



# against poverty

Irregular bulletin of the London Coalition Against Poverty

Issue two ♦ Spring 2008

## Residents Taking Action

*Hostel residents 'have had enough' of the filthy, unsafe, insecure conditions at their 'temporary' accommodation in Stoke Newington.*

RESIDENTS at the Alexandra Court hostel on Hackney's Belgrade Road took to the streets in April to protest at the condition of the accommodation their families have been dumped in and forgotten about by Hackney Council.

Residents presented the Council with a long list of complaints including overcrowding, disrepair, safety concerns with prostitution and drug users wandering into the hostel off the street and leaving used syringes, filthy conditions elsewhere with blood stains, urine stench and mice infestations throughout the building; and a lack of security to tenants' rooms.

Alexandra Court is not untypical of the quality of temporary accommodation provided by Hackney Council and LCAP is aware of disquiet among residents in other hostels in the borough. Concerned residents contacted LCAP in March and, following a meeting that we attended, residents took the decision to march on the Town Hall.

At this first meeting, attended by around twenty of the hostel's residents, we learned of some of the

complaints: one resident spoke of the overcrowding - seven people sharing 4 beds in one room, numerous cases of disrepair such as windows falling out, communal bathroom doors not locking, heating system broken down, lifts frequently out of service leaving parents to carry buggies up several flights of stairs. One child has had two asthma attacks as a result of climbing the stairs.

### Lack of safety

Residents were also concerned about the general lack of safety in both the communal entrances and in the rooms themselves. People can wander in off the street as the front gate is broken and the CCTV is not working. Locks to room doors are not changed for new tenants, the caretaker keeping sets of the same keys.

Attempts to register concerns have been met with unacceptably long delays or been completely ignored as the hostel manager is

uncontactable most of the time. Residents spoke of the long delays in getting problems fixed: 3 months

for a new cooker to be fitted, and 3 months for heating to be fixed in rooms housing young children, some with respiratory problems worsened by the unfit state of the place.

By law, local authorities have a duty to house homeless clients that are in 'priority need' in temporary accommodation whilst their application for housing is considered. Temporary accommodation, such as the hostel at Alexandra Court, does not have to meet nearly as many of the standards that a secure tenancy would be required to meet.

As a result, many of Hackney's temporarily housed tenants find themselves dumped in the same kind of overcrowded, squalid conditions such as those at Alexandra Court.

*those placed in temporary accommodation can often be left in administrative limbo for years*

Use of the term 'temporary' might suggest that residents will only have to put up with such terrible conditions for a few days, weeks or perhaps a couple of months. However those placed in temporary accommodation can often be left in

### ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

Focus on...

**Struggles in Cologne and South Africa**

(centre pages)

administrative limbo for years while they wait to hear how their housing applications progress. Alexandra Court residents reported that they are not being offered anything in the way of secure tenancies by the council - the bidding process (tenants must bid for flats from the council) they have found to be an utterly futile experience.

With this catalogue of grievances, residents marched on the Town Hall on April 12. LCAP are working with the residents to organise and publicise this event as this bulletin goes to print. A full report of the demo and campaign will appear in our next issue.

Judging by the feeling coming out of the residents' meeting many are aware from previous experience in reporting problems to the Council that it may take a lot more than a single march to gain improvements to conditions at the hostel or in securing permanent housing for their families. Yet they seem determined to continue to take action to improve their conditions and make themselves a visible problem for the Council to take account of and responsibility for.

# News and Campaigns

*Since the last bulletin London Coalition Against Poverty has continued its work to combat the gate keeping of homeless people at Hackney Council's Homeless Persons Unit (otherwise known as the Housing Needs Office) on Wilton Way.*

LCAP continues to leaflet the Housing Needs Office to make sure people know the basics about their rights, supports people who are being messed around and stands with people when they want or have to fight back. LCAP has also organised two demonstrations to tell the Council that we hold them responsible for turning away people who need to be housed and that changes need to be made.

For those who don't already know, LCAP has focused its attention on Hackney Housing Needs Office since July 2007, and we have seen time and again that homeless people are turned away unlawfully often employing a practice known unofficially as gate keeping.

There are deliberate attempts to discourage people from getting the help that they are lawfully entitled to. Because of this, many vulnerable people and families are left on the street or other insecure, dangerous places.

## Homes for All on Halloween

**ON HALLOWEEN** last October, LCAP organised a demonstration at Hackney Town Hall to tell the Council that gate keeping at the homeless office was going to have to stop.



