

# **Prepare to Sink the Service Charges**

Conor McLoughlin

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## **The Poll Tax Rebellion by Danny Burns.**

**AK Press.**

**£4.95 (available from WSM Book Service)**

IN THE LAST issue of Workers Solidarity we discussed the proposed introduction of service charges in Dublin. We pointed out how they were a grossly unfair form of double taxation on ordinary PAYE workers. How can they be resisted? A refusal to pay campaign in Waterford, Dublin and Limerick beat the water rates in the 1980s we believe a don't pay, don't collect campaign can do so again. Conor Mc Loughlin examines a new book on how the Poll Tax was beaten in the UK.

This book was completed by Danny Burns in January 1992. He was secretary of the Avon federation of Anti-Poll Tax Unions and co-ordinated the campaign in the South West. He was also one of the three non-aligned (i.e. non-party members) on the executive of the All Britain Federation. The book is a history of the growth of the non-payment campaign which involved thousands through the Anti-Poll-Tax Unions (APTUs).

It is a refreshing change from your typical history book in that the events are seen mainly through the eyes of the people directly involved. It is written as a story beginning with the growth of local APTUs and moving on to courthouse disruption, bailiff resistance and leading to the Trafalgar square riot and the eventual defeat of the Poll-Tax.

In total 17 million people in Britain did not pay their poll-Tax. Some would argue that this was purely passive and that most of the non-payment was "can't pay" rather than "won't pay." This book clearly illustrates how thousands perhaps millions were very Actively involved in the fight against the Poll-Tax.

The tax was first greeted in Scotland then Britain by the formation of local APTUs. By November 1989 there were 1000. Most groups started small but many built up memberships of 500 and more. This was a campaign which drew in thousands who had never been involved in politics before.

## **New Tactics**

This meant that new tactics and approaches were needed to get people involved. For example in Easton in Bristol the local union was built on a door to door basis. Firstly a group of 5 or 6 friends got together and organised a public meeting to see if there was any interest at all. 50 people turned up and some joined.

The next stage was to drop a window poster into around 2000 households. Posters appeared in about 100 windows. These were then approached directly and asked to join the group. They then carried out a local survey. This was not really a scientific poll more of a pretext to sound out local feeling.

In the end the union had about 300 members. It attempted to keep people in touch by having street reps and a local news-letter. This was useful as it informed people that they were not alone and that non-payers were all around them. Using these tactics APTUs succeeded in changing non-payment from a passive individual act to an active collective one in many cases.

## Motivation

They also recognised the vital role of confidence building and political motivation. The first priority was to convince people to fight. The second to convince them that they could win. The aim in most APTUs was to make all the members feel that they were an active and important part of what was happening. Networks of kids kept an eye out for bailiffs and sheriffs. Pensioners and parents working at home organised telephone trees and were ready to assemble at a moments notice to defend houses from sheriffs and bailiffs.

In fact bailiff busting became a high art. So much so that many debt collecting firms went bust. In Edinburgh a group called scum busters were equipped with squads of cars and CB radios. Several minicab companies in London performed a similar service. POUNDINGS (whereby a sheriff can value and remove goods) were resisted by crowds of hundreds in Scotland (they didn't have the power to do it in Wales and England). Bailiffs' houses were picketed and sheriffs offices occupied.

The movement was built from the grass roots up. It was based closely on already existing community networks. Capitalism has broken up many traditional communities and created in their place vast estates. However in some cases this has back-fired on them. For example in Mayfield (sounding not unlike it's name-sake in Cork);

“Our area is mostly made up of housing schemes. There isn't a big shopping area. It was a mining community but then they closed down the pits so there's a high unemployment rate in this area. The centre of Mayfield is the labour club, everything goes on there. It's a built up area there's not a lot of play for the kids. There's a small community centre, nothing else around here. But we pay high bus fares if we go in to town”. (Chris Mayers, Mayfield APTU)

