

“He was only the District Auditor, but...”



Photos from Lambeth's struggle against ratecapping

**with a foreword by
TONY BENN**

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PHOTOS FROM LAMBETH'S
STRUGGLE
AGAINST RATECAPPING
BY
THE LAMBETH FIGHTING FUND
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Foreword

The Labour movement has always drawn great encouragement from its history and stories of the Peasants' Revolt, the Levellers, Tolpuddle, the Suffragettes and the Poplar Councillors have been told and re-told to generations of our people.

Yet how many of us are able to see the historical importance of the struggles of today, as they are actually being enacted in front of our eyes as by the Greenham Common women, the miners, or the printworkers?

Amongst that band of modern heroes must rank the surcharged councillors at Lambeth and Liverpool who have fought every bit as hard for social justice as did the pioneers.

Those Councillors were defending the people who had elected them and staying true to the policies on which they had won their majority.

They were acting in line with the policies endorsed by the National Executive of the Labour Party and by Conference.

They took their case to those who had chosen them and received a further vote of confidence.

This book tells their story for all to see and what a story it is.

The whole Labour movement should now rally round with financial support and clear demands that when Labour is returned to office, as it will be, these brave councillors are compensated in full for the punishment imposed on them by the Tory Judges, with a full repayment of all fines and a cancellation of all sentences.

That too is what the Labour Conference has decided and it is a pledge that must be honoured in full.

The arguments used by those who do not want to do this on the grounds that it would involve retrospective legislation are completely false.

The only objection to retrospective legislation is when an act that was legal when it was done is made illegal retrospectively, so that people acting within the law are punished under a law that was not in force at the time.

But an amnesty, and compensation is quite a different matter and there are many precedents for it.

The Tory Government made sure that after the Africans won their freedom in Zimbabwe, Ian Smith, who had led the White rebellion received an amnesty for all the hideous crimes that he and his government had committed.

The Lambeth Councillors have, of course, committed no crime, unless it is a crime to look after the old and the sick, the disabled and the unemployed, the homeless and communities who are suffering so much under the Tories.

That is what the Lambeth campaign was all about and I hope that those who read this book will make themselves a part of that struggle by giving generously to the appeal.

We are all proud of them because they kept faith with their own people, with the party and with their principles and no-one can do more than that.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony Benn". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tony Benn
June 1986

“He Was Only The District Auditor, but...”

By 1985 the Tories had been in power for six years. Six years of increasingly authoritarian attacks on working people.

Wages were a target whilst monetarist doctrine justified cuts in health care, education and housing.

Drastically curtailed Trades Union rights and a reinforced police and judiciary balanced spiralling unemployment and the erosion of civil rights.

The abolition of the GLC and the other metropolitan authorities spelled a new onslaught on democratic rights.

Labour Party leaders faced with a massive Conservative majority were unable to take on the Government and unwilling to sanction extra-Parliamentary opposition.

However in the boroughs newly elected Labour councils saw the ratecapping laws as an issue for confronting the state.

“The ratecapping campaign was a lost opportunity,” comments one surcharged ex-Lambeth Councillor.

“Nationally the time was right to take the fight to the Tories. We had the issue and the support for a successful campaign.”

“Lambeth’s battle locally was a victory, but as other authorities failed to stand firm not only did Thatcher escape unscathed, but we were left exposed to the Tory courts.”

Today, with Labour administrations chasing Swiss bankers for huge loans or selling off assets to make ends meet, it is difficult to imagine that they once posed a real threat to the Tory Government.

CHALLENGE

However in the Spring of 1985 it was a different story.

Up and down the country the coalmining communities had been in open rebellion for over a year.

Now in the cities the radical Left in local authorities prepared to open a second front.

RATES ACT

By the Rates Act 1984 the Secretary of State could designate “high spending” councils and limit their rate for the next financial year. In conjunction with other Tory legislation slashing Rate Support Grant it was devastating.

Socialist councils who had used rates increases as the only way to preserve jobs and services found this option axed. There was a straight choice: make Tory cuts or break the law.

DUBIOUS TORY

Even Tom King as Minister for Local Government in 1980 had said:

“If we’d started to determine their (Councils’) rate levies for them, then I’d accept that that would be a major threat to local democracy.”

THE RATES REVOLT

Eighteen authorities were designated for ratecapping. All but two Labour controlled.

The ensuing outrage galvanised Councils of many different complexions into action. A strategy of

non-compliance was thrashed out that involved councils deferring their rate-making for the next financial year.

This was endorsed by the Labour Party Annual Conference and its national Executive.

The revolt in prospect gained immense strength from the Miners' Strike and threatened to plunge the Tories into deeper crisis. The councils' confrontation with the law brought the very real possibility that the Government would have to sack over 500 elected councillors.

HIGH STAKES

There were no doubts about the high stakes. As early as March 1984 GLC Leader Ken Livingstone stressed:

"Irrespective of the odds, Labour councils have no option but to refuse to comply with the new laws."

And a year later Labour Herald struck the keynote in its editorial of March 29th:

"Refusing to make a rate means refusing to administer local authorities on the terms laid down by the Tories. By adopting this policy councils are saying both to the government – and to local communities and local workers – that they will not make their cuts for them."

BETRAYAL

Unfortunately by the time that this appeared in print the strategy had begun to crumble.

On March 7th, the day after massive anti-ratecapping demonstrations in London and at Town Halls around the country, the ILEA set a rate. On March 10th the GLC followed suit. Two of the major players in the game had fallen at the first hurdle.

Ex-deputy Leader of Lambeth Council, Graham Norwood said:

"Livingstone took the GLC out of the struggle, which was a crucial blow for the Left."

"This paved the way for other councils to bottle out".

RHETORIC

The campaign's strength had been its unity. This was now exposed as fragile with different political objectives hiding behind many of the protagonists' rhetoric.

Two clear camps emerged: those who, with the unions, were willing to confront the Government and those who had used the issue as a means of negotiating with the Tories never intending to go illegal.

Graham Norwood continues:

"Those who carried on the fight were correct in their view that ratecapping would mean cuts for the local community."

"but challenging the Government sorted out the socialists from the fainthearts."

THE FIGHT GOES ON

Disheartened but determined a number of the Councils fought on. Nine failed to make a rate in March: Lambeth, Camden, Greenwich, Hackney, Haringey, Islington, Lewisham, Southwark and Sheffield.

Inevitably though much of the steam had gone. Over the next three months eight councils buckled under the pressure and set rates.

LAMBETH

Lambeth was the last ratecapped authority to set a rate.

