



# against poverty

Irregular bulletin of the London Coalition Against Poverty

Issue one ♦ Autumn 2007

## Fighting to win

*an introduction to LCAP and direct action casework*

WELCOME to the first of what we hope will become an ongoing roundup of activities and campaign updates from the London Coalition Against Poverty.

So who are we and what do we do? London Coalition Against Poverty (LCAP) brings together activists, advice workers, and campaigning groups in order to tackle the causes and effects of poverty in London through merging advice work with direct action and libertarian organising. We have been going for less than a year but have already had some modest successes as this newsletter shows.

As our name suggests we were initially inspired by Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) who developed the model of direct action casework. Since 1989 OCAP have been using a range of effective tactics to mobilise many of those at the sharp end of the attacks on their welfare, housing and employment rights. While these rights are not enough by themselves, asserting them is a necessary first step to extending those rights and, we hope, widening our struggles in the process.

What is Direct Action Casework (DAC)? There are three core principles around the DAC model of activity. Firstly to combine legal work with disruptive action to achieve an immediate, or more quickly arrived at, outcome. This means understanding what people are entitled to under the law, and at the same time knowing that people have power in disruptive action.

Secondly, not to duplicate the work of legal clinics or other agencies. There are numerous legal clinics and agencies that are given money (usually from government) to fight on people's behalf or provide them with services.

Thirdly, to forward political goals but never compromise the interests of those you are working with in the process. Landlords, bosses and government bureaucrats break the rules all the time and we're the ones who pay. They often do this unchallenged. The official channels of appeal that are available are often lengthy, costly and ineffective. Direct action casework is designed to cut through this to get people what they want.



See OCAP at <http://ocap.ca/>

Organised workers have the power of going on strike. They have a power that comes from withdrawing their labour and suspending their activity in the economy. But if people on benefits simply stop participating in the benefits system it gains them no power at all; the opposite in fact. Instead we need to force our way into the process in order to be heard and to secure our demands. Keeping business operating as usual is very important to the functioning of many institutions; it is often easier for them to make a concession than to try to continue while disruptions are taking place. Our success will come from demanding people receive what the law says they can have and backing it up with effective action.

To be clear, we are a political group with political goals. As Jeff Shantz of OCAP explains, "*recognising that direct interference with the practices of various levels of government and their business backers is the only way [...] people can effect a real measure of control in their own lives. OCAP avoids token protest in favor of actions which upset our enemies' plans. Rather than pleading with them to stop hurting us we act to develop the means to prevent them from implementing their plans.*"

In the next few pages we sketch out some of the early work that has begun in these areas. We would like to make contact with others interested in working with us and we would be interested in hearing what you think.

LONDON Coalition Against Poverty has started to take action against the 'gatekeeping' of homeless people by councils. Gatekeeping means when people go to the council because they are in desperate need of housing they are being lied to, misinformed, delayed and unlawfully turned away by homeless persons units (HPUs). They do this because the effect of housing policy, from local authorities and from central government, is to seek to keep the numbers of people being housed as low as possible. Since the beginning of August LCAP has taken on several casework actions at Hackney Homeless Persons Unit (or Housing Needs Office).

## FIRST VICTORY

The first, on Friday 3rd August, was in support of a man who had been sleeping in a park for a week, after being excluded from his house by bail conditions. The housing office had told him on the previous Monday to come back on Thursday for an appointment — NOT with a Homelessness Officer, but with a Housing Options

worker. The difference is that he was entitled to a proper homelessness interview, which would lead to the council giving him a place to stay until they had finished deciding if they had a duty to house him permanently. A housing options interview would just be someone explaining his 'options', none of which would give him a place to stay right then. In this options interview, after sleeping rough all that time he was told verbally that he was intentionally homeless.

Three of us came back with him the next day and demanded he be given a

homelessness interview. At first the manager threatened to call the police when we demanded he be given an interview that day, not after the weekend as offered. But when we stood our ground, they handed over the interview appointment for that afternoon.

See our Focus on... Expert Witnesses in this bulletin

# Mentally ill man left to sleep in the rough

Council denies gatekeeping policy accusation

by RUSS LAWRENCE

A MENTALLY ill man slept rough for five nights in a public park because the council failed to fulfil its statutory duty to find him emergency housing, it was claimed this week.

