

Rent Strike: St Pancras 1960

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Introduction

This is a timely publication on the historic tenants' battles of St Pancras in 1960. Twelve years later, millions of tenants are being forced into action by the Housing Finance Act whose viciousness matches that of the differential rent scheme imposed by the St Pancras Tories in 1959. For me, St Pancras was the first example of working class action I saw in England. I remember getting off the train from Scotland in 1960 as a young man who had just moved to England. I stepped out of Kings Cross station and into a battle between mounted policemen and demonstrators outside St Pancras Town Hall. I remember thinking "England can't be as bad as I thought!"

The most important lesson which comes over from the pamphlet is the amazing strength and initiative of working people when they go into action. When the scheme was announced there was one tenants' association in the borough. Four months later there were 30 associations and a co-ordinating body which could organise a demonstration of 6000 tenants. The fighting spirit of St Pancras demonstrates that working people, even tenants who it is assumed are isolated, can come together to form a powerful fighting organisation.

There is no doubt that the main reason for the defeat in St Pancras was isolation. If in every London borough similar struggles had been taking place, then the state machine could never have broken the tenants. This was not the case in 1960; it is, however, today. Seven million tenants are being hit in a similar way by the Housing Finance Act. Already, many thousands are on rent strike in over 100 towns and cities in the country. If the strike were to spread and the fighting spirit of St Pancras were kindled in these areas, the tenants can certainly win.

The question of industrial support for the tenants is also vital. In St Pancras they weren't helped by the fact that there were no major factories in the borough. The strike action which took place of building workers, council workers and railwaymen, therefore, was not very effective. In 1972 the question of trade union support for the tenants is equally vital. Already the Liverpool dockers, by their one-day strike, have shown their support for the Liverpool tenants on rent strike. Miners in Yorkshire, Wales and Scotland have pledged support; shop stewards' committees in many areas have given pledges of strike action. We must translate these promises into reality and bring the power of the working class, which forced the dockers' release, into action behind the tenants.

A further important point which comes across in the pamphlet is the futility of relying on a Labour council to protect the tenants. Indeed, it is clear that the Labour Party in St Pancras was only interested in winning votes and using the tenants to get back to power. (Although it must be said that the Communist Party also jumped on the electoral bandwagon.) The subsequent disillusionment when the Labour council found that it would be "illegal" to reduce the rents has a fairly precise parallel today. The original outraged opposition by the Labour Party and Labour councils against the Housing Finance Act became increasingly muted when it became the "law of the land".

Now less than forty Labour councils have refused to implement the Tory rent rises (despite the fact that many of them fought and won their elections on a platform of opposition).

One could make detailed criticisms of the tactics of the tenants in St Pancras. For instance, their tactic of selecting two tenants to be martyrs allowed the state to concentrate its forces. But given a particularly nasty Tory council, a Tory government which was determined to break the strike and use the full force of the state to do so, and their own isolation within the labour

movement, it is likely that the tenants were bound to lose.

Their struggle was not in vain; it must have held up Tory plans elsewhere. Indeed it is only now that a lot of things the St Pancras tenants fought against have been implemented by the Tories in their Housing Finance Act. This pamphlet presents in a readable manner the story of St Pancras in 1960. Read it and use it to help the battle against the Housing Finance Act.

Hugh Kerr, Harlow Tenants' Federation, October 1972

Rent Strike: St Pancras 1960

Dave Burn

St Pancras and the Rents

On 4th January 1960 over 2000 council tenants in the borough of St Pancras were on partial rent strike. Their campaign was against the differential rent scheme introduced by the Conservative council. The numbers of tenants who were actually withholding the rent were to fluctuate during the nine or ten months that the struggle was at its height, and although two tenants were forcibly evicted and many others intimidated, the council was left at the end of the year with rent arrears totalling over £20,000. This pamphlet looks at the causes and the history of the rent strike. It examines the reasons for the rent scheme and its connections with the general financing of council housing; the history of the tenants' movement and whether its struggle could have been more successful; and finally, the part played by various organisations both in the tenants' movement and against it.

At the time, St Pancras was a large central London borough stretching from Highgate in the north to Kings Cross and Regents Park in the south. (After April 1965 it became part of the London Borough of Camden.) Its population was mostly working class and there were over 8000 council tenants within it. Under Labour control, it had been council policy to municipalise all the land in St Pancras. This was, of course, hampered by property speculation and the rise in land prices. It was a prosperous borough and in spite of its working class population large commercial and industrial interests contributed 70% of the rates.

St Pancras council had tended to change at each election from Labour to Conservative and back again. The Labour councils when elected were fairly tame ones until 1956, when John Lawrence took over the Labour leadership. The result was a marked switch to the left in council policy. Under John Lawrence's leadership St Pancras refused to operate civil defence arrangements, flew the Red Flag on 1st May, brought in a rent scheme where maximum levels were pegged on a low scale, insisted on a closed shop for council employees, and generally infuriated the Conservative opposition. The rent reductions, especially, enraged the local Tories. They produced a "typical" ratepayer who objected to these reductions at the council audit; but the District Auditor was persuaded by the council that the rent levels they had set were "reasonable".

The Tories continued to snipe at the rents set by St Pancras and in 1958 produced again a number of ratepayers (one of whom was later to sit as a Tory alderman) to complain to the District Auditor. Again he said that the rents policy was reasonable, but this time also that a general review of rents was overdue. Such statements are usually another name for a general increase of rents. He maintained that the yardstick of the 1957 Rents Act – rents at 21 times gross value – was to be used. The principle of the 1957 Rent Act was to raise drastically the permissible maximum of rents for private tenants. (This led to the sort of exploitation practised by Rachman.)

Before the audit. there was a drastic change in the St Pancras council. In the summer of 1958

John Lawrence and 13 other Labour councillors were expelled from the Labour Party for "views believed to be inimical to the best interests of the Labour Party and indistinguishable from those of known Communists". They retained their council seats, but sat as a group of Independent Labour councillors.

About six months after John Lawrence's expulsion the council increased rents. Although the increases were fairly small, local people saw them as a surrender to the Conservatives and the District Auditor. The Independent Labour group voted unsuccessfully against the increases. These increases in rent were not considered adequate by some of the council officials. The Town Clerk, Borough Treasurer and Housing Manager published a report at the same time as the rent scheme was announced. They criticised the councillors for not implementing rent levels nearer to those recommended by the 1957 Rent Act, and drew attention to the growing deficit on the Housing Revenue Account, which was expected to reach £300,000 in 1960.