But at an acrimonious meeting on July 3rd right-wing Labour dissenters Janet Boston and Stuart Cakebread pushed through a legal rate with support from the Tories.

CONCESSIONS

In financial terms the campaign had been a

success. Applying pressure to the Tories paid off, in late June with no rate set the Government slipped the Borough an extra £5.5 million in Housing subsidy.

Coupled with a GLC Stress Borough loan the gap between the Council's income and its ratecapped expenditure was bridged.

There were no cuts in Lambeth in 1985/6 and not a single worker was made redundant.

ILLEGALITY

However Lambeth's Councillors were now subjected to legal butchery, along with 49 Councillors from Liverpool on a charge of 'wilful misconduct'.

In their wisdom Justices Glidewell, Russell and Caulfield ruled the appalling deprivation of the Borough irrelevant and surcharged the Councillors £106,000 and disqualified them for 5 years.

TORIES OUTWITTED

Lambeth's Tories rubbed their hands with glee. Unable to win an election in the Borough the prospect of power by default thrilled them.

Newspaper promises of reduced rates and axed jobs preceded their arrival at the Council Chamber on the night of April 2nd. That night they expected to take control.

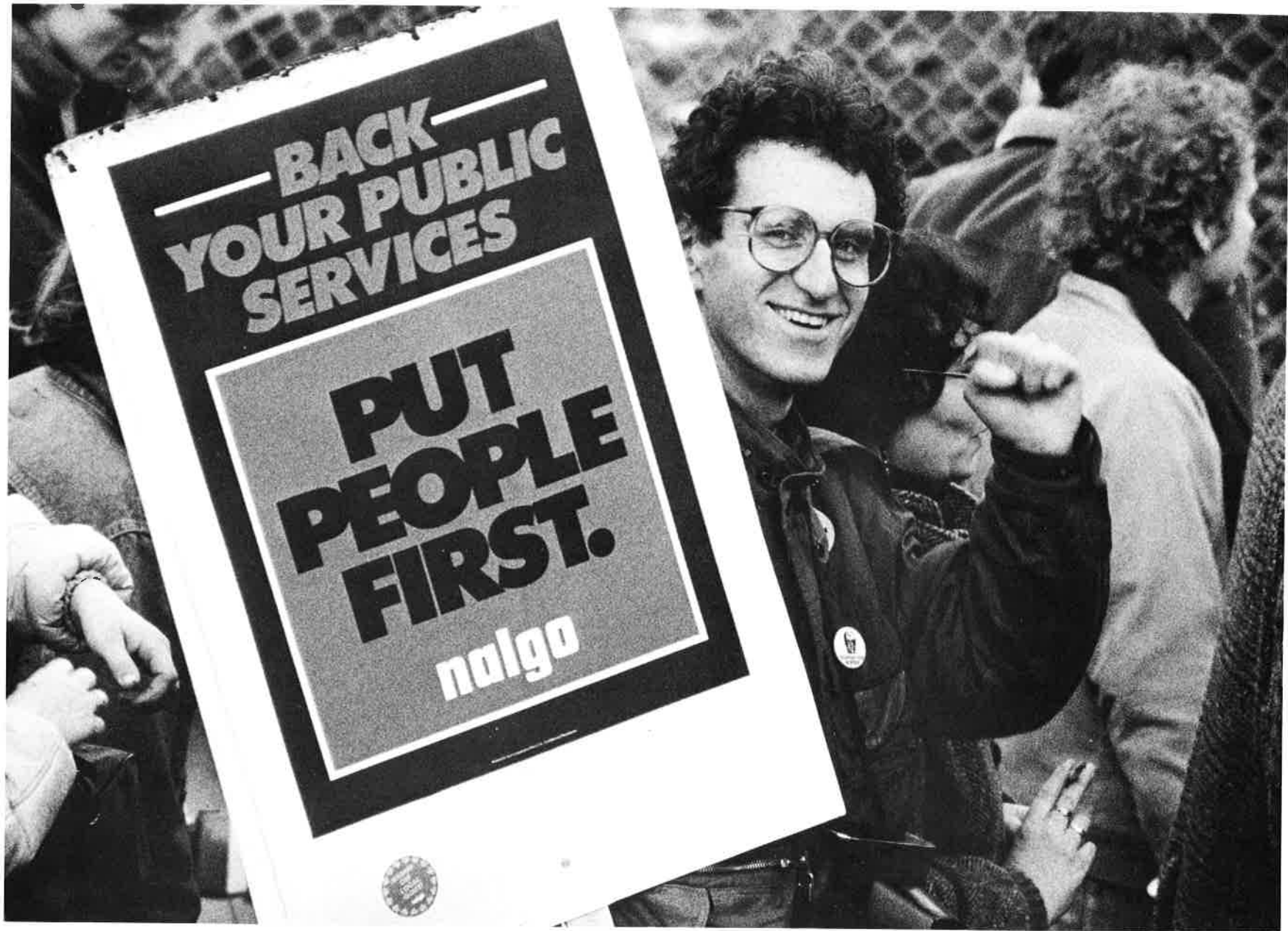
Unfortunately for them they were outfoxed by procedural changes that prevented their ascent to power until after the May 8th elections

But on that day the people of Lambeth voted overwhelmingly Labour and the Tories failed in their bid for power.

The whole campaign lasted two years, in that period there were many interesting and exciting moments many of which are captured in the images that follow.



Tory attacks on local democracy mobilised all sections of the community.



The message was clear. . .



. . .and union rallies attracted large crowds. Clapham Common 7/11/84.



The prospect of a second front with striking miners loomed.



Strong links were forged between ratecapped authorities and pit villages.

AUEW
EETPU
TGWU
NUSMW
UNITY IS



UCATT
GMB
NALGO
NUPE
STRENGTH



Union Unity means strength . . .



NALGO chair Anna Tapsell spells it out . . . as “Red Ken” and “Red Ted” share a joke in pre-split days.



Massive anti-ratecapping demonstrations preceded "crunch" meetings . . . Malet St. 6th March 1985.



Ragged Trousered Philanthropists? 6th March 1985.



Support for rebel Councillors gathered . . .



On the steps of Lambeth Town Hall . . . 7th March 1985.



Inside the Council Chamber Lambeth Workers urge "No Rate"!!



The Councillors oblige by accusing the guilty Tories.



At Southwark tempers flared.

One Councillor attempts to enlighten members of the Press!!



Some had the stomach for the fight . . . others just for Marmite butties!!



