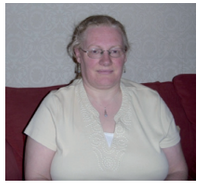
Thousands Say examines the political history of the tenants movement on Merseyside during a period of heightened social tension in order to understand the complex characteristics of working class struggles centred on living as opposed to working spaces. The historical detail unearthed from a variety of original sources explains the militancy of the tenant population in terms of both the political traditions of the wider movement and the social and cultural background to the region's economic decline. In the grassroots and community origins of most organised action, it finds a conflict between the spontaneity of struggles located in urban spaces and the structured political organisation at the heart of the labour movement. In illuminating the difficulties of organising political resistance from a condition that is socially and politically marginal, the book offers fresh and valuable insights into the political life of urban communities.



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CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

This research will examine a series of significant events in the history of housing struggles on Merseyside. Never subject previously to academic scrutiny, the housing protests of the period will be critically assessed through the hidden history of the people involved. An underlying intention of this study is therefore to validate the significance of local people's experiences which constitute a lost element of the history of the local labour movement. In a reflection of the marginal nature of these events, many of the accounts featured here are of necessity drawn from information sources outside the political mainstream. In undertaking a study of a less well known or understood form of workers struggle, the research is concerned to identify from the data the characteristics that distinguish workers struggles centred on the home from those centred on the workplace and the impact of those qualities upon the culture of working class struggle more generally. By listening to the voices of the participants of the Merseyside rent strikes (whilst recognising the methodological difficulties that this inevitably entails) the research attempts to understand the political tenor of the causes that drove these protests and the quality and significance of their place as working class political experiences.

The context in which this research places itself is a context in which the above experiences have almost without exception been considered to be 'marginal' in nature. While the era 1968-1973 has spawned a body of work on protest politics, Harman (1988) has written the only significant history focused primarily upon the labour struggles of the period. Of those works that examine the politics of housing during the 1960s and 1970s, the work of Sklair (1975) and Lowe (1986) is exceptional in focusing upon tenant rather than worker resistance to free market policies. With the exception of Lipsky (1970), ethnographic studies of workers in struggle have tended also to focus directly or in detail on resistance in the workplace rather than in the home communities. A number of accounts of individual strikes have been written, but only one general history of the tenants' movement (Grayson 1996). In academia, labour struggles in which workers refuse

to pay the rent on their homes rather than withdraw their labour from the workplace remain a great under-explored arena of political life; they are marginal within a discourse, the history of labour, which is itself a separated, distinct specialism. Yet, as the data uncovered here will show clearly, housing struggles were as normal a part of working class life on Merseyside during the period, and as substantial a part of working class political experience, as industrial struggles. In entering the living spaces of working class families, it is the ambition of this study to develop our understanding of labour resistance beyond the limitations imposed by its marginal place. In order that this may be achieved to its fullest extent, and to understand the development of the movement as a whole, much of the narrative of the strikes and protests is presented chronologically.

Sklair (1975), Lowe (1986) and also Grayson (1996), note the strong links of many rent strike leaders and activists to the labour movement; while it may be less well known as a part of the whole labour experience, the tenants movement boasts a 'social and cultural milieu' that is 'overwhelmingly working class' says Lowe (1986, p83). All three, however, refer to the role of local conditions, and the separateness of local action groups, as factors limiting the political impact nationally of rent strike activity. Rent strikes are a form of protest organised often in localities, and sometimes in response to highly localised conditions. Like Lowe's study of the 1967 Sheffield rent strike and Sklair's study of the 1972-1973 rent strike against Fair Rents, this study focuses upon a series of events taking place in a confined space, confined in this case by locality of issues or events or of organisation. Without doubt, locality is a factor in the relative remoteness of the rent strike within the histories of labour and from the discourses of social policy analysis. It lies also at the heart of the conundrum that is the tenants' movement. While housing struggles are a form of resistance rooted in the traditions of labour struggle, rent strikes happen where national or media attention is least likely to be focused; inside local communities, targeting local issues and drawing support from women and those less integrated into the organised forms of struggle. All studies of rent strikes are studies therefore of marginal people. Yet, in their relative autonomy, disconnected in their roots from political hierarchies, lies the germ of a more radical politics, connected organically to the vital issues

in housing and in social policy. In seeking out, from a variety of grassroots sources, the authentic voices of rent striking tenants, this study explores the confusing and controversial issues at the heart of community-based struggle, organised from the margins of political life.

In contrasting approaches to the Clyde rent strike of 1915, that forced the wartime government to introduce for the first time, national rent control legislation, Damer (1980) and Castells (1983), agree upon one important reason for the singular success in this instance of the strike instrument. It lay, they suggest, in the strong organisational connections of the rent strikers to related labour struggles on the Clyde and to conditions affecting much of the country, in particular rising unemployment and the exploitation of cheap labour in industrial areas. In studying rent striking tenants, we are striving to understand a group of people whose actions are connected closely to core debates in social policy, and themes in working class history, but whose experience is recorded at the margins and not in the centre. Throughout this study, I will return to this issue.

In examining the contextual background, the opening 'review' chapter will explain the paradox at the heart of the movement historically. Since the Second World War, the causes of major rent strikes may be seen in policy developments at national level, in particular the shift away from rent control and the inclination in urban regeneration to relocate established urban communities to rural industrial estates. While strongly connected to major developments in social planning, the strikes functioned in relative isolation from each other and from the political sphere. In three parts, social policy, the tenants movement historically and finally the Merseyside dimension, the review will 'connect' the strikes on Merseyside to the conditions, and political traditions that influenced and guided them. Rent strikes are acts of high social meaning but conducted in small communities beyond the centres of great power, by marginal people. In these three areas of connection, the relevance of the strikes to the outside political world will be explored.

On Merseyside, the urban plans of the 1960s, far sighted at the time in their assessment of the factors implicated in urban poverty, sought not

only the physical creation of new areas of residency and industry, but a regeneration of all aspects of the region's social, economic and cultural life (Couch, 2003). However, while Liverpool viewed the problem of urban regeneration more holistically than national government, the pressure to reduce the impact of public spending meant it was unable to realise its ambitions or act upon the findings of its own surveys, in particular the 1966 survey of social malaise which told the planners that most tenants wanted better homes, but in their existing communities. According to Couch (2003) Liverpool was not so much a leader as a test case for the theory and practice of urban regeneration.

When, in 1972, tenants on Merseyside organised against the Conservative Fair Rents legislation, many were the same tenants who, living in old and new communities, had resisted, at the end of the 1960s, the impact of regeneration on their living spaces. Scotland Road and Kirkby, the areas of greatest militancy in the fight against Fair Rents, were the primary areas of impact, during the 1960s, of the slum clearance programme. The strikers of 1972 were complicit too in a long tradition of tenant resistance to market housing manifest with particular vigour during the 1960s when tenants in London and in Sheffield resisted prototypes of the national scheme.

In order to be examined, the data here must be retrieved from its margins, which is the aim for the Merseyside movement of this study. Any history of the tenants' movement, or of any part of it, has to call upon an array of unusual sources. Following the review, Chapter Three, explaining the methodology of the research, will explain how the tensions at the heart of housing struggles influence the nature of available sources and the impact they make upon our comprehension of the strikers' experience. On Merseyside, those sources include radical or fringe press, rarely accessed archives and oral testimonies, eye witness accounts from the period, and interviews provided for this project by former activists. From an area of social conflict marginal to orthodox discourses, the body of source material is wide ranging and diverse. At the same time, in their diversity and difference, the contributions of participants outside the structures of power, enhance the authenticity of the experience and of the historical record. This too is part of the paradox of housing protests which this study is designed

to reveal; marginal to discourses and yet central on a number of levels to social experience.

Chapter Four examines housing protests on Merseyside during the years 1968-1969 which were formative as part of a series of events this study suggests deserve to be regarded as a movement. While it has not had its place in a debate, like the strike at St Pancras or on the Clyde, the Merseyside movement during the early years 1968-1970 is mentioned by Lowe (1986) and Grayson (1996) as an important example of a coherent, permanent tenants movement, and its story forms the major part of the opening data chapter of this study. The 1968 Liverpool network, which became the *Amalgamated Tenants Associations Co-ordinating Committee* (ATACC), grew beyond its original single issue, the rent rises imposed by the Council in April of that year, to become a pressure group fighting for better living conditions, and in opposition to the market rent. The ATACC network is important not only because it was formative but because it illustrates the paradox of 'domesticity'; while its targets were the policies and failings of the local authority, its politics lay at the heart of the labour movement in the locality, and it spawned, from its organisational base, the impetus of a more confrontational politics.

While ATACC was focused upon causes entirely local in origin, the coalition expanded its membership beyond Merseyside. Four years later, when Fair Rents altered the currency of the struggle, the federation's membership expanded again, but to accommodate groups with a more specific purpose to target the direction of national housing policy. As an area of contention in the conduct of rent strikes, the politically traditional nature of the federation's politics, using existing links to pressure Labour politicians, was not to everyone's taste. As strategy, participation politics, suited ideally to community-based struggle, would later drive a wedge between ATACC and the single issue groups. In describing the conflict within the movement over whether and how to politicise the struggle, this study attempts to illuminate the paradox at the heart of a form of struggle that is local and suburban but also class based.

Direct conflict with political power challenged the ordinary man or woman's view of the political world and when centred on the home community it involved people for whom political conflict was less familiar. Grayson (1996), citing Baldock on the 1968 Sheffield federation, suggests that, alongside their strength when confronting officialdom directly, there was an openness in how the Liverpool women organised and communicated that was radical compared to the traditional, hierarchical male forms (cited, p47). And it was local not national forms of protest that challenged poverty directly and which spawned a radical independent media. In 1970 the feeling that real politics began at community level was a radical new insight rather than an old conservative one. It was reflected in the community newsletters and alternative workers papers that emerged from struggle during these early years of struggle but grew in influence and stature throughout the period. Without them this study could not have achieved its primary objective, to give voice to the protestors, and would have been constrained in its ability to interpret their experience.

While ATACC began in the post-war overflow communities of the South, Speke and Childwall Valley, by the middle of 1969, a sea change in the direction of housing policy nationally, away from improvement and towards slum clearance, was being felt on Merseyside. Chapter Five describes the protests triggered during 1969 and 1970 in the inner city areas, among the slum dwellers. While bound entirely to the conditions affecting housing tenancy in Liverpool, many protests were spontaneous examples of the autonomous grassroots structures that would feature prominently in 1972 when the focus was not the local authority but the government. Abercromby, the biggest, and longest, strike of the period illustrates the helplessness of the inner city tenants in the face of policy tied, equally helplessly, to the economic market. While the Abercromby strike was constrained by its focus on a few dozen inner city streets, the particularity of the cause did not prevent the tenants from maintaining a total rent strike for eight months, ended as it were, by elevation into the national press when the tenants and student allies protested at the royal opening of new university buildings.

After the *Housing Finance (Fair Rents) Act* (HFA) became law on 1st October 1972, the movement began a struggle waged simultaneously alongside tenants in many parts of the country. While in this important respect the struggle was different, the manner in which it was conducted was not. The events described in the final two data chapters quantify the complex duality at the heart of a working class movement focused upon the home. Chapter Six will consider the connection, noted by Sklair (1975) and Lowe (1986), of many of the tenant groups, to the labour movement, and how, rather than invigorating the campaign, this link to the political system sowed the seeds of disaffection and division. The rejection, in July 1972, by the national tenants' federation, NATR, of a call from its affiliates for a national strike, happened because of a consensus instinct that said it must try to work with Labour Councils before it tried anything else. When the strategy failed, it was simply too late in too many places for tenants to organise independently of their leaders. In Liverpool and in Kirkby a very public promise not to implement failed to divert the action groups who were ready for the anticipated betrayal when it came. But they were fighting a national law at a local level and in conditions of relative isolation. The difficulty for the movement across the country of organising without and beyond locality as the unifying instrument was starkly illuminated. For some groups too there was the difficulty of breaking with the political traditions and habits associated with community politics; in particular, the limitations of pressure exerted at community level in bringing about fundamental political change.

On Merseyside two associations resisted the mainstream consensus in favour of rent increase strikes, choosing instead total withdrawal of rent. While they carry a lower risk of eviction, rent increase strikes contain a reduced level of impact. The Tower Hill action group (THURAG) broke with its allies in the *Kirkby Rent Alliance*, in going for a total rent strike, and in Vauxhall, 'Over the Bridge' broke with its neighbour associations in Scotland Exchange, when a motion for a total strike was lost. Both areas shared in the experience of trauma and dislocation, albeit from different horizons, as a result of the housing policies of both government and local authorities; Kirkby as a new town development, and 'Over the Bridge' as a slum clearance area. Both associations were examples of what Sklair (1975) and Lowe (1986) call

single issue action groups, manifesting a higher level of political consciousness he contends than the traditional multi-issue tenants associations. Struggle with a strong focus is unlikely to succeed however unless the focus is common and not diverted by concerns that are distanced from the affected communities.

Chapter Seven describes the continuation of the struggle in Kirkby, accompanied for a while by Scotland Road and in the old town of Bootle, but in the face of the collapse of the struggle elsewhere. In October 1973, as the anti-HFA strike entered its second year, film maker Nick Broomfield, arrived in Kirkby promising the *Kirkby Reporter* he'd give the 'failing' town a 'fair crack of the whip' (3rd October 1973, p6). Such was the centrality of the rent strike in the lives of the people of Kirkby, what he produced in the end was a remarkable visual biography of the life of a poor, working class community during a rent strike (*Behind the Rent Strike*, 1974). In Kirkby the same dilemmas and divisions materialised; over the issue of compromising political alliances and the attempt by the group in Northwood to combine rent resistance with community politics. In the end, inevitably, old alliances were remoulded into new ones by circumstance, as the campaign converged around the militants who were holding out. Following the imprisonment of two Tower Hill tenants, the strike was ended by a deal done to keep others out of jail. Across the country the Tower Hill armistice ended most of the resistance.

The purpose of this history spanning the years 1968-1973, a 'post-war zenith' in the history of housing struggles according to Lowe (1986), is to tell the story of a significant movement of workers that, during a period of upheaval, mounted a series of struggles ostensibly disconnected from each other but which cumulatively mounted an organised challenge to an unjust housing system (1986, p89). Struggles that relieved hardship in the lives of a few people only, and are therefore of small import in the assessment of great power politics, flourished alongside others that challenged, directly, the rights of power over people. Taken as a whole, the events happened often enough to be completely normal for large sections of Merseyside's housing community; and for those who experienced them, they aroused passion enough to be called a movement. Furthermore, they were a

movement of working people, whose interpretation of social truth was at odds with the condition of the property owning classes. It is in this condition that events become detached from the legitimacy conferred by officially sanctioned history, as they did at the time from the legitimacy of sanctioned conduct.

The extent to which tenants, even the militants of Tower Hill, could openly defy the law was limited by the controls built into the ruling system, and by an overwhelmingly unfavourable set of social and personal circumstances. For too long, Thompson (1988) reminds us, labour historians have described working class struggles through their connections to the forms or the terms of institutional power; indeed, this would appear to make sense, in reconnecting these important, but seemingly small social struggles to their bigger social world. Even where these institutions are 'Trades Unions and working class political organisations', however, the constitutional approach reduces the quality of struggle to the 'relationship between the working classes and the state' (Thompson, 1988, p4). That relationship confers on the tenants' movement an identity as part of our recognised, legitimised social history. It is a relationship that may be seen, however, from the examples described, to be highly problematic in the successful conduct of a rent strike. The issues that separated ATACC from its supposed rival *Liverpool Rent Alliance*, 'Over the Bridge' from its neighbour associations in Scotland Road and Tower Hill from it's Kirkby neighbour Northwood was the same principle fundamentally over which the striking tenants of St Pancras were divided in 1960 and over which those in Sheffield split in 1967; whether or not to organise or campaign on the values of community participation or those of an autonomous class politics. In reality we will find from the evidence of the Merseyside events that this conflict happened not because of a clear division of interests or values between groups. They happened because in fact the struggles examined were never entirely class or community centred but a coalition of diverse interests with connections to all aspects of social living.

Since the core objective of this study is to materialise the events as they were experienced and understood by the strikers themselves, the tenuous link to normal political discourse can be considered to be

highly problematic for the interpretation of their experience. It is a fundamental condition, however, if we are to understand the rent strike experience as it is interpreted differently by people who are marginal to sources of power and whose options are either limited or subverted by that condition.

CHAPTER TWO
Rent Strike Sources: Review

The events marked for study are located within a broad history of a movement hundreds of years old. As an arena of discourse and debate on public policy, and as a trigger for protest in working class communities, housing has predominated over other areas of social policy, most particularly education and health, neither of which boasts a comparable tradition of class struggle. While it is prescient as an arena of conflict, as a body of writing housing is neglected, and housing protests particularly so. In this examination of the small but committed literature on political and social conflicts in housing, the collective housing experience since 1945 will be reconnected to those social ideals; in this reconnection, it is hoped that the meanings contained by the rent strike experience for those who took part in the strikes will be illuminated.

The literature on rent strikes as a broad concept is small as a part of the recorded history of the labour movement generally. The disjuncture in knowledge between housing as an arena of public policy, and housing protest as an arena of action, is one important focus of this chapter and the methods chapter that follows. In its treatment of housing literature in general and of the evidence accumulated by those involved in and affected by rent strike action, the review is intended to address this disjuncture. In understanding rent strikes, the tensions at the heart of our social ideologies become reconnected to the causes and meanings of social dissent. It is through this connection of policy to protest, that the rent strike experience will challenge our knowledge of our social world.

In order to reconcile the rent strike, an experience that is ‘other’, to the constitutional process, to the inside world of legislative authority, the literature on housing will be examined in the following three categories: developments in national housing policy; a survey of significant housing protests and, in conclusion, an examination of the politics of housing on Merseyside. In these dimensions, and in the reconnection of the component parts they describe, we will see that the causes at the heart of tenant protests are those at the heart of housing policy

debates during the twentieth century: the legitimacy of public tenancy and the right to an affordable home; and the voice of tenants as a class of people with a right of partnership in the governance of their living spaces.

I will accept, in agreement with the consensus of writers including Malpass and Murie (1988), Timmins (2001) and Jones and Lowe (2002) that the politics of housing policy, at both national and local level, is driven by concepts of social need engendered by economic priorities. I will argue that a responsibility, assumed by policy makers, to sustain a compromised policymaking structure, built on consensus, is a direct result of the predominance of economic priorities over ideological imperatives. I contend, therefore, that, because of its subservience to market forces, housing policy since 1945 has functioned as a structural system of social management; this is a direct consequence of the inherently contentious nature of the home as an arena of social concern, and of housing tenure as a source of class tension.

Part One: Housing: the Politics of Consensus

In this opening section, I will examine developments in national housing policy since 1945 up to the most intense period of rent strike activity in the early 1970s. In the progressive shift away from the strong support for public investment apparent at the end of the Second World War, we see the workings of political consensus; we see also the primacy of economic imperatives in shifting the terms of the consensus, a view which is in itself a consensus among social analysts. The development of housing policy since 1945 is characterised by the progressive intervention of an increasingly powerful market. It was in the period of the major chapters of this work, the late 1960s and early 1970s, that the shifts of post-war policy, away from quality municipal housing and towards economic new towns, and away from low rents and towards market rents, reached a nadir. The events described therefore add to the conflicts that occurred between government and tenants and between local authorities and tenants in their communities a critical political context.

Towards the Welfare Society

Jones and Lowe regard housing as 'the "core" social service' (2002, p154). Paradoxically, however, they say it is also the one 'least readily associated with the welfare state' (p154). With an Act in every Parliament since 1945, it has predominated legislatively over other areas of social policy, an energy say Alcock et al (2004) not apparent before World War Two. The advance towards the Beveridge report and universal benefits was underway during the inter-war period, but housing was 'one of the last areas of social provision to attract the attention of a nascent and developing welfare state' (p216). Indeed, at the beginning of the Attlee administration, it did not even have its own ministry, but was contained within Aneurin Bevan's *Ministry of Health* (Timmins, 2001, p141). Timmins (2001) in his biography of the Welfare State notes Bevan's 'jibe' that whilst at the *Ministry of Health*, he spent 'five minutes a week' on housing (cited, p142). In what seems almost a reflection of Jones and Lowe's argument about the poverty of its 'coverage' in comparison to other areas of social policy, housing since 1945 has rarely found itself analysed or understood as an entity, like welfare or education or health. Often, it is contained, as a small component, within broader works describing the development of the modern welfare state.

The legislation that followed World War One and the 1915 rent strike on the Clyde controlled rents and permitted subsidies for local authorities to build houses. Indeed, while the 1915 *Rent Restrictions Act* that froze rents at the pre-war level and the 'Addison Act' of 1919 would be mirrored after World War Two, the 'emphasis' during the inter-war period, say Alcock et al (2004) 'remained with the private sector' with public housing as the 'minority undertaking' (p217). In one of the few studies dedicated to housing policy specifically, Malpass and Murie (1988) argue that, in line with trends in other areas of social policy, while not 'enthusiastic', state intervention in the housing market was expanding during the inter-war period, at least to a point of 'permanent' presence (p67).

The principle of public subsidy for the provision of cheap housing, fought for by the Clyde tenants in 1915, and conceded in 1919, should be understood as a perennial area of communication between workers

and government. While we see government inhibition we see too a pattern of necessary concession over house building and rents. It's in the tension between the demands of private investors and the expectations of the public, that we see the primary cause of conflict between government and tenants, after both world wars.

The Post-War Boom

It was the Second World War that thwarted the small but steady growth in government spending on housing during the inter-war years. The trend was re-invigorated afterwards, however, by a convergence of needs: to replace 450,000 bombed civilian dwellings and meet the political demand for social reform. Both of these were policy commitments that helped Attlee's Labour win the 1945 election. Timmins (2001) argues that Aneurin Bevan, minister with responsibility for housing, 'spectacularly reversed' the balance in house building 'between private and public' (p143). In the years immediately following the war, and in the figure of Bevan, the people's right to homes for heroes appeared privileged over the demands of the private market. Bevan restricted private house building, increased the proportion of money provided by the exchequer, instigated the trebling of the Council house subsidy and strengthened rent control legislation. And while private contractors were building the bulk of the houses, they were building them not for sale but to be rented from local authorities and they were building them in accordance with new, improved minimum standards. Bevan resisted amending those standards in order to increase the number of properties being built.

Significantly, however, Bevan wouldn't agree to the radical labour demand for a nationalised housing corporation. He built three bedroomed homes, with proper toilets and built them in idyllic settings, which says Timmins (2001) earned him the honour of being dubbed by local government Minister Dalton, who wanted a more flexible standard, 'a tremendous Tory' (cited, p146). The programme was radical enough to provoke opposition from Conservatives including Churchill who accused Bevan of 'partisan spite' in 'checking' the role of private investors whom he believed had provided for the public need with great success (cited Timmins, p144). Alcock et al (2004) agree with the predominant view among analysts that, in partnership with the

building of state structures to provide common welfare, there was ‘a radical shift’ after 1945 towards public intervention in the marketplace of housing (p218). In reality, because, in its origin, the post-1945 consensus was not ideological but an economically engendered agreement, beginning with the need to build houses, it was, over the long-term, likely to prove resistant to the radicalism of Bevan. Jones and Lowe (2002) argue that the post-war ‘revolution’ in the nature of housing tenure was driven by demography; the increasing mobility of the population and a change in the character of the family unit (p154). It was during the period of post-war building, not during the public spending squeeze of the Thatcher years, that the Conservatives coined ‘property owning democracy’ as a party slogan (Alcock et al, 2004, p218). And it was Conservative housing Minister MacMillan, in 1954, three years after the Conservatives were elected on a promise to out build Bevan, who declared a great social ‘crusade’ with housing at its centre (Timmins, 2001, p181). It wasn’t that ideology was becoming synergised in the years after 1945 but that the social character of families and communities and the origin of housing ideology in economic needs and interests, produced policy that appeared compatible with party positions regardless of longer term aims or values. By 1949 Bevan had been forced to agree to a reduction in the scale of building. While in 1951 and 1952 the numbers of houses built was maintained significantly above the newly agreed level of 140,000, under Labour it never again rose above 200,000 or approached the 1948 high of 227,000 new homes. The Conservatives, on the back of their election promise, reached a high in 1954 of 357,000 new homes (Timmins, 2001, p147).

The Economic Burden

By the mid 1950s, the demand for new homes had been substantially met, changing the nature of need. While house building is the branch of housing policy that ‘attracts the keenest attention’, as Donnison contends in a 1960 study, it is also ‘exposed to all the winds that blow in a draughty economic climate’ (cited Timmins, 2001, p140). The steady shift in housing priorities, from the mid 1950s, towards economic management of the public sector and increasing investment by the private, was, I suggest, the true motor of the radically changed marketplace we see today. Subsequent events, leading to the

replacement of public housing with private ownership and private rentals, were predicated without need of the housing revolution that is assumed to have occurred under Thatcherism.

After 1954, the post-war drive to rebuild slowed to permit slum clearance programmes. A 1952 report from the *Sanitary Inspectors Association* suggested houses were falling into slum condition with the same speed that new ones were being built (p183). In spite of MacMillan's crusade, the Conservative government stalled the public spending band wagon, cutting back on subsidies and, in pursuit of their election promise to build 300,000 houses, reduced the size and quality of new properties. MacMillan also permitted the first post-war sales of Council houses, selling off 3,000 by 1955. It signalled a return of the property owning democracy but with a 1950s context. For MacMillan private investment and ownership was one aspect of a multi-lateral market that needed to reflect diversity and choice: 'of all forms of property suitable for … distribution, house property is one of the best' (cited Timmins, 2001, p181).

Historian of the tenants' movement, Grayson (1996), is sceptical of the meaning of the Conservative approach calling it 'a revival of the policies of the 1930s' (p46). According to Malpass and Murie (1988), 'the private sector was set free and given the dominant role in housing provision, while the local authorities were set on a course towards a much more limited role' (p73). As early as 1955, the encouragement of private building was reflected in the attitude to rent when the Conservatives urged local authorities to adopt 'realistic' rents. It was intended to address the variable, indeed arbitrary, rents charged for comparable properties, a result of the post-1939 rent freeze, and increase money available to landlords to carry out repairs. Malpass and Murie (1988) argue it was the beginning of a 'trend towards Council rents more closely related to market rent levels, with greater reliance on means–tested assistance' (p73). For those who rented their accommodation, within ten years of the end of the Second World War, the great aspiration, of affordable homes, supported by public investment, had been overtaken by events; supplanted, it seemed, by a more pragmatic sense of priorities.

The final element of the 1950s 're-orientation' was the 1957 Rent Act. It decontrolled rents in the private sector but, Malpass and Murie say the trend infiltrated the public sector. While not a free market, it introduced a market culture into the public sector (p73). In 1959, the *House Purchase and Housing Act* that extended grants for home improvements encouraged authorities to lend mortgages to their tenants. Jones and Lowe argue that the regeneration programmes were part of the drive to meet the changing, multiple needs of a more mobile population. The Conservatives support for 'new town' and high rise building was another aspect of the drive towards economic homes, and from 1956, housing Minister Duncan Sandys raised the subsidies for high rise blocks above those of other dwellings (Timmins, 2001, p184).

Malpass and Murie (2002) argue that the concept of an 'economic' rent was as related to the drive to accommodate population growth and movement, as the schemes for urban development. Subsidies to Council housing were under attack from the mid 1950s, and instead of the universal rent controls won by the Clyde tenants during the First World War, there was 'targeted assistance' in the form of means-tested rebates (p155). Within the tenants movement there is a long history of resistance to means testing, viewed by tenants associations as a mechanism for replacing public subsidy (Grayson, 1996). And there was protest too from Bevan who called for all privately owned rent controlled properties to be transferred to public ownership, a policy endorsed by Labour at its conference in 1956 but which never materialised as policy (Timmins, 2001, p184). Re-orientation reflected a consensus in policy-making. It was I suggest also a divergence; the needs of economic restructuring were becoming separated from the immediate interests of tenants, as these were expressed in 1918 and in 1945 in the demand for state welfare provisions. Because it could not be accommodated by the private sector alone, the demand for affordable housing that followed both World Wars, provided what Malpass and Murie call a 'temporary, political advantage to the working class' or at least to the better off workers, those able to benefit from the 'economic power of organised, skilled labour' (p74). Wherever and whenever political policy diverges from public investment and the

control of the market, the interests of working class tenants are challenged.

Building Boom Part Two: 1960s Regenerations

In his autobiographical account of community architecture, Hackney describes the tunnel vision of the builders of the early 1960s, in their belief in the profitability of imported standardised materials; what Timmins (2001) calls a tear them down, build them high belief in the 'honesty of bare concrete' (cited, p186). Keith Joseph, housing Minister in the early 1960s admitted in an interview that the new architecture was a policy without a purpose beyond the simple need to build: 'I used to go to bed at night counting the number of houses I'd destroyed and the number of planning approvals that had been given' (cited, Timmins, 2001, p186). The new properties were built with insufficient attention to the closeness of local amenities or of family and community networks and were inclined to fail or fall into disrepair. Such was the remoteness of the building programme in Newcastle from the needs of the electorate, in 1970 a bribery scandal lead to the imprisonment of Labour Council leader T Dan Smith. While it may have suited single people, the 1960s version of Bevan and MacMillan's dream of idyllic socially mixed communities left families isolated and trapped inside dark, forbidding blocks of concrete that became linked to social ills in particular crime.

Like the means test, the poor building practices, beginning in the late 1950s, were to become a trigger for protest in working class communities, once it became apparent in both old and new housing conurbations that the new towns and estates were not the rural idylls promised by the planners. Economic building was a direct product of the market and of shifts in policy damaging to the immediate economic interests of workers, which lay in publicly subsidised housing. While it undermined belief and confidence in Council housing, the concrete ghetto appeared to be a poor return for the workers post-war advantage. It would play its part, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, in a new phase of tenant activism, acknowledged by Sklair (1975) Lowe (1986) and Grayson (1996).

Timmins argues that the high rises were disastrous for politicians but it was rent that was the 'chief source' of tension within and between the parties (p188). More importantly, it was the issue that encapsulated the growing gulf between the politicians perception of appropriate public spending and that of the tenants whose rising rents would be payable from wages that would not be rising. The cost of renting had declined since the Second World War to the point where the average family spent less on the price of its accommodation than it spent on alcohol (cited Timmins, p188). Macmillan did not believe living space should have been a peripheral cost, as it was for many families, but the first and biggest demand on the family income (cited Timmins, p188). It was the decontrol legislation of 1957 that was the true end of Bevan's post-war revolution, and of the workers great advantage.

From Economic Homes to Economic Rents

In the late 1960s, there was a brief revival in public house building, forestalled in the 1970s by government programmes designed to reduce public expenditure. It was at the opening of the period covered by this project, in 1968, that a further re-orientation, this time towards 'rehabilitation and improvement of existing dwellings' resulted in the 1969 Act that introduced General Improvement Areas (p75): 'the new policy represented a major reduction in public investment in housing over the next five years or so' (Malpass and Murie, 1988, p75). Housing protests related to the slum problem broke out in urban areas across the country, but particularly on Merseyside where the slum clearance programme was vigorous. While the value of properties in the old inner cities crashed, rents were not subject to similar market adjustment. The 'new high-rise industrialised housing' say Malpass and Murie (1988), was 'expensive, unsatisfactory and unpopular' (p75). In 1972, with the introduction of the Conservative Fair Rents legislation it became more expensive still, when local authorities lost their right to determine levels of rent independent of the market. The decline of the private rented sector was related primarily to the development of homes for owner occupation while the rate of growth of the public sector (its share of the housing stock doubled between 1945 and 1956) had by the 1980s slowed to the point of negative equity when Council house sales exceeded completions (p77). In fact, there were clear differences between the parties in the housing culture and market they

envisioned, which is the reason the belief that housing is an area of controversy persists in the face of an apparent policy consensus. Jones and Lowe suggest the Conservative policies of the 1950s were 'vigorously' opposed by Labour (2002, p156). While the Conservatives wanted the owner occupier to benefit from the development of land, Labour wanted to nationalise it or introduce a 'betterment' tax on windfall profits (2002, p155). Labour opposed the 1959 *Town and Country Planning Act* that restored the free market to land sales. Also, prior to its election in 1964, it promised to build half a million houses by 1970.

What is important is that these differences did not appear to alter the general direction of policy. Public concern, even opposition, did not compel Labour, any more than scepticism within its own ranks, to institute radical policies to reverse the process of marketisation. While the 1964 Wilson government is credited with a revival in the public sector, this proved short-lived. Malpass and Murie (1988) remind us that the text of Labour's 1965 White Paper suggests the party saw the building programme as a means of restoring parity with the private sector, no more; there would be no return to the 1940s. The expansion was intended to meet 'exceptional needs' while 'building for owner-occupation' reflected a 'long-term social advance which should gradually pervade every region' (1988, cited, p74).

When it returned to power in 1974, Labour invested once more in the public sector building programme and in 1975 in the form of the *Housing Rents and Subsidies Act* it repealed the 'Fair Rents' imposed on public tenants by the Heath government in 1972. The public building revival lasted only two years however and the Act that replaced Fair Rents set up a housing review that led directly to what Malpass and Murie call the 'insipid' Green Paper of June 1977. The 1977 paper offered no proposals that might reverse or even address the trend towards so called economic rents, tied to property values rather than ability to pay.

The weakness of the government's parliamentary position at the time is blamed by Malpass and Murie (1988) for the failure of the Green Paper to institute the 'thoroughgoing reform of housing finance' that was

needed (p76). Since it did not endure, it's clear that, in the case of Labour support for the public sector, the advantage to the workers that might have accrued from the organised struggles of the early 1970s was another temporary one, until normal order could be restored. Most significantly, in spite of what Grayson (1996) agrees was the opposition of many Labour authorities in the 1960s to the means test, there was no reversal by the 1974 Labour government of the policy of tenant subsidies, in the form of rent rebates. It was the provision of central government funding for rebates, enshrined in the 1972 Act, that Grayson says began 'the long march to housing benefit dominated estates' (p50).

In summary
Rather than telling us housing is an area of controversy, the post-1945 housing legislature demonstrates an inclination on the part of the political class towards general agreement in identifying and meeting priority need. The divergence that matters was the replacement of the public welfare instincts of the 1940s with the private market, as the perceived appropriate instrument of economic probity and security. In this realignment lies the separation of public housing from public policy and of the housing political class from the 'class' of public tenants. The pattern post-1945 duplicated that of 1918, when government faced similar demands for housing provision. Once the post-war need for quality public housing, which in the 1940s could not be met by the private sector, subsided, the way was open for private developers to step in with economic building schemes designed to satisfy more immediate, short-term needs. Since the pattern here suggests public building was in itself a measure-designed to meet a short-term need, the consensus was more partisan in its support of private enterprise than the bi-partisan middle way suggested by Malpass and Murie (1988).

On Merseyside, the tension inside *Liverpool City Council* described by Muchnick (1970) in his account of the city's urban renewal programme, between those who wanted to redevelop the City Centre by slum clearance and those who wanted to renovate, was the trigger for social conflict inside the targeted inner city communities, as well as a direct cause of rent strikes and other housing protests. Both Grayson (1996)

in his history, and Sklair (1975) in his account of the anti-Fair Rents strikes of 1972 agree that the 'precipitating factors' in the rent strikes of the period 1968–1972 'were not only the rent rises but also a worsening of repairs and maintenance on the estates' (Sklair, 1975, p270 cited Grayson 1996, p50). Tenants, Grayson says, 'were confronting the effects of the mass building of the 1960s' (1996, p50). The subservience of building to the market, expressed in slum clearance, economic construction and regeneration schemes, exacerbated the problem of failing and inadequate housing, and by extension of resistance to the policy of decontrolling rents. Rising rents, cushioned by rebate schemes designed to make tenants subsidise the rents of others, were a direct economic threat to the living standards of working class tenants.

It was the universality of the home as a source of public expense and of private profit that converted Labour opposition into pragmatic 'partnership'. This pragmatism was expressed in the tendency to respond to Conservative pro-market legislation by seeking concessions, such as the safeguards for tenants included in the 1965 Rent Act and, most significantly for this study, in the conversion of opposition to HFA into pressure for a reduction of the rent increases. The 'most telling' symbol say Jones and Lowe (2002) of the 'return to market forces' was the 'battle over rented accommodation' (p157). In the attack on affordable rents, set on the basis of need, was the essence of reaction; a reversal of 1945, and of the workers post-war ascendancy in the debate on the welfare society. Rent is the key, not only to understanding a process of political change, but of political separation; the dislocation of a large class of working people, conjoined in a common set of economic needs, from the perception and practice of 'public' interest.

Part Two: the Nation on Rent Strike

> Your King and Country Need You
> Ye Hardy Sons of Toil.
> But will your King and Country need you
> When they're sharing out the spoil?
>
> (radical lyric, cited Gallacher, 1936, p30)

In this section, I will examine accounts of rent strikes that happened outside Merseyside and during the period before 1970. In revealing patterns in the causation, organisation and political results of rent strike activity, I will show how periods of tenant protest are related to shifts in housing policy since 1945 that threatened the interests of tenant groups. The data will show how, in its need of partnership, the movement becomes connected invariably to a political orthodoxy it cannot control. In this partnership with governance are sown the seeds of the social management that divides different styles of action from each other; and the stifling of tenants' ability to confront the political shifts that harmed their interests. It is a theme that will be developed further in Chapter Three, where the political values of sources emanating from outside centres of power are contrasted with those of orthodox channels. In the means used by protestors and radicals to disseminate information and news, the same fundamental tension was expressed; seek out legitimacy and legitimate channels and the authenticity of the voice becomes contained. Through the details of the strikes included here, I will demonstrate the endemic nature of the partnership dilemma as a method of managing rent strikes, its origin in the politics of consensus and its consequences for the political cohesion of the working class housing movement.

While it is a component of social living, every bit as important as wages in the management of family income, housing is a perennial source of tension for governments in the management of national resources. Saunders (1981) argued that while the provision of housing is a necessary instrument for the maintenance of industrial production, the long-term nature of the demands it places upon the state mean it is disproportionately expensive. Furthermore, it compels the state to 'mediate' between institutions and interests involved in the construction and exchange of the commodity, not all of these economically productive (p232). So long as policy is founded on a pragmatic concept of management, predominating over ideology, the impact of tenant protest as an instrument for change is limited. As can be seen from the course of housing legislature since 1945, housing policy and practice responds structurally to broader economic and social pressures, including the protests that are triggered by policy initiatives. The class

interests they arouse are absorbed, inevitably, into a process of mediation, at the heart of which lies the Labour Party, as a mediator of workers aspirations.

Red Clyde and the Controlled Rent

During the First World War, workers looking for jobs in the munitions factories flooded into Clydeside, an overspill town on the outskirts of Glasgow. Reductions in wages resulting from a high demand for jobs accompanied by increases in rent imposed to exploit the urgent need for extra accommodation, triggered a series of highly organised industrial actions and a rent strike; a combination of worker actions referred to commonly as 'Red Clyde'. Historians and social scientists, including Melling (1980), Damer (1980) Castells (1983) and Englander (1983) agree it was the rent strike on the Clyde that lead directly to the 1915 *Rent Restrictions Act* that froze rents at their pre-war level and ultimately to the 1919 'Addison' Act which set up a building programme of public housing. A pattern of housing reform energised by war may be seen from the studies of housing policy mentioned in part one to have been repeated after World War Two.

As has been shown, the literature on rent strikes is modest. Given its profile, wartime setting and the policy formulations that followed, it is no surprise that Clyde has more authorship than other strikes. It is treated by policy and social analysts simultaneously as archetypal and as special. Many rent strikes, but not all, are triggered by increases in rent. Many, but not all, are concerned, in some form, with the exploitation of workers by owners. Few, however, have produced outcomes which housing analysts, even if they disagree about what it means, appear to agree were instigated substantially by the workers own actions, and which are regarded as long-term.

Saunders (1981) argues that concepts of class, based on an outmoded division of landlord/capitalist and worker/tenant have created a misconception that social provisions reflect no more than the economic dominance of 'fractions' of the capitalist class; because policy may be seen in the long run to have favoured capital accumulation, including the post-war building programme, this, he argues, does not mean no process of engagement was involved beyond economic profitability

(p241). Saunders disputes the view among Marxists, in particular Rex and Moore, that political concessions are designed merely to placate workers. Real improvements in living standards earned by workers he suggests could hardly have happened at all if profit was the only factor at work. In his assessment of Clyde, Damer (1980) argues that the connectedness of the workers actions and the 'higher level of political consciousness' it indicated frightened the state into concession (p75). Castells (1983) agrees it was the Clyde movement's fusion of the dynamic parts of urban life that made it work as a motor of change. Unlike Damer though, he argues that policy was amended not because of the direct impact of revolutionary action but because the unified protest demonstrated a common interest, of boss and worker, in functional public housing (1983). Saunders (1981) does not acknowledge the paradox of concession; that it may be enacted specifically in defence of profit, as the more workable solution to the problem of resistance. Damer (1980) and Castells (1983) recognise the paradox, but assume, like Saunders, that protest, in this instance, directed political change independently of capital interests. The nature of the dynamics that created the movement and forced political concessions matters less than the reasons the tenants movement in general has been unable to sustain over the long-term, political advantages gained from struggle.

As was the pattern after World War Two, the victory of the Clyde strikers was a partial if not temporary one, at least as they saw it. Once the dust had settled, the Government passed the 1920 *Rents and Mortgage Restrictions* Act that permitted landlords to raise rents so long as they carried out repairs. While most of the country accepted the increases Clydeside did not, and there was a further series of rent strikes in the area during the 1920s (Damer, 1985). Castells and Damer locate the Clyde strikers differently, as a class group, the former seeing them not as an industrial class but as a class of social consumers moulded by the experience of living in urban communities. Saunders (1981) also does not believe tenants are separable into a distinct economic class. In their shared belief that the actions of the Clyde workers altered the terms of policy, the three writers express a common view of the nature of workers relationship to the state. It is a view that presupposes the existence of forms of political mediation. It is

in those forms of management, relieving policy makers of an obligation to consider or represent class interests, that the prospective power of social movements to alter the terms of policy is dissipated.

Leeds and the Movement of Council Tenants

Bradley (1997 and nd), in two online articles on rent strikes in Leeds, suggests, like Castells, that the political zeal of rent strikers cited by Damer (1980) and by Grayson (1996) is largely mythical. The mainstream tenants' movement Bradley argues is moulded to the needs of electoral Labour and where tenants express a clear class interest, it is rarely in unity with other workers and they are isolated by Labour and ridiculed. He suggests that tenants represent a threat to governing authority only when they are disconnected from traditional Labour, and the consensus politics it represents. He illustrates this view in two studies of rent strikes in Leeds prior to the Second World War. In 1934, it was a Labour Council that imposed a rent rebate scheme intended to make better off tenants pay for the relief of slum dwellers, and the opposition Conservatives who supported the strikers. While these 'better off' tenants never enjoyed the legitimacy conferred upon members of the propertied class, they were fair game for Labour which, Bradley alleges, portrayed them as 'well off parasites, living off public subsidies and stealing scarce resources from the poor' (p 17). Indeed, in a companion article on the Leeds strike of 1914, called to fight a 6d rent rise, Labour he says steered the *Tenants Defence League* away from the rent issue towards a general campaign for social housing, turning it into the 'popular wing of the Labour Party's main electoral campaign' (nd, np).

St Pancras 1960: Failed by Labour

In St Pancras in 1960, the consequences for tenants of connection to Labour produced outcomes similar to Leeds but in this case striking in their similarity to what happened subsequently in 1972, because the St Pancras strike shared with 1972 even in the precise details of the cause and of the campaign. In his foreword to David Burn's pamphlet on the St Pancras strike, Hugh Kerr of *Harlow Tenants Federation* notes the similarity of the St Pancras differential rent scheme to that contained in the HFA legislation (1972). Means testing, in which tenants specifically rather than the community in general subsidise the

rents paid by the poorest households, is an integral part of the ideology of economic housing; relieving the burden on society of public housing. Kerr notes too the similar behaviour of St Pancras Labour in its treatment of the tenants cause.

As in Tower Hill, the St Pancras tenants united their various *ad hoc* committees into a coalition, the UTA. The central committee ran sub-committees on every estate; the organisers favoured direct strike action; the strikers refused to apply for rebates; they tracked down and picketed Councillors; the foot soldiers were women; the area was protected by an early warning system. Also much like the strikers on the Kirkby estate, the St Pancras tenants were forced to abandon their strike and rely instead upon a change in political governance because the law was used against them and because the promised industrial actions, the connected parts of grassroots labour action, failed to materialise.

It is in their relationship with organised Labour that we see the most poignant of the experiences the St Pancras rent strikers share with their comrades and predecessors. In his assessment of the tensions that drove St Pancras to rebel, and resulted in its defeat, Burn (1972) blames the 'mechanics of the housing financial system' (p23). Increased rent paid off interest charges on loans for house builders. It is in the context of this that the 'the actions of the state' in defence of a class interest 'become clearer' (p23). Burn sees constitutional Labour as a political representative of that financial interest.

In 1986 the Labour party published a Heritage pamphlet intended presumably to counter what its author David Mathieson (1986: 24) admits was the perception of betrayal by Labour. In support of his view that confrontational politics fails because it provokes reaction, Mathieson contrasts the non-consensual approach of the Conservatives, who refused to negotiate, with that of Labour which saw housing as a 'social service' and used the instruments of democracy to protect workers from rampant power. Mathieson's argument is a defence of the political role of Labour; that the party seeks amelioration for workers in the face of abuses and for tenants of the problem condition.

As a mediator, Labour doctrine is ranged specifically in opposition to radical political action. Mathieson describes the Labour of 1960 as a consensus party, distinguished from Conservatives by its support for partnership rather than division. It was, he says, the desperate measures of the militants 'when one or two moderating voices might have made all the difference' that exposed the tenants to the 'ferocity' of the blunt instrument (p23). The march, to which he refers, when the police launched an assault on the tenants, with a ferocity acknowledged even by the *Daily Express*, took place after the arrest of tenant leaders Cook and Rowe, and the destruction of their homes. The 'passive, physical resistance' advocated by Mathieson had in fact failed to prevent reaction in its blunter forms (p19). Mathieson's analysis makes the case for constitutional tenant politics, which he sees illustrated in St Pancras. However, the flaw in this argument was the failure of St Pancras Labour once in power and of the constitutional instrument therefore, to provide the tenants with the promised relief. Once partnership felt to the St Pancras tenants as it is viewed by Mathieson, as the only viable option, it became destined to fail them. Partnership necessitates the surrender by the outsider of his autonomy, and therefore of the prospective advantage that may be garnered from mass action.

Fair Rents: the Early Struggles

In a 1995 review, in the journal *International Socialism*, Nick Howard rallies to the defence of the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire' (p 3) against Stuart Lowe and others, who view the 1967 Sheffield rent strike as Manuel Castells and David Englander (1983) did with Clyde, as a social movement with origins in the functionality of urban communities, and therefore in local conditions, rather than in labour–capital relations (p 4). The Sheffield strike targeted another 'differential' rent scheme, similar to St Pancras, seven years earlier. In aiming to subsidise poorer tenants from rebate schemes instead of housing subsidies, it was similar in origin and ideology to the market rent scheme, favoured by the Conservative party, and imposed nationally in 1972 in the form of the *Housing Finance (Fair Rents) Act* (HFA). In an article written for *International Socialism* in Autumn 1967, during the early stages of the strike, Howard suggests the differential schemes (another one

provoked a strike in East London in '68) had 'brought the working class in some cities into the closest confrontation with the financier class since the 1915 Glasgow Rent Strike' (np). Sheffield was one of a number of strikes during the late 1960s that originated in grievances similar to those that provoked the strikes on Merseyside and elsewhere. Like St Pancras, the Sheffield strikers failed to stop the scheme or to stall the introduction of the Fair Rents legislation.

In May 1970 the Conservative Party published first a pamphlet, followed in July 1971 by a White Paper describing in detail the proposed fair rents legislation. The 1968 East London rent strike was the forerunner of the 1972 strike in that it was called in response to a scheme that was a trial run for HFA but 'tested' on the capital by the *Greater London Council.* In their account of the 1968 strike, Moorhouse, Wilson and Chamberlain anticipate the arguments of Damer on Clyde (and Nick Howard), describing the personal significance 'for those involved' of direct action housing protests; the politicisation of strikers is frequently cited as evidence of the class nature of the rent strike experience, a universal effect of the struggle against landlords, regardless of whether the cause is local or national (1972, p133).

The strikes occurring in the immediate years before HFA was implemented are interesting not only because the causes anticipated 1972, but because the strikes were ended for the same immediate reasons as Tower Hill; promised industrial support failed to materialise. If action outside the constitutional process is to succeed, then political consciousness, and tradition, must 'work' in rallying the support of workers in the factories. The strikes of the 1960s are interesting also because their existence as a prior example failed to facilitate a national response to HFA when it came in 1972, or to prevent the divisions that fragmented the movement both on Merseyside and elsewhere.

The Politics of Community: Strengths and Weaknesses

For the tenants' movement, historically, the great barrier to united action has always been the locality of causes. It is central also to the debate between analysts on the class interpretation of rent strikes. The particular local condition or cause is cited, most prominently by

Castells, alongside the demography of urban communities or estates, as subversive to the delineation of tenant groups as distinct class or class interest and of their resistance therefore as a form of class struggle. While in Sheffield and London, at the end of the 1960s, tenants were concentrated on fighting means-tested market rent schemes, on Merseyside it was the slum clearance programme that triggered a series of strikes in inner city areas between 1968 and 1970. Locality has always been a barrier to the development of tenants' collective interest into a movement with a common investment, purpose and history. The struggles of tenants living in slum clearance areas were connected to the national picture of dis-investment in public housing, but markedly different in immediate aim from the concerns of those living in the new towns. Those who could not pay their increased rents were fighting the same 'enemy' as the slum dwellers but not in the same sense as those who 'benefited' from rebates.

As Grayson (1996) argues in his history of the tenants movement, there are substantial areas of common ground in tenants struggles: the differential rent, for instance, trigger in St Pancras, Sheffield and East London, and of common strategy; links to grassroots Labour, the cultivation of media, the mobilisation of women, the preference for direct action forms of protest. Policy emanating from nationally designed strategy is imposed frequently and to begin with at local level. Where resistance is organised by local associations and action groups, the scope of public interest is limited, as is political support, where the cause or event doesn't appear 'big' enough. It isn't that causes aren't shared but that the knowledge of related action that connects those struggles is not shared. The Tower Hill tenants who risked liberty to beat HFA are unlikely to have known anything about the St Pancras strike of 1960 or East London in 1968. As Sklair (1975) and Grayson (1996) contend, the failure of the national tenants federation in July 1972, and again in September, to agree to a national strike against HFA, directed from the centre, was a major obstacle to prospective success, right from the outset.

