

# 1990: Accounts of the poll tax riot



An interesting series of personal recollections of individuals participation and experiences of the poll tax riot in London's Trafalgar Square in 1990, which marked the beginning of the end of the Thatcher government.

## 1. I BOOKED A BABYSITTER

It was only the second demonstration that I've been to, and I didn't really know what to expect, but I decided that I was not going to miss it, so I booked a babysitter for the weekend and got a train down to London. The atmosphere on arriving at Kennington Park was like a carnival. Bands were playing, the sun was hot, thousands of people were out to demonstrate their united opposition to the Poll Tax. It looked like it was going to be a good day!

The sound of a band of drummers drew me like a moth to a light, a stick and an old discarded beer can to mark the rhythm and we were off. It was a joyful experience, dancing and shouting through the streets virtually all the way to Trafalgar Square. When we reached the Parliament end of Whitehall, a line of police had blocked the road and the crowd was diverted towards the Embankment. We could see behind the police lines rows of mounted police, ominously still and waiting. That's when I felt my first pangs of fear and anger. I remember thinking that they had some nasty plans for us, visions of being fodder for exercises in crowd control. The police in the lines looked incredibly smug.

I continued with the crowd, marching up Northumberland Avenue, the excitement and tension increasing as the band came to a standstill as we entered Trafalgar Square. The energy became warlike, the beating of the drums and the chanting seeming to get louder and louder and the crowd more and more dense as thousands more swept up Northumberland Avenue. I pushed my way through to the Whitehall junction where it became apparent that something had already started. A man was fighting his way back through the crowd, a real sense of panic hit me as I heard him shouting "Get any kids out of the way, they're going to charge". Images sped through my mind of the mothers with young kids, old people, disabled people that I had seen on the march. They were all here in the square, the bastards were going to charge us and there was no way out! Bloodbath! Severe panic.

I pushed my way towards the junction with the Strand, shouting the warning for those more vulnerable to try and get out. There was another police line across St. Martins Lane and the

only road free for exit was the Strand. As I looked up the length of the road, I saw a police van speeding towards us. I got out of the road and watched in horror as it sped in towards the crowd and screeched to a halt as an unsuspecting body flew through the air on impact and landed in a heap on the side of the road. This was too much! My anger exploded and I ran towards the van screaming and shouting and pulled open the door on the drivers' side, screaming blue murder as the terrified officer inside wrenched the door closed. I spat, banged on the windows, thought of broken glass, didn't want to put my hands, looking for something to throw, something to hit with.

Everything was happening at once, the man in the road with people bending over him, people crying, me shouting, spitting, furious at the police. A woman gently rocking her baby, rhythmically, protectively as she made her way across the road away from the violence. I shouted at a policewoman in the lines to let her through with her baby, realising as I did so that it was the same policewoman I had just been screaming and spitting at when the van had hit its victim. I swallowed my fear as I walked with the woman right up to the police line, stopping just long enough to see that she got through to safety, then racing back to where the van was, thanking my fate they hadn't grabbed me.

There was a frustrating lack of anything to hand to smash the van windows with, I pulled at something at the side of a building, it wouldn't come loose. Wires attached, a light of some kind, leave it! Hands banging the glass again, feet kicking, not enough people! Things being thrown, we need more people, shit why wouldn't the fucking glass break! Break away for a minute, I want a good hard brick. Nothing around. I see a woman sobbing on the kerb, uncontrolled sobbing helplessly. I had to get her out of the crowd, she'd be trampled. I remembered being in a similar state on the tube once and home seeming like a million miles away. I managed to get her to her feet and then some other people with her took over and led her down the edge of the crowded road away from the battle zone.

I was at the back of a crowd now and couldn't get back near the van. I pushed my way through. The mounted police had already charged and the police now had some measure of control and were moving people out of Trafalgar Square down the Strand, telling everyone to "go home, go home". A young black boy, about 12 or 13 years old, yelled back at them "We ain't got homes to go to mate" I smiled, I didn't want to go home either. Somehow I managed to get down a side street and back onto Northumberland Avenue.

At the back of a crowd again, a crowd buzzing with its own energy. Occasional bursts of electric as the riot cops charged at the front and the whole crowd swarmed back in, a panic, then closed up again. I was terrified of being trampled and made my way towards the side of the road where the crush was less intense when the panic stricken running broke out.