The Labour group would not accept rateable value as a basis for determining rents. They wanted to keep the rents of large flats down in the interests of larger families. The Conservatives objected to the whole new scheme and tried to move an amendment in the council meeting. It was proposed by Cllr P.A. Prior, the man who later was to become a central figure in the drama. He wanted the adoption of a differential rent scheme, "with the particular object of producing really low rents below those at present pertaining in cases of genuine need whilst charging no tenants more than he can reasonably afford".¹

The motion was defeated. But it had shown the extent of the forces arrayed against the tenants. The Labour rent scheme ran for a month, until the council elections. Although there was little doubt what a Conservative council's rent policy would be, a margin of about 100 votes in the Regents Park ward (an area of predominantly council tenants) brought in nine Conservative councillors. So the composition of St Pancras Borough Council changed once more.

The New Rent Scheme

On 8th May 1959 the Tories were returned to power on St Pancras Borough Council. Almost immediately they announced several new measures. As the *North London Press* headline on 15th May put it, "Council Rents Up, Red Flag Down, Closed Shop Out". In addition, for good measure, the installation of a municipal automatic launderette was to be deferred. As the Conservatives had made "low" rents a subject of constant attack while they were in opposition, there was little doubt that a new rents policy would mean higher rents for most council tenants.

The rent scheme was approved on 29th July at a council meeting which lasted from 7.00pm to 4.20am the next morning. The Labour group tried to refer back the report of the Housing Management Committee, but their opposition could only be verbal as the Conservatives were obviously going to win any vote. Meanwhile hundreds of people queued for the gallery and later went to a protest meeting organised by the St Pancras Trades Council.

The rent scheme was to consist of a system of maximum and minimum levels based on rateable value, plus a system of rebates. However, the new maximum rent level of 1s 9d in the pound rateable value meant a large increase over existing rents, and brought them above even the levels set for private tenants under the 1957 Rent Act.

The maximum rent was calculated not only on the basis of removing the rate subsidy, the "deficit", from the Housing Revenue Account, but also with the idea of cutting down on the pool of subsidies paid mainly by the Exchequer. Rents were therefore expected to bear the burden of rising land and building costs. This was coupled with the scaling down of subsidies, already begun under the 1956 Housing Subsidies Act, where subsidy had been confined to slum clearance, expensive sites and the building of one-bedroom flats.

The intention of the subsidies (for those entitled to them) was to bring the rent down to one-

fifth of the gross income of the tenant and his wife after a deduction of certain allowances on a weekly basis: £3 15s for a married couple, £2 for a single tenant and 5s for the first non-earning child. There were to be extra charges for lodgers, children earning over 30s a week and old age pensioners.

A number of points seem to be forerunners of the 1972 Housing Finance Act: for example, if a son or daughter were living with old parents, the son or daughter might be classed as the tenant and the parents as extra income earners. Another provision was that applications for rebates from "persons who choose to occupy accommodation too large for them"² were to be specially considered – that is, in all probability, rejected.

The new maximum rent levels amounted to a massive increase – and 52% of tenants had to pay the maximum rent. Most of the rents on the pre-war estates were trebled, and those on the post-war estates doubled. The weekly rent for a four-roomed flat in Kennistoun House, built in 1934, increased from 16s to £2 9s; and in a similar flat in Willingham Terrace, a post-war block in nearby Leighton Road, the rent rose from £1 3s 6d to £3 1s 3d a week. Similar increases were instituted all over St Pancras.

Most tenants were furious. The scheme not only went beyond the recommendations of the report published by the council officials in January: it outstripped the recommendations of the 1957 Rent Act, where a level of 2½ times gross value was considered adequate; here the maximum level was over three times the gross value.

There were already some small tenants' associations and other ad hoc organisations; but tenants only started to organise seriously after the rent scheme had been passed. The new organisations bypassed a lot of the existing ones whose committees were inactive. Early in August council tenants in Ward 8 met to set up an association. The general position was aired at this meeting. It was pointed out that it cost £2,500 to build a council flat, but that to finance themselves the council had to borrow money on 60-year mortgages, bringing the total repayments up to £8,200. What this meant was that most of the rent was going not to paying off the cost of the housing, but to the profits of the big financiers who had put up the money. One speaker added: "The Tories are going to cut the rates by about 2d and put £1 on the rents. The people who will really benefit from such a rate reduction are the big firms and British Railways. They will have thousands of pounds knocked off their rates."³

Further meetings in other wards and associations followed, and by the end of August various groups had come together to form the St Pancras Borough Council United Tenants' Association (or UTA). At a meeting called at Kennistoun House, Leighton Road, the secretary of the new UTA, Don Cook, who had been secretary of the small Kennistoun House Tenants' Association, spoke. Describing council remarks that rent increases would be nominal and that no-one would suffer, he said:

"This is an outrageous distortion of fact. Rents are to be doubled and in many cases trebled. More than 6,000 tenants will be paying an additional £735,000 a year in rent revenue. This means an average increase of about 24s a week for every tenant. Many tenants are forming themselves into associations. The anger and resentment apparent makes it obvious that tenants are not prepared to accept this imposition. The tenants of this borough can, as a united body, defeat the aims and intentions of this Tory council."⁴

In the early stages, many tenants in the meetings were calling for direct action. They wanted an all-out fight including, if necessary, a refusal to fill in rebate forms and a possible rent strike. The Labour Party's attempt to limit the struggle to legal means was apparent from speeches made by its representatives at the early meetings. At least one Labour councillor implored tenants not to go on rent strike.

