

Defend Council Housing

National Conference Report 12th July 2007; TUC, Congress House, Central London

“ More than 200 council tenants, trade unionists and councillors joined MPs at the DCH National Conference on July 12.

The conference heard from a range of speakers and workshops tackled housing finance, responses to the Hills and Cave reviews, the economic case for the 'Fourth Option', and much more.

There was a united message: we've all had enough of government bullying and blackmailing tenants and councillors to accept one of their three privatisation options. We want the 'Fourth Option' – and sooner rather than later!

There have been more tenants' No votes than ever before and a number of councils have subsequently changing political control including Birmingham, Dudley, Camden, Edinburgh and Brighton giving politicians a clear message.

We've built an unprecedented alliance in support of the 'Fourth Option' uniting tenants with all the major trade unions, the TUC; MPs and councillors across most parties and increasing numbers of housing professionals and academics.

The last three Labour Party conferences have supported our case and we'll take the 'Fourth Option' back this September if it's not resolved.

All six Labour deputy leadership candidates were reported by the end of the hustings as supporting the 'Fourth Option'; Gordon Brown's spokesperson told *Inside Housing* he had an 'open mind' and he told the Unite-Amicus conference "I cannot promise to implement the fourth option on council housing today but what I will tell you is that councils will be allowed to build homes again".

We now want to see evidence that he is really listening and not just manoeuvring to buy more time to drive through another wave of privatisation schemes.

The campaign has formulated five clear demands and we're not now about to settle for 'warm words' or be sold a pup.

Gordon Brown referred in Parliament to the last two major house building programmes (in the inter-war period and the 1950s onwards). But in both these cases there was a cross party consensus that the private sector couldn't be trusted to build the homes people need. Local authorities were given the lead role.

The fact is that the private sector has historically failed to provide the homes people need at a price they can afford – there is no reason to believe that they will deliver today.

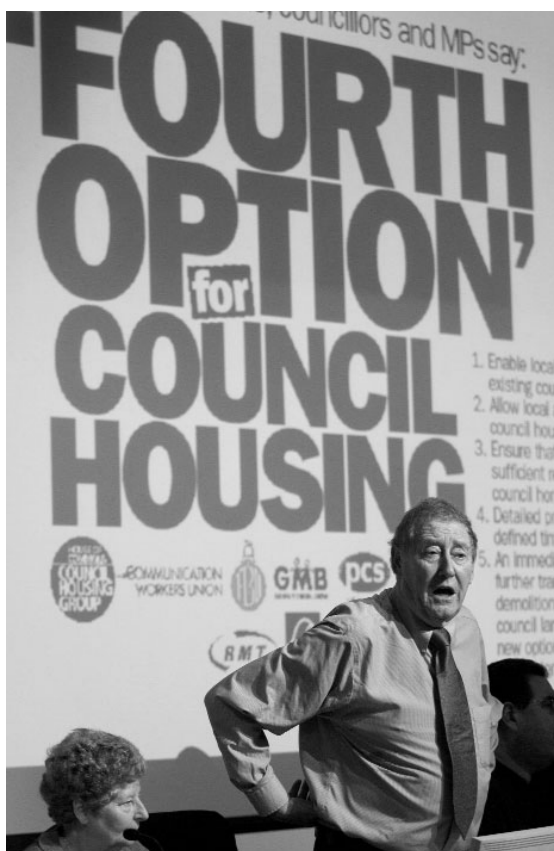
We've no problem with people being home owners. What we object to is billions of pounds being taken from council housing denying council tenants improvements to our homes and estates.

This robbery has been a national scandal. It has to stop now. A small fraction of the proceeds would enable the remaining councils to improve their homes and estates.

And along with a level playing field on debt write off and borrowing and changes to the HRA, it would allow councils to maintain council housing as first class housing in future years and start a new council house building programme.

The case is overwhelming and we've got the support to make it happen. Our message to the government is simple: invest in council housing.

Alan Walter, chair Defend Council Housing



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Austin Mitchell MP

“ Change is definitely in the air...

It's been tough all these years fighting ballots which were loaded against us; fighting propaganda which was designed deliberately to bamboozle tenants and mislead councils; fighting the divisions in our party, because there's been no subject more divisive for the Labour party...

Though change is in the air, I have to say, we won't be fooled

again! What we want is real substance...