Next thing I was up against the wall and riot cops were charging straight at us. I couldn't move anywhere and was terrified as they came within a few feet, truncheons raised, manic frenzied looks on their faces. A moment later they were gone, swallowed from my view as the crowd stood its ground and surged forwards again. That was my first view of riot cops in action and I realised how frightened I was. No questions asked before the truncheon comes down on your head. I started looking for missiles to hand to those who were taller, could see where aiming and were a better shot.

Another rush from the crowd, running madly. Somebody grabbed me from behind. I spun around. "It's alright, it's only me". A friend thank god. Hands held. "Don't run, that's what they want". I'm running because I don't want to get trampled. We get out of the crowd for a breather, talking excitedly, then look down the road to see smoke billowing out, something's on fire. The news spread quickly down to us, "What's burning?" "South Africa House",

"South Africa House has gone up in flames". Sheer ecstasy. The joy on people's faces as this news spread.

After this, we made our way back up Northumberland Avenue and tried to break through the police lines. I got thrown back, separated and stayed on the outskirts till I spotted some friends again. We decided to go and have a drink 'cos we all needed a break.

We made our way to Covent Garden and were amazed to see, as we ordered our tea, hundreds of coppers swarming through the place. We thought we'd just left the riot! "Look through there, broken windows". We crossed over and couldn't believe our eyes, the whole street had been wrecked. Glass everywhere, police everywhere, the banks smashed, the shops smashed. We'd arrived in the wake of a frenzy of ecstatic smashing and looting. It was the perfect scene to end the day with, as exhaustion overtook us and we headed home to watch the news on the telly.

## **2. MAN IN SKI MASK SEEN**

Hang around Kennington Park watching the march go by. After a few thousand have passed we see some friends and join them. excited talk..."Have you see the route?" "Yeah. Goes past Downing Street" "Nice weather for it!" Five minutes into the march we hear a loud crash. "Ladbrokes windows have gone through" somebody says. Christ! Already I think, but it turns out to be the sound of the cops' traffic markers being tipped over. For about 20 minutes every marker is pushed over. Lots of noise. Cheering and stuff. The cops lose control and people march on both sides of the road. A cop chases our mate for knocking another cone over. The cop gives up. Just past Lambeth railway bridge, the cops try to take an anarchist flag from the march. A few scuffles. I think someone got arrested. Couldn't see clearly though. Keep on marching. We cross Lambeth Bridge and go towards Parliament. Nothing much going on. A few angry chants. Take a quick rest on the grass before Whitehall. Going down towards Downing Street was slow as the crowd was thick. We decide to rest again as we get to the Ministry of Defence opposite Downing Street. Nice bit of greenery to sit down and see if anything happens. By the line of coppers protecting Downing Street is a group of about 200 people who are shouting and occasionally throwing cans and bits of placard. This goes on for about 30 minutes. More people stood by the M.O.D. Eventually the cops block off Whitehall and divert the march. A friend and I piss off a Sky W crew who are trying to film the trouble by shouting rude things about Rupert Murdoch over each attempt they make to film their reporter. They fuck off to Trafalgar Square. The trouble is getting heavier and more people are either stopping or getting involved. The police bring in some riot cops - some mounted, others in little snatch squads. The next 20 minutes is pretty confusing. There's some hand to hand fighting and some missile throwing.

A few charges by the cops. A big cheer goes up when a massive Class War banner arrives. Our lot get split up a few times. The horses charge the crowd and push us behind the M.O.D. building. Immediately a small barricade is built out of building rubbish from skips in the yard. A roll of barbed wire (I) is dragged across the top of the barricade. The mounted cops don't charge again. By this time the adrenaline is flowing pretty neatly. I pick up a piece of masonry from out of a skip and smash it smaller. A cop sees me doing this but I don't care. The M.O.D. windows start to get trashed. I love it. The M.O.D!

