

RENTS

IN LITTLE over a year Labour's policy on rents has been turned upside down. In 1974, within hours of their return to power, Labour imposed a freeze on rents.

They needn't have bothered. In June this year Environment Secretary Anthony Crosland stood up in the Commons and said: "Increases will have to do more — and quite a bit more — than merely keep pace with inflation."

The increases which many tenants are now facing make the 1972 'Fair Rents' Act rises look like a joke. And yet the Government may well escape a nationwide tenants' campaign.

The 'Fair Rents' Act forced councils to put up the rent of every tenant by the same amount. There would be a series of increases, which would stop when each tenant reached his or her 'fair' rent level.

This time the Government have left it to local councils to decide when the rents should go up — and by how much. (The 60p limit on increases does not come into effect until next year.)

The result will be small, local struggles taking place at different times. And arguments about the size of the increases in individual towns may distract attention from what is, after all, a national Government policy.

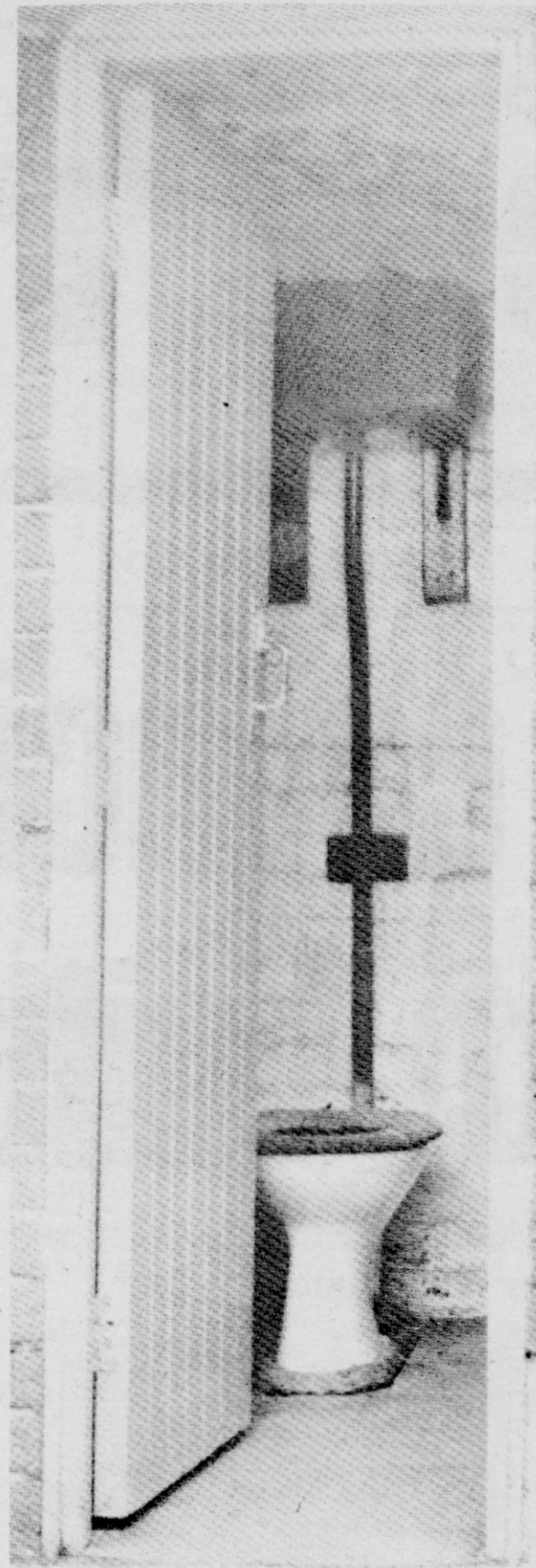
Although the average increase in Liverpool is £1, it is unevenly spread. Some tenants have had reductions, but 46% are being asked to pay more than £1. Tenants in the inner city areas are hardest hit, with many increases around £2. A few tenants are being asked for as much as £4 extra.

But the rent increases are only part of a much broader trend that threatens council housing. The Government have used the Tories' traditional weapon — cuts in public spending.

Money for improving older houses has been almost halved from the expected £572 million to £330 million. Restrictions have been imposed on councils buying out private landlords.

There is to be no extra money for repairs, and councils have been told to seek ways of pushing responsibility for repairs onto tenants.

On new housing, too, councils have been told to cut costs.



Toilet to let - only £50 a year

ARE THE CORPY round the bend? That's what some Liverpool council tenants are asking.

Most of the rents in Heriot Street have gone up to £7.41. And at that price you'd expect to have all mod. cons.

But there's one convenience too many for eight of the tenants. It's not all that modern and it's put their rent up to £8.34... 93p a week more than their neighbours'.

All the houses in Heriot Street look alike. Which made some tenants wonder where all those extra pennies were being spent.

The answer, according to the council, lies in the back yard. Some lucky people have outside toilets.

But then, everyone in the street already has an inside toilet. At £50 a year, a second toilet is quite a luxury.

TENANTS' PLAN OF ACTION

NO INCREASES in rent or rates — that's the policy of the recently formed Liverpool Tenants' Co-ordinating Committee.

They say: "We cannot accept massive council rent increases at a time when wages are being restrained and the purchasing power of these wages is being eroded away daily by inflationary price rises in all main commodities and transport."

The committee is formed mainly of tenants' associations from the areas with the biggest increases — the inner city and Speke.

But efforts are being made to involve tenants from other areas and trade unionists. Liverpool Trades Council have said they will give support.

Although refusal to pay the rent increases is an important part of the tenants' campaign, the co-ordinating committee are being careful not to put all their eggs in one basket — so a variety of tactics will be adopted.