In their causes the strikes in St Pancras, Sheffield and East London were connected to policy developments formed at national level, and informed by the increasing preference for private investment and

control as a cost effective solution to the housing 'problem'. That tenants are workers at 'home', in communities of living spaces not work spaces, alters their relationship to the political process, which is more organic compared to that of industrial workers. As Saunders (1981) argues, the home is not disposable as are other commodities, nor is it contained in a direct relationship to the process of production like a job. Castells (1983) believes community social networks transform the home into a different commodity and the tenant therefore into a worker with different interests and allegiances. For Damer (1980) and Castells (1983), it was the connectedness of the Clyde workers actions to industrial strikes and related actions elsewhere in the country that was the key to its impact. Disconnection, produced by the community nature of the experience, weakened the actions in St Pancras, Sheffield and East London. Even where a policy may be devised and imposed at national level, as was the case with the Fair Rents scheme, if it is administered at local level, it is harder for tenants to perceive the cause as common or to organise resistance that is focused and powerful.

It is, I suggest, the connection of workers interests to those of constitutional political instruments rather than to their home communities that subverts most effectively coherent, sustained class action, as it was organised and conducted in Clyde. The nature of the connection is illuminated by Castells (1983) in his essay on Clyde, and by Lowe (1986) in his assessment of Sheffield. While the social character of relationships in urban communities means they are independent of state power, it means also that once grievances are mobilised, they need a place to travel and, like economic interests, are inclined to become absorbed into the political structure. The paradox of tenants' relationship to political process is illuminated too by Malpass and Murie (1988) in the temporary nature of the advantages to workers they argue were created by war. As Saunders (1981) suggests, the state does not in fact wage class war. Political process is a less messy, unpredictable means than war of managing the interests conflicted by the equally unpredictable workings of economic markets. Politically-conscious mass organisation is the alternative to trusting Labour and political representation. Lipsky (1970) argues that, in the 'uniqueness of the rent strike's threat to public order' lies the ability of tenant protest

groups to construct themselves as independent players in the process of mediation (p187). To have any hope of success, however, pressure must be intense, extending beyond the authorities ability to endure. It is at the grassroots, inside communities, where relationships are most free of hierarchical or controlling structures and influences. To succeed at this level, however, a movement must achieve and sustain connection to related struggles of class, rather than the connections, rooted in civic politics and locality, that create profile but enable the authorities to intervene and contain.

The Politics of Labour: Partnership or Containment?
It is through the Labour movement, the instrument that should enable workers struggles to become common and connected, that tenants become connected instead to traditional political processes, leading directly to reliance upon those Councillors and activists functioning at local level, and controlled by local political conditions and instruments. Lipsky (1970) reminds us that promises related to housing are an important part of the electability of politicians; for a while, after 1945, this civil partnership did indeed appear to work in the interests of tenants. However, in the case of Leeds and of St Pancras, we see how reliance upon it 'worked' for the politicians who manipulated it to reassert power. For the St Pancras tenants trying to get Labour re-elected was no more than a signifier of the failure of more coherent organised actions.

In his 1975 essay on the HFA strikes, Leslie Sklair is measured in his assessment of the old alliance with sympathetic Labour politicians, which he contends can be turned to the benefit of workers. During the course of 1972 initial promises of support from Labour Councillors were filtered by the power of Labour's constitutional ideal, as indeed they were in St Pancras: 'The law of the land, however unfair, however oppressive, must be obeyed until it is repealed' said Labour leader Harold Wilson (cited, Skinner and Langdon, 1974, p 95). While Sklair acknowledges the subverting impact on the strikers organisation of the widespread 'promise' by Labour Councils, including Liverpool and Kirkby, not to implement (four fifths of strikes occurred in areas where the Council implemented the legislation immediately) Sklair argues that the only Council that followed through on its promise, Clay Cross in

Derbyshire, is an example of what a democratic and accountable Labour has the potential to enable workers to achieve, were it to be reproduced across the country. If it had been reproduced in the manner Sklair suggests, Clay Cross would indeed have provided a connected instrument, in the manner of Clyde, with the power to both unify and coerce. However, it would never have been reproduced in this fashion precisely because it was not a constitutional but a lawless act. Ultimately, the legislation was implemented in the Derbyshire borough by the government's commissioners and after its re-election in 1974, Labour paid off the Councillors fines. So long as it is engaged, as a structural control, law restores normality in the face of any rebellion. A connection at any level, to constitutionality means the power of structure and the influence of propriety and the interests it creates will intervene producing the widespread collusion Sklair (1975) mentions and the subsequent impotence that he accepts defeated many potential strikes even before they could be organised.

What defeated the instrument of protest in Sheffield, in St Pancras and in Tower Hill was the same politic that undermines workers interests in the formulation of policy; social and political order restores normality by absorbing different interests into a consensus built on the perception of shared civil values. As Lipsky (1970) says: while militant action appears 'incompatible with securing the "respect" of ... civic leaders', tenant leaders who attempt to cultivate 'the styles of middle class political actors ... risk alienating constituents whose loyalty is based upon leaders' opposition to the "power structure"'. Damer (1980) is surely right in his assessment of Clyde: it is only because the action was at some level detached from consensus politics, that it was class conscious; as is Sklair on Clay Cross, another lawless action. It's certainly true that St Pancras, Sheffield, East London and Tower Hill all contained elements of anti-constitutional action. However, in every case, the political structure withstood the assault. Rarely will significant numbers of people commit to action that places them beyond what Lipsky calls 'established community values' (1970, p192).

From this tension, between the need for political voice and the consequences of political partnership, the state, to the benefit of political order, draws the means to manage tenant protest. Indeed,

central to the methodology of this work, is the drawing out of the voices of the struggle in their authentic, original condition. The relationship of housing protest to a constitutionally driven Labour movement played the same part with similar results in St Pancras in Sheffield and in East London in the 1960s as it had done in Leeds in 1934. The voice was altered in its meanings and lost. Rent strikes become class struggles in the manner of Clyde and St Pancras when groups of workers perceive a threat to their interests arising from the mechanics of the economic system. Malpass and Murie (1987) argue that this is precisely what happened after both World Wars.

For resistance to happen in the plural fashion necessary to produce fundamental change however, it must be relatively unbounded with a high level of unifying consciousness, or common goals, enough to overcome the paradox the processes described by Castells (1983) and by Bradley (1997) produce. Attempt to speak from a marginal position and you will be isolated; ally yourself to constitutional action, in a political partnership with governance, and you will be contained. This is a theme to which I will return in Chapter Three where the impact of inclusions and exclusions upon the nature of rent strike perspectives and voices will be examined in a methodological context.

Part Three: the Merseyside Dimension

As we saw in the earlier section on national housing policy, there is substantial agreement among analysts as to the broad nature of housing policy after 1945. Strong government support after the War for public intervention in the housing market, manifest in programmes of municipal house building, gave way, progressively, to partnership with private investors and an inclination in policy towards financial thrift, lower grade 'estate' building and the scaling back of local authority powers. As we saw in section two, a longstanding causal relationship exists between policies tied to market values and major rent strikes, of which St Pancras, East London and Sheffield provided examples in the 1960s as, in the early 1970s, did the series of strikes against HFA including Kirkby's Tower Hill. Analysts including Jones and Lowe (2002) and Alcock *et al* (2004) emphasised the vulnerability of post-war government support for public housing which was shifted readily they suggest by the controlling impact of other factors, including

demographic conditions and changes inside families and communities and the economic pressure created by public spending programmes. And we know too from the section on rent strikes that the locality of community governance and of causes inhibits the ability of tenants associations and action groups to organise co-ordinated resistance to changes that originate in wider social and political conditions.

From Boom to Bust: the Decline of the Seaport

In order to understand why and how urban planning on Merseyside functioned as it did during the 1960s, and the recalcitrance of the city's urban poverty, it is necessary firstly to note the origin of Liverpool's one-time economic power and the background to the subsequent reversal of its economic fortunes. As Couch (2003) reminds us, the economy of Liverpool as an urban centre was built on its role as a seaport serving the industries of Lancashire and Cheshire. The development of Liverpool into a centre of mercantile commerce is, historically speaking, comparatively recent. The majority of the docks were not built until the eighteenth century, and it was during the course of that century that the city's population expanded from 6,000 to 80,000 (O'Connor, 2000, p8).

The wealth of Liverpool's shipping families was built up substantially upon the ownership and sale of slaves: the perceived primacy of slavery for the city's economy and the political influence of those who profited from it, may be measured from the parliamentary debates of 1787-1807 during which Liverpool Corporation lobbied energetically against abolition, submitting sixty four petitions and paying for a permanent delegation (Hunter 2002, cited Hunter, nd). During the nineteenth century, an influx of immigrants fleeing the Irish famine expanded the city's population to 205,000, providing a ready supply of labour for the docks, but a chronically overcrowded living space for the workers (p8). By the latter part of the nineteenth century, says Crouch, the vitality of Liverpool's docklands had turned the city into a 'prosperous and thriving metropolis' (2003, p11). Industrialisation altered the demography of the city but not in the alleviation of social inequalities or in the enrichment of the poor. The influx of warehouses and traders into the fashionable river side streets encouraged the wealthy former slave traders to move out to Everton and Vauxhall to

the immediate North of the centre and Toxteth to the South. According to O'Connor (2000) those left behind in the overcrowded centre 'lived in appalling conditions of squalor and disease' which began to stretch outwards to North and South City which were in turn abandoned by the wealthy middle class who headed further South into the suburbs of Mossley Hill and Aigburth (p8).

While the mid-nineteenth century terraces were an improvement on the 'courts' – claustrophobic apartment blocks built to house immigrants – they were still constructed in close proximity to each other and when, in 1864, 18,000 dwellings were declared 'insanitary' a process of demolition began, accelerating after the First World War (p9). As has been shown, the post Second World War social housing revolution also failed to break up the city's clusters of poverty. Indeed, the demolition of good housing and the break up of traditional inner city communities created centres of 'malaise' in the furthermost suburbs. According to O'Connor, 'in their enthusiasm to improve upon the insanitary conditions' the planners of the twentieth century 'chose the indiscriminate use of the bulldozer' (p10).

New Economy, New Communities

The factors influencing housing policy, in this case shifts of population and in patterns of investment on Merseyside, the beginning of consensus and the replacement of old communities with 'new' towns may be traced to the 1930s and the policy, in high population areas, of buying up land beyond city boundaries for industrial development. In Liverpool, says Meegan (1989), it was government policy, enshrined in the *Liverpool Corporations Act* of 1936, for the local authority to buy land for the purposes of building factories. Following the Act, two industrial centres were begun in Speke to the South of the city and at Aintree to the East and negotiations begun to create a third, in Kirkby to the North East. It is in the 1944 *Merseyside Plan*, however, that we see encapsulated the long-term vision for the area; in the development of new communities built around new industries, the economic problems of the city would be addressed in a connected fashion and its decline arrested:

> The decentralisation and regrouping of the population displaced on the reconstruction of the congested areas of Central Merseyside, in conjunction with the distribution and location of the new industrial areas (Thompson, 1945, cited Meegan, 1989, p198)

As was the case nationally in the building of homes, it was post-war reconstruction that energised the plan (Meegan, 1989). The acquisition by Liverpool of the wartime Royal Ordnance factory was part of its commitment to make Kirkby a third industrial zone. Firms moving into the area in the years following the War tended to close and move out, which Meegan suggests might have been taken as an indicator that the plans were flawed, but it did not alter the course of change. The movement into the area of multi-national corporations such as BICC and *Kodak* provided reassurance, but it was not until the 1950s Development Plan and the relocation of workers to Kirkby that a second wave of investment, from companies including *Birds Eye*, *AC Delco* and *Otis Elevators* was triggered and the numbers employed on the estate began to increase, reaching 16,000 by 1960. 'In just two decades' argues Meegan 'the Merseyside economy had been significantly restructured both sectorally and spatially' (1989, p200).

It was not a matter solely of economics, but of regenerating the social and cultural life of the region. The 1944 plan classed 258,000 people, a fifth of the population, as 'overspill'. Liverpool's slum clearance programme was in tune with developments in other urban centres, but was 'widely recognised' for its 'vigour' (Couch, 2003, p35). According to Couch, for central Liverpool, the nature of change was 'a legacy of vacancy and dereliction' (p5). *Merseyside Socialist Research Group* viewed the Merseyside Plan as not much of a plan at all but as a series of 'anarchic developments' inspired by no more than a fanatical belief in the annihilation of the inner city as a solution to the economic problem (Nightingale, 1980, p59). During the 1950s and 1960s the two municipally owned estates earmarked to receive the overspill alongside Kirkby, were Speke and Halewood, located side by side beyond the city's Southern boundary.

Not everyone believed that a seaport with a long history of relative prosperity, at least for the few, could be saved by the painstaking construction of a new non-maritime economy, and living spaces designed to accommodate 'new' industries. In 1958, the Minister of Labour told a delegation from *Liverpool Trades Council* that the city should export its labour (Nightingale, 1980, p57). According to *Merseyside Socialist Research Group* (MSRG), the slum clearance policies of the 1960s were an attempt by Liverpool to encapsulate as policy this dictum, but as a strategy for the regeneration of the entire life of the city. As was the case nationally, those working for the 'local state', says MSRG are 'dealing with forces which are beyond their immediate control' (Nightingale, p61). In a free market economy, the needs of private capital predominate, as indeed they did for Liverpool in the eighteenth century. When the market fails to provide the right kind of sustenance for the people, as had happened already in Speke, housing officials are reduced to acting as 'managers of discontent' (p61). The challenge faced by the housing class during the 1960s was almost apocalyptic. They must succeed where previous governance had failed lamentably. They had to stimulate an investment culture, but one that functioned in sympathy with the social needs of local communities.

Liverpool: a Leader in Urban Regeneration

As was demonstrated by the data in the first section of this chapter, like other urban centres, Liverpool operated under the pressure of shifts in housing priorities nationally towards multiple lower grade 'estate' developments, with insufficient attention to the closeness or appropriateness of local conditions or amenities. On Merseyside the process appeared accelerated. According to Couch (2003) by 1963 Liverpool had undergone 'more economic restructuring and urban change than any other city in Britain or Europe'; and the more dramatic changes still, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, were yet to happen (p3).

While, in the 1960s, the role of the planner was concerned primarily with 'land use zoning and physical problems' (p1) by the 1970s an interest in the character of urban poverty had transformed the ideal of regeneration into 'an important area of urban planning' (p2). No matter

how insurmountable its task may have seemed Liverpool rose to the challenge and, for its time, its approach was energetic if not visionary (Couch, 2003). At the beginning of the 1960s it was 'one of a number of British cities at the forefront of innovation in planning' and 'widely recognised for the vigour of its slum clearance programme' (p35). *The Liverpool Interim Planning Policy Statement* of 1965 (IPPS) was argues Couch 'one of the earliest attempts to prepare a city plan that went beyond the land use zoning function' (2003, p35), while the 1966 *Survey of Social Malaise*, 'represented one of the earliest local authority discussions of inner city social conditions' (p59). The Council set up a programme of consultation with community representatives and used as measures of social need pre-school education, youth activities and welfare services in addition to slum housing. In 1970 Muchnick, in an early evaluation of the City's urban renewal programme, noted that Liverpool had broken decisively from central government prescriptions for slum policy which focused only on the structural condition of dwellings (p86).

The 1965 plan included a new underground railway network and motorways and selected housing contained in three concentric rings around the City Centre to be 'demolished and redeveloped under the urban renewal programme' (p41). The *Inner City Plan*, published a few months later, outlined the plans for a new ring road and four new shopping zones of which the fourth, left undone in the 1970s, has been completed in 2009 under the brand name *Liverpool One*. Also in sympathy with more recent developments, the City Centre Plan recommended re-introducing housing into the central areas, but for the benefit of those who would be working there (p54).

As early as 1970, Muchnick saw the vulnerabilities of the new holistic approach. This was a concept embraced by Liverpool but which operated in a climate of growing economic austerity and which seemed almost bound to fail in some if not all aspects. The authority was dealing not only with measures of deprivation but with cultures; communities with history, identities and with family and community roots of longstanding. There was, Muchnick suggests, 'neglect, in the formation of physical renewal policy, of the particular social needs ... of different neighbourhood groups living in apparently similar housing

situations' (1970, p87). Couch (2003) agrees. While the 1965 IPPS specified that the new suburban areas should preserve the features and amenities of the 'historic townscape' (p45), there was insufficient 'recognition given to the merits of environmental familiarity, neighbourliness, the social or cultural life of the city' (p47).

While the survey of social malaise recognised the susceptibility of low income families to the disruptions of relocation, and the desire of half of the inner city population to be re-housed in their immediate communities, this, Couch (2003) suggests, was not the only pressure. The new 'science' of urban planning stimulated an increasing interest in corporate models of management. In 1970, the Council received a report from a planning consultancy that recommended restructuring Council committees in accordance with a corporate design. The 1970 *Inner Area Plan*, which marked the inner city districts to be cleared, reflected a shift in Council priorities away from social planning and towards economic management. Couch points out that it featured no discussion of policy ideals, functioning as 'part of a chronological and spatial hierarchy' that had simply begun in 1965 with IPPS (p61). Under the IAP 78,000 dwellings were to be demolished, amounting to seventy percent of the entire inner city and thirty six percent of the city's housing stock. From the latter part of 1968 these inner areas, particularly Abercromby, Granby, Dingle and Everton became the settings for the majority of rent strikes and protests during the two years that followed.

In its physical detail, the city's re-housing programme was the partner of its slum clearance policy. The hope it appeared to offer was seductive for slum dwellers. The ideals of the Kirkby development promised a perfect fusion of the needs of industry with those of residency. In their 1974 study of migration patterns, Pickett and Boulton concur with Gentleman (1970) that in Kirkby 'services of considerable usefulness already existed – water, electricity, and gas supplies, new main roads and public transport' to sustain a new community (p10). Furthermore, people wanted the new houses and 'the housing system evidences reasonable concern for the choice available to the displaced families' (Muchnick, 1970, p90). However, when it came to the needs of community resettlement, the apparent

suitability of new estates was a Trojan horse. The Council did not or could not banish the ‘social malaise’ revealed by the 1970 survey because while people wanted new homes, they did not necessarily want to move from their local areas or want their existing communities broken up.

The financial pressures of the era, when, as was shown in the earlier section, housing policy nationally was becoming subordinated to economic considerations, meant convenience often predominated in the allocation of housing and choice for the tenant became ‘illusory’ (Muchnick, 1970, p90). The scheme, Muchnick suggests lacked ‘a programme to ease the adjustment problems of moving and a method to assist friends, relatives, and social groups to move together’ (p91). In practice, this amounted to ‘the equal physical treatment of families with different social desires’ (p95). According to Minster (1970) families dispersed to overspill estates tended to be young adults with small children. According to Meegan, the youthfulness of its population earned Kirkby the nickname ‘Bunnytown’ (1989, p202). In the same vein, Minster (1970) argues that separation from the support of the older generation intensified feelings of isolation leading sometimes to depression and mental illness (p4).

As has been shown, the 1957 Rent Act was the beginning of the end for the ideal of the controlled rent and rising costs pushed up the rents on Merseyside’s new homes beyond what was promised or intended. Minster (1970) points out that, while newcomers to the overspill estates benefited from central heating, the new ‘economic’ rents absorbed ‘an unduly high proportion of the family income’ (p5). Ironically, a programme designed to liberate communities from social and cultural poverty created communities where family life became centred not on the home as security in a shared community but the home as a mere physical reality with purely physical benefits. And as has been shown also, and will be developed in greater detail in chapters four to seven of this study, the twin prongs of unaffordable rents for unsatisfactory homes set the scene for the rent strikes of 1968 and subsequently in 1972.

Liverpool City Council found that corporate planning could not reverse a decline that had its origins in more powerful economic realities, and in a more general shift towards the private sector. Within four years housing priorities had begun, for the first time, to diverge from the general plan. Encouraged perhaps by the short-term switch in policy that occurred during the years of the Wilson administration, by 1972 the Council was approving plans to renovate 61,000 private sector inner city dwellings (Couch, 2003, p64). While the 1969 Act encouraged local authorities to improve rather than demolish, among the reasons for the shift on Merseyside Couch argues was tenant unrest in the multi-storey apartment blocks. From January 1973 all municipal housing was restricted to two storeys.

The Council's re-invigorated interest in saving local communities was of course too late for most. By 1961 the population of Speke, initiator and centre of the 1968 rent strike, had already expanded to 27,000. This was 'eclipsed' however by Kirkby which, as the later development, expanded by sixteen times during the same period, much of it during an intense period of growth in the 1950s and 1960s (Meegan, 1989, p202). The last of Kirkby's estates, Tower Hill, was not completed until 1974 and was therefore still growing during the HFA rent strike. Although smaller than Kirkby, Halewood, another area that featured a rent strike in 1972, experienced growth during the early 1960s that was 'qualitatively ... just as dramatic as Kirkby' (p202). Muchnick (1970) and Minster (1970) both acknowledge the 'traumatic' effects of the urban renewal pointed out by Meegan (1989, p203): tightly knit communities were broken up and extended family and kinship networks ruptured' (p203). In terms of employment, Kirkby was more fortunate than other estates, where the 'mismatch' between the skills of labour and the jobs provided was more marked (1989, p204). In Kirkby the factories existed mostly before the housing estates were built and while the shopping and leisure facilities came after the housing they were at least built. In Speke and Halewood they were not, a deficit that would be noticeable today to visitors to either town.

During the early 1970s, in the midst of a nationwide recession, Kirkby experienced a period of modest prosperity. The carefully cultivated economy was not diversified, however, relying overly on manufacturing

industries. A gulf in opportunity materialised between those in work and the unemployed, with the latter, Meegan (1989) suggests, alienated from the social life of the town. There was, he says, among the working population, a strong inclination towards resistance in the face of prospective unemployment. Far from being a disconnected underclass, the culture of 'resilience and resistance' Meegan describes manifest itself in 1972 during the occupation of the *Fisher Bendix* factory in January and, after October, during the HFA rent strike, where the quality of the town's tenants network and the determination of the *Kirkby Rent Alliance* to fight on, as compared to others, was notable (Meegan, 1989, p225).

The End of Community

When in 1970 Leeson made the documentary film *Us and Them*, almost all of Scotland Road's 13,000 community lived in corporation homes, 'provided by them for us' according to narrator Peter Moloney. During the 1840s, 300,000 Irish immigrants were squeezed into slums scattered along and around Liverpool's docklands, the condition for the establishment of a strong cultural and ethnic identity in the area described by Liverpool Council as North City. By 1970 only a few remained of the hundreds of pubs, schools and churches that proliferated across the Scotland Road area before the Second World War. In Leeson's film it is suggested that the children who entered the grammar schools brought home to their parents story of better places 'out there'. In the streets dereliction of land and buildings became the new play zones for the children one resident tells the filmmaker. To the children, claims the quoted narrator, planners are just people who knock down buildings. Six years before, the Milliken family returned to Scotland Road from their new home in 'snobby' Kirkby. Where would she have liked to have lived, the interviewer asks Mrs Milliken. Aigburth she replies because it has parks for the kids. In Scotland Road the parks had been transformed into car parks for city workers, bearing signs saying 'no ball games'. What was left of the area's community spaces was taken in 1971 by the second Mersey tunnel.

After Kirkby's Tower Hill, of Merseyside's anti-HFA coalitions, the Scotland Road depicted in Leeson's film (1970) was the best organised and the most militant. Broomfield's documentary *Who Cares* (1971)

focuses on the South City districts of Granby and Abercromby, scene of a major rent strike in 1969 connected also to the slum clearance programme. Broomfield's film depicts the area in the 1940s and 1950s through scenes of bustling shoppers and workers but in 1970 as a semi-derelict adventure playground. 'I could go berserk over my kids the way they are trapped' was one mother's verdict, delivered from her new multi-storey home. Yet, just as was the case in Leeson's film of the North, the frustration expressed by the residents in Broomfield's film focused on the absence of a community back home to rediscover: 'If they built flats fifty times, I wouldn't come back … there wouldn't be any of my old neighbours' says one woman. A man relocated to the East Liverpool overspill estate, Cantril Farm, tells the filmmaker that you only got to know your new neighbours when one of them died and someone came calling looking for half a crown.

What the two films depict is not a paradise lost but a hope that flourished innocently in the slum children, found ultimately to be unattainable. According to Meegan (1989) by the early 1970s 'the rural idyll of hedges' had 'disappeared underneath Liverpool's bricks and concrete' (Fletcher et al cited p202). The only moment when Leeson's film switches from monochrome to colour is at the very end, when the schoolchildren are taken out for the day to play in a park and the fields are green (1970). For his 1989 study, Meegan interviewed Kirkby residents who were children when Leeson filmed *Us and Them*. Some remembered the feelings of hope the new rural communities appeared to offer: 'it felt like we were on our holidays with the green fields and woods' (Meegan, 1989, cited p203).

It was of course the harsh realities of the economic system that killed the dream for Liverpool's slum dwellers, as it killed the ideal of homes for heroes that followed both world wars. The experiences of those who managed the city's fortunes during the 1960s would have to have been very different materially from those who wanted new homes but lost their communities. In their anger or frustration some of the latter resorted to withholding their rent. The experiences of the displaced residents are encapsulated in a form in the films by Leeson (1970) and Broomfield (1971). The nature of the connection between location and perception, and the impact of the first upon the second, is a central

concern of this study. In understanding the narratives of the rent strikes, I will, in the chapter that follows, consider the methodological foundations upon which a social and an historical examination of the strikes is based.

CHAPTER THREE
Rent Strike History: Methods

In this chapter I will examine the source materials of the project in their two component parts, written and oral. I will do so in order to explain how and why the methodology that governed the selection and use of sources was designed to be open and democratic. I will show how and why the diverse source materials used, which include a number emanating from orthodox centres of information, 'work' together in fulfilling the projects objective; to create a history that transmits the alternative visions and voices of participants who are excluded people in equality with those who are not.

Like the rent strikes described in the previous chapter, the details of the Merseyside events are largely absent from major media and government documents. Official sources operate with a set of informed or legitimised purposes, to record or explain; they have no need to include the activities of protesting tenants. Unofficial sources, separated from centres of influence, money or power, provide fresh insights into the nature of rent strikes. They do so because they provide a counterweight to approaches to the rent strike narratives emanating from political sources outside the rent striking communities. In particular they redress the inattention of those mainstream media sources which regard strike action by workers as 'bad' news or as symbolic 'failure', and may be inclined therefore to downplay it.

Because of the local character of the rent strikes, the actors in these cases are absent from many labour history of the period. From the outset and in order to access the basic details of events, this research project would need to call upon sources created by people who were active outside those mainstream channels of information and influence. Rent strikes are lawless actions, and critical to understanding their relationships to the external political world, is the participants' perception of political action that is non-consensual and non-constitutional. These lesser known sources manifest not only a presence, and a direct relevance to the subject matter, but a clear rationale for their inclusion. For a project designed to restore a missing piece of social history, the non-official sources and the narrative

possibilities they contain, were known to me and identified from the beginning as important. If they did not exist, no history of the strikes could have been written which would not have excluded voices closer to the tenants' social locations or sympathetic to their actions. The insights contained within the radical fringe press and community news channels include more fully the voices of the rent strikers, and the people and communities affected by the events. Given the primary objective of this study, to understand the distinct interpretive world inhabited by the strikers, data drawn form the grassroots forms an important element of the picture generated by this account.

According to Grele in a study of oral testimonies (1991), all history is 'cultural construction' (1991, pvii). In understanding the constructions, he argues, we understand more honestly the events we seek to relate. Similarly, this examination assumes that all historical narratives, no matter what their form or purpose, are expressions of an ideology. While I do not believe that personal narratives are ideologically pure or consistent I accept the presence of ideological prescriptions, whether conscious or unconscious. It is for this reason that, as Grele suggests, this study recognises the need to unravel the concept of a hierarchy of authority in source materials.

Written Sources

According to Thompson (1988), formal written records contain formally structured biases; they may have been written to persuade, embellish or hide. Even the baldest statistics are subject to what he calls the demographer's 'abstract concepts', and no more contain absolute facts or truths than newspaper reports, private letters or published biographies (p106). Even the personal accounts contained in the form of autobiographies, simply because they are written, were regarded by the historian AJP Taylor as a construct 'set down to mislead' (cited, p104). In spite of their biases, indeed because of them, bald statistics are included in this study, as are traditional newspaper reports and written memoirs. In their spontaneity oral history may escape the censure Taylor describes in his view of autobiographies but they are complicated by the intervention the orator's perception of personal space makes into an historical record drawn from multiple sources. Yet this study is concerned very deliberately with perceptions. In those

perceptions, and the different characteristics of the sources that contain them, may be revealed the conflicting interests and ideals emanating from differently located political lives.

In its substantive *materiel,* this project is no different to any other work designed to retrieve a piece of 'lost' working class history. Grassroots sources are mostly those labour historians would regard as traditional: the written accounts of campaigns recorded by activists, labour leaders and radical journalists, drawn from searches of library and museum archives. From the outset, it was the intention to examine all commentaries, news or records related to rent strike activity from whatever sources precisely because differences in origin might reveal divergences of perspective reflecting social values or location. It became apparent from the information stored in the local archive and from searches of all stored news media from the period that non-mainstream or localised sources would provide more relevant material, indeed more insightful material about the events and opinions on those events. Radical journalism for instance enjoys many of the advantages and disadvantages attributed to other written sources: unlike memorials, including written memoirs and retrospectives, it is contemporary to the events and has not been reconstructed as Taylor says to lead historians. Like every other form of source available to historians of labour, the radical news-sheets do not represent absolute facts. Like the news reported by the mainstream media, alternative press such as *Big Flame*, the *Scottie Press* and the *Liverpool Free Press* reports with bias; a purpose rooted in a particular set of values.

In order to understand how the political values of grassroots protest are different or differently constructed from those of visible political power and the impact of any differences upon the housing campaigners values, this study adopts a positive attitude towards the voices of non-consensual activism. The alternative papers record events outside those that interest mainstream journalists; the radical sources 'enable' therefore a history that would otherwise be 'lost' to be constructed All three of the papers mentioned covered rent strikes as ordinary news of relevance and interest to their communities.

In examining the body of data copied from these sources, the intention was to unearth the grievances that provoked strikes, and indicators of background or context that may explain them. Specifically, the data was examined for evidence of the tenants' motives for striking, political beliefs, strategies for organising, forms of protest adopted and also divisions or differences within the associations and between the strikers and elements of the local community. In order to assess differences of experience, the relationship of the strikers to the local media and to their political representatives was a central concern. At local levels, mainstream news media covered some rent strike activity to which data the same research questions were applied. Into the body of selected data was incorporated details of the tenants immediate grievances and causes as they described them, evidence of their links to outside agencies and the mass circulation press, or lack thereof, their responses to what they were told by politicians and public and their feelings in the face of hardships and setbacks, as these were relayed to the reporters.

Mainstream organs of news are different structurally from the radical press in that ideology may be sensed but is never stated overtly in news reports. The respective politics and purposes of the radical or community papers is open, and for this reason accountable therefore to critique by the researcher as well as the reader. They are specifically not trusted, as established papers and broadcasters are trusted, and are engaged with their readers in an open-ended debate. If you know the objectives of an information source designed to relay news, you read from a position of scepticism. Even if you share in its beliefs you are required by the paper's marginal status to defend them to those who do not. As will be noted from the details of rent strikes described in the previous chapter, the customary locality of rent strike activity makes it harder for tenants to unite their actions to resist government policies. It is a factor too in separating their political world from that of industrial workers. The radical papers used in this study were locally based and reported from a local perspective. The utility of these sources must be measured against the tendency of the papers themselves to extrapolate politically very broad messages from highly local circumstances. However, their role, as the only public press at the time with a radical profile, is to assist the narrative in this important

respect; such sources counter-balance the view, supported by writers such as Castells (1983) and Lowe (1986) that, as an arena of political life, community is less overtly engaged in the traditional politics of class. Of these sources the most openly committed to a position, and therefore most likely to challenge the scepticism of the 'impartial' reader, is *Big Flame*. The anarchist news-sheet, an ever present at industrial actions and demonstrations, was open about its purpose: class war. The Flame reported on the smallest of housing actions, even where the grievance related to a single family. Through its round-up columns, reporting the progress of the campaign locally and nationally, strikers were connected to each other's experiences, as indeed was the researcher. In its constant critique of traditional labour politics, Big Flame's controversial approach provides an insight into the origin of the political tension between consensus and non-consensus strategies. As almost the only source committed to engagement with the Labour 'problem', it was important that comment in the paper related to the conflict over partnership strategies was incorporated fully into the narrative. *Big Flame* also introduces the sectarian interests that may influence the conduct of left-wing groups, and which caused tensions between outside activists and some tenants.

Those who formed the community news-sheets of the early 1970s were not, like the Flame, waging class war. Like the radical political press, however, they understood that 'news and information are not neutral'; the words of the *Liverpool Council for Voluntary Services* written in 1972 in a short appreciation of the community press included in its monthly newsletter the *Castle Street Circular* (no 50, Jan/Feb 1972, p7). The *Scottie Press* was concerned with events that were not filtered by established interests, views or needs but were, says LCVS, of direct relevance to ordinary people because they happened to them in their daily lives. *The Scottie Press,* the first of the era, was used extensively in this study because of its reporting of the HFA strike in Vauxhall, which was second in its level of militancy only to Tower Hill. The *Tuebrook Bugle*, the first of the community papers, reached a circulation of more than 2,000 copies across its small catchment area. The potential base of the communities extended beyond that of political papers like *Big Flame*. Unlike the Bugle, the *Scottie Press* still publishes today. As the only community paper with an archive, it is the

only one that could be accessed comprehensively so that its evolving output could be incorporated into the narrative. It connects the research questions, particularly the nature of political activism conducted at community level, to the concerns of one small community in Scotland Road.

One of the writers who provided stories for Chrissy Maher's Bugle, was Brian Whitaker. With two other *Liverpool Echo* journalists, Rob Rohrer and Daniel Massey, Whitaker co founded the *Liverpool Free Press* in July 1971 (Whitaker, 1981). Formed originally inside the mainstream Echo, as an alternative news-sheet called the 'Pak o' Lies', the infant Free Press sought to mimic what Whitaker regarded as the Liverpool Echo's aristocratic news values (p96). The Free Press was a source, like *Big Flame* known to me when I set out, and like *Big Flame*, a reason therefore for believing at that time that I could proceed with some reasonable hope of unearthing material. The Free Press was non-profit-making, produced only when there was news to go in it, and not owned or controlled by powerful or corporate interests. Unlike *Big Flame*, its business was local rather than simply political news, but with a politically occasioned scepticism towards the values of the corporate press.

In his history of the *Liverpool Free Press*, Whitaker says the Daily Post and Echo printed stories about improvement and regeneration schemes but shied away from the social and economic problems inside poor communities. Unlike the *Liverpool Echo*, he says, the Free Press would never have claimed to be impartial; indeed its editorial statement said openly 'we do not pretend, like the established Press, to be "neutral" or "objective"'; 'our politics is … contained in what we choose to report' (p103). Unlike the academic researcher the Press had no need to form relationships with agencies claiming to represent the government or the people; no need to facilitate their goals; no need to identify its subjects or justify the matters that concern them, even if it chose to do so; no need to be constrained by any attachment to instruments of expert opinion; no need to be constrained either by a demand or expectation to provide or produce. A source of this kind, operating outside mainstream politics, is, for the politically Conservative. For the purposes of academic study, its authority will

always be compromised. For this particular study, however, I believed it was essential to include those compromised voices. Understanding the different politics of the Free Press, how it 'works' or 'fails' compared to orthodox political discourses, connects the source methodology directly to the academic concerns of the work. The news and perspectives contained within the Free Press are a source of an important narrative which is largely excluded from other discourses.

In fact, as was its intention, this research project is not confined to any one form of source material. Given the vast range of instruments and agencies involved in the production of news, it should be remarkable that these events did not receive much 'official' coverage. Partly, this may be attributed to the fact that they were highly localised, even within the Merseyside community. Given the nature of the rent strike phenomenon, rooted as it is in multi-dimensional social communities, the rent strike experience may differ at its contained local level. This represents a further strong reason why a thorough search of local press, both mainstream and alternative was conducted, not least to uncover the nuances of community action.

While the Daily Post and Echo gave little space to the strikes, its smaller sister papers, the *Kirkby Reporter* and the *Bootle Times* reported on housing protests in the communities of circulation, and in the case of the *Kirkby Reporter*, as a matter of routine. Pertinently, they included statistics, commentary and opinion provided by the local authorities and politicians, alongside comment from tenant representatives. Both of these forms of narrative, included by the *Kirkby Reporter* and by the *Bootle Times*, were searched by the researcher for material pertinent to the research questions but also to enable the approach of the mass circulation papers to be contrasted with the versions of events provided by the radical and community press, and by, prospectively different, or less 'known' spokespeople. The *Kirkby Reporter* and the *Bootle Times* offer a contrast also to the reporting styles and values of the 'independent' outlets, such as the Free Press.

One mainstream publication that provided coverage of housing protests during the early part of the period was the 'politically

independent' *Liverpool Weekly News* (LWN). While committed to traditional news values (unlike the Free Press and *Big Flame* it claimed to be non-political) it was nonetheless not owned, like the *Liverpool Echo*, by any news corporation or conglomerate. The LWN flourished during the earlier period, from 1968 to 1970, when reporting of housing protests was rare even in the Echo's 'sisters' and *Big Flame* and the Free Press did not exist. LWN reported on events regardless, apparently of scale, in particular complaints against the local authority, even where the issue was of concern only to the smallest number of people. Like the radical and community papers, the Echo's sisters and LWN provided a small but diverse range of photographic materials to assist in the visualisation of the different narratives; pictures of individuals and of demonstrations and sit-ins.

In order that the narrative should represent a divergent range of approaches, a number of sources, traditional in form, in that they are the narratives of high status individuals, are included, specifically the memoirs of film director Nick Broomfield and broadcaster Jon Snow. Broomfield made two films during the period, one on the city's slum clearance programme and the other on the 1972 rent strike in Kirkby. Broomfield's observations about the politics of slum clearance are included in Chapter Five of the study, which covers the protests related to the slum problem that developed during the early part of the period; indeed they are measured against the narratives of tenants who appear in the film, Broomfield's first film, *Who Cares* (1970). In Chapter Seven, scenes and events depicted in Broomfield's film *Behind the Rent Strike* are included as a secondary source, in support of the news as detailed in the community-based press, but also as primary data; the scenes of the pickets of Kirkby housing department and of Walton jail, depicted in the film, provide invaluable details and insights, which cannot be communicated in photographic or print forms.

As a student activist, Jon Snow was prominent among the radical students who supported the Abercromby rent strikers, tenants of the *University of Liverpool*, in their 1968-1969 struggle for re-housing. In his memoir, Snow confuses the details of the Abercromby strike with those of the student occupation of the senate house one year later, which did not feature the visit by Princess Alexandra, or indeed any

connection to tenant protest. As a measure of the impact upon a personal memorial of political activism, with its disparate concerns, Snow's error is acknowledged in Chapter Five, as part of the accounts of the Abecromby strike and its causes drawn from the *University of Liverpool* archives, the *Liverpool Weekly News* and the oral testimony of Ethel and James Singleton.

During the years 1968 and 1969 Snow's student radicals used their own student news media to illuminate the slum problem; a source superficially more akin in character to a community paper like the *Scottie Press*, but representing an interest group that could not be regarded as marginal or excluded. Reports and articles inside the student *Guild Gazette* that concerned the rent struggle were copied and examined; they provided additional details, in that they revealed a little of what the students were doing as part of the campaign but also a contrast to the Free Press in political rhetoric, and in reporting styles to the *Liverpool Weekly News*.

The presentational style of the records in the University's archive is very different to that of the Gazette, and different again from those contained in the oral testimonies that will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. In their respective impact on the narrative contained in Chapter Five, the University accounts illuminate the differences of perception, so critical to the methodology of this work, between those viewing the events as observers or as individuals of relative privilege and those directly involved in the strikes but outside centres or means of power or influence. In the manner of the official sources written for sanctioned purposes (Thompson, 1988), the University's account is sober, proper and without the rhetoric that appeared in Gazette accounts of the slum problem. In a history of the University's housing association, we are offered a view of the precinct development as a public service, conducted in difficult conditions, and again in its staff newsletter of June 1969 when the University defended itself against the charge of 'slum landlord'.

As they are already present in official discourses, dominant versions of rent strikes, viewing them as managed crises, do not predominate in this study. Given the locality of the events however, the University's

account of the Abercromby situation is of direct interest and relevance and informative of contrasting views. In different senses, both groups, students and administrators, were outsiders to the lived experience of the rent strike. Their approaches were of two extremes, both different in tone to the writing that appeared in the *Liverpool Free Press*. The Free Press was harder, less sentimental than the student paper about the business of rent striking. All the sources mentioned above, with the exception of the University, are sympathetic to the positions of the rent striking groups in the narratives they contain. Yet in the differences they exhibit in style, values or approach, they inform the central academic questions; the influence of class and status on narrative values, and the problematic nature for marginal people of political connection.

Oral Histories

Because it allows 'heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people' to emerge, oral history is, according to Thompson (1988) more inclusive and democratic than history that relies entirely on written postscripts provided by influential people (p21). In that their narrative is present when others are not, the data provided by the oral contributors to this study are significant. As Grele (1991) reminds us, oral narratives inform on many levels precisely because of the highly individual multiple constructions they transmit. Since it is an individual component, an oral account is as distinct from other oral accounts as from any other forms.

The view that official recorded event is the most reliable evidence is relatively modern and based on the belief that it carries a prescribed intention to record accurately, not influenced by a need to validate nor distorted by the vagaries of memory (Thompson, 1988). On the other hand, because a personal narrative contains multiple meanings and messages, visualised through an individual life, its individual character makes it informative, as an original perspective, even where it may be isolated from other oral accounts. While the written sources, drawn from the radical fringes or the archives, are, for this research, mostly not those of powerful interests, like all written accounts they are subject to the pressures created by their particular context; and, in their lack of spontaneity or immediacy, to the management processes which may

convert experience into de-contextualised versions of official truth. Thompson is surely right in his contention that in validating the claims of outsiders, to be history makers, and in the absence of direct mediation of their words, oral history 'offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgement inherent in its tradition' (p21).

In the above context, Terkel's (1991) argument that, since they are conferred with a right to be heard as experts, traditional interviews with powerful people do not require the subjects to actually construct narratives, is worth noting; the interviews are conducted merely to extract opinion or contribution based on values neither owned nor questioned. While Grele (1991) draws attention to the presence of an ideological structure in retrospective oral interviews, he argues that in visualising a narrative experience, conversation has the capacity to be revelatory, reaching beyond the myths that necessarily pervade all attempts at understanding history. Grele argues that since both parties in an interview carry narratives, the interview itself is a 'method of developing historical consciousness' (pxvi). Thompson too noted the role of the interview for the interviewee in the moulding of a personal story through historical event. An important reason why tenant interviewees were sought was my own belief in the importance of personal consciousness in people who do not own the formal expertise that confers authority; and in the significance of the consciousness those narratives represent as arbiter and measure of historical experiences located differently in the political process.

While there are riches in the written sources used in the writing of this history, snippets of interviews reproduced by the alternative press are the only elements of personal narrative to have survived written sources to be incorporated into this study. From advertising in local press, libraries and community centres, a number of people, including activists, trades unionists and housing campaigners of the original era, and of the present, contacted me by email or phone, often with tips on sources and/or names of significant individuals still living. Few, however, possessed direct information about the original events.

The initial aim was to secure the narratives of as many people as possible so they could be interviewed about their experience of the rent strikes. At this stage, I believed more voices meant more perspectives and a broader scope. The fact was that many former rent strikers are deceased, while others would for their own good reasons, and not least due to the sheer amount of time that had passed, not want to be interviewed so long after the events.

One source known in advance and identified from the outset as important was Marjorie Gallimore MBE, the Speke tenant associated most prominently with the development of ATACC. A contact at *Liverpool Tenants Federation* who knows Gallimore mediated, but this failed to facilitate a contact between myself and the proposed respondent. As a leading exponent of both the constitutional strategy and of locally based activism, any narrative she provided would have been an invaluable addition to the data collected on the politics of partnership and alliances with political radicals. However, while she did not contribute to this study directly, in 2004 she gave an oral history interview as part of the *Living It Up* exhibition on multi-storey living which provided a secondary source in the creation of the narrative. One Kirkby tenant and one prominent non-Kirkby activist were also approached through third parties, but neither chose to contact me. A direct approach to a prominent female Kirkby striker, whose work details were passed on to me, failed also to produce a contact. A very late approach, after my data was collated, to a prominent male activist whose contact details were forwarded, also produced a negative response. The efforts that were made to access the 'voices' that experienced the strikes were exhaustive. However, it became clear during the course of data collection that it was neither realistic nor practical, given the passage of time, for me to assume that belated oral testimonies would be widely forthcoming or that they would predominate in their influence on the narrative over the contemporary sources discussed in the previous section.

Oral narratives are always specialist narratives in the sense that the business of moving on in life means only a small number of people are likely to come forward to assist in the telling of events long passed. In the end, apart from my parents (who were asked), only one tenant

came forward to be interviewed: former publicity officer for the local tenants federation, Kathleen Kenwright. Since they are only two in number, oral testimonies remain a small component of the final narrative. However, for the reasons suggested by Thompson (1988) and Grele (1991), their contribution is important. In addition to producing little known, supplementary details, they add to the narrative personal perspectives on the events and views on the salient issues and questions.

At this stage, the ethical implications of incorporating the testimony of my own parents, James and Ethel Singleton, should be noted. In addition to the observations made by Terkel (1991) about the value of the narratives of people who are outside centres of power, their inclusion in this account is more than justified by the privileged access they allow to the strikes themselves. The conversation with my parents took place in 2001 long before any documentary research had been conducted. Unlike the later interview with Kathleen Kenwright, it was not strictly a project interview, structured by knowledge, but a conversation structured by a project idea. While it does not alter the value of the material, with hindsight the interview would have been better conducted at a later stage when data from other sources was available to be incorporated into the conversation.

In 2001, the questions asked were drawn only from the vaguest personal memories of events and names, unchecked and unsupported by other sources. Whether a set of questions be right or wrong, depending on the purpose at hand, they must be the right questions. With the benefit of hindsight, the unique first hand experiences and material supplied by the interviewees would have been facilitated more easily had more informed questions been available to be asked and complementary retrospectives to be shared. Given the emotional nature of reminiscence, and the significance of the moment for the narrators, I did not believe it would have been fair or appropriate to have repeated the procedure. Indeed, it would have subverted the authenticity of the material drawn from the original encounter. However, in February 2004, a follow up interview with Ethel Singleton was conducted using a less intrusive instrument, the telephone. By this means, and in a format more natural for people from the same family, I

was able to utilise information and opinion supplied by other ‘narrators’. This prompted fresh details and comment that complemented material from written sources.

In the case of the interview with subjects who are related so closely to the interviewer, the dynamic of Thompson’s (1988) ‘social bond’ with its potential for triggering collusion in selective memory was exaggerated (p119). Furthermore, as would be true of a number of prospective subjects, Ethel and James Singleton have ‘moved on’. They do not live anymore in the community where the Abercromby strike occurred or for that matter in a traditional working class community. Nor do they participate in the political causes they did in 1968. As a circumstance this might have been useful in contrast to subjects whose location might be different. In fact, the closeness of interviewer and interviewees was a tension contained within this interview, not truly comprehended in advance, but which distorted the personal narratives involved. Where the interviewees are close relatives, it is harder for the researcher to function as an interviewer, let alone as a third party analyst. I used prepared questions because I believed a basic structure would reduce the tension inherent in a family interview. From my own experience of the interview, however, formal questions simply increased the feeling of oddness that underpinned the experience. Had I not taken the decision I did to interview at a time during the early development of the project, I could, with the benefit of information garnered from other sources, have offered more incisive or challenging questions.

An individual locates for himself or herself a role or place in the history of any experience. Where experience or shifts of experience impact upon the perception of personal identity, personal narratives are subject to change. The information supplied in the interview with James and Ethel Singleton was more ‘speculative’ than Kathleen Kenwright would offer, three years later; James and Ethel Singleton provided impressions of an era, or experience the narrators regarded, as ‘symbolic’; their recall of detail was less precise than Kenwright but anecdotal event was informative, humorous, intriguing. It may well have been invigorated in this case by the changed location of the

Singleton's compared to Kathleen Kenwright. In the former case the experience was being 'rediscovered'.

In Thompson's elite category of 'informants … whose richness and consistency of memory is absolutely exceptional', must be included Kathleen Kenwright (p240). Kenwright was one of the organisers of the original strike in Childwall Valley and one time publicity officer for ATACC. She was an activist and not therefore 'apathetic' or connected to the rent strike experience indirectly by virtue of membership of a geographical community or class. Nor did she experience elevation into the Merseyside political class, as had Marjorie Gallimore. She remains today somewhere akin to her original location, as a working class woman living in the community where the strikes took place and holding similar views on the efficacy of struggle. In these respects that she had not 'moved on', might explain her keenness to contribute to the project compared to the contacts mentioned earlier who did not. She remains connected positively to the meaning of the original experience, which is the prime reason the fullest use was made of her words and perspectives in the framing of the narrative. While she was exceptional at recalling details, including names and dates, Kenwright remembers still, moments that, while not part of the maelstrom of 'fact', communicated a sense of experience and perception from the inside. Recollected events such as lobbies of politicians or housing officers, or occurrences during street leafleting and house to house visits, were specific, not general or symbolic, as is the case with some oral accounts, depending, Thompson (1988) suggests, on the narrators life cycle or particular 'imaginative and narrative skills' (1988, p242). If she couldn't quite recall a name or date, Kenwright was frustrated, almost bemused; this and the specificity of the events she remembers, are the qualities which confer on Kenwright's account what Thompson calls 'internal consistency' (p239) and Grele (1991) calls 'consciousness' (pxvi). Kenwright told me she believed the strikers had done a fantastic job for their communities, one that should not be forgotten. Her willingness to volunteer is an indicator of that belief, as is the precision of her recollections; the experience it seemed had not been 'left' somewhere at the back of her mind, but 'kept' in the front lest it be 'lost'.