At the end of August, Don Cook announced that there were now representatives from 25 tenants' associations on the central committee of the UTA, and only a few small blocks of flats had not affiliated to the organisation. Thus a mass movement had sprung up and organised

itself in the space of a month. Its solidarity and unity were already apparent. Regarding politics, as Don Cook said:

"Members of political parties are taking part in the struggle, and are working in the associations, but it is certainly not our intention to work for the furtherance of any party. Our one aim at the present time is to fight this vicious rent scheme."⁵

The tenants' movement showed its strength at the first march and meeting organised by the UTA. On 1st September over 4,000 tenants marched in a mile-long procession from Kentish Town to the Assembly Rooms at St Pancras Town Hall in Euston Road. Most of the marchers couldn't get into the packed meeting so overflow meetings and demonstrations were held outside. Among the speakers were Cllr Ratchford, Charles Taylor, chairman of the UTA and a councillor expelled from the Labour Party with John Lawrence, and Don Cook who put forward a seven-part resolution, which was enthusiastically adopted:

"One: This mass meeting of St Pancras Borough Council tenants considers the council means test rent scheme to be an abominable attack on the living standards and liberties of 8,000 St Pancras families.

Two: It demands its complete withdrawal by the Borough Council.

Three: It calls on the mayor of St Pancras to receive a deputation of council tenants at the council meeting on October 7th.

Four: It calls on council tenants to stand solidly together and not to fill in the means test forms.

Five: It pledges full support for any tenants threatened with eviction for failure to pay the increases, and especially for the tenants of requisitioned properties whose rent increases start on October 1st.

Six: It calls on the ratepayers of St Pancras to support the tenants.

Seven: It calls to all trade union branches and the Trades Council to support the tenants in this issue."⁶

The Conservatives remained outwardly calm, even arrogant, over the opposition to their rent scheme. They maintained that the scheme was just and that its effect had been distorted by disreputable elements in the tenants' movement. The strength of opposition, however, was attested by the presence of a large number of police outside St Pancras Town Hall on 1st September, and about a fortnight later by the use of mounted police at a demonstration organised by the UTA to coincide with the meeting of the Housing Management Committee.

Over the next few months the UTA campaign stayed at its original level, with regular marches, meetings and demonstrations. There were now 31 tenants' associations affiliated to the organisation; and support from the trade unions was evident from their participation on the marches.

The UTA organisation was thoroughgoing and effective. Committees were set up in every block and every week some 200 tenants would meet, representing all the associations in the borough. These meetings decided UTA policy, and in this sense the tenants themselves were the real leadership. Masses of people were involved on a day-to-day basis in keeping the struggle going. At one stage the UTA were putting out leaflets three times a week. They could produce a leaflet within 24 hours so the gap between the elected leadership and the rank-and-file tenants could be kept to a minimum.

At the height of the struggle the UTA took out every night as many as 60 women, banging on the councillors' doors. If a councillor did not get two visits a week he was lucky. As one UTA leader put it: "We sent their wives up the wall." It was a tactic and it paid off. The police were less likely to arrest the women and the women themselves were very keen. It wasn't difficult for the average housewife to realise she was in trouble with the rent rises. Most of the women didn't go to work then (they have to now to pay the rent). They formed the backbone of the movement, keeping everything going in the day and giving each other mutual support.

However, the council was determined to implement the rent system, in spite of

representations by the UTA to council and committee meetings, and the attempts of the Labour group to amend the scheme. Cllr Prior ignored arrangements made to meet UTA delegates and at the same time complained about UTA organised demonstrations and the alleged "intimidation" of councillors and their families.

Two events in mid-November foreshadowed the future course of events. At the council meeting on 11th November, after tenants had demonstrated in the public gallery, the police were called in to clear it, although no arrests were made. Secondly, the UTA held a delegate meeting attended by 165 representatives from 35 associations, where two motions were passed with almost unanimous support. The first gave delegates a free hand to negotiate with the council if the opportunity arose. The second resolved that if negotiations failed or were rejected, and the council persisted in implementing the rents scheme, tenants would be advised to withhold the increased rent demand from 4th January 1960.

The Tenants Organise

In December 1959 the lines of battle between the council and its tenants had pretty well been drawn. The council was intransigent and the tenants were determined to resist. A petition to the council signed by 16,000 people had no effect. The council refused to negotiate while the tenant's campaign continued.

The hated rent scheme was supposed to start on Monday 4th January. In the early stages of the campaign about 80% of the affected tenants withheld the increases. Even Cllr Prior admitted that the UTA had had "some measure of success", and a town hall spokesman stated that about a quarter of all St Pancras tenants were withholding their rent increase – that is, about half of the 4,200 affected. However, Cllr Prior warned that "... unless there are special circumstances a tenant who gets in arrears is liable to be evicted".⁷

The UTA answered this threat by recommending that the tenants pay no rent at all if eviction notices were issued. At the same time, they said that they were still ready to negotiate with the council.

Over January the number of tenants withholding their rent increase went down. A large number of tenants were intimidated by the letter from the Housing Manager, and morale was also badly affected by the public surrender of some local Labour Party leaders among the tenants who went along to the rent office in the third week of the struggle and paid up in full view of the tenants. A canvass organised by the UTA at the end of January showed that only 624 tenants were withholding the full 10s increase. Meanwhile the UTA was looking to other methods of action against the council; a solidarity conference on 16th January showed that trade union support would be forthcoming, and a one-day strike in St Pancras was suggested if the council threatened to evict anyone.

The Housing Committee had decided on 18th January to serve notice to quit on tenants in arrears. This was ratified at a stormy council meeting, on 10th February, when once again the police were called in to clear the public gallery. Cllr Prior said that 223 notices to quit had been prepared, 156 of these had been served and since then 88 tenants had paid the arrears. This left 68 still under the threat of eviction, but that number had been decreasing during the day. He was still refusing to meet any deputation from the UTA.

Different meetings held in February illuminate the relationship between the Labour Party and tenants' organisations. At one meeting organised by the Labour Party the accent was on "moderation" while seeking "modification" of the rent scheme. Tom Harris, the chairman of the Holborn and St Pancras South Labour Party (the branch that had expelled John Lawrence and another 29 members), was insistent that the tenants should not continue with the rent strike. He advised tenants to pay the rent so that negotiations with the council could take place. The MP for St Pancras North, Kenneth Robinson, now taking a much less radical position than he had done before his election, said he could do nothing as an MP – the rents were solely the concern of the council.

At a meeting organised by the UTA, where trade union support was forthcoming from the local branches of the ETU, AEU and NUR, Don Cook pointed out who those on the front line really were – the tenants under notice to quit. A Labour Party speaker, Cllr Tate, said that the Labour group intended to try to negotiate separately with the Tories. Answering this, Don Cook stressed that the tenants could not throw away what weapons they had and that the latent support for the "veto" would have to be mobilised.

