

SHEFFIELD SCENE

Quiet might be the appropriate word. Even taking into account the natural lull of the holiday period, there's not a lot of obvious activity to report.

Despite this non-payment still seems to be the flavour many people prefer. According to Treasury chiefs as at August the council had only collected 15% of the poll tax for this year. Some of this non-payment might be from people who object to being 'surcharged' for non-collection. If bills had gone out on time they should have collected at least at least £36.8 million (4/10ths or 40%) out of the expected £92 m. for the whole year. Last year the council claims it collected 80% of the expected poll tax.

Court hearings

There have been a couple of liability hearings for this year's non-payers but attendance has been extremely low. This undoubtedly due to our lack of effort to get people there but also the feeling that the poll tax is on its way out, we've won the argument if not the war, the Labour Party will probably be elected soon etc. etc. The reality is that enforcement still grinds on.

Two lots of committal hearings have been held which can end in jail sentences. On the first day the Star report of "20 poll tax demonstrators" was probably a fair one. Some of us also sat through the court proceedings which consisted of reading out the names and addresses of all the defendants, none of which had turned up. Out of 20 cases called, two were withdrawn, some were adjourned and warrants with bail issued for the arrest of the others except one who was ordered to be arrested without bail.

On the following week, three defendants turned up but our presence was greatly reduced, partly due to many activists being on holiday at the same time - I admit to being one of them! Two cases were adjourned; one got a suspended jail sentence despite being defended by a Law centre solicitor. We are now trying to contact this person to offer support.

There is some puzzlement as to why the council is not really 'going for it' as far as jailing non-payers is concerned, as some other Labour councils have done. It could be that it's seen to a waste of time, many of the non-payers are people on benefits, we've done a good job in showing we can fight back, they don't want to revive the campaign by creating a new focus for a rally - who can read the official mind. But we can't be complacent. The councils is apparently mainly going for self-employed people, many of who also can't pay but whom the council thinks we might be unsympathetic to. It's not a case for sympathy so much as solidarity for the overall victory. We must continue to be on our guard. Council tactics can change at any time. There's also the risk of political unpopularity or keeping up the front of being 'the caring council'. Whatever, we should not assume that Sheffield is a soft target.

Howard Knight has tried to enlighten us of the surcharge on the bills. He says that £11.67 is for the interest charges (on loans presumably) for "the difference between poll tax paid and money spent". Further, £25.44 is to allow for the difference between money required and money spent in respect of deductions for: student reductions, exemptions, people who've died or moved out of the area. (Star letters).

Cuts in services

Wendy is preparing a new public news-sheet on this so 'I'll skip this one except to say cuts are still blighting services even more than before and the situation for next year looks just as bad.

NATIONAL SCENE

Collection problems

The poll tax is still haunting the Tories. Councils' organisations have been pressing the govt. to drop enforcement for people on Income support and others who only pay 20%. It costs about £15 to collect about £6 average monthly payment. A Tory described it as 'not good business practise'. Next April, if they're still with us, these people probably won't have to pay at all.

Collection rates have fallen sharply this year; David Blunkett reckons £1 billion was uncollected last year. About £404 m. was uncollected in Scotland in 89-90 and this year only about 5% has been collected. All councils are reporting lower collection rates. One quarter of people have failed to make a payment so far this year. Some of the areas were odd ones, with very low payment rates in presumably Tory rural areas in the Shires. Overall by September, only 12% had been collected (9% down on last year). None payment in Suffolk Coastal District and Three Rivers Hertfordshire was as high as 75% and 94% respectively. David Blunkett says the poll tax nightmare is far from over. Quite.

Another problem has now cropped up. If there is no election this year, it will become very difficult to do all the legislation and administration to get the poll tax in by 1993. It could now be 1994.

Enforcement

About 70 people have now been jailed. Twenty of these are in Labour. Burnley, and a demonstration was held. One woman was held in a detention centre and a man was held in police cell. This suggests there isn't much spare capacity in the prison service; Britain has one of the highest prison populations in Western Europe. They obviously cannot jail 18 million or more non-payers which is why the rest of us must support the ones who get picked on.

