

Ned Donaldson

Homes for the Needy

This is a story about an event which took place in 1951, nearly forty years ago. Why do you think we should talk about this event so long ago? What happened on that day is significant to the present set up. Most of us who were involved are still living.

I would have to tell you the historical background.

In 1951 upwards of 5,000 workers mostly from building sites, some from factories, tenants associations, Labour Party Branches, Communist Party branches and the Trades Council, marched to George Square in Glasgow on a cold sleety day and went on strike for half a day to demonstrate on the proposed sale of a whole scheme of houses in a place called Merrylee in the Cathcart area of the city. The fact of the matter was that the extraordinary scenes that happened on that day triggered off a campaign that lasted until May 1952. I will go on to tell you as much as I can about the details of it.

Now what was Glasgow like in 1951 as far as housing was concerned? There were 100,000 people on the waiting list, and, except for war-devastated Europe, it must have been the worst housed city and had been that way consistently for the last hundred years. Slum landlordism was rampant, sub-letting, miles of decayed and rotten tenements in the Gorbals, Govan, Cowcaddens and Partick. Tuberculosis rampant. I am talking about every fifth of sixth person at a certain age group either had a shadow on their lung or were going treatment for this dreadful disease which was caused by bad housing. Other diseases were rampant, the situation was desperate. Yet in the six years after the war Glasgow Corporation, as it was then known, had, through their Direct Labour Department, only built seventeen thousand houses.

Incidentally, I might mention the fact that right from the end of the war there was an organised Squatters Movement. Not isolated families but squads of people moving into army camps, taking over old houses, taking over empty hotels. The situation was pretty bad.

The general political background was something like this.

After the war the Labour Party was in power for about five years. Churchill comes back with a Tory Government in 1951. The Korean War is at its height... there is a general swing to the right in British politics and indeed international politics. The witch-hunt is at its height, the left wing are under attack all over the world – anti-communist hysteria has reached fever level. There are witch hunts in the trade unions – in the Transport and General Workers Union in particular who put a band on any member of the Communist Party from holding office and this is at a time when the London Dockers were led by Communist Party members and the London buses were led by Communist Party people. Because of the building industry's circumstances, the big sites that went on during the war, the building of aerodromes, the huge armaments factories, Mulberry Harbours and so on, changes the whole character of the building industry. The craft unions no longer have the sway... it is the semi-skilled and the general labour who is coming in in large numbers. Now the reason why the capitalist class attack the TGWU in my opinion, is that they see this mass of unskilled labour as a potential menace and they have got to go for them. That is why there is a witch hunt in the TGWU in particular. The craft unions have taken a back seat. They didn't all go to the right. The electrical unions, in fact,

were very good, they went to the extreme left. The miners, as usual upheld the flag. They did not tolerate the witch hunt. The building unions and the craft unions either sat on the fence or did nothing and I have spoken about the TGWU which is going to organise the new influx of unskilled and semi-skilled workers into the trade. There is industrialisation in the building trade, factory building, prefabrication and again it is mostly semi-skilled and unskilled workers but at site level the unions are organised in something called "The National Federation of Building Trade Operatives". A convenor was now called a Federation Steward and there was a rule that said a labourer could not be a convenor...I mean, how blatant could you get?

I have to describe the Corporation's own building department. This is a very efficient organisation. It is perhaps the most efficient house building unit in the whole of Britant and it is run by the workers themselves...on the sites, more or less. It has been started in the 1930s by a Labour controlled Corporation at the behest of the unions who demanded that they set up our own direct labour department. Now the men have returned after six years of war.

Now to let you understand about this Progressive Party (that's what the Tories called themselves). They were elected in 1949, I think it was and they were in office for two years. They did not have an overall majority. In 1951 in the May election they had a very tiny majority and it wasn't a working Majority. There are two people in Glasgow Corporation to this day (not elected people) and one of them was on holiday and they brought him back to cast his vote, so that they could put the Tories back in power after thirty odd years of being out of power. One of the first things they did was propose the sale of this scheme in Merry lee and you think of the anger that cause amongst the workers. A very select leafy suburb near transport (the motor was not quite in at this time) ...Great! They'll guard these houses. They put the best tradesmen on them, they used better materials than they did in Pollok or any other schemes. We know this. But throughout Scotland the Tories are moving to sell council houses, and Glasgow is chosen to be the flagship.

Now I have to explain what that is about. These were houses subsidised by the Government to provide cheap rented accommodation for working people and they were going to sell them. At that time Weirs of Cathcart was near to that site and obviously people employed there and living in the slums of the Gorbals and the South Side thought perhaps they might get a house near their work, and why not? They are very indignant about this. They call a conference of all interested parties. A whole number of people, off the building sites, and a Tenant's Association set up a campaign committee. The first decision we come to is to have this demo. The response to this is absolutely tremendous, particularly for the building workers. It's a cold sleety day as I said and the workers stopped at twelve noon. The workers from the east end of the city assembled at Cathedral Square and marched to George Square. We did not ask for police permission ... they were dumbfounded; the traffic is held up and chaos reigns. Inside the Council the discussion is going on. The Labour Party are trying to make speeches. They are ruled out of order.