The case is not an isolated example, according to a homelessness charity which has accused Hackney's Homeless Persons Unit of operating a "gatekeeping" policy towards those in urgent need of a roof over their heads.

David Rowland, 54, who is being treated by his doctor for clinical depression, says he spent five nights sleeping in a park in Blenheim Park, Stoke Newington, after he was refused a place to stay at the council's Homeless Persons Unit.

Mr Rowland had been made homeless last month after he was arrested following a row with a neighbour and turned up at a council of police bail from Liberty's Grove, Stoke Newington.

After spending a weekend sleeping in the bushes because he had nowhere to stay, he went to the homeless persons unit, where he was told he would be made homeless unless he could find a place to stay.

"They arranged an appointment for me to return three days later and gave me a list of homeless units away in south London, but with no money to pay for a place, I ended up back in the park sleeping on cardboard under bushes, which was

frustrating," he said. The London Coalition Against Poverty, a new organisation which fights for people's rights, has been set up to support those who are homeless and to help them to take proceedings over housing.

"The council has a legal duty to house vulnerable people, but they exploit people's ignorance of their rights by sending them away to get documents before making an appointment to talk them through what they are entitled to when they are required to give a written statement that can be challenged," he added.

However, the council disputed Mr Rowland's version of events, claiming he agreed to stay with friends while his homelessness application was

disregarding the guidance concerning the safety of victims of violence being paramount. Again and again the woman returned with her baby to the office and was sent away to stay wherever she could temporarily find, no matter how unsafe it was for them. In fact the woman concerned had faced further acts of violence as a result of the HPU forcing her to make a report to the police, and even then refusing to house her.

Although we had to return the next day for an interview (Tuesday 7th August), as she was pressured into staying one more night with a friend, she was also

person earning money struggle to afford suitable housing with enough space for the whole family, let alone save money for a deposit and rent in advance.

When some members of LCAP went to the office with the mother, we didn't have to do anything but ask and staff offered her an appointment for a few days later. However, we did have to return one month later, as they were still messing her around. She was told by her caseworker on the phone that she had been turned down, and so the council would put her in a Bed and Breakfast for a while after her eviction. Around seven people went with her to the office, holding placards that read "Stop Gatekeeping" and "House the Homeless Now". We had an interview with the head of the homeless team, who said the application hadn't been turned down. Her eviction hasn't come yet, so we may have to take more action with this woman, if the council tries to gatekeep her again.

So far we've seen that by directly supporting people we can help them get what they're entitled to. We know that gatekeeping won't end until a strong movement for housing rights confronts the lack of cheap housing, extortionate rents and the destruction of social housing. However, we can help individuals and through collective action at least make it more difficult for the housing offices to keep abusing people.

## STOP GATEKEEPING

Our third HPU visit with someone was at the beginning of September, again to demand a homelessness interview for someone who was being told they were intentionally homeless. This single parent family is facing eviction from a flat someone had illegally sub let. Due to high rents, families with only one

given interim housing following her interview.

How the Hackney Gazette reported the story

## YOUNG MUM FOBBED OFF

We returned the following week with a young mother, who having fled her temporary accommodation due to violence and harassment had been sofa surfing since November. Hackney Council had decided she was not homeless, completely



LCAP members involved in the *Haringey Anti-Poverty Initiative* explain how the campaign took shape

# Targeting the debt pushers

FOLLOWING a series of discussions beginning at the start of the year, the *Haringey Anti-Poverty Initiative* was launched this summer by local activists, aiming to deal with the impact of the £1.4 trillion debt industry on residents in one of London's poorest boroughs.

With the dual methods of offering support and advice to those attending the group's advice surgery, combined with confronting the finance companies profiteering from those wrestling with their personal debt, HAPI admits it faces a huge challenge on its modest resources should the project extend outwards from the Noel Park area where the first estate work and advice session was held in June.

Two agencies currently struggle to provide the bulk of the free debts advice work in a borough where the percentage of children living in families on out of work benefits is more than double the national average. However HAPI are at pains to make clear that they have not been created to supplement the work already being done by the *Citizen's Advice Bureaux* and *Law Centre*.

