

POWER AND THE PEOPLE

No heat: just a big bill

LIVERPOOL Corporation have given notice to quit to a young woman who refused to pay for heating she has not used and which she cannot afford.

Wendy Leader lives with her 11-year-old daughter, Tracey, in the Entwistle Heights flats, off Upper Parliament Street, Toxteth.

The flats are all electric. But as well as electric fires in the living room they also have electric under-floor heating in the living room and kitchen.

This under-floor heating is classed as 'background heat', which means it is not sufficient by itself. The tenants have no control over it and it is not operated by individual thermostats in each flat.

Wendy says it usually comes on during the night when people are in the unheated bedrooms.

Until last August, this under-floor heating cost 75p a week, added to the rent. But then it jumped to £2.15 a week.

For people living on Social Security, like Wendy, this was disastrous. Because, although the Corporation regard the £2.15 as part of the rent, the Department of Health and Social Security refuse to do so.

All people like Wendy could claim was an extra 47p a week heating allowance. The rest of the £2.15 — and her normal electricity bill on top — would have to come out of her living allowance.

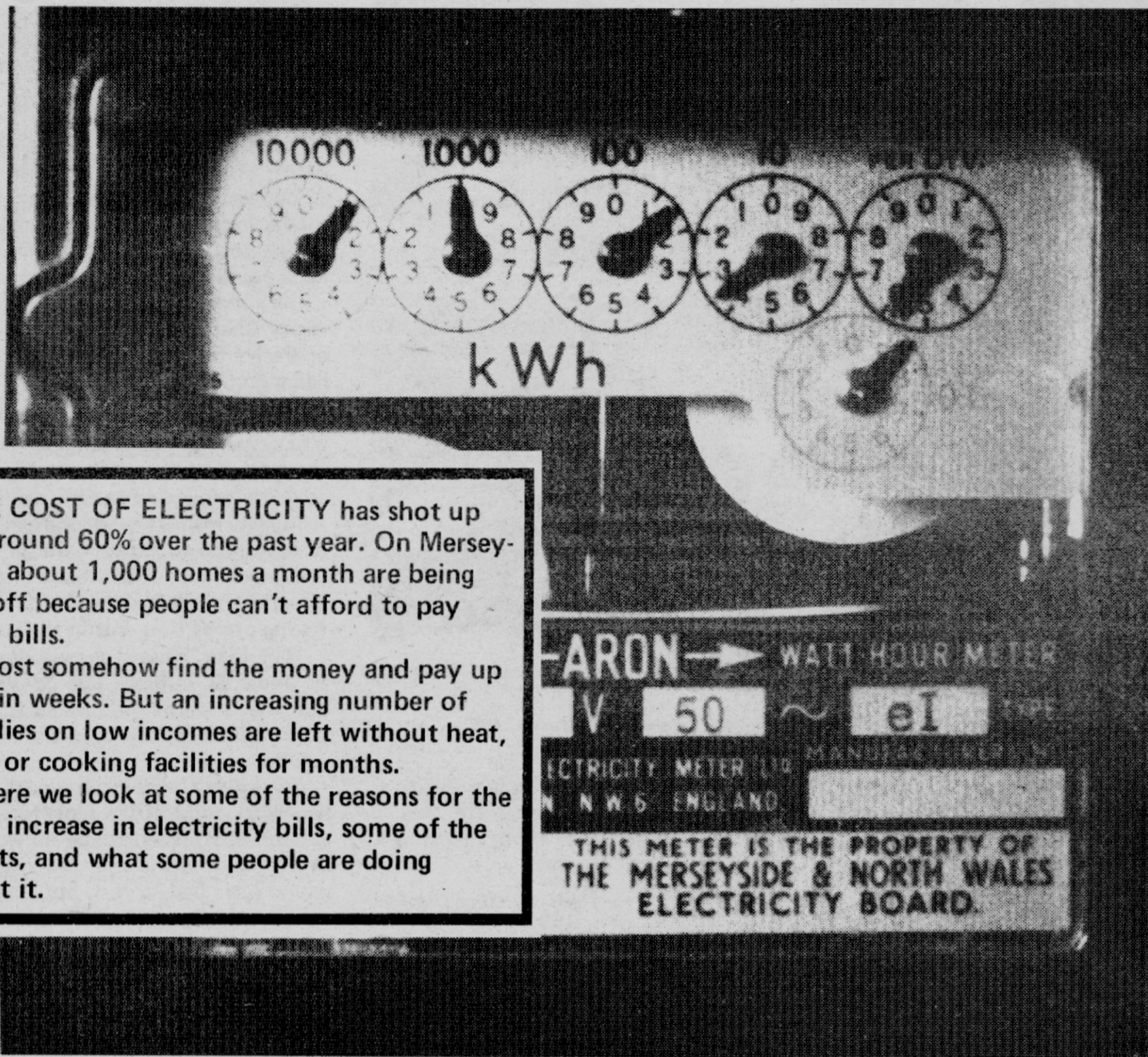
Wendy decided it was impossible. "If you're on low incomes it's a hell of a lot of money. It's just sheer luxury." She turned the underfloor heating off and told the Corporation she would not be paying the £2.15.

