

# 'WE WON'T PAY' -

Women's Struggle on

**TOWER HILL**

**(a new housing estate near Liverpool)**

This article has been written by women in Big Flame who are part of the Tower Hill women's group. We've written it to explain why and how we are active on Tower Hill, and to describe some of the ideas of the women's group. It is not a complete description and analysis of the rent strike.

## TOWER HILL

Tower Hill is 10 years old and still growing, the newest part of Kirkby Lancs, built round an industrial estate of 200+ factories. It's typical of many new housing estates, thrown up on the edge of the city for the victims of slum clearance and overspill. As everywhere, families and communities in Liverpool are split up through housing policy, and on the new estates people have to rebuild friendship and solidarity.

Tower Hill tenants did this quicker than most new estates through the rent strike which lasted from October 1972 to December 1973, a long, hard, mass struggle which marked it out from other areas also fighting the Housing Finance Act. Through this struggle the working class on Tower Hill could begin to re-unify itself, against the fractures created by capitalist 'development'.

In these notes we talk about one part of the struggle on Tower Hill, then and now. About women's struggle and its central role in unifying and building the autonomy of the whole class. This is the question we in Big Flame were helping to organise round

during the rent strike, and which is still central to our activity there.

## WOMEN ON TOWER HILL

Tower Hill is a young estate, built for the grown-up children of the rest of Kirkby. Many of the families have children under 5. Because of this the women on the estate were hit hard by the rent rise, and it was their struggle as much as men's. But it's not just important that they were involved. We also have to see what women brought to the struggle and what **more** they could have brought from their own experience as women under capitalism.

When the left and bourgeois papers talk about the crisis and the living conditions of the working class, very little is said about the specific material situation of housewives, how they fight back, and how they are also a hidden force behind, for example, the wage struggles of men. Everyone comments on price rises and the housewives' budget. But only the women's movement and some other women in struggles have really got down to analyse the central struggle of housewives like all workers, for more money, less work and more freedom to live well and happily. If this analysis is lacking, the specific needs of housewives, and therefore all women, are submerged and forgotten.

For housewives, the crisis means more work, less money- the two things go

together all the time, whether or not you are also in waged work. Cuts in state spending on health, schools, services plus price rises, all mean more work. Dole money or low wages means more work. You can't buy labour saving food, you mend clothes instead of buying them, you can't get out and enjoy yourself.

As the ruling class tries to cut our living standards, they bank on the sting being taken out by the housewife, who's supposed to just buckle down, work harder and make ends meet. When hospital beds are cut and patients sent home quicker, the sick are returned to 'the community' to be cared for. While back in the hospitals women doing the same jobs as housewives, only for a wage, work harder as nursing staff are cut. When nurseries are closed or never built the children still have a place at home - for free. And always, the housewife has to parcel out the budget, scrimping and saving through strike, lay-off or a normal waged week. Of course some men too do this work at times, but very few men are put in the role of 'housewife'.

Increasingly, unemployed men, young people and people convicted in the courts are made productive as cheap or even free labour to do these jobs in the community that the state won't pay for - seeing after the old, the sick, the young. In the same way housewives have always been used as a way of making the working class share out its own poverty.

On Tower Hill, with high unemployment, rundown conditions, no facilities, wage freeze and inflation, the £1 rent rise was the straw that broke the camel's back. Everyone. And the women refused to just make ends meet. They kept the money and fought to keep it.

But this didn't mean that the point of view of housewives was always put forward in the policies and discussions of the rent strike. The point is not just women being involved but that they have something particular to say and to win. If this is not brought out the content of the struggle becomes less unified and autonomous.

## TOWER HILL BASE GROUP

The Tower Hill base group is one of 5 in Merseyside Big Flame. It started in December 1972 when some women on Tower Hill asked us to help start a womens group there.

Base groups are set up for two main reasons. First, different questions and problems are raised by the experience of different sections of the class. Unity and a strategy for the whole class cannot be built by submerging these differences. Most important, the independent organisation of women, immigrants and blacks is central to a process of unification. It not only asserts their particular needs and ensures these are not submerged, but can actually reshape class consciousness and be a major force for autonomy.

Linked to this, sections of the class can at times act as a reference point for the autonomy of the whole class because of their particular relation to capital. For example, throughout Europe, immigrant workers and other workers on mass assembly line work in the car plants have begun to express autonomy from capitalist organisation of work - against grading, work, division of labour, hierarchy, delegation, trade union mediation and for the money to live separated from production for capital.

In a slightly different way, because so far we haven't clearly defined and used our power in a mass way, women have begun to assert social, sexual, political, economic autonomy from the needs of capitalist development. And so we're beginning to reshape the objectives of the whole class.

Second, revolutionary organisation in this country has for a long time been external to the mass of people in struggle. This is true of all existing groups, however many working class members they contain.

Linked to this, all revolutionaries can become detached from the women and men they're with every day - even if you're working class, if you work in the same factory or live on the same estate. This is a problem in revolutionary development everywhere at all times.

The labour movement and the left have been built on the strength given by the capitalist division of labour to the male, white industrial working class. But both are weakened politically by sectionalism, racism and sexism. Both have often been out of step with the struggles of the rest of

the class, and even from the mass struggles of the workers inside their own sphere. These struggles can often politically transcend them.