Necessity had built up community links. People met in shopping centres, outside schools, at laundries, football matches etc. As APTUs worked on new links or tapped into already existing one there were some changes in perception. “The barriers of age, sex and race began to crumble. Ali, the local Asian shopkeeper, allowed us to stick a huge notice board in his shop window. The local launderette took leaflets. Some people became noticeably healthier. Mary Mc Innes, one of the oldest members of the Preston field group, who occasionally needed a ventilator to breathe, and at first needed a lift to meetings, literally ran up the street to be at Paul Smarts house before the sheriff officers”. (Bob Goupillot, Prestonfield Community Resistance.)

## Don't Pay Don't collect

Some on the left argued for non-collection of the tax to be fought for within the unions. However NALGO (the local government workers' union) which was won to a non-payment policy refused to lift a finger to implement it. Those union members who tried to organise workplace campaigns met with hostility from the leadership. The book devotes only a mere 2 pages in a section on wage arrestment (to pay tax arrears) to the idea of non-collection.

We believe that non-collection of service charges could and should be fought for within IM-PACT and the CPSU — the unions concerned with collection in Ireland. If workers can be won

over to this idea then they are making a very fundamental statement against the state's right to collect a new tax. They are questioning who runs society and in whose interests.

However given the present state of the unions, the low level of activism on the ground (after years of national wage deals) and the stranglehold of the bureaucracy this won't be an easy battle. In fact the current policy of both IMPACT and the CPSU supports the introduction of a head tax to improve local services and increase employment. They have bought in totally to the "partnership" myth.

In 1986/1987 there was a major debate within the LGPSU (now a part of IMPACT ) about hospital charges. The national conference voted for non-collection but the executive found this unacceptable and held several repeat votes until it swung in their favour. This shows that a major union could be won to non-payment but any measure which broke the law would face hostility and non-co-operation from the bureaucracy.

## **The workers strike back**

The national Anti-Poll Tax demonstrations of 200,000 in London and 50,000 in Glasgow was in many respects the turning point in the Anti-Poll-Tax battle. The rioting which broke out involved thousands in a spontaneous outburst of class anger. 542 police officers were wounded, thousands of demonstrators were injured as police charged with horses and drove vans at demonstrators.

The "Militant" dominated national executive of the All British Federation of APTUs proved they were totally out of touch with reality. Tony Sherridan claimed that those "embroiled in running battles had nothing to do with our protest" (post march press conference)

Steve Nally (on ITN April 1<sup>st</sup>) announced "we are going to hold our own internal inquiry which will go public and if necessary name names". However the first opinion poll after the riots showed one third of people felt the fightback against the police was justified.

Norman Tebbit from his own class point of view) proved more perceptive "if you tell people to break the law by not paying the tax, you're not far off telling them to break other laws as well". Within weeks of March 31<sup>st</sup> the number of APTUs had trebled.

Overall a great read. I would only have one or two minor quibbles. At one stage the point is made that the strength of the APTUs was their tactical diversity which is very true. However he continues that firebombing Poll Tax offices could be included in this list claiming "their activities of those who were not prepared to break the law were not undermined by the actions of the few who chose to throw firebombs."

This isn't exactly the point though. After all non-payment was breaking the law. The problem with isolated and "glamorous" pieces of direct action like petrol bombings is that they are entirely individualistic. They tend to alienate many involved in the boring hum-drum activism that adds up to a popular fightback. Sometimes such tactics may be justified in the face of all other avenues of struggle being closed by the state. Here though they served more as a distraction from the real campaign.

Another problem is given the secrecy of this type of action it could not be democratically planned and agreed by most of the members of a particular APTU so it is not fair to claim to "represent" anyone in these actions.

This aside the book is a well written and highly readable account of the struggle against the Poll Tax. It encribes the writing in large clear letters on the wall for anyone wishing to fight

our own “service charges”. The only way to defeat a community based household tax is by mass community and workplace resistance.

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