

# Defend Council Housing

Labour Conference 2007



# Help secure 'Fourth Option'

**MAKE SURE COUNCIL HOUSING CONTEMPORARY MOTIONS ARE DEBATED**

**WE WELCOME** Gordon Brown's personal assurance that councils will be able to build new council housing. We're further encouraged by expressions of support for the 'Fourth Option' from all six deputy leadership candidates.



by **Austin Mitchell MP**, chair, House of Commons Council Housing group

However, the changes to housing finance set out in the Housing Green Paper (Chapter 8) that would allow councils to build new council homes must not be tied to councils entering into public/private partnerships. Moreover, we're still waiting for a solution for existing tenants who have rejected privatisation but want their homes modernised.

After ten years of campaigning for an end to government robbery of council rents and capital receipts and demanding a 'level playing field' on debt write off and borrowing we need more than 'warm words'. We won't be sold a pup.

On too many previous occasions promises of a review have been cynically used by government to buy time to bully more tenants into accepting one of their privatisation options. We're suspicious that they plan the same again and want to rush through new pilot Local Housing Companies to push councils into selling valuable public land for private housing before new options for council housing are agreed.

Our alliance of tenants, trade unions, councillors and MPs (across parties) along with growing numbers of housing professionals and academics demonstrates that we've successfully won the argument that the 'Fourth Option' of direct investment in council housing makes economic, social and political sense.

So it's time that government stopped bullying and blackmailing the three million council tenants and respected the choice of those who reject the government's privatisation options and want their

elected council to improve their homes and estates.

The private sector – including heavily subsidised Registered Social Landlords – have failed to provide the homes people need at a price they can afford. There's no reason to believe they will do it now.

We need a massive programme of investment to build housing for people in need but it's essential that these homes offer secure tenancies, low rents and an accountable landlord. Council tenants have refused to trade these tangible benefits for new kitchens and bathrooms because they recognise that the so-called 'social' and 'affordable' alternatives to council housing are less secure, more expensive and totally unaccountable.

A new generation of first class council homes built using best design and materials, in well placed locations with good facilities has to be centre stage of the government's housing strategy.

This would challenge attempts to stigmatise council housing as housing of 'last resort' and offer those who can't afford the madness of the market or prefer to rent the chance to move from temporary accommodation, their parents home, or a friend's settee. They need homes of their own.

We reject outright the neo-liberal proposals to replace secure council tenancies with means testing and time-limits to force people into the private sector. Professor John Hills' 'Ends and means' report in February reminds us that council estates were once 'mixed communities' until scarcity meant that only those in the most desperate circumstances had

## Labour Conference Fringe Meeting

5.45pm, Tuesday, Bournemouth International Hotel, Priory Road

### Speakers include:

**Austin Mitchell, MP; Frank Dobson, MP; Jon Cruddas, MP; Jack Dromey, UNITE Deputy General Secretary; Heather Wakefield, UNISON National Secretary; Mary Turner, GMB President; Billy Hayes, CWU General Secretary; Wilf Flynn, UCATT Executive Council; Alan Walter, chair Defend Council Housing**



Tenants, trade unions, councillors and MPs say:

# 'FOURTH OPTION' for COUNCIL HOUSING

1. Enable local authorities to improve all existing council homes and estates;
2. Allow local authorities to start a new council house building programme;
3. Ensure that local authorities have sufficient revenue to maintain all council homes in future years;
4. Detailed proposals and a clearly defined timetable for implementation;
5. An immediate moratorium on any further transfers, PFI or ALMOs, demolition schemes or sale of council land and properties, until the new options have been formulated, to give tenants real choice.



a chance of getting a council tenancy.

Building more council housing for the 1.6 million households on council waiting lists (many not in 'priority need' according to Shelter's *Roof* magazine) would make council estates once again diverse communities housing young and old, families, single people including butchers, bakers, health and education workers.

There's no point improving existing and building new council housing if government doesn't also change the 'perverse' (Audit Com-

mission 2006) housing finance system that prevents local authorities maintaining the standard of their homes.

We must have a moratorium on further stock transfer, PFI, ALMOs, sale of valuable council land or homes and one sided ballots while Ministers are formulating the new options. Councils can't go on telling tenants there are no alternatives if they want improvements. It would be a scandal if local authorities were pushed into rushing through selling

off council land for private housing without an informed public debate that includes the option of councils regenerating their own estates and building new council homes.