Big Flame base groups are set up to confront both these questions. They are set up by small groups of people, who both are and aren't already struggling inside that situation, to work in a continuous, daily way in specific workplaces, housing areas of kinds of struggle. We try to build a close relationship with other militants there, mutually learning and teaching, instead of commenting from the outside or just building paper membership. This way our experience and understanding of different kinds of struggle is deepened and our theory tested and rooted in Merseyside. We can also offer our own experience of struggle in other factories, colleges, offices, shops, womens groups, claimants unions, and explain why we are revolutionaries and what that means in a particular situation.

The base group acts as an organisational focus, bringing people together who want to organise, whether or not they are in Big Flame. It also organises in a mass way, and the Big Flame members try to build it as a reference point for the development of mass autonomy and organisational forms that strengthen it.

The base groups work independently, and are controlled by all the militants inside them. The Big Flame members are guided by the militants in their base group and also by the strategic perspectives and theory of the organisation as a whole.

We went to Tower Hill to start base work with other women in struggle. We wanted to work in a way which showed the falseness of separating 'womens struggle' from 'class struggle' - and to bridge the gap between the ideas generated in the womens movement and the mass struggles of women.

We didn't go to Tower Hill just because there was a rent strike. We had been involved in the partial rent strike in Halewood, and had been actively supporting the tenants on Tower Hill - writing articles in the newspaper, joining the road blocks and house pickets, helping to organise joint meetings between different areas. Through this we met women on Tower Hill, who were learning about their own struggle and

wanted us to start a womens group with them. There was the basis of a really mutual relationship. So although we lived in Liverpool, had no children and some of us were ex-students (all of which raised questions we had to work out in practice), we were all women in struggle whose experience had led us to similar ideas.

On Tower Hill during the rent strike the womens group was our 'base group', only this time set up mutually by members of Big Flame and other militants. So it was not a Big Flame group. This article has been written by the Big Flame women to explain our perspectives, although its based on discussions in the womens group as a whole.

## TOWER HILL WOMENS GROUP

For many women on Tower Hill the rent strike was a first taste of collective struggle, a time when they made friends and overcame the isolation and passivity forced on them by life as housewives on the estate.

The women who started the womens group were all among the most active. At the same time they were aware of their own problems in being active while still having responsibility for the housework, and especially the children. So they knew why other women were less involved. Men's attitudes to women and women's ideas about themselves could make them passive or nervous. Also women often couldn't get to the meetings, either because they worked evening shift or were in with the kids. So women often missed the chance to discuss policy and activity. They also thought the struggle should be widened in the hope that more women would get involved if it took in more issues that directly concerned housewives.

But we were all uncertain which direction to take. There were 10 of us (4 from Big Flame). We started with door-to-door leafletting and big open meetings with 30 to 40 women. In the leaflets we simply raised issues and in the meetings we failed to give any direction. We were trying to avoid taking on a leadership role that would prevent other women having their say, but in the end we just added to the confusion. Other women were even less confident than us about suggesting activity.

At the same time we failed to start



Rent strike demonstration on the estate

discussion about the rent strike. This was a mistake, based on wanting to be an open group, including women not on rent strike.

Gradually the meetings fell away for these reasons and because of practical problems. But that first phase hadn't been a total failure. Through working in a mass way we'd brought together women, some of who had been isolated before, and we were understanding our struggle better.

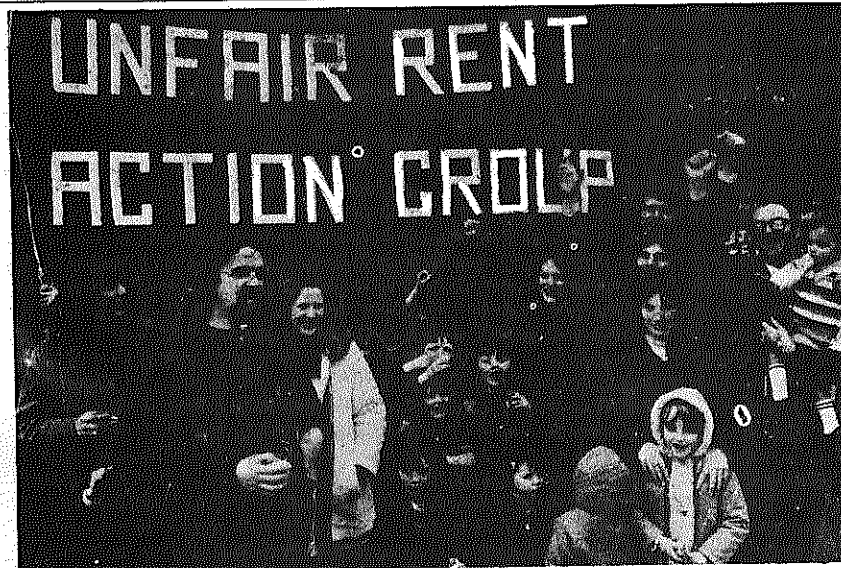
As a consistent, ongoing group which met regularly we were likely to stay small. But other women would be involved in different ways, with the womens group as a valuable reference point. For example, in autumn '73 some women organised road blocks for safety barriers and came to us for support, even though they didn't want to come to meetings. And some women had informal meetings on their block which we were involved in. The womens group could help give continuity and development so these particular campaigns and discussions didn't just come and go.

A main problem however was the separation of the womens group and the rent strike and Action Group. This was partly because we were unclear. We thought that if women weren't on rent strike, or not actively involved then we should organise around other things separately to involve them. We weren't clear how we could organise as women in a way that drew the rent strike and other struggles together, from our point of view.

But this was also a result of developments in the Action Group. Generally, we failed to build the collective confidence and strength to make our ideas a part of the Action Group policy. Either we failed to put our ideas across clearly or we were just knocked back. And alot of this was just the usual problem of not being used to speaking in meetings, and being easily silenced by the confidence, and even hostility of some men.