My first shot hits a window frame then the second one hits the wall. Oh well. More windows get done. My friends regroup and I moan at them to find some food. Convinced that we won't miss much due to the likelihood of it getting much harder we wander off. At Charing Cross Road we lose one of our group when she wanders off to go the toilet. We walk into the punch-up that's happening down by the South African Embassy. I throw a bottle at a passing riot van and miss. Shit. I hope my luck gets better. When we reach the Strand entrance to

Trafalgar Square it's just a fucking riot. The cops have driven two vans into the crowd and have been surrounded. Very brave people are right next to the van bricking the windows and shoving metal barriers underneath the wheels to stop it moving. A snatch squad charges us and we scatter in all directions. I lose contact with everyone. Walk around for a bit. Shit! Lost 'em. Trundle back to the fighting and see that the Army Careers' shop has had its window smashed. So nice. I want to do something now. Chaos everywhere. I get a rock and wait by Midland Bank for the crowd to clear a path and then turn and chuck the rock into the plate glass. Bang. The rock splinters everywhere and the window is even dented. I apologise to a woman who was close by who had jumped at the unexpected noise. Walking off I see the need for keeping my head in the few hours. About a hundred yards down the Strand is a large group of spectators. One woman says to me after a chuck a stone at a riot van "That was pointless". I don't argue. I suppose I'd rather do what I can than just watch. At the South African Embassy some people pick up a crash barrier. I take hold of one end and we push it through an Embassy window. I shout at them to do the next one but they walk away. A punk guy tells me to "just attack the cop, not property". I ask him why. "Because I said so" he tells me.

At Trafalgar Square someone I recognise tells me that one of the group has been injured by a shittily aimed rock. I walk around the crowd and find him. Luckily he's not seriously injured. Just a bit dazed and pissed off at having to miss the rest of the fun. After chatting for 10 minutes we see thick black smoke in the air. Hum! What's on fire'?

I say goodbye and walk back to Trafalgar Square. Jesus! The portakabins on Grand Buildings have been set ablaze. Massive fires climb up the side of this office development. I vaguely consider such an action as a bit over the top. Oh shit. I forget that's what it is all about isn't it. As I feel the heat from the fire, I wonder how more mental it's gonna go. I still can't see any of my friends in the area but over on the left I can see that somebody's set alight to the South African Embassy. I love the person who did that!

Spend an hour looking all over the Square for someone I know. I must have walked past all the serious hand to hand fighting down by St. Martin's In The Fields, completely oblivious to what was happening. I see a police coach leave its post at the South African Embassy and immediately a group of 20 people rush over and attack the Embassy with sticks and rocks. Still can't find any friends. I leave the area to get some food as I'm really hungry and knackered. Couldn't get back from Charing Cross Road to the National Gallery so I have to take the long way round. Eventually I rest up on the grass opposite Canada House. Watching the policing whilst eating my grub reveals that the police are like headless chickens. They are attempting to clear the area but instead of pushing us south to the Thames, they are pushing people into the West End. After about 10 minutes the police send mounted cops into the crowd in front of Pall Mall.

Really stupid. The crowd is incensed. Some people drag metal crash barriers into the road to barricade it off. A few gaps are left to let people get through. I drag another barrier into the road and hang around. Someone then pulls all the barriers back to the side of the road. Anyway the horses don't charge again.

In Pall Mall the crowd is drifting off. I watch groups of people make their way out of the riot area. The cops are still pushing them along. Suddenly a group of about 500 people are forced together at the bottom of Haymarket and I sense further excitement. I join the stroll up Haymarket and my imagination is on overtime. Why are the police pushing us into the heart of the West End? We are a stone's throw away from the capital's most luxurious stores! We weave in and out of the traffic and reach Piccadilly Circus. All the time the chanting continues..."No Poll Tax...No Poll Tax". This is so good. Some people sit down but such

protest isn't really in many people's minds. One step, two step and we walk into Regent Street. This is unbelievable. More chanting, traffic still flowing. We are 300 yards into Regent Street. Someone says..."A chance to do some real shopping". I don't know anyone here but exchange a few smiles with a group of casuals.

Smash! The first window goes in. So excellent. The cops are at the back of us. They charge but this just pushes us further and faster. More plate glass goes through. C'mon. I must do some. I run down a side road to a skip and put some large bits of masonry in a carrier bag. Back to Regent Street and I dump them in the road. Take one for myself and pull my hood up and scarf over my face. Take aim. Fuck. I can't miss this time. Whack! A big hole appears in the shitty shop window. Keep on going. Up to the traffic lights at Oxford Circus. Pick up a paving stone and break it up in front of the cars parked at the lights. I don't care. Turn around and crack...Hello plate glass windows. Keep on moving. I look in a skip for more rocks but it's full of plastic and wood. A man comes down the road and sees me all masked up frantically looking for rocks in black sacks. He says something but I can't understand his accent. He turns into Regent Street to confront the trashing.