Three consecutive Labour conferences have backed the campaign's demands. I hope this conference will make it four to speedily bring this campaign to a successful conclusion for the benefit of council tenants in some 200 authorities and those on waiting lists who want a council home. We mustn't be ignored again. ■



Picture: Simon Clark

● **Re-affirm the 'Fourth Option' – don't let the government off the hook**

● **Campaign against privatisation of council housing in your area**

## TUC backs the 'Fourth Option'

The 'Fourth Option', direct investment in council housing, won the unanimous support of the Trade Union Congress after Britain's two biggest unions tabled motions underlining the importance of this campaign.

Writing ahead of the debate Dave Prentis, general secretary of UNISON, argued: "Investment to improve existing council homes and estates and to start building new first class housing, the clarion call of the 'fourth option' backed by Labour conference, but still unimplemented, is now mission critical." (*Morning Star*, 10 September) and he pointedly asked delegates "What is so wrong with councils renewing their housing stock... respecting tenants' choice?"

Derek Simpson, general secretary of UNITE-Amicus, speaking at congress said: "The housing crisis is a problem of affordability and supply. Unless we solve that problem it will be a major downer for the labour movement... I'm pleased that council housing is back as a term in the vocabulary of Labour - it hasn't been for too long. That is down to your efforts."

Jack Dromey, deputy general secretary of UNITE-T&G, speaking at the DCH fringe meeting, said: "We welcome the fact that councils will be allowed to build but we have been insisting that new build for councils must not be conditional on working in partnership with others... The green paper is not the last word... I pay tribute to Defend Council Housing for what has been a long hard campaign."

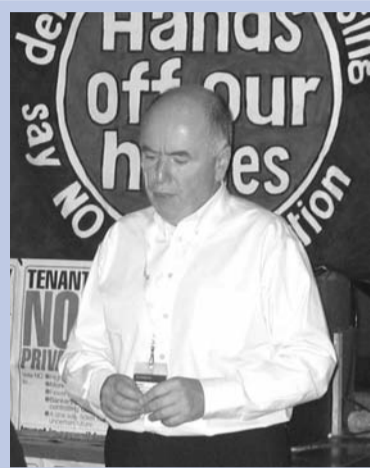
John Thompson, president of UCATT, speaking at the DCH fringe meeting, said: "Council housing is a major issue in our society... we are really pleased that this campaign has reached this pinnacle. But people mustn't fall into the trap of feeling that we've done enough. It's a social necessity; we need to leave something in place that will make a difference to future generations."

# Defend 'secure' tenancies

**Last year the Smith Institute floated means testing and time limiting tenancies arguing 'social housing' encourages dependency. This is a straight neo-liberal attack on one of the key pillars of the comprehensive welfare state with the clear intention of forcing almost everyone into the private housing market.**

In February the press was encouraged to speculate that Professor John Hills would support removing secure tenancies in his February 'Ends and means' report, but he didn't. In July the Smith Institute again argued "A significant proportion of social rented housing stock is occupied by those who no longer need it. We cannot afford this, morally or economically, and it must stop. In addition, the doctrine of perpetual tenancies must be amended." "A simple reapplication for tenancy, say every five years, would ensure that those who remained eligible for the accommodation they occupied would stay in it." ('Social

**"As part of the housing working group I asked whether the government intends to end security of tenure, the answer from the government was 'No' and so I asked for that to be put into a written policy document... There were some mad civil servants pointing to this as the way forward ... we need to give it a quick burial." JACK DROMEY (speaking at the DCH fringe meeting at the TUC)**



Housing: Breaking New Ground', the Smith Institute, July 2007)

Earlier this month the Tories produced their own public service reform proposals. *The Times* (Sept 4) reported "The Tory policy group suggests that renting council or housing association property should be regarded by tenants as a temporary stop on the path to owning at least a share of their own homes. 'We believe in a new

definition for the purpose of social housing. Living in social housing should be viewed as a transition during which support is temporarily required before moving up the 'ladder' to some form of shared or outright ownership, or sheltered housing"

All these proposals - often promoted in the same breath as the desire to create 'sustainable communities' - would turn council es-

tates into transit camps. No one passing through would bother to put down real roots or contribute to the community. Constant pressure (whether social or legal) on tenants in work to 'move on' would make council estates stigmatised ghettos for only the most desperate - which is, of course, the intention.

The fundamental principles underpinning our comprehensive NHS, schools and council housing is that they are first class public services for all - not second rate services for those who can't afford private sector solutions.

Calls for means testing or time limiting council tenancies are a deliberate and crude attempt to kill off council housing now that further privatisation is impossible.