"We take our inspiration from those progressive movements working for social change," said Dermot Morrow when asked what differentiated HAPI from

the traditional advice providers. The project, he explains, has four main objectives: advice, action, support and research.

"Firstly, to give advice where we can provide it, for sure. But to use that meeting as the opportunity for moving to the next stage, which is to bring together some of those people coming into the surgeries and working with them to decide what action to take together against the source of the problem. It could be a credit company offering ridiculous terms, like the Provident let's say [typical APR 183.2%!], or one of those no credit check stores like Brighthouse where people are getting fleeced when they go in to buy furniture, on the basis that they feel they have no other choice, as finding the cash up front isn't an option." Bringing people together to make the problem a collective issue, rather than one faced individually by each and every person seems to be the point here.

"The third element is support, whether it's encouraging people to challenge

*claims against them at the county court and going along with them for moral support, or sending word quickly around those we are in contact with, if someone knows a debt collector or bailiff is coming.*"

Finally, HAPI hope over time to map the main problem areas based upon what they are hearing and from collecting testimonies from those that make contact. "It's early days. We spent the first few months talking through what we wanted and how we would do it. Then came the publicity work leading up to our first advice session. A few of us took a break over the summer but now we are meeting again and putting down further plans for targeting the lenders ourselves as we're no different from anyone else in the fact that we're in debt too!"

## Picket

HAPI's most recent work has been in picketing Brighthouse in Wood Green, which on the last

occasion led to the store manager angrily confronting those leafletting outside. "He was partly bewildered by who we were, and partly concerned that we were affecting his takings." The picket drew interest from passers by unaware of the store's shonky business practices, but who were nonetheless entertained by the manager's response to the leaflet being handed out.

Owned by the Thorn group, Brighthouse's sister company was banned in France several years ago for the high levels of interest it charges those with poor credit histories. Those, in fact, who may be least able to afford to continue long repayment periods. While HAPI are under no illusion that the government here would dare attempt a similar intervention, they are hoping that the captive market the company rely on for their trade are made aware of some of the tricks the company employs in its marketing and also of the legislation in place to protect the consumer... something that Brighthouse do not appear to make clear to customers.



HAPI's debt advice surgery on the Noel Park estate

If you would like to contact HAPI for advice, wish to get involved or are interested in setting up something similar in your area contact them at: [debt@haringey.org.uk](mailto:debt@haringey.org.uk) or phone 0845 223 5270.

# Expert Witnesses Sham or Scam?

We look at how local authorities are outsourcing their medical assessments to justify questionable housing policy decisions

COUNCILS need to assess whether people applying for housing have medical needs in order to assess whether they can get priority for housing as homeless, or on the waiting list for a permanent council home.

Traditionally, councils used in-house occupational therapists or other medical professionals (often seconded from the social services department or the local PCT) to carry out these assessments. These in-house medical advisors would often meet the applicants and interview them about their needs before any decision was made. Generally these in-house advisors tended to be reasonably fair in their assessments and had no vested interest in deciding that the applicant did not fit the criteria for medical priority.

This has all changed with the appearance of *NowMedical* – a private company set up by a GP called Dr Keen – who have successfully marketed an “independent” medical advice service for local authorities. For £30 +VAT

Dr Keen will provide an opinion on the vulnerability / medical needs of an applicant within five working days (or for a price, within 24 hours).

Dr Keen (or one of his three or four cohorts at *NowMedical*)

does not meet the applicant, see his or her medical records or discuss the case with a professional working with the applicant. He simply

looks at the (often sketchy) material provided by the council and, following his disturbingly simplistic guidelines, says whether or not he thinks the applicant meets the criteria (no prizes for guessing that he normally says they don't). For example, in Tower Hamlets figures for January to April 07 show that of 888 cases referred to Dr Keen for assessment, only 24 (2.7%) were, in his opinion, in priority need.