The Lambeth Battlebus went in search of rate-making authorities.



PHOTO: JOHN CHAPMAN

“What is to be Done?” Even Lenin entered the fray!



As Councils buckled, angry workforces demanded retribution.



Meanwhile in Lambeth, Ken Phipp regaled every Council meeting with his by now famous joke about "the rate that got away"!!



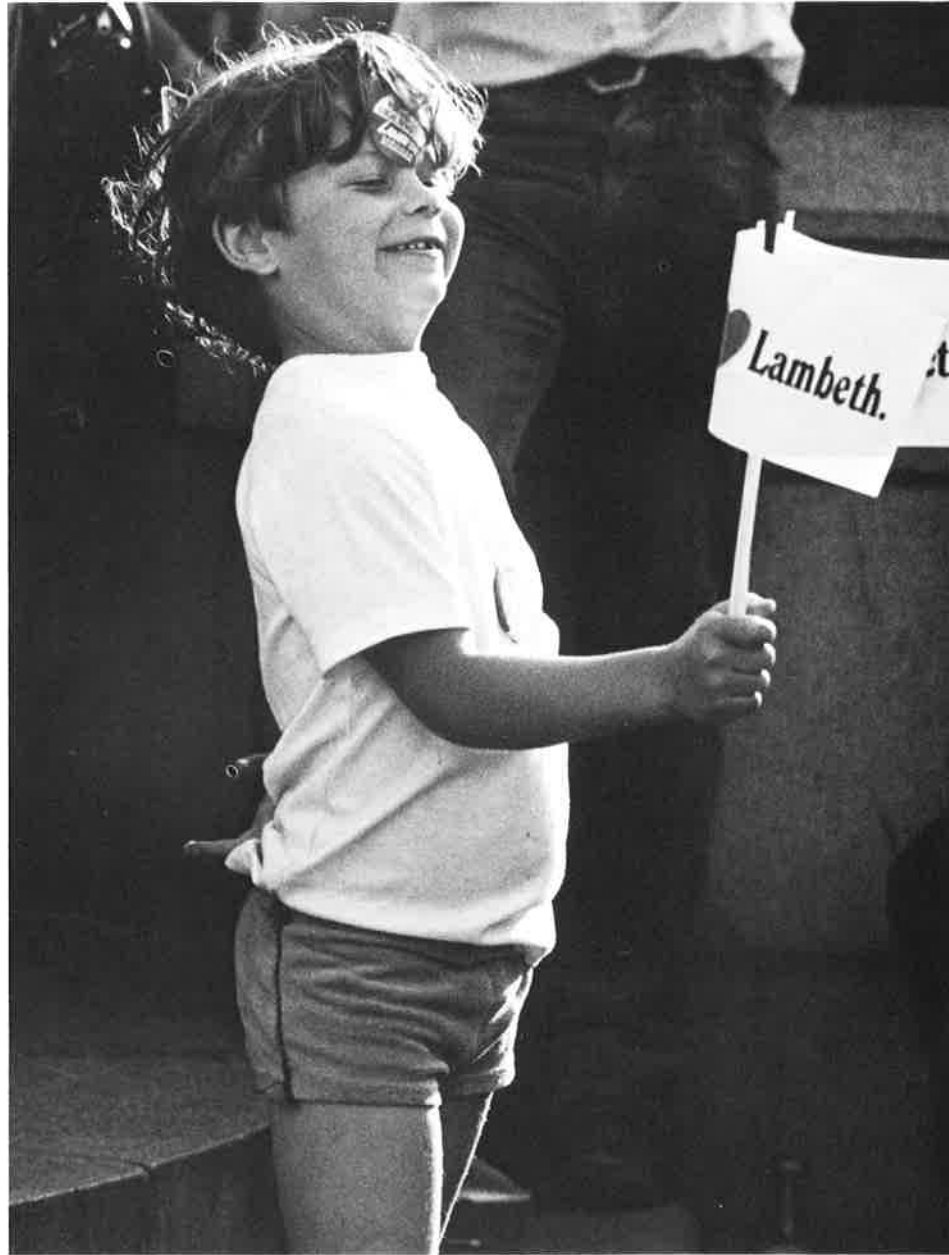
PHOTO: BRIAN MARTIN

South London Mayors try to exert their influence . . .



PHOTO: BRIAN MARTIN

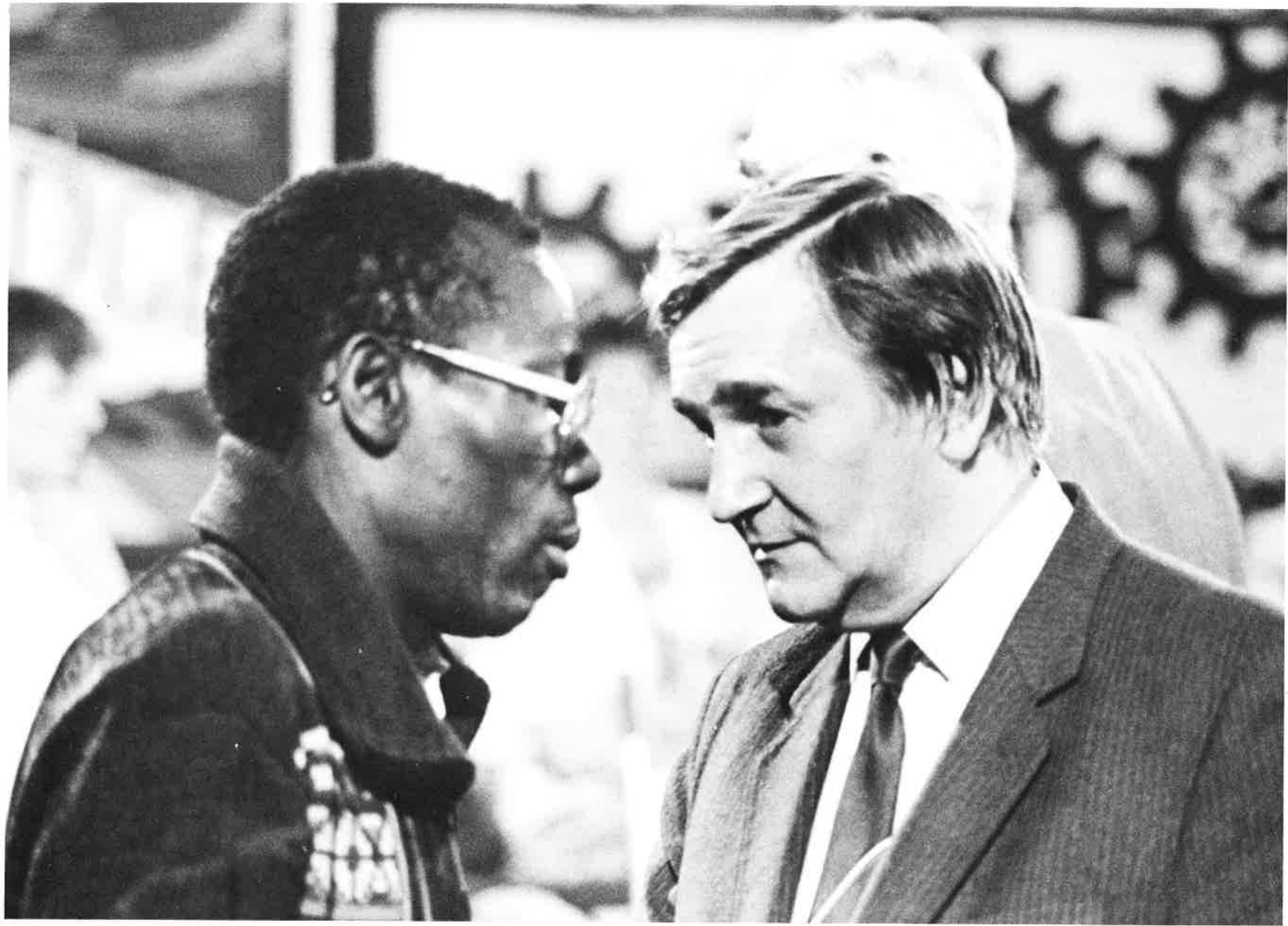
... whilst Labour leading lights Kinnock and Cunningham make a rare gesture of solidarity.



