

DECENTRALISATION: LABOUR'S CONJURING TRICK

AT A TIME of increasingly strong central Government control, a few Labour-controlled councils are attempting to put into practice an idea which aims to break up central Town Hall control by reducing professional control over services and giving more 'power to the people'. 'Decentralisation' as a strategy has a lot hanging on it.

The strategy has two quite distinctive faces—the purely administrative form which Camden are talking about, and the more radical transfer of executive powers and budgets to local people which Hackney and Islington are discussing. It is however, in both forms, an administrative reform which is being seen as a way of gaining popular support and involvement. What prospects does it have of living up to its name?

Islington aims to have its first neighbourhood offices open by September and has just completed its first round of consultation with the public, Hackney's plans are even further advanced. They aim to put one office into each neighbourhood which will house social services, housing, community development, welfare rights advice and environmental health—other services would be added later.

What we need to look at is whether

decentralisation will increase local awareness and involvement, or just co-opt activists. Will closer links be developed between tenants and unions or will management exercise more grass roots control? Is there really a chance that councillors and professional staff will freely pass control to 'the people'?

Involvement

For the whole plan to work, people must be behind it and believe in its potential. This has been the motivating force behind the wide-scale 'consultation exercises' taking place in Hackney and Islington...

But the plans so far are poorly conceived. The consultation process aimed at finding out what people want has not been applied too well. The consultation starting point was not 'Do you want decentralisation?' But 'where do you want your neigh-

bourhood office?' If this is the level of 'power sharing' that people are to expect, it won't take long for the whole project to collapse.



Somehow, there is a belief that decentralisation in itself will mean more involvement in services and give people more say. But it's precisely that which must come from a real commitment to power sharing. This is already sadly missing in the consultation process.

For information only

Decentralisation is not a response to public pressure. The consultation process has not been about deciding

how to improve service but about making decentralisation work—the whole exercise degenerating into one of public information.

The questions people are asking are rarely being answered: 'Couldn't money being spent on decentralisation be better used? Say on more nurseries, better housing, and so on...?' Islington's only major expansion in its budget is for decentralisation, yet it is only one of many manifesto promises. Delivery and quality of services are major factors but so are resources. People already know that central Government is cutting resources. The main problem is in finding ways to fight effectively against the Government.

Increasing demand, as undoubtedly local offices have the potential of doing, without increasing resources or actively campaigning alongside

local people, will only increase frustration for front line workers and service users. Tenants, unions and local groups are already getting together by themselves—making sure that tenants and workers have a major role in determining that the service be given top priority.

Tenants and unions in a number of boroughs have put forward joint plans for increased control at a local level. These are the plans that should be used as the basis for any change. It is these demands that are crucial. The Labour councils' strategy for increased and better provision must be based on supporting tenants and community groups' demands, and not on channelling that energy into their own bureaucracy.

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SUPER SNOOPERS

The Specialist Claims Control squad of the DHSS received a surprise welcome at Sylvester Rd DHSS office, Hackney, on Monday March 7th. A unified picket with backing from the two local major civil servants' unions, the local unemployed centre, claimants' union and many picketers from nurseries in the area had been hurriedly organised when rumours of the super snoopers' arrival in Hackney had been substantiated.

This time the squad's target is single parents (1 in 3 families in Hackney). The Specialist Claims Control was created by a ministerial directive in 1981 to find a 'cost effective' way to discover fraud. It costs £6 million a year to run and claims to have saved £14 million a



THE 'GREY PANTHERS'

On March 1st Central Hall, Westminster was packed to overflowing by a protest meeting. Those assembled were present for the 4th National Pensioner's Convention. They had come from as far afield as Newcastle and Belfast. The message of this meeting was clear. Ten million retired people—most of them working class and on fixed incomes—are angry. More than that, many of

working class. This is already happening in some places. In the USA old activists have joined forces with young people in a new movement called the 'Grey Panthers'!

In this country one tactic could be to link with trade unions, who could be encouraged to take secondary strike action similar to those during the NHS dispute to support demands for pension campaigns.

Also more militant tactics can be taken by pensioners themselves. And indeed there is