*A careful analysis of the number of assessments carried out by NowMedical to their various clients shows that Dr Keen's company could be spending as little as 2.8 minutes per assessment!*

*“I will use my power to help the sick to the best of my ability and judgement; I will abstain from harming or wronging any man by it.”*

(Extract from original Hippocratic Oath)

*“We provide consistent and defensible medical opinions to use in legal proceedings if challenged under section 202 review.”*

(Extract from *NowMedical* website – now removed)

Consider that most applicants have to fight (often with the threat of court proceedings) to even get their applications assessed – and you can see what sort of effect *NowMedical* are having on the acceptance figures for single vulnerable homeless people.

Dr Keen is now providing this service to over 100 local authorities, all who have seen a massive drop in the numbers of applicants they

accept on the basis of medical priority. A careful analysis of the number of assessments carried out by *NowMedical* to their various clients shows that Dr Keen's company could be spending as little as 2.8 minutes per assessment!

This work is extremely profitable. *NowMedical*'s turnover last year was £173,000 and apparently Dr Keen, himself, currently has over £129,000 sitting in his bank account. In between making money out of turning away poor people from housing assistance, Dr Keen finds time to work as a partner in his GP practice - the Bedford Park Surgery,

in Chiswick, west London.

Given the widespread use of *NowMedical*, you might expect the qualifications of the staff to be up to the job. Given that a very large proportion of vulnerable single homeless people have mental health problems – you might expect that Dr Keen or one of his colleagues would have a mental health background. But no, Dr Keen's background is in obstetrics!

But there is some good news. The courts are becoming less and less impressed with *NowMedical* – judgements in recent cases such as *Khelassi v Brent* and *Shala v Birmingham* have included less than complimentary comments on the practices and expertise of *NowMedical*. The fallout from the *Shala* case is that Dr Keen has had to find himself a doctor with a psychiatric background fast. Never one, however, to turn down the opportunity to make a quick buck – *NowMedical* are now charging £50 plus VAT for psychiatric “assessments” - £20 more than the standard ones.

Given the recent court judgements, some people are saying that *NowMedical*'s days are numbered – lets hope so.

# Not that *intentse*

THE *London Citizens*, an alliance of community, religious, and other civil society groups (including trade unions and charities), has picked up on the lack of affordable housing in London and organised a direct action response. Hundreds of people including LCAP activists camped out on the lawn outside City Hall in early September, with the twin objectives of raising the housing issue and pressing for a commitment to a pilot Community Land Trust (CLT). CLTs are, in essence, housing with the land cost (and hence initial purchase price) subsidised, and re-sale prices restricted. The CLT lets low-income people buy their own properties, but makes property speculation and buy-to-let impossible. It

also pulls against the dispersal of working class people to the suburbs and resultant decline in community strength (pushed by the demolition of social housing and rocketing property costs).

Unfortunately, legal threats led to decampment before the end of the first day, but the event had successfully raised the housing issue all over the London media and had (off the back of the threat of an action, rather than the action itself) won a commitment from the GLA to a small pilot CLT project, in Bow.

This tent city differed from the riotous ones elsewhere in the world, with tightly controlled (though democratic) organisation,



Camp as a row of tents

and standardised bulk-purchased tents. It showed, nonetheless, that being well organised, determined, and willing to defy the law en masse (even in a limited way) can get the goods. Imagine what they could have achieved if they had not given in to the threats!

## Workplace Organising

LCAP has been discussing how poverty often starts in the workplace with low wages, few benefits, poor working practices, poor health and safety, and stress leading to sickness all contributing to the increasing gap between rich and poor, especially in London.

If we are to fight poverty on all fronts we need to look at how we interact with people in the workplace.

Most of us are aware that the best way to fight for improvements in pay and conditions at work are through organising with our workmates to defend each other, and campaign collectively for better pay, utilising tried and tested principles of solidarity and direct action. Some may prefer the syndicalist or informal solidarity union approach, others working through more mainstream 'reformist' unions.

As a first step towards expanding our activities into the area, LCAP is planning to hold a one-day workshop early in 2008. This would include sessions on basic "know your rights" stuff and an intro to organising at work. If you are interested in sharing your experiences of action at work, or if you want to learn about it, get in touch.