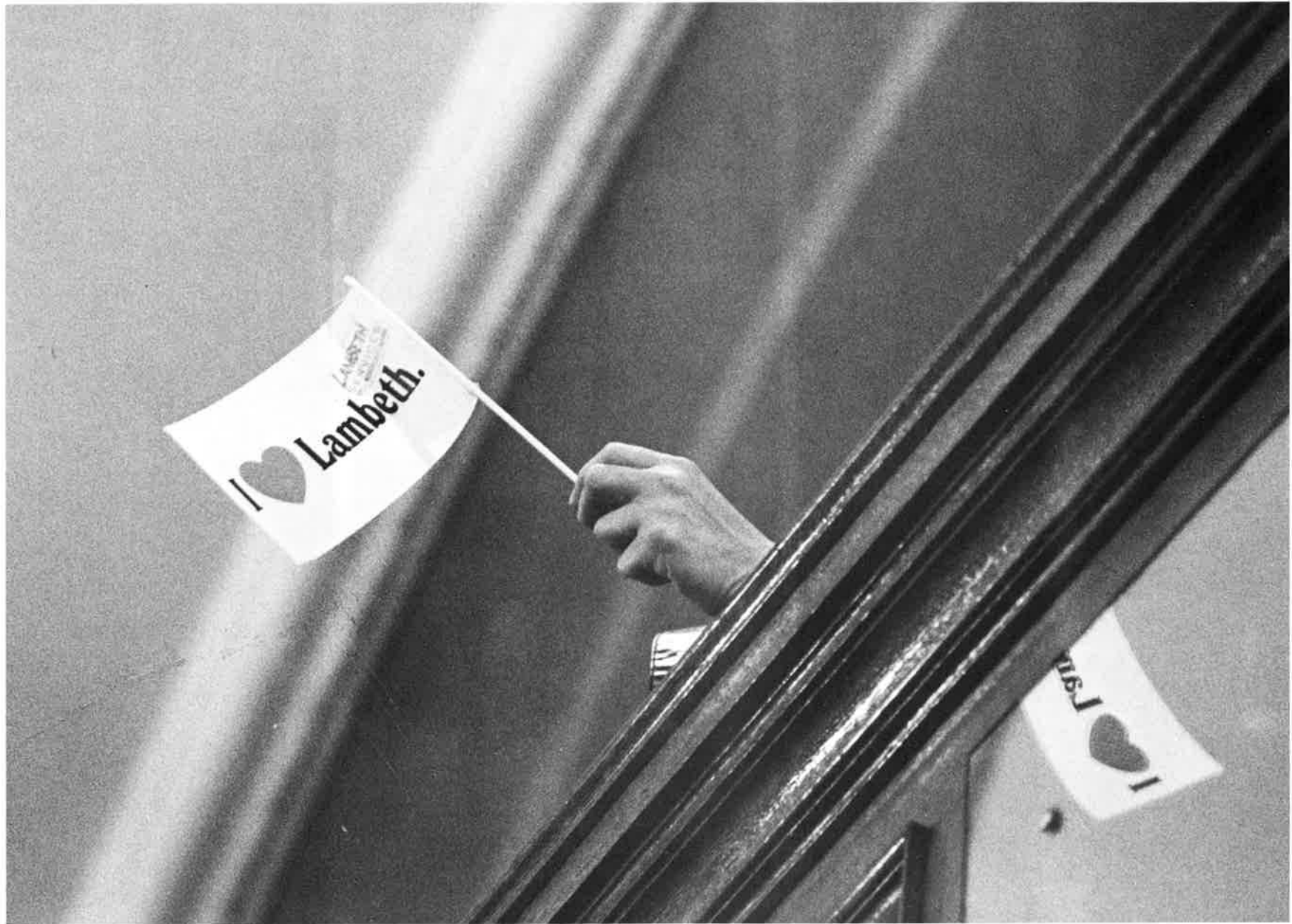
The campaign brought the flags out . . .



... ratecapping certainly wasn't cricket. Oval Test Match 1985.



"A word in your ear", Ted Knight convinces Vince Leon to vote against setting a rate. Vince later defected to SDP.



"No Rate" in Lambeth on June 5th. A disillusioned Tory surrendering?



PHOTO: JOHN CHAPMAN

Janet Boston, aided by the Tories, pushes through a legal rate.

THE LEGAL BACKLASH

1985

- June 25 Lambeth Workers' Joint Trades Unions set up Fighting Fund to raise legal expenses.
- 26 Councillors serve "Notice of Wilful Neglect" on 10 Downing Street and District Auditor.
- Sept 6 District Auditor claims £126,947 due through 'wilful misconduct'.
- Oct 16 "Dereliction of Democracy" notice served by Lambeth Councillors on District Auditor.