- Individual tenants' groups are arranging their own pickets at rent offices. There are also larger pickets one day a week in different areas.
- There will be a march to the Town Hall for the council meeting on September 3 to hand in a petition.
- Groups of tenants throughout the city are being urged to apply for rate revaluations (see below) as rents are directly related to rateable value.
- Plans are being made to organise support for tenants threatened with eviction.

COUNCIL housing is often attacked for being "heavily subsidised". But a look at the figures shows the average council tenant in Britain is less subsidised than the average house buyer.

Council tenants get an average subsidy from taxes and rates of £2.89 a week. Rent rebates average 75p a week.

TOTAL: £3.64.

Tax relief for house buyers amounts to £3.75 a week. In addition there is a subsidy from building society investors because the inflation rate is higher than interest rates. This benefits house buyers by about £5.50 a week.

TOTAL: £9.25.

Eventually, of course, the house buyer becomes the owner and then only has to pay for repairs. The tenant goes on paying for ever.

Also, while subsidies to council tenants are being cut, the amount of tax relief for house buyers increases automatically with rising house prices.

Tricks in rebates

IN THE SAME envelope as the letter announcing the increases, tenants received a leaflet, "There's money off rent". It explained the rebate system.

If you believe everything you read in the papers you may have got the idea rebates are the greatest thing ever invented... and that if you're lucky enough to be very poor and have a very high rent, you'll pay nothing at all.

But let's look more closely. ● Rebates were introduced as part of the Tories' "Fair Rents" Act. They sound generous but were actually part of a package intended to save the government £300 million a year.

● Rebates involve a means test — a particularly complicated means test if your income fluctuates because of overtime.

● The maximum rebate is normally £6.50, so there are tenants who can't get all their rent paid by rebate, no matter how small their income.

● The examples shown in the leaflet are not based on take-home pay, but total income of husband and wife before tax. (There are deductions if you have grown up children or pensioners living in the house.)

● Rebates are eaten away by pay rises. Anyone who gets a government approved £6 a week rise will find their rebate cut by about £1.

Try for a rate cut

TENANTS in St George's Heights, Everton, are applying for rate reductions in the hope that their rents will be reduced as well.

Rents in council property are based on rateable value — and the rates on three-bedroom flats in the tower block are nearly as high as rates on three-bedroom houses in select areas like Childwall.

The idea has now been taken up by the Liverpool Tenants' Co-ordinating Committee and they're urging tenants all over the city to do the same.

They asked for a pile of applica-

tion forms but officials told them each tenant had to write and ask for a form. So the tenants' association had some letters duplicated and each tenant simply filled in their name and address. The letters — all 117 of them — were collected and sent off in a bundle.

● Requests for revaluation forms should be sent to the Rate Valuation Office, 72 Church St, Liverpool 1.

You will be expected to list on the form the reasons why you think your rates should be lower, eg. lack of facilities, poor environment etc.

Fighting evictions

SOONER OR LATER the corporation will take action against tenants who refuse to pay the increases.

They may evict or get an Attachment of Earnings Order (which means the arrears are deducted from a tenant's pay packet).

Privately, officials admit that attachment of earnings is not effective (see page 7), so eviction is the usual course.

Long before eviction takes place the council send various warnings which sometimes frighten tenants into leaving when there is no need to go. So that tenants know what is happening, the eviction process is outlined below.

It's virtually impossible for the council to end the rent strike with massive evictions. Once evicted, people are homeless and the council must, by law, find them somewhere to live.

(Some officials have made 1984-style efforts to change the meaning of the word "homeless" to escape this obligation, but they haven't succeeded yet.)

The first people to be threatened with eviction will probably not be the "ringleaders" but those tenants who were already in arrears when the rent strike started.

In previous rent strikes some tenants' associations have had a policy of not supporting tenants who were in arrears at the start.

But the feeling this time — at least on the co-ordinating committee — is

that such a policy would be wrong. With massive increases in electricity and gas bills, and the general economic depression, there are bound to be tenants in arrears.

Of course, it's one thing to say you'll support these people and quite another to actually save them from eviction. And it's here that tenants may be able to learn from the rent strikes of 1972-3.

Tower Hill, Kirkby, is an important example. There tenants went on total rent strike — a more militant line than in most areas — and some of them held out for 14 months.

When it was rumoured that evictions were imminent, several hundred people blocked entrances to the estate. Taking part were tenants from as far away as Netherley and Scotland Road.

This show of strength probably softened the council's attitude to evictions.

The strike ended after two tenants were jailed for a few days for refusing to appear in court. But there were no evictions, and some of the tenants are now paying off the arrears at as little as 10p a week.

EVICTION PROCEDURE

1. A letter telling you you're in arrears and threatening action within 14 days. You can ignore this.
2. "Notice to Quit". Tells you to leave within four weeks. You should NOT leave. They have to get a court order first.
3. Notice saying the Corporation are taking you to court to get a "possession order". You do not have to attend court. The order will normally be granted, but if you want to go to court and fight it you can do so. You can have a solicitor if you want. You need not leave yet.
4. Notice of eviction by bailiffs. This is the only stage when the eviction might happen. You will probably want

help and support so contact your tenants' association.

Note: The final decision to evict is taken by a small committee of councillors who ask for reports on the home situation from a social worker.

The meeting is usually on the Friday before the date set for the eviction.

These are the phone numbers of some of the people on the co-ordinating committee. If you think you are in imminent danger of eviction ring one of them.

207 5645	427 0917
207 6064	425 3865
207 4289	425 4104

Advertisement

OCTOBER BOOKS



4b Temple Court (off Mathew St) Liverpool 2

China, Albania, Vietnam, Africa, America. Britain: past, present and future.

Books, pamphlets, posters from all over the world.