

News from everywhere

BUILDING workers in Birmingham — despite severe unemployment in their trades — are starting a campaign to stop the demolition of buildings they consider worthy of preservation.

Their first target is the city's Victoria Square post office which is due to be demolished and then the area redeveloped.

The builders are supporting local conservationists and threatening to boycott the site, although the city council and the Royal Fine Arts Commission have said the building is not worth preserving.

These moves follow the visit to Birmingham of Jack Maundy, former general secretary of Australia's powerful Builders Labourer Federation, who claims to have helped save hundreds of buildings in Australia.

The building worker organising the campaign is Pete Carter, an active member of the Building Workers' Charter group, and a member of the UCATT regional committee.

The man advising the Post Office to knock the building down is former Lord Mayor of Birmingham Frank Price, who is a director of a property consulting firm.

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AMERICAN doctors in Chile are working on a mass sterilisation campaign on the orders of the junta to "prevent the birth of children of working-class couples", according to a report in the Algerian weekly 'Resistance Bulletin d'Information'.

Dr Hugh Davis, who is leading the operation, refuses to divulge any information to foreign journalists in Chile.

The junta received 30 million dollars from the UN World Health Organisation in May and half that is now earmarked for the new "family planning" scheme.

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CIVIL Assistance, the strike-breaking "there's Reds under every bed" army of General Sir Walter Walker, launched their Greater London branch just before Christmas. A guest speaker was Leslie Male, chairman of the Police Federation of England and Wales.

He entertained the audience with talk of 30 years of leniency, misguided liberalism and psychiatric rubbish.

Speaking beside a montage showing the extent of communist infiltration in Britain, he called for the restoration of capital punishment, and condemned the liberalising laws on abortion, homosexuality and prison reform.



Male also agreed with the questioner who described the BBC as a "disgusting left-wing organisation".

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YET ANOTHER union-bashing movement has reared its ugly head, calling itself the Movement for True Industrial Democracy (Truemid). It distributed large quantities of literature to AUEW members to influence their recent postal ballot for control of the union.

Truemid was founded last April after the premature unveiling and subsequent failure of Colonel Stirling's GB 75 movement. The chairman is Mr Syd Davis, ex-convenor and publisher of various reactionary circulars in the past.

One of the members is Major Thomas

Adams, a former Conservative and Liberal Party parliamentary candidate and author of "Where Now" (with a foreword by Jo Grimmond), a book that stressed the importance of "rooting out the communists and actively organising Labour against the socialists."

Truemid has already established links with two older Red bashing groups, Industrial Research and Information Service and the Economic League.

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IN A LETTER to the Sunday Times, Mr Richard Marsh, British Rail chairman said: "Any organisation which has in 12 years reduced its labour force from 304,000 to

191,000 without any major industrial trouble on that account surely deserves a little credit."

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THE £6 a week pay limit is apparently limited to certain people in Nottingham. The pay of a member of the county architect's department is up £1300 a year, field officers and their assistants get a rise of £700 and education supervisors a modest increase of £900 a year.

At the same meeting a pay increase of 40p a week was awarded to male cleaning staff employed at the town hall.

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AS PART of a campaign for an amnesty for political prisoners in Spain, hundred of chickens were let loose wearing T-shirts with the word 'Amnestia' printed on them, in the streets of four towns.

The police had some difficulty arresting them.

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SEVEN members of the 289 Battalion Royal Artillery, a territorial unit, armed with self-loading rifles and dressed in combat uniforms with faces blacked, marched in combat formation down East Ham High Street.

A gentleman waiting for a bus asked if they were on exercise. A soldier said it was none of his business and punched him on the ear.

An army spokesman said: "They were on a run as part of their training and it's standard practice to do fitness training in the dress you fight in."

Community action: a new power base?

OFFENSIVE

LAST MONTH on this page, Jim Hart, a former community worker and a member of the Labour party, wrote about community action. He pointed to the small size of the support in local elections for the three main parties. He argued that community development was a spontaneous movement concentrated mainly in the most deprived areas of the city. He looked at the achievements of community groups and asked whether they could form a new power base.

We invited readers to comment on the article. The first reply came from JOHN BOOKER, a former voluntary and full-time community worker, who is now doing a postgraduate diploma in Adult Education:

TALKING of "community action" in the most deprived areas of the city, Jim Hart says, "Its professional workers may articulate its wishes and initiate activity, but they in no way account for the origins and progress of the movement."

What Jim does here is to skip over the ancient and unresolved debate about the relationship between the professional and the community within which s/he works. With the best will in the world, community workers tend to have leading positions in community movements. How spontaneous can a 'spontaneous' community movement be if the community has a conscientious community worker in its midst?

No account of the origins and progress of a community movement in which a professional has been involved will be complete without an account of the professional's "professionalism." Community workers would do well to remember this. Even taking Jim at face value, "articulation of wishes" is a very dangerous business. It implies that community movements speak a language which local authorities can't understand, when usually it is simply a language that local authorities refuse to understand. It also implies that a large measure of the control of the situation has passed into the hands of the professionals.

