

## Dronfield Labour Discussion Group

2<sup>nd</sup> July 2023

We've had it in mind to bring out a third edition of 'Six Years of Labour Rule in Sheffield 1926 - 1932' for some years now, and I'm glad to say that it's here. This will be our fourth pamphlet.

I would like to say something about how we started pamphleteering. You might say that's a bit old fashioned for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but there's nothing wrong with that if it gets people thinking and asking questions.

I set up the library in Sheffield ten years ago.

I joined the Labour Party in 1971 and the Co-operative Party 23 years ago in 2000. My enduring belief has always been that without ownership and control, people have no power. So my starting and finishing point is that common ownership and control driven by the will and participation of the public is the aim. These aims also formed the driving force of the early ILP, and later in 1918, the Labour Party. The vision of the Co-operative Movement was always to bring about a Co-operative Commonwealth, our previous pamphlet throws some light on that.

The Labour Party started to bring about many benefits through this policy nationally, bringing about much needed but rudimentary cohesion starting in 1945. But without continuous control of Parliament this could not succeed. And we have now

lost all the social benefits to the private sector.

I joined the Co-operative Party because it has the specific purpose of defending and promoting common ownership. But my experience indicated that what is needed is a more general understanding of the history of the Movement, socialist and co-operative, not by academics and specialists, but by the sort of people who you might meet at the bus stop. Our co-operative became known as Principle 5 (known universally as the Principle which commits to Movement to education).

We have a lending library, archive and resource centre, open to all. But unless people visit, it achieves nothing. So we started pamphleteering.

### **Six Years of Labour Rule in Sheffield 1926 - 1932**

This pamphlet was first published in 1932 by the Sheffield City Labour Group, and written by Alderman Ernest Rowlinson, leader of the City Council.

Before more is said, I would like to focus on what to my mind is the most important point - Direct Labour. Sheffield Council was socialist and its policy was to bring services 'in house' thus cutting out the private profiteers. Under municipal ownership came new markets, roads, houses, extended tram routes, swimming pools, new libraries, a new workshop for the blind, a new City Hall and a Municipal Printing

Department to supply all the needs of the whole Corporation Departments.

During these six years 7,844 houses were built. They were built to superior design, workmanship, construction and equipment. Bungalows were built for older people. The housing was much appreciated, incorporating gardens, bathrooms and other modern conveniences. The workforce were employed directly by the Council under proper working conditions. And as the purpose was to provide decent houses and services for people, the job was done right. Not as under the political opposition, who's purpose was to give contracts to private businesses for the profit motive. Their houses had been shoddy and inadequate.

There are many examples in this pamphlet about the services delivered to Sheffield people by Direct Labour. This was municipal socialism in practise. Of course a large number of the electorate were Council workers, who were benefiting by the new houses and Council services. This gave Labour a significant electoral advantage.

The Liberal Party and the Conservative Party fought Labour at elections as a coalition, under various names such as the Citizen's Alliance and the Progressives. In the pamphlet, these are generally referred to as Anti-Labour. Their message was simple – contract out services to the private sector. In other words allow Sheffield to be run on a profit basis.

Although both the Conservatives and Liberals had been ambivalent to public ownership in the past, choosing to take some services under municipal control – such as trams and water – the savings made by doing so were passed on to residents in the form of rates reduction, rather than being used to improve services. However, with the rise of the Co-operative and Labour Parties, both the Liberals and Conservatives in Sheffield then became hostile to public control.

Under the previous administration, huge public debt was accrued through avoidable policies. The pamphlet explains this. For instance, under anti-labour rule, rates were collected separately from rent, with a bi-annual rates bill. Many people found that they could not pay. Labour brought back weekly payment in the rent and balanced the books. Let no one talk about Conservative competence.

I'll not say any more about the pamphlet because all of this leads onto another question. How can Sheffield once again allow the economy of the City work for the benefit of its whole community.

These days, services are outsourced and public money is leaked out to faceless multi-national companies. How can we keep the economy local?

I would like to draw your attention to the last article in the April 2022 edition of the Sheffield Co-operator 'Book Review Essay'.

This article examines three publications:

- Paint Your Town Red by Matthew Brown & Rhian Jones
- Building From the Bottom by David Blunkett & Geoff Green
- People's Republic of South Yorkshire by Helen Jackson

[https://www.principle5.coop/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/The\\_Sheffield\\_Co-operator\\_2022.pdf](https://www.principle5.coop/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/The_Sheffield_Co-operator_2022.pdf)

The strength of the Community Wealth Building ideas is that it has been put into practise in various places, particularly in Cleveland USA and Preston, Lancashire. Matthew Brown, in his book says that the ideas have to be adapted to the circumstances of the place, but Preston can give an idea about how it can be done.

Given that the political circumstances in municipalities is not acceptable, it is not good enough for local politicians to say that the Government will not allow us a suitable budget, so that's that. We can't give anything to local communities, only fulfil statutory requirements and pass on the running of things to large multi-national corporations like Amey.

It's not good enough to say that there is no alternative, especially when imaginative ways forward have been demonstrated.

## **How Can CWB Strategy be Developed?**

Anchor Institutions such as the Council, The Universities, Hospitals etc. could work together to procure as many services and supplies as possible

from local companies. Through using these sites of permanent economic demand, community wealth builders seek to increase democratic control of the local economy by supporting the development of co-operatives and community development institutions, who in turn are encouraged to procure their services locally. Why should school meals, for example, be procured from a multi-national corporation and not a local co-operative?

Can the local authority, in some cases, bypass procurement and concentrate on community ownership and management of local resources?

The outsourcing to the private sector has never been a cheap option.

Sheffield City Council is already beginning to look at Community Wealth Building.

After years of leaving it to the private sector and Council Officers, can local people and the City Labour Group rise to this challenge which requires imagination and courage?

One problem is that any such strategy takes years to put into place. How long, for example, is the current tender for providing food to schools? How can a local co-operative be built up in preparation for being competitive at tender? Can the Council do this without being accused of being “anti-business”?

I'm sure this problem could be overcome, but it requires long term thinking and politicians who are

committed to giving it a go, and being able to explain it to the voters in a way they understand and can get on board with.

In Sheffield we have an additional problem, because our Council is currently being managed by Labour Central Office. Will they allow local politicians to take political decisions that conflict with the ideological leanings of those in charge of the Party, or that are considered “too left wing”.

### **Recommended Reading**

The History of the City of Sheffield 1843 - 1943 Vol 1 POLITICS  
Ed. Clyde Binfield (available at Sheffield Libraries)

Sheffield Troublemakers. David Price

Paint Your Town Red. Matthew Brown & Rhian Jones

[Sheffield Co-operator April 2022](#)

Six Years of Labour Rule in Sheffield 1926 - 1932

Steve Thompson  
Principle 5 Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre  
Aizlewood's Mill  
Nursery Street  
Sheffield S3 8GG

<https://www.principle5.coop/>

[steve@sheffield.coop](mailto:steve@sheffield.coop)

Tel: 282 3132