We were also discouraged by the view put forward by some men that we were being divisive. Even though we knew that the womens group was simply trying to break divisions that already existed between militants and other tenants, between men and women etc. Divisions which are not thought of as such because they are accepted as the natural order of things. The hostility of IS made this worse. They failed to understand us, or even try to, politically and so could only assume we were troublemakers. We mention this only because IS, as a revolutionary organisation which claims a vanguard role and which played an important part in the rent strike has a responsibility to at least attempt an understanding of the role of women in struggle. Instead, they resorted to private and personal criticism against the womens group and Big Flame.

The result of this was that when we were most confident or most in agreement with the actions of the whole Action Group we tended to let the womens group fall off and failed to do mass work which would have built our relationship with all women on the estate. When we were weakened and



'A main problem . . . was the separation of the women's group and the rent strike and Action Group.'

isolated in the Action Group we turned to the womens group and tended to withdraw from activity with the Action Group. So our practice in both became separate and therefore both were weakened.

Obviously another factor affecting us was that as a small group of women with young children we had a lot of work to do just maintaining the homes and families, and just organising in a most basic way to have meetings and see to the kids collectively. Even when we were all in the background of the Action Group none of us was ever "doing nothing".

We still think it was right to have a womens group. It wasn't the cause of the political separation - that existed already. But the womens group didn't become strong enough, inside the AG meetings or on a mass level, to overcome it.

### RENT STRIKE & ACTION GROUP

This section is a summary of aspects of the rent strike from the point of view of the womens group. We want to make it clear that we're not trying to reduce everything that happened to the womens group, and we're not saying that there was always just disagreements in the Action Group. We hope that Tower Hill tenants will write about the rent strike as a whole. Here we're just drawing out elements in what happened that were important to us.

For months before the increase some people had been preparing. Doing leaflets, posters, holding meetings. This included some of the present womens group, IS and other tenants. The Unfair Rents Action Group was the political and organisational focus of the rent strike. Initially hundreds went to the weekly meetings, as they did at the end. But most of the time there were about 20-30 people who went regularly.

Big Flame came to identify with one perspective, expressed by the womens group and some men, which we thought was closest to developing some of the most important elements of the rent strike.

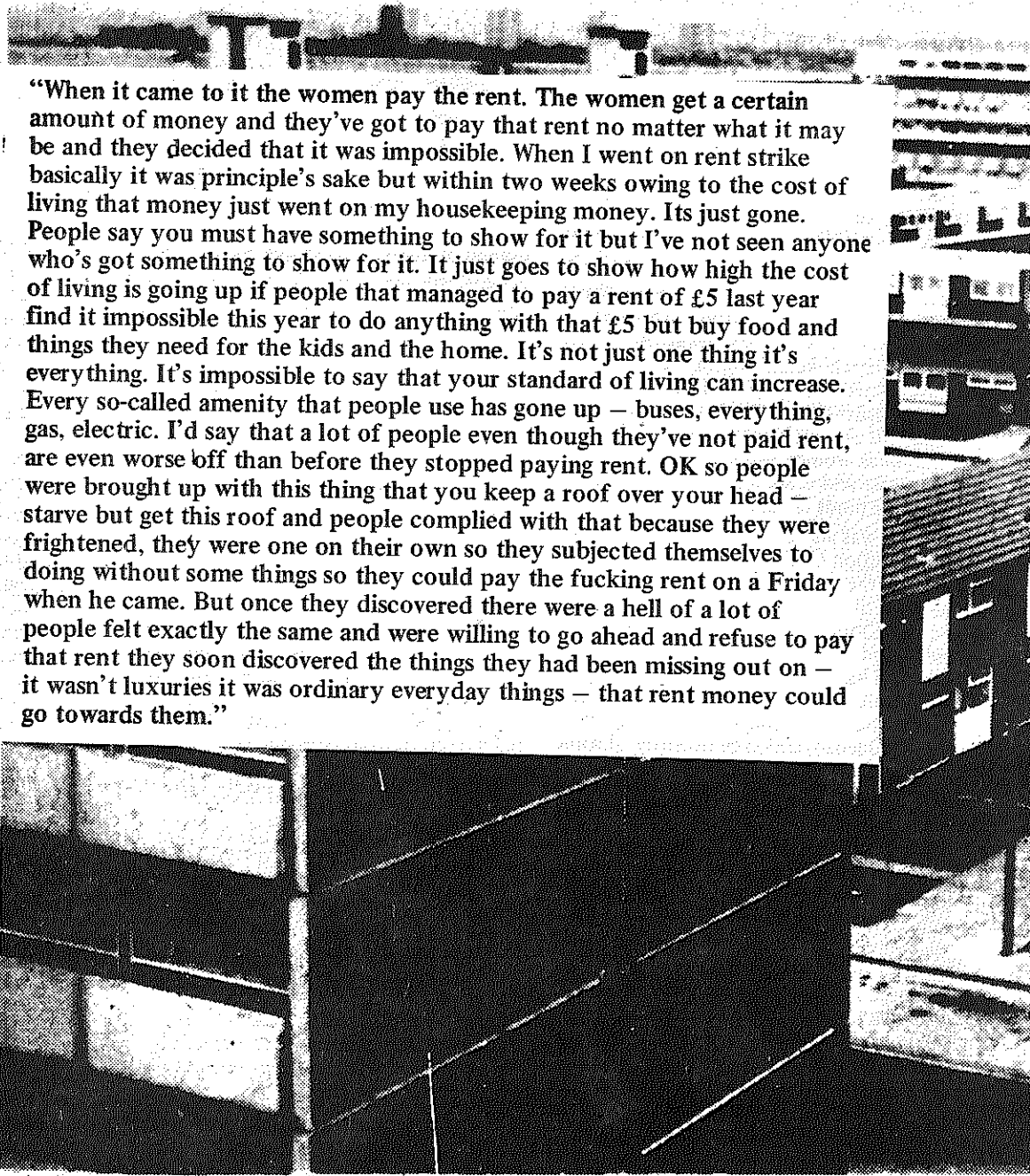
When we say this we're not discounting other people or other ideas least of all the mass of people who created the rent strike. The starting point of all Big Flame's analysis and intervention is always the mass struggle, the situation and needs of those involved. Because of this we link ourselves inside the struggle to those ideas and ways of organising which are most likely to strengthen mass initiative, activity and political autonomy.