I ought to make it clear that I believe that

community pressure has played a very valuable part in marginally improving a lot of people's social conditions. So that whilst I am discussing the achievements of community groups, it is not the achievements themselves I am criticising but rather the circumstances of the achievements.

For instance, Jim says that community groups "have revolutionised thinking on children's play..." Is this true? Not really. What has happened is that a group of professionals have provided newer theories on the provision of play facilities, and wherever these theories have been put into practice it has been done by professionals. I'm not denying that the theory and practice of children's play has changed, and by and large for the better, but it is the professionals who have done the changing — often whilst local communities have looked on in amazement.

I think it is true that community groups are "almost the only source of consumer attitudes towards municipal services", but I suspect that within every vocal group you will find a professional community worker. And have community groups really been "influential in altering local and central government policies from clearance to conservation of houses"? Or is it rather that an alternative professional attitude to housing has gained ascendancy (i) because it is cheaper than the traditional methods, and (ii) because it allows inhabitants of Town Halls to cover their over-riding concern for cost-benefit analysis with a veneer of "community consciousness" or whatever?

COMMUNITY GROUPS AND THEIR WORKERS

I am not saying that community groups cannot be influential or even powerful — they are often both. But the relationship between the community group and the community worker is far more complex than Jim would have us believe.

To take an example. Whereas an adventure playground may reflect the abilities and character of the children that use it, it will certainly reflect the abilities and character of the playground leader!

But the basic problem is that the community group can only be influential. It cannot be decisive, simply because community groups have no real power. They only marginally affect decision making by local authorities, especially in any really important areas.

An illustration of this is the community group that I knew of that played a part in altering a council's road building plans. They fought a long campaign against the council over the proposed new road, but all their pressure would have been in vain if there hadn't been a few councillors who were predisposed to rejecting the scheme anyway. The council's decision was not to reject the whole idea of putting roads before homes, but to delay implementing the plan until traffic flows had been re-assessed. The delay in fact proved fatal — government financial policy has seen to that.

However, the fact that the road was not built was not a result of the council shifting its priorities. For all its pressure (and allies) the community group has external financial factors to thank for its 'victory'.

EXCLUDED FROM WIELDING ANY REAL POWER

This is the crux of the discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of community action. Community groups are excluded from funds, information, etc., because they are excluded from gaining and wielding any real power. Real power is political power — that is the ability to decide on the use to which scarce resources and surplus value are put, and to implement those decisions. Community groups will be condemned to a relatively ineffectual existence until this central nettle is grasped.

Perhaps Jim Hart recognises this, but community groups must not just develop their understanding of political and class processes, they must become political movements. Political with a small 'p', so to speak, a movement without party cards. The class struggle will have to be fought on the council estate as well as on the shop floor.

It is essential that the community worker takes sides in all this.

The relationship between community worker and community group should be one where each

learns from the other, the group having more importance than the worker by virtue of the weight of interest the group represents. The most reliable way to avoid the fate of being "bought with grant aid" that Jim rightly warns of is for a community to develop its own consciousness of itself as part of a class involved in a class struggle. This is essential if a community is to be able clearly to recognise its own interests, and thus avoid being co-opted (or coerced) into mistaking its own interests for those of the City Council.

To sum up — the activities of community groups must be seen in the general context of the class struggle. I am well aware that little of what I have said is new or original, that it is all much easier said than done, and that no amount of discussion is going to clarify the position and responsibility of the professional. But I do feel that without clarity about purpose and circumstances, to which discussion (as well as action) can contribute, then it is impossible to make any progress in the theory of community action.

The second reply comes from PAUL JOLLY of 188 Newton Road, Lowton St Mary's, Warrington:

I ENJOYED reading Jim Hart's article on community action, especially his political analysis. Although I have a few quibbles to make about the details, my main cause for concern was his sustained attack upon the Liberals. I do not want to defend them, but I was suspicious of some electioneering as I read the article. As I believed Mr Hart was trying to point to community action as a new power base, this confused me.

I agree with him that "no party in Liverpool has the power nor the necessary policies to make much difference what happens". But I was disappointed in him that this seemed to reflect badly on the Liberals and Tories, whereas Labour is hardly mentioned.

At the end of the article he mentions something very crucial... that is community groups' relationship to political parties. But I can only reflect sadly upon an opportunity missed, that he himself who seems to be in a superb position to work out such a relationship, fails to do so. The debate of entrism, which he raises at the end should have been raised at the beginning. Perhaps in a further issue he will be able to amend this omission and to state some of the implicit assumptions in his article that I think blurred his point.

"OFFENSIVE" will be back again with a new topic in our next issue. Any more discussion on this topic will be continued in our letters column.

If you would like to write an article for readers to debate, please let us know. DO NOT send completed articles but write or phone first and tell us briefly what your article would be about.