The debate was lively enough – remember there's 5,000 people kicking up a row outside – and there is inside the Council Chambers complete confusion. It started when Councillor Mains of Hutchesontown wanted to speak. He was told the debate was closed. He refused to sit down and kept shouting over the din of the Progressives "Sit down" chorus that he represented a section of the community and he was going to speak. A young man wearing glasses who was in the gallery jumps up and yells: "I'm from a Tenant's Association and you can't vote now, people are dying from

tuberculosis. If you vote on this you are condemning them to death. There will be thousands of workers demonstrating, nothing will keep them back.” He stood for a minute shouting down at the councillors below him and gripping the rail of the gallery and holding on as two attendants tried to pull him away. Finally they were successful and he was pulled away as Councillor Main was on his feet protesting. The suspension was moved and carried. He left and was escorted out of the door by the attendants. The decision was carried – I think – 48 votes to 47. Now that’s the situation inside, but outside we have marched on the Square and somebody said “You are not going to get heard inside. The Corporation will only meet on of the many applicants and that will be Glasgow Trades Council”. But we wanted to be heard and we are barred. Someone said “Right Ned, have a go at the door”. Now this is the highlight. There are 5,000 workers and they charge the gate at the City Chambers. There are only two policemen and an Assistant Chief Constable called Doherty at it.

A young policeman pulls a baton out of his pocket and attempts to wallop me across the head and the old Assistant Chief Constable knocks the baton out of his hand and says: “If you hit him we’re finished”. I leaned back, the gate closed. Now Harry McShane criticised me for not going right through. We came back from the gate of the City Chambers and there is chaos in the square. Les Forster, one of the leaders of the campaign, jumped up on the lion. The reason he did this was to restore order. The policeman pulled him off the lion shouting “You are desecrating the lion”. I said “You must let him speak. If you don’t there be another riot”. Les speaks from the lion and tells the workers to go to North Frederick Street where a platform is set up. I have never heard such speeches in my life. The speeches were made by shop stewards off the sites, by trade union officials, by women from tenant’s associations. There was a woman there with a dead rat that she caught in her house that morning. There was another lady with a piece of stinking rotten plaster. They managed to get into the Chambers. I don’t know how, but they’re chasing councillors up and down the lobby telling them to stop their bloody nonsense.

After that tremendous day the campaign developed. There was a huge Labour Party rally in St. Andrews Halls and the Hall was absolutely jam packed. The whole council is there, also MPs. They were saying just the same as they are saying today: Wait for the election.

A call is made from the balcony from Les Forster to black the site and pull the workers off it: that is the only way to stop the sale. The Labour Party do not like this and they walk off, telling us to wait for six months till the elections in May. Les makes another proposal to the meeting: that we march en masse to the home of Tory housing convenor, Mr McPherson Rait, who lives quite close by. McPherson Rait is the villain of the piece. Among our posters we have a banner hanging from the balcony on which is displayed a huge rat with the head of McPherson Rait. Most of these banners and posters were made up and painted by Tom Cattermole, a navvy and a first-class artist.

The campaign continues with public meetings throughout the whole of the Glasgow area and workers from the building sites are speaking at these meetings which had been organised by local Tenants’ Associations.

There is another half-day strike and demonstration called later in the year. It was called by the STUC. This is a very different demonstration: permission has been asked for – it’s all very official. The police are ready this time. The newspapers reported that there were hundreds of police in the quadrangle of the City Chambers. The Special Branch is there and the mounted police. They are not required: it’s

not that kind of demonstration. It is a good demonstration but entirely different in character from the previous one which was spontaneous, militant, angry and therefore much more effective.

There is on this should be mentioned. The building department gave everyone a xmas greeting in their pay packet, thanking them for all the good work they'd done that year and wishing them the compliments of the season. The workers treat this message with the scorn it deserves. Every single message is collected and delivered back to the head of the department and he is told what to with them.

Another highlight of the campaign is a deputation from the city to the Secretary of State for Scotland in Edinburgh. He refuses to meet us and sends down his Under Secretary, the MP for Hillhead, Mr Galbraith. The complaint is listened to, he thanks us very much and says: "I will note it."

We had an impromptu march on the streets of Edinburgh which the police tried to stop. But the Edinburgh people were there to back us up and we held the march nonetheless.

The new year 1952 begins and the campaign carries on. But now victimisation begins on sites. Myself, Les Forster and several other leading shop stewards are sacked. The official trade union movement give us no backing. We are isolated. I myself, a bricklayer, could not get a job in the building department for many years, even although there was a shortage of skilled labour. I had to seek employment outside the city.

During the municipal election campaign the main plank of the Labour platform is NO SALE OF HOUSES AT MERRYLEE. They got in to power with a majority of 62 to 46 seats. The Labour Party in effect hijacked rank-and-file campaign for their own opportunistic ends – as they always do. But of course the principle of no sale of council houses was established by the workers, and it took a vicious Tory government and an acquiescent Labour administration in the council to reverse it fairly recently.

If the lessons of the Merrylee campaign of the early 50s were learned today, then there is no issue which cannot be altered in favour of the working class. Direct Action won the day. It will again.