The information supplied in the interviews, both face-to-face and by telephone, are the 'evocative' facts that Thompson (1988) suggests are the unique product of a history that is 'personally felt' and retrieved by the oral history method because it of its 'creative and co – operative nature' (p9). In spite of the absence of other knowledge, maybe even because of it, the interview with James and Ethel Singleton was strongly evocative; more so perhaps because perspectives were being shared, indeed exchanged by two different personalities with highly personal approaches. Like all history that is 'outside', oral accounts by ordinary people are directive precisely because they are multi-dimensional in character, an 'exchange' Thompson says of all the influences that frame our perceptions of historical event, not just the interests and investments that confer formal legitimacy (p20).

Kenwright was a source on the 1968 strike and the birth of the tenants' co-ordinating committee, ATACC, not on the later 1972 HFA strike. James and Ethel Singleton were sources on both, but Ethel Singleton occupied a leadership role, like Kenwright, both during the earlier years and also for ATACC during the later strike. In 1968 there was no *Big Flame* or *Liverpool Free Press.* And in Kenwright's Childwall Valley there was no community paper such as the *Scottie Press* in Vauxhall. In this respect, the volunteer interviewees became significant sources of information for the period in which they flourished, not just as perspective. In the interview with Kenwright, press cuttings taken from the only major written source from the era, the *Liverpool Weekly News*, were used to trigger memory and invite responses, including a photograph of Kenwright and letters she wrote to the Editor. As it turned out, Kenwright's memories of events that were covered in local media synchronised remarkably with the details, and even the dates, suggested by those other sources.

Tales of significant events, of successes and failures are part of the anecdotal character of oral histories. Kenwright's narrative was moulded by the perception of engagement in a process of change, beneficial to a community of people and shared with that community as a community experience. As such, her personal narrative is harmonious to the critical research questions. Interview questions were framed to address emerging issues: how did the tenants associations

form, organise and operate; what was the cause that triggered the 1968 strike; how did she come to be involved in ATACC; what were her views on links with Labour and left-wing radicals, and the views of others; what were the attitudes of the husbands of the women tenants to the strike?

In responding to questions about theory or effect, Kenwright was less animated than in the telling of events, which was also true of James and Ethel Singleton. This may indicate that controversies about consensus politics were of academic concern or were a personal narrative or ideology of the interviewer rather than of the interviewees. Kenwright offered none of what Thompson (1988) calls 'moral lessons in success or failure' (p242). For those in search of a class critique, Kenwright's narrative will disappoint. Class was experience rather than remote analysis. The connections she valued were those associated traditionally with the feminine rather than masculine style and with working class attitudes to community; hers was an inclusive and unstructured voice. The cause belonged to the group as friends and neighbours, which was more important to Kenwright than the rigid, hierarchical structures favoured in labour organisations led traditionally by men. Nonetheless, Kathleen Kenwright's narrative spoke to the important discourses of locality and community that separate rent strikes from other forms of working class protest. In this respect it contributes directly to the empirical dimension of the study.

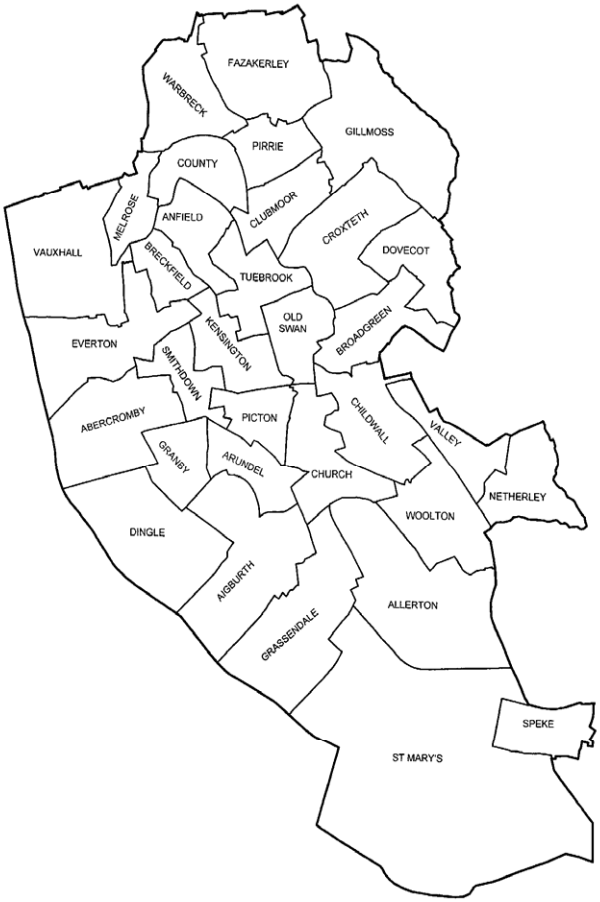
In *Envelopes of Sound*, editor Ronald Grele recalls Marx's critique of personal alienation as obstacle to political action which Marx suggested might help explain why workers struggles succeed or fail (1991, pviii). Could the complex personal narratives of workers and activists, Grele asks, help us to understand why the protest movements of the early 1970's resulted not in real political change, but in the more conservative politics of the later years of that decade. Kenwright described resistance, but was not driven to conclusions about the political identity of the movement, or its pretensions. She remembered the people the tenants association helped. She remembered how the campaign changed some people's lives. This was her narrative.

Oral history accounts, Thompson reminds us, 'weave together symbols and myths with information' to create a picture that in its multiple dimensions, offers multiple challenges (1988, p247). An interviewee's sense of personal role or identity will impact directly on the nature of the community or social history she tells us. The power of oral history is encapsulated within that dynamic, making an impact upon those who receive it, which cannot in turn be extrapolated from more regulated sources. Given the specialist nature of personal narratives, the status of the material provided by each interview in the final account is not I believe diminished by the absence of multiple examples, especially in a history that I accept was not designed to be dominated by oral or any other form of narrative. In combination with a wide range of written sources emanating from very different locations in the power structures that encompass rent strike activity, the oral histories enhance the narrative, as an instrument designed to embrace wide and divergent experience.

Like a number of the written sources, the interview subjects in depth knowledge of the campaign strategy provided direct, first hand access to details and insights that would never have appeared in any media. In the chapters that follow, describing the action and ideological content of the strikes, those sources are worked to 'amend' the duplicities inherent in a top down history that is by its nature inevitably exclusionary.


Southport
Formby
Maghull
Rainford
Crosby
Haydock
Kirkby
Litherland
Aintree
Newton-le-
Willows
St. Helens
Wallasey
Bootle
Prescot
Moreton
Liverpool
Warrington
Birkenhead
West Kirby
Garston
Widnes
Lymm
Bebington
Runcorn
Heswall
Speke

Merseyside



The City of Liverpool in 1980, shown as electoral wards

CHAPTER FOUR
1968-1969 A Movement in the Making

ATACC, you might think
Is a right funny word,
And you know it's meaning,
It's not so absurd;
It means tenants united under one flag,
And not, I might add, a political gag;
Who are the youth, you ask
And what do they do?
Well, for a start, we are fighting for you;
We formed up last April,
When your protest rang the city;
And we called ourselves,
The Amalgamated Tenants Co-ordinating Committee
(Kenwright, 2004b)

An important objective, developed in Chapter Three, was to incorporate into this study the voices of the strikers themselves. Those voices are contained in their own accounts and in the non-official commentaries created from outside centres of power that flourished during the period. It is for this reason that the course of events as they were moulded by the strikers forms the structure of the narration, running freely through the chapters that follow. In the course and power of the events, the movement is visualised in its connected parts, as both experience and as historical moment. In accepting into our reality events as they were influenced and directed by the strikers themselves, the historical meaning acquires a democratic authenticity that Thompson (1988) reminds us is compromised where we have only the records of official governance to guide us.

From the early formative years described in this chapter, to the later years of class conflict, described in Chapters Six and Seven, we see the movement as a whole, materialising the parts of the experience that are shared with other examples, as well as those that are not. The political consciousness of the campaigners shifted through the direct experiences of activism in pursuit of change; it shifted through

disappointments and frustrations; and it shifted through partnerships and alliances created by the power of organisation and through the betrayals that sometimes resulted. In reflecting upon what has been found, I believe a clear pattern may be discerned from the course of events. Furthermore, in its material phases, the movement illuminates the controversies at the heart of the discourse on rent strikes.

Special Relationships

Tenants have organised against unscrupulous landlords for over a hundred years, for much of that time as 'allies and reflections of the trade union movement' (Grayson nd, p1). As Grayson's history shows us, any movement of tenants, at ant time in history and in any place, shares in an historic tradition. It is the special relationship of the Council tenant to a landlord who is also his political representative that Grayson (nd) believes makes 'all tenants collective activity ... political' and this is the reason that visions of political life have conflicted for centuries with that of the home (p1). It is also central to the conundrum at the heart of tenant activism, noted in Chapter Two: the dual character of a movement that is centred upon urban living, and thus fundamentally on domestic concerns, but which also lies at the heart of political life. Housing struggles grow from political activity organised at the grassroots, in a place furthest removed from centres of governing power. It is ostensibly 'suburban' but at the same time radicalised by the element of autonomy that distance engenders. As a potential 'power', the tenant is peculiarly vulnerable when the political class fears him. Given the arguments presented in Chapter Two it is worth reiterating that a perception of public 'interest' may well be shaped as much to contain the public tenant as to liberate him. As a worker 'off shift', campaigning away from the culture of the workplace, the tenant is situated somewhat awkwardly in his shared history of working class struggle (Nightingale, 1980, p67). When the state is vulnerable, and the citizen powerful, government is as likely to concede rights as to remove them, which is why, says Grayson (1996), rents were frozen during both world wars. Just as the rent strike on the Clyde produced the 1915 rent freeze and then the public subsidies of the Addison Act, the 1939 freeze was not unconnected to the establishment in that year of the first nationwide tenants federation.

The promise of better things was post-dated for 1945, and phase two of Lloyd George's original 'partnership' of state and citizen, the 'homes fit for heroes' that helped his wartime coalition win the 1918 'khaki' election. Grayson's reference to the special relationship between tenant/citizen and social landlord, in which the former is the consumer of a service, is for tenants in struggle a highly contentious issue. The concessions won after both world wars reflected a short-term advantage only for the working class, a return for services rendered to the state; and as was described in Chapter Two, the advantage proved to be short-term. In a number of rent strikes during the course of the 1960's, in particular in London St Pancras and in Sheffield, when some tenants were drawn into partnership with local authorities or the Labour Party, the movement split or was tempted away from its original causes.

Special Times

The movement on Merseyside during the years 1968-1973 endured all of the frustrations and betrayals Grayson's (1996) account suggests are a recurring factor in housing struggles. If they were in tune with their history, Merseyside's tenants were also in tune with their era, one of unusual militancy which connected their struggles to those of workers in general. In Britain, says Chris Harman, the year 1968 was the beginning of a gradual escalation of industrial unrest, peaking in 1972, when 23.9 million working days were lost to strikes (1988, p226). In Liverpool, the 1967 dock strike was followed by a series of strikes the following year involving bus drivers, dustmen, market porters, construction workers and haulage drivers. The Ford car plant was paralysed by 383 women demanding equal pay, and the rest of the industry by twenty two engineering workers at Bromborough in the Wirral. There was, Harman suggests, 'a new climate of militancy in the city' (pp228-229).

The tenants movement also 'reached a post-war zenith during the five year period from 1968 to 1973' (Lowe, 1986, p89) which Grayson (1996) suggests was 'linked to and mirrored … general political trends in society' (p44). As Harman describes the city's industrial struggles, Grayson refers to the housing protests on Merseyside during the years 1968-1969. During this period, when a coalition of associations

became an important player, Merseyside, he suggests, was a leader. Liverpool's network of tenants associations was a model for traditional tenant politics, built upon a concept of tenants as an interest group.

Organising in the Community

This chapter, which opens at the beginning of 1968, and concludes at the middle part of 1969, describes events leading to the formation of the *Amalgamated Tenants Associations Co-ordinating Committee* (ATACC) and its subsequent consolidation as the leading pressure group speaking on behalf of Merseyside's tenants. In its structure and values, moulded upon an ethic of negotiation energised by pressure, ATACC was a prime example of what Lowe (1986) and Grayson (1996) regard as community oriented tenant groups; distinct in its fundamental character from the highly politicised action groups that developed in 1972 in response to the Conservative government's Fair Rents legislation.

In its relationship with its tenants, January 1968 was a busy month for the city's Conservative controlled local authority. It wrote to tenants inviting them to purchase their Council houses, the second such scheme in six years. It also chastised them for improving the exteriors of their dwellings, 'instructing' them to 'restore' the external renderings to their original colours (*Liverpool Echo*, 22nd Jan 1968, p8). On the 24th January the Council met to hear and debate a 'confidential' review of Liverpool's rent structure, presented by the *Director of Housing* and the *City Treasurer* (City of Liverpool, 1968). The report anticipated an escalating revenue deficit over the next three years. And it is clear also that the authority saw 'a complete review of the present rent structure' as linked to government directives to extend the rent rebate scheme (p1). As happened in Leeds in 1934 (Bradley, nd), Liverpool's Council tenants would be subsidising each other to reduce the Council's deficit, and, of course, to 'hold a reasonable balance between the interests of tenants and other ratepayers' (City of Liverpool, 1968, p5). The quarter of their income Liverpool's tenants paid in rent was already the highest in Western Europe and was about to become higher (Taafe and Mulhearn, 1988). A series of Labour amendments was defeated, and steep rent rises for many tenants became policy, scheduled to be imposed from 1st April.

The *Liverpool Echo* announced the rent rise on the 25th January, the day after the Council met, but 'balanced' it with good news: 'some tenants will pay less', it explained, referring to those living in 'desirable' inner city residences (p7). As the Council's reassessment emphasised criteria such as age and amenities, it targeted, for the greatest increases, the inhabitants of the less popular or rather less populated areas. The less desirable, but newer properties, furthest from the City Centre, were top of the scale, to be hit with the biggest increases. With 'less desirable' viewed by the Council in this instance as better off, the storm broke first in South Liverpool, in Speke and Childwall Valley, well away from the Georgian and Victorian inner city areas.

Childwall Valley and Speke were, in the regeneration vocabulary of the late 1960s, non-traditional communities. Central to their identity was their role in Liverpool's slum clearance programme as recipients of the overflow from the inner cities. Speke was the city's first industrial development, with a build up that began in the 1930s peaking during the 1950s until it was overtaken by Kirkby. Netherley, one of the components of Childwall Valley, was a primary focus of new building during the 1960s and early 1970s and recipient of new population. In 1968, when the clarion of a new tenant unrest sounded, it was not in the slums of the inner cities among those waiting to be allocated their desirable new homes, but in the suburbs where no such hope flourished.

Part of the pre-history of a 'typical' rent strike, says Sklair (1975) is previous struggle with 'many tenant leaders… already playing an active part in the life of the labour movement in their locality' (p269). Certainly, in Liverpool, those with experience ascended quickly into leadership positions and were more likely to be male. And, of course, they provided what Sklair calls 'an organisational and an ideological structure' (p269). When working class action is organised inside communities, it benefits structurally from what Grayson (nd) says is its organic connection, through the public landlord, to the sources of power, and to a network of activism centred on the estate or living community. The pattern of early campaigning was a familiar one of spontaneous organisation by working class women, often mothers. In

common with the community tenant movements described by Lowe (1986) and Grayson (1996), the origin of the action reflected the closely knit nature of community life. In Liverpool, it was synthesised with the reality of the city's urban condition and to the politics of regeneration that so often established a sense of community or the absence of one. Mothers and housewives like Kathleen Kenwright, Vilma Hill, Mary Stocker, Betty Hayes, Joan Bent and Dolly Smith trudged the Council estates of Belle Vale, Netherley and Speke, in the early stages of the thirteen week bus drivers strike, pushing prams filled with leaflets and calling on their neighbours and friends to join them (Kenwright, 2004a). With the prospect of struggle looming, it was the traditional community value of neighbourhood communication that was energising the activism of resistance.

Once 'formed', the 'movement' began growing outwards from estate based activism in the equally familiar style noted by Sklair (1975) and Grayson (1996) as traditional allies of Labour began to mobilise in solidarity. Pledges of support were received very early from the Trades Council and from constituency Labour parties in the suburban areas of West Derby and Wavertree. On 7th March, the *Liverpool Weekly News,* the non-aligned community paper greeted the impending 'revolt', reporting tenant meetings with Tim Fortescue, MP for Garston (which included Speke and Childwall Valley) and a call from Labour Party Secretary, Simon Frazer, to all constituencies, to support a national rents freeze (p1 and p8). Two days before, forty Speke tenants watched as a three person delegation boarded a train at Lime Street Station bound for London and an audience with the MP and the *Prices and Incomes Board*. In Childwall Valley Road, graffiti proclaimed 'No Rent Rise in April', while the action squads organised hits on other areas, calling tenants to meetings set up to form new associations (p8). The *Liverpool Weekly News* reported murmurings of a rent strike in the overflow town of Halewood, Southern neighbour of Speke, while undercurrents were flowing also on the large Norris Green estate in East Liverpool (p8).

Unlike Norris Green, Childwall Valley was an area with an existing tenants association, a long-term group of the type Castells (1983) and Lowe (1986) suggest is the destiny of tenant protests, if they are to

avoid dissolution or irrelevance. ATACC was new, not old, in that it was a mobilisation spawned by policy, by a single issue. However, in time, it ascended to permanence as the voice of a disaffected community with many grievances. In an interview she gave in 2004 for the *Living It Up* exhibition, Marjorie Gallimore, the housewife associated most closely with ATACC, recalls that the origin the network lay in simple community concerns. An idea for a tenants association was suggested to her originally by her local curate. It was triggered by the Council's threat to evict her if she did not remove her pet dog from the multi-storey flat, one among a number of grievances. The sympathetic curate loaned his church hall for meetings. Gallimore lived in the Valley's Hartsbourne Heights, and conditions in the tower blocks, she says, were poor, 'very damp…like an ice box' (2004).

For Kathleen Kenwright, speaking in the interview she gave in 2004 for this study, the Childwall Valley association, as it was in 1968, meant nothing and represented no-one. It existed, she says, 'in name' only and had no intention of 'getting involved' in the tenants campaign (Kenwright, 2004b). It is a distinction recognised by sociologists of rent strike, including Lowe (1986), that, in pursuit of any cause, it is 'difficult to rekindle political action from an established association' (p101). In the Valley, wider concern about housing conditions, rising rents and the exclusion of tenant voices from the process of decision-making, was required to be drawn out from anger related to apparently parochial issues such as dogs and damp. And of course the relationship between public tenants and officialdom pointed out by Grayson (1996) may tend to neutralise collective anger or divert it towards less political concerns.

With the Childwall Valley tenants producing their own leaflets and stickers, and windows on both estates displaying 'No Rent Rise Here', the momentum had been created for what Lowe (1986) called 'rekindling' and the early signs suggested support was growing. Speke acted first says Gallimore, contacting Childwall Valley, and, in both areas, traditionalists were to hear the voices of tenants demanding no rent rises (2004). The Childwall Valley tenants association itself was one of the first targets for the newly mobilised groups. The 'militants' tabled a motion of no confidence in the chair, who, Kenwright recalls,

had to be removed physically from his chair (2004b). A new committee was elected with Marjorie Gallimore as Secretary, and once re-invented, Kenwright says, the campaign 'just sort of evolved from there' (2004b).

The campaign was however expanding beyond the Southern areas. In its 7th March edition, the Weekly News had announced the formation of a new association in Norris Green (p8). In contrast to the 'new' communities of Speke and Childwall Valley, and the inner city, in decline since the decanting schemes of the 1950s, Norris Green is a public housing conurbation old enough to have established itself. In the late 1960s, it boasted a preponderance of inter-war property (93%). According to a study commissioned by the Council, it was ranked and regarded by many tenants, at that time, as a superior estate (Weinberger, 1973). Its tenants registered the highest level of 'satisfaction' with their accommodation (86%), above Speke and Childwall Valley and well above North City on the outskirts of the City Centre. They were also, the study suggested, a better off group, with a different set of consumption interests from the inner city slum dwellers. While, in North City, 69% of tenants received rebates, in Norris Green it was only one in ten, and the area boasted almost as many non-manual professional 'heads' as the other three areas combined (p7). Maybe because of their higher aspirations, half wanted to buy their homes, the Norris Green tenants were most likely to be critical of their landlord. Support here was a fine indicator for the organisers of outward growth and of the potential to unite tenants behind a collective sense of grievance and set of interests. With trouble brewing in 'happy' and 'desirable' Norris Green, the Council was entitled to fear a domino spread of tenant action.

In some places the authorities stepped in quickly to stifle dissent, an indicator of anxiety that the potential strike area was growing. In Skelmersdale, a West Lancashire town with, like Netherley and Halewood, a population growth fuelled by Liverpool's slum clearance émigrés, the Council issued 200 tenants with notices to quit. At a meeting in Liverpool Stadium, the infant *Liverpool Co-ordinated Tenants Association* received pledges of support from groups whose collective membership now totalled 60,000. Four days later, the

chairman of the Housing Committee, Leslie Sanders, used the columns of the Weekly News to 'respond' to the new network. He threatened the militants with the tactics used in Skelmersdale: 'We'll wait and see what numbers there are first … and the normal steps in conjunction with the police will be taken' (28th March 1968, p1). For the new movement the threats were an important moment. The campaign was shifted decisively from its origins in highly localised community groups. The relationship with their political representatives was shifted too, away from partnership towards a form of representation of their own creation, independent of the political power. As an idea, however, autonomous activism rests somewhat uneasily alongside the community values that energised the new coalitions. Those values depend upon settlement rather than resistance and upon a necessarily broader range of interests.

Rival Visions

At this very early stage, the political tensions in St Pancras in 1960 and in Sheffield in 1967, concerning the nature of the movement's alliances, and described in Chapter Two, were becoming apparent on Merseyside. In its early resolutions, the course of ATACC's subsequent development may well have been set. What became the *Amalgamated Tenants Associations Co-ordinating Committee* was, according to a Speke member quoted in the Weekly News, formed partly 'to move away from the Liverpool Rent Action Committee and so remain non-political' (28th March 1968, p1). For tenants, of a lowly social status, how to 'appear' to those in authority was a critical and potentially divisive question. Was the Weekly News spinning an establishment yarn, good tenant versus bad, or, at this early stage, was the old dilemma, of non-political community action versus issue centred political activism, about to strangle the new movement at birth?

As Grayson's (1996) history makes clear, Liverpool's tenant 'federations' were not the first or only ones of their era, but preceded by examples from those other regions. The phased 70% increase imposed in April 1967 by the *Greater London Council* triggered a fifteen month rent strike involving up to 11,000 tenants co-ordinated by the Tower Hamlets Federation (Grayson, 1996). The dilemma, how to become 'respected' without sacrificing principle, was nothing new

either. The *Sheffield Tenants Federation*, formed in July 1967, was, by the beginning of 1968, challenged by a rival 'democratic' federation, inspired by opposition to 'communist' influence (p46).

The rent strike in Sheffield was an actual contemporary of the Liverpool events and grew in the same way, from action by women on one estate, into a new order of campaigning groups. The Sheffield network, Lowe (1986) insists, was a social not a political movement, but the Sheffield strike shared with Liverpool characteristics common to many non housing, industrial struggles. Amongst these, was a tension between two distinct approaches, a self-organised autonomy versus the 'non-political', the latter inclined towards using existing power structures. Part of the life cycle of every grassroots movement, if it is to survive and grow, is the undercurrent of how to fight, from the margins, effectively. In Sheffield, Lowe (1986) explains, the Labour Council used propaganda branding communists as 'political', and as extremists, to undermine the strikers growing resolve, and to entice them away from a direct challenge to the authorities. The rival associations were the inevitable result.

In Liverpool the Rents Action Committee was formed very early at the announcement of the April increases, by the Trotskyist *International Socialists* (IS) 'with the express purpose of getting tenants to organise themselves (*Liverpool Weekly News*, 21st March 1968, p8). In a letter to the Weekly News, on behalf of the committee, Martin Barker accused the paper of ignoring the action committee in its coverage, in favour of official Labour versions of how the new movement was created. The IS led committee, operating from an address in Liverpool 8, on the Southern fringe of the City Centre, initiated the leafleting in the South, he says, distributing 60,000 copies across the city. In an article in the party paper, he listed the achievements of the committee, including 40,000 signatures on a petition, as well as organising, on 16th March, the first mass demonstration (*Labour Worker*, May 1968, p8). While tenants largely organised themselves, the Weekly News, he alleges in his letter to the editor, was overplaying the role of the Labour Party, which, in practice, did nothing at ground level to help tenants mobilise (21st March 1968, p8).

In their history of Militant, the Trotskyist faction inside the Labour Party, Taafe and Mulhearn (1988) claim that most of the 1968 tenant groups were in fact organised by the Executive Committee of the Trades Council and that the role of Militant Labour in particular was 'key' in helping the strikers 'in setting up associations' (np). Indeed, they suggest that the division inside the party over the increase, was the beginning of a rebellion against right-wing Labour, and 'an important dress rehearsal for the struggle against the Conservatives' Housing Finance Act in 1971-73' (np). The conflicting claims of primacy in the early development of the campaign are a strong indicator that in one important respect ATACC was no different to the single issue action groups that formed in 1972. As Sklair (1975) reminds us, while its origin lay in neighbourhood based action, it derived both its ethos and its organisational structure from links to a network of community-based Labour and left-wing activism.

The *Liverpool Echo* gave little coverage to the tenants in general regardless of affiliations: 'they just would not give us any coverage whatsoever' says Kenwright, even after a group of tenants confronted the editor (2004b). It is in the attitude of the 'politically independent' Weekly News, a community paper that tended to be more permissive than the mass circulation Echo, that we see coverage happen. While they printed his letter, in its reporting the paper seemed to reflect Barker's alleged hierarchy of acceptability; for Barker the Gallimore approach was favoured if not encouraged by the paper. ATACC's Gallimore certainly supported, strongly, the ideology of 'presence', speaking a language of social concern intelligible to a paper like the Weekly News. Contained within that, is an implied scepticism towards links with less palatable 'political' groups. Gallimore was an activist drawn from the heart of community-based thinking. She worked tirelessly, almost a full time job, writing letters, answering phone calls and 'going about and forming associations and talking to people' (2004). In an oral history interview, a transcript of which is held at the *Museum of Liverpool Life,* she attributes the successful establishment and growth of ATACC to the organisation's temperate approach to campaigning. We did not go in 'banging the big drum' she says, for if 'anyone comes to you like that, what do you do?' (2004) 'We did not

work like that at all, and I think that's why we were successful', she concluded (2004).

Not surprisingly given his political allegiance, Barker, in his article, co-authored with Stan Starkey, in the IS paper *Labour Worker,* outlines a different vision (May 1968, p3). It was the 'political inexperience' of the tenants he says that was causing some to be too easily 'diverted by the Labour Party and others' away from the rent rise struggle into campaigns against 'Council inefficiency' (p3). In Childwall Valley, the authors suggest, the Lee Park association was the strongest because it organised in advance of the rent rises and at street level. The limited impact nature of the rent increase strike, because it demands a lower level of risk, was tempting tenants 'to give way' (p3). In contrast to Gallimore's view that a wider range of concerns would increase tenants influence, Barker and Starkey suggest that a tenant movement, where it needs to fight, is weakened if it hijacks a rent strike to more general concerns, shared with and so controlled by the political establishment. For the Trotskyist Barker, the key to beating the increase was 'a massive, determined fight in every street and close, linked with support in every factory and union branch' (p3).

In spite of the 'conflicting' Gallimore and Barker approaches, far more united the tenants than divided them. This isn't so difficult to understand when we accept that the means of empowerment and of suppression lie in the campaigners' connections to the forms of community and grassroots politics that may be seen both as suburban and so non-political but also as non-hierarchical, independent and therefore free thinking. A kind of consensus existed, says Kenwright (2004b) which admitted outside help but on strict terms of tenant control. For this reason, the embroidery of the campaign was a complicated web of interconnecting groups, individuals and concerns. The newly formed and the 'renewed' tenant groups often cultivated multiple affiliations; ATACC and the Trades Council for instance, as did individual campaigners, including Barker's ally Starkey who served on the committee of ATACC. Kenwright remembers Barker and his radical student friends who were she says important in helping the early action groups get organised (2004b). The initial impromptu meetings took place, furtively, in the McAusland Lounge in the Students Union, a help

that was broadly welcomed, so long as it did not compromise the autonomy of the tenant cause. The students supplied leaflets and stickers, but 'did not ask us for any money' nor mark campaign materials with the names of the political groups: 'there was nothing on them, they did not put the *International Socialists*' (2004b).

Kenwright suggests too that many tenants understood the divide and rule nature of some of the establishment attacks on the so called extremist affiliations of strikers. She notes a press agenda that went beyond the Echo's news blackout and she understood the political structuring behind it: when they received coverage it was invariably designed to divide tenants from each other or from potential allies: 'some of the papers started to try and vilify them [the students]', she says, with a McCarthyite 'get back to Russia' smear campaign; and it was a problem that never went away (2004b). A year later, Kenwright wrote to the *Liverpool Weekly News* to plead with the tenants of the Nile Street area not to be swayed from joining their local campaign because of the Communist affiliations of one of it's founders, Roger O'Hara (17th April 1969, np). 'I would like to clarify our position' she told the paper: 'While the ATACC is non-political, it is written into our constitution that we will accept help from anyone, irrespective of their political beliefs, so long as the help benefits the tenants' (np). O'Hara, she said, helped form associations which he then 'handed … over to us without any strings attached' and as ATACC's Public Relations Officer, she thanked him for this important contribution (np).

For Kenwright, who is the only oral contributor to the project with substantial inside knowledge of ATACC's early years, the cause was simple enough to be unequivocally inclusive. She felt that what encouraged opposition to 'outsiders' was more fear or mistrust of potential 'rivals' than irreconcilable tactical differences. (2004a). ATACC was 'non-political, non-racist, non-sectarian' which, for Kenwright, meant open, inclusive and democratic as opposed to directed by outside influences (2004a). Barker and Starkey, too, recognised the dangers of political evangelism from campaigners with party allegiances. 'Many tenants' they wrote, in their *Labour Worker* article, 'became totally hostile to all forms of politics' because of political groups trying to take control, instead of offering tenants 'the

benefit of their experience' to help them self-organise (May 1968, p3). The IS authors single out the rival Labour and Communist parties as culprits. 'We weren't interested in … being political. All we were interested in was being able to pay the rent and to be able to get repairs done and just to try and live … a bit of a decent life' says Kenwright (2004b). She sees no inconsistency between a very 'ordinary' aspiration and the activism that energises any fight for justice.

Kenwright's view of Labour, whom she thinks feared the tenants as a potential electoral threat, is sceptical: 'they thought we were going to put up Councillors. Do you understand?' (2004b). In the case of the electoral threat, the party's fears were unfounded: 'the issue of tenants' candidates has not been seriously raised' Barker and Starkey told their readers in the early weeks of the campaign (*Labour Worker*, May 1968, p3). Still, the struggle for the soul of the movement and the purity and meaning of its ideals took its toll. During what Barker and Starkey call 'the ensuing fight to keep the control in the hands of the tenants', and away from, in their view, acolytes of Labour, 'much damage' was done (p3).

Community Actions, Political Rights

As the 1st April deadline for the rent rises approached, the traditional style of spontaneous direct action campaigning, noted by Grayson (1996) as characteristic of female led community protests, was intensifying, including the tenants attempts to track down and confront Prime Minster (and Merseyside MP) Harold Wilson. On 29th March a delegation from the new co-ordinating committee met the Prime Minister at the City Centre *Adelphi Hotel*. A day later, tenants marched the mile from Islington to the Town Hall and handed the Lord Mayor a petition signed by 20,000 people. The size of the petition testified not only to the level of local concern, but to the energy of the activists, given that all the campaigning was taking place on foot. Once the rises were imposed, tenants marched again on 4th April. Meanwhile, the Trades Council sent its own delegation to the leader of the Council, Harold MacDonald Steward, asking him to freeze rents pending a government enquiry (*Liverpool Weekly News*, 4th April 1968, p1).

On 18th April, with the strike a mere fortnight old, the Weekly News greeted the official formation of ATACC by announcing the tenants impending defeat. Using the 'official' statistics, the paper claimed fewer than 2,000 tenants withheld their rent increase, less than 3%, and that half of these were living in Speke: 'the first battle', the paper declared, 'has been almost an outright win for the Town Hall' (18th April 1968, p1). ATACC was, in the view of the Weekly News, the 'non-political body representing tenants associations from all over the city', which meant that, in its relationship with the paper, it's voice was 'legitimate' (18th April 1968, p1). Stan Starkey stepped into the space offered by the paper therefore, accusing the Council of playing the statistics, counting tenants who paid fortnightly, as non-strikers (p1). In spite of their impending 'defeat', the Weekly News reported the Trades Council's decision to support the striking tenants formally. Following its own meeting with Wilson, the Council, according to Secretary Simon Frazer, had concluded there was little chance of any rebate of the rent increase. Accordingly, the Council 'plans to distribute leaflets in corporation estates advising tenants not to pay the increases' (p1). Within a month, the level of the campaign was becoming elevated, from spontaneous meetings at estate level, towards a more formally organised dynamic, exploiting what Sklair (1975) and Grayson (1996) suggest was the male activists connections to grassroots Labour.

ATACC wanted to tie the rent rise issue more generally to concerns about inefficiency, waste and injustice, the kinds of issues that were the parlance of the pre-existing community associations from which the new movement was an offshoot. Once the strike was running ATACC needed connections, not only to establish for itself an identity beyond the original issue, but to keep the movement and the tenants concerns in the public domain. What about the £11,300 the Council lashed out on 'a pair of nags to draw the mayoral coach around Liverpool?' asked Stan Starkey (p1): a marginal issue no doubt but one that made for excellent newspaper copy.

What would unite the associations, and the grievances, in common purpose ATACC believed was the campaign for a tenants' charter. In sympathy with its origins, ATACC's strategy of direct pressure meant nothing went unchallenged. In exposing a pattern of official neglect,

incompetence and deception, ATACC was doing more than providing copy for the Weekly News: the groundwork was being laid for the establishment of an interest group for Merseyside tenants. On 25th April, Secretary Gallimore followed Stan Starkey into the Weekly News, challenging again the Council's official statistics. Apart from the fortnightly tenancies, they were counting as payers tenants in receipt of benefit. There were, in fact, she claimed, 4,000 striking tenants which was 'very encouraging' for a campaign no more than six weeks old. She reminded the paper's readers that the campaign was not only about rent but 'the treatment the tenants have suffered in the past at the hands of the Housing Department' (25th April 1968, p1). The following week, and the day after the tenants strong showing in the May Day march, Gallimore signalled the growing confidence of the new network when she declared that the strike would not end until the Government 'draws up legislation' (*Liverpool Weekly News* 2nd May 1968, p1). Meanwhile, the Childwall Valley association and the Trades Council began distributing fresh leaflets, urging tenants not to be intimidated by the threat of eviction.

ATACC was building, through the combined power of various forms of pressure, a complete instrument of tenant protest. It was becoming an archetype of what Lowe (1986) suggests is the common form of tenant protests rooted in diverse but highly local concerns. ATACC stepped up its campaign for the charter by calling a meeting of all member associations, on 27th May, with their local Councillors, the Trades Council and prominent Trades Unionists. Boasting 'the backing of other cities and towns in similar positions', ATACC, growing in ambition, wanted the campaign 'lifted up onto a national rather than a local level' (*Liverpool Weekly News*, 16th May 1968, p3). ATACC was profiting from simple community-oriented principles that could unite people in a common cause, because of their relevance to their daily lives. However, in the rekindling, as Lowe (1986) called it, the campaign was becoming more articulate about a wider range of grievances and needs. The principle of the charter, Kenwright recalls, was to provide tenants with the safeguards only currently available to private home owners. While private housing was built with a ten year guarantee against structural defects, Council houses, she says, were 'thrown up'

and those building them 'were getting all the money paid and all the shoddy workmanship' (2004b).

Poverty in the Home

Given the academic concerns of this study it is important to point out that while the linkage of issues moved ATACC towards traditional tenant politics it did not preclude political insight on the part of its activists anymore than it inhibited confrontation. Nor did it separate ATACC from its alliances with grassroots labour. Those conducting the ATACC charter campaign were poor people, but while visiting in their own and similar communities, many were shocked at the extent of the poverty they saw. This development in the campaigners' sense of social justice grew from involvement, at community level, in forms of political struggle. Kenwright recalls one home in particular, visited with fellow activist Betty Hayes, where the family was living in the cellar with half the stairs missing. 'They had children, they had no gas, they had no electric, they had no water … there was bowls, buckets, baths; all over, the room, was full of urine and faeces, they had no toilet even' (2004b). The family were regular visitors to the housing office and, on behalf of the tenants association, Hayes had written to the housing manager and the *Liverpool Weekly News*. The morning after the visit Kenwright greeted the housing manager, Leonard Bennett, as he arrived at his office. She waited while he telephoned the housing office in Warwick Street and got the family re-housed to Catharine Street. Word must have circulated, she believes, as the association was overwhelmed by calls, even in the early hours, from tenants living in desperate conditions, who hoped the association might be able to do for them what the corporation had, seemingly, failed to do for so many others (2004b). Kenwright, of course, knew the limitations of the campaign and was depressed by them: 'I'll try and help you, but I can't put you in houses' was all too often the necessary retort (2004b).

ATACC recognised the lowly status of the tenant, and the injustices structured into the housing system accordingly. Kenwright notes that the *Liverpool Weekly News* was used regularly as a campaign tool, to broadcast the scandal of 'rats, mice, cockroaches, no toilet and no-one cared' (Kenwright, 2004a), and activists such as Everton's Jim Moran and Betty Hayes from Speke met through appearing in and using its

columns (Kenwright, 2004b). The principle of a minimum standard of accommodation, for a fair rent, was the baseline. What mattered more was making those responsible, also accountable.

On 30th May, the Weekly News reported the outcome of ATACC's meeting with local Councillors, three days before: the housing officials agreed, in principle, to create a 'liaison committee' as a 'go-between for both sides', subject, of course, to City Council approval (p1). At the meeting, representatives of tenants associations in the South, including Speke, Netherley, Childwall Valley, Garston, Halewood, Hunts Cross and Cressington Park, joined with allies from areas just beyond the City Centre, Norris Green, West Derby, Huyton, Old Swan and Wavertree, to demand undertakings about repairs and an end to press propaganda about 'subsidised' tenants (p1). That the policymakers were disarmed enough by the campaign to start talking, was a shift, in a few short weeks, from the attitude Kenwright remembers from her own local Councillor who promised those who did not pay the estimated ten shillings increase that '2,000 people' on the housing waiting list would be moved into their homes (2004b).

As activist associations, drawn together by the experience of rent strike, many of the groups linked to ATACC never existed before the strike. The coalition was encouraged in its work, by any evidence of change in how the local authority was managing the repairs issue. The Council, Kenwright recalls, 'started putting offices in different parts of the city, so that area could go to the Housing' (2004b); the movement of housing administrators into new regional offices was, she says, one of those changes. Victories at home seemed only to inspire greater confidence and a belief that what could be done at community level could be reproduced across the region if not the country. The next step for ATACC, working to 'nationalise' the issue, was a conference of delegates from tenants associations across the North West, uniting the striking Liverpool tenants with fellow strugglers in Blackburn, not to mention, potentially, those elsewhere in the country, Sheffield, Edinburgh, Mansfield and London (*Liverpool Weekly News*, 25th April 1968, p1). In its own membership ATACC was already expanding geographically with, Kenwright recalls, affiliates in Cheshire, Manchester and even Derbyshire (2004b).

The principles of ATACC originated in the community. Some activists, including Kenwright, were inspired moreover by the conviction that they were actively fighting on a wider front against poverty and injustice. It is in this mobilisation of social conscience, born of experiencing inequality first hand in the communities where activists lived, that we see the dichotomy of community-based working class politics. In that causes may be special, unusual or particular to a small group housing activism may be seen from one perspective as limiting. In its closeness to the details of daily living however it has the potential to be highly educative, especially for those estate dwellers with less direct experience of the more formally organised instruments of labour protest.

The women tenants, in particular, were at their best when self-mobilised and confronting, directly, the housing political class. Kenwright remembers a sit in, during the early days, at the office of the housing director during a heat wave. J H Boddy, predecessor of Bennett, and co-author of the Jan 1968 rent rise report criticised the tenants, or rather their grandmothers, says Kenwright, for not saving their money, and then called the police (2004b). The officers, she recalls, did not have the heart to remove the children, who, by this time, had been replenished, secretly, with tap water, by a sympathetic secretary (2004b). Charlie Stocker was the coalition's unofficial investigator, according to Kenwright 'he could find a penny in the middle of Liverpool', and whatever he found ATACC wrote to the press, and/or organised committees of tenants to confront the official concerned (Kenwright, 2004b). Amongst these, of course, was Kenwright's near legendary 'ambush', with Christine Doyle, of Housing Minister, Anthony Greenwood, at Liverpool's Lime Street Station. As he drew up, in a green Mini, the women leapt from their hiding places, behind the mailbags, and challenged him about leaking waste pipes outside front doors, amongst other things (*Liverpool Weekly News*, 7th Nov 1968, p1).

Traditional allies were called in often to support direct action protests, which were part of the movement's wider objective to speak out on multiple issues. Furthermore it introduced the women activists to the

more established and connected forms of worker protest. When word began to circulate that Kenwright might be on a list of tenants to be evicted, a contingent of dockers went to the Housing Office, to speak up for her (2004b). While working at a local convent, she was offered some unwanted paint stored in the shed, which she subsequently shared with Christine Doyle. After attending to some outstanding decorating tasks, large quantities were removed in a pram and stored in the tenants homes, for campaign purposes: 'if they come to evict me, I'll board my windows up', she thought: 'they're all going to go away full of paint because I wasn't going to go quietly' (2004b). For Kenwright the small details of the campaign as it happened at the 'ordinary' level were important. In a sense they symbolise ATACC's core purpose which was to re-invent community bonding and solidarity into political reactivism.

Speaking for All

In spite of the Childwall Valley women's threat of a 'housewives strike', reported in the Weekly News, but of which Kenwright remembers nothing, she believes the majority in the community, including the men, supported the tenants cause (9th May 1968, p1). Her husband, like many others, did not participate directly, she says, but 'I needed him to mind the kids, you know' (2004b). If the men were politicised, there was a better chance of acceptance, at least of the normality of struggle: 'I married a man who had the same feelings' she says (2004b). The hostile, or unfriendly, exceptions to the general rule, were bewildering to Kenwright and, occasionally, heartbreaking. She only ever received one letter attacking the tenants, from a 'rate payer', to whom she replied by offering the writer the tenants association's help. She recalls a leafleting session at a block of maisonettes near Craighurst, from where a woman emerged, trailing young children: 'they were filthy, they had little vests on, no trousers, absolutely filthy' (2004b). 'Oh no, I'm a Conservative' the woman proclaimed (2004b). If, when you have nothing, a patriotic allegiance confers 'belonging', for Kenwright, it was not the only way to belong. 'I mean', she said to husband, Reg, 'what have they got to conserve?' (2004b).

In common with a number of the women activists, having a family forced Kenwright, ultimately, to give up her ATACC responsibilities,

though she remained active in the *Netherley Tenants Association*. A raised political consciousness 'linked' her activism to wider, but related, forms of struggle, mirroring developments inside the movement generally and its tradition of labour connections. Kenwright spent three days and nights, on hunger strike, in a tent in Liverpool's St John's Gardens; 'nothing to do with the rent strike', she says, and amongst her poetry, which appeared occasionally in the Weekly News, and appears at the head of this chapter, was a tribute to dockers Shop Steward, Frankie Deegan, veteran of the Spanish Civil War (2004b).

Local Knowledge

The essence of ATACC's campaign, and how it would empower or improve the lives of tenants, says Kenwright, was 'clout' and the clout was hardened by 'finding out what they did not want us to know' (2004a). A further strength of activism at the community level is that it provides access to specialist inside knowledge. What was heard or circulated among networks of neighbours could be used to challenge or question decision-makers. Perhaps because the community mattered to them, activists were inclined to use both official and non-official instruments to build a pool of knowledge. From that knowledge, and the desire to know and share in it, could be constructed an instrument of pressure. While the network was becoming formally organised and connected, at the grassroots informal community remained the building blocks of action, and the networking and knowledge that they facilitated.

Sometimes it was chance occurrences that lead to the exposure of Council misdemeanours, but no matter how the evidence was garnered it was invariably circulated and used. One ATACC affiliate, the *Abercromby Tenants Association,* discovered an important piece of official information in a public telephone box (Singleton and Singleton, 2001). Ethel Singleton, the association's secretary, heard voices on the line as she placed money in the slot to make a call. 'I shouldn't have listened', she admits but couldn't help herself once she recognised one of the voices, the rent striking tenants local Conservative Councillor, David E Daniel (2001). The Councillor was being told of a *World Health Organisation* report suggesting the lead content in the water supply to condemned properties was dangerously high. 'I don't think Councillor

Daniels (sic) would have told us'; in any case, she says, his 'face was … a study' when confronted with the 'leaked' report at a tenants association meeting (2001).

The information the tenants gathered was presented to the authority, sometimes at meetings, but most often in the form of written questions to the Town Clerk, who, legally, 'had to answer them' (Kenwright, 2004b). While it was hard by these means to alter policy, the committee could foment indecision, force delay or improve the quality of services by exposing possible abuses. One example of political injustice discovered by community knowledge and exposed by community values was the subsidy scandal. While, in the press, Council spokesmen often suggested tenants were subsidised by ratepayers, the real story, exposed by ATACC was that housing subsidies, paid to the Council by central government, were being diverted to hold down the rates. Gallimore wrote to Liverpool's MPs and the cause was taken up by Walton MP, Eric Heffer. In this case, the discovery enabled the Housing Minister and the Prime Minister, to be confronted by a simple question of natural justice: housing from subsidies belonged to the tenants and should be used to repair and improve the quality of their dwellings (Kenwright, 2004b).

Exposures did not make revolution, but they did force policy makers to change, alter or reverse decisions, producing direct benefits for groups of tenants. £168,000 spent on demolishing a block of flats, less than two years old, was, after exposure by ATACC, re-directed back into the housing revenue account (Kenwright, 2004b). The pressure created by the campaign was enough sometimes to force Council officers and politicians to shift their allegiances. The 'tip' that enabled Kenwright and Doyle to trap Housing Minister Greenwood came from Councillor Bill Sefton (Kenwright, 2004a). In 1972 when Labour was in power and not in opposition, then Council leader Sefton reneged on his promise to defy the Conservative *Housing Finance (Fair Rents) Act* (2004a).

Building for a Future

In 2004 the 73 year old Kenwright, who has never moved from the Childwall Valley community, talked, still, with the same enthusiasm and pride of the tenants 'fantastic' achievements (2004a). After a year of

the campaign the tenants staged a mock party in the McAusland lounge. There was only water in the glasses to mark ATACC's first birthday, but 'we put up in the photograph that we were having this big party' (2004b); there was a cake, though, and the photo made it into the *Liverpool Weekly News* (2004a). These new movements, organised and run at street level by women, were, says John Grayson, because of the mutual supports on which women rely, often more open and democratic than the traditional male centred Trades Unions (1996); in a sense, he suggests, they 'anticipated … the women's liberation and community action movements of the 1970's' (Baldock, cited p124).

Gallimore's promise, that the strikers would keep going, was no idle boast. The strike, supported by the assorted forms of what Kenwright (2004b) called 'clout', lasted six months, winning from the Council an overall reduction in the rent increase of two shillings and sixpence, or twelve and a half pence in 'new' money (Grayson, 1996, p46). The concession on rent was a small one, the campaign was too fragmented by its other interests Barker would say, but 'it was the first time it had ever been achieved' says Gallimore (2004). Apart from those small victories that supported individuals and families, the public 'association' created by the campaigners between rising rents and poor housing was a longer term substantive achievement. Indeed, the image ATACC created of Liverpool's tenants as abused or ignored reflected the condition of the city's political climate at that time: the displacement of slum dwellers from traditional communities to high rent accommodation in outlying areas.

Planning Ideals and Errors

A survey of the physical condition of corporation housing, published in 1969 illustrated the awesome scale of the task facing the City's planners. The housing department report revealed 'design deficiencies' in 62% of the Council's stock, 81% of which was flat or apartment accommodation (Cormack, 1981, Appendix D). By any standard of measurement, deprivation, education, unemployment, social amenities, health care, 'the inner city of Liverpool will stand condemned' (Nightingale, 1980, p57). Whatever the plan, it would fail to address the scale of the problem if it was not perceived at least to be radical and

tough. While the Council stood accused of culpability in the poor quality of the city's housing stock, and it might have had good cause for keeping 'secrets' from its tenants, remote authority was not in fact a model of governance embraced by Liverpool in the formulation of policy. As Couch (2003) reminds us (see Chapter Two), during the 1960s local authorities began looking at the urban slum problem less in terms of the physical structure and placement of buildings and more as a social or cultural problem of cyclical poverty. Such was the perception at that time of Liverpool as a failed city, it became, 'a laboratory for almost every experiment and innovation in modern urban policy' (p3). Liverpool's 1965 *Interim Planning Policy Statement* was one of the earliest examples of a total plan for an inner city area, proposing the re-development not only of living areas but of industrial centres, transport systems and recreation facilities. Far from keeping secrets, Couch suggests Liverpool became an exponent of the new community centred approach, formulated on the basis of openness and partnership.

The 1965 policy statement described the ideals that would drive Liverpool's regeneration programme. While designed to address the 'problem' in its totality, the pre-determined drive to clear the inner city lay at the heart of the plan. In its 1966 survey of social malaise Liverpool was a leader once more; it was one of the first complete surveys of Council tenants' views. However, it was conducted after the slum clearance programme had been agreed. There was something about regeneration, the power perhaps of the belief that the city was failed, that was resistant to revision. The 1965 statement provided for new transport systems that would not only break up communities but facilitate the outward flow of people to new industrial zones. According to Muchnick (1970) the city's post-1968 slum clearance programme focused almost exclusively on 'the three inner areas of Everton, Toxteth and Abercromby' (1970, p51). In the three years after 1968, all three would become centres of tenant protest.