Ghosts and ghouls say 'Homes For All'

Around seventy people came, some in scary costumes and the demonstration made noise outside, especially when the kids got hold of the megaphone. When the Council meeting started most of those gathered went in to the public gallery and made more noise, letting down a banner from the balcony that read "*End Gate keeping: House the Homeless Now*".

The Councillor's meeting was briefly disrupted, although after we had told them our demands we left them to their meeting, knowing we would be back!

## Hackney Hauntings

**ON 17 December**, LCAP followed up with a second demo outside the Town Hall and a piece of seasonal street theatre on Mare Street.

Despite the frigid cold,

more than fifty people attended. We called for an end to gate keeping and intimidation at the Homeless Persons Unit and genuinely affordable housing in Hackney. While Scrooge' Jamie Carswell,

Many people returning home from work stopped to listen to our Carols and cautionary tales of Council misdeeds, and to share their own experiences of Hackney's Housing department. We also met some people who saw our demo and wanted LCAP's assistance with their housing problems.

LCAP will continue to fight for people to be housed by Hackney instead of being turned away. We use direct action casework when the council doesn't give individuals their rights, and we hope that our campaigning will mean Hackney can't get away with illegal gate keeping for much longer.

## Edinburgh Coalition

**EDINBURGH Coalition Against Poverty was launched on 2 March, with an event at the Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh (ACE). See their report in this bulletin.**

ECAP is an alliance of the Edinburgh Claimants Union, ACE and Edinburgh Industrial Workers of the World. LCAP was invited to come and speak about what we've been doing in London at the launch, alongside delegates from the other groups. The Claimants Union have a long history of radical advice and skill sharing in their weekly advice and mutual aid night. In the past they have used direct action tactics to challenge abusive dole officers including the "three strikes and you're out" campaign.

Cloudberry, speaking for ACE, ended her talk by reminding us that "we get what we ask for, ask for everything".

the head of Housing Strategy, was inside discussing housing policy, the Ghosts of Christmas were outside to insist he change his miserly ways.

The ghost of Christmas Past explained to passers-by how housing in the Borough has gotten to the terrible state it's in today.

The ghost of Christmas Present chilled us all with tales of all the homeless people LCAP has seen the Council turn away when they should have been helping and housing them. The Council was then warned by the ghost of Christmas Yet to Come that they'll be seeing more and more of LCAP until our demands are met. A delicious Christmas dinner was served to all and passers by while we boisterously sang specially adapted Christmas carols about housing.

# “We haven't requested it, we have demanded it”

*How a group of claimants in Germany ensured they got their benefits*



UNEMPLOYED people and supporters have taken action in Cologne, Germany to receive what is theirs from the benefits offices and protested against humiliating and unfair new laws. A group called **Köln Zahltag!** have organised two successful actions in the Cologne Jobcentres, showing how direct action and solidarity can have immediate effects in the struggle for our basic rights.

The **Cologne Payday! Campaign** is based on solidarity amongst the unemployed stating that “The most important thing on this day is that the unemployed, who have not received their money, or have some other problem with the Jobcentre, go together to the administrators.”

During the first action in October 2007 about 160 people gathered in, and in front of, the Jobcentre and stood firm and resolute - even when faced with hundreds of police. They occupied the foyer of the Jobcentre and used it as a public space for assemblies for two days. The result of this action was not only a sense of collective power, but many immediate payments of outstanding claims.

A **Payday!** leaflet stated: “In response to our complaints about the Jobcentre, the administrators and politicians spoke about 'single cases'. Cologne has

thousands of 'single cases'! But when they organise, as happened at the beginning of October, then the whole Hartz shit can soon start to shake harder than some politicians want it to. It called those who “don't only want to complain” to future actions. “Hartz 4 must go! Bring on the beautiful life!”

## **Hartz IV**

Hartz IV is the German equivalent of the New Deal in the UK, the Wisconsin Project in the US or Mehalav, in Israel. In Germany there was widespread resistance to the new workfare programmes when they were first introduced. All over the country people took part in ‘Monday Demos’ protesting against the new system. But the protests died down when the daily reality of having to hussle for your little bit of money kicked in.

Once again it seemed like a collection of individual problems as people were not receiving payments, were forced to work for one Euro per hour and faced constant harassment and intervention from the Jobcentre. The **Payday!** group are trying to break down exactly this view that you are alone with these problems and are succeeding in socialising them again.