Nevertheless a compromise was reached in the movement. At a meeting of the UTA on 17th February, 118 delegates agreed that if the council would withdraw the eviction notices, postpone the July increase, and agree to enter negotiations without prejudice, they would withdraw the rent rise veto. But this compromise proved unacceptable to the council.

During the next few months the pattern of claim and counterclaim on the success of the campaign continued. The public gallery continued to be cleared by the police at council meetings and this culminated in a demonstration in the council chamber on 27th April when tenants chained themselves to their chairs and threw eggs at the Tory councillors. The public was then excluded from the next three council meetings.

In March the Conservatives lowered the rate from 17s 4d, the level since March 1957, to 17s in the pound. This was made possible by the very rent rises which had caused so much resentment. As Mrs Sheridan an Independent Labour alderman noted, ordinary ratepayers stood to benefit by only 3d a week, while big business would gain "to the tune of thousands of pounds".

The Holborn and St Pancras South Labour Party was still, in effect, trying to undermine the struggle. Its general management committee passed a resolution urging the tenants to give up the veto, though they also condemned the eviction threat. Meanwhile, the UTA discussed ceaselessly whether the rent veto should be called off or not, but still came to the conclusion that it should stay.

Just before the council started court proceedings against 23 tenants, they announced that the increase in rent in July would be limited to 12s 6d and the balance of the total increase would now be demanded in January 1961. The Housing Committee claimed that this was a great concession, saying it would cost them £16,000 for that financial year and would increase the estimated deficit to £194,000. But tenants were reminded that council flats would still be a "burden" on the rates and that it was proposed to build 450 flats next year with a liability of £75 per flat per year over 60 years. This was a further warning of a rent increase, if the deficit increased again – as it inevitably would.

The court cases started in May. Agreement was reached in the UTA that only a few tenants should face eviction so that their flats could be defended more easily. Most of the arrears were paid and finally only three cases remained. They were heard at Bloomsbury County Court on 28th June and judgment was given against all three. These were Don Cook of Kennistoun House, Leighton Road; Arthur Rowe in Silverdale, Regents Park Estate, and Gladys Turner of Goldington Buildings. However, the notice for possession was extended for two months – the tenants could expect eviction to start from 28th August.

The UTA reacted swiftly to the impending evictions. The campaign was stepped up even more, with two objectives: the first was to gain more support from tenants and organise the defence for when it was needed; the second was to force the reluctant council to negotiate. Now even the Labour Party felt compelled to echo the increasing militancy. Tenants, they said, ought to get together to show their opposition to the rents scheme. "No borough council tenant has ever been evicted in St Pancras and we must see that no-one ever is. The way to stop them [the evictions] is to jam pack the entrances to the flats so that no-one can get in."⁸

The police banned further meetings in Bidborough Street "until things have quietened down a bit". Prior called the meeting a "carefully organised piece of hooliganism and intimidation" and asked for police protection. This followed a procession of about 20 tenants to his home in

Highgate which was stopped by the police.

Nevertheless the UTA were still trying to negotiate and eventually an informal meeting was arranged between Cllr Prior and the UTA on 26th July. As a measure to demonstrate their sincerity, all public activities of the tenants' organisation were suspended from 20th July. However, the two-hour long meeting was fruitless. All that Cllr Prior would talk about was the size of the deficit on the account. He avoided any discussion of hardship effects on the tenants.

The council had been saying that only about 50 tenants were in arrears, but in the middle of August 250 notices to quit were sent out. The UTA claimed these 250 were still only a small percentage of those on rent strike. Their policy since the abortive meeting with Cllr Prior was total rent strike rather than the withholding of rent increases. At the same time tenants were making preparations for the defence of the two tenants faced with eviction. The third tenant who had been to Bloomsbury Court and ordered to vacate, Mrs Turner, had come to an arrangement with the council.

The Tenants' Case

In their propaganda, the Conservatives insisted that council tenants were being subsidised by a contribution that went from the rates to pay the "deficit" on the Housing Revenue Account. They claimed that if the rent scheme had not been brought into operation, council tenants would have been subsidised by over £300,000 in the financial year 1959-60 and by increasing amounts every year after. What was the reason for this deficit? Were council tenants really being subsidised by the private tenants and house owners in the borough? Were the rent increases financially necessary?

Until 1955 the "deficit" in St Pancras was negligible; indeed in 1954 the council made £6,000 profit out of council rents. A balance was kept by fixing the rents of new dwellings at levels sufficient to cover the costs of building and maintenance of the estates. Up to 1956 there was a range of rents for different estates depending on their age. However, as both the costs of building and borrowing money rose, disproportionate differences in rent levels appeared. So in 1956 the Labour Council under John Lawrence decided to freeze rents at a level that they thought the average family could afford. All rents above these levels were reduced to the new maximum. Those below were left as they were. Maximum rent levels were high compared to some other London boroughs but less well-off families still had the opportunity of flats at low rents.

The pegging of rents meant that, although the deficit would tend to rise, the cost would be spread all over the borough through the rates. This was fair, since housing was a social service. In November 1956, however, the Conservative government abolished all housing subsidies (except for slum clearance, expensive sites and one-room flats). Thus in one year the deficit rose from £30,000 (the last year when full subsidies were paid) to over £95,000.

There were also two other factors that caused the deficit to increase rapidly from £30,000 in 1955-56 to an estimated £300,000 in 1959-60: the increased price of land and building, and the rising cost of borrowing money. By far the most important of the rising costs was interest. Under the post-war Labour government, councils could borrow money for housing from the Public Works Loan Board at the rate of 2½% interest. But the Conservative government elected in 1951 ordered councils to borrow money from "normal" sources – the finance houses, banks and insurance companies – at the prevailing rate of interest: up to 6 or 7% over 60 years. This caused an astronomical leap in the cost of the built dwelling. The proportion of council housing expenditure which went on interest to the moneylender rose correspondingly. In 1958-59 the amount paid back in interest reached £457,104. Interest repayment for 1959-60 amounted to £534,229 – over 50% of total expenditure.

Land prices in the borough were rising. Land in St Pancras now cost as much as £30,000 an acre. During 1955-60 the property boom was well under way. Land costs could be as much

as £400,000 an acre, and large fortunes were being made by the developers.⁹

The rise in land prices in central London affected all prices for building land roundabout. It was ultimately the tenants who had to suffer for the sake of the developers' wealth. The council's policy of relying on the rates to "spread out" the cost of housing did not, oddly enough, involve raising the rates.