The shift in 1969 from ATACC's inclusive concerns of 1968 towards inner city protests with a more specific focus reflects the increasingly radical impact of the slum clearance programme. As was described in Chapter Two, with the new Labour government rethinking the politics of

demolition, the programme of Council house building peaked in 1967 at 159,300 new homes (Grayson, 1996, p44) while, in the same year, a shortfall of 1,500 of these new build properties was addressed by a switch of emphasis, towards the improvement of existing dwellings. The 1968 *Town and Country Planning Act* created a national housing renewal scheme and the Housing Act, the following year, introduced home improvement grants and *General Improvement Areas* (Cormack, 1981, Appendix D, p13). 1969 was the beginning, also, of a three year programme to sell off existing Council houses. The building of high rise blocks was, after 1968, similarly doomed, when twenty two storeys Ronan Point in London's West Ham collapsed (Grayson, 1996, p44).

In spite of it's zeal in clearing its slums, in concert with the switch of emphasis nationally, the number of demolitions carried out by Liverpool was declining, and did not revive until 1972. According to Muchnick (1970), the city's housing renewal strategy, created by the 1965 planning advisory group, became pre-occupied with 'the organisational environment and the decision-making process', and so, by implication, was following rather than confronting the ideology of regeneration (1970, p7). National government's definition of a slum, based on the structural condition of the dwellings was, Muchnick (1970) insists, unhelpful to Liverpool, taking, as it did, no account of income, unemployment, crime or standards of education in the areas designated (p86). However, in addressing the reality of urban poverty, a danger emerged, that the significance of social community may be overlooked. In the 'formation of physical renewal policy', he says, Liverpool was inclined to 'neglect ... the particular social needs ... of different neighbourhood groups living in apparently similar housing situations' (p87). As was the case nationally, there was, in Liverpool, a 'conflict between the proponents of a policy of comprehensive re-development of housing … and the advocates of a more specialised programme to increase the production of housing' (p8).

What the *Merseyside Socialist Research Group* calls planning anarchy (Nightingale, 1980) grew not from a clash of old versus new but from what it suggest is an eternal liberal bourgeois mythology, that urban poverty can be conquered by the creation or re-creation of model communities. In the Liverpool of the late 1960s, they say, as in the

1950s, this amounted in practice, to relocating the population of the ageing inner city into new model towns such as Speke, Skelmersdale and Kirkby. In re-designing their communities, the planners hoped to re-design the people, as if the perfect community were possible, or even desirable as a matter of design. If policy makers see themselves as designers, they will invariably deny their plans are contained or directed by the market, since this would suggest they were unable to re-design anything. It was precisely, MSRG insists, the need to maximise the productivity of labour that drove the 'renewal' ideal, and, in truth, caused it to fail. The people were to be moved to where the jobs would be created, but when the market failed to deliver the jobs, it was the tenants not the planners who lived with the consequences. A motorway and ring road was built to facilitate the outward flow (originated in the 1965 City Centre Plan that followed the planning statement), and, in the ten years after 1966, the population of Liverpool's inner city declined by a third (p57). Grayson's (1996) special 'relationship' with elected power remoulded tenants, but into victims of their class 'purpose' as a labour market.

Moving On

One evening during the summer of 1968, Ethel Singleton attended a meeting of ATACC at the McAusland lounge at the *University of Liverpool* (Kenwright, 2004b). The re-invigorated *Abercromby Tenants Association* was a member of the network and, in October of that year, it called the tenants of thirty six Abercromby streets out on a total rent strike. Abercromby, the cities poorest ward, and located on the outskirts of its centre, was the classic paradigm of inner city decline. It was the focus of one decant scheme in the 1950s, and, in 1968, most of its remaining tenants were earmarked for relocation to the new towns. Old slums or new, ATACC was the focus and trigger for a campaign to expose the condition of housing in the city, and its causes. From a place of relative marginality in the broader plans of politicians, tenants would begin to speak in pursuit of a simple demand. Whatever else, I have the right, for myself and my family, to a minimum standard of living space, in a community where I belong. In the next chapter, assessing developments in the slum clearance areas, the importance of this ideal will be shown and the problematic nature also of the tenants special relationship to their political governors.

CHAPTER FIVE
'We've Got An Open Air Loo, Have You?'
The Campaign for Real Homes, 1969-1971

During the years 1969-1971, the focus of housing protests in Liverpool shifted from the general concerns of tenant communities to the specific and ongoing decline of the inner city communities where large areas of housing was earmarked for slum clearance. The country was entering an economic recession and it was a time therefore of hardship for workers generally. This chapter will describe the protests during these years in the slum clearance areas. The course of events will show how the increasing harshness of the material conditions of those living in Liverpool's inner city communities connected their resistance to workers political discourses on a range of fronts. In the experience of community life, now more than previously, the groundwork was laid for housing struggles to move to a higher level of consciousness extending beyond the home environment. This chapter will show the shift in the nature and focus of tenant concern explaining how and why it resulted in a radicalisation of the movement.

The Waterfront Organises

ATACC, now representing the bulk of the cities Council tenants, was organising against a Conservative proposal to slash government subsidies to Council houses. At the same time, tenants living in Cathedral St James, on the Southern outskirts of the City Centre, were forming another new tenant group, the *Nile Street and Cathedral Precinct Tenants Association* (*Liverpool Weekly News*, 27th March 1969, p1). The riverside neighbourhood, extending down from the Anglican cathedral towards the Queens Dock, was earmarked for slum clearance. According to Muchnick (1970), re-housing was one tool of the city's urban renewal programme which had the potential to 'greatly benefit or torment the displaced population' (p88). However, much like the tenor of ATACC's original broad appeal, there was an incontrovertible association in the minds of tenants between the conditions in which they were living and the rents they were forced to pay. Since they were awaiting re-housing, and the demolition of their neighbourhood, the Cathedral tenants homes were, in market terms, 'worthless'. In the terms of market economics this meant the Council

felt entitled to charge the tenants more rent to live in them. A letter was sent by Communist candidate for St James, Roger O'Hara, to the City Surveyor, asking him to meet a tenants' delegation. The new association announced it would call tenants out on rent strike if the Council ignored pleas and pressed ahead with massive rent rises of between six and ten shillings a week (*Liverpool Weekly News*, 27th March 1969, p1). 'We are adamant that the increase will not be paid', declared the new association's Chair, facing a personal rent increase of six shillings and three pence: 'The rents of slum property, and that's all these are, should go down not up', she declared (p1).

A fortnight later, tenants of multi-storey blocks to the North, Canterbury and Crosbie Heights, followed Cathedral St James in forming a tenants association of their own. Untypical of much of the property around the centre, the Heights, built, alongside neighbouring Haigh Heights, in 1965, were little more than three years old. Within that short space of time they had acquired the nickname 'the Piggeries'. They were examples of the physical approach to the problem of house building, but also of the quick fix solutions that became popular during the late 1950s and 1960s when governments were concerned to reduce spending. As I suggested in Chapters Two and Four, after 1965 the City of Liverpool rejected the physical bricks and mortar approach in favour of a more holistic view of the causes of urban decline. Nationally also housing policy was moving away from quick fix demolition towards a multi-lateral approach that hinted at the possibility of progress. In this respect, Canterbury and Crosbie could be viewed as iconic symbols of 1960s planning mistakes. What was not changing however was the ideology of regeneration, presuming as it did the necessity to permanently alter the landscape of the inner city: 'The Corporation should pay us for living here', an angry tenant told the Weekly News (17th April 1969, p16). However, the tenants Councillor, Mary Powell, who sat on the authority's health and housing committees, cautioned her constituents against any arbitrary action. If tenants wanted to form an association, she told the paper, they should contact the Town Clerk 'who would help them' (p16). They would get the benefit of being able to 'join in with the meetings of the committee each month' (p16). While she did not like multi-storey flats the Councillor suggested 'it was the only way we could re-house people from the slum areas' (p16). As for

the damp problem, she offered the families a little reassurance. 'Reports that we have say the dampness is caused by condensation' but this 'will disappear when the buildings dry out' (17th April 1969, p16).

At this stage, the flurry of activity was following the familiar pattern observed in Chapter Four of local resistance drawing in diverse communities but with similar grievances. A week later the Canterbury report provoked a reaction, as tenants from another North City block, Candia Towers Jim Moran, and a spokesman for another new association, Pickering Street, had letters published in the *Liverpool Weekly News* alongside ATACC's Kathleen Kenwright (24th April 1969, p3). Pickering Street was another slum clearance area, and the tenants association here was concerned less about rents than about inaction on the promised re-housing. It attacked the Council for its indifference to 'the suffering they cause through their unnecessary confusion' and called for an enquiry into the management of the entire slum clearance programme (p3). In the same edition, the Weekly News announced the formation of yet another association in another multi-storey, in another inner city area, Firley House, in Dingle (p1). Firley spokesperson Lillian Roberts demanded the re-housing of all the occupants of the model block. Like Canterbury and Crosbie, Firley was a mere four years old. 'I feel sure a mistake was made in the building of the flats, for they are in a terrible state' explained tenant, Dorothy McDonough. She remembered the damp in the flats when they were new, but, far from drying out, the problem turned into rampant fungus, 'making many rooms uninhabitable' (p1). A week later, on May Day, the Weekly News reported the findings of a survey conducted amongst Council tenants by Allerton's opposition Liberal Party. The results, candidate Jean Freeman told the Editor, reveal a pattern of institutional neglect. The picture was one of 'rising damp, mouldy walls, obsolete light switches, a total absence of electric power points, rotten window frames with broken catches and delays of up to four years in carrying out repairs' (1st May 1969, p3).

Voices from the Slums

As was described in Chapter Two, in forming a coherent housing policy Liverpool was, like any local authority, subject to the political priorities

of government. Nationally, by the late 1960s the private sector, favoured by central government, was outbuilding local authorities, and a brief revival of municipal building under Labour in 1967-1968 was overturned by the government as part of its drive to reduce public expenditure (Malpass and Murie, 1987). Indeed the 1969 Housing Act that compelled Council's to improve rather than demolish, was not so much a policy redirection or indeed a policy at all, as a public de-investment in housing (p75). Conditions in some areas were becoming so severe, they were for many unbearable. According to Malpass and Murie (1987) 'public resentment' at the consequences for the inner cities of the re-development of their old neighbourhoods and communities was growing (p73). While the slums were being cleared, the corporation, acting on predictions of a housing surplus (as well as the government legislation), slowed down the house building programme. For the year 1969, the planning office reported the lowest number of new homes since 1963 (cited *Big Flame*, 13th March 1970, p2). For those living inside the slum clearance zones this created an additional pressure. With the new homes failing to keep up with the pace of clearances, tenants were trapped inside living areas made untenable by rapid physical decline.

Weinberger's (1973) Liverpool commissioned survey of Council tenants attitudes to their landlord revealed some measure of the level of discontent, indeed of the 'torment' described by Muchnick (1970). It showed the tenants of North City (home of Candia and Crete Towers and 'the Piggeries') to be the most connected to their local area through existing family and community networks. But higher levels of unemployment, poverty and the decline of the area's mostly apartment and flat accommodation was clearly beginning to change their relationship to that community. With almost half the tenants of North City struggling to pay the lower rents, the re-development zone registered the highest score on the housing department's official scale of 'social malaise'. Two years before the Weinberger report, Director of the *Shelter Neighbourhood Action Project*, Des McConaghy (1971), concluded, that 'in spite of considerable expenditures by some local authorities, and sometimes because of them, the decline of inner residential areas has now become an established trend' (1971, p2). The poor, he says, 'are increasingly concentrated in specific territories

of the urban realm' and let down by planners, academics and politicians who blunder in attacking individual problems without a holistic assessment of 'the collective pressures of inner urban areas' (p2).

It's unlikely that during the 1960s and 1970s, more than a minority of people would have read or heard much of the scale of discontent or realised the impact of strikes, even the anti-HFA strike in 1972, unless they knew where to look. One attempt to move the unconscious was Nicholas Broomfield's award winning film of Kirkby during the 1972-73 strike (*Behind the Rent Strike*, 1974). Those who have seen his film of Kirkby may not know that *Behind the Rent Strike* was not Broomfield's first cinematic journey, or that it was not his first into Merseyside's housing wastelands. In 1971, before he entered the *National Film School* he produced and directed a seventeen minute documentary, shot in black and white, called *Who Cares.* It was in *Who Cares*, made three years before *Behind the Rent Strike,* that the people of Liverpool's South City, specifically the Toxteth districts of Abercromby and Granby, described their experience.

The idea, originated in the 1944 *Merseyside Plan*, to relocate overspill of both industry and people to new developments beyond the city boundary meant not only the creation of new communities in Speke, Kirkby and Halewood but of a new inner city (Meegan, 1989). According to Broomfield during the late 1960s and early 1970s, relocation from Toxteth amounted to moving out mostly the whites, leaving behind a 'black ghetto … something it had never been before' and which, he suggests, created the despair and rage manifested in 1981 during the riots (Wood, 2005, p15). For Broomfield, this concept of regeneration was a result of a cult of 'modernity', a development he blames for destroying 'so much of people's sense of community and placement' (p12).

Broomfield did an 'agit prop screening' of *Who Cares* in one of the local tenement blocks, but found his return to the area a 'dispiriting' experience (p17). Most of it, he says, 'had been torn down and all the people I had met had been re-housed' (pp17-18). He couldn't persuade the old lady who did the film voice over to come back for the viewing;

she ‘was so unhappy in her new modern home that she just wanted to die’ (p17). The elderly woman’s new home was located in Cantril Farm. Like Netherley, Cantril Farm was not a new town in the manner of Kirkby or Skelmersdale, but a new estate. It lies within the city boundary but is located three miles away from the centre. The housing on the estate was built mostly in the late 1960s, one of a number of developments flowing from the Council’s 1965 policy statement and plan. As a result of the original 1944 plan and its successors Liverpool acquired a new motorway, inner ring road and transport system and the shopping centres at St John’s and Clayton Square. While a new centre was being built, those living inside the innermost of the three concentric rings, that is Toxteth to the south and Vauxhall (Scotland Road) to the north of the centre, were designated for what the 1965 statement called ‘decongestion’ (Couch, 2003, p49).

Who Cares attempts to show the three distinct phases of Toxteth’s regeneration, all of these carried out within the space of a few years. It shows Toxteth thriving, its streets and marketplaces thronged with people of all types and races; and it shows its streets empty of people and blighted by boarded up shops. It also attempts to explain the new poverty that met the people when they reached their new living spaces in Cantril Farm, Netherley or Kirkby. ‘I had great neighbours’ says the old woman, people who had ‘no badness’. The failure of her dream had affected her profoundly: ‘we were under the impression we’d all be together ... we’d have all been friends together again’ she says. ‘I could go berserk over my kids, the way they are trapped’ a young mother tells the film maker. And her feelings about her multi-storey, high rent home? ‘I’m not worried about the house ... I never clean it ... I don’t want company anymore’.

While Broomfield’s film may well be the only piece of recorded history left by the people of Toxteth, to describe their experience, Peter Leeson’s *Us and Them* (1970) may well be the only one left by the people of Scotland Road, to describe theirs. As I explained in Chapter Three, both films provide unusual insights into the causes of housing unrest during the period. The visual reality they portray, both of demolition and of physical and social change, integrates the voices of those affected directly by the slum clearance programme into our

perception of its impact. It is a reality difficult to visualise from the words contained even in the most forthright accounts of the failings of the programme, or in the formally expressed grievances of ATACC.

When *Us and Them* was made in 1970, almost all of Scotland Road's 3,000 people, most of them descended from Irish immigrants, rented their homes from the Council. It was the Councillors, one male Irish resident tells the film makers, who set the example for the vandals to follow. The washhouse was demolished to make way for a motorway; the heart of the old community, Paddy's Market, was moved to Great Homer Street; instead of lying at its centre, the market was attached to the community by a walk-bridge; and land that could have been used for kids to play in safety was transformed into dangerous adventure playgrounds packed with the cars of City Centre office workers. The 'final knockout punch' for the Scotland Road community however, was Kingsway, the 'new' Mersey tunnel built in 1971 in spite of the presence of the 'old' one half a mile away. The reason the tunnel was not located, as logic suggested it should have been, in the southern suburbs lining the river, claims the film's narrator, was because the Council feared the objections of the prosperous residents. From the words of the interviewed residents, two themes recur throughout both films: firstly, a feeling of powerlessness in the face of incomprehensible, seemingly uncontrolled change; secondly, a sense of disappointment and betrayal.

The people living in the inner city areas needed and wanted new homes. However, by the late 1960s, with North and South City decimated physically by the demolition programme, the need had become urgent. From a condition of urgency, choice over the alternatives available is pressured. In Toxteth as depicted in *Who Cares* and in the Scotland Road of *Us and Them*, so much more was lost in terms of community than was gained in the physical form of new homes. *Us and Them* diverges from its monochrome format only at the very end: the children from St Anthony's school are on an outing to Stanley Park. They play in safety. The land is green.

Broomfield's *Who Cares* was cited by a Royal Commission on Housing but the effect, he says, was 'disillusioning' (Wood, 2005, p14). It failed

to stem the rising tide of homogenisation and he did not feel 'that anything really came out of it' (p15). Produced as the 1960s drew to a close, both films illustrate the perception of some at the time that the displacement of inner city communities was a moment of huge significance in the lives of those affected. Alongside the community print media, whose contribution and significance as historical record is also described in Chapter Three, both films were examples of a new radical media beginning to flourish. They represent the kind of historical documents that can expand our understanding of the slum experience beyond those provided by official accounts, explanations and statistical surveys.

Abercromby: a Case Study

Abercromby, a ward that merged parts of Liverpool 7 with parts of Liverpool 8, was the immediate neighbour of multi-ethnic Granby, and of Cathedral St James, and a near neighbour of Dingle. Together, these areas were the designated by the Council as 'South City'. With its large pool of private tenants, Abercromby was as deprived as any part of Liverpool 8, and more so than some parts. Like the Georgian quarter of Liverpool 8, Abercromby no longer exists, as any kind of centred residential community but is occupied today by a large number of transient residents. Its fate was sealed as long ago as 1949 when the *University of Liverpool* accepted William Holford's proposal to develop a new site for the expanding university in the heart of the slum clearance area. By the late 1960s, the streets of Abercromby 'once rather upper-class, had degenerated in the social scale and were occupied by large numbers of lodgers and subtenants', (Cook, 1975, p3). According to Cook (1975) the University's development plan was 'paralleled by the development schemes of the Liverpool Hospitals nearby and of the City Council itself' (p3). It was 'clear', he says, 'that there had to be a radical change in the nature of the district and a great shift of population' (p3).

This design was to be carried out 'humanely and in a co-ordinated fashion' with the University promising the local authority that it would 'take all possible steps to provide re-housing accommodation for persons … displaced' (p3). The manager of the scheme was to be the *Abercromby Housing Association*, nominally independent of the

University but using money 'loaned' by the University for the purpose. Its programme, initially, was to 'modernise or adapt' houses in order to 'accommodate people displaced' (p3). In 1958, with development proceeding more slowly than anticipated, the association began buying houses outside the immediate precinct area and transferring the tenancies of those living within the precinct to the university itself. Between 1961 and 1964 there was a steadily increasing rate of re-housing, with 146 houses purchased. By 1968, it was, specifically, the 'custom of buying large houses and turning them into bed-sitters or small flats … early established as one of the associations policies' that altered the demography of the area (p4).

If, as the University believed, it's 'regeneration' was in tune with the direction of housing policy, then it could not separate itself from 'change', wanted or otherwise. By the late 1960s, the wider programme was superseded by outside forces, as improvement ideology was converted into slum clearance pragmatism. It was the McKinsey Report, forecasting a tenfold increase in Liverpool's surplus housing by 1980 that was the real motor of change (Cormack, 1981, app D). The University needed to dispose of its properties as quickly as possible even if this was at the expense of the terms. Cook admits that from 1968, the year the Council received its first proposals for selling off its housing stock, the *Abercromby Housing Association* was 'running its activities down' (Cook, 1975, p4). As the local authority looked to re-house in order to facilitate its slum clearance programme, it resorted increasingly to the use of *Compulsory Purchase Orders*. The CPOs forced the University to sell off its houses, regardless of significant losses, while at the same time entering 'the market for better homes' (p4).

From the minutes of the Housing Association during this period, it seems the ascent of market forces was no progressive wind of change, but sudden and overwhelming. As early as 26th April 1968, its management committee received a proposal by its secretary, Hugh Higby, 'on the possibility of disposing of the Association in view of its continuing losses and the fact that the University could now make it's own arrangement for re-housing tenants from the Precinct' (minute 3). Both its annual reports for the years 1969 and 1970, and the

minutes of its committee meetings, reveal a pattern of appeals to the university for loans to cover its losses, which appeared to be driven by the 1969 Housing Act.

The association, obliged by its founding principle to transfer its assets only to 'a purchaser … who would undertake to treat the tenants with responsibility' (26th April 1968, minute 3) found its budget for repairs and maintenance shrinking in the face of 'the erosion of the Association's assets by Compulsory Purchase Order' (*Annual Report*, 1969). The association's report for the following year revealed a huge loss of £16,463 of which £12,714 was accrued on properties sold. It was precisely because it was forced to sell occupied properties that the value was eroded. In 1974, the association sold off its remaining assets, with an 'historical book value' of £117,000, for a mere £45,000. According to Cook (1975) the £72,000 deficit therefore represents 'the University's investment in the safety and comfort of those it displaced' (p4). The university's willingness to subsidise the association's losses indicated, he says, 'a flexible and humane approach to the personal problems of tenants' (p4). And a measure of the association's commitment to its thankless task, he concludes, was that 'there was never any formal complaint against it from dissatisfied tenants or from people being re-housed' (p5).

Notwithstanding Cook's account, the frustrations of the University's housing managers may be seen as minimal compared to those of the tenants actually living in the houses around the precinct. While the *University of Liverpool* may have been its immediate target, the re-development of the inner cities was the real trigger of what was to become the longest rent strike of the period. The Abercromby rent strike would illustrate dramatically the potential of some 'local' housing actions to become radicalised where conditions for tenants are rendered untenable. If indeed their landlords had little more control than they did over the elements of the housing 'market', the Abercromby rent strike was a testament not only to the inner city condition but to the condition of tenancy itself. As I pointed out in Chapter Two, tenants are partners in a relationship to public policy that has the power in equal measure to both enfranchise and marginalise. According to Grayson (1996) it is the dual possibilities for tenants of

the partnership that can elevate housing struggles to a higher level of political consciousness. Where the conditions driving the grievances appear omnipotent, the ambiguous qualities of the partnership are likely to be enhanced. Over the course of nine months, Abercromby's rent strikers would find themselves embroiled in a different kind of politics involving radical students, anarchists and even members of the royal family.

Strange Bedfellows

The first of Abercromby's alliances, and compared to other rent strikes the most unusual, was the radical student fringe. This wasn't a case merely of activists offering help. There was among the students of the University an organised campaign in support of the rent strikers intended to target the institution. On 10th December 1968, students sympathetic to the tenants published a two page feature in the *Guild Gazette* on the rent strike, describing in detail the 'squalid and insanitary conditions' of the families living in Melville Place (p6). The article, written by Gerald Cordon, described a range of problems in a number of the houses including my family home, number fifty, with its leaking roof, crumbling walls, subsidence and single habitable bedroom for a family of five. Also mentioned in the Gazette story were Melville Place residents the Doyle family, at number fifty four, whose nine children (the eldest aged nineteen) shared a bedroom and living room with their parents, Mrs Kynaston, who shared the cellar of number eight (and kitchen with rats in residence) with her mother and the Gannon family at number sixty six. 'We're not human beings … any more' Mrs Gannon told the student newsletter, while Mrs Doyle described a catalogue of inactions by the corporation including its refusal to make the street a play area, even after her daughter was run down outside the front door.

Traffic accidents were not uncommon in Abercromby, as were domestic fires and arson attacks on empty commercial and residential properties. Like the Scotland Road children featured in Leeson's 1970 film, children played in home made adventure playgrounds, on the demolition wastelands that were referred to as 'ollers'. Signs forbad the playing of ball games within the boundaries of the large tenement blocks. The Leeson and Broomfield films describe how the physical

transformation of the areas broke up the bonded communities, routines and structures that were far more the essence of the people's lives than the buildings they lived in. In Abercromby, all work necessary to maintain former conditions of life was stopped, which the Leeson film points out happened in Scotland Road (1970). As the houses deteriorated, and utilities became unusable, families were forced to retreat into smaller and smaller living spaces. Eventually, the back of the Doyle house was boarded up with corrugated iron, but, according to the Gazette alleges, the University contractor complained about the cost (10th December, 1968, p7).

Given that the University was in tune with housing priorities generally, the slum problem in Abercromby was not only about the University's interests or plans. Abercromby's fate was connected to the bigger picture of displacement across the inner cities. While tenants formed an unusual alliance with students, the respective roles of the University and of the Council were equally joined but also conflicted. Cordon admits the corporation rather than the University was 'responsible' for the re-housing of this area, and on behalf of the University, quotes it's *Estates Development Officer*, blaming the slow pace of the re-housing programme which he claimed was the underlying, critical cause of the tenants condition (p7): 'The unfitness order has nothing to do with the fact that these places are in the area allocated for university development' (p7). His claim, however, that the University received regular reports on repairs from its housing managers who 'call there every week', was assessed differently by Ethel Singleton (p7). 'Nobody's been round here, except the rent collector' she told the Gazette, and those who had repairs done carried out were 'those who withheld their rents' (p6). The Gazette quoted a corporation official, who claimed that up to 8,000 families in forty four areas were awaiting slum clearance. Does this, the article asks, explain the tenants 'bewilderment' when, on a visit to the housing office, they discovered they were not the priority list for clearing? (p7).

Old Methods, New Plans

Like the April 1968 strike in Speke and Childwall Valley, the Abercromby strike was organised at ground level by reanimating an existing tenants association, one that had previously limited itself to

traditional community concerns. While the bond of families to their community was the instrument of mobilisation, a single outstanding issue, in this case the effect on tenants of the slum clearance programme elevated the interests of the community group to a higher political level. The original *Abercromby Tenants Association*, in summer 1968, was composed of a small number of people, 'four or five … at the most' (Singleton and Singleton, 2001). In the democratic, 'feminine' tradition, it had 'no leaders', but most prominent amongst its membership was its treasurer, Lilian Kerruish, a friend of Marjorie Gallimore (2001). In its original form, say Ethel and James Singleton, ATA campaigned on repairs to the properties in which its members lived but these were mostly 'not slum properties' (Singleton and Singleton, 2001).

At that time, ATA's membership was composed mostly of people living in Georgian Liverpool 8, in and around Upper Parliament, Canning and Huskisson Streets (2001). In a sense, the re-development of the Abercromby streets within the University precinct separated those living there from their neighbours in and around Upper Parliament Street, forming two communities with distinct priorities, and possible futures. ATA was obliged to accommodate the different needs of tenants who wanted to move away, alongside those who wanted to remain and those who wanted to fight to stay. It was, like the Childwall Valley group described by Kenwright in Chapter Four, a traditional community association designed to accommodate plural concerns of interest to the people living in the area. Also, in common with Childwall Valley, in the short-term at least, its character would become changed fundamentally by the intervention of a single issue forcing it to confront political authority. According to Ethel and James Singleton, while the slum tenants could not remain in their homes, as others outside the precinct had the option to do, their 'argument' like the Liverpool 8 Council tenants, was still 'with the City Council, not with Liverpool University' (2001). According to James Singleton the original ATA, with its community ethos, was 'a talking group, more use to the Council than the tenants' (2001). For the slum dwellers, talking to the Council about how to improve a community earmarked for demolition was not going to address the problem.

As victims of the disincentive that exists for any landlord to maintain a minimal standard, once an area is earmarked for 'regeneration', the interests of the housing association tenants would not be served by talking to the Council about general issues of improvement. While the radicalisation of ATA followed precisely the pattern that created ATACC in 1968, in the Abercromby case the observations of Ethel and James Singleton make the distinction described by Lowe (1986) between long-term community associations and single issue political campaigns: 'we knew that the *Abercromby Tenants Association*, the main bulk of it, was this campaign fight, and not the original one, with the small group that went on with the Council for repairs; it was not the same thing' (2001). There was says Ethel Singleton, no intention on the part of the slum dwellers to carry on after the strike as part of a broader network of concerns. If successful most of them would in any case no longer be resident in the Abercromby area.

The transformation of ATA was not precisely the same as Childwall Valley (see Chapter Four). The new influx of tenants into membership joined the original members, rather than replacing them, as part of the association's broad coalition of interests. But, exactly in the mould of Childwall Valley, the group was transformed from its original community model into a revitalised activism, with a strategy that had to be confrontational: 'We were a single issue campaign' Ethel Singleton recalls, and 'we knew that once our object was achieved, then we would all disband' (2001). That the tenants believed their struggle was a fundamental one, not a matter of choice, meant that the future of the association long-term was influenced if not pre-determined by that condition: 'We did not want to continue it to be some sort of bureaucratic thing that would end up meeting with the City Council, with a load of blather' (2001).

How did the peculiar urgency of their condition influence the tenants' view of the politics of the strike? In spite of its single issue re-orientation, Abercromby was a member of the new group of tenants associations linked to ATACC, and in getting itself organised, it used methods familiar to all. Like its sister group in Childwall Valley, the association 'hired' a room in the Students Union, sent a representative to ATACC meetings, and as its organising principle, shared the non-

sectarian approach described by Kathleen Kenwright which meant it was politically unaffiliated (Singleton and Singleton, 2001).

It is because the origin of the tenants' movement lies in community networks that the conflict of interests described by Lowe (1986) between causes of urgency and those of normality is always present when tenants go on rent strike. Community is the key to cohesion, and occasionally to the radicalism of the grassroots. It may however, become a barrier against the wider political world, connections which must be cultivated if cohesion is to be maintained in a confrontation with housing management. Abercromby's ATACC affiliation was not however acceptable to every tenant. Geoffrey Ford, of Percy Street Liverpool 8, who had been published in the Weekly News letters column in support of the Abercromby cause, resigned from ATA because the needs of the slum dwellers were he claimed not compatible with ATACC's campaign for Council tenants' rights (*Liverpool Weekly News*, 24th April 1969, p3).

A related tension that springs from the ambiguities of community politics is the controversy that may arise over connections to overtly political groups operating outside the mainstream. ATA's operated in accordance with the ATACC principle described in Chapter Four, of accepting support but under tenant control. Radical 'outsiders' were broadly welcomed, if they could help the Abercromby tenants, but only on the strictest condition of tenant leadership: 'we would not allow them to take any major part in what we were doing,' Ethel Singleton recalls, and, James Singleton concurs, 'if you weren't a tenant you did not have a say' (2001). In fact, the origin of the Abercromby tenants' alliance with students at the University lay in chance when a group of the latter wandered into a meeting between the tenants and their local Councillors. The students, Ethel Singleton says, 'were shocked to find out that the University actually owned these properties' (2001). Others, James Singleton says, were simply intrigued to know 'how a movement could have been born out of nothing, that wasn't led by something political' (2001).

In considering the origin and development of ATACC, Chapter Four demonstrated the ambiguous nature of the division between

community and political. The Abercromby strike is an example of a single issue campaign with political connections but inspired by a non-sectarian, grassroots community approach and principle. According to Ethel Singleton the tenants struggle was emboldened precisely because of its simplicity: they had to get out of their slum homes; the students concerns 'really had nothing to do with us' (2001). Nonetheless, the students help appeared to be freely given as Kenwright (2004b) claims was also the case during the 1968 ATACC strike. The tenants used student allies to obtain and test samples of Abercromby's water supply after the tenants discovered the lead in the water allegations mentioned in Chapter Four. Significantly, it was information from students, targeting the money the University was spending elsewhere on its 'development' that would lead, ultimately, to a dramatic sequence of events that would bring the strike to an end (2001). Also, Abercromby was connected organically to the ongoing plan to empty the inner city and the bigger picture of urban re-location.

Direct Confrontation

While, in the political support it received, Abercromby raised the profile of the rent strike, it did not get a hearing in the mainstream press even to the extent that other strikes had done. The Abercromby issue was not reported by the community friendly *Liverpool Weekly News* until 8th May 1969, by which time the total rent strike of hundreds of tenants was seven months old. And when it hit the headlines, it was not in the form of a story about a rent strike, but that of a royal visit. On 15th May, the University was to open formally two new buildings constructed as part of its development plan; the Senate House in Oxford Street, and directly opposite, the Oliver Lodge Physics Laboratory. Officially, the cost of the dual opening was £500 (disputed by the tenants), including the ceremony to be performed by HRH Princess Alexandra, and subsequent royal 'entertainment' (Singleton, 2004). Not surprisingly, the dinner attracted the attention of both the rent striking tenants and the radical students, each party making its own representations of protest.

For its part, at first the University invited the tenants association to send a representative to the function (Singleton and Singleton, 2001). According to James, Ethel Singleton was treated as a 'leader' because

'they had to have a figurehead' and received a personal invitation from the Princess (2001). In spite of the opportunity it afforded the tenants to 'speak' to the Princess about poverty, the association concluded that the barrier between themselves and royalty was too great for meaningful communication to happen and voted overwhelmingly to join the students in a boycott of the event. In its letter to Vice Chancellor, Winston Barnes, the association asked the University instead to divert some of the money being spent on the event to alleviate 'the misery of those families living in Vine Street' (*Liverpool Weekly News*, 8th May 1969, p1). 'I'm sure' Ethel Singleton told the Weekly News 'the Princess … would not wish such large sums of money to be used on her behalf if she knew the appalling conditions of our people who live within the University precincts' (p1): 'If our requests fail' she declared 'we … are quite prepared to picket the Senate House, on the afternoon in question.' (p1).

The University was, of course, disappointed at the tenants' response. It invited representatives of both student and tenant groups, but to separate meetings. At the meetings, the University representatives cautioned each group against associating with the other since the other was 'politically motivated communists' (Singleton and Singleton, 2001). Ethel Singleton regards the incident with amusement: 'did they think we wouldn't speak to each other?' (2004). In its anxiety about a possible joint protest, the University was recognising the importance of information in moulding the public perception of events. In the event of a joint tenant-student protest, the University's view of its contribution of the re-development of the area might have been publicly compromised. The royal opening was an opportunity for ATA to publicise the tenants cause. The association aimed to use the royal connection but in reverse; instead of meeting the Princess they invited her to meet with them. 'If Princess Alexandra wishes to speak to any of us, she's welcome to come and visit the streets we live in' the association's letter said and the invitation to the Princess to visit the tenants homes was accepted (Singleton and Singleton, 2001).

On the morning of the visit, the *Liverpool Daily Post* published a six page supplement, paid for by the University, celebrating its 'successful twentieth century development' (15th May 1969). The previous day,

students, supported by the University Liberal, Labour, Socialist and Communist societies published their own senate house special, carrying an extended history of the University's residential holdings and an open letter from Ethel Singleton (cited senate occupation online archive). Naturally, the student account will not have achieved the readership of the Post supplement. However, in the publicity it was courting lay the danger for the University, that a less optimistic view of its re-development ideal might flourish in the press that would be written after the event.

In the potential of the visit lay the means for the Abercromby strike to become elevated by its myriad of connections onto a higher level of consciousness than the inner city protests that preceded and accompanied it. The student element of the coalition wanted to be involved in the protest just as passionately as the tenants and of course their target was very specifically the University itself. A week before the visit, in a front page 'opinion' in the student Gazette, the Guild charged the University with building 'a castle for the bureaucrats' when what was needed were 'homes for the poor' (*Guild Gazette*, 6th May 1969, p1). According to the students the senators had the power to get the people out of their slums sooner but preferred instead, to 'build themselves a palace and import a Princess' to open it' (p1). Still, in accordance with the community principle, a deal was struck between the parties that the students would 'stay back' from the main tenant gathering (Singleton and Singleton, 2001). Hundreds of students gathered outside the Senate House in Oxford Street, holding placards branding the University a 'slum landlord' (*Liverpool Echo*, 16th May 1969, p7). Meanwhile, the tenants were assembling nearby in Vine Street, beneath a banner hung from one side of the street to the other, inviting the royal visitor to 'Come and Visit the Slums of Vine Street' (*Big Flame*, 26th February 1970, p2). Sadly, the Princess was to see somewhat less of the slums than she might have done. The University, or possibly the City Council, put up boards to seal off some of the streets … and painted the hoardings white (Singleton and Singleton, 2001).

There was no unanimity of opinion regarding the royal visitor among the tenants. According to Ethel Singleton some of the tenants were

royalists who ‘wanted to invite her [Alexandra] in for a cup of tea’ (Singleton and Singleton, 2001). Others, particularly from among the ‘better off’ Council tenants living in the Myrtle Gardens tenements, were supporters of ‘Orange’ working class loyalism. If they did not regard the protesting tenants as anarchists, then at the very least, they saw them as people who were shaming a poor, but loyal, community. For their part, the housing protestors did not gather in Vine Street alone, but lined the Princess route, taking in Grove Street, Myrtle Street, Crown Street, and culminating in what was intended to be a Vine Street meeting. The motorcade travelled the length of Melville Place, a row of three storied mid-Victorian houses. Outside number fifty, stood a nine years old Kim Singleton, alongside her grandmother, Ruth, and younger sisters, Jane and Audrey. Certainly, I recall the visit was felt inside the community to be an important event. We waved small union flags as the Princess car passed but behind us the houses were adorned with humorous messages of protest. Outside number fifty, the makeshift hoarding proclaimed: ‘We’ve Got an Open Air Loo, Have You?’ (2001).

As I pointed out in Chapter Four in relation to ATACC and in Chapter Two as part of the common history of the movement, the political is a central problematic in the affairs of housing protest groups. Whether or not to be seen to be connected to radical activism is always controversial for some, while for others it is a necessary element in the struggle to elevate housing struggles beyond the politics of community life. Even on the day of the royal visit, the issue was visible for the Abercromby tenants. Opposite number fifty, a group of Council tenants from Myrtle Gardens (now Minster Court) shouted their disapproval at the children protestors. Adjacent to Melville Place, was Vine Street, the Princess intended ‘destination’. The house earmarked for a royal tour, chosen as the best maintained in the street, was number 111, home of Jane and Frederick Parr. Alexandra arrived, Ethel Singleton recalls, in a cortege protected by heavy security, with pillion outriders, back and front, and accompanied by the Lord Lieutenant of Lancashire (2001). According to the *Liverpool Echo*, Singleton chatted to Alexandra about how many pans of boiled water it took to fill a tin bath (*Liverpool Echo*, 16th May 1969, p7). She remembers Alexandra telling her that the University was doing its best, and the Princess surprise when she

replied, 'Well, it's not good enough' (Singleton, 2004). While details of the conversation were reported widely afterwards, they are less vivid in Ethel Singleton's memory than the thoughts she had as the royal visitor approached:

> God, the fabulous clothes this woman's got on, and she's my height and my size. I wish I had a few of them … it was the overall image of this person in this fantastic silk coat and fantastic hat and handbag and shoes that would probably have cost what we could have lived [on] for a week
>
> (Singleton and Singleton, 2001)

To the disappointment of the royalist Jane Parr, the Lord Lieutenant stepped in front of Alexandra to 'remind' her of her pressing schedule, at which point she apologised to Mrs Parr and the intended tour was not conducted (Singleton, 2004). The *Liverpool Echo* emphasised a different theme: 'a Great day for the people of Vine Street', it declared, and it contrasted the 'applause' it says greeted the Princess in Vine Street, with the 'jeering' of the Senate House students (*Liverpool Echo*, 16th May 1969, p7). The paper reported an amusing story about little Carole 'Scousar' (reported as Scoullar by some papers), who, mistakenly, handed the Princess bouquet of flowers to her Lady in Waiting (p7).

Of Public Concern

In Chapter Three, I discussed the contribution historically of Merseyside's radical fringe press. While mainstream media focuses on the experiences of elites, in recording working class experience radical and community press views resistance not as aberration but as a legitimate standard for assessing the operations of power. For the purpose of this study, the Alexandra affair is a salutary marker not only of the socially conflicted nature of the experiences of the tenants compared to those of the ruling elites but of the primacy of that class division in driving the values of the public news medium. Throughout the late 1960s tenants associations and action groups complained repeatedly about the reluctance of mass circulation papers to report their grievances (see Chapter Four). In common with the ATACC

strikes of April 1968, the Abercromby strike was absent from the established press until, that is, a week before the royal visit, when the *Liverpool Weekly News* reported the planned demonstration.

As far as the management of information is concerned, ATA's invitation to Alexandra to visit the tenants' homes was, as it turned out, a stroke of genius. Through the medium of a single royal visit, Liverpool's inner city slums were transformed into mass circulation news. The morning after the royal tour, the Abercromby rent strike received national press coverage unprecedented in the history of the movement locally. The royal personality taking an interest in the problems of ordinary people is a common formula for news items in the mainstream press. On 16th May stories on the slum visit, accompanied by pictures, adorned the pages of the *Daily Mirror*, the *Sun*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* as well as the *Liverpool Daily Post* (cited senate house occupation online archive). Most carried details of Alexandra's conversations with tenants focusing on the Princess sympathy for their plight. 'Princess Alex in Slumland' said the Mirror, the most generous of the dailies with a large front page article and the whole of page five devoted to the story while the Mail preferred 'Princess Charming ends the boos' (cited, senate house occupation online archive). A day later, on 17th May, the *Liverpool Daily Post* printed an interview with Jane Parr. While her Vine Street terraced home had no bathroom or hot water it was, she told reporter Ann Cummings, 'a palace' compared with others in the area: she had wanted to 'get over to the Princess the terrible state these people are living in' (cited, senate house occupation online archive).

In the evening, after the demonstration had dispersed, the tenants attended the Students Union to view an exhibition of photographs the students had taken of the houses, and displayed in the foyer outside the *Mountford Hall*. In the bar nearby, a TV set was playing, whereupon the tenants were able to watch themselves on US television news, surely a first for the Merseyside movement. It was the royal angle that interested CBS, which, Ethel Singleton explains, believed it was reporting 'an uprising against the royals' (Singleton and Singleton, 2001). The image on American television was not one of dignified deference, but a colourful landscape of 'revolting peasants'. It

was, indeed, the end of a 'tremendous day' says Ethel Singleton, because 'we'd never experienced anything like this' (2001). The cause, shared with other inner city dwellers, was elevated very suddenly into a matter of public concern, by unusual alliances and political connections, formed almost from chance. While the matter was elevated it was not of course settled. According to James Singleton, the University had 'a different interpretation of revolting than the American media' (2001).

The University Responds

A month after the visit, the University used its staff newsletter to mark the recent opening of the Senate House. In a front page article, it answered the critics who made the Princess visit 'the occasion for a protest … about housing conditions in the vicinity of the precinct' (*University of Liverpool*, Staff Newsletter, no 47, June 1969, p2). Given 'our students … splendid record in the field of social work …it was all the more regrettable … that … the facts were both misrepresented and distorted' (p2). The University attacked the *Guild of Undergraduates* for its newsletter special, which it claimed omitted the final two paragraphs of the statement the University asked it to print. The missing parts, it claimed, 'provide an almost complete answer to the various charges made against the University' (p2). The £500 spent on the visit, it continued, was 'a small sum in relation to the amount … the University spends each year on re-housing' (p2).

Reprising the statements issued to the national press on the 16th May, the University explained that money for re-housing and money for rebuilding are made available, by the Grants Committee, 'on separate accounts' and 'cannot be applied to repairs or re-housing' (p2). It may be 'regrettable' that much of the property purchased was 'too dilapidated to be renovated economically' (p2) but the University can claim 'with full justification … that its record in re-housing is a very good one' (p3). Through the *Abercromby Housing Association* the University in effect 'provided money for … tenants who have decided to buy houses elsewhere' (p3). The majority of the houses in the Vine/Chatham Street area were owned by the corporation, not the University, and those that were University owned were it claimed purchased only in May 1969. The article concluded with a calculation

that, during the previous twenty years, the University had spent £430,000 on re-housing, and this, alongside a much larger budget, expended by the local authority.

The University was the prisoner of an inexorable market, but those forces could hardly be said to be operating either in the interests of the tenants. In October 1968, when the strike began, a 'good number' of the houses in my home street, Melville Place, were in fact owned by the University (and managed on it's behalf by *Liverpool Improved Houses*) (*Guild Gazette*, 10th December 1968, p6). That the University was committed to doing its 'best' for them was, we may assume, little consolation to the tenants waiting to be re-housed.

From the data stored in its archive it would seem, when the broader picture is viewed, that accommodating the inner city community was a small part only of a very large scale development plan. The sum spent over twenty years on the re-housing scheme contrasts with large single capital outlays on new buildings, money facilitated by a ready access to grant aid. In March 1968 the University received a grant of £500,000 from the Government to spend on one building, the Biochemistry Department, and another, £200,000, for Civic Design. The same year, the University's accounts revealed an increase of £278,000 on its grant for the previous year, as well as grants of £645,583 from 'various other sources' (*Liverpool Echo*, 25th March 1968, np). While it answered the charge of indifference, the University statement makes no reference to a more general political activism amongst the student population, of which support for the rent strikers was merely one example.

In his 1981 centenary history of the University, Kelly notes the 'widespread spirit of revolt that manifested itself, in the 1960s, among the young people' resulting in a pattern of 'marches, demonstrations, sit-ins' (p336). In spite of Liverpool's 'long tradition of friendly and co-operative relations between the university administration and the student leaders', the year 1969, he says, was an aberration, when a small group of socialist agitators, breaking away from the *Labour Society*, instigated a protest upon the visit of Princess Alexandra, to open the Senate House. Well meaning students, he suggests, were used and misdirected by 'a small group of left-wing radicals less

interested in righting particular wrongs than in overturning the whole system' (p336). It would appear that, in his attitude to the student housing protesters, Kelly (1981) is very much in tune with the University authorities of the time. A month before the royal visit, the University used the columns of its staff newsletter to remind staff (and presumably students) of the proposals submitted to the Senate and the University Council, in February 1968, for the creation of new disciplinary boards (no 46, April 1969, p1). In a leading article headlined 'Discipline' it reminded readers of the Senate's power to 'regulate and superintend the discipline of undergraduates and other students of the University and to suspend or expel any student if thought necessary' (p1).

The University's concern about direct action by students is an indicator of the volatility of the political climate at that time. In spite of the particularly local focus of the strike, the Abercromby tenants were benefiting directly from the prescience of causes which appeared to arouse the interest of outsiders in their struggle. In this instance, the involvement of the University as a player connected the Abercromby strike to a wider radicalism, involving the strikers directly in controversies that were otherwise external to the slum clearance programme and the protests surrounding it. It was a typical local struggle, disconnected from outside affairs yet for a moment in political time, the single issue Abercromby strike was at the heart of political dissidence. On behalf of ATACC, a month after the visit, Marjorie Gallimore thanked the student radicals for all they had 'done for the people of Abercromby ward' (*Guild Gazette*, 24th June 1969, p1). As a consensus activist Gallimore notes the 'responsible' behaviour with which they answered those critics who said their presence would inflame the situation: 'if all students protested about such things, England would be a better place' (p1). From Gallimore's choice of emphasis, we may understand the importance of Abercromby as a wake up call for the movement of a developing culture of political resistance.

Political Legacies

No matter what was behind the University's fears of student indiscipline, the approach indicated by the creation of the new

disciplinary boards in 1968 would appear not to have been successful. On 9th March 1970, ten months after the Alexandra protest, the red flag was run up the Senate House pole, as 300 students occupied the building and barred the doors. Though they were, says Kelly (1981), opposed by 'a considerable body of students', they managed to force the resignation of the Guild committee (p338). In fact, the controversy predated the occupation as, according to the University's official statement on the occupation, issued on 23rd March, there had been no Guild committee since 9th February.

Kelly's scepticism about the purity of the radical students' ideals is contradicted by one of them, journalist Jon Snow, in his 2004 memoir. According to Snow, the 'vast majority of the students' had never been involved in direct action before: the 'formally ideological' represented 'less than a hundred of our number' (p59). Snow was one of a number of students involved in the Alexandra protest, who were involved also in the later Senate occupation. Through its connection to a network of radical student interests, Abercromby was linked to a chronology of indiscipline. On 19th March, initiating the procedures designed in February 1968, the University summoned ten students to the *Board of Discipline*, and charged them, says Kelly (1981) under a 'revised' procedure, which was he says 'in accord with natural justice' (p338). In a secret hearing, at which the accused complained they were forbidden to take notes, nine students (including Snow) were suspended and one, Peter Cresswell, was expelled (*Liverpool Weekly News*, 16th April 1970, p1).

The protest of March 1970 was triggered, like the Alexandra affair by a dinner invitation. This time, the target was the South African ambassador, (invited by the Guild), and the University Chancellor, Lord Salisbury, whom the students accused of pro-Rhodesian sympathies. In his memoir, Snow recalls the visit of Princess Alexandra, the student protests and the request made by the student group for a meeting with HRH (2004). Indeed, according to the *Guild Gazette*, in May 1969, it was Snow who caused a 'storm' at Guild Council complaining about the money spent on the Alexandra visit and the University's alleged 'plans to erect hoardings to obscure the view of a slum area' (6th May 1969, p1). But, in his memoir, published thirty five years later, Snow,

incorrectly, connects the occupation directly to the Alexandra protest that occurred ten months previously. The error may indicate the extent to which the radical causes at that time were converging.

In his account Snow describes the student protestors similarly to the description of ATACC given by Kathleen Kenwright (2004a) in Chapter Four and by Ethel Singleton (2001) of the Abercromby tenants, in the sense that he does not see them as driven by ideology. At the time, this 'conservative' institution was, Snow says, 'awash with issues', many of the protesting students inspired by 'the sheer fun of simply being there' (2004, p45). In this respect of course their inspiration was very different from that of the tenants, whose cause was a matter of direct personal impact.

From the picture of University life, recounted in the *Guild Gazettes* of the time, it seems there was nothing remarkable about sit-ins, or particular about the causes. In November 1968, as the Abercromby strike was building, a group of students occupied the Union because the lights went out on a *Pink Floyd* concert (*Guild Gazette*, 12th November 1968, p14)! 'In some senses', Snow concedes, 'We were actively in search of *the* issue with which to confront the authorities at Liverpool' (2004, p52). With those issues ranging from South Africa to Vietnam to Biafra, it's not surprising that, given the passage of time, Snow is unable to separate all the causes from their effects, not to mention the dinner invitations. For Snow's error we can blame Kelly's spirit of the age (1981), which drew together a diverse range of causes, issues and interests that were distant from the immediate needs of slum dwellers.