One focus point of the second **Payday!** was the DiMa, the so called 'Disability Management' project of the Cologne

Jobcentre. In this pilot project a further step of the degradation and disenfranchisement of the unemployed becomes clear. The DiMa is a department where those unemployed who require 'special treatment' are dealt with. The premise for a transfer to the DiMa is a personal stigmatization by a case manager, after the person is classified as physically, mentally or socially 'disabled', so that 'care' of the affected person is recommended (and so also the possibility of putting them into a social care category and so making them vanish from the unemployment statistics). The self-assessment of the affected person is irrelevant.

In Cologne, as in London, we have instances of gate-keeping, where people were initially denied the chance to make an application, which systematically delays the processing of their claim, meaning that they had to wait for money or any other benefits.

## **Payday! Payouts**

The second **Payday!** took place on the 3 December. A summary posted on the *Indymedia* website gave a report of the day's events:

“Today the second action took place against the systematic harassment of claimants by the Jobcentre. One focus point was the degrading practice happening there - e.g. in the Cologne Model Project 'DiMa'.

“About 8am the activists and unemployed began to take over the foyer. The public meeting began, accompanied by a violin duo and samba rhythm, in the Jobcentre building (which also houses the registry office and the town library), which over the course of the morning was joined by more and more unemployed with certain 'requests' of the Jobcentre. There were many speeches and contributions during the day as part of the activities of the public meeting, including about the degrading DiMa pilot project.

**Payday!** offers support for claimants that raise demands on the ARGE (Job Centre) - like demands for money not paid out, housing benefits, rejection of food vouchers, which were offered instead of money, and demands to process applications, which were not processed so far. The joint resistance and self organisation of the claimants again proved to be a very successful tactic, just as it was at the last payday. During the morning at least 22 people got immediate payment, after the claim of the affected was firmly presented, with support by participants of **Payday!**

“I had the impression that the ARGE clerks literally come towards us with the money”, said a surprised claimant.

## Focus on... Community Struggles in South Africa



*People are struggling hard in the South African townships and shanty towns; they are collectively resisting evictions, the 'struggle electricians' are reconnecting their neighbours' cut-off power; entire communities are reacting to the arrival of new water meters by revolting, smashing the meters and chasing away the installers*

THE SOUTH African state is constantly trying to demolish shack settlements in urban areas and there are often hardly any basic provisions such as water and sewage systems, rubbish collection or electricity - leading to disease and fires. In Durban, the shack dwellers' movement, **Abahlali baseMjondolo**, now has members in almost 40 settlements.

"Each settlement meets once a week and the leaders of all the settlements meet once a week. We are prepared to talk but if that doesn't work we are prepared to use our strength. We will do whatever it costs us to get what we need to live safely. This is why we have resorted to the streets. When we stand there in our thousands we are taken seriously... This movement is a kind of social tool by which the community hopes to get quicker results... It will finish its job when land and housing, electricity and basic services have been won and poverty eliminated."

They have largely stopped evictions in all the settlements where they are strong, have built and defended new shacks, have openly undertaken and successfully defended their expansion of existing shack settlements, won access to various state services, set up creches, gardens, sewing collectives, football leagues, music competitions, and connected thousands of people to electricity.

### **Christmas victory in Western Cape**

When the homeless or shack dwelling people of Delft occupied newly built and empty houses, they had the support of the whole of their local community and the **Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign**. The occupiers had been on housing waiting lists for years and in some cases for decades. Delft is extremely overcrowded and people are desperate for housing. When the police turned up to evict the people there was mass protest. On the 24th of December the case went to the high court who ruled the evictions illegal. Although it is temporary, it is a major victory for about 1000 backyard dwellers and the homeless residents of Delft.

"The initiative of poor communities in self-organising, re-housing evicted families, and reconnecting disconnected water supplies (often using inventive local technology), and the courage of campaigners to fight the police in the streets, has meant that to enforce the war on the poor in Cape Town is no simple thing.... By and large the actions of the council grind to a halt."

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### **"In cities, all taps have an owner"**

By 2002 over a million people across South Africa had been disconnected from water; 40,000 children were dying from diarrhoea caused by dirty water every year. Cholera returned, infecting thousands.

When the water company came to disconnect water in a house in Chatsworth, the community turned up en masse and formed a human wall around the targeted houses. "The security company withdrew. There was a mood of elation and militancy... with people dancing in the cul-de-sacs ... The next day an agreement

was reached that the water cut-offs would be stopped. Accounts would be frozen with no further interest charged on arrears, and the water could be turned back on." Struggle plumbers abound – and are not prosecuted. The council re-disconnects, and the struggle plumbers dis-re-connect.