The Corporation's reaction was that the £2.15 had to be paid whether the heating was used or not. In February, Wendy was told she was £44.79 in rent arrears. And last month she got notice to quit.

Meanwhile, Wendy and some friends have carried out a survey in the block about the heating. So far well over 50% of the tenants have said they want individual control of the heating.

This directly contradicts a Corporation survey carried out only last year. It found, surprisingly, that a large majority wanted landlord control. Which is certainly what the Corporation want.

"As more tenants cut down on heating," said a council report, "there would develop a chain reaction to the point where heating became uneconomic." (Note the assumption that people would cut



THE COST OF ELECTRICITY has shot up by around 60% over the past year. On Merseyside, about 1,000 homes a month are being cut off because people can't afford to pay their bills.

Most somehow find the money and pay up within weeks. But an increasing number of families on low incomes are left without heat, light or cooking facilities for months.

Here we look at some of the reasons for the huge increase in electricity bills, some of the results, and what some people are doing about it.

down. Why? Because it's too expensive?)

There is not doubt that the heating is already "uneconomic" for some tenants. Seamen in the block, for instance, have to pay for the heating even when they are away. And nobody knows whether empty flats are being heated or not — and if so, who pays.

Presumably even the Corporation would agree that the pensioner who turned the heating off over two years ago for health reasons — and who still has to pay the £2.15 — has got a raw deal.

Before Wendy Leader and her daughter moved to Entwistle Heights, they were homeless. The Corporation apparently intend to take the heat off themselves by making them homeless again.

Cold comfort in Social Security policy change

A CHANGE of policy by the Department of Health and Social Security might stop some people having their electricity cut off.

The DHSS have agreed with the nationalised fuel industries that they should prevent disconnection in cases of hardship. But the DHSS will then deduct 50p a week from supplementary benefit towards the outstanding bill — and also a further amount to cover future bills.

This arrangement will only operate where people have lived on Social Security for some time and where there would be "hardship" — for example, where there are young children.

The DHSS already have the power to pay fuel bills in cases of "exceptional need". It remains to be seen whether the new policy will help people who would not qualify for a grant — or be used to reduce the number of grants made.

But what it does mean is that people already living on the minimum DHSS allowance will have 50p a week taken off them.

And the new arrangement will do nothing to help those slightly above supplementary benefit, or on low pay.

Manweb bring in detectives

THE ELECTRICITY board have hired a firm of private detectives to help them recover money owed on electricity bills.

MANWEB say that Ferguson Investigators, of Dale Street, Liverpool are used simply to trace people who have changed addresses.

They insist that Fergusons, the biggest private detective firm in the country, are not employed to collect money or to check on whether people have reconnected their supply illegally.

"As far as we're concerned," said the firm's managing director, Cyrus Ferguson, "the only reason we have for calling anywhere is to establish the present whereabouts of somebody. We do not act as debt collectors."

This doesn't entirely explain why a private detective from Ferguson Investigators called at the home of Sally and Ray Edmonds in Redbrow House, Tower Hill, Kirkby.