# Justice for Cleaners

CLEANERS in the corporate headquarters of the City of London and Docklands are perhaps the starkest illustration of London's 'global economy'. Cleaners, many of whom are refugees or economic migrants from Latin America, Africa and Eastern Europe, typically earn the £5.35 per hour Minimum Wage – often forcing them to work more than one job to support their families. Meanwhile, the stockbrokers, and bankers earn bonuses in the millions, the profits of international "free" trade.

'Justice for Janitors' was born in a victorious '90s Los Angeles janitors' strike.

This inspired the Transport and General Workers Union to launch the current campaign in London. Late 2006 and early 2007 saw a rash of demonstrations, pickets and occupations under the banner Justice for Cleaners (J4C). The first of the big names to fall was Goldman Sachs, owners of global cleaning giant IFF. Around forty cleaners and their supporters occupied the lobby of the company's global headquarters for two hours, trapping bankers in, and shouting 'no union, no peace'. That very evening the company gave in to union demands. Within a month, two other large companies had followed suit.

In September, LCAP activists joined a picket outside the insurance firms' insurer, Lloyds of London – which had been paying poverty wages, and bullying union activists.

J4C is heavily reliant on union funds at present, rather than being an independent force, but is a useful demonstration of the possibilities of unconventional direct action approaches to workers' campaigns. The campaign continues, and LCAP will be there supporting it whenever we can.

# Let's get ready to Jumble

FINSBURY Park's Andover Estate was the site in October for LCAP's first fundraising event of the year: a jumble sale. Everyone that came and browsed seemed satisfied enough. Eager too, as queues began to form 20 minutes before the opening at the Red Rose Club.

Those that saw the ITV documentary *Anne Widdecombe v The Hoodies* earlier this year will be familiar with Andover as the estate stigmatised by the twisted Tory and her camera crew as a no-go zone where anti-social young people run amok, wreaking havoc. For an on-this-planet account we'd recommend viewing the response from some of the young people on YouTube (tags: Beyond the Hoodie).



As for the sale itself, perhaps it was the tasty home-made cookies or the esoteric selection of old vinyl records; whatever, organisers and shoppers alike left wondering when the next jumble sale is to be arranged. For LCAP members it was as much a social and a launch event as a fundraiser, taking £350 for a 4-hour event was an encouraging start to building up funds and plans for an office to base the campaign from.

Sale organisers hope to host another jumble sale in the run up to Christmas, perhaps with Widdecombe attired as a suitable Dickensian character. Or on second thoughts we could still do with a prize turkey.

# A NIGHT LEFT ON MARE STREET



Halloween

Wednesday 31st October, 6 pm,

Hackney Town Hall

London Coalition Against Poverty and supporters will be picketing the Hackney Council meeting this Halloween to let the Council know that they will no longer be able to deny homeless people their rights in silence. LCAP has had a presence at Hackney Housing Needs office since July 2007, and we have seen time and again that homeless people are turned away unlawfully. Hackney Council cares more about balancing their budget than about their resident's needs. To spend less money, they try to delay or stop people making a homeless application, and to achieve this the officers often act in an intimidating or disinterested way. Because of this "gate keeping" at the housing needs office, many vulnerable people and families are left on the street or other insecure, dangerous places.

**LCAP will continue to haunt Hackney Council until these changes are made. Trick or Treat?**

**MEET AT 6PM, HACKNEY TOWN HALL,  
MARE STREET, E8 1EA**

Come as something scary and send the shivers up their spines!



Like what you've read so far?  
Want to find out more?

**Get in touch**

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[londoncoalitionagainstopoverty@gmail.com](mailto:londoncoalitionagainstopoverty@gmail.com)

- ◆ Come along to a campaign or general meeting on alternate Thursdays  
– All welcome
- ◆ Join the e-list for action callouts: [lcap\\_news-subscribe@lists.riseup.net](mailto:lcap_news-subscribe@lists.riseup.net)  
Give as much (or as little) time as you can manage – just tell us
- ◆ Start an action group in your area. *We might be able to help!*
- ◆ Find out your rights... and tell others. *Get some LCAP information leaflets for your college or workplace*
- ◆ Give a donation – *help with our fund to find an office*

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Postcode ..... Best time to call .....