Judged by its total rateable value, St Pancras was a wealthy borough. The product of a penny rate in 1960 was £15,500. (For comparison Dagenham could only raise £7,000.) The reason for this was the large industrial and commercial interests in St Pancras, especially in the south. 70% of total rate revenue came from industrial and commercial ratepayers, and only 30% from residential ones; and the value of the former tended to rise more rapidly.

It was partly the recognition of the steady rise in rateable value, especially in the non-residential sectors, that enabled the Labour Council under John Lawrence to stabilise rents and make the richer commercial interests take their share of the cost of providing housing. Naturally the commercial interests did not like this arrangement. It is interesting to note that the Conservative rate reduction in March 1960 only meant very small reductions for residential ratepayers, whereas savings were larger for the commercial and industrial interests.

The changes in rent and rates balances brought in by the Conservatives produced some anomalies. Total requirements, if no rent increase had been charged, would have been £22,140. However, the additional income for the borough for that year included £109,000 from the London Rate Equalisation Fund and £87,500 extra from new property rates in the borough; the total additional income being £206,000. This amount also offset the requirements, and, if an extra penny rate had been charged (giving an extra £15,500), the council's costs would have been covered without any rent increase.

What happened, therefore, to most of the extra rent income the council collected? How was it budgeted for in the estimates for 1960-61? Simply by being placed in various funds and bank balances. For example, £46,500 extra revenue from the rates went into the Repairs and Renewals Fund, a fund for the council to buy small items of equipment, which at the end of the financial year 1959-60 had a balance of £50,123. The council estimated they would spend £21,490 over the year, and if no additional revenue had been put into the fund, its balance at the end of 1960-61 would have been £41,598. However, with the additional revenue, the council was budgeting for a balance of £88,098. Similarly in the Capital Fund, the balance in 1959-60 was £12,307, yet an additional £31,000 was put into the fund. The council also rated for a bank balance of £100,000.

Why then were the rent increases imposed? There can be no clear overriding reason. One cannot rule out the influence of the sheer antipathy of the Conservative Party and its backers to council tenants. There is the element that some large ratepayers would have objected to paying for council housing. Withdrawal of subsidies and high loan charges had made them pay a larger share towards the cost of housing. The opposition of these ratepayers and those who objected to the social spending of council money would be inevitable if rents were geared to the income of families rather than paying towards the profits of those in similar positions to the large ratepayers.

Another reason lurked behind the imposition of higher rents. A pamphlet published by the UTA put the rent scheme into a national context. They noted that Henry Brooke, then Housing Minister, had proposed that councils should fix rents "at such a level that many tenants would actually find it cheaper to move out and buy their own houses", thus forcing them into the arms of building societies and doing speculators a good turn.

The Evictions

The extension of the eviction order, given by Bloomsbury Court expired at midnight on 28th August. By that time well-constructed barricades had gone up both at Kennistoun House and

Silverdale. Don Cook had 12 pianos in his flat barricading various doors, as well as other old furniture and doors put against windows, and barbed wire and an old bedstead on the roof to discourage bailiffs from entering that way. There were also plans for human barricades; tenants and trade unionists were to be involved in a 24-hour picket of both flats so that, in an eviction attempt, defence and warning could be simultaneous. Preparations were made at Kennistoun House for a bell to be rung and rockets fired if the bailiffs arrived on the scene. On hearing or seeing the warning, workers all over the borough were prepared to down tools and rush to the assistance of the two beleaguered tenants. An intercom system was set up between Don Cook's flat and the campaign headquarters in another flat in Kennistoun House.

Local trade union support was evident. On Monday 29th August railwaymen of Camden No.2 branch of the NUR held a two-hour token strike; council workers who struck on the next two days went to man the picket lines; and local firemen stated that they would not be involved in any attempt at eviction. Support from the tenants at Kennistoun House was total. On 31st August when half the tenants in the block were supposed to pay their rent, only one old-age pensioner was at the rent office. Banners saying "No Evictions" and "Force the Council to Negotiate" hung from the access balconies and an effigy of Cllr Prior hung in the middle of the courtyard.

From that time the council refused to negotiate with the UTA. The Town Clerk set out four conditions for agreeing to a meeting:

"1. All picketing to be stopped, and all attempts to intimidate or coerce council tenants into withholding the rent to cease. 2. All obstructions, placards and notices to be removed from council property. 3. All demonstrations to stop. 4. Mr Arthur Rowe to pay the Court Judgment debt ... since June 28th in accordance with the present rent scheme and to pay all rates due to the Council."¹⁰

Since this meant a virtual abandonment of the campaign by the tenants, these preconditions for talks were immediately ruled out as unacceptable. The Tories had now decided that they too would only negotiate if the Town Clerk's proposals were accepted. An offer by the Chalk Farm Tenants' and Residents' Association to act as a mediator in the dispute was accepted by the UTA but met with no response from Cllr Prior.

By Wednesday 14th September, 514 notices to quit had been sent out by the council. Determination to hold on was stronger than ever amongst the council tenants. There were regular marches and demonstrations throughout the borough, to which the NUR, ETU and AEU all sent delegations. Even local vicars began to notice the change in atmosphere.

On the evening of 21st September – the evening before the eviction – a demonstration of about 500 tenants took place outside St Pancras Town Hall, as a housing committee was being held inside. The police had already banned demonstrations outside the Town Hall; now they cleared the area and violently manhandled demonstrators. Eleven people were arrested, including John Lawrence, and the crowd, which included young children, was charged twice by mounted police.

After the demonstration, a meeting was held in Kennistoun House with tenants' representatives, Labour councillors and Communist Party members. The latter two organisations had been frightened by the demonstration and there was a great deal of talk about caution. However, there was now no time for new tactics to be instigated. Only a few hours after this meeting, events made cautionary remarks or strategies both inadequate and obsolete.

Around five o'clock in the morning of 22nd September, bailiffs supported by about 800 police attacked both Silverdale and Kennistoun House. At Kennistoun House the pickets put up a two-hour defence against the bailiffs and the police; oil was poured over them as they tried to get up the stairs to the entrance to Don Cook's flat on the top floor, and one of their number was seriously injured and had to be taken to hospital: but the great mass of tenants were

unable to reach the flats to defend Don Cook due to the large numbers of police and mounted police who had cordoned off the block with lines at least three deep.