1986

- Jan 14 Appeal of Lambeth and Liverpool begins in High Court.
- March 5 Judges rule deprivation irrelevant and find both Councils GUILTY.
- April 2 Lambeth Councillors decide not to appeal, therefore they are disqualified for five years and surcharged.



Ex-Deputy Leader of GLC, John MacDonnell, greets Ted Knight at County Hall with certificate for District Auditor.



The Lambeth Fighting Fund was established to fight the court case.



Tony Benn MP

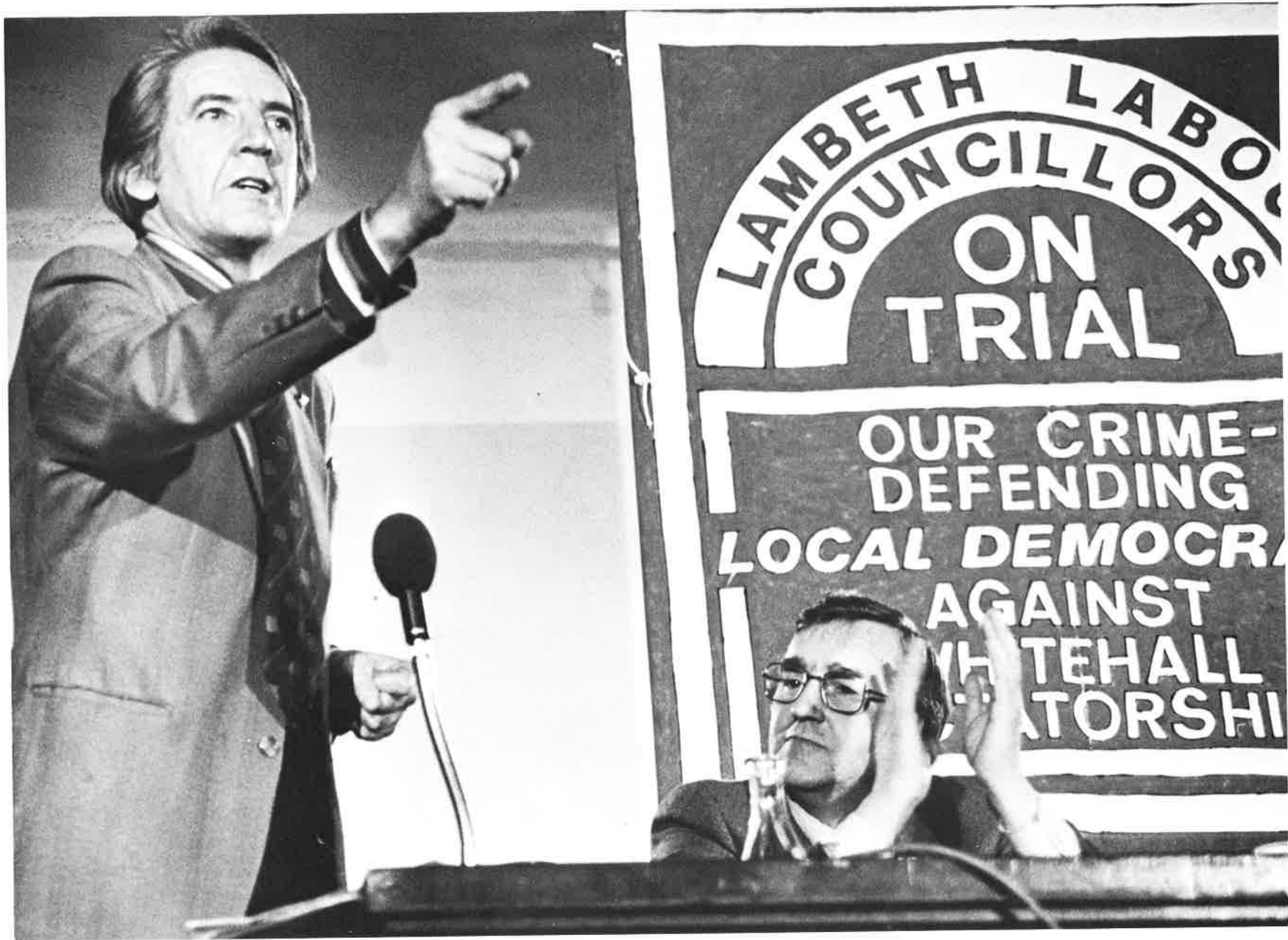


Jo Richardson MP



Bernie Grant

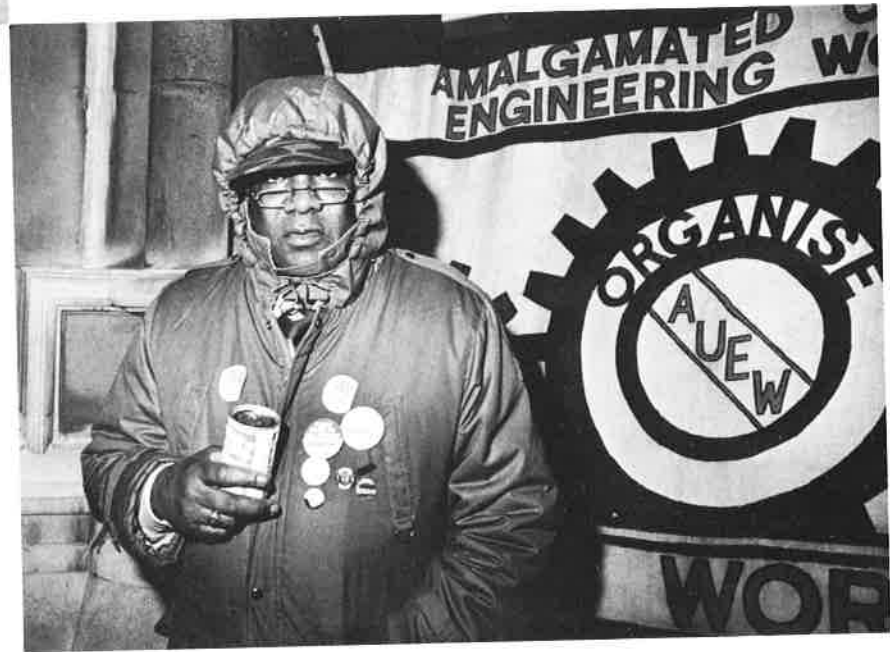
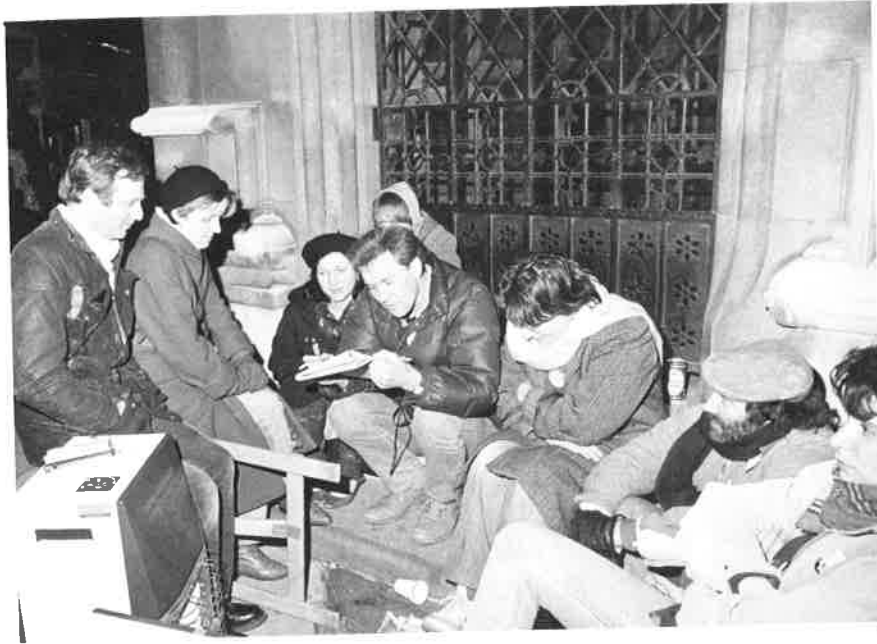
Many major speakers attended Fighting Fund rallies.