James and Ethel Singleton concur in their belief that the students targeted by the University in March 1970 for suspension or expulsion did indeed include those with a previous involvement in the 1969 housing protest (Singleton and Singleton, 2001). For the students generally, not only for Snow, Abercromby was one aspect of a wider movement, connecting a number of anti-capitalist struggles and causes. An online archive created in 2009 by former students to memorialise the 1970 occupation opens its historiography in the year 1968. It carries articles, letters, statements and photographs relating to

the student campaign against the slums, the rent strike and the Alexandra protest. According to Dave Robertson, in a piece taken from *Sphinx* magazine in the summer of 1970, the Alexandra protest was the moment when the Senate revolt was 'born'. James Singleton shares Robertson's view of Abercromby as a part of a chronology of student as well as tenant protest. The targeting of the occupation students he insists was 'selective … there were some people they wanted to make examples of' (2001).

The University saw the matter differently, offering a more precise explanation for the selection of students. In a statement, on 'Disciplinary Proceedings' issued by Registrar Herbert Burchnall on 26th May (following the students appeal hearing), the University said the ten students selected were called because 'the University had evidence both of identity and of participation in the occupation' as opposed to mere presence at the Senate House protest meeting (np). The ten day occupation was an act the board regarded not only as 'a most serious breach of University discipline' but as 'a contravention of the law of the land' (*Occupation of the Senate House*, 19th March 1970). The rebels, including Snow, and the Students Union President, Richard Davies, both of whom helped organise the Alexandra student demo, had in fact been threatened over Abercromby, but the University, Ethel Singleton says, decided not to pursue disciplinary action when the tenants association wrote to the Vice Chancellor, telling him that it 'would not take lightly to it' if the University tried 'a thing like that' (Singleton and Singleton, 2001). No matter how or why it identified the rebels of 1970, the warning in its staff newsletter, a month before the 1969 housing protest, tells us that the institution had identified a discipline problem, and that it certainly predated the Senate occupation.

Social Consequences

Alexandra may have been the strangest of the rent strikers' bedfellows and the most unlikely of its allies. She was, Ethel Singleton contends, 'just used for that purpose' but she was the catalyst (2001). Ultimately, the striking Abercromby tenants found the Council, who were responsible for purchasing the University's remaining holdings, taking a more active interest in their re-housing needs. Certainly, after the

Alexandra affair, re-housing 'started to happen quicker', James Singleton recalls, while Ethel explains 'there was no favouritism … we all got re-housed according to our needs and family' (2001). There was no priority on the housing waiting list, but the tenants had been 'wise enough to hold onto our rent money' (2001). Since the University 'never came for it', the unpaid rent was effectively written off (2001).

The *Abercromby Tenants Association* lived on after the re-housing 'settlement', under the guidance of Kerruish and the umbrella of Gallimore's ATACC. In fact, as it turned out, the strike 'deal' was no 'closure' for the community of Abercromby. In September 1969, ward Councillor, John McPherson, was reported prominently on the front page of the Weekly News complaining about the 'wholesale selling' of Council properties to private developers, 'in an area which has already been affected by the sale of whole streets of perfectly good homes to the University' (25th September 1969, p1). 'Every home sold … means one less available to thousands urgently waiting for a Council house', he told the paper, and he suggested the practice was spreading to other areas of the city (p1). As late as May 1972, an *Abercromby Tenants Association* was reported in the press staging a sit-in and occupation at Concord House (*Mersey Mirror*, 4th May 1972, p8). It was, Ethel Singleton believes, the Kerruish-Gallimore group still fighting on its traditional causes (2001). Most of the Myrtle Street group from the days of 1969 were, by then, busy campaigning against the *Housing Finance Act* from their new Council homes elsewhere.

Historical Legacies, Social Meanings

As I explained in Chapter Two, sociologists look for the links between 'industrial and housing configurations' they believe are the indicators of a class consciousness as part of their assessment of the class meanings of rent strikes (Moorhouse et al, 1972, p11). In a number of articles on the rent strikes in Clydeside during and after the First World War, Damer (1997) connects the ongoing Clyde struggle to regional, national and even global conditions, but also to working class traditions, in the Scottish case, dating back to the nineteenth century. He believes the manner of working class action was conditioned by the nature of Glasgow's population, drawn from Ireland and the highlands of Scotland who had an historic mistrust of landlords and their factors.

Whether or not it was written, it was a working class history and folklore and perceived as such, and it 'informed all aspects of local working-class culture', especially for 'who had to manage the household budget' (p38). First-hand accounts by strike leaders such as Willie Gallacher (1936) and the daughter of John MacLean (Milton, 1973) paint a picture of near revolutionary fervour, as the drama and passion of struggle changed the relationship of the workers to the environment around them. According to Damer (1997) it is a tradition that will stir people to action in any confrontation, as it did in 1990, when a third of Glasgow's population refused to pay the poll tax.

Some writers, notably Castells (1983) and Lowe (1986), do not doubt rent strikes grow from a class base but think working class traditions create as many obstacles as opportunities; others think struggles flourish with greatest meaning for the participants when they are without those connections entirely. As I explained in Chapter Two, Bradley (1997) believes the 1934 Leeds tenants were targeted by a Labour Council and Labour movement because they were a little better off than their neighbours and therefore easy to blame without reciprocal loss of working class votes. And, he suggests, it was precisely this tension with poorer workers and inbuilt distance from the middle class that created a special, powerful movement of housing classes, the movement of Council tenants. Srebrnik (1995) examines the struggle experience of Stepney's Jewish women rent strikers in terms also of their separation from the wider working class, in this case through their immigrant status. The racial outsider status of the women, more than their traditional role as homemakers, was the 'more significant cultural marker and indicator of personal identity' (p294).

Abercromby did not strike during a world war like Stepney or Clyde, nor was it connected to industrial actions, housing policies nationally, or in its new form to the more general local campaign for tenants' rights. It did not draw directly on anti oppressive struggles of race or gender, or absorb itself in general working class concerns, though these were 'happening' at the time. Unlike St Pancras in London, wealthy compared to inner city Liverpool, Abercromby was poor even for the Toxteth area, so the strikers were not like the Leeds Council tenants Bradley (1997) suggests were more affluent than their neighbours.

While slum clearance programmes were in progress in other large cities such as Sheffield, the Abercromby strike was triggered by a specifically Merseyside dimension; the dramatic impact of regeneration upon a number of working class communities across the inner city and in the suburbs earmarked to receive the 'overflow'. The profile of the Abercromby strike illustrates the amenability of housing struggles, rooted in local conditions, to a variety of pathways, experiences and connections which may politicise their struggles. Abercromby was connected everywhere, to militant students, to alternative media and of course to royalty. In spite of its militant 'insularity', Abercromby's profile was certainly enhanced compared to other local actions. This was not so much because it was disconnected from powerful interests or traditions; in its resilience and its drama the strike seems well qualified for membership of what Damer (1983) regards as a folklore of housing struggle. It was strong for the same reason that its allies in ATACC, engaged in a broader, therefore less contentious, struggle, were successful; because it accepted 'help' but avoided 'intrusion'. And with a total, rather than partial, rent strike, it separated itself from the principle of a 'fair' rent, and so from the more popular model of struggle. Like Stepney, and unlike Clyde, it was lead and managed by women. It resisted attempts to turn it into any form of 'participation' (Ethel Singleton turned down all three political parties who invited her to stand for ward Councillor) and it took its struggle onto the streets, and away from the committee rooms (Singleton, 2004). In truth, necessity, the condition that separated the tenants from the students and other external causes, was the true mother of Abercromby's vision; with nothing to lose, the ruling groups paradoxically, lose a little of their power to dissuade you.

In spite of its splendid isolation, in happening as and when it did, Abercromby was a part of something bigger 'happening' at the time; connected to what Kelly (1981) and Snow (2004) suggest was the spirit of the era. The relationship between Merseyside's working class and its bosses was strained, a confrontation that may be sensed in the inspiration of some to create their own media. As I explained in Chapter Three, the documentary record left by independent media has opened the history of the time to a broader range of voices and

concerns. As well as the grassroots documentary films, the years 1970 and 1971 were the heyday of the community news-sheet and Merseyside's radical, alternative press.

The People's Media

On 26th February 1970, *Big Flame*, founded by Steve Ferdinando, and published from an address in Wallasey on Merseyside's Wirral peninsula, produced its first edition. BF described itself as a 'Revolutionary Socialist' organisation and its politics as 'Marxist Liberation' (*Big Flame* online archive). The name was taken from a 1969 Jim Allen play about a fictional Liverpool dock strike. Drawing on the example of an Italian revolutionary group, *Lotta Continua*, the Flame stressed the perspectives of community, the origin in its view of the class experience. 'This is more like a piggery than a place to bring up children' one Seacombe (Wallasey) mother told the paper, while nothing was ever done said another tenant until 'we've pestered the health and welfare until we're sick and tired' (p2). It was in examples such as these that *Big Flame* saw the germ of class warfare. In its first edition, the Flame predicted further rent increases and called upon tenants to organise themselves. As an example it printed a narrative of the Abercromby strike.

Politically, the Flame pulled no punches. It was here to persuade workers to follow the path of revolution, a spark it saw burning as brightly in the home environment as it did in the workplace. In their account of a strike at Pilkington in St Helens, a small town eleven miles East of Liverpool, Lane and Roberts claim it was the *Big Flame* sellers who inspired Lady Pilkington to blame 'troublemakers from Liverpool' (1971, cited p66) for causing near revolution in 'a good Catholic town' (cited p67). It was the traditional 'outside influences' and 'reds under the bed' stories but, in this instance, it was *Big Flame* that inspired the *Daily Express*, to blame the Merseyside followers of 'Chairman Mao' for 'anarchy' in the town (pp66-67).

Alongside *Big Flame* there were also independent, community weeklies, Chrissie Maher's *Tuebrook Bugle*, founded by a ladies keep fit class, and, first of the breed, Vauxhall's *Scottie Press*, produced with the help of the *Vauxhall Community Development Project,* and

publishing today from the local neighbourhood centre. Many of the community news-sheets were expansions of brief information sheets distributed by local church and community centres; they covered events happening directly to local people. In the North there was the *Everton Telegraph*, formed by a coalition of churches, and in the South the *Princes Park News* published from the *Merlin Street Community Centre* in Dingle, Liverpool 8 (*Castle Street Circular*, no 50, Jan/Feb 1972, p7). According to the CVS the 'authors and editors' of the community weeklies 'learnt the lesson that news and information are not neutral' (p7). From interest in purely local, not national or global, issues and experiences, a radical experiment in democratic news media was created on Merseyside. The news-sheets were successful, the CVS concluded, 'because people know about and are involved in the news they contain rather than in spite of it' (p7) (see Chapter Three).

There is a tension between the traditional news values created by the 'free' market, and the alternative reality of market forces as experienced by poor people which is that without money, there is no voice. The core value of community media, which enshrines the potential of local politics to develop political awareness, is the principle of democratic accountability; popular democracy is assumed to originate in forms of governance closest to people, which exist at the local level. This tension between the values of establishment and of alternative media was expressed very directly in the origin of the *Liverpool Free Press*, which published its first issue in July 1971.

The *Liverpool Free Press* was born inside the mainstream *Liverpool Echo* as a 'guerrilla newspaper', called the 'Pak-O-Lies' (Whitaker, 1981, p96). It was circulated in secret among the paper's workers by three of its journalists, Brian Whitaker, Rob Rohrer and Daniel Massey. The ultra-conservative Editor in Chief of the Post and Echo, Sir Alick Jeans, was an open admirer of the Portuguese dictator, Antonio Salazar, and according to Whitaker (1981) the paper's news values were a prototype of classless nationalism. The Echo he says encouraged a 1960s feel good factor to the exclusion of 'bad' news about unhappy workers or failures of industrial relations, for fear it might be 'thought to encourage them' (p94). According to Whitaker

(1981) it preferred the images of the hard working poor to stories about social injustice, and 'improvement' schemes to the reality of inner city decline. During this period, when inner city residents were being relocated to outer estates, such as Netherley, Kirkby and Skelmersdale, Whitaker alleges the Echo masked the truth of the city's decline and the painful death of its traditionally diverse communities.

Ultimately, Whitaker and his co-conspirators broke away from the Echo. Operating rent free from a room above *News from Nowhere* radical bookshop, they founded the paper under the new name *Liverpool Free Press*. The new paper did not pursue the targets that were popular in mainstream papers, so-called scroungers, agitators, refugees, vandals, prostitutes, the homeless or the 'odd'. The Free press was concerned with the supposed self-interest and the corruption of owners and decision-makers. Unlike the Echo, the Free Press made no claim of impartiality. Justice, indivisible and equal, was its code of practice, judging the strong by the standards it believed they reserve for the rest of us. For most of its stories, it relied on tip-offs from ordinary people. It was the *Free Press* that highlighted the July 1971 Conservative White Paper, *Fair Deal for Housing*, with its implications for Council tenants, and for the future of public housing. Leading, ultimately, to the *Housing Finance (Fair Rents) Act*, and the series of rent strikes that followed it, the White Paper was broadly welcomed by the official press, including the 'left-wing' *New Statesman* (August/September 1971, p7-8). The Press study group of tenants and writers produced the first critique, anywhere, of the White Paper, exposing what it saw as its underlying ideology of profitable homes.

Rents: Storm Clouds Gathering

You may recall from earlier in this chapter, the McKinsey Report of 1969. Its forecast of a tenfold surplus in available homes led to dis-investment in the slum problem and a slow down in the pace of house building. Two years later, following a surge in Council house sales and the appearance of failure in the policy of regeneration, the picture was changing. It was the Free Press that revealed a 'secret' Planning Department report, predicting, not a surplus, but a massive shortfall of fifty thousand homes, a story picked up subsequently by the *Liverpool Weekly News* (August/September 1971, pp1-2). As *Big Flame*, in

March 1970, had warned it not to do, the Council, on the basis of McKinsey, scrapped house building programmes in Fazakerley, Kirkby and Speke. The McKinsey assessment was based on a calculation of re-lettings, but resulted instead, the Free Press alleged, in a manufactured deficit in new homes (p1). Certainly, it was a trigger for protest in the inner areas, and of the community concern subsequently expressed in the production of community news-sheets and radical media.

A month later, the Free Press reported the first tenant meetings called to organise a campaign against the new Fair Rents scheme (September/October 1971, p5). Fair Rents would become the next phase of struggle, connecting once again the twin pillars of tenant concern, the decontrol of rents without reciprocal improvement in housing conditions. As the 'Fair Rent' clouds were gathering, the people of Dingle, a part of Liverpool 8 nestling between Park Road and the waterfront (and numbered fifty three on the corporation clearance list) were still campaigning to get action taken on the condition of their homes. Like Cathedral, Canterbury and Abercromby, its neighbouring districts of South City, the Dingle tenants were the victims of the circumstance that left the city with a slum clearance programme operating alongside a chronic shortfall in available new homes. Tenants, pushing their children in prams, marched along Dingle's Park Road to the town hall with placards comparing their living conditions to those of the 1930s, and demanding a public enquiry into why promises on re-housing had been repeatedly broken (*Liverpool Weekly News*, 16th September 1971, p1).

Concluding Remarks

What had, by 1971, become a sense of inevitability in local housing policy, in terms of the cruel choices it created for tenants, was the child of the rent strikes and protests across the inner cities between 1969 and 1971. In the sense of desperation it engendered in the slum areas of South and of North City and the loss of community it caused for some relocated tenants, it generated on the other hand a vision of community radicalised to the point that it spawned a political media in film and in print. A pattern of decay, followed, belatedly, by demolition was irreversible by 1971, so the planners had little incentive to

intervene in Dingle or in any of Liverpool's inner city areas; and, if the secret report was to be believed, the tenants could be waiting a long time for their new homes. The ideal of new rural communities cleared of slum housing was fraying at its edges; in Kirkby, Skelmersdale and elsewhere, the true story was not enough homes, not enough jobs. According to McConaghy (1971), the planners' programmes for resolving individual 'physical' problems did not work because they failed to see that poverty is an absence of resources and power in every aspect of personal and community life (p3).

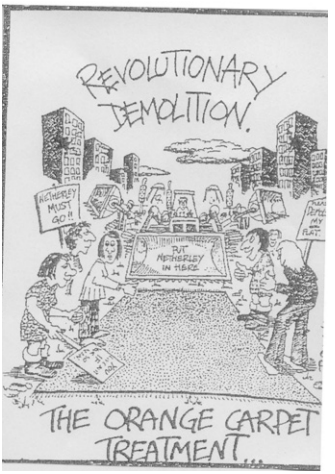
In spite of the energy of their resistance, by the end of 1971 the tenants remained where they were at the end of 1968. If political power was indeed shackled to an economic marketplace, the process of decision-making was removed further therefore from the people it was designed to serve. Given the level of tenant discontent, the Free Press sensed, in the approach of the Fair Rents scheme, a storm brewing. And, when that storm broke, in 1972, it would rage with greatest vigour, not in the cleansed inner cities, not even in Liverpool, but in one of Merseyside's most controversial 'new' communities to where this study, in its next chapter, will turn.

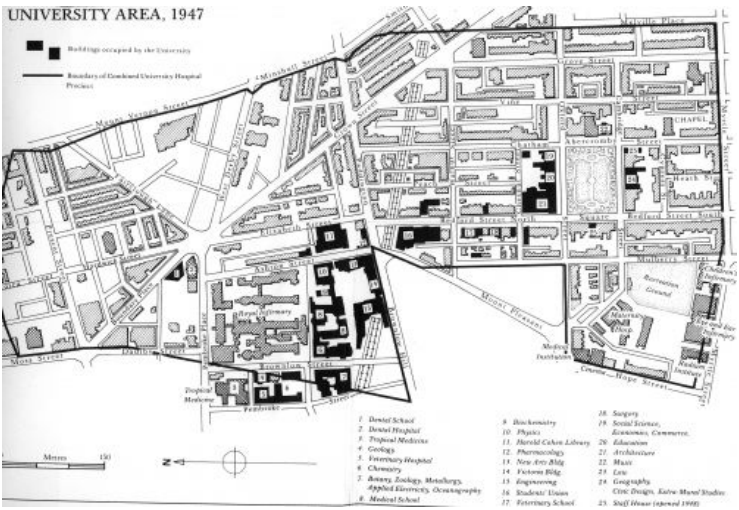
The author (centre) with sister, Jane, and neighbours from the Doyle family, during the Abercromby rent strike, December 1968.

Left: Kathleen Kenwright at the time of the ATACC rent strike, November 1968 and Marjorie Gallimore, MBE, in February 2005 at the time of the *Living It Up* exhibition.

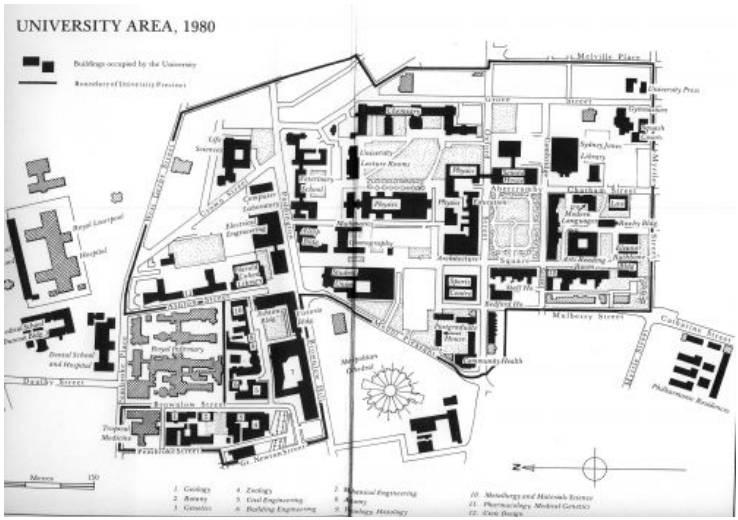
Scotland Road, late 1960's. A child plays on an 'oller' and below, the bulldozers at work on Woodstock Gardens.

Above: a scene from Broomfield's 1971 film *Who Cares? Below:* the orange carpets were the hot tarmacs that accompanied the outward flow of inner city slum dwellers to Netherley and other new estates and suburbs.

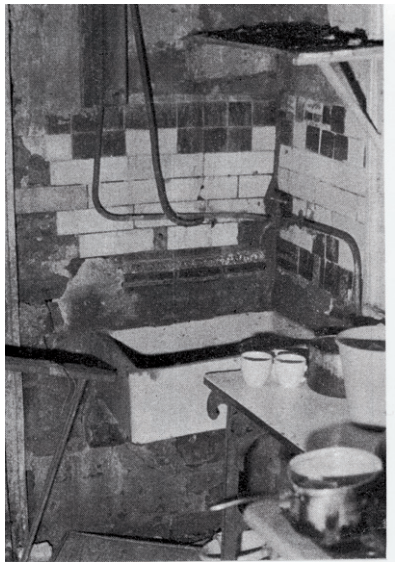




Abercromby Reshaped. The map from 1980 (below) shows the spread of University buildings (in black) after the 1947 Holford Report.



Above: Grove Street, the heart of the University precinct, as it looked in October 1968. *Below:* Melville Place, birthplace of the author, as it looked in December 1968.



The *Guild Gazette* claimed a tenant in Chatham Street, Abercromby, was paying £4 a week to use this kitchen (above), May 1969. *Below:* on the morning of Princess Alexandra's visit, the University Registrar, Herbert Burchnall, appears in a supplement to the *Liverpool Daily Post*.

According to the *Guild Gazette*, this slum property was situated a few yards from Senate House.

Princess Alexandra as she looked in May 1969. *Below:* her programme for the opening of the University Senate House, 15th May, 1969.

Programme
for the
Opening of the Senate House and the
Oliver Lodge Physics Laboratory
by
Her Royal Highness, Princess Alexandra,
The Honourable Mrs. Angus Ogilvy
on
15th May 1969

3.00 p.m. HER ROYAL HIGHNESS will arrive at the main entrance of the Senate Room and after presentations will inspect the Senate Room.

3.15 p.m. Opening Ceremony.
The Chancellor, the Most Honourable The Marquess of Salisbury, will invite HER ROYAL HIGHNESS to declare the Senate House and the Oliver Lodge Physics Laboratory open and to unveil commemorative plaques in the two buildings.
The Vice-Chancellor, Dr. W. H. F. Barnes, will express thanks to HER ROYAL HIGHNESS and make a presentation.

3.25 p.m. HER ROYAL HIGHNESS will inspect the Senate House and the Oliver Lodge Physics Laboratory.

4.45 p.m. HER ROYAL HIGHNESS will take tea in the Tate Hall, Victoria Building.

After HER ROYAL HIGHNESS has left the Ground Floor of the Senate House guests are invited to inspect the Senate Room and the model of the Precinct and then make their way to tea in the Tate Hall, Victoria Building by 4.30 p.m.
Tea will be served immediately HER ROYAL HIGHNESS arrives.

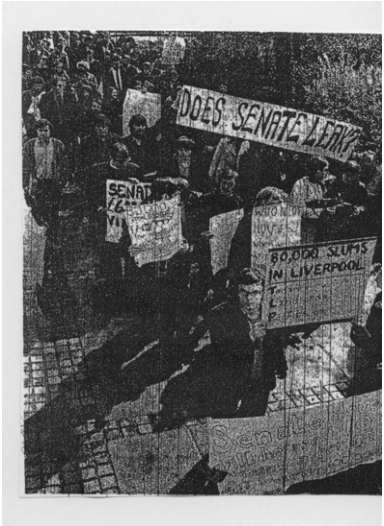
The Oliver Lodge Physics Laboratory will be open for inspection after tea.

Above: the scene that greeted Alexandra as her car entered Vine Street. *Below*: the cortege captured by the *Daily Mirror* and in the *Daily Mail* the Princess meeting Vine Street 'housewives'.


COME AND VISIT THE SLUMS OF VINE ST.

Warm-hearted welcome for the Princess in Slumland

YOUR STARS

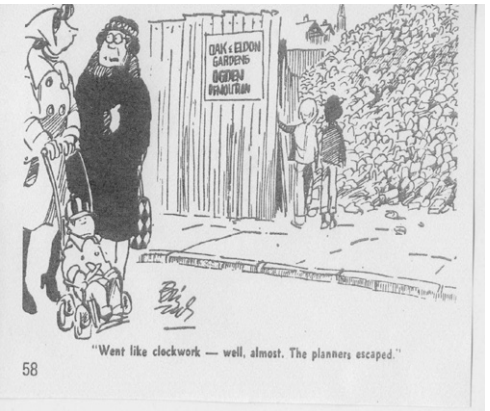


Students supporting the tenants association gather outside the Senate House, 15th May 1969.


'Slums this way' eyeopener for Princess

Princess Alexandra talking to tenants' representative Mrs. E. Singleton

Above: the Sun reports the Vine Street meeting while two days after the Alexandra protest, Jane Parr (below) poses for the *Liverpool Daily Post* in the front room of her Vine Street terraced home, as it was prepared for the Royal visit.

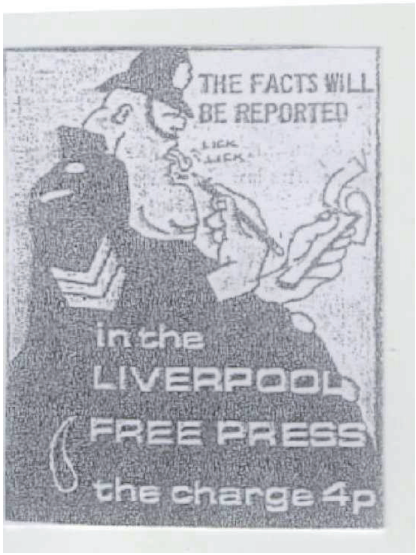


Cartoonist Bill Tidy finds a ‘flaw’ in the perfect demolition of Oak and Eldon Gardens; the planners escaped! *Below:* an unprecedented seven thousand people gathered at the city’s Pier Head to mark May Day, 1970.

Above left: Candia and Crete Towers, Everton, as they looked in September 1970.
Right: 'the Piggeries' Scotland Road.
Below: Big Flame assesses the condensation problem.

Above: the *Liverpool Weekly News*, reporting a story that appeared originally in the *Liverpool Free Press*, August 1971. *Below:* Dingle slum clearance area tenants march to the city centre, September 1971.

Summer 1970 and the first edition of *Big Flame* is published.
Below: the *Liverpool Free Press* explains its intentions!



CHAPTER SIX
Fair Rent is Bent!
Tenants Take on the Government

During the years 1970 and 1971, housing protest on Merseyside was centred on policies controlled at local level, the clearance and regeneration of the inner city areas and the development of higher rent economic housing on new suburban 'industrial' estates. As I explained in Chapters Three, Four and Five, the locality of struggle influences the dynamic content of the movement, even where causes may be shared. In the shift away from local governance, enforced by the introduction of the Conservative government's Fair Rents scheme, we may understand more fully, from this chapter and the one following, the paradoxical nature of that dynamic, where the cause is both local and not.

In the form of the *Housing Finance (Fair Rents) Act* (HFA), the underlying direction of national housing policy, assessed in Chapter Three, became connected to the concerns of the movement locally. In the struggle against HFA, described here in its early phase, a network of tenant groups rooted organisationally and culturally in their immediate local communities would be required to unite in struggle to alter a policy shared not only with the rest of Merseyside but with Council tenants across the country. The market values influencing the direction of national housing policy during the 1960s would now not only affect the nature of tenants' accommodation but set the level of their rent (see Chapter Three).

In the challenge of HFA, the movement was confronting directly a housing policy with an origin in Conservative pro-market ideology. While, as we saw in Chapters Four and Five, the traditional forms of tenant representation are rooted in community values with a non-sectarian, non-political approach, a governing ideology is hard to confront without a general politicisation of those ideas. In its partnerships with grassroots and local labour, the movement is connected both to community interests and to a working class tradition with a national focus. While connecting the movement at both levels, it

is a relationship that expresses the ambiguity at the heart of working class struggles centred on the home. The controversy aroused by potential alliances with non-conventional radical activism, which we saw in Chapter Four, influencing the values of ATACC, was likely also to resurface. In a direct engagement with the process of national policy-making, the consciousness of the tenant groups would have to be challenged, with potential therefore both to energise and to deter resistance. Through the early months of the struggle against HFA, described in this chapter, we will see once more the paradoxical influence upon the movement of the duality of its links. Through the development of the struggle in this latter phase, the core questions of this study, concerning the tension between the community and class instincts that are the twin dynamics of housing struggles, will be illustrated. In the contentiousness of outside political alliances, particularly, the core debates among social scientists about the nature of the movement, as social or as class based, are demonstrated.

In Defence of Public Housing: a New Kind of Struggle

It was the neighbourhood connections and community values discussed in Chapters Four and Five that facilitated the growth of the ATACC network during the years 1968 -1971. As may be seen from the developments described specifically in Chapter Two, there was a shift in housing policy nationally during the 1960s. The private sector was growing and once the benefits of the post-war boom began to fade policy veered decidedly away from public investment in municipal housing and towards fiscal control. While the housing protests on Merseyside during the period were set against a background of austerity in housing, the grievances that provoked strikes, particularly in the inner cities were animated by immediate local conditions, not shared with neighbouring areas and so appeared detached from the bigger picture. Protests targeted the inflexibility of the slum clearance programme and the perceived neglect by the local authority of its housing stock. Following the White Paper of July 1971, outlining the Fair Rents programme, tenants accustomed to confronting an authority accessible directly from inside their local communities would have to draw from a community-based concept, the means to resist a piece of government legislation that targeted every Council tenant in the country.

In a sense, the shared nature of the problem would require tenants to think and act as a social class rather than as community activists, a condition in which the complex dualism at the heart of the movement would be severely tested. From a different set of conditions and, prospectively, of alliances, the complex issues of political allegiance, and of resistance to legitimate authority, that in 1968 separated ATACC from its 'rival' *Liverpool Rents Action Committee* would, after October 1972, dominate the politics of the new movement. When struggle becomes a matter of resistance to the law, the connection of tenants groups to grassroots labour, cited by Sklair (1975) and Lowe (1986), becomes yet more contentious and problematic. Was the relationship to political labour, and the legitimacy it conferred, the winning formula that would transform the tenants cause into a representative labour struggle? Or would the traditional non-sectarian, class neutral approach, weaken the movement at a moment when it needed to transcend the politics of community? Whatever the merits of the non-sectarian approach in unifying the political strands within ATACC, housing policy formed at national level was unlikely to be changed without a political settlement within the local movement of these conflicts.

The Concept of the 'Fair Rent'

The Heath governments *Housing Finance (Fair Rents) Bill* was an attempt to settle what was regarded, by the 1970s, as the 'problem' of subsidies in the public sector. According to the 1971 White Paper , '"Many taxpayers who pay their share of Exchequer housing subsidies… and many ratepayers who meet the cost of rate fund contributions, are poorer and worse housed than the Council tenants whom they subsidise"' (cited, Sklair, 1975, p251). By 1971, the social 'right' to an affordable home was, for the Conservatives at least, openly contentious, with a contrary view of public housing as 'outside' and a burden upon the 'community'. While, in the Fair Rents legislation, we see the nadir of a new kind of thinking in national housing policy, we see also a moment of challenge for the tenants' movement. In a national rent strike, the movement would be overwhelmed by the paradox that is central to any assessment of its identity and values; the dual nature of a community-based movement rooted in the traditions of labour.

In 1971, in its August/September edition, the *Liverpool Free Press* printed excerpts from mass media on the subject of the White Paper and the 'Fair Rent' legislation it proposed. The Conservative government's prospective housing finance Bill received a universally warm welcome from political commentators (pp6-7). 'Fair and bold' said the *Daily Mail*, and, from the *Daily Express*, 'The wisest reform of housing this century' (p7). The *Daily Telegraph*, the *Times*, and the *Economist* were similarly convinced. The Bill would 'push some richer Council tenants out into owner-occupation'. If the view from Conservative leaning papers was influenced by the Bill's seeming encouragement of owner occupation (p7), the view from the liberal press did not dissent. The 'fair deal … deserves a warm welcome' said the *Observer*, while the *New Statesman*, edited by former Labour Housing Minister Richard Crossman, praised 'the first entirely logical approach to housing finance' (p7).

Where sceptical voices sounded they came from the margins, in community and grassroots labour, a further indicator perhaps of a comprehensive political divide rooted in class. 'It is hard to see in this "fair deal" philosophy', declared the *Municipal and Public Services Journal*, 'anything other than a deep contempt for the owners and tenants of nearly one third of the nation's housing stock' (*Liverpool Free Press*, August/September 1971, p7). Its stance was not surprising, said the Free Press, since the journal represented 'the poor officials who will have to administer this monster' (p7). The *Child Poverty Action Group* published a pamphlet explaining how the government's concept of a fair rent differed from the reality of what people could afford. When the housing revenue account, money for maintenance measured against rent income, is in subsidy, rents would be fixed at market level and exchequer subsidies (and therefore tenant rebates) withdrawn (Parker, 1972). In its analysis of the Bill's potential to impoverish poor families, to the advantage of everyone else, CPAG was seeing Fair Rents as class ideology.

The local government workers union, NALGO, went further than the municipal services union and CPAG, setting up its own working party to 'review the development of national housing policy'. The NALGO

think tank reported ‘serious concern about … the Housing Finance Bill’ similar to the concerns expressed by CPAG (*Housing: The Way Ahead*, 1973, p4). The working party, which included housing officers from London and the housing directors of Leeds and Bristol proposed a remodelled housing policy ‘emphasising the social service aspects of housing’ (p4). However, as would become apparent from the subsequent course of events, the opposition among the community sector did not mount early enough or decisively enough to assist the opposition in its necessary transition to a truly national labour struggle. The NALGO group did not begin meeting until November 1972, by which time HFA was already law, and it did not publish its substantial report until June 1973.

For some working inside public services the prospective ‘Housing Finance’ Bill was concerned with more than balancing the books of local spending. With their rents fixed at market level, not by a rent officer, but by the Council, public tenants would not enjoy the private tenants right of appeal, and any tenant unable to afford the new ‘fair’ rent would be stigmatised by the rebate system. In forcing Council housing to meet its own surpluses, the Bill treated profitability as the condition best suited to satisfy need. HFA might also influence the drift of housing policy at local level, encouraging authorities to demolish rather than improve and, simultaneously, slowing down local authority spending. In January, eight months before the Bill ascended into law, *Labour Weekly* predicted a post HFA ‘boom at the “lower end of the private market”’ (7th January 1972, p7). The escalating cost of mortgages will make homes more expensive for everyone, the Labour paper said. What mattered from the point of view of the Bill’s opponents was that a shift among Council tenants towards owner occupation was clearly also anticipated and not only by Conservative newspapers.

There were, at local levels, privatisation schemes that preceded HFA (see Chapter Two) but, according to Parker (1972), the Bill sought to impose the ideology of the free as opposed to the social market on local authorities in the provision of homes. In so doing, he concluded, it deserved to be called a ‘redirection’ of social policy (p3). In its radicalism, Fair Rents was a moment of huge importance for the

tenants' movement historically, and for the understanding of the contradictions at the heart of housing struggles. If, as it seemed, the gains of workers after both world wars, in the provision by government of low rent 'homes for heroes', were to become reversed, the nature of housing struggle locally was about to change fundamentally. The movement must shift not only conceptually from locality to class but would be required to connect to an overtly ideological struggle in defence of the principle of social housing.

At the heart of the 1968 Liverpool strike that created ATACC was the Council's reassessment of rents on the basis of the desirability of properties (see Chapter Four). While in 1968 the target of the rent strike was the administration of housing policy at local level, as it was during the 1960s at St Pancras, in Sheffield and in East London (see Chapter Two), a traditional focus of the tenants movement was now a component of ruling ideology. Housing causes are often rooted in ruling ideologies, as we saw in Chapter Two where the similarity of issues and commonality of links to grassroots labour was illustrated. It is part of the paradox of housing struggles that they are both connected by membership of a labour tradition and disconnected by the locality of tenants' experiences. It is the administration of housing policy at a local level, which involves a close relationship between residents and local politicians that inhibits the perception of a shared interest.

In HFA, Parker (1972) suggests, policy was becoming re-directed away from the state citizen partnership that treated need as the governing principle of public housing. This does not necessarily mean that it was becoming re-directed away from the political partnerships that govern housing administration at the local level. As the national cause was the same as those that triggered local strikes in St Pancras, Sheffield, East London and Liverpool during the 1960s, its familiarity might blur the distinction in the mind of tenants between national and local governance. This too reflects the conundrum of housing protests that are connected to the fundamental issues of political governance but rooted structurally in experiences impacting at community level.

Opposition on Merseyside

The *Liverpool Free Press* began its campaign against the new Fair Rents at a much earlier stage than NALGO. The Free Press did not accept the idea of a post-war political consensus in support of public housing, seeing instead a natural inclination in capitalist governance towards the private sector (August/September 1971, p6). In responding to the Conservative White Paper, published in July 1971, it suggested the political class prefers to spend as little as it can on public housing unless forced to do otherwise. Far from being socially progressive, the housing system, it said, was rigged in favour of property interests at the expense of corporation tenants. Tax relief on mortgages rewards owners of larger properties, pushing up the annual subsidy to owner occupiers to an average of sixty pounds, against thirty nine pounds for the Council tenant (p6).

The reality, exposed by the Free Press, of Council tenants subsidising the communities upon which they are a 'burden' was Sklair (1975) points out never mentioned in media sympathetic to the Conservatives. Under the new proposals, said the Free Press, the 1,300,000 private tenants would find their rents forced up by deregulation. HFA builds on the tradition of getting the poor to subsidise the poor by making the poorest tenants subsidise everyone; mortgage holders through tax relief, private landlords through subsidies and the government, standing to make an additional £300 million out of the scheme (*Liverpool Free Press*, September/October 1971, p5). The Free Press did not believe that support for public housing among the ruling class was a matter of principle. On the issue of tenants joining with Labour to oppose the legislation, the paper was likely therefore to adopt a position of scepticism.

In October 1971, a year before the Bill was to become law, some Merseyside tenants were talking about the threat posed by the White Paper. At a meeting of tenants associations in Stanley House, Marjorie Gallimore attacked the prospective subsidy which she said would force working class tenants to support the very needy who should be the responsibility of all (*Liverpool Free Press*, September/October 1971, p5). Any subsequent legislation, she told the group, would create ghettoes of second class owner occupancy alongside third class

Council housing. In May 1972, The *Scottie Press*, the independent newsletter for Scotland Exchange (part of North City), joined the Free Press in calling upon tenants to resist, publishing an article, 'Caught in the Act', by Barbara Stone. It called on residents to 'join one of the Tenants' Associations that are being formed in every block in this area' (May 1972, p1).

A month later, *Big Flame*, reissued after a break from publication, joined the anti-HFA campaign. Like the Free Press, the Flame advocated action outside the discourses of the political mainstream. It may be significant that radical groups sympathetic to Council tenants were already taking positions on the matter of how resistance should be organised. These anticipated the tension between the twin origins of the movement in both community life and in the political traditions of working class struggle. *Big Flame* cited tenants in Dingle who organised to stop the dumping of sewage in the area, as an example for others to follow. The action the radical paper was calling upon tenants to choose was a form rooted solidly in community values thereby illustrating once again the paradoxical nature of the movement's dual identity. For *Big Flame*, the values of community were not pre-programmed to function as instruments of social partnership as argued by Castells (1983) and Lowe (1986). In elevating the ordinary housewife and worker into political 'leadership', democratic organisation at community level, in the manner of the Dingle tenants, carried within it the germ of a different non-hierarchical politics, drawing workers away from dependency on formal political power.

As a contrast to Dingle, the paper cited the example of tenants in the Everton re-development area whose single issue rent strike the paper claimed was beginning to crumble. The Everton tenants were unable to 'develop a sense of solidarity' becoming 'disillusioned' when they couldn't see action or 'suspicious of their neighbours paying the rent secretly' said the Flame (p5). Tenants should choose non-traditional, grassroots forms of democracy, it said, whenever they are called to fight a remote decision-making power. In the face of the new 'Unfair Rent Act' tenants who realise rent strike 'is their best weapon' will be betrayed if the strike organisation is restricted to central committees of

“dedicated people” (p5). All tenants, the paper warned, ‘must be involved in discussion and planning’ (p5).

Workers Power

Big Flame and the Free Press were interested in grassroots resistance of many kinds. In their coverage they linked housing struggles to those organised in the workplace by industrial workers. It is in this linkage, cited most often in the example of ‘Red Clyde’ (see Chapter Two) that the community tradition of permanent campaigning, represented by ATACC, is subverted in favour of a different set of alliances. The radical papers were anticipating the tension, central to the analytical model of this work, between what they saw as bourgeois community thinking and the real grassroots anger capable of mobilising workers into actions uniting the spheres of work and home.

Alongside the street level committees and action groups, connection of home struggles to those in the workplace was central to the democratic alternative the papers represented. Alongside their coverage of HFA, both papers reported a number of strikes in industrial locations happening at the same time, connecting them as working class experience. In June 1971 workers at *Upper Clyde Shipbuilders* (UCS) took over the Glasgow factory and ran it as a workers cooperative. While UCS was prominent news in national media, actions on Merseyside of similar character were less well reported. These included occupations at *St Helens Plastics* and at the *Fisher Bendix* electrical supplies factory in South Boundary Road, Kirkby (Harman, 1988). The model of workers power created by the workers at *Fisher Bendix*, featuring a shop stewards committee answerable to general meetings of workers families, was the same in essence as the one advocated by *Big Flame* for the tenants groups organising against HFA (*Under New Management*, 1972). For this to be adopted by tenants as an organising principle, the movement would have to shift significantly from its traditional partnership of non-political and class political instincts towards a distinctive class politics, no longer focused on local conditions.

As Harman (1988) suggests, conditions existed during the early years of the 1970s that replicated circumstances on the Clyde, in particular

the spectre of mass unemployment. During the turmoil of 'Red Clyde' in 1915, the import of cheap labour into the armaments factories linked the rent issue to falling wages and rising unemployment, creating the connected worker tenant strikes described by Damer (1980) and Castells (1983). At the time of the occupation, *Fisher Bendix* was not the only example of redundancies, or of redundancies in Kirkby. *Lybro Universal* and *British Trailers* closed their Kirkby factories, while 240 jobs were lost at *Birds Eye*, 65 at *Dubilier Condensers* and 40 at *William Harvey*. The pattern was repeated across Merseyside with 400 job losses at *Cammell Laird* and 900 at *Joseph Lucas*, where another worker occupation lasted four months (Taafe and Mulhearn, 1988). A further 450 jobs were lost at *Silcock and Lever*, 400 at *Electro Hydraulics*, 560 at *Bear Brand* and 1200 at *Cadbury-Schweppes* (*Socialist Worker*, 3rd July 1971, p4). For *Big Flame* in particular it was important for the Fair Rents struggle that in conditions of economic recession tenants sensed the connected impact on working class families of wage and rent.

According to Moorhouse *et al* (1972) the linkage of work and home that created 'Red Clyde' is a necessary precondition for the success of any protest form that relies on autonomous worker action (see Chapter Three). Without a sense of common purpose among its adherents, it is more difficult for a movement without a traditional leadership to develop and grow. In their community base, housing protests are, according to *Big Flame*, a purer form of struggle, unencumbered by the male hierarchies associated with trades unionism. However, in its calls for industrial workers to support the anti-Fair Rents cause, the Flame was recognising once again the paradox at the heart of community politics. In times of economic stability, community is the connector that draws people into the political life of their estates. During a recession, however, the community focus would tend to obscure the wider connections, hindering the development of any class analysis of the workers economic condition.

The job insecurity of the era, noted by Harman (1988), and the weakening of the bargaining position of workers, is a necessary precondition of the linkage that must be recognised by workers if a political protest is to evolve into class struggle. On Merseyside, job

losses and wage cuts were the background to what Harman called a new era of militancy. At the same time that working class families were losing breadwinners, they needed extra cash to pay for the rising rents on their homes. It is through hardships that affect the ability of families to maintain a minimum standard of living, that housing protests become linked to family income.

It is not only in the experience of family hardship that the preconditions of a class struggle were forming. A reduced standard of living was a circumstance not confined to one particular class. If recession impacts on values, then it does so equally upon those who own their homes, those who employ workers and upon the governance responsible for the maintenance of order. A warning for those who might choose the strike option in the campaign against HFA was contained within the deal that ended the occupation of the *Fisher Bendix* factory in Kirkby. In return for the right to work, the union accepted a no strike clause and 'no resistance to reorganisation', which the workers agreed at a mass meeting on 20th March 1972 (Harman, 1988). In order to force concessions, the independent workers council had to reconstitute a partnership with firstly the union and then the employer. Ultimately, as the cost of a job, fundamental rights had to be sacrificed by the Kirkby workers.

According to Harman (1988) throughout the early years of the 1970s the state was shifting from partnership towards repression as a strategy for controlling both inflation and its immediate social consequences. The 1971 *Industrial Relations Act* (IRA), in force at the time of the Kirkby occupation, created special courts empowered to punish unions for so called wildcat strikes that were called by workers without union backing. As we saw in Chapter Three, the national Fair Rents scheme was preceded by forerunners in London and in Sheffield that also triggered rent strikes. In that it criminalised, specifically, actions by workers in support of other workers 'industrial relations' was a reflection in the perspectives of government of the presence of economic linkage. It too was not new. Taafe and Mulhearn (1988) argue that it was the fulfilment of the vision outlined in the 1969 Labour White Paper *In Place of Strife*.

As a result of a confluence of threats to workers living standards, struggles were happening simultaneously in the communities and in the workplaces. If, in the experience of multiple struggles, workers sense a class condition, they may see that condition also in the conduct of their employers and landlords, in which case the merits of organising without the political establishment may appear stronger. However, in a class conscious condition, one important advantage of community struggle is jeopardised. While struggle at local level, targeting local political order, draws in people who might otherwise be marginal to workers causes, community politics is integrated into the mainstream of political life. Mass action by workers in conjoined causes is not. Once more, in its potential to animate, the paradox at the heart of the housing movement contains the means to divide.

Where tenants rely upon fellow workers rather than neighbours to invigorate their struggle, two consequences may follow. While the legitimacy conferred on housing struggles that are nominally non-political is compromised, through class struggle tenants are strengthened by a more powerful network of connections transcending both party and locality. In housing struggles the values of community and of labour are present and significant in equal measure. It is a central contention of this work that the duality of the movement, rooted in both community and labour traditions, is the reason for the existence of areas of contention among tenants engaged in housing struggles. While rent struggles are overtly working class in character, the movement is subject to divisions over political aims, including links to class conscious causes. A further element is that class and community values both contain the germ of new and of traditional forms of political engagement. While links to industrial labour unite workers in class consciousness, they also assimilate them also into established hierarchies. Community networks may divert tenants from confronting political power, but they permit people to act independently of traditional leadership. For the tenant groups organising against the rent increases, the *Industrial Relations Act* was a portent of what, in circumstances of economic hardship, they might end up having to face. It affected directly the ability of workers to act in support of other workers and pertinently for this study, the means for industrial workers to strike in defence of tenants.

If the recession was indeed to draw industrial workers into the housing struggle, consequences were, at least theoretically, far reaching. Malpass and Murie (1987) suggest that the anti-union policies of the era eroded workers belief in the value of the alliance with Labour. 'People could not tell the difference between Conservative and Labour' was Harold Wilson's assessment of why the party lost the 1970 election to Edward Heath's Conservatives (Taafe and Mulhearn, 1988, np). In the sense that the labour movement is the usual instrument of mass action, a break with Labour would potentially revolutionise the struggle. Mass action, but organised without leadership, would indeed be revolutionary even for the housing campaigners whose relationship with industrial workers is already complicated by the physical separation within the labour movement of work from home. In seeing their interests as detached from or antithetical to those of organised Labour, workers would need an extraordinary level of faith in self-organised resistance, and in the palliative power, expressed in the worker occupations, of worker autonomy. As long as the cause appeared to have friends in influential positions, engagement with the orthodox political process, primarily in the form of an alliance with sympathetic labour, was likely to remain a favoured option for workers aiming to alter or amend policy. In the case of the tenants' movement, links to the Labour Party are most developed at the grassroots, community level where opposition to Fair Rents appeared to be mounting.

Local versus National

The tenant's chances of preventing the implementation of Fair Rents would be harmed, even mortally, if they could not build a national campaign with a united strategy, from the experience of local struggles. Clearly, it was a challenge. Local networks are the bread and butter of housing struggles, but harder to adapt to bigger 'linked' causes. In January 1968, when Liverpool's local authority published its proposals to re-evaluate rents (see Chapter Four), tenants formed their own associations and committees or joined and re-invigorated existing ones. This was the model *Big Flame* wanted tenants to follow, in the manner of the *Fisher Bendix* workers. The paper believed recession and the raised political consciousness of the time would make the

grassroots model associated with housing struggles, an instrument of real class politics. While local networking was a working model, the actions at local level must become connected if the campaign was to influence national government. For 'community' politics to work in a struggle against a universal condition, tenants needed to move beyond the local condition and the relationship to purely local governance. The struggle must achieve a profile that assisted in obtaining the support of workers engaged in industrial struggles. If the fusion of rent and wage was indeed the condition for a successful struggle against a national rents scheme, the alliances involved would trigger once more the divisions inside the movement that resulted from its dual identity. Like the unions that lead the workers in the Kirkby factory occupation, the organised, official tenant networks, with connections to constitutional Labour, reacted differently, and with different instincts from the workers themselves.

According to Sklair (1975), there was an overwhelming demand among tenants for a national rent strike against the Fair Rents scheme. This groundswell, he suggests, was ignored at the outset by the national federation which listened to labour officials instead of grassroots opinion. The Communist led *National Association of Tenants and Residents Associations* (NATR), 'the only tenants' organisation in a position even to consider this' ignored a call for a national strike at its conference in July and subsequently again in September at a tenant rally in Trafalgar Square (Grayson, 1996, p48). The Trotskyist *International Socialists* formed a rival *National Tenants Action Committee* (NTAC) but not until September 1973, too late to abort the developing pattern of fragmented local actions. According to Grayson (1996) 'scores' of affiliated tenants associations went ahead 'on their own initiative' (p48). It was the kind of self-organisation, and momentum, characteristic of the tenants' movement. Without the focus NATR might have provided, however, the co-ordinated directing strategy would be harder to rouse (1996, p48).

While the 'ordinary' tenants who wanted NATR to call a national strike were the least connected politically, and therefore rooted in the politics of community, their instincts were more radical than those with direct experience of leadership, even where the latter adhered to a class

based view of worker's relationship to the instruments of power. Castells (1983) and Lowe (1986) argue that the urban base of the movement is the reason traditional multi-issue tenants associations become transformed into instruments of social pressure, functioning differently from work based labour organisations. However, it is also in the politics of community life that tenants are separated from the values of the traditional hierarchical and formally led worker organisations and from the model of partnership with constitutional Labour. In the values of community, and in the non-oppressive democratic planning that prevails at community level, *Big Flame* believed tenants might become sufficiently radicalised to mount a powerful campaign.