One council tenant from Islip Street said: "I heard the rockets. We all ran out in our pyjamas. Everywhere there were people running towards Kennistoun House. But when we turned into Leighton Road all we could see were police. There were hundreds of them. We could do nothing. We could not get near. The police are here to help the bailiffs if they are resisted but we never had a chance to resist."¹¹

Two other participants in the struggle reported: "The first we knew about the raid was when about five bailiffs came in through a hole in the roof. They came down the stairs and forced open the sitting room. We retreated to the kitchen and re-barricaded.... In the kitchen we made a cup of tea while the bailiffs were pushing and shoving to get in. The bailiffs used crowbars and hacksaws. Those who had come through the roof let more bailiffs in through the window. When they broke into the kitchen we offered them a cup of tea. They drank it.... They were unable to get through the window because of the barbed wire so they ripped the slates off the roof and made a hole in the plaster with their axes."¹²

"We ran up the stairs with the bailiffs behind us. There were seven of them, with two police officers. I was forced back against the wall. Then I was carried downstairs. I heard a lot of shouting and Don called out to me. They took us by surprise by getting in the back way."¹³

Over at Silverdale the police and bailiffs used similar tactics. Large cordons of police kept the tenants from defending Arthur Rowe while a group of bailiffs and police carried out the eviction. Arthur Rowe and his son held out for about an hour, but eventually bailiffs smashed a hole in a four and a half inch brick wall to get in. When they were finally evicted, they were lifted onto the shoulders of the other flat dwellers and carried up onto a grass bank where Arthur Rowe made a short impromptu speech. He thanked all his fellow tenants for their assistance and said that the fight must continue against the "greatest social injustice of this time". He then went up to Kennistoun House to join the evicted Don Cook.

At Kennistoun House the fighting went on well into the day. When building workers who had left the Shell Centre site at Waterloo arrived, they marched up Leighton Road, led by John Lawrence, but they hardly had time to get there before they were attacked by the police and fighting broke out again. During the day 200 men struck at Camden Goods Yards, and about 100 at the Shell site, but trade union support was more limited than had been expected.

The police cordons stayed around the two blocks of flats all day and tenants only dispersed when it was announced that a meeting would be held at Kennistoun House that same evening. During the day Don Cook issued a statement:

"The Tory council in St Pancras now stands condemned as the instigator of the most violent attack on ordinary people witnessed for many years.... Arthur Rowe and I are out of our flats, but there are many more who will follow us. The barricades of St Pancras have only just begun. We will continue the fight and justice must prevail."¹⁴

The violence of the morning was pale in comparison with the march from the meeting at Kennistoun House down to St Pancras Town Hall in the evening. Most tenants were still raging at the events of the morning as a crowd over 14,000 strong made their way down Euston Road. They were faced by a cordon of about a thousand police around the Town Hall and a small number of demonstrators tried to force their way through the police lines. What followed was described in horrified tones by most newspapers as "violent riots against steadfast and patient police" but some degree of truth even slipped into the press. It seems as though a line of police, completely out of control, waded into the mass of the crowd:

"The police action last night was the worst – and the most frightening – I have ever seen. Quite unnecessarily, I was punched and kicked and sent hurtling against a wall by policemen who, in my opinion, had completely lost their tempers. At least 50 policemen advanced on a

crowd in a solid mass. There was no simple request to 'Move on'. Instead they just came at us with fists flying."¹⁵

That reporter's opinion was shared by many of the tenants who were present at the fight. Many were injured and large numbers arrested. However, "outside extremists" and the "red menace" were later blamed for the violence on that night; undoubtedly many people were extremely angry and windows in several cars and a bus were broken. But the method of eviction in the morning and the action of the police in the evening turned a large demonstration on the rent rises into a confrontation and a riot. Later comment on the situation stressed the Communist influence.

The area around the Town Hall was finally cleared by about midnight on the evening of the 22nd, but police remained guarding the Town Hall, Kennistoun House and Silverdale all night. Meanwhile Cllr Prior had announced that the Housing Committee would now meet a small deputation of tenants, provided that all demonstrations ceased.

These conditions were easy for the tenants to fulfil since the next day the Home Secretary issued an order under the Public Order Act 1936 banning all public processions. With the evictions carried out, a ban on all demonstrations, and negotiations opening, a new phase in the campaign started.

The Final Defeat

While the UTA was preparing for the next stage of the conflict, abuse from all political quarters came down upon its head and it was not long before the fragile alliance of tenants and the Labour Party began to show signs of stress. The Labour MP Robert Mellish joined in with an attack on the "agitators":

"Disputes such as that at St Pancras should be settled by negotiations. The approach of the Holborn and St Pancras South Labour Party has been right, but the situation has been exploited by outside elements who have come in wanting to start a mood of revolution. They have used any and every excuse, even the Labour Party, as a means for causing friction and trouble. We are diverted from the main issues in order to try to quell a tiny insignificant few who make the noise and get the press and publicity."¹⁶

The UTA did not see the coming negotiations as having any preconditions about the toning down of the campaign. On Wednesday 28th September, the central committee recommended that all tenants withhold the whole rent in order to cripple the council's finances; and that the rent money be given a fighting fund to reimburse or compensate those jailed, fined or injured as a result of the struggles. As a result of this decision by the UTA and the leaflet issued setting out these proposals, the council decided yet again to break off negotiations, and refused to recognise the UTA as a representative tenants' body.

The Labour Party also professed to be shocked by the UTA leaflet. Charles Ratchford said that the tenants had "stabbed him in the back", and most councillors thought that the leaflet should not have been sent out, although they still affirmed that most of the tenants were represented by the UTA and that the Tories were still chiefly to blame.

The situation continued with the UTA offering to negotiate but remaining firm on the question of the rent strike. The council negotiated with various individual tenants' associations but not with the UTA as a whole, with the purpose of gathering various proposals and amendments to consider for the "review" of the rents scheme in November. The Labour Party were worried about this stalemate and the possibility of the tenants' movement being "led astray" again, and urged the Tories to negotiate seriously.