Further...a cop van drives round to the top of the crowd and passes. It stops then reverses and fucks off. The sound of breaking glass continues. At Portland Place after the BBC and the BBC shop are smashed up, we run out of shops to trash. I mill about and am amazed by how most of the crowd have disappeared down side roads.

It's like the riot popped up, did its stuff then became invisible at the click of a thumb. Real SF stuff. I take a side road to head for the West End again. Even here a bank has been attacked. I sit for a while but get cramp in my leg. Shit. It really hurts. About 20 cops walk past. I'm hopping on one leg trying to unlock the cramp and appear as normal as possible. They walk past towards Regent Street. Round the corner in Goodge Street someone attacks the Iran Airlines shop with a rubbish bin but the windows don't smash. I catch a tube to Charing Cross but the police have sealed off three stations and I have to get off at Tottenham Court Road. One stop down the line! As I walk into Cambridge Circus I find the riot again. I thought that Regent Street was the only thing happening but the cops are using horses up here. Tourists and theatre goers are confused...and interested. I sit by a totally trashed bank and talk to someone who is loving it also. Smiles etc. Talk to a tourist who is lost. Explain about the Poll Tax and the riot. She's really excellent about it.

Stroll to Charing Cross Road. Fuck...some serious looting is going on here. Loads of shops attacked. At a music shop I join a group of people pulling stuff from the window. I pull the shutter up a bit and see what's left. Very little. There's nothing here that I want. I walk off. Where are the cops? Someone puts a brick into another music shop window but it doesn't break properly and the alarm goes off.

I talk to an Irish bloke who's had his foot stepped on by a cop horse. He says "Jesus...I thought they only rioted in Belfast. These people really know how to riot". Talk a bit more then leave the area as I've hung around for too long and feel conspicuous. Up to Tottenham Court Road where the police are chasing people around. They push the crowd into Oxford Street to give them new shops to smash and loot. A small fire is burning by the tube entrance. More cops arrive. It's obvious that the police have lost all control. Their numbers are small and the cops that have been on duty since this morning have yet to be stood down. I keep saying in my head over and over again..."You've lost...you've lost". It sounds so good.

Really tired now and my leg still hurts. I go down Charing Cross Road again. Past the fucked up shops. Past the wrecked TransAm sports car. A shop owner wrestles back a drum machine and guitar from a looter. Cops are around in certain places. Knackered...must get a train. Get back to see the news.

### 3. BAD PENNIES

A Saturday afternoon stroll in the park on a warm sunny day is a chance to put on summer shirt and shades. In Kennington Park we look up the anarchists, who are raggier than ever. The demonstration is leisurely with no heavy police or Militant (stewarding) presence. It looked as though the massed Nalgos are about matched in numbers by the Convoy looking types (Vauxhall and S.W. London lumpenproletarian Residents' Association). It looks as though the TUC have done an effective 'distancing' operation as there is just one union banner, from Bristol SOGAT. No doubt there will be printers, miners and other (ex-) workers somewhere, but they are just part of the crowd. We meet occasional friends, stop and talk, pass cynical comments; quite a lot of the bad pennies have turned up and later most of them seemed by good luck or good instinct to be in the right place at the right time, a notable first. We speculate about the timing of the traditional push for Downing Street.

Reaching Parliament Square a T.V. guy as a butch Maggie Thatcher is screamed at by a woman and then a young man tries to land a punch on him. The queerbasher is hustled onto the pavement and a cop asks if everything's alright. The cops have kept a low profile and the official line that this is a family protest of 'ordinary' people has so far held. Then the police throw a line across the end of Whitehall, diverting the back half of the demo down to the bridge and along the Embankment. We get split up, a few of the Convoys go nuts and one gets arrested. Further up Whitehall a strange slow motion escalation begins. There has been some pushing at Downing Street and some balsawood sticks and empty cans are being thrown. There is no ammo in Whitehall. A flag off the Cenotaph is burned. Then the horses are bought out - a crude way to control a crowd, especially one with nowhere to go as they've blocked the other end of Whitehall too. More sticks and cans and a crush is developing. Some of the peaceful protesters panic.