A movement focused on a national issue needed an agency such as NATR working democratically under the direction of its membership, to supply a directing mind if not leadership. Even without a formally called national strike, the energy of the local associations would not be wasted if it could still be harnessed to a broad campaign, establishing the common, visible cause that would function as a core, unifying issue. Without national leadership however, a number of problem conditions became established from the outset. Without the direction of their 'parent', the animated regional tenants associations were weakened, reorienting inevitably the original strong support for a strike towards lower risk alternatives. With local conditions set to dominate the plans and responses of regional tenant groups, the campaign divided, inevitably, into partial strikes, increase strikes and total strikes. Significantly, a division emerged between those who wanted to strike now and those who wanted to wait on the policies of their particular local authorities.

The failure of NATR to call a strike meant that associations were forced to plan belatedly, and without the reassurance of national support, which carried consequences for any subsequent actions. On Merseyside, it was not until 5th September that an anti-Fair Rents campaign group was created, at a meeting of twenty tenants associations, in Church House, Hanover Street (*Liverpool Free Press*, September/October 1972, p4). Since they would not be paying, the groups agreed that tenants should not keep or bank withheld rent. In

contrast to what happens when strikes are targeting a local condition, the new group called for 'industrial support… to protect tenants from victimisation' (p4). Significantly for the future course of the campaign on Merseyside, the motion calling for a total rent strike was amended to the lower risk but reduced impact plan to withhold rent increases.

The Campaign in the Community

While the campaign against Fair Rents would not be organised as a national event, it was likely it would still happen on a national scale. This made anti-HFA different in substance to the local campaigns described in Chapters Four and Five. Both elements of the movement, community networking and 'links' to the labour movement must in this case operate not only effectively but effectively in combination. In the regions tenants remained united against the Bill, as indicated by the large number of associations mobilising and forming. Few parts of the country were untouched by the early murmurings of a campaign. According to Grayson (1996), the North West of England emerged strongly with well supported and well organised strikes called in Manchester, Oldham, Bolton and Preston. In South Yorkshire there were 'no go' areas for rent collectors and strikes in parts of the more affluent South of England including Greenwich and in Cheltenham, where tenants, on strike since April, had forced the Conservative authority to freeze the increases (*Big Flame*, September 1972, p4). While the practices of tenants associations were refined traditionally in struggles over community issues, in organising against HFA at regional level the movement was adapting its traditional method to a new set of conditions.

On the 23rd August the campaign on Merseyside became visible when hundreds of people marched through the City Centre chanting 'Fair Rent is Bent' (p1). Tenants in the Scotland Road area of North City had been preparing for action since April when a letter in the *Scottie Press*, 'Fair Rents, You foot the Bill' called residents to a meeting in Limekiln Lane. As I described in Chapter Five, the slum clearance programmes of the late 1960s had altered the demography of the Scotland Road area of North City built originally around its Irish immigrant community. However, the study by Weinberger (1973) suggested that in spite of dissatisfaction with their accommodation, the residents of North City

were more rooted in their communities than those living in the suburbs (see Chapter Two). Local networks of communication were strong enough that the area was prompt in organising a coherent and connected strategy thereby uniting the multiple of existing tenants associations in the area.

The campaign on Merseyside was spreading beyond the already 'organised' groups into areas with less of a community tradition. New, single issue anti–Fair Rents action committees were being formed on Kirkby's Tower Hill estate and in other areas beyond the city boundary, in Bootle to the North and in the town of Birkenhead (home of *Cammell Laird*), on the Wirral Peninsula. As October and the imposition of the rent rises approached, in areas not yet 'organised' intent was signalled by mass meetings, in Tower Hill's neighbour estates in Kirkby and in Fazakerley, neighbour of Norris Green, in North East Liverpool. In other areas activists were distributing leaflets calling tenants to meet. On Scotland Road's Bronte estate, 1,000 tenants signed up to say they wouldn't pay the increases (*Scottie Press*, October 1972, p1). Similar 'manifestoes' were circulating in Everton and, to the South of the city, in the working class town of Halewood (*Big Flame*, September 1972).

While located on the borders of Cheshire, Halewood, like Kirkby, was an overspill estate of Liverpool. *Big Flame* set up initial meetings in the town and told its readers that 60% of tenants were supporting a rent increase strike (October 1972, p1). Halewood's new action committee organised collections of money on the estates at Leathers Lane and at New Hutte, picketed rent offices and created a wall newspaper to communicate with residents, using boarded up shops as posters. In Halewood, while the campaign was a new experience for many residents, it was perceived by some of its organisers as an opportunity to kindle old style community tenant politics. 'Even if we don't win this time, we have made a start in Halewood … We can start to do something together about some of the other problems on the estate now' a tenant told *Big Flame* (p1).

The opportunity the campaign afforded residents to communicate with each other at neighbourhood level appeared to be a key element in helping tenants organise the rudiments of a campaign. As we have

seen through the course of events in Chapters Four and Five, local networking was the primary instrument used by tenants confronting local conditions or events. Yet, in the national cause the local networks were working more effectively duplicating action rapidly across the region. In their geographical breadth, the early preparations indicated that the local character of the campaigning groups was fuelling the spread of resistance rather than the reverse. As a corollary of course, the local base of the campaigning was producing a range in types of actions and strikes, also characteristic of community politics.

Big Flame was an organised network of activists, not simply a newspaper. As such it was committed to intervening directly to help tenants organise. The *Free Press* was only operating as a newspaper that connected disparate groups through providing information about the campaign. Like the Flame, it was reporting strong support for the strike across the region. However, in the appearance of strength, an adverse reaction to the campaign from supporters of the policy or of the Council may well have been inevitable. From within the political establishment, criticism began to be voiced. Bootle MP, Simon Mahon, expressed his concern at the formation of the *All Bootle Rent Action Committee*: 'I know my constituents are very responsible people … they will have no time for irresponsible bodies who intend to take action against lawful authority' (*Liverpool Free Press*, September/October 1972, p4). On the day the Bill became law, however, the Bootle group's supporters, 'celebrated' their new Fair Rents by burning their rent notices in a coffin outside the offices of lawful authority, the town hall in Marsh Lane. In other strike situations, described in Chapters Three, Four and Five, we have seen controversy about radical or extra legal actions or influences lead to divisions within and between associations. That the Bootle tenants were not dissuaded by their MP's concerns may be taken as an indicator of unity in the face of that problem or merely perhaps of the strength of anti-Fair Rents feeling in the town.

Tenants withholding their rent in the South City area of Falkner Square used the Free Press to appeal for help 'from other areas of the city' (p4). While they were organising at local level, in seeking to unite with others fighting the same cause, the Falkner tenants demonstrated the effectiveness of community in getting people not just engaged in local

political life but connected across boundaries. On North City's Bronte estate (Scotland Exchange), *Big Flame* claimed that all but three tenants were committed to the increase strike (p4). In October, to illuminate the unity of workers across their communities, the paper printed it's 'rent strike map'. In addition to Scotland Exchange, Bootle, Kirkby and Birkenhead, the Flame reported increase strikes in East Liverpool on the estates at Cantril Farm and in Huyton. Beyond Merseyside, in the more rural county of Cheshire, it reported a rent strike in Warrington and also an invasion of the Council chamber in Widnes (p5).

The Political Strike

In spite of the variety of the examples of activism described, and the unity they indicated, it was apparent that differences in the local areas over the extent or type of action reflected, at least in part, the coalition in political values characteristic of the movement generally. The variations in strategy were part of the diversity of the movement attributable to the locality of its bases. While diversity was clearly an enabler, bringing people into the struggle on terms acceptable to them, it could be used also to divide, in the manner seen at Sheffield in 1967 and in Liverpool in 1968. In both those cases, the value of 'outside' agitators was controversial because of the threat some, including Liverpool's Gallimore, believed they posed to the 'non-political' community base of tenants associations. In the case of the campaign against HFA, which would very likely involve connections to bigger causes, and probably to industrial actions, this carried implications for the unity of the campaign.

In utilising total withdrawal as an instrument of pressure, strikers breach the relationship of the tenant to his landlord, a bond that is in principle maintained only so long as a 'fair' rent is paid. In continuing to pay rent, increase strikers avoid the stigma of lawlessness and of radical dissent. While it may be attributable in part to individual conditions, or family circumstance, a difference of political analysis is apparent therefore between tenants willing to participate in a total strike compared to those favouring partial or increase strikes. In declaring a willingness to continue paying a 'fair' rent, the act of striking

becomes symbolic, retaining the legitimacy accorded gestures of protest which minimise disruption.

Unless the withheld rent is retained, a difficult option for working class families during a recession, a total rent strike means hardship in the longer term, unless of course it is won. Furthermore, it attracts a hugely increased risk of eviction or legal action. It is because withdrawal is a matter transcending principle, but also linked fundamentally to core principles that it becomes a matter that may inhibit unity or impede the cohesion of linked actions. In the two alternate strategies, the tension for tenants inherent in a politicised campaign such as that against Fair Rents is expressed. In this case, I suggest that adherence on the part of group leaderships to either a community or class conscious approach influenced their attitudes towards increase or total rent strikes, with the class position favouring total strikes.

The moderate consensus created by NATR was disposed towards alliances with Labour rebels and towards a diversity of local actions as opposed to a national strike. In spite of the original widespread support for a national total rent strike, relatively few associations were willing to break from the lead of the parent organisation. On Merseyside two tenants associations representing areas with very different identities voted overwhelmingly in favour of a total rent strike. On the Tower Hill estate in Kirkby, a mass meeting of 450 people answered Big Flame's call for a total, as opposed to an increase, rent (and rates) strike. Tower Hill organised eleven estate based divisions, subdivided again with a committee representative on each street or in each block (*Big Flame*, September 1972, p1). In Scotland Exchange, which includes the districts of Scotland Road, Vauxhall and Everton, the Scotland Road associations opted for a similar style of democratic organisation, operating through sub-associations: 'every area is meeting to organise their response to the Act' explained the *Scottie Press* (October 1972, p1). Ultimately, one of the Scotland groups, known as 'Over the Bridge' would break with its neighbours and join Tower Hill in a total rent strike (November 1972, p8).

A decision to withhold rent, in any form, was a defining moment for those who made that commitment. The decision was inevitably

followed by related forms of independent action and engagement, unfamiliar where a community is not engaged in struggle, but inspirational, potentially, where people come together with neighbours in a common cause. While the issue was not local in origin, the *modus operandi* of the groups was the same as it had always been in local struggles, and in the tradition of the movement. Kirkby's fledgling *Unfair Rents Action Group* organised pickets made up of housewives and the unemployed to 'follow' rent collectors. In 1972 the action squads of flying pickets were the same in character as those from Speke and Childwall Valley that picketed homes and offices in 1968. In this case, however, they would be needed for other duties once the corporation issued its first eviction notices (*Liverpool Free Press*, September/October 1972, p4).

The Struggle inside the Labour Party

As far as strategies require an assessment of a political condition, they are political in content, whatever the community base of any of the action groups. As it embraced formal political process, a 'moderate' strategy, built on partnership with NATR or the Labour Party was strengthened by the perception that it was not driven by ideology. It consisted of more than a preference for the local as opposed to the national rent strike, or for an increase rather than a total strike. As I described in Chapter Four, the relationship of the movement to political labour, in its many forms, was a powerful, definitive symbol of the ambiguity at the heart of a protest movement with a strong class base, but a heritage rooted in the community. As Sklair (1975) reminds us, in 1972, the national tenants federation, NATR, was diverted from rallying its affiliates in a general strike, primarily by the traditional faith of organised labour in the Labour Party.

In this instance the hope embraced by the federation was the promise made by a rash of Labour controlled authorities not to implement the *Housing Finance Act*. As I pointed out in Chapter Two, an historical tradition exists, established by experiences common to strikes across the country, of a betrayal by Labour of promises made to tenants. Nonetheless, the power of the party, and the legitimate voice it appeared to offer, meant the cultivation of Labour allies is common across the movement, and was indeed to be expected. Groups acting

independently of Labour are likely to find themselves struggling without money and access to mass media. As 'outsiders', they retain a purity of ideals but become vulnerable to political attack and isolation. As in other cases (see Chapters Two and Three) tenants would be inclined to nurture an alliance so long as the signals from Labour appeared positive. It was the Liverpool leader, Bill Sefton, who proposed a motion passed by in June 1972 by seventy four ruling Labour groups, not to implement HFA (Grayson, 1996, p48). It may have encouraged tenants to believe they had a chance of getting the rent rises delayed, if not stopped, if they stood by their Councillors.

The Electoral Option

In standing by their Councillors tenants demonstrated an evident trust in the electoral system. Local accountability is another area of political life inclined to produce divisions between traditional community associations and single issue action groups. In studies of rent strikes in Leeds (see Chapter Three), Bradley (1997 and nd) argues that the Labour Party's alliances with tenants are governed not by a common investment in the interests of workers but by electoral opportunism. According to Bradley, Labour's investment in the constitutional process means the party is governed by the needs of electoral competition and committed politically therefore to the upholding of laws, even bad ones. As Liverpool Labour faced the responsibility of administering the Fair Rents scheme, Bradley's observations are again pertinent: 'Government will be told that Liverpool [Council] will not foist these measures on Liverpool' declared Council leader Sefton on the 28th April, in a pre-election 'promise'. Again, on 5th May, following the party's sweeping victory: 'Our policy is still non-implementation' (*Liverpool Free Press*, September/October 1972, p4). Once the election was over, Sefton admitted to the *Liverpool Daily Post* that in Council estates, the authority's opposition to the Fair Rents scheme had been a 'major factor' helping Labour in the election (cited, p4).

The matter at hand for the tenants of course was whether Labour would keep its promise. Beyond the city boundary, Liverpool was the landlord of Kirkby tenants living in Southdene and in Northwood. The tenants of Tower Hill paid their rent to Kirkby, but it seemed likely that in its position on HFA, Kirkby would take account of its neighbour's

views. In July, Kirkby Council promised the newly formed Tower Hill Action Group that it too would not implement HFA (*Kirkby Reporter*, 19th July, p1). Within a month, however, Kirkby's local paper, The Kirkby Reporter (sister of the *Liverpool Echo*), was reporting threats of resignation by Kirkby Councillors, worried Liverpool might renege on its promise (23rd August 1972, p1). In May, while Bill Sefton was promising that Labour would not implement the rent rises, a group of Liverpool Councillors pledged to 'go to jail' rather than implement the increases (*Scottie Press*, May 1972, p1).

To defeat the Bill by electing Councillors who would not implement the legislation must have been an attractive option for the newly forming anti-HFA groups, when set against the hazards of a strike. Yet, if mistrust of Labour was as widespread among tenants as Sklair (1975) suggests, electing or re-electing Labour was an option with the ability to materialise the movement's traditional tensions. In hindsight, the emergence, so early, of prospective Labour 'rebels' was a sign that opinion on how to resist the Bill was no more universal or agreed among constitutional Labour than it was among the campaign groups. If trust in elected Councillors was to carry the day in the Merseyside movement, it could very easily backfire.

As the summer drew to a close, a change in Labour's attitude to the Bill nationally was becoming apparent. A mere two weeks after the original Sheffield gathering, where Bill Sefton led the anti-HFA rebels, Labour Leader, Harold Wilson, met the leaders of Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds Councils to advise 'caution' (Grayson, 1996, p48). Before Merseyside's authorities assembled to vote, party policy nationally had shifted beyond the 'delay' strategy outlined in the party paper *Labour Weekly* back in January (14th January 1972, p1) to the 'grudging implementation' described by the *Kirkby Reporter* on 23rd August (p1). The fair rent proposals were 'reactionary and socially divisive … arbitrary and authoritarian' future Environment minister Anthony Crosland had said in a parliamentary debate in November 1971 (Jones and Lowe, 2002, pp170-171). As Labour Councils wrestled with the dilemma of having to administer HFA, it was Crosland who stepped forward to issue the warning: 'Don't talk about defying the law-that is

not only wrong in principle, it's not even the best thing for your tenants' (cited Sklair, 1975, p255).

The change inside Labour was reflected not only in public pronouncements but in practical policy at every level, where moderate increases were favoured over a refusal to implement the Bill. In August, the left-wing Labour paper *Tribune* celebrated the achievements of the thirty two Labour Councils who had won 'reductions' on the increases (p255). In spite of their status as 'heroes' for tenants, by the end of August, 'the militant Councils and Councillors had been effectively isolated within the official Labour Party' (Sklair, 1975, p258).

On 20th October, and now with the legislation in effect, Frank Allaun, MP for Salford East, and member of the party's *National Executive Committee* (NEC) pleaded the case for Labour's implementing Councillors. He told the party paper that the government remained 'vulnerable on the issue' and he urged the tenants movement to direct its anger against the 'real enemy- the Conservative Cabinet rather than against the Councillors who have been bludgeoned into implementation' (*Labour Weekly*, 20th October 1972, p3). Given the observations of Sklair (1975) and Bradley (1997) on Labour's need to defend the principle of constitutional law, this shift should not have been surprising. It is more difficult however for a movement, even one with a record of scepticism about Labour, to give up on the electoral alliance when among its traditions is a strong connection to grassroots labour, and in particular to the local political party.

The Kirkby Reporter's prediction, made as early as 23rd August, that Council's on Merseyside would implement the Act may have been triggered by the announcement, a few days before, by Bill Sefton, that Liverpool Council would be making its decision on a free vote in the Council Chamber. With the votes of Conservatives and Liberals, who supported the legislation, a free vote guaranteed that any resolution to implement would be carried in Liverpool (*Liverpool Free Press*, September/October, 1972, p4). In Kirkby, the matter was to be settled in a more public fashion. On 11th September, 'shouting and chanting' broke out in the Council Chamber as, on the casting vote of the Chair,

a special meeting of Kirkby Council voted to implement the new legislation (*Kirkby Reporter*, 13th September 1972, p1). In a proviso, the Council undertook to pressurise the Government to 'approve a more generous Rent Rebate scheme' (Minute 227).

Councillor David Tempest, sponsor of the motion passed by Kirkby, urged tenants not to give up on the electoral option. He reassured campaigners: 'the next Government will be a Labour Government who will repeal' (*Kirkby Reporter*, 13th September 1972, p1). Given his open support for implementation, and with two others, Tempest resigned his office. However, rebel Councillor Jimmy Hackett had no need to resign. He was expelled from the party's policy-making group, and from the Labour whip, for calling his fellow Councillors 'traitors and cowards' (*Kirkby Reporter*, 4th October 1972, p1).

Three weeks after the Kirkby vote, Liverpool tenants arrived at a meeting of the City's Housing Committee. If, however, they were hoping to influence the actions of their Councillors, as Kirkby tenants had tried to do, they were to be disappointed. The 'free' vote to implement the Bill had been taken during the summer holiday at a special closed meeting (*Big Flame*, September 1972, p4). Liverpool Labour hoped to avoid the public divisions that emerged in Kirkby by softening the decision and the manner of its making by offering to include tenants in the political process. While the motion passed by Liverpool Council gave 'total powers' to two 'reliable' individuals, Housing Chairman Joe Morgan and his Deputy, Joe McPherson, to implement the rent rises in return for their co-operation, the city's tenants were to be offered a role in setting the level of the new rents (*Liverpool Free Press*, September/October 1972, p4).

Liverpool leader Sefton wrote to ATACC, inviting it to submit representatives for a new committee of Councillors and tenants. The committee's job would be to compile evidence for the *Rents Assessment Committee* to persuade it to keep the rent rises low (p1). Given its role as a permanent instrument for a range of community concerns, it was reasonable for the Councillors to believe that ATACC might respond positively to their injunction. Others would not be likely to do so however, illustrating the point made by Lowe (1986) that

where it is at odds with its supporters Labour is inclined to divide so called moderate tenants from those of a more radical inclination. In its September/October edition, the Free Press pleaded with ATACC not to join the new committee. If the network agreed to join, the likely outcome it claimed would be 'a split between ATACC and other tenants' groups in the city who have a policy of total non-co-operation with the Act' (p1).

The Final Break with Labour

As far as the anti-HFA tenants were concerned, the attitude towards any alliance with 'grudging implementation' was, from the beginning, sceptical. As far back as June 1972, 'Over the Bridge', an association representing part of Scotland Road warned of the dangers of trying to delay the Bill in the hope that it could be killed later. In a front page article in the *Scottie Press* 'Over the Bridge' Chair, Brian Rutter, reminded readers of the political structure-designed to ensure implementation: 'with the assurance of our own local Labour Council not to operate it … The Government will simply set up its own Rents Commissioners' (p1). In Kirkby, the Tower Hill group echoed the words of Rutter: 'what we don't want is for the Council to stand around while the commissioners do the Government's dirty work for them', Tower Hill spokesman Tony Boyle told the *Kirkby Reporter* (19th July 1972, p1). Three months later 'Over the Bridge' lost its battle for a total rent strike across the Scotland Road area, when seven partner associations favoured the lower risk rent increase strategy. In November, Mickey Keating and Jim Disley told the *Scottie Press* that 'Over the Bridge' was 'not alone' in its commitment to a total rent strike (p8). The association would distribute a weekly tenant's newsletter to every household in the area.

Both in its rejection or the rent increase strike and in its sceptical attitude to the policy of delay, the strategy favoured by 'Over the Bridge' and Tower Hill was a break with the majority. It illustrates once more the differences in perspective and approach of the two contrasting models of tenant protest described by Lowe (1986). Located in areas directly and materially affected by the regeneration policies of Liverpool Council (see Chapter Two), Tower Hill and 'Over the Bridge' were cause-based action groups, not long-term multi-issue

community groups in the manner of some associations affiliated to ATACC. In respect of this division, the anti–HFA campaign on Merseyside was following the pattern of previous strikes against market rent schemes, described in Chapter Two. In St Pancras in 1960 and in Sheffield in 1967, the tenants association split over the issue of whether or not to abandon strike action in favour of an electoral alliance with the Labour Party. In both cases the promises of the politicians were not substantiated and the campaign was damaged mortally by the majority inclination to ally with the official Labour Party. In September 1972, three months after the *Scottie Press* called upon tenants to organise regardless of Labour's promises, the paper was naming and shaming the local Councillors, representing the wards of Sandhills and Vauxhall, who reneged on their pledge to vote against implementation (September 1972, p1).

As I suggested in Chapters Four and Five, in its origins the tenants' movement is a network of working class groups operating inside local communities. In that its alliances with the labour movement are strongest at the grassroots, and in localities, they do not possess a comparable means to impact at the core of the party's power base. The critical flaw at the heart of the NATR strategy of trusting Labour not to implement was the inadequacy of an alliance forged at local level to coerce Labour or the Conservatives at national level. Instinctively, the affiliates of NATR would be directed by the views of their members whose experiences were rooted in local conditions and local frameworks of action. Divergence of actions and attitudes are the hallmark of the movement's model of local democracy. In this case it was however the democracy that failed when NATR did not act on the views of its own affiliates. Compared to the rejected option of a national rent strike, local divergence was a framework less well adapted to a national campaign against a political law.

The Alliance with Industrial Workers

The alternative strategy, mass action by workers, is the one that succeeded in Clyde in 1915 (see Chapter Two). Unusually the partnership with industrial workers was strong enough in the Clyde case to equal the power of the tenants' movement's more traditional alliances in local community life. As Moorhouse *et al* (1972) argue joint

action with industrial workers elevates the movement from its place in the urban community to the centre of political dissent. For the strictly non-sectarian tenants' movement, the socialism of the industrial alliance had to be controversial. Inevitably, in a movement of extraordinary diversity, the centre of political dissent was not where every tenant or tenants association would want to be found.

For the radicals of Tower Hill and 'Over the Bridge' action had not been suspended pending the outcome of any Labour rebellion or election campaign. In August, Tony Boyle outlined the Tower Hill position explicitly when he said the group had 'plans for either contingency' (*Kirkby Reporter*, 23rd August 1972, p1). The fall back option should Labour implement was secondary action by industrial workers. Boyle's threat to rally industrial support would of course represent a significant development for Tower Hill, if similar calls were to come from neighbour associations and were to be heard. Alliances with industrial workers could raise the political profile of the anti-HFA movement from the local to the national level. Direct action taken by industrial workers in support of housing protests represents the fusion of home and work that Damer (1980) and Castells (1983) suggest is the hallmark of a class-based workers struggle. However, unless industrial action was connected and widespread, as was the case in the 1915 Clyde strike, it would fail to elevate the campaign above the constraints imposed by its regional bases and biases.

Whatever the difficulties of rousing outsiders to support the campaign, in the short-term at least, the Kirkby action groups intended to continue their policy of networking and said as much to the press. On 20th September, nine days after the Kirkby Council vote, Tom Staples, acting Secretary of Kirkby's tenants co-ordinating committee, told the *Kirkby Reporter* 'we believe unity and strength, even in a little place like Kirkby, can have it's effects', and in the same edition, the paper revealed that the Kirkby committee had contacted Trades Unions, who were 'asked to consider industrial action' (p1). According to *Big Flame*, Kirkby had already secured undertakings from workers at *Massey Ferguson* and *Bamburghers*, to strike in the event of evictions related to HFA arrears (September 1972, p1).

Certainly, by the time the Act became law, the break with Labour was complete and not only in Kirkby. In its October edition, the *Scottie Press* went further than Tony Boyle blaming Labour directly, not for the betrayal but for the legislation itself of which it said they were the true 'architects' just as "in Place of Strife" was he claimed 'the test run for the Industrial Relations Act' (p1). With the end of the Labour alliance, the groups like Tower Hill who prepared for what Boyle called the 'other' contingency, emerged as leaders of the material campaign, to be waged after implementation. On 2nd October, the day after the rent increases were imposed, *Fisher Bendix* workers in Kirkby were among the first to answer the tenants call, staging a sit in inside the factory. Thirty one workers at *Fords* in Halewood were sacked for joining an anti-HFA demonstration while at *Birds Eye* in Kirkby, twenty two workers were suspended and their stewards sacked (*Big Flame*, October 1972, p6).

Support from industrial workers and the increasingly cynical view of the role of Labour expressed by tenant leaders such as Boyle and Rutter indicated that the campaign was becoming separated from traditional party politics. While for *Big Flame* this was progress, the paper remained sceptical about the industrial alliance. The paper saw the Trades Union movement as an inhibitor of tenants and workers independence and aspirations in the manner of the Labour Party. In an article on libertarian movements of the 1970s, Max Farrar, a founder member of *Big Flame* in Leeds, described the group's ideology as 'the theory of autonomy and the linking of community and workplace struggles' (1989, p59). The real distinctiveness of the *Big Flame* model he suggests was its 'effort to extend the horizons of politics into what were called community issues' (p59). The commitment to the cause of the ultra left *Big Flame* exposes the duality of community-based workers struggles in their ability to arouse both conservative and radical instincts. For Farrar, the traditions of community housing struggles represented more potential for a revolutionary approach to politics than the 'male-dominated practices of English Anarchism' (p59). For *Big Flame* this meant the rejection of links with any agencies structured hierarchically or inclined to exercise expert leadership. The paper issued a warning aimed at prospective alliances with union bosses and officials whose values it suspected were those of

traditional Labour. Hundreds of workers at Ford in Halewood who voted at a mass meeting to join the anti-Fair Rents demonstration were not supported by their union officials said the paper, leading directly to the victimisation of 'rebel' workers (October, 1972, p6). Ultimately, the thirty one Halewood workers were reinstated but, in the manner of the deal that ended the *Fisher Bendix* occupation, on new terms and conditions agreed by the union. In the case of *Birds Eye* too the Flame saw a divergence between the commitment of workers at the grassroots and the interests represented by their union officials. While the alliance with electoral Labour was over, the continuing scepticism of *Big Flame* towards the labour movement in general indicated that the strength of the tenants' movement's links to labour beyond its parliamentary base remained problematic, with an inherent ability to signal division. The suspended *Birds Eye* workers were targeted by the company because they came from the militant 'cold store' said the paper but it was the action of ordinary workers picketing the factory and stopping lorries at the gates that got them reinstated (October, 1972, p6). For special praise *Big Flame* singled out the women picketers. It printed a statement from the women's group that expressed the core ideal of the mass action contingency, the fusion of home and work and therefore of local and national: 'we're housewives and working women. For us, the fight over the rent increases and the bosses' attack on the workers in the factories is all one fight' (p6).

In the response of the *Birds Eye* management to its ostensible defeat, the immediate reasons why industrial action divides workers were illustrated. On the 11th October, the *Kirkby Reporter* dropped a 'bombshell' when it announced the factory's impending 'closure' (p5). Amidst claims of 'subversive activity', the *Birds Eye* Chairman, Kenneth Webb, flew into Kirkby to visit the factory and emerged, the paper said, complaining of 'totally sinister' outside influences (p5). Webb told The Kirkby Reporter the disruption was 'a Kirkby problem', not reproduced at any of the company's other factories (p5): 'The thing that bothered me most was that production had been stopped there as a result of a loud-mouthed, obscene rabble-rousing crowd sheltering behind prams with "babies" in them' (p5). Webb bemoaned the '"general malaise in the Merseyside area"' and gave union and

management six months to ‘come up with some suggestions’ or else face the closure of the plant.

While it amplified the risk for workers of striking in support of tenants, the management threat also illustrated the opportunity that direct conflict affords to rally workers in support of victimised comrades. Under its new name, the *Tower Hill Unpaid Rents Action Group* (THURAG) sprang to the defence of the factory workers and of the local Kirkby people who supported them, with Boyle telling The Kirkby Reporter that Webb was talking ‘absolute rubbish’ (p5). When it came, however, the *Birds Eye* settlement was another management-union deal addressing management-union concerns: ‘“The Chairman just rubber stamped how we intend to approach the problem”’ Deputy Union Convenor, Ian Bramwell told the Kirkby Reporter (25th October, 1972, p6). It was outside the control of the tenants in whose name the original protests were organised, illustrating the difficulty for tenants in relying on industrial support mediated still by sections of the labour movement.

The Propaganda Campaign

The tension between the community partnership approach and autonomous mass action, extended into all areas of the political world including the arena of information. As I explained in Chapter Three, in utilising media striking workers are disadvantaged. When the Council uses the press to broadcast information, what appears carries official sanction and status; opponents, not officialdom, carry the burden of proof. The opportunities afforded by access to mass media carry the same dangers as any strategy that relies upon a partnership with political power. Specifically, striking workers face the danger of misrepresentation, which may shift the public mood from indifference to hostility. Leaders may be enticed away from the grassroots by the responsibilities of media profile, thereby potentially at least dividing the campaign.

Absence from media, and the authority media endorsement confers, was one problem for tenants but not the only one. In December 1972, Over the Bridge’s Mickey Keating told the *Scottie Press* that sales of the *Daily Post and Echo* were plummeting across Scotland Road

because of 'their refusal to print the truth and cover the story of tenants' struggle in any detail' (p1). However, using media that relies predominantly on official sources is equally problematic. Where they are responding to official 'truths' it is difficult for workers to alter public perception of the core issue or problem.

Not only was *Birds Eye* saved, but the *Kirkby Reporter* suggested HFA was not the monster it appeared to be. 'Hundreds Get a Cut in Rents' the paper claimed on its front page (25th October, p1). Based on assessments made by Kirkby's Housing Office, the paper announced that 90% of Kirkby tenants who applied would receive rebates. The Corporation official did not speculate as to how rents that 90% of people can't afford to pay could be 'fair'. The Kirkby Reporter felt entitled, also, to conclude that 'picketing of the town's two rent offices appeared to have slackened off in the past week' (p1). While claims that HFA was not in fact likely to cause hardship emanated from the Council, it is unlikely at least among the general public that they aroused much scepticism. Equally, it was important for a campaign that was now shifted into reliance upon grassroots alliances that strikers did not believe they were fighting without the support of others.

Press campaigns similar in tone were mounted in other areas by the authorities. In Bootle, the local paper the *Bootle Times*, like The Kirkby Reporter a sister paper of the *Liverpool Echo*, claimed the Corporation was taking on extra staff 'to deal with a flood of applications for rent rebates' (2nd November 1972, p1). Also, in common with the *Kirkby Reporter,* the Times accepted the notion that the strikers were heading for defeat. Not only had the 'number of tenants refusing to pay the increases … dropped considerably' but according to the Corporation spokesman, 'many tenants are clearing arrears of rent increases from previous weeks' (p1). The Times highlighted interpretations of the facts supplied by the Council, even where these appeared inconsistent or improbable. On 27th November, the paper suggested a 'massive increase in rent arrears' in the Litherland area was the result of 'some people ... taking advantage of the Housing Finance Act' (p14). The Rent Officer cited was implying that mounting arrears were not connected to the increases, but were an example of mass opportunism by people desperate to withhold their rent. It remained a fact, the

spokesman asserted, confidently, that 'the number of people refusing to pay … is decreasing' (p14).

So long as the campaign remained outside the mainstream, Council attempts to influence the public perception of the issue could not be countered by the tenants on the same scale or with equivalence of impact. For the campaigners, Council claims that tenants who said they were on strike were in fact betraying their neighbours were particularly challenging. On 4th December, Kirkby's *Health and Housing Committee* heard that 'only 553 tenants were not paying rent' compared to '1,475 on October 16th (*Kirkby Reporter*, 20th December 1972, p1). Boyle responded by explaining that the Council was including as loyal, tenants whose rent was paid as benefit by the Ministry of Social Security or paid on lock up garages. He admitted nonetheless that some tenants had started paying, which he blamed on a media blackout that isolated the strikers. A 'hard core' remained he said who were 'committed to smashing the Housing Finance Act' (p1). While the Council made the front page, Boyle's comments were relegated to the end of the report on page four. Certainly, it is hazardous for any family to withhold its rent, even without Council propaganda in the press. Boyle at least, however, recognised the potency of media as a weapon in the hands of the authorities.

While they had nothing approaching the circulation of the *Kirkby Reporter* or the *Bootle Times*, the campaigners had the radical press, for whom the status of the tenant leaders was equivalent to that of the official spokesmen who lead coverage in the mainstream papers. In its December edition, the Free Press countered the negative official press with more reports on areas of strength in the campaign. 'Over the Bridge' in Scotland Road, public and commercial walls carried graffiti warning the rent collectors and bailiffs to keep away. The Bridge action group reported 'almost complete support from the 570 residents' for the total rent strike (p4). *All Bootle Rents Action Committee* claimed '75% … with-holding the increases', in spite of 'visits' from Council officials intended to persuade people to pay up while in Old Swan the Rents Action Committee claimed 521 tenants were withholding the increase (p4).

No matter how drawn into the world of national politics the Fair Rents cause became, the character of its activism remained unchanged and traditional. In the format of all housing struggles the campaign was organised and conducted in localities as a network of interests and strategies, promoted mostly by non-official or community media. In integrating groups that represent discrete communities, housing campaigns invariably follow this pattern. Also invariably, they feature forms of action that are organised most easily using neighbourhood networks of communication. While they may be associated with a non-political approach they were for some, such as *Big Flame* or the *International Socialists*, prototypes for autonomous worker action.

At the grassroots the campaign duplicated the kind of actions described in Chapters Four and Five when the immediate causes were local. The Old Swan group held meetings at which it passed resolutions demanding no evictions and the cancellation of all post HFA arrears (*Liverpool Free Press*, December 1972, p4). In Netherley, a district of Childwall Valley, tenants from a new group, led by Doris Holly, picketed rent offices. The Netherley group invited Liverpool Council leader Sefton to attend one of its meetings (*Liverpool Weekly News*, 28th September 1972, p18). The Free Press promoted the Netherley increase strike claiming it had 50% backing (December 1972, p4). In Allerton, an affluent suburb to the South, the new tenants association reported more people not paying than the association had originally thought; it also planned to release a leaflet to counteract misinformation about the value of the rebates. In a further indicator of the power of information, an Allerton tenant admitted that 'many people still think it is a good thing' (p4). In the fine details of its actions, and how they were connected by information, we see again the ambiguous nature of community protest. The printed form of local networking was not local governance or media. It was the radical, independent or alternative press.

Leading by Example

The alliance between 'Over the Bridge' and Tower Hill and their emergence as areas in which participation was greatest suggests a link between strength in the campaign and issue-oriented groups favouring the total rent strike option. Both associations were action groups rather

than traditional tenants associations with multiple community interests, a division acknowledged by Sklair (1975) and Lowe (1986). Short-term single issue action groups are inclined not only to favour tougher actions by tenants but to unite with industrial workers in joint resistance. In contrast to the unease about political radicals that characterises some traditional associations, they are inclined also to be lead by people with known socialist or communist affiliations. Once the alliance with rebel labour was lost the action groups survived the inevitable lethargy that damaged the campaign in some areas of Merseyside and killed it in many parts of the country (Sklair, 1975). As they were organised early and with contingencies in place, the single issue groups tended to respond to news from other areas and to establish relationships with each other. When Kirkby Council threatened to evict Boyle, 400 Scotland Road tenants descended on Tower Hill to defend him (*Scottie Press*, December 1972, p1).

The non-implementation strategy rejected by Tower Hill and 'Over the Bridge' was founded upon delay, a strategic concept that was problematic because it was shared with those who supported the Act. In seeking concessions on the increases, the delay strategy admitted its overriding principle. As a 'constitutional' party, Sklair (1975) says, Labour shared, with the Conservatives a right to rule, which is jeopardised by any action outside the law (p263); this left the party at odds with the grassroots feeling among tenants that the Act could not be defeated by constitutional means (p263). By January 1973, after Clydebank Council submitted to the courts, Clay Cross in Derbyshire was the only Council refusing to implement Fair Rents. The Clay Cross Labour Councillors were elected in 1960 on a manifesto of strong support for public housing. Clay Cross demolished more slums and built more houses than anyone else, and, Sklair says, kept its rents low by subsidising them from rate income. On 2nd December 1972, coaches left the Pier Head carrying Liverpool tenants to Clay Cross to demonstrate in support of the rebel Council (*Big Flame*, December 1972, p4). The support of local tenants groups for the Derbyshire Councillors was all that remained of the original alliance with Labour. For Sklair (1975) the 'Clay Cross Road to Socialism' was a break from Labour's tradition, and an example of the kind of class struggle that could have been organised if there had been more examples of the

Clay Cross variety inside the Labour Party (p259). Even in its radical new shape, the campaign was subject to the same divisions over the same issues, centring on the core issue of local autonomy. On the alliance with Clay Cross *Big Flame* dissented as it had on the alliance with Trades Unionism. While it supported their actions, the Clay Cross Councillors 'have in no way questioned their closed and "expert" style of politics which excludes the majority of tenants' (October 1972, p5). Since, by December, the government had defeated most of the remaining constitutional opposition, and since waiting for Labour Councils not to implement had killed most of the strikes, the cause was converging around outstanding exceptions of which Clay Cross was one component and Tower Hill another.

Up Against the Law

By the end of 1972, the collapse of a unified national action against HFA was a big, and swift, win for the Conservative government. It wasn't that the old alliance with 'good' Labour had failed the campaign; more significantly, its failure was that partnership with rebel Councillors had assisted the implementation of the Act (Sklair, 1975). 'In 'over two thirds' of the areas with rebel Councils says Sklair (1975) 'there is no evidence of any rent striking'; '80 per cent of the rent strikes occurred in places where the Labour Council implemented the Act in good time' (p268). As 1972 drew to a close, not only tenants but government and local Councillors were developing a different strategy. Since, in a campaign predicated on mass action, outstanding examples may serve to inspire others, a new approach from the authorities was brewing. In Kirkby, the Council had been making plans, early on, to use the law against rebels. On 10th November, seven Tower Hill families received notices to quit, one of them carrying a deadline of three days (*Big Flame*, November/December 1972, p1). Nine hundred tenants, including another large contingent from Scotland Road, converged on the estate to defend the threatened family. According to *Big Flame,* Tower Hill was a 'virtual no-go area for any bailiff foolish enough to attempt to evict anyone on rent strike' (p1). Fifty tenants surrounded the threatened family's home while the rest sealed off the estate to all traffic. A false alarm brought a hundred tenants to another house in minutes. Even though the family was leaving of its own accord, in

circumstances unconnected to HFA, the tenants response, *Big Flame* said, showed they were 'well prepared to resist' (p2).

'Over the Bridge' strikers were 'issued' with notices to quit in public, their names displayed on the rent office notice board. Phone calls from factory stewards offering support, showed that the threatened strikers would have the 'united strength of Merseyside' behind them' said *Big Flame* (November/December 1972, p2): 'So far there have been no evictions and no sign of any bailiffs' but, the paper warned that if future threats were to be similarly thwarted 'we need to break down barriers between what happens in the community and what happens in the factory' (p2). Those husbands who, the Flame said, 'are actively discouraging their wives' are playing the boss at home, and, in telling their women to pay, are acting as 'scabs and strike breakers' (p2).

The authorities were not it seems deterred by the prospect of workers rallying. On 8th December 1972, a Liverpool tenant appeared in court charged with assault following disturbances in the public gallery at the announcement of Liverpool's decision to implement (p2). On 13th December, Kirkby tenants gathered outside the town's Civic Centre to lobby the *Health and Housing Committee*, following its threat to issue eviction notices to all Tower Hill's striking tenants (*Kirkby Reporter*, 20th December 1972, p1). On another majority of one, the committee decided that, in the event that letters to the tenants did not produce a result, they would be followed by an application to the county court for a 'money judgement' against defaulters (p1). Legally, this would turn the tenants withheld rent into a debt, opening up a host of legal remedies that could be used against them.

The lines of the HFA conflict appeared drawn, with well organised militant groups on one side ranged seemingly against the legal system. For phase two of the struggle, *Big Flame* hoped industrial workers, organising without the leadership of elite groups, would rally in defence of evicted families. It hoped that in core struggles for the right to a home and the right to strike, support for the tenants would spread, triggering a fresh campaign, reoriented to its origin as a working class struggle. In spite of the paper's cautious optimism, fragmentation of the actions at regional as well as national level suggested support from the

factories or the wider community might be similarly localised or partial. With the authorities seemingly confident that the exceptions could indeed be isolated, the fragmented nature of resistance and the lack of a discernible hierarchical structure could yet prove decisive once the striking tenants were forced to face the law.

Concluding Remarks

The events described in this chapter followed a distinct course. In fighting to stop a piece of national government legislation, the movement did indeed enter a new phase, politicised by the ideological nature of the Fair Rents programme and by the imperative it carried for tenants to resist in common with workers outside their own communities. By the end of 1972, however, the remnant of what might have become a strong, connected national campaign was concentrated in the hands and the care of those willing to fight on in the absence of the formal support of politically legitimate elements.

By the end of 1972, the campaign was elevated to the condition of political consciousness favoured and desired by *Big Flame* and described by Castells (1983) as the essence of class based struggle, but without a national strategy. As is the currency of the tenants' movement, and central to this study, the successful campaigners drew on both traditions at the core of the movement, local and labour, in order to achieve a condition of political clarity. As we have seen in Chapters Four, Five and Six these are precisely the traditions that can lead to divisions within the movement, and a separation of community politics from class action. Rooted in community life but engaged in struggles with an origin in working class history and concerns, the diversity that is the movement's strength became its weakness once alternative options replaced a national strike as the modus operandi of the campaign. This too, was part of that currency. Within a few short months, a campaign against an Act of Parliament was directed almost exclusively at the local politicians in whom tenants had originally chosen to trust. In relying upon the traditional instruments of community politics, grassroots energy was created. A politicised leadership also materialised but not in leadership of the greater campaign that needed a clearer national focus in order to succeed. During this early period of mobilisation, the tensions and limitations

inherent in a community movement when it is called upon to direct workers in political struggle are starkly illustrated.

CHAPTER SEVEN
Breaking the Law: Tower Hill Fights On

In the previous chapter, I discussed the drawbacks for the movement of running a mass campaign predicated upon the support of allies inside the Labour Party and Trades Unions. In particular, the events of 1972, described in Chapter Six, lead to a loss of autonomous control by the rent strikers over the terms of struggle, as the popular call for a national tenant leadership was rejected in favour of alliances with politicians. Also, the resulting impact of resisting a national policy through localised organisation and thinking caused the national campaign to fragment and dissipate. By the beginning of 1973 a new set of conditions prevailed. In this chapter the implications of that change, involving a redefined struggle conducted from the political margins, by a small number of well organised local groups, will be examined.

By the spring of 1973, following the broad collapse of Labour support for the overthrow of HFA (see Chapter Six), many tenants associations were moving towards an acceptance of the inevitability of rent increases. As Sklair (1975) says, early alliances with friendly Labour Councils meant that once the Act was implemented it was too late in many areas to switch to an alternative strategy. While strikes remained current in many towns and cities, particularly in the North, they were co-ordinated by small associations operating at a local level and the numbers of tenants committing to the increase strikes was dwindling.

With the partnership strategy in flight, and the remnant strikers now fighting in opposition to established law and conditions, the autonomy of the movement, fragmented during the early months of the struggle, was restored. While the striking groups were no longer beholden to their local Councillors, or to a national network, they could not win unless they were able to rouse a level of pressure comparable to that of the Labour rebels. If they were to force concessions from the government, they had to persuade non-striking tenants to join without the direct support of Labour, and along a path of physical resistance.

As we have seen in chapters Five and Six, the paradox of a class-based struggle growing from a mindset rooted in communities is a central theme of this study. The energy of organised labour is more usually focused away from the home, on the workplaces or in the governances where traditional notions of class are easier for workers to recognise. It was in the changed circumstances of 1973, with the struggle dependant upon isolated areas of resistance detached from national groupings that the balance of the components of the struggle had altered substantively. As resistance to HFA was now politically marginal, in its core values the struggle was different fundamentally from the community-based protests described in Chapters Four and Five. In its isolation it was self-driven, but the only means of connecting the cause to the working class generally was through alliances with industrial workers. While its balance shifted, anti-HFA was a housing struggle, overwhelmed by the distinguishing characteristic of all housing struggles. The foremost allies of the strikers were their neighbours, and in each area the local condition was the driving force for resistance.

It is specifically because the campaign had moved onto a level of ideological struggle against agreed state policy that the tension at the heart of housing protests is illuminated most starkly by the events of 1973. The community-based movement was to spawn a unique radicalism, with a strong socialist creed, manifest most prominently on Merseyside in one particular community by the physical resistance of Kirkby's Tower Hill. The vision and objectives of the Kirkby strikers were clarified by both the sharpness of the political division on Fair Rents and the support of their own local community. For Tower Hill and its allies, the paradox of housing struggles would be expressed once again through the relationship with Labour. In the need to win workers over to participate in related actions, the connection to Labour had to be re-established.

Kirkby: the Character of 'Failure'

As the data in Chapters Four and Five showed, housing struggles are distinguished from other workers struggles by the importance of locality in determining occasion and cause. They are driven by issues and concerns rooted in those immediate communities and reliant

organisationally upon networks specific to community life. The fact that the cause of Fair Rents was a matter of national policy, indeed of governing ideology, did not mean that those local conditions played any less central a role. Indeed, in its fusion of both, the anti-HFA struggle contained the sum of the movement's many parts.

Inside the Council chambers Clay Cross remained the sole example for Labour authorities to follow. In the communities leadership was exercised by the Midlands town of Dudley and on Merseyside by the network of strike actions still enjoying widespread support inside the overspill town of Kirkby. The fact that Kirkby resisted where others folded means we cannot understand the fourteen month strike in the town unless we address also those elements of its history and culture which may explain its centrality to the events of 1973. It is important, firstly, to recall the historical development of the town of Kirkby as a housing conurbation. As the sources cited in Chapter Three illustrated, the development of the town of Kirkby was subordinated during the 1950s and 1960s to its purpose as a recipient of new population, relocated from the slums of the inner cities. As Minster (1970), Muchnick (1970) and McConaghy (1971) explain, and the films of Leeson (1970) and Broomfield (1971) demonstrate, there was at best disappointment among the former slum dwellers at the poor quality of their new lives, without the connections and supports of the old communities. In what Meegan (1989) calls the trauma of Merseyside's 1960s regeneration may be found one possible reason why discontent over Fair Rents manifested itself so strongly in certain areas.

In 1951, the original parish, around which the new estate was to be built, boasted a population of 3,000. By 1960, it had expanded to a new town population of 60,000, outstripping that of Speke by sixteen times, and, remarkably, through the course of a single decade (Pickett and Boulton 1974). As an example of regeneration, Kirkby was leading not only Merseyside but the rest of the country. Based on the findings of the 1961 census, Kirkby was the 'fastest growing township nationally' (cited Meegan, 1989, p202). However, while Kirkby's development was dramatic compared to other areas it was not unique. Its role as an overspill estate may not have been the only factor therefore contributing to its militancy in 1973. We must consider also the political

currents inside the town, and the perceptions that may illuminate the evident ability of the town's people to focus on the rent issue.

In 1961 the City Architect presented a report describing the development of Kirkby as a success and its community as 'well established and thriving' to Liverpool's Housing Committee (15th September 1961, p14). Alongside the pubs, clubs, clinics, community and shopping centres, playing fields, medical centres and old people's homes built by Liverpool, the report listed magistrates courts and police, fire and ambulance stations provided by the county of Lancashire. Apart from the scale of building, the report cited 'a considerable amount of private enterprise housing' as well as 'three substantial areas of ground … set aside for private development' (p14): 'Everyone … concerned with this vast new project, has responded nobly to the new challenges which it has afforded' (p14). In a 'remarkably short period', said the report, project new town had created 'a feeling of "belonging" and pride in the new Kirkby': 'it is not possible … in print', it explained '… to convey the spirit of Kirkby or the enthusiasm which has gone into its creation' (p14).

The perception, apparent in the 1961 report, that the development of a new town community in Kirkby was a success contrasts with the view of the town that would dominate in the media of the 1970s and 1980s and which would be conveyed in 1973 by the town's resistance to HFA. Indeed a *University of Liverpool* social science study into the experiences of South City slum dwellers relocated to Kirkby during the 1950s suggested the young families that left inner city Abercromby during the post-war boom had not found the 'clean and healthy environment' to which they aspired (Vereker *et al*, 1961, p67). In a finding that must challenge the suitability of the town for overspill, the study, comparing the attitudes of new residents to those of longer term, found 'feelings of loneliness or lack of privacy are displayed to much the same extent in both groups of Kirkby residents' (p70): 'Long-term unemployment is a frequent experience in the Abercromby area … and it would seem that the move to the estate had not improved their position as much as might have been hoped' (pp70-71). The report concludes by contrasting this shortfall with a different outcome in Skelmersdale, another Liverpool suburb, where 'house-letting is tied to

employment' (p71). It measured dissatisfaction amongst the Skelmersdale residents, living in a true 'New Town', not 'an overspill estate … developed specifically for people in housing need', at no more than 9% (p71).