The awaited review and amendments to the rent scheme were finally announced at the council meeting on 9th November. The changes were marginal, involving some £15,500 in loss of rent revenue. The rent scheme was said to be fair on all tenants. and St Pancras

ratepayers were alleged to be "subsidising" council tenants.

Councillor Prior added that no further review of the scheme would take place for two years. He conceded that total arrears of rent on 1st November were £17,718 as against £4,000 for the financial year ending March 1959. 384 notices to quit were still outstanding, with court cases considered in 118 of these.

The UTA condemned the review as completely inadequate and repeated their determination to defeat the rent scheme and also to get Don Cook and Arthur Rowe rehoused. But support was slackening. The council were sending bailiffs around the estates during the day to intimidate tenants and their families, and to threaten them with the seizing of their furniture and all their goods if they did not pay up their arrears. This measure was to some degree successful, and arrears increased at a slower rate every week as more people paid up.

At the UTA general meeting on 5th December, the central committee, realising that a number of tenants were paying the rent who had previously been on rent strike, announced that a new policy was being worked out. At a meeting at Silverdale on 5th February, Don Cook explained the new policy:

"Our position has altered in the light of previous experience. We cannot see other tenants thrown out onto the streets. I can assure you that we are not surrendering. If it came to any tenant being evicted we would act in every possible way to support him. In fact all we have done is to buy time. If the majority of the tenants were withholding the rent there would be no need for this change of policy. We cannot expect a minority to place themselves in danger of eviction – in fact we cannot allow it.... We must work to see there is a defeat for the Tories in the coming LCC elections and above all we have got to work for the return of a Labour council next year. We are not withdrawing from the battle. We are going to fight in a different way."¹⁷

At a rally at Silverdale on 22nd September, the anniversary of the evictions, the unity of aims between tenants and the Labour Party was reaffirmed on this new footing: the basis of unity was the approach to the forthcoming council elections. P. Richards the UTA chairman spoke:

"We want to see a new council swept into office next May and we want them to clear out this rents scheme and fix the rents at a level perhaps 10s a week above the old rents. We shall also expect Don Cook and Arthur Rowe to be rehoused."¹⁸

The message was repeated by a Labour councillor, Sid Munn: "We want your help to ensure the return of a Labour council next May. Both Labour Parties are in close touch with the UTA to try to work out a satisfactory solution to the rents problem."¹⁹

This was echoed by the Communist parliamentary candidate for St Pancras North, Jock Nicolson: "We want a Labour and progressive council at the Town Hall."²⁰

Early in January 1962 the Labour Party announced the rent scheme they would adopt if re-elected in May. The differential rents would go, to be replaced by standard rents based on 2~3 times gross value. Any tenants in hardship could appeal to a housing subcommittee. At the time this was estimated to cost £100,000. The UTA endorsed the Labour rent policy, saying that it met many of the proposals they had put forward for consideration; several members of the UTA committee were putting up for election as Labour councillors (and some as Communist councillors). With this promising unity against the Tories, it seemed that if the elections were successful, the tenants were finally going to win their battle against the council.

In May 1962 Labour won control of the council by 51 seats to 19. The new leader of the council, Charles Ratchford, was quick to announce: "Of course there will be some big changes of policy straightaway. The differential rent scheme will be abolished. That was the issue on which the electorate voted us into power."²¹

Don Cook and Arthur Rowe were put at the top of the housing list and the new housing chairman, Cllr Luke O'Connor, promised a new deal for the tenants. Time passed, however, and no new rent scheme was forthcoming. Even the Conservatives began to ask questions about its non-appearance in the council meetings, for it had been expected as the most pressing business of the new Labour council. The first signs of difficulty for Labour in proposing a new rent scheme became apparent in July. Cllr P. Jonas, a member of the housing committee who had also been deeply involved in the UTA campaign, explained that if the rents were to be reduced by a "substantial amount" the councillors might be breaking the law and therefore be liable to heavy surcharges. "Reasonable rents" were demanded by law and the interpretation of what was "reasonable" was the prerogative of the District Auditor. He concluded, "I am afraid the high hopes we had cannot be fulfilled".²²

At this time the withdrawal of the Labour rent programme was denied by Cllr O'Connor. He said that the legal advice had not yet been finalised and he gave an assurance that the differential rent scheme would be rescinded. The speculation on the implementation of a scheme with lower rents continued for several months. The council finally proclaimed its decision in October. The differential rent scheme was to stay, and rents were to be fixed at existing levels until the end of the financial year. Cllr Ratchford said that they could not legally rescind the old scheme: "We can't defy the law and nobody can expect us to do it."²³

Tenants demonstrated in the public gallery and sang the "Red Flag", but for them it was too late. Their realisation of what the Labour Party would do once back in office came only slowly in the months between July and October. They had pinned their hopes and policies onto a one party political bandwagon and it had broken down, leaving them completely stranded both tactically and strategically. Another rent strike was threatened, but with little confidence in its success.

The council ratified its October decision by a final recommendation at the beginning of 1963. The differential rent scheme remained, rebates were increased marginally and other arrangements for rebates would be considered for tenants who objected to "means test" forms. These changes were estimated to cost an extra £22,000, a little over the cost of the amendments made by the Conservatives in November 1960.

In spite of a number of deputations to the council, and even threats of rebellion from the UTA Labour councillors, the scheme was passed in February and came into operation on 1st April 1963.

Could the Tenants Have Won?

The St Pancras Rent Strike and the tenants' campaign against the differential rent scheme ultimately had failed. Although Don Cook and Arthur Rowe were rehoused by the new Labour council, the high maximum rents remained. Could the St Pancras tenants have won their fight? Against them were ranged immense forces. The council was actually the least of these; it was placed in the front position by virtue of its action in raising the rents, but the general situation which dictated that more income was needed from the tenants was not of its making.

Behind the council there was, first of all, the District Auditor. He was an executor of government policy. When the Labour council in the late 1950s subsidised the rents of de-requisitioned tenants, individual councillors were surcharged to the amount of "lost" revenue at the instigation of the District Auditor. When the 1962 Labour council reneged on its election promises for fear of being surcharged, it is arguable whether or not this would have been done.

The state machine was only evident on a few occasions, most explicitly on the day of the eviction. It seems as if the tenants' movement had become too dangerous for the state to tolerate; the overwhelming numbers of police and the brutality of their tactics were meant to intimidate the tenants and to crush their opposition. The action of the Home Secretary, R.A. Butler, in banning all demonstrations in St Pancras immediately after the evictions was

another part of this plan.