The window of a souvenir shop gets broken and they are lobbing small cuddly toys at the cops. I think, well that's the day's looting.

Serious fighting has begun in Trafalgar Square, where the riot cops have been bought in. There is concrete rubble, scaffolding poles and a few hundred people who are seriously having a go at the cops, unimpressed by the boiler suits and shields. The boiler suits charge into the crowd in a 'flying V', hitting anyone in the way, but they can't win any ground because people won't run away. Instead, the "working class heroes" charge back twice as ferociously, covering their own tactical retreats with crowd barriers so that the cops won't have a clear run. This the police do not seem to know how to deal with. It is different from other recent political riots and many people are there to try and settle street fighting scores with the cops, who still seem astonished and who are perhaps inhibited by the setting and the cameras on them in broad daylight. They lose control of the Square and now the Portakabins are alight. In the Strand they are doing shop fronts and the South African Embassy, where it takes half an hour to batter a hole in the window and start a fire.

The police have decided that the only thing to do is clear the Square out any way they can, but it is going to be a long job. We are tired and decide to cut up St. Martin's Lane for a drink and something to eat before going. But there, the next stage has begun and this is really something new to us. People had been pushed north into the theatre district; if the police had lost control in the Square, they were nowhere at all up here. Tony Roma's won't be serving any more ribs and margaritas today. There is more breaking and burning than looting although obviously people are getting a few presents. I'm not really dressed for it, although looking like a tourist helps. You can just stand still and look stupid if need be.

We have gone up St. Martin's and Long Acre, and it is a running joke. Then into Covent Garden Piazza where the shop staff are politely asked to move back before all the windows

are put in and the clothes taken out, mostly to be just thrown in the street for anyone who wants them. I need some proper trousers but you can't get the plastic security tags out easily. A lot of people have joined the party, like the winos and kids who were just hanging out. Occasionally groups of people break into chants of "No Poll Tax", at which they break down in giggles, although it is only partly a joke. The government of the last 10 years has committed acts of class robbery far worse than the Poll Tax, but this still seems to have hit a nerve. So "No Poll Tax" it is.

That night I am out drinking and dancing, but it's only a few days later - when no-one I know has been nicked yet - that I realise what a good mood I've been in. This lasts a couple of weeks, and during that time I have several 'political' conversations of a kind I thought I'd given up. Maybe it's coming back into fashion.

#### **4. FROM 1381 TO...**

Listening to the squeals of condemnation from Thatcher, Kinnock and co after the Poll tax riot, you'd think that violence and direct action has never happened before in Britain. In fact, the working class heroes of Trafalgar Square were carrying on a very long and honourable tradition of violent struggle against the state and the bosses. This tradition is as old as the division of society into rich and poor, exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed. Here are a few of the enormous number of examples of violent struggle in our history ....

1381 Peasants' Revolt - across the country, hundreds of thousands rose up against poverty and tyranny: "We are men formed in Christ's likeness and we are kept like beasts" was a common declaration.

1549 Enclosure riots - against the forced enclosure of common land by the rich landowners, with a major rebellion in Norfolk and smaller uprisings in Essex, Hertfordshire, Rutland, Worcestershire, Wiltshire, Hampshire, Somerset and elsewhere.

1649 Levellers' uprising — against the sell-out after the English Civil War by such men as Oliver Cromwell who is reported to have said "you must cut these people in pieces or they will cut you in pieces" (he said it first); also the Diggers' settlement (primitive communists) at St. George's Hill.

1736 Edinburgh riots - many were killed by the state, but in a second riot the general responsible for the massacres was himself lynched.

1780 London riots - this led to the smashing of prisons and liberation of many prisoners.

1820 London - king attacked in the streets; in Glasgow, troops fought with 60,000 strikers.

1834 Lancashire - the whole area was paralysed by strikes for 16 weeks; workhouses were burned down; also the Tolpuddle Martyrs were deported to Australia for trying to organise

1840s Chartism — the first mass working class movement: it sent tremors of fear down the ruling class' spine, as millions of workers organised, debated, demonstrated, picketed and rioted.

1888 Strikes - across the country, in the docks, busses, mines, etc.

1911 More strikes and riots - general transport strike in Liverpool, troops open fire on demonstrators (killing two), attempted freeing of prisoners at Walton Jail (Liverpool); riots and disturbances throughout the country (Llanelli, London, Bristol, Newcastle, etc) continuing up to the start of the 1st World War (1914).