One hundred Scots (a frightening thought) stopped a warrant sale in Glasgow.

Dave Nellist MP has got a Judicial Review for being refused a McKenzie friend. This is because the appeal of the Leicester case resulted in a restoration of the right to have a McKenzie friend. Hundreds if not thousands of people could probably do the same thing. but the reality is it takes money. Only people on a low income who could get legal aid could do it. Anyone who feels their case was wrongly dealt with when the liability order was granted and were also refused a McKenzie friend should get in touch with me if they think they might be able to get legal aid. From now on, McKenzie friends are in again.

Another MP. John Hughes got his poll tax paid by a mysterious 'benefactor' to save him going to jail. Now he's trying to find out how they discovered his particulars to do this, contrary to the Data Protection Act. In a more recent case the High Court at Poole, Dorset quashed a Magistrate's decision to commit someone to prison for 30 days in March. This was an unemployed man with nine '0' levels and the magistrate claimed he could have found a job and because he didn't and was then unable to pay he was guilty of 'culpable neglect'. The Judge said there was no evidence of this. The magistrates should have considered other options. The defendant was bailed after 11 days pending the appeal. This is the first case of its kind. Anyone who has been jailed should consider whether an appeal should be lodged. Legal aid should be available for this, subject to the usual income test. Any one in this situation in Sheffield should contact the Law Centre or John Howells & co solicitors. The national Poll Tax legal group may also be able to help.

While this kind of thing is always a laff to see the judiciary eat their humble pie, it is not a substitute for political campaigning. Our impression of committal proceedings in Sheffield is not much different from the liability hearings. The magistrates invariably believe the council rather than the defendant, take all evidence as more or less 'read' and assume that prison sentence, albeit suspended is the only option available.

Before a council can initiate committal proceedings they must satisfy Para 41(1) of the Community Charge (Administration & Enforcement Proceedings) 1989 in that they should have attempted to levy distress as set out in para 39. In other words they should have sent in the bailiff. Of course we know that the council is not seriously doing this and should not be able to apply for any committal proceedings but the Magistrates happily gloss over that one.

In another case, in another town however a Magistrate did decide that just pushing a calling card through the door does not amount to levying distress. This is another area begging for a legal challenge.

NATIONAL EVENTS

National Demo Saturday 19th October, London.\*

There are still people in prison following the National demo in 1990. The Trafalgar Square Defence Committee is staging a commemoration demo as above. We have decided to support this and are preparing some publicity. If you want to go (surely we can fill a minibus?) get in touch as soon as possible. Promises will not be enough: money upfront please. £6.00 waged and £3.00 unwaged. The march will go from Holloway Prison to Trafalgar Square. (Yes the police do know about it). Legal volunteers and 'care' stewards will be required.

National Conference Sat/Sun 26-27 October, Manchester.

This has been organised by an 'independent' group of A.P.T. U.'s (3D.etc). Two people are already going but any number can go. This will be an opportunity to get direct info about grass roots experience and discuss future strategy.

LOCAL MEETINGS

Central meetings continue on the 2nd and 4th Monday of each month at 7.30 pm Sheffield Poly Students Union. Why not surprise us and turn up.

Enquiries:

General/legal etc. Shirley 450563 (Secretary)  
 Demos & Conference: Wendy (joint secretary) 342488 before 10.30 pm  
 or Pete Jackson 759466

Next meeting:

MONDAY 14th OCTOBER 7.30 SHEFFIELD POLY  
 WE REALLY WANT TO SEE YOU!

POSTSCRIPT

The national demo theme is POLL TAX AMNESTY for all poll tax prisoners non-payers and demonstrators etc. A Prisoners newsletter will be given out at the next meeting. Is anyone interested in the idea of a pre-xmas fundraiser/social - if so please come to meeting with your ideas, offers of help etc.

*I've got thousands of general anti-poll tax leaflets which are not doing much good in any living room and are in the way anyway. local contacts must make an attempt to distribute these in their areas. Come to next meeting to get yours I have Shirley.*