By the mid 1970s the Kirkby dream, articulated in the 1961 report and in Liverpool's urban plans (see Chapter Two) was no longer promoted by any mainstream or established media or political interest. By 1970, when opinions were written about the Kirkby experience, they tended not to speak of visions or to give credit but laid blame and analysed failure. One in particular has been selected here because, like the 1961 City Architect report, it illustrates the nature of outside perspectives on the town, diverging from those that may have prevailed from within. In 1976, the social workers magazine, *Community Care*, printed an assessment of what had gone wrong in the 'self-destruct new town' (Morris, 1976, p14). The article is clear in acknowledging the social poverty overwhelming the lives of the people, and it's structuring (p15): the town's population was youthful, a third of its inhabitants under the age of fifteen and 60% of these received free school meals (pp14-15). Kirkby too boasted a preponderance of larger families, with an average size of 5.2 children (p15). In 1971, 10.2% of the town's population was unemployed, the highest on Merseyside, but twice the national level (p15).

However, while the vision of Kirkby in *Community Care* is in direct contrast to the celebration of 1961, it does not apportion blame for 'failure' to the planners but to the people, or at least to some of them. The service providers interviewed express concern at the betrayal of their hopes by anti-social elements of the town's population. The Chair of Social Services asks why her 'dream' is 'turning into a nightmare' (p14). Kirkby 'did not attract enough settlers' of her 'calibre' was the explanation offered (p15). The author admonishes Kirkby's designers, but for a different failure of vision. Kirkby, he says 'was originally an overspill town for Liverpool and there is more than a strong suspicion that the city decanted more than a fair share of "problem families" into Kirkby' (p15). 'Liverpool pulled a fast one on Kirkby' was the assessment of Social Services Coordinator, John Baldwin. His colleague, team leader Jim Simpson, agrees. Liverpool's planners

simply ‘took the opportunity of Kirkby to clear out its ghettoes’ (p15). Social worker Sarah Rennie tells readers that Kirkby people ‘never go about in two or three but always in gangs’ and, she continues, ‘They are never laughing’ (p16). Another commentator feared that ‘violence against property would switch to violence against people’ (p16).

By the mid 1970s, *Community Care* was reflecting a version of history that illuminated the experience of the political class and its service providers. From helpless recipients, the people of Kirkby are perceived here by some of their ‘carers’ as failures. In addition to the physical restructuring of their communities, it may be that the experience of blame and the rejection of the town’s people by some outsiders may explain also the anger in Kirkby at HFA, and the manner of its expression.

While the view of Morris is contradicted by Minster (1970) and Nightingale (1980) we have no analysis of the Kirkby experience offered by working class people living in the town, except the views of residents in Leeson’s 1970 documentary film who describe not a wasteland of criminality but a ‘quiet and snobby’ new estate where there were no friends or neighbours. One attempt to redress the balance was Meegan’s 1989 study of the attitudes of Kirkby’s workforce, most of whom were slum children when they moved into the town. Contrary to the image of an underclass implicit in the *Community Care* report, Meegan suggests that the Kirkby experience created a politically conscious workforce with a structural mistrust of authority (pp225-226). Kirkby’s new population was accustomed to work and ill prepared for the experience of unemployment, evidenced also, says Meegan, in the town’s unusually high proportion of adult learners. If Meegan is correct about the resilience of Kirkby’s inhabitants, and Nightingale (1980) is right in asserting that housing politics is about the management of mistakes, then in 1973 the culture of the town was a heady mix, unlikely in the face of a recession to result in quiescence.

The Campaign Trail

As in the case of 1972 (see Chapter Six), while the tenor of the campaign on Merseyside was politicised by the break with governing Labour authorities, the focus of upon very specific areas of strength

meant it reproduced the organisational characteristics of the years of localised protests, 1968 and 1969 (see Chapters Four and Five). In Kirkby the campaign used the ATACC style politics of linkage, drawing in grievances centred on specific Kirkby issues. In April, a group of 'angry mums' from the Northwood estate formed an action group to pressure the Council over conditions in their rental apartment properties, hoping, eventually, to incorporate, into the new group, flat dwellers in the neighbouring estates of Westvale and Southdene (*Kirkby Reporter*, 4th April 1973, p9).

Three frustrating months later, the *Northwood Flatdwellers Association* was a player on the Kirkby scene, indicated by its relationship with local news media and the interest of political representatives in its cause. The association's chair, Chris Welsh, told the *Kirkby Reporter* that the tenants had 'promises of support from two unions', while local MP, Robert Kilroy-Silk, told the paper he was taking legal action of his own on behalf of the flat dwellers and that he would 'support action such as a rent strike' (*Kirkby Reporter*, 11th July, 1973, p1). While old style community politics was the driver, Northwood was a new recruit to the Kirkby alliance at a time when in other parts of the country, the movement appeared to be in retreat. As I suggested in Chapters Six, for the movement in general linkage was a sign of vigour, and was characteristic of the diversity growing from the primacy of locality. However, later in the campaign the old style concerns Northwood represented would result in tensions between the Northwood group and Tower Hill similar to those that emerged in 1968.

In resisting conditions of poverty on the Northwood estate, the Northwood struggle, like ATACC's, was enmeshed in the culture of permanence and community; namely the tenants belief that they shared a collective investment with their neighbours in the estate. For the movement, the wider problem of urban poverty could not be revoked in the manner of a bad law and was therefore permanent. In the case of Kirkby, the social poverty described by *Community Care* was functioning as its permanent element, drawn from its condition, but fuelling the struggle in the traditional manner (Morris, 1976). While the immediacy of the summonsed Kirkby tenants' condition detached the Tower Hill campaign locally from the more general concerns, a

coalition of housing interests, indeed of workers interests, would nonetheless have to answer the call of *Big Flame* and rally in their defence.

On 12th March, Kirkby's *Health and Housing Committee* met in the town's Civic Centre and heard that 261 Kirkby families remained on rent strike, creating arrears of more than £75,000 (minute 720). Outside the building, a noisy demonstration was clearly audible to the Councillors inside. The ambush of Councillors constituted old style community activism, but the air was clearly militant. Upon the late arrival of rebel Councillor, Jimmy Hackett, a small group forced its way in, before being 'forcibly dragged' away by Police (*Kirkby Reporter*, 14th March 1973, p1). The Housing Officer's report, presented to the meeting, promised that the existing court orders against tenants would 'be actioned in the next few weeks', while 'court orders would shortly be obtained against other tenants on rent strike, beginning with those who had the highest arrears' (p1). While the style adopted by Tower Hill's THURAG may have been resonant of ATACC or the *Abercromby Tenants Association*, in this case the authority obliged to deal with the Kirkby strikers aimed to adopt a tougher approach, empowered perhaps by the relative isolation of the targets. In understanding the nature of the shift in the campaign, towards a class politics, we can recognise that the prospect of the law being used against Tower Hill tenants was greater than it had been before.

In dealing with recidivists Liverpool's local authority was also inclined towards militancy. Five of Scotland Road's 'Over the Bridge' tenants, were issued with summonses, not for the recovery of arrears but for the 'possession of property' (*Big Flame*, February/March 1973, p2). This meant the Liverpool accused, due in court on 14th February, were facing eviction. If ultimately, the law was to be used against the strikers then the movement would indeed be entering a different phase of open class warfare, centred on a single issue, albeit on a limited scale. In contrast to Tower Hill, the Scotland Road tenants decided to recognise the orders, and use their court appearances to denounce the Act and the corporation. In a sense it was a break with Tower Hill. The inner city tenants would not be risking jail which might potentially have reduced the public impact of their defiance. *Big Flame* however

remained optimistic that the example of the few would rally the many in support: 'the whole community… in Scottie is prepared to support the five… backed up by workers and tenants from all over Merseyside' (p2).

While, in assessing the strength of the campaign, the isolation of the rebel strikers might seem like a near death condition, the hope of *Big Flame* at least was that in its urgency and its extremity it would reinvigorate the cause. Could the extremity of the threatened tenants' condition turn anti-HFA into a true class struggle; spilling onto the streets as it did in St Pancras in 1960 and into the factories as it did at Clyde. By February 1973, even the fringe of Labour rebels inside Liverpool's ruling authority was gone. Liverpool Labour's twenty one rebels decided not to carry out their threat to resign and returned, quietly, to the party whip (Big Flame, January/February 1973). Rebellion was downsized to opposition, the former rebel group promising to 'link up with the Trades Council, tenants associations and any sections of the Labour Party which are actively opposing the Housing Finance Act' (p2). No power existed, from within the political structure, that could be mobilised in the tenants defence. Whatever the prospects, single issue militancy was indeed the condition in which the struggle to abolish HFA would now be progressed. In truth, during its formative moments, that power had weakened the cause. However, this did not mean that everyone involved in the struggle was inclined or able to break from the traditions of small scale community activism to support open defiance of the state.

Everywhere, with the exception of Kirkby, February appeared to be a month of setback for the Fair Rents campaign. In Bootle, the notices to quit issued to tenants during that month appeared to have forced many strikers into paying. The action group's Sam Watts complained to the *Bootle Times* that the Council had not made it clear to tenants that notices to quit were 'NOT eviction notices' (22nd February 1973, p10). Three weeks later, in a letter to the editor, the action committee of Watts, Wallace and Morris admitted that 'most Council tenants have submitted to the risk of eviction and have decided to pay the increases' (15th March 1973, p10). Of the increase strikes, Bootle had appeared most solid. Left with nothing but the failed constitutional strategy, the

Bootle committee called upon the town's eighteen rebel Councillors to 'become more publicly vocal', and tenants to appeal against their rent assessments and withhold the increases (p10). The people 'are far from defeated', said the letter and to prove its defiance, the committee staged a demonstration outside the town hall (p14). In Bootle, it seemed there was to be a return to normality. In keeping with the tradition of 'permanence' the action committee was obliged to a continuance of its activities, even without a strike. However, the retreat of Bootle from the strike meant the lines of conflict were redrawing themselves around Kirkby and the right to strike.

Scotland Road Challenges Labour

Having failed to halt the implementation of Fair Rents, the traditional methods of demonstrations and pressure on political representatives, now favoured by Bootle, were unlikely to produce a reversal of Conservative policy nationally. The old strategy was back for one reason only: for too many strikers the risks implicit in the alternative remedy, disobeying the law, were just too great. As we have seen, in keeping with the core values of housing struggles, it is the instinct of tenants in struggle to identify more easily with their neighbours. One strategy that had so far not been tried, but which confronted the Labour local authority at the core of its power base, was direct intervention by the action groups in the electoral process. In February, the *Scottie* Press announced the 'Over the Bridge' group's unanimous decision to field candidates at the Council elections in the Scotland Exchange wards of Sandhills and Vauxhall (p1). Tenants associations formed to fight the rent act, Frank Keelan explained, were 'increasingly becoming involved in the battle against the atrocious living conditions we have put up with for years' (p1).

Once again, we see in Scotland Road the impact on the general campaign of specifically local conditions and perceptions. As an inner city area, whose population was reduced not expanded, Scotland Road's condition was specifically not shared with Kirkby. Seeking to punish Labour where it hurts, in votes, may also be viewed as another campaign strategy characterised by a local dimension. In 1973 Scotland Road was the heartland of Labour support among the working class. As a community formed by 19th Century Irish

immigrants seeking work on the docks, Scotland Road is the original stronghold of the Catholic parties, and during the 1920s, of the *Irish Nationalists*. In opposing Labour at all and particularly in an election, the Scotland Road tenants were breaking with an established local tradition.

On the front page of its April edition, the *Scottie Press* printed the election addresses of the main contenders including tenant candidate, Joe Stroud. The multi-storey blocks of Candia and Crete Towers in Everton were incorporated within the boundaries of the Scotland Road wards where the tenants campaign for renovation was now four years old (see Chapter Four). Candia's long-term campaigner Jim Moran, of ATACC and the tenants union predicted in the pre-election *Scottie Press,* that the Council's latest plan to transform the blocks would amount to nothing, and that the tenants would be betrayed, as they were in 1970 (April 1973, p6). Given the wider dispensation to relocate Liverpool's inner city dwellers, it was a struggle destined never to be won. While today, Candia and Crete are waiting to be transformed into 'luxury' flats, the nearby blocks of Canterbury, Crosbie and Haigh Heights, known locally as 'the Piggeries' were to be included in the demolitions of the 1980s.

The eternal problem for the movement based upon its local dimensions is that what makes sense in one geographical area may not make sense in another. Furthermore, in the context of a struggle shifted by contentious political issues, not every action will be tuned to every tradition. To take on the tenants in the new Metropolitan election, Labour played its strongest card, Council leader, Bill Sefton. *Big Flame* remained sceptical of the electoral strategy, issuing a warning. While the defeat of Sefton would boost the tenants' morale, participation in elections increased the 'credibility' of the people whose power the tenants were challenging (February/March 1973, p2). 'To take the struggle from the streets … into the council chamber can distract people from building up the power of their mass action': and, it said, even if victories at the ballot box are won, 'a national issue, made law by the state' cannot be addressed by victories over local leaders (p2); 'Our real power', it concluded, 'must lie in street organisation and struggle within our communities' (p2). For *Big Flame* mass action was

not a flawed strategy, but the only one the ruling class genuinely feared.

Stroud lost to Sefton by 500 votes. Nonetheless, the Scotland Road coalition fielded candidates Bernie Doyle, Tommy King and Brian Rutter in the Liverpool district elections against a Labour team that included Housing Committee Chairman, Joe Morgan (*Scottie Press*, May 1973, p1). On its May front page, the Press printed an appeal from the tenant team for electors to break the habit and not vote, in time honoured fashion, for any candidate simply because he is representing Labour. It also printed a letter from Labour thanking the voters for their 'faith and trust in Bill Sefton and the Labour Party'; a confidence, the letter said, expressed in the face of 'vitriolic and pernicious attacks' by 'some of the people participating in the election' (p1). After the Metropolitan election, some tenants questioned the wisdom of the electoral strategy, and the usefulness of the opportunity it appeared to offer. In June, Brian Rutter's wife, Stella, told the *Scottie Press* that Labour was helped to victory by a campaign of misinformation, built on persuading voters that strike leaders were secretly paying their rent (p1). From the electoral experience, she learned that 'honest and sincere candidates' who 'don't throw dirt' do not get elected (p1): she concluded, 'As an ordinary housewife always brought up to believe in Labour, it has opened my eyes' (p1).

By March the success of the grassroots campaign rested increasingly on the stalwarts in Tower Hill and Scotland Road. *Big Flame* admitted that, in its fifth month, the strike was 'much less active now… than when it began in October' (February/March 1973, p2). There was a dip in support even in formerly solid areas; only 500 remained on increase strike in Bootle, and Tower Hill's 90% backing had shrunk to fifty. Still, the paper claimed that 'thousands of tenants are still refusing to pay' in both these areas, as well as in Halewood, Old Swan and Cantril Farm. While they were reduced in number the refuseniks everywhere remained 'dead solid' it said (p2). *Big Flame* was hoping for a resurgence of support on all fronts in April given that increases for those parts of the country that did not get them in October were being introduced alongside the routine financial year rent increase. In sympathy with the democratic principles of the movement in its local

bases, the paper expressed the hope that Tower Hill's leadership would be the local dimension suitably equipped to raise the level and expectations of the campaign.

In Defence of Civil Liberties

In May, THURAG used the *Kirkby Reporter* to publicise its anti-eviction strategy. Having returned their original summonses marked 'rent strike', the Kirkby tenants would now ignore the Court Registrar's invitation to attend *India Buildings* 'to discuss their defence' (23rd May 1973, p8). We won't fall for the 'con' that we can use rent strike as a defence, Tony Boyle told the paper: 'We have decided to completely ignore the Registrar and Kirkby Council's counter action' (p8). In the coalescence of the cause around the rebel strikers and their defence of the right to strike, the language of THURAG was becoming increasingly separated, and specific to the Tower Hill strikers new conditions. Unlike the tenants who fought the *Greater London Council* through the courts, four years before, Boyle said defiantly 'we will go on fighting in our own way' (p8). All future 'invitations' from the courts, he promised, 'will be treated the same way' (p8).

Following their failure to attend their 'defence' hearing, the seventy defaulting tenants were ordered to repay their arrears in monthly instalments of up to £32; the notices were, once more, ignored by the rebels: 'Tower Hill Unfair Rents Action Group will not be intimidated by either the Council or the County Court' Boyle told the *Kirkby Reporter* in June, and the paper revealed that, with arrears of £80,000, the tiny estate was now third in the arrears league table, behind Bolton in Lancashire and Dudley in the East Midlands (6th June 1973, p1). Also in June, Scotland Road's 'Over the Bridge' tenants claimed not to have received their notices to quit, forcing the Council to re-apply for the orders (*Big Flame*, June 1973, p3).

In a new cause, defending the right to withhold rent, the prospects of defeating HFA appeared to be receding. As far as it represented a restructuring of the campaign imposed on the strikers by the authorities, this final shift emphasised more than any other, the relative isolation of the housing dimension in the perception of workers interests. As I mentioned in Chapters Four and Five, the perception

that community issues are a distinct arena is critical to the character of a movement strongly working class in tradition but detached at its root from the highly politicised arena of the workplace. It is harder for tenant groups to make an impact at national policy level without industrial workers resorting to the withholding of labour.

In its local dynamics and diversities, the tenants' movement integrates new people and new ideas into the political maelstrom of working class life. However, in the analysis of class struggle, a radicalism centred on community is paradoxical creating divisions over the nature of political activism. Radical elements calling for workers leadership are sceptical of 'higher' class politics because it is not lead from the roots of the working class. It is for these reasons that many housing struggles, and certainly Fair Rents, function as coalitions of traditional community and labour concerns. If, however, the anti-HFA cause was about to leave the rents issue behind, to defend the rights of imprisoned tenants then it would no longer function in the manner of the traditional housing coalitions, or indeed as a housing struggle at all, but as a multi-dimensional class struggle. In this condition two entirely opposite possibilities presented themselves. Firstly, in its lack of purpose the struggle, and the strikers, would be abandoned; alternatively workers would see in the threatened tenants, the defence of the labour movement as a whole, and would thereby transcend the work-home dichotomy.

Alongside the defeat of Stroud, whose Labour opponent Bill Sefton enjoyed the nominal support of *Liverpool Trades Council* secretary Simon Fraser and rebel Councillors leader Eddie Loyden, the reality of dwindling numbers of strikers and options meant it was likely the anti-HFA campaign would converge finally around the defence of liberty and the right to strike, without any connections to 'legitimate' labour (*Big Flame*, June 1973, p3). While hoping for a reaction to the April increases, *Big Flame* appeared to recognise the inevitability of this convergence and the opportunity it presented for a further radicalisation of the campaign: citing the organised example of the plan to defend the Tower Hill estate from bailiffs, the paper said workers must mobilise those networks in support of threatened tenants, to stop evictions (February/March 1973, p2).

The Essence of Class Struggle

In the raised consciousness of a new activism, lies the potential for a radical break from political traditions, in the manner desired by *Big Flame*. For the paper, the building of a political consciousness connecting housing protests not only to industrial struggles but to oppression in all its forms was the key linkage. As part of this concept, during 1971 and 1972 the Flame formed a number of 'base groups' inside Liverpool's estates. One of these, *the Tower Hill Women's Group* would go on to play a direct role in the Kirkby struggle. The participation of the *Big Flame* women's group was an indicator of change in the political consciousness of some Tower Hill tenants as the cause converged. Also it was to become part of the controversy that would be sparked by a new class politics.

In October 1972, at the beginning of the strike, *Big Flame* printed an interview, taken from a Kirkby strike bulletin, with two members of the group who took part in the picket at *Birds Eye* (p3 and p6). It is clear that, from their involvement in housing politics, that both women, using the pseudonyms 'Mary' and 'Connie', were beginning to understand their condition differently from before, and as a class experience. For 'Mary', the rent struggle showed how the class war against workers undermined personal and social relationships; in particular, how the patriarchal ideal sold to their men, stifled working class women

> A woman's supposed to be stuck in her back kitchen all her life, with a ball and chain on her ankle … She's just not allowed her own opinion, and that's the fallacy that most men have. They don't bother to talk to their wives, they don't discuss anything that's outside (p3).

'Mary' compares the experience of being a housewife and being branded as stupid, to coming out of the kitchen and being re-branded women's libbers. In joining the Tower Hill picket she said they found themselves re-branded again as communists. 'I've been frightened … it's not an easy thing' says 'Connie' (p6). Some of the older women were afraid of losing their homes, thought it was too late to fight, or that the younger ones simply did not understand why you can't risk losing

what little you have: but, says 'Connie', 'I know what it's like from my mother and father' (p3). Once parents start talking real politics, they pass on to their children a different tradition.

For many of the women on the Tower Hill estate, the rent strike was 'a first taste of collective struggle' (*We Won't Pay*, 1975, np). In an account written after the strike was over the *Big Flame* women describe their experience as housewives marginalised from the collective struggle by the centrality of the male work ethic. At the heart of the consciousness that drove their activism however was the recognition that, as managers of the household budget, women were the 'hidden force' behind the wage struggles of men, with 'something particular to say and to win' (np). In the concluding scenes of Broomfield's documentary *Behind the Rent Strike*, THURAG's May Stone would tell the film maker that the rent strike had changed her, most particularly because she would now never become 'a carbon copy of what my own mother and father were'; and, she added, 'if I'd stayed like that, that's what my kids would have been' (1974). 'Connie' found the courage to spend her unpaid rent, an 'irresponsible' act she defended to her friend Joan: 'I'll come out without a bleeding hapenny. But it will go in the kids bellies next week' (*Big Flame*, October 1972, p3) 'Connie' thought the women the strikers needed to reach most of all, were the ones who were afraid. 'I wish I could be like that, I haven't got the nerve' they often said, but, said 'Connie', 'you get a taste for something like that and you do it agin (sic)' (p6).

While the consciousness raised by the struggle was, for new women activists like 'Connie' and 'Mary', life changing, the personal costs of political struggle would surface, repeatedly, during the months following. In linking the empowerment of women to the wider struggle, the women's group would be accused by some strikers and agitators of dividing the campaign, leading them to withdraw from full engagement with THURAG and deterring the 'mass work that would have built our relationship with all women on the estate' (*We Won't Pay*, 1974, np). Within the action groups the risks of direct confrontation would create the same harmful divisions we saw emerge in 1968 at the creation of ATACC. Where the struggle becomes linked to wider political ideals,

the appropriateness of civil disobedience and compromising links with the non-Labour political left become areas of genuine contention.

The Problem of Linkage

As it turned out, *Big Flame*'s longing for a second phase of struggle was not without some foothold on reality. On 1st August, with court action now imminent, the *Kirkby Reporter* sensed 'signs of renewed militancy' in Tower Hill, with 'tenants who dropped out after a few weeks … returning to the policy of non-payment' (1973, p1). 'The solidarity which is being maintained even after nine months on rent strike is absolutely fantastic', Boyle told the paper testifying to 'the determination of the people here to resist the Housing Finance Act' (p1).

In Kirkby of two well organised struggles were taking place simultaneously, one of these, that of the Northwood flat-dwellers, was a housing struggle of the traditional kind. Both were linked however, in membership of the *Kirkby Rent Alliance*, which might have mirrored the difficulties I have mentioned if the Tower Hill struggle had become separated from the rest. Certainly, the Northwood campaign was attracting the interest of the local press alongside the Tower Hill strike, which may have assisted in raising the profile of the Kirkby dimension. In the same edition as the story claiming a resurgence in support for Tower Hill, the *Kirkby Reporter* also printed an article on Northwood, describing the estate as vandal-ravaged' and 'a melting pot of violence – self inflicted and uninvited – of hardship and of despair' (p1). Three weeks later, the paper reported the government's promise of an inquiry into conditions in the Northwood flats, triggered, it said, by a dossier of complaints compiled by the town's MP, opposition leader, Harold Wilson, the new target for the flat-dwellers given that Housing Chairman Joe Morgan appeared inaccessible (22nd August 1973, p1). According to the *Liverpool Free Press*, Morgan was 'rarely seen in public' and 'especially since he agreed to the "Fair Rent" rises' (June/July 1973, p1). During the summer, the Northwood tenants resorted to marching on the Councillor's home in Walton Park 'to tell him about the scandalous condition of their flats' (p1). Those who suspected the Councillor was not real or alive should be reassured said the paper. According to one of his neighbours, he was alive and

well and 'living in luxury' (p1). Neighbours reported the arrival of a new toilet and washbasin at Alderman Morgan's home and, the paper alleged 'they're not the type commonly installed by the corporation' (p1). 'That could explain everything' the Press concluded: 'the Alderman was on his throne when the tenants called to flush him out' (p1).

For his part, Morgan strongly denied that he had broken promises to the flat-dwellers, telling the *Kirkby Reporter*, that he had 'answered in great length all the complaints … in a letter sent to the association about three weeks ago' (22nd August 1973, p1). According to Northwood secretary, Chris Welsh, the association was 'not satisfied with the answers from Joe Morgan' whom he claimed then refused a further meeting (p1). On the matter of the inquiry, Morgan told The Kirkby Reporter he had 'no further comment to make' except that he was 'unaware of any report coming to the Housing Department intimating that an inquiry is to be held' (p1). The flat-dwellers association was, said Chris Welsh, 'delighted' that the inquiry would be conducted by the department of the Environment Minister and not by local officials (p1).

As we have seen in Chapter Five, local conditions draw people into political struggle as indeed they drew the Northwood estate into the Kirkby alliance. At the same time however, they make it harder for tenants facing a desperate set of circumstances, to accept the restructuring of their interests away from the salient condition. If, as The Kirkby Reporter alleged on 1st August, the conditions on the Northwood estate, and lack of action by the Council, were indeed driving residents to self-harm and suicide, it would be painful indeed if the extraordinary energy and determination of the residents' campaign was perceived to be wasted on outsiders or outside interests.

The role of the rent alliance was to hold together the different strands of the HFA campaign. Maintaining the public profile of the causes would be achieved by traditional joint actions emphasising the importance for everyone of the anti-HFA case. As October, and the next stage of rent negotiations between local authorities and the government approached, an anti-HFA protest march was planned to

take place in Kirkby on 1st September. The rally would be followed on the 23rd by a national conference, also organised by THURAG. Northwood would provide a speaker for the September rally, alongside Eddie Loyden and Tom Staples from the Trades Council, Ethel Singleton on behalf of ATACC, Kirkby rebel Councillor, Jim Chambers and, from the national 'scene', Clay Cross Councillor, David Skinner. Boyle told The Kirkby Reporter that THURAG was hoping for 'a big turnout from both the unions and the tenants organisations' (1st August 1973, p7). In spite of the massive arrears created by increase withholding tenants in Dudley, 'those groups who've been on total rent strike have stuck it out the longest', he told the paper (p7).

While, as a community, and in the example it set of total rent strike, Tower Hill was distinctive, the locality of its base and causes did not inhibit its collective identity. THURAG was working hard to reassemble the coalition of interests that formed originally in the early stages of the campaign. While afterwards the *Kirkby Reporter* dismissed the September rally as a 'straggly non event', two days before the demonstration at a mass meeting, hundreds of Northwood tenants, voted to join tenants elsewhere and withhold the next HFA rent increase (5th September 1973, p1).

As we have seen from the data in the preceding three chapters, both short and long-term, community and multi-region causes may result in radical or conventional values or methods, and most often in a coalition of the two. While Tower Hill was running a political campaign aimed at all workers, it utilised traditional community concerns in order to achieve its linkages. Apart from Tower Hill's Kirkby alliance with Northwood, in Liverpool anti-HFA was linking to campaigns over housing conditions. Tenants connected the poor quality of their accommodation to the demand for higher rents and in some cases were as willing to resist the law physically as their counterparts in Tower Hill. Flat-dwellers in Croxteth in the East of the city had been campaigning as long as Northwood over conditions in the multi-storey blocks infested with damp and rats. In support of their campaign to get re-housed into empty Council houses on the estate, the tenants resorted to squatting, which brought them, like Tower Hill, into direct conflict with the law (*Big Flame*, July 1973, pp1-2). Two Croxteth

families, the Abbotts and the Irvines moved into nearby Council houses, left empty for slum dwellers. The Council applied for court orders to evict them. In granting the orders, Judge Pigot described the families as 'law abiding people driven by desperation' who 'with a little more humanity … might never have been in court' (p1). In the actions of the squatters *Big Flame* saw the potential that housing struggles had to provoke in workers reactions that could take them beyond the limitations of non-housing causes.

The Free Press also was interested in the cause of the Croxteth squatters. While the squatting families were awaiting eviction, Liverpool Housing Chairman Joe Morgan was, the paper alleged, pressing Speke Housing Office to find him a two bedroomed flat in Aigburth's select Jericho Lane (October/November 1973, p1). 'Alderman Morgan isn't homeless' it said, he 'just … seems to fancy a move' (p1). In contrasting the circumstances of the squatting families to the comforts of the Councillor, the Press pursued a class angle. With the example of Croxteth circulating among the striking communities through the radical press, Northwood adopted the militant approach. Two families squatting on the Kirkby estate were also anticipating court action. *Big Flame* likened the eviction proceedings against the Croxteth and Northwood tenants to other 'political trials' going on elsewhere; part, it said, of a general 'repression of working class militants, usually through the courts' (July 1973, p2).

As we have seen from the events described in chapters Four, Five and Six, the urban setting of housing protests is a tension at the heart of the movement. As grievances draw very often on local conditions, they may be interpreted as 'suburban' or 'community' concerns and therefore as apolitical or class neutral. Yet, it is in the location of housing protests away from the traditional arena of worker and employer relations that the germ of a different political dynamic may be sensed. A movement that is a coalition of community-based protests faces a number of pressures derived from its dual identity. In its concern for the betterment of community life it may be viewed as socially conservative. Yet, in agitating for the interests of workers away from the workplaces, and outside the formal structures of the labour movement, it connects the areas of working class life, in the manner

necessary for the engagement of class politics. It is for these reasons that links to authority or to outside activism are, for any movement drawn from the grassroots, perennially contentious.

In the events of this chapter, namely the final phase of the anti-HFA struggle, we see the movement converging around a smaller number of leading struggles. From a position of direct confrontation with government the movement had become what Sklair (1975) and Lowe (1986) describe as a radical single issue campaign. Yet in spite of this radicalisation, traditional housing concerns were animated not diverted, becoming drawn into a coalition with the anti-HFA cause. In light of the contentions here concerning the duality of the movement, the paradox of mass action becoming triggered with the national cause in retreat and the Fair Rents groups increasingly isolated, should be noted. However, in the revival of the campaign, and the re-establishment of traditional housing linkages, the controversy that divided ATACC from the *Liverpool Rents Action Committee* (see Chapter Four) emerged again, as groups clashed over the issue of outside help (or interference).

On the 17th October, the *Kirkby Reporter* claimed that the Northwood group would resign from the *Kirkby Rent Alliance* unless the *International Socialists* group was 'kicked out' (p1). Chris Welsh complained that the IS people were outsiders, 'schoolteachers and the like from places like Sefton Park' who were 'only interested in their own little set-up' (p1). Two weeks before, the *Liverpool Echo* had reported the 'country's first home possession order', over HFA arrears, issued against Bootle's Billy Cavanagh (5th October 1973, p7). According to the *Kirkby Reporter*, Northwood was angered by the 'last minute' decision of the Bootle tenant with 'no political leanings' to pay up rather than face eviction (17th October 1973, p1). According to Welsh, the man was 'frightened off' after a private conversation with IS members (p1).

As we saw in Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six, the fear of being damned by association with 'extremism' is certainly used by the authorities as a strategy for stifling dissent. There is, nonetheless, among some workers, an anxiety about the purpose or safety of

engagement with outside radicals. Les Wareing, at the time a union organiser at Ford's who agitated in support of the rent strikers, remembers what he called the problem of IS 'hijacking' (2004). In spite of Abercomby's radical student alliances, Ethel Singleton feels, with hindsight, that the Fair Rents struggle was 'doomed once the political groupies got hold of it' (Singleton and Singleton, 2001). As we can gauge from the core tensions with which this study is concerned, the origin of housing struggles in unstructured grassroots neighbourhood networks rests awkwardly alongside the ideals of organised ideological groups or parties. It is also worth noting the mistrust of 'the system' that Meegan (1989) ascribes to the politically roused sections of Kirkby's working class (p217).

Discomfort at the actions of 'outsiders' was not necessarily limited either by geography or politics, nor automatically overcome by the tenants' movement's non-hegemonic style. Within the Kirkby alliance, among those workers committed to a socialist interpretation of the housing system, there were tensions caused by divisions between the radical groups. In their account of the strike, the *Tower Hill Women's Group* claims their desire to link the rent struggle to the empowerment of women did not meet with the approval of the *International Socialists* (We Won't Pay, 1975). In order to admit a range of women's concerns, the *Big Flame* group was not linked initially to the rent strike cause, but appeared detached from housing or class issues.

In its openness and in the absence of direct leadership, the THWG was embracing the values of community-based campaigns generally. However, the responsibility to avoid direction was not, they suggest, the only impediment to the group's objective of involving women in mass action. The pressures of running family and home, and the allegation made by some men that the principle of organising women was 'divisive' was, the authors say, made 'worse' by the 'hostility of IS' (np). The isolation the authors describe is a condition that may befall grassroots activists where their linkages reach beyond the consciousness or interests of some of those around them. Also, using linkages to 'other' forms of oppression to raise awareness may itself threaten the drive to mass action. In its need to popularise a cause,

organised socialist activism is not always inclined towards radicalisation but sometimes, very deliberately, towards compromise.

As I described in Chapters Four and Five, it is precisely because local conditions predominate that fear of the wrong type of 'help' will not inhibit alliances in every case. Both ATACC and the *Abercromby Tenants Association* acted in partnership with political radicals, under tenant direction. The appearance, in 2009, of two websites, a *Big Flame* archive and a 'senate house occupation' site dedicated to the Liverpool student radicals of 1968–1970 is a reminder too that it is by no means inevitable that former activists will shift from their early radicalism to 'betrayal'. In spite of her later reappraisal, Ethel Singleton trusted the *International Socialists* (IS) enough at the time to join. The suspicion of the outsider expressed by Northwood's Chris Welsh would not appear to have been the predominant view in the Tower Hill group, whose leaders held various leftist memberships and affiliations, with no seeming loss of trust. As for tenant Billy Cavanagh, whose case sparked the original dispute, in November a small item in the stop press column of the *Liverpool Free Press* reported, with no further comment, that the impending eviction of a 'Bootle tenant' had been called off 'after tenant agreed to pay' (October/November 1973, p1).

Beyond the Law

The argument over outsiders merely added to the existing pressure created by threats of eviction or imprisonment, which had the potential to divide tenants in any case. In the same piece that mentioned the 'split' between Tower Hill and Northwood, the *Kirkby Reporter* revealed that THURAG Chair Maurice Lee and Treasurer Tom Bradburn, both *Communist Party* members, were 'about to resign their positions' (17th October 1973, p1). The paper 'understood' that Lee, a Tower Hill tenant was 'unhappy with the plan for Tower Hill's rent strikers not to attend court' (p1). In Broomfield's film it is Lee who is pictured telling a tenants meeting, reluctantly, that even if he did not attend court himself, then 'my missus is going to go' (1974). The pressures facing tenants and their families may become intolerable once the authorities initiate legal procedures against them. Ethel Singleton recalls the impact on the small Old Swan group once rumours of eviction began to circulate (Singleton and Singleton, 2001): 'we were worried if it got to

that stage, then you'd have to do something … because you just couldn't have people evicted, you know' (2001).

Facing the courts was not, in 1973, a remote possibility that workers could afford to set aside. During this period, the criminal justice system was used routinely to interfere in the conduct of direct action style protests. As we have seen previously, the community base of housing campaigns means it is less natural for protestors to move beyond their own spaces to seek the support of workers elsewhere. As a result of the 1971 *Industrial Relations Act* (IRA) charges of 'affray' and 'intimidation' were used commonly against workers gathered in large groups. Where the law is used against tenants however, as it was in St Pancras in 1960 (see Chapter Two), the circumstances are less well known or publicised and the fallout across the labour movement inclined therefore to be more contained. For *Big Flame*, the 'most serious political trial' of the period was that of the so-called 'Shrewsbury 24' building workers (July 1973, p1). The accused faced charges of conspiracy arising from the building workers strike the previous summer. In organising with others to picket sites, they were deemed responsible for acts of assault and disorder that occurred in those places. If consequences such as these were likely to follow the action of supporting striking industrial workers, then, given the lower profile of their cause, the possibility of mass action in support of tenants was diminished.

As the strikers contemplated the first anniversary of the anti-HFA action, the campaign was converging around the small number of tenants able to fight the law which meant the movement was engaged in exactly the kind of direct confrontation that was most risky for tenants. As we have seen, many Fair Rents strikes were subverted, originally, by faith in the willingness of the political class to 'listen' and of Labour Councillors to 'rebel'. At the end of dialogue, resistance is elevated to a higher level of political thinking but at a correspondingly elevated risk to the campaigners.

As you will recall, the Northwood group, agitating over conditions in the estate's apartment homes, had chosen not to issue summonses against Liverpool Corporation pending the outcome of a promised

government inquiry. On 30th September, the day before the rents were increased for the second time, the flat dwellers association announced that the inquiry had been "unsatisfactory" (*Kirkby Reporter*, 3rd October 1973, p1). 'We really believe (sic) that we had reached the top' Chris Welsh told The Kirkby Reporter: 'We thought Mr Rippon (sic) would come and see for himself and walk around' (p1): 'As far as we can see, his inquiry has been a postal one to Liverpool Corporation' (p1). THURAG's Tony Boyle took the opportunity of the Northwood 'betrayal' to caution against trusting the law. In a statement in the *Kirkby Reporter* he cited the 1968 rent strike, when tenants tried to fight the *Greater London Council* through the courts, as an example of the consequences of trusting the law. While the Northwood experience may have strengthened his case, the position adopted by Boyle placed the Tower Hill rebels beyond the normal political boundaries of housing struggles.

On the 22nd October, more than thirty tenants were commanded to appear in court to 'submit to examination of their personal finances' (*Kirkby Reporter*, 10th October 1973, p1). The penalty for failing to attend was a fourteen day jail term for contempt of court. Using its new affiliation to the *Kirkby Rent Alliance*, THURAG sought to extend the total rent strike across the town, and, rather than attending court, Boyle promised 'industrial action throughout Merseyside' (*Kirkby Reporter*, 10th October 1973, p1). 'We have gone this far' he said, so there was no question now of turning back or abandoning the policy of ignoring the courts: 'if anyone is committed to prison there will be such a terrific explosion that the government won't know where it is' (p1). A week later, to demonstrate their continuing unity and confidence, the tenants celebrated the first anniversary of the strike at a social, where for a charge of 25p per person, they 'drank, sang and danced the night away' (*Kirkby Reporter*, 17th October 1973, p1): 'The social is a tribute to the solidarity of the tenants, who have shown an amazing spirit', Boyle told the *Kirkby Reporter* (p1). As we have seen, it is the contention here that the unity of the Tower Hill estate as a community, rather than its political case, was central to the quality of its resistance, and that this appears to be characteristic of housing struggles. In the case of the Kirkby estate, the close-knit community feeling animated the tenants to organise for their physical defence. Across the estate, a

system of telephone alerts using Second World War sirens was in operation to trigger early warning, an assembly point was identified and the area was being 'policed' by volunteer patrols of tenants. Also, in the event of a move by court officials or bailiffs, THURAG's weekly action bulletin, posted to everyone on the estate, printed emergency telephone numbers (*Big Flame*, November 1973, p4).

Following the October summonses, two Tower Hill tenants submitted to due process, agreeing to repay arrears at £1 per week, whilst Northwood allies who had agreed already to repay at 50p per week were according to *Big Flame*, now 'being told to pay more' (p1). The forty Kirkby tenants who were still holding out found however that the bailiffs failed to appear (*Kirkby Reporter* 24th October 1973, p1). As was demonstrated by prior events, beyond the law is an uncomfortable place for workers to reside, but more so for tenants. While in Kirkby the will to defy remained strong, outside the town, it did not appear that resistance would be maintained in contempt of the courts. In Liverpool the second phase rent rises had been implemented by the city's special committee without a debate in the Council chamber and at an average weekly increase of 40p. The borough of Sefton, which included Bootle, claimed the reduced increase as a 'victory' over the Conservatives (*Big Flame*, November 1973, p4). The 'single issue' that must unite the movement in clarity of purpose was now precisely the sort of secondary action targeted by the law. Tenants, and workers, must act in defence of the rights of others who were willing or able to risk jail.

The End of the Tower Hill Strike

After October there was a revival of protest activity in Liverpool, suggesting that nominally separate actions do indeed possess the ability to empower each other. The Croxteth action group joined the anti-HFA rent strike while in Speke disabled tenants living on a new £200,000 adapted estate called a rent strike in protest at conditions in their 'dream' homes (*Liverpool Weekly News*, 20th October 1973, p1). The near unanimous response from the Tower Hill rebels that appeared to be thwarting the threat of arrest was also holding. Tenants who ignored the October summonses were called twice more in November, on the 6th and then again on the 21st to purge their

'contempt', by which time all but three were still holding out (*Big Flame*, December 1973, p1). *Big Flame* celebrated: 'The Council and court made a big mistake if they thought they could isolate and intimidate the first Tower Hill tenants to be picked out for threats of imprisonment' (November 1973, p1).

By December, however, the conflict was moving to a point of necessary resolution for both sides. On the 3rd, Tower Hill tenants forced their way into a Council meeting where, according to *Big Flame*, they were 'brutally removed by police' (December 1973, p1). On the day of the Council meeting another striker, Alex Scott, attended court to purge his contempt. While support from fellow tenants was encouraging, THURAG knew that the fate of the rebels would be sealed if action did not materialise among workers in the factories. For the first time, at a THURAG meeting on the 4th, tenants expressed anxiety that, with Christmas approaching, 'the possibilities of industrial action are lessening' (*Big Flame*, December 1973, p1). Undeterred, Boyle told the *Kirkby Reporter* that 'industrial strife' would be unleashed in the event of committals against the Tower Hill rebels, who were, by this point, reduced in number to fourteen (5th December 1973, p1).

Just as the anti-HFA campaign was drawing in related housing causes, it appeared that the response of the authorities was becoming similarly connected. On Wednesday 5th December, the Orrett family of Southdene in Kirkby was due to be evicted by Liverpool Corporation. The family called upon ATACC to help. Bootle's Sam Watts reminded the Kirkby Reporter's readers of the ruthlessness of the Liverpool authority in dealing with its tenants in spite of Sefton's original pledge that there would be no evictions: 'Everyone is shouting about the tenants at Tower Hill, but this man owes only a fraction of what most of their rent strikers owe' (5th December, 1973, p1). Watts promised that Liverpool would receive as determined a response from the co-ordinating committee, as Kirkby faced from Tower Hill. If a twenty four hour picket of the family's top floor flat did not prevent the removal of the Orretts and their seven children, then 'we will be appealing to all the unions on Merseyside to come out in support of this man' (p1).

In the convergence of threats to the liberty of tenants and the security of their homes, the struggle was shifting away from its traditional coalition of interests and strategies towards a single overriding issue. As we have seen, the territory of class politics is less secure or familiar for the tenants' movement than it is for workers struggling in industrial settings. Specifically this is because the singular cause must transcend differences rooted in local conditions, and the ideologically diverse character of housing activism. THURAG was relying upon the imminence of action, and the extremity of the measures planned against the rebels to rouse anger. Christmas was still approaching however, and action by the authorities was entirely unpredictable. On the 6th December, a mere three days after the THURAG meeting at which defaulting tenants expressed their fears, the air raid sirens sounded over Tower Hill (*Behind the Rent Strike*, 1974). In their homes, Larry Doyle and Brian Owen were arrested by bailiffs and taken to Walton jail (*Big Flame*, December 1973, p5).

Within an hour of the bailiffs action road blocks were in place around the town and within a few hours the gates were locked at *A C Delco* and at *Otis Elevators*, workers at *Frigoscandia* and at *Anglia Paper* walked out and a contingent of tenants marched on to the shop floors at *Fisher Bendix* and at *Plessey* (*Big Flame*, December, 1973, p5). At a meeting in the community centre, tenants agreed that the picket of Walton Jail would begin at 7pm that evening (p5). The following day women from the estate managed to get a part of the centre opened as a playgroup, which was used also as a daily meeting place for the campaign. While Doyle purged his contempt, Brian Owen remained in solitary confinement.

For the tenants the timing of Owen's imprisonment, a few days before workers were due to be paid for Christmas, could not have been worse (*Big Flame*, December 1973, p4). Also, in spite of his 'sympathy' for the accused, on 6th December a judge issued a Council possession order against tenant Les Irwin of the 'Ugly Sisters' tower blocks in Everton, scene of a longstanding strike over conditions (*Liverpool Weekly News*, 6th December 1973, p3). Eddie Cartwright of the *Salisbury Tenants Association* told the Weekly News that Irwin was a 'test case', as, indeed, was Brian Owen (p3). For whatever reasons, the first week of

December had become the moment for the law to institute measures against tenants. While favourable to the authorities it was hardly a moment that suited the rent strikers, especially since industrial support was clearly now the only instrument of resistance that could have changed the picture.

At Walton jail the evening vigil was reinforced by tenants from Liverpool including Old Swan, the new group from Croxteth and long time allies 'Over the Bridge' (*Big Flame*, December 1973, p5). On Sunday the 9th, at a mass demonstration, chants of 'Free Brian Owen' were heard once more outside the jail (p1) and two of Owen's comrades, Bruce Scott and Pat McElhinney, were allowed in to the jail to visit him (*Kirkby Reporter*, 12th December 1973, p1). According to *Big Flame*, prisoners 'waved their hands out of the cell windows' in support (p1). 'I think there was a lot of understanding for him inside the prison', James Singleton recalled (Singleton and Singleton, 2001). Ethel Singleton recalls the cans rattling against the bars but she says it was not so much because of the plight of Owen but more in protest at the authorities suspension of all the prisoners 'free' time: 'they were locked in their cells for twenty four hours', she explains, and this, she says, because of a man who was 'in jail voluntarily because he wasn't paying his rent' (Singleton and Singleton 2001). The tensions created by the presence of Owen in the jail are a reminder of the difficulties for the action groups of building support among the working class for those on rent strike, an action not understood on the same level as an industrial strike. The scenes of mass support outside the jail were however worrying the authorities, at least according to *Big Flame*. The paper claimed that inside, the frightened authorities were stockpiling 'anti riot gear' (December 1973, p1).

While it was confident in the picketers, *Big Flame* was not so confident in the traditional mode of industrial muscle. Union officials and shop stewards are obliged to submit in the face of the law it said just as much as rebel councillors (*Big Flame*, December 1973, p4). In spite of the mass leafleting of factories , and strong sympathy, amongst the rank and file for the striking tenants, 'in most factories the convenors and many shop-stewards spend most of their time trying to keep the men in work and … production running smoothly' (p4). As it is feared

most of all by the state, mass action is the workers strongest weapon in any struggle. In the prospective reactions of the state however, lies precisely the reason mass action is the hardest to organise, even where the cause enjoys the familiarity of a traditional industrial struggle. Since the *Industrial Relations Act*, those who risked their jobs in support of Tower Hill faced the possibility of joining Brian Owen in Walton jail.

According to *Big Flame*, union hierarchies not fear of the law was inhibiting workers from acting in support of Owen. Some stewards, it complained, simply failed to call mass meetings when workers wanted them, and, at Fords in Halewood, the original pledge of industrial action was rescinded on the technicality that no-one had actually been evicted; the same technicality, the paper suggested, would, presumably, have been applied 'if Brian Owen had been put before a firing squad' (December 1973, p4). No factories were open when the bailiffs snatched Cook and Rowe in St Pancras (see Chapter Two), and on Merseyside, few workers could afford to walk out just before Christmas and risk losing money. Alternatives, such as 'work-to-rules and go-slows', could have been considered as well as 'general indiscipline' among workers and students, said the Flame, but were not (p4). 'If Tower Hill doesn't get the support it needs', then the failure, the paper said, would not be that of the Tower Hill tenants but of 'every section of the working class that fails to give [support] … or is unable to' (p4): 'A defeat for Tower Hill is a defeat for the whole working class' (p4). If the traditions of unionism were in fact failing to serve the tenants even in the face of repression, then the struggle may have become affected once more by one if its central tensions; the lower profile of housing struggles in the culture of the Trades Union movement.

However, the Flame was underplaying an element common to all workers struggles; the advantages enjoyed by the authorities once workers are placed beyond the law. On charges of conspiracy, three of the Shrewsbury picketers received jail sentences, one of them, the late Dennis (Des) Warren, for three years (Arnison, 1974). In spite of the extraordinary profile of the building workers strike, the labour movement was unable to protect the sanctioned workers. Almost

simultaneous to the sentencing of Warren, Tomlinson and Jones, county court bailiffs arrested another five Tower Hill strikers. Four apologised immediately to the court, purging their contempt, while one, father of six, Pat McElhinney, chose to join Owen in Walton Jail (*Kirkby Reporter*, 19th December 1973, p1). In spite of the stand of Owen and McElhinney, Tower Hill, like St Pancras (see Chapter Two), had nowhere to go once tenants were in jail. In order to prevent further arrests, THURAG was forced to talk to Housing Manager Winstanley: '"We are going to give him a mandate from the Group that we are willing to end the strike if the Council withdraw all legal threats against tenants in all forms"', Boyle told the *Kirkby Reporter* (p1).

And now for 'the reckoning' said the *Kirkby Reporter* on 27th December, as Brian Owen, having served his time, walked out of the gates of Walton jail and the end of the strike loomed (p1). As part of the deal, Pat McElhinney also left the jail, but to attend court and purge his contempt (p3). In exchange for 'no more legal action… against tenants', THURAG agreed to pay arrears at £1 per week and a week later, on a majority vote, the tenants accepted THURAG's recommendation, and called off the strike (p1). The strike in Dudley was over already, in October, when the tenants agreed a similar arrears deal. In Oldham, however, where 400 tenants were waiting on court summonses, following the Tower Hill agreement the strike in Oldham was also was called off (Grayson, 1996, p49).

