



DEFEND COUNCIL HOUSING

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More than 220 people attended the Defend Council Housing conference in Manchester on 21 October, representing 82 tenant groups, trade union bodies and anti-privatisation campaigns.

The government has been shaken by losing three recent ballots, union conferences over summer stepped up their opposition, the campaign held a successful meeting at the Labour Party conference, and the transfer in Birmingham is looking increasingly unlikely as opposition builds up in the Labour group.

George Brumwell, general secretary of the building workers' UCATT union, opened the conference by reaffirming his union's support for the campaign with a promise to help build a mass lobby of parliament on 24 January next year. As well as mobilising its own members to come to London, UCATT pledged it would pay for the rally and called on other unions to throw their weight behind the campaign. "We have to go on the offensive to defend good public housing," he argued, pointing out, "If you want to attack poverty, poor health, education and crime it begins with a good roof over your head."

Alf Chandler, chair of the national tenants' organisation, TAROE, made the case for defending decent, affordable housing very clearly by asking, "What's the point of having good schools if children get sent home to poor homes? What's the point of building new hospitals if people get sent home to damp, rundown housing?" he argued.

Jean Geldart, chair of UNISON's local government executive, told the conference, "We're working to help create a broad, massive national campaign to force the government to make the direct investment that council housing needs."

A growing number of MPs have been supporting the campaign, and Jeremy Corbyn warned the conference of the changing nature of housing associations: "The lack of democracy surrounding housing associations needs to be addressed. These are not small organisations any more—they're businesses."

Messages of support were received from John McDonnell, Austin Mitchell, Lynn Jones and Tony Benn, who have all promised to help organise the lobby of

"Globalisation is a buzz word used by the media. It means privatisation around the globe, the idea that public is bad, private is good. That is a myth and we have to attack it."

● George Brumwell,
UCATT general secretary

parliament in January.

In the workshop session Dexter Whitfield from the Centre for Public Services in Sheffield gave an overview of housing finance. He explained the various "alternatives" to transfer, and pointed out that the government could easily change Treasury rules that prevent councils investing in their housing stock.

There was a real working atmosphere in a packed room covering organising local



campaigns, where Barbara MacClure (chair of the campaign that has just won the ballot in High Wycombe) was amongst several experienced campaigners giving advice. Frank Fitzmorris, a tenant from Knowsley in Merseyside, said, "It's now a wholesale drive by the government to abolish council housing and turn housing into being purely a commodity, and ignoring the whole question of public need." He took away the new Southwark campaign broadsheet, intending to produce something similar himself.

Piers Corbyn from Southwark, south London, described how housing privatisation amounts to asset stripping. Piers argued, "We can now seize the time to turn the government's attack on housing rights on its head. If the government really wants to offer people

real housing 'choice' we insist they should offer private tenants the opportunity to become council tenants, and they should offer housing association tenants the chance to come back to the council."

In Glasgow, where the council plans to ballot 95,000 tenants over transfer next May, Billy McAllister, vice-chair of the newly formed Glasgow Campaign to Defend Council Housing brought the news that the inaugural meeting was attended by over 100 people representing all the main tenant and trade union organisations in the city. The first major initiative they are organising is a major demonstration on 2 December.

Ron Cantor, a tenant from the SHOUT campaign in Manchester, explained how Shiredale tenants stopped Manchester council bulldozing their estate last year, and went on to call press conferences that rallied tenants' reps from across the city, forcing the council to put its privatisation plans on the back burner.

The Daylight Robbery campaign were also at the conference. The government has siphoned over £12 billion from council rents, taxing council tenants twice to subsidise housing benefit payments, money that could be used to pay for more than half of the national backlog of council housing repairs.

Alan Walter from the Defend Council Housing national committee summed up the mood of the day: "We are saying we don't want to go back to the horrors of the market and private landlords, which an older generation fought against to establish council housing."

"It's nonsense to say the government can't afford council housing. If they could afford it after the war, why not now? The real strength of the campaign will be what we organise on the ground, on the estates and streets. We should now plan major public meetings in various towns and cities. We have three months to build the lobby in January to make it a massive protest against privatisation, and to insist the government invest in council housing and stand by the original principles embodied in the idea of a welfare state."

Lobby of parliament WED 24 JANUARY 2001

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