We also think that, because of their material situation, women are both a potential force for unifying and developing struggles in this way and also held back and weakened unless they organise their power collectively. So we identified with the womens group both as a focus for women on rent strike, an indication of the interests and potential of all women, and because that group of women was guided by the interests of the whole working class on Tower Hill.

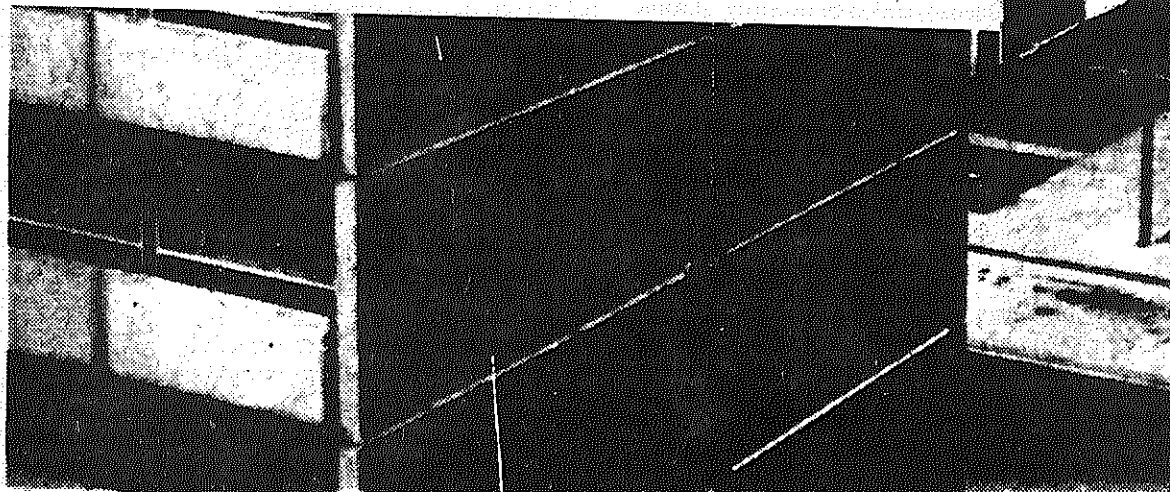
Just to be clear, this didn't mean a rigid separation of men and women. The womens group didn't always speak with one voice. We didn't always say the same things as other women. Men also often shared our ideas. Nor did we always say the right things.

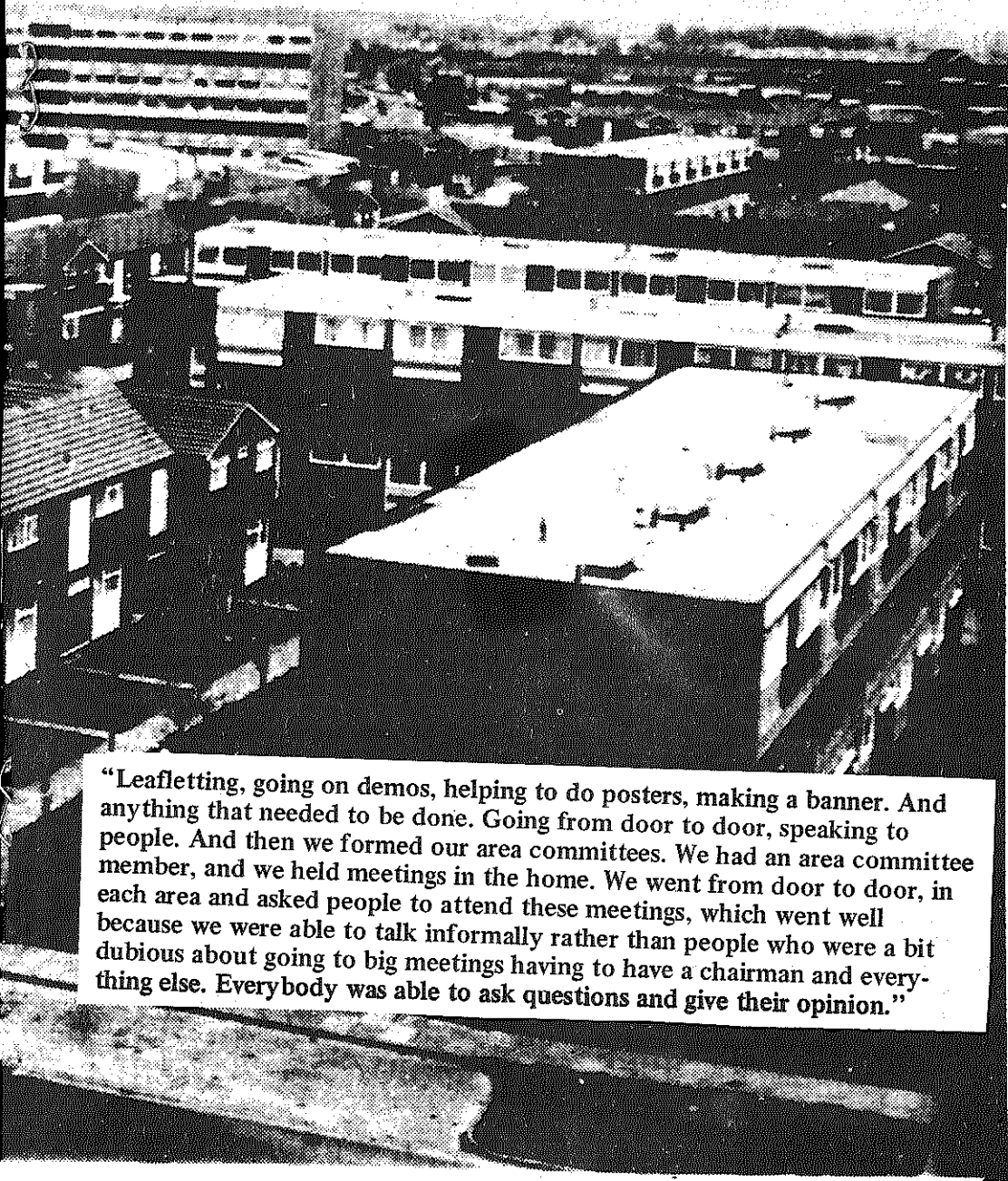
The total rent strike was itself a fantastic move towards political autonomy. And it lasted a long time because of the activity and forms of organisation that grew out of this. But autonomy can't be reduced to super militancy. What was important was that the rent strike welded together the daily struggle of people on the estate into a united fight against the state and the interests of capitalism. This is crucial. When the working class starts to assert its own needs directly against capitalist needs, and when in the process it refuses the mediation of Labour Party and bureaucratic channels, then it begins to pose the question of revolutionary change and power. Not as an abstract future goal, but as integral to our struggle now, as we live it every day.