Mpumalanga was an area violently divided during the anti-apartheid struggle, but nowadays there is a militant and united struggle, sparked when the council tried to install water meters. The community reacted by ripping up the meters and chasing the contractors and police away. In 2001 the

council tried again. Again residents resisted with intent, ripping up the water meters. But there was also police repression, arrests, and two people shot dead. But the most dangerous tactic employed by the council was to employ local people to install the meters, thereby risking a return to violence within the community. But the community realised this, agreed to suspend the violent sabotage policy, and instead waited for the first non-payment disconnection letters. In March 2002 the whole community closed down as tens of thousands of people marched to the local rent office. There, they demanded to pay 10 Rand a month and the council officials had to process each singular payment. The idea caught on and there were 'Ten Rand marches' in Tafelsig, Chatsworth, Wentworth, Umlazi and Mpumalanga.

### **The struggle continues**

The site of these struggles is the neighbourhood. The people involved are of all ages, men, women and children, and of many different South African cultures. The people communicate amongst themselves and take decisions by together, often in large assemblies. The demands are immediate and winnable, and are sometimes won – but they always have to be fought for. Within this new movement any direct action taken by ordinary people to meet their needs is not only considered justified but heroic.

## WESTMINSTER COUNCIL 0 HOMELESS SOUP RUNS 1

LAST NOVEMBER Westminster Council sponsored the 10th London Local Authorities Bill which proposed to make it a crime to distribute free food on the streets of London. This was an attempt to ban soup runs, which distribute free food to street homeless and poor people on the capital's streets. Letters opposing the ban were sent from many different Soup Runs, individuals and community organisations and a demonstration with free tea was held outside the *London Councils* meeting of all the London boroughs to discuss the proposed bill on November 13.

Ken Livingstone turned up at the meeting and told the council leaders that it would be wrong to "criminalise" soup runs. On November 16 LCAP discovered that the proposal had been dropped, and people would still be able to provide hungry people with food without being arrested. Phew.

However, just two days before Christmas, *Radio 5 Live* reported that Westminster Council is still determined to ban the soup runs.

### Hide the homeless

Westminster say they want

to ban soup runs because they keep people on the streets, and that they are used by people who aren't homeless. Conservative councillor Angela Harvey, the Council's cabinet member for Housing, stated on 5 Live that she knew people who eat at soup kitchens are "in work and housed". On the one hand Westminster say that soup runs don't work, on the other they say that such runs are too uncoordinated which mean there are a lot in Westminster.

The real problem Westminster has is that the

borough's businesses, shoppers and residents complain about having to see rough sleepers and poor people on the streets of the rich borough. Victoria's *Safer Neighbourhood Business Panel* meeting on Nov 6 looked forward to soup runs being shut down. A representative from the Police congratulated the department store *John Lewis* for making "real physical changes to help combat the homeless problem" by removing the hot air vents from their building. Other Council tactics targeted at street sleepers have included asking shops to put up "No Sleeping" signs in their windows.

The ban on giving out free food was defeated through Soup Runs and their supporters mobilising to show their opposition, and several organisations, including LCAP, stating they would defy the ban. The defeat of the proposal to ban soup runs is encouraging, but attacks on street homeless people take many forms and still continue.



Soup kitchens & queues, campaigns and modern day mobile food distribution. London's poor though the ages. Westminster Council wishes that they would just disappear.

## Solidarity, Wins, Victories

### Coalition Against Poverty launched in Edinburgh

"IF YOU'RE being hounded by debt collectors, had your benefits cut, been threatened with eviction, or got some other problem - don't suffer in silence. Seek support and stand up for your rights." That's the message from Edinburgh Claimants.

This independent group holds drop-in advice and solidarity sessions, in conjunction with Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty (ECAP), every Tuesday afternoon at the Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh, by Leith Walk.

"We have won several significant victories recently," Edinburgh Claimants told *Indymedia*. "We stopped the Council evicting Gloria and her young daughter from their emergency accommodation."

"The Council claimed she had turned down an offer of permanent accommodation, so they could evict her. But just after she had viewed the flat on offer, she had been forced to flee when a group of men in the street had subjected her and her child to racist abuse. This happened close to the flat,

so obviously she was afraid to move there. She told the Council, but they didn't listen. "However after we made phone calls and wrote letters on her behalf the council backed down. They withdrew the eviction notice and restored her full housing priority."

