

JUNE 2017



The horrific fire at Grenfell Tower in neighbouring Kensington & Chelsea has totally exposed the rift between the rich and poor in that borough, how the safety of those living in that tower was treated differently from those who live in the luxury blocks across that borough. It also raises the question for how long can those who have been cutting resources and funding for national, London and local services and standards continue to say they carry no responsibility for the consequences on the ground? We have seen local services cut including enforcement responsibilities of local authorities, the forcing of the most vulnerable and homeless to get the worst standards of housing often being shipped all over the country, cuts in fire services, failure to carry out recommendations setting safer standards for fire safety in tower blocks and similar in many other areas of life, cuts to the Health & Safety Executive, to local EHO enforcement etc etc.

We face similar in Westminster. We have lost two fire stations, seen council departments cut back, see families shipped across the country as part of a housing policy. These two very rich boroughs serve as a symbol of what is happening in our country today – the rich get richer, ordinary people are treated with disdain and given minimum assistance. We see the disabled suffer more and more indignities and attacks on their services. And it is only when such a tragedy hits the headlines do the media start asking the questions the rest of us have been asking with gathering intensity since the days of Thatcher.

We have to expose the deliberate confusion being created by those responsible for the disaster as they constantly say they cannot comment on anything until the public inquiry reports ages off. To determine specific causes is the job of the inquiry but that does not stop dealing with matters that can reduce exposure to risk – such as the sprinklers proposed by the Peckham inquest, having more than 1 escape route, having tight enforcement of safety based on risk assessments not just the inadequate regulations.

Now we have to keep up the pressure to fight the class inequality in our borough and in our country. The recent election shows the worm turning but we have to press harder to get the world changed. If they can spend billions on defence which they claim is to protect our lives then why are they neglecting expenditure on the safety of our everyday lives, which is a real and present danger. We also must salute the emergency services who have to deal with the consequences of this culture of indifference to the worst off in our society. The best tribute to those emergency workers would be start listening carefully to what they say through their unions and also to ensure that they also can afford to live in the city they have to look after along with all the ordinary people of London.

There are blocks of flats in Westminster where you have some flats sold off, and increasingly owned by private landlords, whilst others are still occupied by council tenants. Those in such blocks say trying to get clarity on who is responsible for what is like fighting blancmange. It was not too long ago the disdain of the council was revealed over exposing tenants to asbestos in tower blocks from the 1980s. It is also difficult not to detect an attitude that wants to see those at the bottom of the pile moved out of Westminster to create a Tory nirvana of luxury flats everywhere – achieving what Lady Porter had sought 30 years ago.



UBER & LONDON BRIDGE ATTACK

In the aftermath of the June 3 London Bridge/Borough Market attacks black cabs helped people get away, offering free rides out of the area. What did Uber do? Upped their fares by over 4 times to make a “killing”. People were charged massive increases – one £7 fare going up to £40! Later, as they came in for social media attacks, they tried to claim it was just how their automatic system worked and they said they were now offering free trips. Then they admitted the same had happened in Manchester after the bombing there.

A QUIET PROPERTY EXPLOITER IN WESTMINSTER

Most people familiar with the wealthy areas of Mayfair, Knightsbridge, Belgravia etc will know some of the key big companies that own so much – Grosvenor Estates of the Duke of Westminster, Great Portland Estates which bought up part of what had been the Duke of Portland property empire, the Cadogan Estate of the Earl of Cadogan, & the Crown Estate. There is another that keeps a low profile and, other than our PCS friends in HMRC, is fairly anonymous usually escaping under the radar – the de Walden Estate. When ninth Lord Howard de Walden died in 1999 the inheritance went to his 4 daughters and is run through the property company. It owns some 90 plus acres – most in the Marylebone/ area and includes places like Harley Street & Marylebone High Street. (It manages and leases properties across an area that extends from Marylebone High Street in the west to Portland Place in the east and from Wigmore Street in the south to Marylebone Road in the north.) The estate origins also come out of the Duke of Portland’s massive 18th century land grab and an inheritance divi up in the 1870s.

**THE
HOWARD
deWALDEN
ESTATE**

It has built up recently a reputation of constantly squeezing tenants – for example, boasting of upping rental income from Marylebone High Street by 25% in 2014. In 2016 rents rose 10%. One business tenant said to the Standard “The rents they charge are egregious”. Yet hey also have the colossal gall to join in supporting complaints from business tenants about rising business rates - whilst themselves squeezing the same tenants dry by far greater amounts which go into the de Walden shreholders private pockets.

TRADES COUNCIL BACKS BERWICK STREET MARKET TRADERS

When Berwick Street Market traders fought back against plans to develop them out of existence the Trades Council gave their backing to the campaign. Westminster City Council seems to have backed off and the Berwick Street traders are hoping to get in place “development” that helps them rather than threatens all they have built up. The TC gives its continuing support.



The market exists south of Oxford Street east of Oxford Circus down into Soho and has a history going back to the 1770s. It has always had a core of providing food, fruit & veg but many different stalls and shops are in the market area.



We asked our local UNISON local authority branch about their current position and got the following interesting answers.

Secretary UNISON

- What are main problems facing your members right now?

Allegations of bullying, stress due to over work, constant reorganisations, pay increases below inflation.

- What are changes to numbers employed by the WCC in last year and in particular number of UNISON members?

The reorganisations have led to redundancies and our membership has reduced in those directly working for WCC but increased for those outsourced. Our density has increased as more people join UNISON when reorganisation occurs.

- What are main cuts to services?

Last financial year saw cuts to Children's Services, Adult Services, Libraries, Public Health. Only small numbers in other areas.

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- What is happening to pay for your members?

UNISON has accepted the 1% pay increase for the last two years, WCC is still part of National terms and conditions (Green Book)

- What is happening to facility time/time for union duties

Facility time is based on the number of members we have and there has been no reduction in the time offered. Management support membership of the unions and see us as vital in the changes taking place.

We have difficulty in attracting stewards as people are more focused on their own jobs.

- What further contracting out of services is happening?

Nothing is planned as yet. 50% of our membership is outsourced. The discussions are about Legal Services next.

- What are effects of changes re tri-council set-up?

It was announced that Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea are going to become Bi-Borough and we will be working towards that over the next year. This will cause disruption to our members and possibly services. UNISON and the other unions will be consulted from an early stage and we are having pre discussions now and being briefed on the process.