But we have to be clear what this means, especially for the hundreds of people on the



**“When it came to it the women pay the rent. The women get a certain amount of money and they’ve got to pay that rent no matter what it may be and they decided that it was impossible. When I went on rent strike basically it was principle’s sake but within two weeks owing to the cost of living that money just went on my housekeeping money. Its just gone. People say you must have something to show for it but I’ve not seen anyone who’s got something to show for it. It just goes to show how high the cost of living is going up if people that managed to pay a rent of £5 last year find it impossible this year to do anything with that £5 but buy food and things they need for the kids and the home. It’s not just one thing it’s everything. It’s impossible to say that your standard of living can increase. Every so-called amenity that people use has gone up – buses, everything, gas, electric. I’d say that a lot of people even though they’ve not paid rent, are even worse off than before they stopped paying rent. OK so people were brought up with this thing that you keep a roof over your head – starve but get this roof and people complied with that because they were frightened, they were one on their own so they subjected themselves to doing without some things so they could pay the fucking rent on a Friday when he came. But once they discovered there were a hell of a lot of people felt exactly the same and were willing to go ahead and refuse to pay that rent they soon discovered the things they had been missing out on – it wasn’t luxuries it was ordinary everyday things – that rent money could go towards them.”**





**"Leafletting, going on demos, helping to do posters, making a banner. And anything that needed to be done. Going from door to door, speaking to people. And then we formed our area committees. We had an area committee member, and we held meetings in the home. We went from door to door, in each area and asked people to attend these meetings, which went well because we were able to talk informally rather than people who were a bit dubious about going to big meetings having to have a chairman and everything else. Everybody was able to ask questions and give their opinion."**

estate who wouldn't have described their struggle as political, let alone revolutionary. The womens group remained conscious of the fact that the political content of the rent strike lay in what it meant in the daily life of people on the estate - not in abstracted rhetoric. The fact that it was a fight against the state didn't make it 'political' in some abstract sense. It went that far because the tenants were clear what their interests were and would fight to the end. When women said they needed the money for new shoes for the kids, and would fight for it - that was the political content of the struggle. No rhetoric was necessary. And there was a chance for those who were consciously revolutionary to be politically united with everyone else in that struggle. It is very easy to generalise through the work that women do especially. Wages, prices, industrial and social struggle are all mixed up together in the work we do.

**'I'm going to spend my rent & you know where it'll go. I'm going round to the shop to buy all the food I've not been able to buy over the last 6 months. I could pay my gas or leccy, or I could buy the kids new shoes.'**

As time went on however, more rhetoric crept into discussion, especially from those who were most used to giving direction to the rent strike. The fight was important because it was against 'a vicious anti-working class piece of legislation'. What that actually meant was less clear. It never seemed to mean that women and men were both fighting for their interests, because the specific interests of women were hardly recognised by most of the men. Put like this the working class was empty words, pretending a unity which actually subordinated half the people.

But this can't be explained as an isolated point. It came out through discussions.

For example, there was disagreement about how to relate to other struggles on the estate. In fact, what the rent strike was about. The womens group suggested that the Action Group organise round other conditions on the estate. Looking back we were probably unclear about this and failed to explain. Other people were right to be wary of becoming a social work agency, or of the struggle becoming fragmented or overloaded when there was so much to do.