Other recent Edinburgh Claimants successes include:

- \* The full restoration of Job Seekers Allowance to Simone, whose benefit had been cut for not using the official form to record her job search.

- \* The dropping of a benefits fraud investigation against Tracey, accused of not declaring occasional part time work.

- \* Significant reductions in the level of repayments of council tax arrears John and David had to make to the sheriff officers.

- \* Many month's back-dated Housing Benefit won for Kevin and Alistair, after earlier claims had been turned down. These victories were really important for the people involved.

Now the launch of ECAP means even more support will be available for people up against authorities and bosses. "If the authorities just refuse to budge to right an injustice, we can alert the ECAP solidarity phone tree and people will turn up to insist the right decision is made."

*continued on back page* ►►

# Enforcing Your Rights at Work

## Report from LCAP's activist training day

ON SATURDAY 22 March, LCAP held its first workers' rights day. Sessions included a basic primer on the ideas of individual rights at work, followed by an introduction to the basic arguments about why we organise at work, and finally there was a session on how we get started organising. The day was a modest success considering it was our first one, and people from north and south London are planning to hold their own.

There was lots of discussion about the best ways of organising at work, and about how effective traditional unions (such as Unison or the GMB) are compared to more radical unions, or informal workplace "resistance" groups. A lot of people were especially critical of the ability of mainstream unions to take into account the needs of their members, and their lack of interest in

organising among agency, shop, and bar workers. The only firm conclusions to come out were that it is essential to organise at work, and that a variety of tactics are required.

In LCAP we believe that for many poverty starts at work, with low pay, poor health and safety conditions, and short term contracts; not to mention no contracts. So we need to fight in the workplace as we fight in the community. This can take many forms, if a shop or restaurant worker is sacked while still being owed back pay we can picket the business, flood their phone lines to prevent genuine orders getting through, and contact the local media – a bit of bad publicity can do wonders to concentrate a boss's mind. Workers still in a business who want to improve their pay and conditions can "work to rule" making sure they fill in

every bit of paperwork, log every accident, and work at a strictly defined speed. Equipment that is vital to the smooth running of the business can 'mysteriously' break, we can take an extra few minutes coming back from lunch, or extra toilet breaks.

What all these methods require though is talking to your workmates; this is the first rule of organising - see if anyone else feels the same as you. They are bound to, unless they're complete numpties or on Prozac, or the boss's son. Try and have a quiet chat with them, and see what they are up for, they might come up with some decent ideas that haven't been listed here. See if you can organise regular meetings in a local café or pub where people can share their problems and offer solutions, start inviting mates from other workplaces. Hey presto in

no time you've pretty much got a union of your own.

If you want help and advice you can get in touch with us at the contact details at the bottom of the page. Here is list of helpful websites and organisations as well.

### [www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)

This is the government funded employment dispute resolution organisation. They have some very useful info on up to date employment law though.

### [www.solfed.org.uk](http://www.solfed.org.uk)

The website of the Solidarity Federation, who want to see the creation of revolutionary unions. They work closely with LCAP.

### [www.iww.org.uk](http://www.iww.org.uk)

A militant and independent union, they also work closely with us.

### [www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.org.uk)

The website for mainstream trade unions, it has contact details for unions in your sector. They also have some useful employment news and law info.

## Solidarity, Wins, Victories

*article continued from  
previous page...*

ECAP has the backing not only of Edinburgh Claimants, but also of the Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh and the Industrial Workers of the World, the revolutionary union committed to grass-roots organising.

"Whether you've a particular problem, or you'd like to get involved, or you'd just like to know more, do get in touch."

*Note: names in this article have been changed to preserve anonymity.*

ECAP can be contacted  
c/o Edinburgh Claimants  
Tel 0131 554 6242  
[www.edinburghclaimants.org](http://www.edinburghclaimants.org)

Like what you've read so far?  
Want to find out more?

## Get in touch

07932 24 17 37

[londoncoalitionagainstopoverty@gmail.com](mailto:londoncoalitionagainstopoverty@gmail.com)

- ◆ Come along to a campaign or general meeting on alternate Thursdays  
– All welcome
- ◆ Join the e-list for action callouts: [lcap\\_news-subscribe@lists.riseup.net](mailto:lcap_news-subscribe@lists.riseup.net)  
Give as much (or as little) time as you can manage – just tell us
- ◆ Start an action group in your area. *We might be able to help!*
- ◆ Find out your rights... and tell others. *Get some LCAP information leaflets for your college or workplace*
- ◆ Give a donation – help with our fund to find an office

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