1916 Clydeside — despite intense appeals to nationalism, strikes burst out in Clydeside, as well as riots.

1917 Mutiny - in France, British troops mutiny against intolerable conditions and a futile war.

1926 General Strike - millions of workers go on strike against the bosses' attacks on working class living standards; the struggle is sabotaged by the TUC etc.

1936 Battle of Cable Street - fascists are stopped in East London by local working class people taking to the streets and fighting it out with the fascists and the police.

1945-51 Labour government - despite the first Labour government, many workers go on strike for higher wages, etc, refusing to believe the promises of social democracy; the supposedly 'socialist' government use troops 17 times to break workers' strikes.

1956 London - mass demonstration against the Suez War.

1968 London — mass demonstrations (ending with battle) against the Vietnam War.

1974 Miners' strike - Tory government is bought down by miners' strike.

1977 Notting Hill - anti—police riot.

1979 Winter of Discontent - millions of workers go on strike against the austerity programmes of the Labour government; Blair Peach killed by the police at anti-fascist demonstration in Southall. 1981 Riots — across the country: Toxteth, Southall, Notting Hill, Moss Side, Leicester, Brixton (twice); smaller riots elsewhere.

1984-85 Miners' strike — enormous struggle waged against job losses by miners and other workers.

1985 Riots - Handsworth, Brixton, Peckham, Tottenham (where police officer is killed).

1990 Poll Tax — 609 years after a massed uprising defeated the first attempt to impose a Poll Tax, up to a million people in Scotland refuse to pay and there are demonstrations and disturbances outside Town Halls across England, culminating in an enormous demonstration in London which ends in a huge riot...

These are just a few of the many examples of us taking them on in our struggle for human dignity. Neil Kinnock might bleat "violence is alien to the British working class" but fortunately reality tells a different story. Everything we've ever gained has been through fighting. The struggle against the Poll Tax is a continuation of this tradition - our tradition!

## **5. I SAW THINGS I'LL NEVER FORGET**

The most important thing for me was the way people were prepared to face the riot police. I've never seen anything like it. It was incredible to see people running in to pull others out when they were being arrested. (Not that arrests were foremost in the pigs' minds, it was take no prisoners as far as they were concerned). The next thing that sticks in my mind was seeing the ordinary pigs in full flight down Whitehall, and the roar of the crowd chasing them. For an hour or so it was class war on both sides rather than them constantly shitting on us! And they got more than they expected, I'm sure. During the earlier part of the day, the animosity shown to the pigs by some marchers was uplifting, coppers being spat at and abused etc, instead of the usual quiet acceptance of their authority it was brilliant, and when they tried to arrest people they were shown how we can beat them when we try.

When we were stopped in Whitehall, after the "sit down" or the "attack on Downing Street", neither of which were known to me at the time because of misinformation from the stewards, I amused myself by talking to some of the cops who were obviously shaken and nervous, some of them looked like they hadn't a clue why they were there and their white faces looked more worried every time a copper was carried past them. Then the provocation started, the horses pushed us up the road, a few coppers found that this wasn't an ideal tactic if they intended staying healthy. The rest of the afternoon passed so quickly, repeated charges and counter charges. It felt so good to be a part of the eruption of anger that had been bottled up,

by the people involved, for so long. All sorts of ideas went through my mind. thoughts of Ireland, East Europe, South Africa, Orgreave, etc, thinking about how it will have to be like this more often if we are to get anywhere positive.

When I eventually got into the Square, it was incredible to see the people on the scaffolding. I remember trying to collect my thoughts and concentrate on how I felt, in order to remember it.

The noise was brilliant, the bravery of people on my side was enough to convince me that we are not so helpless after all. I was expecting tear gas at any time by now and also thinking about what would happen if we had to face plastic bullets or grapeshot. I don't believe that people need to justify ever attacking coppers and I want to avoid saying that the events were purely self-defence, a lot of it was, but we don't need any more excuses for fighting back, we've got enough already, we've always had. It's important though not to get carried away with the events of the day, they pale into insignificance when put alongside the amount of work we still need to put into the anti-Poll Tax campaign and everything else if we are going to change this shit world for a better one. The real battle is a political one, and that includes beating the left scum (preferably with a big stick), all of whom have tried to make political gain out of the "riot", none of them have any concept of people being able to act without leadership even when they see it for themselves. From Militant to Workers Power, they all repeat the words of the tabloids and talk of "troublemakers".