On the other hand it was a question of the content of the rent strike itself. Some people obviously thought the question of conditions on the estate was unrelated, irrelevant and petty. If so, it suggested a limited and abstract view of the political importance of the rent strike.

It's not abstract to talk about the political implications of the Housing Finance Act as a major piece of ruling class legislation. But

it was equally important to place this in the context of ruling class policy as a whole, as people were experiencing it. Not just by relating it to the Industrial Relations Act, as many people did, but also by including the experience of men and women on the estate. This would have been more likely to unify than fragment the struggle.

**'I didn't think I was capable of doing it. But I'm not surprised now because women are going from strength to strength now. They've made a stand on one thing and they are going to go on fighting' When I look back stuck in the house and just letting things happen - I wouldn't like to be like that again. I'm surprised I could take a stand and not be scared, because it's a big issue this - it's your house, the roof over your head and you've been brought up to look after that.'**

There were other differences over the course of the rent strike. Months before the final confrontation, we proposed regular mass leafletting of factories. There was a policy to gain industrial support by approaching shop stewards committees, union branches with speakers from the Action Group. We felt more long-term mass work was necessary to gain that support and understanding. On Merseyside and everywhere there were splits between the policy of total and partial rent strike. Many tenants were against total rent strike because they thought you just had to pay rent for a home. Prejudices against Tower Hill could be exploited - they're all lazy, drop-outs, hippies who won't work and won't pay for anything. The other areas of Kirkby were all on partial.

So we thought we should talk in plain language, direct to the shop floor. We felt we could talk in a way that people might understand - worker to worker, tenant to tenant at shop-floor level. This idea was rejected. Some of the trade unionists argued that workers weren't interested, and would never support Tower Hill.

But the policy continued of going through the 'right channels'. Unfortunately, this left the initiative to those union structures that most often adopt the politics of mediation with management and passive delegation from the shop floor - and we include shop stewards committees. Tower Hill was showing a mass initiative and a political autonomy which exists also on the shop floor but is supposed to be controlled by these structures.

In Fords, one of the factories approached by the Action Group in this way, Tower Hill hit a blank wall. The initiative was left to the wrong people - the stewards and convenors who have systematically sat on struggle in the factory. Big Flame did some mass leafletting there, and helped organise gate collections. But there was no

general direction given by Tower Hill to this work and it happened in isolation. Sections of workers who were prepared to support Tower Hill had no idea what they could do short of all-out stoppage, which is what Tower Hill seemed to ask for. And there wasn't the unanimous support to achieve that.

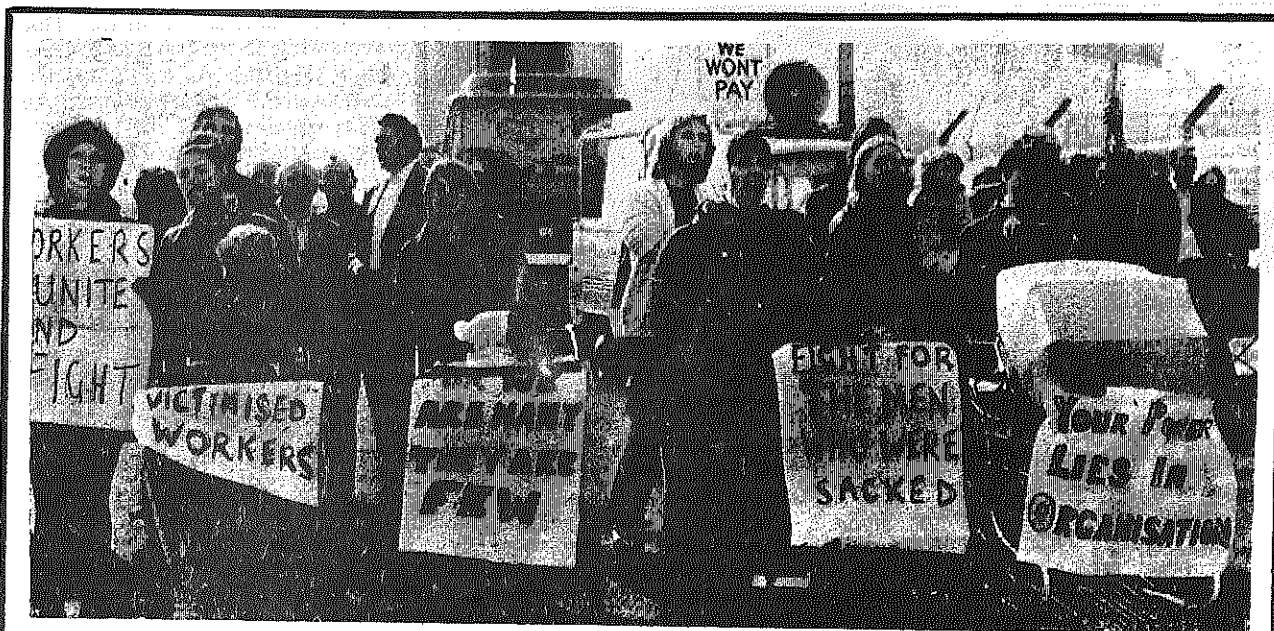
This reliance on procedure also expresses a cynical belief in the passivity and lack of political consciousness of the mass of workers. The long term goal of generalising the struggle in a mass way was ignored and long term work for support was sacrificed in the hope that somehow the union would get the workers out. So shop floor workers had access to nearly nil information or political argument that might get through to them. But somehow they were expected to come out.

Too late, very near the end, the Action Group took up the idea. But the point of it was long gone, and the leaflets could only suddenly demand support after the struggle had escalated to such a point that even more people were opposed to it. And the state chose its ground well - just before Christmas.