Ray is unemployed and the family, including three young children, exist on £24 a week Social Security after the rent is paid. Just before Christmas they got a bill for £42 which they were unable to pay, and they were cut off.

They heard nothing more from MANWEB until the man from Ferguson Investigators arrived at the door last month.

"He said: I'm from the electricity board," recalls Ray. "I'm making enquiries about why you've paid nothing off this bill."

"Later he said: We've been hired by the electricity board to go round. He said it could be worse, I could be making enquiries about you doing something criminal."

Ray didn't give him a chance to explain exactly what that meant. He didn't let him over the doorstep. And that's probably the best way to deal with Ferguson Investigators if they call on you.

Fuel action campaign

MERSEYSIDE Fuel Action Committee is part of the national 'Right to Fuel' campaign.

It consists mainly of social and community workers who would like to act as a co-ordinating committee for local tenants' groups, etc.

Among its aims are: Ending all disconnections, cheaper fuel, adequate incomes to pay bills, and the abolition of deposits against future bills.

Contact: Check! Rights Centre (Tel 708 9665).

Cut off the bill!

A WOMAN in the Knowsley area cannot afford to pay for electricity.

So, like lots of people in that position, she doesn't pay for it.

Just over a year ago she got a bill for over £100. Bringing up two kids alone on Social Security, she had little chance of paying it.

Her offer of £5 a week was turned down. And she was eventually cut off.

"They're senseless the way they do it," she says. "They're not going to get the money out of people doing it that way."

Her home is all electric. And it wasn't long after she was cut off that her 6-year-old boy set fire to some furniture with a candle.

Although she worried about being caught, she decided to let a friend put the electricity back on for her.

And, in fact, she was caught. An electricity man called because of some mix-up and spotted the wires. But, to the man's credit, he did not report her.

"He said it'll mean a lot of trouble for you, and a lot of trouble for me. So let's forget about it." Now she's a bit more careful who she lets in.

The woman (who obviously can't be named) contacted the Free Press to ask whether there was any way

of getting the Social Security to pay her bill. The chances of them doing this are extremely remote.

And so, not surprisingly, she decided the only alternative was to continue the way she's managed so far.

The trade union view

THE ELECTRICAL trade union are to discuss disconnections with the electricity board.

Norman Barr, branch secretary of the EPTU's electricity supply branch, explained the union's view.

"Our people are ordinary working class people," he said. "They would be reluctant to cut electricity off in certain cases."

But he went on to differentiate between "reasonably decent people caught unawares by bloody large bills" and people who "have money coming into the house from the welfare state which they don't use for the necessities of life".

These were people who "should have their electricity cut off".

Where the money goes

THERE'S a lot more to soaring electricity bills than the "world energy crisis".

In recent years there has been a massive increase in wasteful, inefficient and unnecessary electricity generation. The interest on loans to pay for it is enormous — £382 millions in 1974 alone.

And yet the present generating capacity is one-third greater than the highest demand ever recorded. Demand is falling — down 11% last October compared with October 1974. But the Central Electricity Generating Board is still forecasting a growth in demand of 3%.

On top of that, the manufacture of electricity is extremely wasteful of expensive and valuable fuels. Conversion of oil, gas and coal at power stations is only 30% efficient, the rest of the heat going out of the top of the cooling tower.

And at the end of the line, the small consumer is penalised by the tariff system operated by MANWEB and other boards. Under it, domestic consumers are subsidising the large industrial users.

The CEGB's massive investment programme has not even had the advantage of creating more jobs in the industry. From 1967 until 1975 the number of power station workers fell by 51,000, a drop of over 35%.

And the CEGB now plan to phase out a further 28 smaller power stations such as Clarence Dock in Liverpool, and replace them by a few large stations like Fiddlers Ferry.

But an alternative policy of introducing energy-saving measures would both save money and provide more jobs. A large proportion of domestic consumption could be cut by proper insulation and additional maintenance of older homes.

Grants should be made available for insulating houses in the same way as they are available for other home improvements.

Local authorities might be expected to set an example. But, in fact, Liverpool Corporation is still building homes without wall insulation.

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