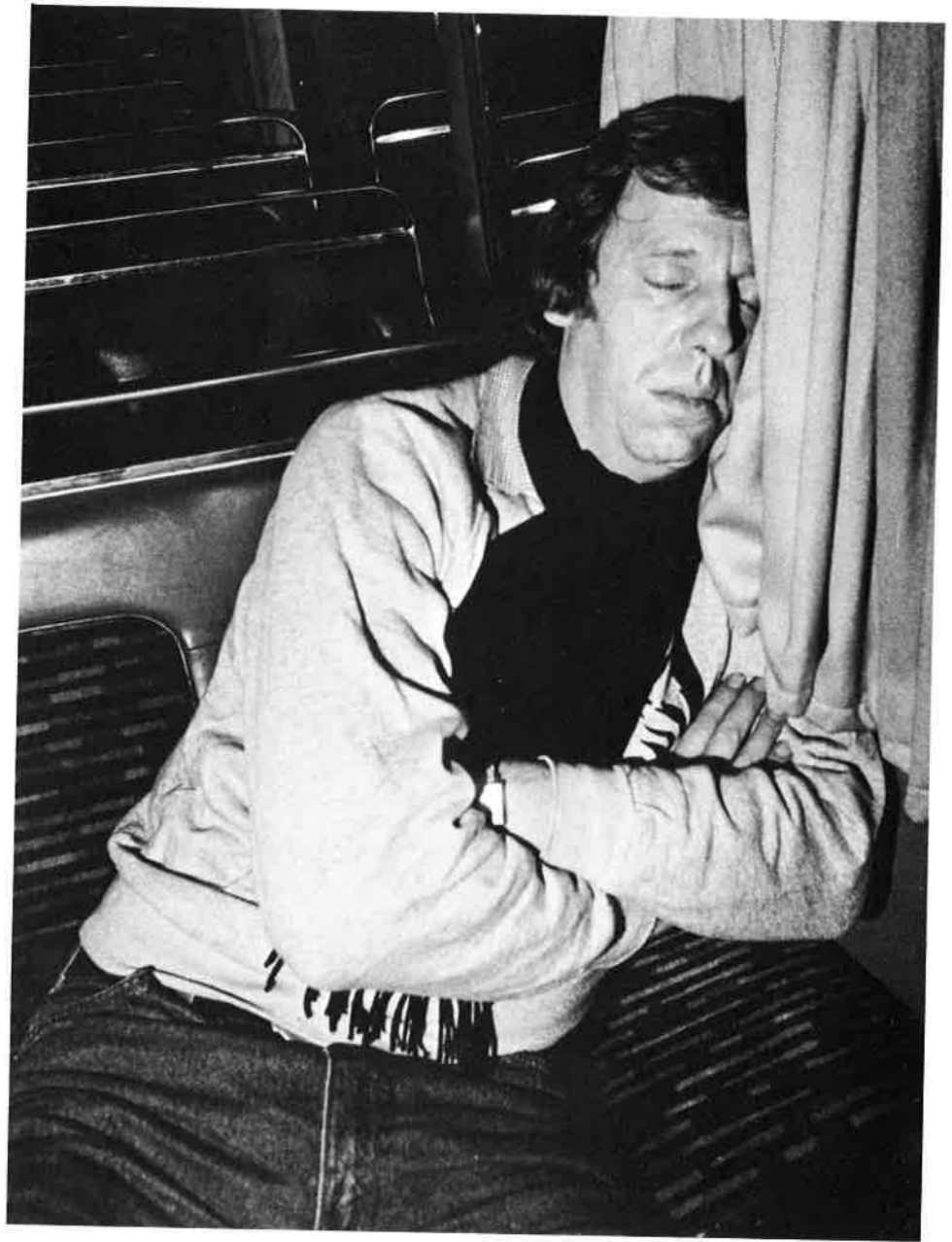
The 'Beast of Bolsover', Dennis Skinner MP, points the finger.



"And then I said to Margaret . . ." Arthur Scargill 12/1/86.



Outside the Court, 13/1/86, some Lambeth workers kept an all night vigil . . .



... whilst others saved their energy!!



PHOTO: TREVOR FORD

Lambeth and Liverpool Councillors outside the High Court . . . 14/1/86.



PHOTO: JOHN CHAPMAN

It was to be the start of a bad year for Derek and Tony!!