We're saying, at this juncture, first of all, stop the ballots that are in progress; stop the transfers that are in progress... They've come about because councils have been starved of money to achieve decent homes targets and councils haven't been allowed to build... Those conditions are now changing; to ask people to go ahead is to vote on a false prospectus and is unfair and unreasonable."



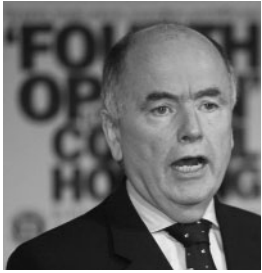
Contributors included:

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Jenni Marrow, secretary, Scottish Tenants Organisation
Cllr. Abjol Miah, Tower Hamlets
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photos: Andrew Wiard www.reportphotos.co.uk



Jack Dromey deputy general secretary Unite - TGWU

as tenants, trade unionists, together we've campaigned to change government policy ... To meet housing need in Britain councils should be centre stage, with councils building new homes.

Austin is absolutely right to welcome the progress we have made. Government has listened ... I am optimistic but hard-headed. The devil will be in the detail. There will be crucial issues therefore that we will need to press, and win:

One, investment by government on a massive scale.

Two, councils being able in addition, to borrow; relaxing the treasury rules...

Third, we want for tenants an equality of access to public funds for their housing to be maintained and renovated. End the gun being pointed to the head with tenants being told, effectively, transfer or else.

And fourth, the emphasis should not simply be on helping those who wish to buy. The major emphasis must be on social housing, council housing, housing for rent..."

I am unashamedly a champion of council housing. I am not an enemy of those who want to buy, but a champion of good council housing; we should not repeat the mistake of poor stan-

dards in the past.

Our call is to do what is right, and end what is wrong: the bias against councils; tenants having a gun held to their heads; the collapse of new council house building from 300,000 a year to 300 a year now."

Councillor Margaret Wilkinson

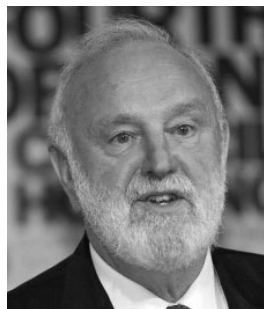
“ Tenants have been loyal to the Council a long time, paid rent a long time. Where's the loyalty back?

Blears, Brown, it's very nice of you to let us build council houses. But it is not enough to build them then just give them away. Stop this voting [to push through privatisation] - it's not fair. 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.

Everyone should write to them - and put one of these [Fourth Option hands] in with it."



Frank Dobson MP

“ The first step on any rational housing ladder is someone getting somewhere decent to live...with large numbers living in poor conditions there is only one

answer: build some more council houses and do up the ones we've got'

It is OK under Treasury rules if you shift our homes to a housing association, you can write off debt - so why not for council housing?

... 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% of the tenants, 77% of the leaseholders, and 74% of the people living in the tenant managed estates voted against an ALMO, then the government should accept the decision, it's as simple as that."

Prof Peter Ambrose

“ Total housing debt has gone up by around 16 times since 1980. The market is flooded with loans which pull up housing prices."



Heather Wakefield UNISON National Secretary

“ The announcements over the last couple of days have of course been extremely welcome. We have to seize this moment; and we've got to ensure now that those words are turned into action. This is a crucial moment in the history of council housing policy.

All of us within DCH and within our own organisations need to

make sure that this tipping point really is just that."



Wilf Flynn UCATT Executive Council

“ People working on the tools are saying they can't wait to construct council housing. And that's not just a spin, that's reality..."

I'll give Gordon Brown the benefit of the doubt, though I'm not convinced we're all singing from the same song sheet. But council housing is something whose time has come, and he won't go on to be the longest serving prime minister if he doesn't get it right"



Gail Cartmail, assistant general secretary Unite-Amicus

“ Let's also refer to the National Policy Forum housing sub group. I believe that in the text of their report there will be words that we would welcome ... and there is a National Policy Forum meeting this weekend, and UNITE-Amicus will be pushing our position.

I think of this list [pointing to DCH's 5 campaign points] num-

ber 4 is what our union will be focusing on within the Defend Council Housing campaign.

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; and I think that's what we've all got to move towards.



Frances O'Grady deputy general secretary TUC

“ The TUC backs this campaign 100%..."

Now more than ever we need to intervene where the market is so clearly failing to deliver; that's why the TUC wants to join forces with you, and organisations like Shelter, to press the case... 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. 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."