to build the LP & these policies are a means to this end. Is this how you politicise people, the meetings have been pretty much a success. The local offices could increase identification with the unions & build peoples' power.

M. M. If dec. means people are meeting & talking then that's a valid reason for BF being involved.

R. W. Unless you have more council workers then nothing can be done. The cuts are still happening so BF should be saying. . . Fight the cuts.

A. N. But maybe you can make the connection between the Tory govt. & the cuts through these changes.

M. A. (NALGO). There are many different interests to be looked at here. . . estates, streets, wards, minority groups which have a borough wide view. Certainly the neighbourhood ctees will have to be pretty 'flexible' about how they operate.

M. L. People could end more cynical & pissed off than ever. If we get involved it'll have to be in a way that encourages joint action to go further then the LP would like.

M. M. Dec. could be a diversion from local struggles if you're not actually working for the council. BF should avoid seeing it as an end in itself as the LF does. It won't create socialism as the LP thinks. Walsall set up neighbourhood centres 18 months ago & 70% of people signed a petition to support them. The Tories got voted in later, & kept the offices open.

D. W. I wish we'd had a talk like this about the GLC's fares policy last year. The Fare Fight campaign did succeed in making transport an issue & I see this as a similar thing. We should be practical about dec., are

these neighbourhood centres going to hold monthly mass meetings for local people. Are we going to make this a project for E. London B.F. or what. Should we do some articles for the newspaper. To me, the council is management, whether it's nationalised or private & our job is to encourage struggle.

A. N. Can we be practical then. Do we demand meeting space in these local offices. The women's employment unit in Greenwich has organised a benefits campaign which has been very successful.

M. (NALGO). The LP would say to you. . fine, we're offering you the chance to do all these things, they'd ask you to come in off the sidelines to make their policies work.

M. L. We would have to be careful not to get our politics linked up with the LP, for example, the police committee is their pet thing now & people getting harassed don't want to cooperate with the law in any way. . . they're people we'd want to support. Perhaps, by following the progress of dec. closely we'd be more able to form alliances with these people & work out a more common front.

M. You'd have to go the meetings for a start & find out what people are saying. You can't just barge in with a 'line', but be a bit more open to what's going on & keep in mind that BF hasN, t got this issue neatly sorted out at all as can be seen by the disagreements here tonight.

The story will continue. . . . we'd welcome comments & views on decentralisation from comrades. For some Labour Party views on it see Chartist, Nos. 92 & 93 (Sept/Oct & Nov/Dec. 82).

E. London Big Flame, 12/11/82.