PHOTO: RICHARD RUDDICK

During the Lambeth case a daily picket was maintained outside the High Court

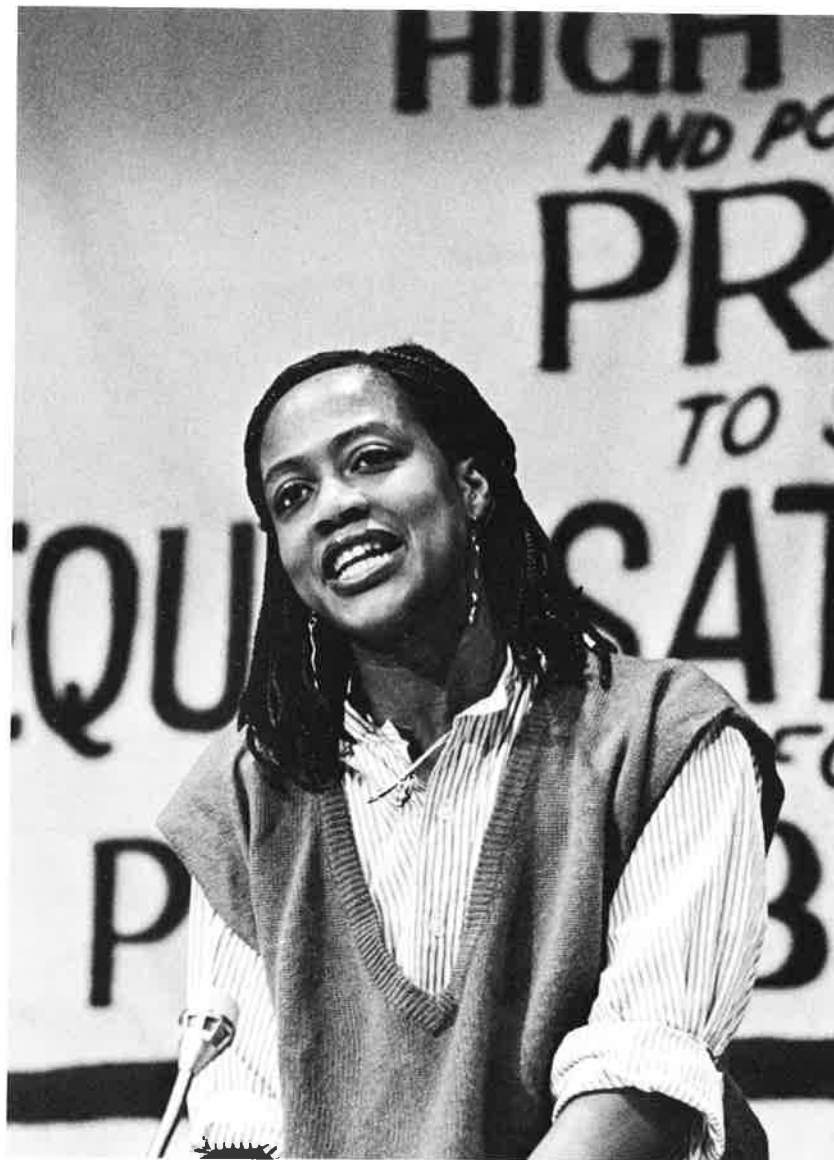


PHOTO: RICHARD RUDDICK

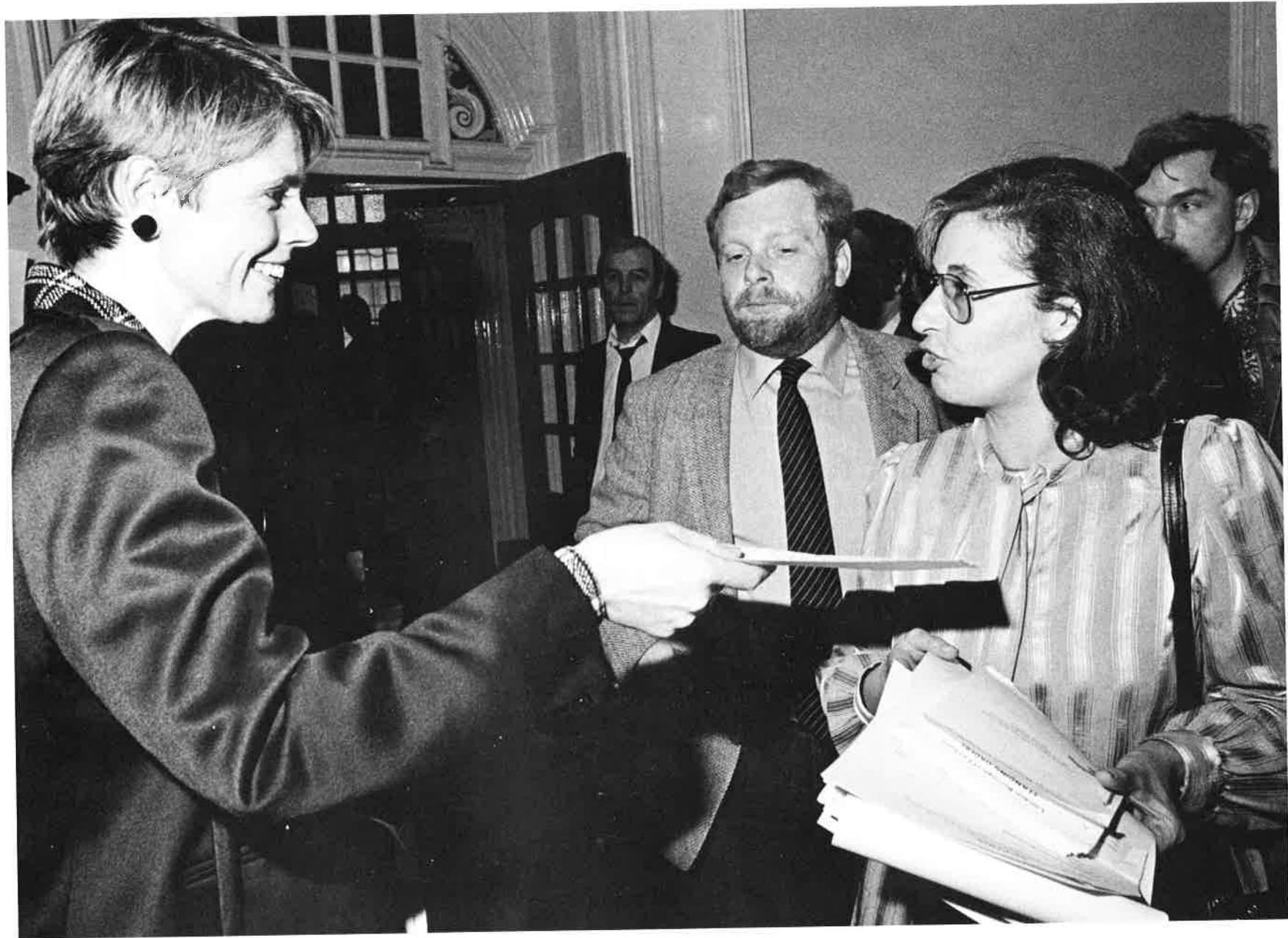
The verdict hits home, Councillors leave court . . . 5/3/86.