The most important force working against the tenants was the mechanics of the housing financial system. The increased rent went mainly to pay off the large interest charges on the loans the council received to build housing. Thus financial interest was involved against the tenants, and the actions of the state both at national and local level become clearer when seen as a defence of that interest. The rent scheme was necessitated not so much by the need to remove all rate contributions to housing, as by the fact that the total cost of housing was rising continually with the price of land and money. The aim was to keep the rates steady while making the tenants pay for the growth of expenditure. While developers' fortunes rose to £40 million through keeping office blocks empty, the rush to develop forced land prices up all over London. There has not been a study made of the fortunes that banks and insurance companies have extracted from the housing accounts of every local authority in the country, but there is no doubt that more money was made from this side of the housing question than any other.

Within the opposition to the differential rent scheme there were contradictions. The Labour Party as an official body was at best a lukewarm supporter of tenants' direct action, in spite of many of its members' activities as individuals in the campaign. The insistence of national and local Labour figures that the "proper" way to fight the rent rises was "through the ballot box" showed that the major interest of the Labour Party was in electoral success. The promises of the St Pancras Labour parties before the 1962 council elections and their subsequent inability to carry out those undertakings confirm this. Prior to the elections there was no hint from the Labour Party that if the rents were reduced they might be open to surcharging: they only received "legal advice" after the elections. Once it became clear that the major plank of their electoral programme was impossible to carry out, why did the council not resign in protest against the injustice they had uncovered? Why wasn't a new campaign instigated with the Labour Party united with the tenants?

The role of the Communist Party can in many ways be compared with that of the Labour Party. Don Cook and many of the leaders of the tenants' movement were members of the CP, and in the early stages of the struggle. Communist Party support for the UTA was total. However, once the direct action had turned into the anti-eviction struggle, and the police had started to attack demonstrations, the Communist Party began to see direct action as "adventurism" and their members advised caution in private meetings, while still saying publicly that the struggle must continue. There was undoubtedly a desire not to see people hurt by police attacks, as had been seen in Euston Road, but there was also a large element of electoral manoeuvring. The contradictions can be seen within the activities of the CP generally. On one hand there had been successful agitation and the leading of a mass movement; on the other there was the CP's overall strategy, the Parliamentary Road to Socialism, with its reliance on elected Left-Labour and Communist representatives to institute the new social system. This policy naturally led to close support of the electoral strategy of the Labour Party and, in this case, to a reduction in agitation and support for tenants' direct action.

What of the tactics of the UTA itself? Some of the contradictions within it and immediately outside it have already been mentioned, but could its tactics nevertheless have made success possible? Its reliance on two "figureheads" to bear the brunt of the fight against evictions, whilst enabling the tenants to concentrate their strength, also allowed the state to concentrate its forces. With regard to the UTA support for the Labour Party council candidates, the mistake was letting this become the major tactic of the post-eviction struggle. Perhaps it was right for the tenants to try to force the Labour Party to adopt their programme; but this should not have allowed the Labour Party to seize the leadership from the tenants. This is unfortunately what happened in St Pancras, with the Labour Party's consequent betrayal of the tenants' hopes.

The lack of effective industrial action allied with the rent strike was another underlying cause of the ultimate failure of the struggle. Key sections of industry were not brought in. Admittedly St Pancras in 1959 was very different from Glasgow in 1915. where such a policy was

successful. The links formed with the trade unions could have led to greater involvement by the rank and file workers in spite of the probable opposition of their union leadership.

A continuation of militant action by the tenants, admittedly in the face of more evictions, brutality and intimidation, would have been a more vigorous and positive policy. It was necessary to bring in more industrial and service industry workers to back up the tenants through strike action, thereby challenging the state on a wider level where working class strength could be used effectively. It has been argued that after the evictions many tenants became disillusioned. But the real disillusionment of the tenants occurred only after the failure of the Labour council to reduce rents in 1962. At times of great crisis, for example when the barricades went up, more tenants than ever before became involved in the struggle.

No realistic strategy in struggles of this kind can afford to ignore the brute facts about where power lies in our society. The so-called democratic machinery of the state, right down to the local councils, is at the mercy of the dominant influences in the state who benefit by increased land and housing costs. The only force on which tenants and workers can rely is their own organised strength, while the elected representatives, sucked into the state machine, have no real power.

After the evictions, some tenants were enthusiastic about the Labour Party's proposals and were ready to make them the only major policy of the UTA, in spite of Labour's sabotage attempts earlier in the campaign. To some extent this was not the result of the state's intimidation. The tenants' association alone could not have successfully fought all the forces that the state was ready to use against it. Many tenants were confused in the period after the evictions, and the struggle might have died away.

A clear lead was needed which placed no faith in the council elections and gave an analysis of the total nature of the struggle. This would have maintained the solidarity of those tenants and workers who were prepared to carry on. It could not guarantee victory but would have provided a basis for continuing the fight, raising morale and widening the battle. The absence of this lead left the struggle to be waged on the purely electoral road which proved so disastrous.

Notes

1. St Pancras Borough Council minutes, 4 February 1959.
2. St Pancras Borough Council minutes, 29 July 1959.
3. *North London Press*, 14 August 1959.
4. *North London Press* 21 August 1959.
5. *North London Press*, 28 August 1959.
6. *North London Press*, 4 September 1959.
7. *North London Press*, 8 January 1960.
8. *North London Press*, 8 July 1960, from speeches by Peggy Duff and Luke O'Connor.
9. See *The Property Boom* by O. Marriott, especially Chapter 11 on the Euston Centre.
10. *North London Press*, 9 September 1960.

11. *North London Press*, 23 September 1960.
12. *The Star*, 22 September 1960, statement by Jim Peters.
13. *Ibid.*, statement by Edie Cook, Don Cook's wife.
14. *North London Press*, 23 September 1970.
15. *Daily Herald*, 23 September 1960, report by Antony Curragh.
16. *The Times*, 24 September 1960.
17. *North London Press*, 10 February 1961.
18. *North London Press*, 29 September 1961.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *North London Press*, 18 May 1962.
22. *North London Press*, 13 July 1962.
23. *North London Press*, 12 October 1962.