We're not saying the situation would have necessarily been better if our suggestion had been taken up earlier. But there was a better chance of getting support that way. And even if workers had not come out, they might have been a bit wiser for the Tower Hill struggle. We also think that we might have got across to more people if more tenants on Tower Hill had been involved in talking to them, and if the guts of the rent strike had been put out on a mass level.

As the rhetoric grew there was less room for discussion. When the first threats of arrest came the womens group helped hold a special block meeting. It was like the early area meetings which had fallen off but which we'd agreed should be restarted. Talking to people in the shops we knew that a lot were nervous and had no contact with Action Group discussions which would give them more confidence. The women were accused of 'panic-mongering' and that there was nothing to worry about. Presumably this was genuinely intended to stop panic breaking the rent strike. But we knew the only thing that would stop panic was discussion, preparation and defence. And getting more people involved in this instead of being isolated at home. The rent strike couldn't hold together if militants just told everyone things were OK.

**'When you talk about it with some of the women, they say; 'I wish I could be like that, I have not got the nerve'. But it only takes once & you get a taste.'**



1972: Picket of Birds Eye, Kirkby Industrial Estate. Workers who took time off to join the Unfair Rents demonstration had been sacked. Women on the estate called people out to the picket with loudhailers, and were joined by building workers and dockers. All the men were re-instated.

Then the court orders threatening arrest started. But only when the final orders came did preparation really start. We were among those to suggest avoiding arrest with road blocks and pickets. This was decided against but with little discussion. More and more individual men substituted brave but unrealistic rhetoric for discussion. It was hoped Tower Hill would be another Pentonville 5 but there was no discussion of whether this was possible, or how the situation had changed since that victory.

The momentum of the Action Group was dictated by the urgency of the situation. But more important by how some people defined what was urgent and what wasn't. In the last week we said, as a matter of urgency, that a collective playgroup be set up during the day so everyone who wanted could be involved. This was met with the accusation, by an IS member, that we were 'bickering'. In a large mass meeting the kids made a noise and men told the women to take them out. The simple question of organising it so that all the women didn't have to leave was treated as 'women's liberation rubbish'. All these things were statements by individual men in the heat of the moment. But what comes out in the heat of the moment reflects divisions which have been hidden by so-called united action, which usually means burying the interests of whole sections of the class. This 'unity' is what the loudest voices impose on the situation and the pattern of domination, by men over women, is laid down by capitalism.

**'A woman's supposed to be stuck in her back kitchen all her life with a ball and chain on her ankle. And she daren't step out that door and speak her own opinions. She's just not allowed her own opinions'.**

## LIVING IN STRUGGLE

Everyone who was actively involved in the rent strike went through a whole new experience that was exciting and disrupting. Women who were active had to change their lives at home and as in all struggles there could be tension between activity at home and outside it.

This was one thing the womens group was formed to confront. To give women the mutual support and political basis to deal with these changes.

Men too face this problem but because of their situation and the division of labour their attitude is inevitably different. Men can sometimes see it as a straight choice between family responsibility and political responsibility. They can often be involved in union or group activity quite easily, unless the woman also wants to be or unless his activity affects the home. If the family is disrupted in this way, when the woman also wants to be involved or demands that he take more responsibility for the home, he can often see it as a choice. And if he chooses 'politics' he's likely to think his wife is reactionary.

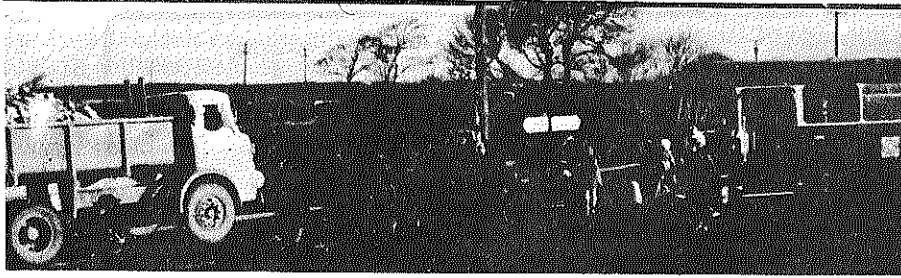
For us this is a serious mistake. Women on Tower Hill didn't make this separation once involved because the rent strike was so bound up with their struggle at home, as housewives. If their home life was disrupted it couldn't be abandoned for 'politics'. There had to be political solutions to housework and the changes people went through. The division of labour between men and women had to be challenged and collective support had to be forged. Collective childcare was needed in some form as a political solution to the isolation of women. Many women could not become more involved because these problems weren't worked out and they had to find personal solutions.

**"Women get frustrated but they're told it's only a natural thing. It's typical of women and it'll pass. And maybe her man comes in and he's nice to her that night and her frustration passes. She's told all she has to do is sit there, be a great mother - that's an outlet. Anything else frightens her. As soon as she tries talking to her man or her sister, when anything goes on, they laugh at her - 'that's not your worry'."**

**"We had to shame her because her man didn't want her to get involved. She's quite militant now. She says: 'When I listen to you I can go to him and I'll say this and that and the next thing'."**

Attempted solutions are never easy and never guarantee the immediate and equal involvement of everyone. But a communist perspective which contains a recognition of the needs of all those involved can make the process of change less painful and be more likely to strengthen the struggle.

We knew before the Cowley wives organised that any struggle has direct repercussions on the work of the housewife and the balance of forces in the family. Historically womens interests have only ever been put forward and acted on when women organise their power together. Just as the working class has never found personal individual solutions against capitalism, but has to forge its own solidarity and collective organisation.