These people do not want a first class public housing sector and they are desperate to get their hands on the valuable land that many of our estates are built on. The biggest obstacle they face is three million council tenants with 'secure' tenancies.

## More than 100,000 tenants have rejected transfer since Labour's 2006 conference

Tenants voted NO in ballots in South Kesteven, Salisbury, Gravesham, Taunton Deane, Brighton, and Tamworth, while Crawley council withdrew its plans to ballot due to overwhelming opposition. Many of these areas will struggle to meet the Decent Homes

Standard. Five more estates in Tower Hamlets voted NO. A resounding NO vote in key Welsh council Swansea has meant that councils in Wales are more reluctant than ever to go down the transfer route despite big shortages. And massive NO votes in Stirling, Renfrewshire

and the Highlands have more or less killed off the stock transfer programme in Scotland.

It is clear that government cannot meet its 2005 Manifesto commitment without providing the 'Fourth Option' to respect tenants choice.

## Deliver promises on 'Decent Homes'

We now need a constructive approach to enabling all local authorities to meet the government's own 'Decent Homes' target and manifesto commitment: "By 2010 we will ensure that all social tenants benefit from a decent, warm home with modern facilities."

As Labour Party conference agreed in Composite 10 last year

"A Labour government cannot leave council tenants who have rejected privatisation without improvements."

Government now needs to provide the funds to bridge the gap for those local authorities where tenants have democratically decided to keep the council as their landlord and the authority needs additional resources to complete

improvements.

It would take only a small part of the £45 billion from 'right to buy' receipts and more than £6 billion from privatising council estates that government has siphoned out of council housing over the years to square the circle and show Ministers are capable of listening and respecting tenants' choice.

## Demand debate on 'Local Housing Companies'

One of the 'big ideas' in the Housing Green Paper is 14 pilot Local Housing Companies to build new homes. But the real concern is that the strategy is to get councils to gift or sell on the cheap valuable council land to private sector dominated partnerships that will build predominantly private housing.

To date there's been no public discussion so DCH has issued Freedom of Information requests to all 14 authorities to ensure there is an informed public debate before any decisions are made.

It would be a tragedy - and the heights of political dishonesty - if whilst we are negotiating a new future for council housing all the land to build new council homes on is disposed.

Demand a moratorium on further privatisation and sale of land in your area and make sure people on the council waiting list are involved in the public debate about what kind of housing should be built.

Bristol council has held two meetings with English Partnerships and is proposing to build 1,500 homes on two sites. None of the homes will be council housing, but instead a mixture of "social rent, shared ownership and outright sale" (Response to DCH Freedom of Information request).

# DCH conference demonstrates united campaign

Quotes from DCH conference, July 12, TUC Congress House, London:

"Tenants have been loyal to the Council a long time, paid rent a long time. Where's the loyalty back?... We are entitled to the fourth option to maintain our council housing. It's about time the government listened. The council tenants are Labour supporters. We will not allow them to build private housing and put us in it. If they don't start listening to us, this government will lose the next election." **Cllr. Margaret Wilkinson, Lead Member for Housing, Vale of Glamorgan Council**

"Council homes have to be the cornerstone of a new housing strategy. We need to make a decisive break with those failed policies of the past. So let's be clear. No to privatisation. NO to PFI. YES to real investment in council housing. That's the message that we together, tenants and trade unionists, will have to

press home at the highest levels and across the country."

**Frances O'Grady, deputy general secretary, TUC**

"My message is clear. The message from Leeds Tenants Federation is clear. We're proud to be tenants. Myself personally I've been a council tenant all my life, I'm proud of that. That doesn't make me a second class citizen. Right-to-buy is yesterday's news. Today we demand the right to rent." **Michael Hall, Chair, Leeds Tenants Federation**

"... the government is now committed to saying that local people should have their say - then it's quite clear, here in Camden, that if 77% voted against an ALMO, then the government should accept the decision, it's as simple as that." **Frank Dobson MP**



"What we say is, we need those detailed proposals on a clearly defined timetable for implementation of the change we expect and demand; and an immediate moratorium on any further transfers, PFI or ALMOs, demolition schemes etc, because without those two things they are simply warm words." **Gail Cartmail, assistant general secretary, Unite-Amicus**

"Total housing debt has gone up by around 16 times since 1980. The market is flooded with loans which pull up housing prices... the economy cannot afford this housing situation. Apart from being morally totally unfair, it economically makes no sense. It's mounting up costs on all kinds of budgets." **Professor Peter Ambrose**

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