Tory Councillor Bob "Yobbo" Parker thinks he's seized power. Ted Knight knows better . . .



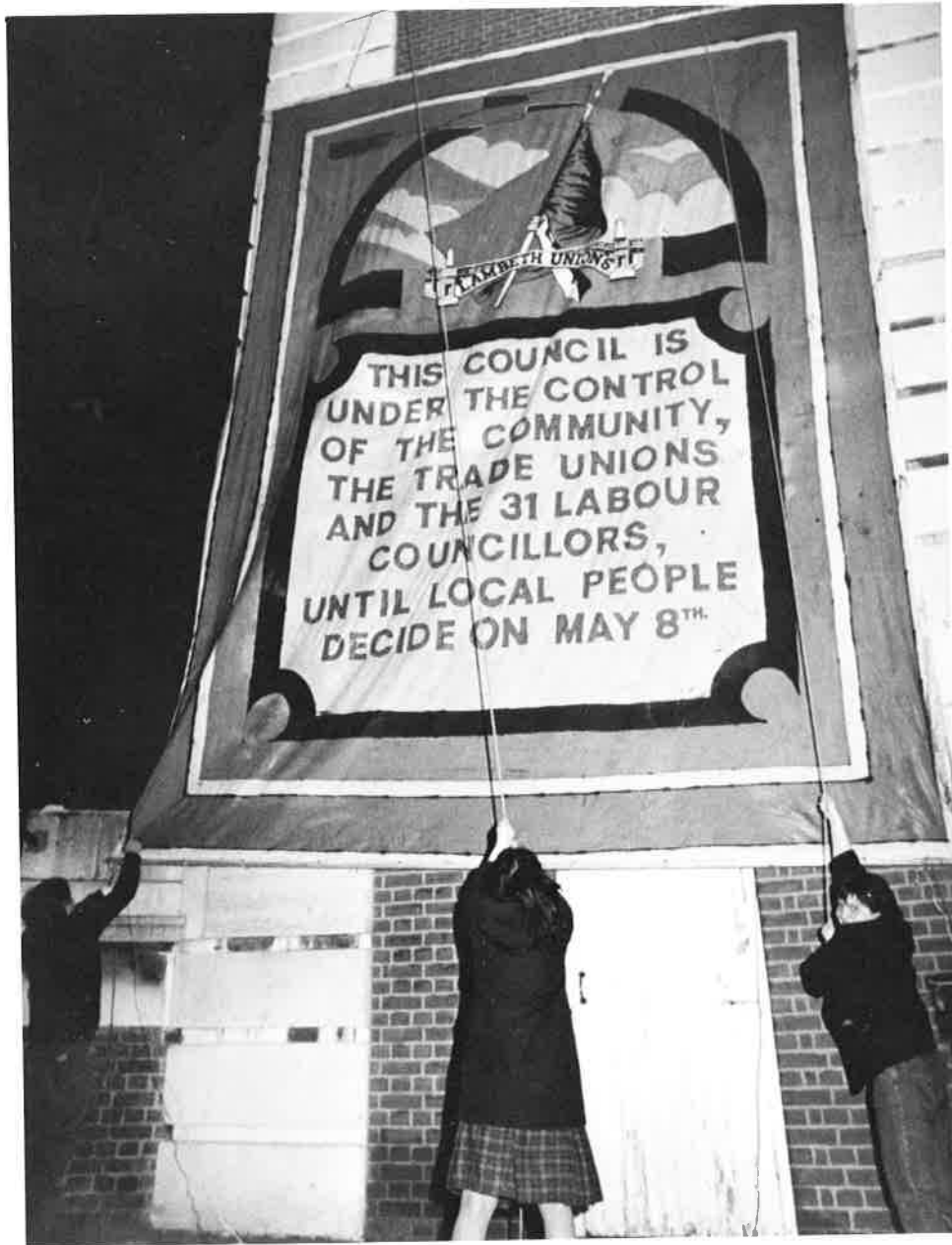
... as do surcharged Councillors Kathy Connelly and Janet Boateng.



"Mary Leigh ... this is your writ". Tory attempts to win votes in rate cutting manoeuvre were defeated in the courts 25/4/86.



'We did it our way'! Surcharged Councillors Irma Critchlow and Jock McPherson Quinn celebrate defeat of Lambeth Tories.



On disqualification Lambeth unions took control to protect democratic rights until May 8th elections.

The people of Lambeth decide



Election night jitters for Party worker Kevin Harris . . . turn to joy . . .

as Labour steal another "safe" Tory seat.



Happiness for surcharged Councillors as their stand is vindicated at the polls.



PHOTO: JOHN CHAPMAN

"Your money for their lives!!!"

The Lambeth Fighting Fund, originally established to raise the legal costs of the 31 Councillors, is now battling to pay off the surcharge.

To stave off personal bankruptcy and the threat of bailiffs at the door a staggering £206,000 **MUST** be found.

It is criminal that councillors carrying out election promises should be punished by the courts. No other elected representatives, be they Minister, MP or MEP, face such a threat even when they actually waste public money.

It is now the duty of the Labour movement and those who believe in democratic values to rally to the Lambeth Councillors side and help see them through their difficulties.

Agreement has been reached with the District Auditor to pay off £5,000 per month . . . banker's orders and donations are not only welcome but **ESSENTIAL**.

Please send any contributions or requests for further details to:

The Lambeth Fighting Fund
c/o The Chief Whip's Office
Lambeth Town Hall
Brixton Hill
London SW2 1RW



"He was only the District Auditor, but ..." is a collection of photos from one London Borough's rebellion against the Tory Government's ratecapping laws.

Between 1979 and 1985 central government grants to Lambeth were reduced year by year until finally local people would accept it no longer ...

It was a fight that took place in one of the country's most deprived areas involving Councillors, trades unionists and community groups.

Initially it was a struggle with a national dimension involving many Councils and threatening to open a second front alongside the striking mining communities.

After a war of attrition Lambeth was isolated and left prey to Tory wolves in the form of the District Auditor and the High Court.

Disqualified and surcharged the Councillors remain unbowed. There were no cuts in Lambeth, not a single redundancy in 1985.

This is the story of a year in which despite the final sacrifice at least one authority stood up for local democracy.