50 Women block the road around Tower Hill estate to make the council create safety barriers between their young kids and the lorries and buses.

Of course women are and will be divided on class lines. But its precisely in the interests of working class power that women must organise together - for themselves and so for the class.

**'I'll keep fighting because I have to. I've been fighting myself for 10 years, trying to find out where I was going' And it's not been easy because I've been frightened.'**

## AFTER THE RENT STRIKE

We don't see the Tower Hill defeat as a sign of the weakness or secondariness of struggle in 'the community'. Nor as a defeat purely and simply.

In those two years both the strengths and the weaknesses of our class were shown. The Shrewsbury building workers were jailed. In '73 various struggles against Phase 2 were isolated by bosses and by the political and organisational limits of trade unionism.

But inside all these struggles there were signs of an emerging potential force - political autonomy from capital and unions.

This was shown on Tower Hill in the '72 miners strike and amongst sections of workers inside otherwise defeated struggles. However small and transitory it is this development which must be built on.

Tower Hill fought on the most difficult ground of all, outside the traditions of the labour movement and outside the more generally understood struggles of the factory floor. It took on the state where for a long time the working class has been at its weakest.

This weakness can't be reduced simply to the lack of industrial support, or the fact that it wasn't an industrial struggle, as if power lies only in the act of stopping production. That weakness is the lack of class-wide consciousness and use of power. The power to impose a political line against capitalist development. The source of power can lie in any section of the class, if it can be generated throughout the class.

But Tower Hill got knocked back. Once the mass struggle was called off the Action Group rapidly fell away. The previous demand 'no arrears to be paid' was dropped and little was done to organise a collective

fight with the council over arrears.

A handfull of us, the womens group and a few men restarted the Action Group. We refused to withdraw from activity in the middle of defeat because there was much more than that to build on. The rent strike had been part of a much wider struggle. The next few months were an uphill but the perspective behind carrying on was right. We continued to have a mass line, to organise mass activity rather than individual or isolated negotiation with the council. We organised mainly round safety barriers, planning to widen this out to organise generally round conditions on the estate.

But compared with the rent strike mobilisation very few people became involved and this was demoralising. Those of us in Big Flame argued that we couldn't expect more so soon after the rent strike. Many people felt they'd got nothing out of that except debts. We had to analyse and understand the situation on the estate, what people were thinking about and work from that. Obviously it was easier for us to take this position. We hadn't been so directly involved and defeated in the rent strike. There was a danger that we'd expect a repeat of the rent strike mobilisation when it was impossible and attack other tenants for not joining us. This would turn us into the worst kind of leadership. We had to ride the tide, be prepared for mass struggle but also prepare to work in a way which suited the new situation.

The Action Group meetings are now few and far between - called when necessary and not out of habit. If needed it can do propoganda work and be a focus for struggle. But at the moment we need to be clearer on what basis we initiate activity.

The women's group has changed in the same way and for the same reasons. But there is more chance that it will be able to act as a continuous focus for women on the estate because of the varied and flexible ways it can organise with other women in the present situation.

A central problem is always how to relate continuous activity of this kind, in this kind of situation after a mass struggle, to the development of offensive mass work. We don't claim to have all the answers, but at least we still have the possibility of working it out, in practice, with other militants on Tower Hill.

The Troops Out group has since involved many of the same people and in some ways has replaced the Action Group as a political

focus for militants on Tower Hill. This has problems while it continues in isolation. It cannot substitute for the Action Group in the struggle on Tower Hill itself. And it will be an uphill struggle for TOM to develop mass influence and activity.

## BIG FLAME

In this situation Big Flame has an important part to play. In the months since the rent strike we've become clearer about our role as a political organisation, part of but not submerged in organisations on Tower Hill. We have proved our activity can't be reduced to recruiting paper membership, or to using struggle for our own organisation. We maintain our involvement in activity on the estate whether or not we recruit. We are open to criticism and show our aim is to support and develop mass autonomy.

But we also maintain our political identity. We have a great deal to learn but also a fair bit of experience to offer other militants in struggle. We are more open now about wanting others to join us. And about thinking that Big Flame is a useful focus in Kirkby. During the rent strike we played down our role as a political organisation, partly to avoid seeming to 'compete' with IS which was known inside the rent strike. It was a mistake and would be even more so now. Big Flame can only be useful if it is known, openly involved and states its political position.

We're now starting a Kirkby news bulletin. We hope this will draw together militants who are isolated throughout Kirkby, and be a voice for any new developments. Having articles which locate the national situation in local struggles we can begin to discuss with other militants a strategy which is relevant to the area. As Big Flame inside this we can draw on our experience in the rest of Merseyside and nationally, and make ourselves known and accessible on a mass level as an organisation which will be part of and give support to struggles in Kirkby.

The bulletin is no magic formula. But it might help create a focus which overcomes the ups and downs of struggle in the area. Militants can still maintain contact and have some involvement in struggles even if their own factory or estate is quiet for a while. And lessons can be drawn out in a more general way.

Big Flame has itself developed new forms of organisation to deal with the unevenness of struggle. We have established branches in north and south Liverpool and in Kirkby which can act more flexibly and more superficially over a wide area than the base groups. We'll continue to have base activity on Tower Hill, and central to this will still be our involvement with women on the estate. But we must also be prepared to respond to other struggles in the area, and relate them to that base activity. And it must be possible for us to continue organising and be accessible to others when that particular base area is not mobilised in a mass way.