Concluding Comments

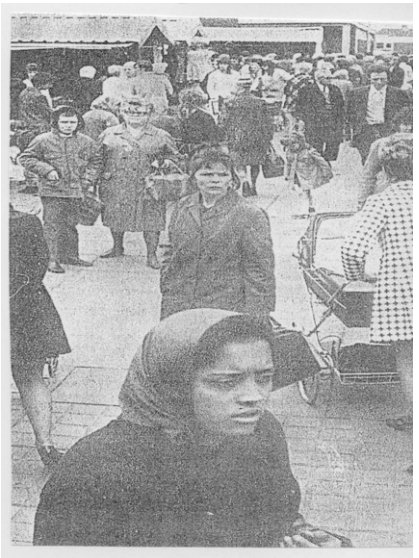
Since the strikes ended with no concessions by the government, in the immediate battle over HFA, Merseyside's striking tenants suffered a material defeat. In reality James Singleton contends, there was 'no outright victor' (Singleton and Singleton, 2001). Over time, he says, 'they had to modify the Housing Finance Act' and, Ethel Singleton adds, it must have taken the Councillors 'an awful long time' to recoup the unpaid rent (2001). For Ethel Singleton, the roots of the movement against Fair Rents lay in community values and in the traditional instincts of tenants groups. The motor of resistance was anger, over an unaffordable three fold rent increase; it was not something planned or organised. Once the strikers were required to defend a class interest, those traditions became an impediment. Too many tenants she

explains ‘thought they were going on rent strike against their own Council’, whom they believed could pressure central government into changing its policies (2001).

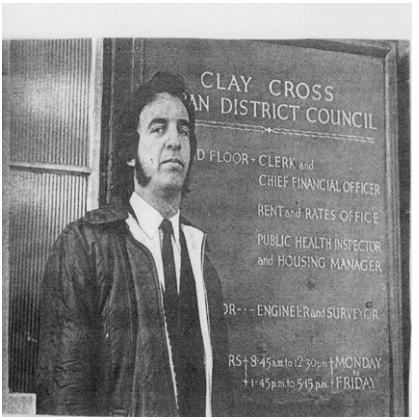
Ethel Singleton recognised the new condition faced by the strikers in the final phase of struggle and the pressures it created. Once people are facing eviction or jail, a rent strike can’t succeed, she suggests, unless it’s ‘short, sharp and quick’ like Abercromby, or is backed by ‘industrial muscle’ (2001). ‘I think it was the lack of industrial support that failed the tenants’, she says (2001): ‘I don’t think … the industrial sides were prepared to take on the government over the rent strike … they did not think it was as important as an industrial strike’ (2001). Many industrial workers, James Singleton suggests ‘were prepared to go on strike for a pay rise but they did not link the two’ (2001).

The pattern of escalating rents was irreversible by 1974, because it was a small part only of a bigger reverse for the tenants; a pattern of demolition, followed by sales of land and homes to private investors, had turned council houses into second class homes carrying the stigma of failure. Like the town of Kirkby, public housing ‘failed’, because it did not ‘pay’. A new set of priorities in economic life was dominant, and removed seemingly from the sphere of public argument. In its community base, its betrayals by Labour or unions and in the paradoxes created by its local diversities, we are able here to understand the unique characteristics of the movement and see how they impacted upon the politics of housing on Merseyside. In respect of its ability to build a class momentum into its struggle, the example of Tower Hill illustrates that there is nothing in its traditions that need inhibit the movement from connecting to its base in the working class. For an explanation of the material defeat of the anti-HFA struggle, we need perhaps to refer more to the data in Chapter Two. The shift in the governing ideology of housing provision, towards the primacy of the market, was simply too big for the movement to reverse.

Above: Alderman Bill Sefton, leader of *Liverpool City Council* pictured in 1972 and in what it called a 'rare' photograph, Joe Morgan (below), in charge of implementing Liverpool's 'Fair Rents', is 'captured' by the Free Press.



Above: shoppers in Kirkby's market place in July 1971. *Below:* Councillor David Skinner poses for *Labour Weekly* outside the offices of Clay Cross Council.

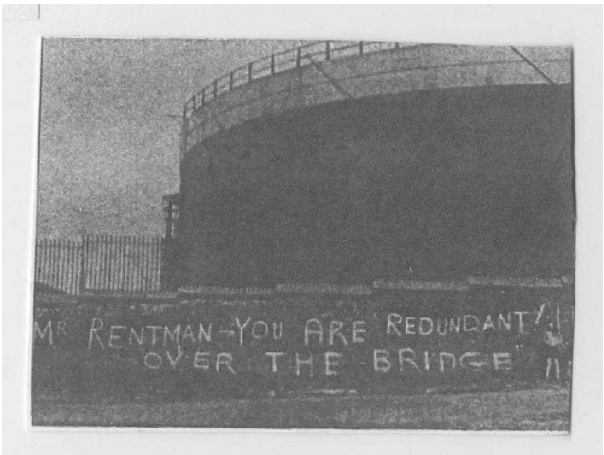


THOUSANDS SAY: WE WON'T PAY RENT RISES

THOUSANDS of Council tenants throughout Liverpool have declared that they will not pay rent rises due in two weeks.

And tonight delegates from all the city's tenants associations, representing 100,000 rent payers, will meet to decide if resistance to the 'Fair Rents' Act will go beyond withholding the increases to a total rent strike

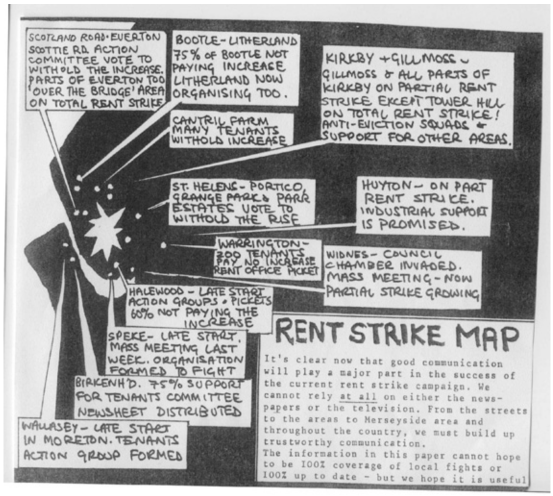
Above: the *Liverpool Weekly News* reports tenant preparations for a rent strike against HFA. *Below:* Kirkby tenants march through the town while *Birds Eye* Chairman Kenneth Webb's 'sinister' women with prams (right) picket the factory, October 1972.



Supporters of the ‘Over the Bridge’ rent strike use unorthodox channels of communication!

Above: the *All Bootle Rents Action Committee* joins *Liverpool Trades Council* in a demonstration outside Bootle Town Hall. *Below:* the late Tony Boyle heads the THURAG 'delegation', October 1973.

Above: Westvale, Kirkby, October 1973. And Northwood (below), where tenants protesting slum conditions joined the HFA rent strike!



Above: Big Flame's map showing areas of resistance! *Below:* the *Bootle Times* finds a positive side to 'Fair Rents' … rebates.

Rent cuts on the way for tenants

ENT reductions for some of Bootle's council house tenants are on the ards following a readjustment under the Housing Finance Act.

This week a special City Council sub-committee approved provisional "Fair Rents" r Liverpool Council tenants. If approved by the ll Council and Rent Scrutiny Board, the rents ill mean reductions for the majority of tenants.

And yesterday the Chair-an of Bootle's Housing ommittee, Councillor ernard Hillen, said that would be reasonable to sume that the rents set the Scrutiny Board for oole "will be comparable th those in Liverpool and her authorities in the erseyside area."

[illegible] provisional fair rents [illegible] the most generous way [illegible] the point of view of [illegible] tenants" bearing in [illegible] the age, character [illegible] location of the [illegible]ellings.

"These provisional fair rent assessments were made by February 9, 1973, in accordance with the requirements of the Housing Finance Act, 1972. Tenants were notified of the provisional assessments and informed that representations could be made if they considered that the assessments were excessive.

"Such representations had to be submitted by April [illegible] were received. These will now be carefully considered by the Housing (Standing) Sub-Committee," said Councillor Hillen.

He emphasised that it will be the Rent Scrutiny Board who will finally determine the fair rent for each dwelling.

Above: Ethel Singleton appearing in Broomfield's *Behind the Rent Strike*, 1974.
Below: the Kirkby rent strike makes the front page of the *Liverpool Echo*.

Rent strike men gaoled

Two Kirkby men involved in a rents strike were gaoled to-day.

The men, married and living on the Tower Hill Estate, were arrested on warrants by bailiffs from Liverpool County Court.

Mr. Brian Owen, of Heathfield, and Mr. Larry Doyle, of Ravenscroft, who have been on total rent strike for 14 months—now face a 14-day stay in Walton Prison for contempt of court.

They are being held after refusing on three occasions to attend hearings to explain their rent arrears under the Housing Finance Act.

Each man owes over £300 in rent and the total debt from the Tower Hill Estate is more than £150,000.

There are 10 men and women who have yet to be arrested by the bailiffs for defying the court.

Above: tenants blockade Walton jail, demanding the release of Brian Owen and a fortnight after the imprisonment of Owen, the *Kirkby Reporter* (below) announces the end of Tower Hill's resistance.

Rent talks start as bailiffs grab five more rebels

A GLIMMER of hope that the Tower Hill rent strike may soon be over sparked into life on Monday, when the rent rebels agreed to "discuss terms" with Housing Manager Mr. John Winstanley.

The announcement followed the arrest at dawn on Monday of five more strikers, four of whom were later released after purging their contempt at the County Court.

But the fifth man, father of six Mr. Pat McElhinney, is determined to remain in Walton jail until Mr. Winstanley agrees to the

held yesterday—with Mr. Winstanley. It was not a back-down.

"We are going to give him a mandate from the Group that we are willing to end the strike if the Council withdraw all legal threats against tenants in all forms.

"The matter of the arrears will be discussed at the meeting."

In the 14 months since the strike began, the rent arrears

CHAPTER EIGHT
Conclusion

This research set out to unearth and critically interpret a series of rent strikes and housing protests on Merseyside that have not previously been subject to academic scrutiny. Its primary objective was to amplify the voices of those who took part in these events as protestors and activists and to investigate and understand the politics of their experience. In so doing, it was believed that aspects particular to this marginal area of labour struggle, centred not on the traditional arena of class conflict in the workplace but on the living spaces of workers, would be revealed.

As I explained in Chapter Three, the experience of workers in their living spaces has not featured to any meaningful extent in established media or official governmental sources, and does not benefit therefore from the authority conferred by those sources. Indeed, this reality is part of the marginality of the rent strike experience, establishing both a purpose for study and the methodology outlined in Chapter Three. More broadly, compared to industrial struggles the body of data from labour historians is modest, with one complete history of the tenants movement (Grayson, 1996) being available and one account only of the 1971-1972 anti-Fair Rents strike (Sklair, 1975).

As may be seen from the data in Chapter Two, most analysis of rent strikes, and comparative historical studies, has been provided by the small number of writers who have contributed pieces on rent strikes from elsewhere in the country and from other periods. For this reason, material from accounts of strikes similar in cause, origin or strategy has been included here to illuminate patterns, and the common characteristics of housing struggles.

While local records do exist on Merseyside, alongside contemporary accounts in radical and independent media, these are tainted by the belief among those less sympathetic to the values of the labour movement that they are partial or ‘political’. From the outset, then, I determined that the controversial or limited nature of these sources

would not be an impediment to analysis, but an aspect to be integrated and assessed as part of the strikers' marginal condition.

It is clear, from the frequency and pattern of strikes on Merseyside, that being on rent strike, or knowing neighbours who were, was an ordinary (rather than extraordinary) experience for the people living in these communities. This encouraged me to seek out the historical details of an experience that constituted an important moment in the history of Merseyside's labour movement. The details regarded at the time as important enough to be recorded, would be acknowledged with a responsibility to understand, politically, the reasons for their selection by the interested media. In this approach, I believed I could extract from the rent strike experience, the 'voice' of the protest movement but also the political currency of a brand of labour struggle that had the home at its core.

Critical Questions

Given the contrast between the absence of data available in mainstream sources, and the interest of community and radical media in rent strikes, it was presumed that, at the centre of its 'official' marginality, was the local or 'domestic' tenure of housing protests. From this tension, a number of critical experiences shared by Merseyside tenants with housing protestors elsewhere needed to be understood, as did as the local demographics that may have served to separate the people's experiences from those of other workers and on occasions from each other.

From the location of its causes in community life, the tenants movement benefits from close connections to the instruments of the 'grassroots' labour movement in Trades Councils and in local Labour and Socialist parties. Its disconnection from national governance and from the leadership of the labour and Trades Union movement may be one reason for the mistrust of Labour and the sense of betrayal that is found throughout the period and described here in Chapters Four to Seven. The paradox of local connection, and national disconnection, may also be the origin of the conflicts examined in Chapters Four and Six between those who believed the movement should remain traditional and stay away from interference by outsiders, and those

who saw in its autonomy the means to organise real workers struggle and force fundamental changes in society. While it was an outside instrument, the ideology of *Big Flame* meant that it saw in the tenants' movement a purer form of workers struggle than that represented by traditional unionism. In particular the radical paper saw housing struggles as an opportunity for activists to counteract male hierarchies by organising women and those previously uninvolved in formal political campaigns. It was in the community-based movement's distance from traditional labour politics, rather than in its connections to organised labour, that *Big Flame* saw the possibility of fusing the two different arenas of working class experience around one class condition. As I pointed out in Chapter Two, it is in this connection of work and home-based causes that rent strike studies have identified a central pre-condition of a class struggle (Moorhouse et al, 1972, Castells, 1983).

Furthermore, in the region's housing policy of the period, in particular Liverpool's slum clearance programme (see Chapter Two), may be found a specifically local background to the Merseyside experience, a contribution to the whole that Grayson (1996) suggests was radical in comparison to other places. Many of the campaigns of 1969-1971 occurred in slum clearance zones, or areas of new 'overspill' economic housing that had fallen into decline. The ATACC network these areas provided was, as Grayson argues, the leading example from the period of a 'permanent' housing pressure group. The militancy of Kirkby in 1972-1973, described in Chapters Six and Seven, was, according to Sklair (1975) the outstanding example nationwide. From its contribution to the national struggle and the quality of organisation inside the *Kirkby Rent Alliance*, we may decipher the town's demarcation as an overflow estate for Liverpool's former slum dwellers. The relocation of workers from formerly settled communities into new conditions without the jobs and family networks of healthy community life was, Meegan (1989) suggests, an important component of the Kirkby residents political education (see Chapters Two and Seven).

The Era of Community

It is not surprising that from the accounts of non-Merseyside rent strikes contained in Chapter Two, to find so many of the experiences of

the protestors duplicated in the later chapters on the Merseyside protests; the divisions over 'outsiders', the assimilation by Labour of the strikers causes or leaders, the isolation of the protest movement from the network of news, the use of the law against rebels who cannot be 'contained', the contrast in values between long-term tenants associations and short-term single issue action groups. It may seem surprising that struggles waged in isolation from the rest of the country should achieve this level of similitude. It should not surprise however given that they are political struggles of labour and considering that the local conditions isolating them from each other are the prime determinants of why all housing groups resist and how they organise.

What may be gauged from the data contained in this research is that the locality of causes overwhelms the Merseyside movement at every phase in its development. Furthermore, it is a key contention of this study that when viewed generically locality operates as a conundrum. According to the *Liverpool Weekly News*, ATACC was created as a 'moderate' alternative to the *Liverpool Rents Action Committee* set up by the *International Socialists* (IS). While democratic in tone, the community values of ATACC did not permit alliances with mass action of the industrial sort or any class brand of socialism. At the same time however its values of grassroots leadership and the spontaneity of its street-level activism inspired a non-hierarchical or 'feminine' *modus operandi* that was more radical in this respect than the highly organised, structured model of official Trades Unionism.

The radical feminine is a phenomenon again growing from the community base of the movement's activities but paradoxical in so far as it contained elements of both conventional and radical approaches (Grayson, 1996). It is apparent from the material contained in Chapters Four and Five that neighbourhood networks influenced the character of the tenants' activism, which relied upon direct physical confrontation in community settings, and the nature of their relationships with outsiders which relied upon 'negotiation'.

The evidence of Chapter Four supports a key proposition outlined in Chapter Two about the nature of different types of tenants. Firstly, the origin of ATACC in the 1968 rent strike, and its merger of non-political

women, community activists and labour supporters, illustrates Sklair's (1975) contention that at its origin the movement is an alliance between the working class and community forms of the labour movement (1975). From its campaigning style, we may also concur with Grayson (1996) that the values of the movement empower the grassroots at the expense of a hierarchical structure. In exhibiting these characteristics, the material suggests ATACC fits the model of a permanent pressure group described by Lowe (1986) and Grayson (1996). The key contention here however is that while discernible, the division between permanent and single issue groups does not represent the antithesis that is suggested of community versus class politics. The contention of this study, supported by data showing the multiple identities of the campaigning groups, is that long and short-term campaigns reflect the paradox at the heart of community-based housing struggles. Since all housing action groups draw on local conditions, they are coalitions of interests and styles, featuring common values and traditions. Potential and means exist for radical or conventional political outcomes in cases of long or short term struggles. The evidence contained in Chapter Five, on the Abercromby strike, illustrates the ability of an entirely local condition to produce a short-term struggle involving tenants in mass action.

It is in the community model that we find the origin of the enduring political division at the heart of the tenants' movement; a problematic shared by the city's rent strikers with the non-Merseyside examples described in Chapter Two. During the years 1969-1971, the focus of struggle shifted from the suburbs, where ATACC originated, to the inner cities, with a number of struggles connected directly to the slum clearance programme. These struggles, described in Chapter Five, in particular the Abercromby rent strike, illustrate the proposition emanating directly from the conundrum of community; the radicalism exhibited in some specifically local situations. While, in Chapter Four, we saw ATACC extending the geographical base of its influence across the North West, during the period covered in Chapter Five housing struggles became contained within a small area in and around the centre of Liverpool. In the specifically local context described in Chapter Two, the movement became more isolated and the strikes less connected. Yet, the regeneration scheme outlined in Chapter Two

created a number of short-term housing associations and committees which Sklair (1975) and Lowe (1986) suggest are more class conscious than the ATACC style coalitions.

While its cause was of interest only to those living in the affected streets, the Abercromby strike formed connections to 'outside' parties, in this case radical students attending the *University of Liverpool*. In its Alexandra protest, it used the interest of the national press in the royal family to break its disconnection from the rest of the country. From the desperation of their entirely local condition, the Abercromby tenants maintained a total rent strike for eight months, forcing the issue of Liverpool's inner city slum clearance onto the national agenda. As Grayson (1996) contends, locality does not in itself limit the horizons of the movement, or the politics of its consciousness; it is in the achievement of cross connection, of the different aspects of workers experience, that community life can be understood as a political condition.

From the events of Chapter Five, I suggest we may conclude that the extremity of the condition of the slum clearance areas during the years 1969-1971 energised if not radicalised the movement on Merseyside, preparing it for the subsequent national struggle against Fair Rents. This contention is supported further on in the study by the events of Chapter Seven, which provides a strong converse illustration. From the material on the 'national' cause, it is proposed that the highly politicised anti-HFA action groups in Tower Hill and Scotland Road at least in part owed their raised consciousness to specific local conditions.

The National Struggle

From Chapters Four and Five we see that, while they inhabit a common tradition, housing struggles centred on specifically local issues are complex, even contradictory and will reflect their local condition. The neighbourhood base of many of ATACC's affiliated groups meant that it was also successful in assimilating formerly non-political residents, particularly women, into the political life of their communities. The struggles in the slum areas also created a pool of potential activists. Some of these, including the secretary of the *Abercromby Tenants Association*, Ethel Singleton, organised new

groups in 1972 to resist the national Fair Rents legislation. Rather than limiting the horizons of the movement, the dislocation in the inner cities and the inadequacies of the new housing conurbations during the early period may explain in part the vigour of the later opposition to the Conservative Fair Rents scheme. From the immediacy of the local conditions, a culture of protest was continued.

The pressure for action against HFA was strong on Merseyside. It was expressed by tenants in their support for a national strike and by politicians in their early advocacy of non-implementation. However, from the material gathered for Chapter Six, we see once again the complex role of community ideals as a means of energising or limiting the horizons of the movement. Responsibility for the implementation of the Fair Rents legislation rested with local authorities, all of whom governed geographical areas with individual housing priorities and political traditions. Furthermore, responsibility for resistance in the communities rested with local associations accustomed to confronting Councillors, not Ministers. These tensions could have been surmounted if the tenants call for a national rent strike across the country had been heeded by the parent organisation, NATR. However, once the opportunity was missed, replaced effectively by an alliance with Labour Party rebels, the movement was fighting on familiar territory; local conditions would in each region or area govern the character of the campaign, and the traditional coalition of grassroots labour interests would be reconstituted.

As the events of Chapters Four and Five demonstrate, the immediate relevance of local issues stimulated participation at local level. However, in the struggle to defeat Fair Rents, regional divergence provided opportunity for powerful and unitary authorities to fracture or divert the national campaign. Once NATR had chosen to trust Labour in preference to a strike, the promise of non-implementation by a number of rebel Councils was enough to deter tenants in the rebel areas from organising, until of course it was too late (Sklair, 1975).

The contention here is that the community tradition, alongside the power of its alliance with the Labour movement, explains in part the failure of the anti-Fair Rents campaign to focus on the national

governance rather than on the familiar local authorities. In particular, the community tradition relies upon communion with local Councillors whose responsibility on this occasion was not to govern or negotiate but to implement. Trusting authorities, in the face of historic disappointments, may imply a sense of powerlessness among the tenants, or an absence of perceived alternatives. Following widespread early scepticism, the alliance with Labour continued to be 'trusted' even as the pattern of betrayal was emerging (Sklair, 1975) which may suggest the habit of community 'thinking' and relying on 'local' Labour was a factor in the minds of the national leaders if not the grassroots tenants.

Conversely, Tower Hill, having prepared regardless of NATR for the eventuality of a tenant lead action, achieved widespread support across the estate, even while the strike was beginning to weaken elsewhere. Certainly, THURAG's success in sustaining a belated total rent strike supports Lowe's (1986) contention that single issue action groups, formed to fulfil short-term objectives, are better prepared than traditional community associations for organising political strikes. However, Tower Hill's example was estate lead, drawing on local conditions, traditions and culture. The paradoxical contention, therefore, that the radicalism of tenants' actions or beliefs is not necessarily limited by strong local influences is demonstrated. Furthermore, the early support for THURAG from associations in the North City slum clearance area, in particular Scotland Road's 'Over the Bridge', demonstrates that the locality of a strike setting does not necessarily inhibit the development of links to other areas. It is the 'permanence' of tenant networks, as opposed to the locality of their concerns, that forces groups like ATACC to disconnect from open class politics.

The 'Problem' of Local Diversities

Once HFA was implemented, resistance began to weaken in too many places, creating for the anti-Fair Rents campaigners a different set of circumstances. While the will to resist was strong, the original hope of non-implementation meant strikers were not expecting to have to strike at all let alone in isolation from each other. A flurry of strikes were organised across the country but by local action groups and tenants

associations. Functioning in the traditional local fashion, the separate actions meant HFA became focused on local targets.

Once again, in the events outlined in Chapter Seven, we see the ambiguities created by this unusual form of struggle, political and non-political, traditional and radical, confrontational and conciliatory. The remaining strikers aimed to defy national government, but were armed only with the weapons of community politics. However, the struggle contained a crucial element that was non-traditional in nature. It was driven by a single issue and freed therefore of the obligations associated with permanence. Given the presence of an overriding political issue, the primacy of local networks might not inhibit the reconstruction of the struggle, which would after all be dominated by single issue or short-term action groups. Forcing the abolition of an existing law, as opposed to preventing its implementation, was an objective unlikely to be achieved without significant pressure on government. This appeared impossible without a genuine alliance with industrial workers. If the local experience fuelled the commitment of Kirkby or Scotland Road to the cause, then, given the strong class nature of the local strike leaders' perception of their struggle, it did not hinder the transition from housing to workers struggle in these areas.

For the small number of striking estates in the North and the Midlands of England and in Scotland, to lead from isolation offers one possibility only; to lead by example. In Tower Hill's alternative alliance with industrial workers rather than official Labour, we see, in the events of Chapter Seven, a housing protest resisting in the manner of an unofficial workers revolt aimed directly at national government. Judged by the standards of industrial struggles, the Tower Hill rent strike was radical and its origin in its immediate community provided its primary energy. Certainly, the interest of the alternative press in the Kirkby events, and incidentally the local mass circulation paper, the *Kirkby Reporter*, testifies to its profile. *Big Flame*, which set up its own women's group on the estate, saw in THURAG an autonomous worker organisation through which the 'patriarchal' values of the labour movement could be challenged.

It was the verdict of Ethel Singleton, in the interview she gave for this study, that the Tower Hill struggle was defeated by the inability to rally industrial support (Singleton and Singleton, 2001). *Big Flame* insisted the divide between home and work was significant, suggesting more than once that the union leadership did not value the tenants struggle equally with those of industrial workers. While they raised a number of factories to strike in the early months of the struggle, the rebel strikers on Merseyside were, in the end, 'betrayed' by their fellow workers more by accident than by design. As Chapter Seven reveals, against a background of anti-union legislation, and the jailing of industrial workers, and in the weeks before Christmas, and during a recession, too many workers could not afford to follow the example set by the jailed tenant Brian Owen or dare to risk his fate. As for those outside the militant areas, Ethel Singleton (2001) suggests the struggle on Merseyside in general was hampered from the outset by the failure of too many tenants to understand that they were engaged in a confrontation with national government and not with their local Councillors.

Understanding the Struggle

Compared to industrial struggles, the political culture of the tenants' movement is ambivalent. While less publicised, housing protests are a connected part of the labour movement (Sklair, 1975, Grayson, 1996). As a result of this ambivalent condition, many tenants mistrusted alliances with overtly political individuals or groups, especially those who were perceived to be outsiders (Grayson, 1996). While mistrust of 'outsiders' may be common to industrial and housing struggles, as Kenwright (2004b) testified in the interview she gave for this project, the concept of a non-sectarian, non-political *modus operandi* was central to the operations of ATACC, and grew directly from the network's focus on community life (see Chapter Four). This was true also of its affiliate, the *Abercromby Tenants Association* as the comments of Ethel Singleton in her interview (Singleton and Singleton, 2001) demonstrate (see Chapter Five). For Kenwright (2004b), it was a rationale across the ATACC network that associations accepted help only where those helping acknowledged the reality of tenant leadership and control. As we saw in Chapter Five, the Abercromby association

kept its student allies well apart once the tenants were in direct contact with the authorities (Singleton and Singleton, 2001).

In relation to divisions over strategy, the material contained in Chapters Six and Seven suggests it is the contrast between permanent and single issue associations that is pertinent. It seems clear that the non-sectarian ideal that may result in mistrust of outsiders was less strong in the short-term action groups than among the traditional associations. While socialist politics was not problematic in Tower Hill, we can see that doubts about the role of Trotskyist group the *International Socialists* were expressed by Bootle and by Northwood in relation to the tenant Billy Cavanagh (see Chapter Seven). While a rent increase strike in Bootle remained well supported for at least six months, the *All Bootle Rents Action Committee* was closely tied to both ATACC and *Liverpool Trades Council*, while Northwood was running a campaign linking high rents to the specifically local issue of poor housing on the estate. For those groups, outside interference was merely a distraction.

As Lowe (1986) found in his study of the 1967 rent strike in Sheffield, disagreements over socialist groups may be treated by the authorities as a division between sensible 'moderates' and dangerous 'extremists'. In the Sheffield case the appeal to 'moderation' did indeed split the strikers into two opposing associations undermining the strike effort (see Chapter Two). The details of the actions covered in Chapter Seven suggest that, contrary to common media representations, the division on Merseyside was ambivalent politically. Opposition to outside 'leadership' was as strong inside *Big Flame* as it was inside ATACC, and politically committed individuals such as the Communist Party's Sam Watts in Bootle operated inside Trades Council groups. Indeed Sklair (1975) argues that the trust placed in leaders with radical affiliations, such as Tower Hill's Tony Boyle and Maurice Lee, rested largely upon the perception that they were mavericks who put the tenants cause before the party interest. The contention of this research is that while the nature of the cause, local or national, short-term or permanent, influenced the attitudes of striking groups, this was a result of the ambivalence emanating from the movement's multiple identities and not a division based on conservative or radical political instincts.

While the anti-Fair Rents campaign on Merseyside avoided an open split, Sklair (1975) argues that Tower Hill's links to the 'sectarian left' inhibited the development of the struggle because of what he calls the ultra left's separatist attitude to the wider movement (1975, p288). In spite of its 'betrayals' Sklair (1975) argues that Labour is the only instrument that can transform workers anger into mass action. The Clay Cross example of popular community socialism was based on the 'solidarity and unity of the eleven Councillors, the constituency Labour Party, and large numbers of ordinary people in Clay Cross' (p259). For Sklair, connection to an instrument outside the community, or beyond the locality, is critical to the success of any rent struggle.

The evidence of the anti-HFA struggle on Merseyside shows that no prospect of a Clay Cross style alliance existed at any time. We may conclude that it was for this reason that resistance converged ultimately around those who avoided the distractions of a Labour rebellion, relying instead upon the strength of feeling in their communities. Indeed, as we saw in Chapters Six and Seven, supporting actions by industrial workers happened mostly inside Kirkby, less so in areas where rent strike action was more modest. It is the contention here that in uniting behind 'mavericks' rather than the Labour Party, tenants and workers on Merseyside reflected the paradoxical nature of the movement's twin origin in connected labour values on the one hand and in the primacy of living spaces on the other.

Given the politically ambivalent nature of the trends within the tenants' movement, it is a further but related contention of this study that political consciousness is not necessarily limited, but may be enhanced by seemingly non-political developments centred around community life. The spirit of renewal that may be generated inside affected communities during a rent strike may reflect the openness of the ideals growing from the movement's community base. While the Abercromby crèche developed into a children's centre (see Chapter Five), the community centre opened by the Tower Hill tenants for their meetings (see Chapter Six) was re-invented as the modern day *Kirkby Unemployed Centre*. The *University of Liverpool Institute of Extension Studies* developed from a project created by anti-HFA striking tenants

in Scotland Road and Everton (Lovett *et al*, 1983, p33). As well as setting up a women's group, *Big Flame* encouraged tenants associations to build supports for rent striking families in the community. The 1972 Halewood tenants Christmas party wasn't just nourishment for the 200 children that attended, but 'gave the adults a chance to get together and talk about things that affected their community' (January/February 1973, p2).

The evidence that may be drawn from these developments suggests that consciousness in a rent strike situation may depend just as readily upon the ability of tenants to retain their autonomy from Labour, as Tower Hill did, as to their ability to connect in the manner of Clay Cross. According to Fantasia (1988) what re-connects people to their communities during a strike argues isn't neighbourliness or other urban ideals but the life changing nature of political struggle. In a confrontation with power workers are forced to align themselves, in struggle or against it, but, 'on both sides of the picket line' they cannot be outside their community, as much of the time they would otherwise be (p194). 'An important dimension of developing strike support' was that strikes were '*collective* activities that created a sense of mutuality and sociability … a whole new set of activities that were other-directed (towards co-workers, their kin, and between families)' (p193). Fantasia is describing an industrial strike at *Clinton Corn* in Iowa, USA, but his words echo those of *Big Flame*; that what arouses working class communities to re-connect is the unusual experience of talking and *doing* politics (January/February, 1973, p2). What is apparent from the experiences contained in this study is that in the regenerative potential of housing struggles, tenants may find themselves *doing* the sort of politics they never did before. 'Knowledge', James Singleton told me in the 2001 project interview 'makes you stronger': indeed, once the HFA strike was over, many Kirkby activists, Ethel Singleton says 'disbanded into various political groups which they were never in before the strike started' (Singleton and Singleton, 2001).

Concluding Thoughts

It was the intention of this study from the outset, to reveal the rent strikers experience in all its facets, social, political and personal. This study has sought to provide an in-depth analysis of the evolution of the

rent strike experience during the period and its connections to developments in the broader labour movement. In so doing, the aim was to enrich what up until now has been a far from complete picture. While this study does not purport to offer an end to the debates about the political character of the rent strike experience, I have attempted to illuminate the multi-dimensional nature of the struggle which flowed, I contend, from the core values that distinguish rent strikes from other workers conflicts.

Unlike industrial strikes, housing struggles take place outside centres of power, and are distanced from the hierarchies that structure the other parts of our lives. Uniquely, in connecting the 'ordinariness' of community life with a radical discourse separated from conventional standards of political behaviour, the rent strike alone appears to operate in a way that can seamlessly connect in political partnership jumble sales and communist activism. If in its separation from orthodoxies, lies its radical potential, then here too lies some explanation for its achievements on Merseyside, expressed in five years of constant and collective resistance.

While it may have been tempting at the beginning to assume otherwise, the events described in this study show there was nothing in the locality of the Merseyside tenants experience that impeded the ability of people on rent strike to understand that experience as part of a greater whole. Echoing the sentiments of Kirkby's May Stone, from Chapter Seven and the *Birds Eye* picketers, 'Connie' and 'Mary' in Chapter Six, Ethel Singleton challenged film maker Broomfield when he questioned the purpose or point of struggle, especially when the cause appears to be lost. She told him just how 'significant' it is for working people to struggle and especially to 'question'; 'people come out of that fight a much wider person in every sense of the word' (*Behind the Rent Strike*, 1974).

When workers are class conscious, they become elevated from merely 'seeing' to actively 'engaged'. In this engaged condition, they become, for the merest moment in political time, the instruments of a new apparently more open politics. In the case of housing protests it is the community base, nominally disconnecting tenants from other workers,

that carries this new politics, an ambiguity at the heart of community forms of working class struggle. It should be little wonder then, as was pointed out in Chapter Three, that the meaning of that moment does not enjoy a place of honour in the framework of our public consciousness. From this reality the ultimate lesson may be drawn, testifying to the extent to which the interests of highly unorthodox rent striking communities have been subsumed by orthodox political languages and thinking.

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Kirkby contingent: *Socialist Worker*, 18th June 2005, online
More arrests: *Kirkby Reporter*, 19th December 1973, p1

APPENDIX

Merseyside on Rent Strike: Chronology of Resistance

March 1968	*Speke Tenants Association* organises against forthcoming rent increases; Liverpool Housing Committee Chairman threatens 60,000 tenants with prosecution if they withhold increases; co-ordinating committee of newly formed tenants associations (ATACC) founded
1st April 1968	Rent rises on a sliding scale implemented, with increases greatest in areas of 'least demand', that is, furthest from the City Centre; three days later, thousands of protesting tenants march to Liverpool town hall; on 18th, *Liverpool Weekly News* reports rent increase strike 'failing', except in Speke and proclaims 'victory' for the Corporation; Childwall Valley saturated with leaflets calling on tenants to join increase strike
2nd May 1968	*Liverpool Weekly News* admits 'thousands' of tenants on strike; Childwall Valley women threaten 'housewife' strike if husbands fail to rally; also this month, Dingle based *Liverpool Rents Action Committee*, formed by *International Socialists*, claiming eight affiliate associations
October 1968	Tenants of one street in inner city Abercromby, protesting delays in re-housing, agree a total rent strike
1st November 1968	Housing Minister, Anthony Greenwood, 'ambushed' at Lime Street Station by ATACC tenants, leaping from behind mail bags
March 1969	Tenants of 36 Abercromby streets on total rent strike; tenants of Cathedral St James threaten strike action over repairs; Conservative leader, Edward Heath, outlines commitment to reduce taxes by cutting subsidies to Council housing

8th May 1969	*Liverpool Weekly News* publishes *Abercromby Tenants Association* plans to 'greet' Princess Alexandra, invited by the *University of Liverpool*, landlord of some of the tenants
15th May 1969	Princess Alexandra opens University Senate House; outside, 400 students protest in support of tenants, gathered in nearby Vine Street; 'a peasants revolt' says US television news; 'a great day for the people of Vine Street' says the *Liverpool Echo*
May 1969	Liverpool Corporation issues 'revised' conditions of tenancy to all tenants, including 'responsibility' for repairs not undertaken by the Council; *Liverpool Works and Housing Department* report reveals 80% of pre-war corporation houses 'sub standard'; ATACC responds, demanding 'rent freeze' on all pre-war properties
June 1969	Abercromby strike ends in success; Council agrees re-housing of tenants, including those paying rent, via a housing association, to the *University of Liverpool*; repayment of arrears 'waived'
July 1969	*Abercromby Tenants Association* protests Council decision to put Vine Street development out to private tender; 'we can't live in a university and two cathedrals', it says
October 1969	Total rent strike by tenants of five 'Bronte' Council blocks, including 'Bullring' tenements, over repairs
26th February 1970	First issue of radical local paper, *Big Flame* predicts further rent increases for tenants; calls upon tenants to organise, in the manner of Abercromby, using direct action
12th March 1970	Speke Labour candidate Ken Stewart calls for a national enquiry into Liverpool City Council's 'neglect and complete disregard' for the conditions of Council housing in the city

21st May 1970	ATACC announces its intention to 'drop in' on Prime Minister Wilson in Downing Street on 27th; 'we'll sit on the steps if we have to', says Secretary, Marjorie Gallimore
July 1970	Bootle tenants receive letters threatening rent increases to pay for backlog of repairs; *Sefton and Netherton Tenants Association* calls on trade unionists to organise in their tenants associations
September 1970	Tenants of Candia and Crete tower blocks, Everton, barricade themselves in against Council plans to 'strengthen' the buildings, with the tenants in residence; tenants respond to threat of eviction by offering to swap homes with corporation officials
July 1971	First issue of 'alternative' local paper, *Liverpool Free Press*, founded by former Echo journalists; Conservative government White Paper *Fair Deal for Housing*, proposing rent increases and subsidies for private landlords, welcomed by everyone except tenants; *Halstead Urban District Council*, Essex, reacts first committing its officers not to implement proposed 'housing finance' legislation
August 1971	*Liverpool Free Press* reveals 'secret' Planning Department report predicting a massive shortfall of 50,000 homes by 1980
September 1971	Tenants across Northern Ireland join rent and rate strike for 'civil rights' including withholding payment of utility bills; in Liverpool's slum clearance area number 53, Dingle tenants march on Liverpool town hall
14th January 1972	*Labour Weekly* reveals Labour Party's eight point plan to 'delay' implementation of rent increases
April 1972	Liverpool Labour goes into local elections promising not to implement Conservative rent increases

May 1972	'Rebel' Councillors declare 'we will go to jail'; *Scottie Press* encourages Vauxhall residents to 'join one of the Tenants Associations that are being formed in every block in this area'
Spring/Summer 1972	Tenants in Everton, demanding re-housing, go on total rent strike; in Dingle, tenants organise street protests against Council plans to dump three million gallons of sewage in the area
10th June 1972	233 delegates from 87 ruling Labour groups meet in Sheffield; by a margin of 74 to 1, meeting passes a motion, proposed by William Sefton, leader of *Liverpool City Council,* not to implement *Housing Finance (Fair Rents) Act;* a fortnight later, Labour leader, Wilson, meets leaders of Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool Councils to advise 'caution'
July 1972	Kirkby Labour Party tells Tower Hill action group the Council will not implement HFA; Tower Hill Secretary, Tony Boyle, tells *Kirkby Reporter* that if Councillors renege on pledge 'they had better not show their faces again on Tower Hill looking for votes'; *Liverpool Free Press* reveals contrasting tenant strategies, ATACC planning to make the Bill 'unworkable' by mass rebate applications, with *Kirkby and Huyton Trades Council* favouring action committees of shop stewards; 'compliance only plays into the hands of the Tories' says a Trades Council spokesman
August 1972	*Liverpool City Council* votes to implement rent increases; *Kirkby Unfair Rents Co-ordinating Committee* formed to unite Kirkby Council tenants from Tower Hill with tenants from Southdene, Northwood and Westvale, paying rent to Liverpool; on 23rd hundreds of tenants, protesting *Housing Finance Act,* march on Liverpool Town Hall chanting 'Fair rent is bent'
September 1972	Across the country, tenants associations in 80 authorities begin organising strikes; on

	Merseyside, Kirkby organises into eleven divisions, with Tower Hill favouring a total rent strike. *Scotland Road Action Committee* calls 'increase' strike while neighbouring 'Over the Bridge' favours total rent strike. Public meeting threatening 'rent increase' strike called by *All Bootle Rents Action Committee*; similar meetings in Birkenhead, Speke, Netherley, Huyton, Fazakerley, Cantril Farm, Old Swan, Everton and Halewood; at a special meeting on 11th, disorder as Kirkby Council, on the casting vote of the Chair, agrees to implement the act; on 28th representatives of all Liverpool's existing tenants associations meet to discuss an anti-Housing Finance strategy
1st October 1972	At Marsh Lane, Bootle, tenants burn rent rebate forms in a coffin outside town hall. Also in October, tenants demonstrate in Birkenhead Park in support of 'rent increase' strike; 60% of Halewood tenants participate in similar 'increase' strike
2nd October 1972	*Housing Finance (Fair Rents) Act* becomes law; sit-in at *Fisher Bendix*, Kirkby in support of protesting tenants; 31 workers at *Fords* in Halewood sacked for joining anti-Fair Rents demonstration while 22 workers from *Birds Eye,* Kirkby, suspended and two stewards sacked
3rd October 1972	Halewood workers reinstated but on new terms and conditions; mothers with prams blockade *Birds Eye* factory, stopping production and forcing the re-instatement of the workers
4th October 1972	While three Kirkby Councillors resign over Liverpool Labour's promise of non implementation, one, Jimmy Hackett, an opponent of HFA, is expelled for calling fellow Councillors 'traitors and cowards'
9th October 1972	'National' rent strike against *Housing Finance Act* begins

11th October 1972	*Bird's Eye* Chairman, Kenneth Webb, threatens to close Kirkby factory, complaining of 'totally sinister' influences; Kirkby rent strike begins
October 1972	21 Liverpool Labour Councillors, including future Mayors, Michael Black and Doreen Jones, split from colleagues pledging 'total' opposition to *Housing Finance Act*; on 25th, *Kirkby Reporter* prints Kirkby Council claims that tenants applying for rebates would be 'better off or unaffected' by Housing Finance rent rises; ATACC considers Council leader Sefton's offer to join a committee to pressure the *Rent Assessment Committee*; Free Press disapproves, suggesting it will create 'a split between ATACC and other tenants groups'
10th November 1972	Seven Tower Hill families receive eviction notices; similar notices issued during November to tenants in Scotland Road and Vauxhall, striking as part of 'Over the Bridge'; anti eviction squads organised
13th November 1972	900 tenants seal off Tower Hill to prevent entry of bailiffs; 50 tenants form human shield around house of threatened striker; THURAG (*Tower Hill Unpaid Rents Action Group*) receives pledges of support from dockers and from car workers at *Standard Triumph*
29th November 1972	*Bootle Times* reports 'dramatic' increase in rent arrears in Litherland
8th December 1972	Liverpool tenant appears in court on 'assault' charge relating to events in the public gallery when Liverpool Council voted to implement the Act
27th December 1972	Kirkby Council votes to issue warnings of legal action to every striking tenant; also this month, increase withholding Netherley tenants picket rent offices and Old Swan tenants deliver anti eviction petition; THURAG claims 1,800 tenants on total rent strike while 'Over the Bridge' claims

	'near total' support, from the 570 tenants, for full rent strike
January 1973	Government enquiries set up to investigate non implementing Councils, only two of which held out, Clay Cross and Bedwas and Machen. In Liverpool, 21 'rebel' Labour Councillors return to the ruling group. In Tower Hill, tenants organise traffic blockades and joint actions with workers at *Birds Eye*
February 1973	After five months, remnants only of strikes remain, except Bootle, with 75% withholding increases, 'Over the Bridge' and Tower Hill, still on total rent strike; Kirkby Council owed £75,000 in rent arrears
14th February 1973	Five Scotland Road tenants answer summonses, using court appearances to denounce HFA
March 1973	Tenants of Scotland Road and 'Over the Bridge' action groups vote to stand candidates in May local election; in solidly Labour Scotland Road, Labour stands Council leader Bill Sefton and Housing Committee chairman Joe Morgan; on 28th, *Kirkby Reporter* admits many of Kirkby's Liverpool Corporation tenants forced to repay the rebates granted in 'error'; Bootle tenants picket Council meeting at town hall; action committee complains to local press about 'threats' used by Council to intimidate tenants
April 1973	Kirkby tenants in Northwood form action group to fight Liverpool for re-housing; on 12th, Bootle Council, under its new Fair Rents adjustments, announces 'generous' rent 'cuts' for tenants; latest proposal to transform Candia and Crete Towers attacked in the *Scottie Press* by *Liverpool Council Tenants Union* Secretary, Jim Moran; Council leader, Sefton, 'romps' to victory by 500 votes over Scotland Road tenant candidate, Joe Stroud

24th May 1973	70 Kirkby 'defendants' fail to appear at Lancashire County Court; summonses returned marked 'rent strike'; cases heard 'in absentia'; also in May, Vauxhall Labour Councillors applaud Scotland Road voters for their 'faith and trust in Bill Sefton and the Labour Party'
6th June 1973	*Kirkby Reporter* reveals Tower Hill now among the country's 'top five' *Housing Finance Act* withholders; notices to pay returned to Kirkby Council
20th and 27th June 1973	Cases, deferred from February, heard against 'Over the Bridge' (Scotland Road) tenants, who claimed never to have received their 'notices to quit'; also this month, Northwood tenants march on the 'secret' home of Liverpool Housing Chairman Joe Morgan
July 1973	Judge, issuing eviction orders against two squatting Croxteth families, criticises *Liverpool City Council*; action committee set up to support squatters; *Big Flame* reports 'a few isolated people' holding out against HFA, while, on 23rd, Kirkby Housing Committee hears that, in previous two months, number of tenants on total rent strike doubled; also this month, three more Kirkby Councillors expelled by Labour and Northwood tenants issue writ for negligence against Liverpool Corporation
2nd August 1973	Good news in Bootle, rent rises 'not as high as expected' says the Council, on page 5 of the *Bootle Times*
22nd August 1973	Environment Minister, Geoffrey Ripon, announces Government enquiry into conditions in Northwood flats
1st September 1973	Protest march in Kirkby addressed by Clay Cross Councillor, David Skinner, representatives of ATACC and Northwood; in spite of high turnout, *Kirkby Reporter* claims tenants more interested in shopping; also this month

	Northwood flat dwellers call for the resignation of their local Councillor
24th September 1973	Kirkby Housing Committee authorises 'compensatory' payments to Kirkby Park tenants 'who were nevertheless paying increased rents following improvements to their dwellings'
25th September 1973	By a majority, Scotland Road tenants resist calls from leaders of 'Over the Bridge' for total rent strike
3rd October 1973	*Kirkby Reporter* 'unveils' film maker Nicholas Broomfield, promising to reveal the 'positive' side of the town
4th October 1973	*Liverpool Weekly News* reports ATACC, complaining about 'premature' notices to quit, caused by clerical errors
5th October 1973	*Liverpool Echo* reports Billy Cavanagh of Bootle issued with first HFA re- possession order
15th October 1973	Newly striking tenants in Croxteth, protesting high rents and deteriorating conditions, form a human barricade, blocking traffic in Altcross Road
17th October 1973	*Kirkby Reporter* reports resignation from *Kirkby Rent Alliance* of *Northwood Flatdwellers and Tenants Association*, over involvement of *International Socialists* group in 'directing' tenants; paper claims Northwood 'unhappy' with Tower Hill decision to ignore the courts
22nd October 1973	Only three of 36 Tower Hill tenants turn up to court, absentees given a final chance pending liability to imprisonment; this month, with no vote, Liverpool Council implements further rent increase of up to 75p per week, with increases of up to 60p submitted in Kirkby; Council blames strikers; 'classic divide and rule' says *Big Flame*; tenants of 'dream' homes for the disabled, built in South Parade, Speke, go on total rent strike, protesting exorbitant rents, poor conditions

6th November 1973	Tower Hill absentee tenants receive notices to attend court to 'purge' their contempt
21st November 1973	All but three Tower Hill tenants fail to attend court
27th November 1973	Fifteen Tower Hill tenants receive letters from *Liverpool City Council* threatening jail should they fail again to appear in court
30th November 1973	The Tower Hill Fifteen miss their final chance
3rd December 1973	Tenants, having been refused entry, force their way into a Kirkby Housing Committee meeting; 'intruders' physically removed by police; inside, Councillors confirm average rent increase of 45p
4th December 1973	THURAG meets to plan tactical response in the event of arrests
5th December 1973	ATACC mobilises picket outside the home of the Orrett family of Southdene, Kirkby, to stop eviction for arrears created by rent increase strike; 'we are prepared to take the law on' ATACC leader, Sam Watts, tells the *Kirkby Reporter*
6th December 1973	Air raid siren sounds in Tower Hill as Brian Owen and Larry Doyle arrested by bailiffs and taken to Walton Jail, to serve two weeks sentence for 'contempt'; Eileen Owen and Josie Doyle, 'destined' for *Risley Remand Centre*, left behind; tenants march to *Fisher Bendix* and other factories to hold meetings; workers walk out, in support of Owen and Doyle at *Anglia Paper* and *Frigoscandia*; picket of Walton jail at 7pm; *Big Flame* reports, prisoners in the jail sing and bang their mugs against the bars in support; *Liverpool Echo* 'discovers' Tower Hill rent strike
7th December 1973	Larry Doyle attends court, 'purging' his contempt, and is released; Brian Owen remains in solitary confinement; evening picket joined by tenants from 'Over the Bridge', Everton, Norris Green and Croxteth

9th December 1973	Mass demo at Walton Jail, 400 tenants chant 'free Owen, jail Heath'; attempt to 'break in' stopped at inside gate; two tenants, Bruce Scott and Pat McElhinney allowed 'in' to visit Owen
10th to 11th December 1973	Picket of rent collectors and rent offices; Kirkby Council now owed £250,000 in arrears
17th December 1973	Five more Tower Hill tenants arrested, only one of whom, Pat McElhinney, refuses to 'purge'; two days later, in the continuing absence of the promised industrial actions, THURAG sues for peace
20th December 1973	*Liverpool Echo* reports rent arrears among City Council tenants 'soaring' to £1,275,000; fails to suggest any reasons
21st December 1973	Brian Owen's contempt is 'purged' and he is released; Tower Hill strike called off by majority vote. Following Kirkby, strikes in Oldham called off, while remnants in Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield hold out for another month; tenants of 'Ugly Sisters' tower blocks in Everton, striking about neglect, face Council possession orders
27th December 1973	Tower Hill 'deal' appears in the press; arrears to be re-paid at £1 per week in exchange for no further court action against tenants
March 1974	Conservatives lose General Election to Labour
1975	HFA 'repealed' by *Housing Rents and Subsidies Act*; rents frozen

Chronology: references

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