As I had to get my bus at 5.00pm I left the Square before the fire. By this time I'd lost my friends or I might have stayed. As our bus was leaving though we saw the smoke and joked about it, not knowing that it really was coming from Trafalgar Square. We had a good laugh when we passed the cop car with no window in the driver's side. I was surprised to see all the scapegoating of Class War and all the talk of anarchists but not too worried by it, we've cleaned up the house just in case.

Of the 341 arrests, quite a few were not charged but they didn't mention that on TV. Most of the people I've talked to about it, not anarchists, are open minded about it, many of them have some knowledge of police tactics, the battle of Orgreave was just down the road and people can remember these things for a long time.

It's interesting that Trafalgar Square has been the scene of battles of the class war many times in the past 200 years, but after the scapegoating (usually of "anarchists"), it is quickly wiped out of the history books to hide the tradition that is definitely there. My overriding feelings on the day is pride, I'm proud of the people involved and I'm proud of my own actions. I saw things that I'll never forget, that were brilliant.

## **6. DEVIL'S ADVOCATE**

While everyone was joining in a massive back slapping wanking session over the riot, "fucking brilliant", "well, that really put the shit up the state", I must admit that my feelings were a little bit negative. Now don't get me wrong – I totally support working class violence ... when necessary" On the 31st when the police attacked the crowd they deservedly got fought off and battered. And yes the riot has a good effect on people not only in the UK but in Europe too. And, no, most working class people wouldn't get scared off the anti-Poll tax campaign.

But listen ... I believe a minority of the fighters were pissed up wankers and prats – how many people got bricks and bottles on their heads 'cos the throwers didn't or couldn't throw properly? And what about the dickheads chucking rocks through pubs and Wimpy bars. Loot what you like but smashing windows onto pizza eaters is S.H.I.T shit. Did people organise to defend the old and young? No, they were more keen on getting their bit of personal glory. I've no sympathy for the Militant stewards who tried to clear the Square on the police's

orders. But as the stewards abandoned the demonstration to the riot police, we abandoned the demonstration to the pissheads. And a fair few of the 370 arrested were again abandoned by us to the filth.

Next time around - and it's going to come you'd better believe it...

respect for the old, young, disabled and scared (and why the fuck shouldn't people be scared!);

defend the demonstrators;

that real power, a police free Trafalgar Square with 200,000 people would have been a deeper statement, and then if people wanted to go for Downing Street, well so be it!;

no anti-social acts...no muggings, no trashing ordinary cars, no stupid brickings;

no photographers. All film is a danger even to the 'innocent' And last but not least - mass non-payment and mass local estate unions/groups .... that's what really shits up the Tories, 'cos this is the base of the whirlwind movement that's going to wipe out Thatcher and the sick system that she and Kinnock want to lead.

## **7. ADVENTURES IN POLL TAX LAND**

Another demonstration!!! Albeit the biggest one for years, much anticipation on this one though, will it go? or won't it? Well, personally I thought it would, that is if it goes down Whitehall. There's no beating about the bush, there's only one way forward on this one, today as at any other time, extreme violence, a series of escalating confrontations between 'workers' and the state (ie police) not on their terms, our terms our place our time, nothing was ever given in this country, everything was taken, every gain went hand in hand with violent civil disturbance (a fact to which I'm sure Wat Tyler would testify), just bear in mind the Chartists, Captain Swing, the Luddites and any number of strikes over a two hundred year period to prove the point social change and resistance always goes hand in hand with class violence, anybody who thinks otherwise is a fool or...lying.

Anyway, back to the day in hand, and sunny it was too, we make our way to Kennington through Brandon Estate and lo and behold Kennington Park and the demonstration seems strange, being as the demo business had all but gone down the drain (there hasn't been a large one in London for ages) and here we are, out again just like old times, familiar sights and sounds, Maggie Maggie Maggie, and immediately a four letter word beginning with D comes to mind (but I refrain from shouting it). Strange accents from places like Mansfield and Barnsley and beyond, and of course the massed ranks of left paper sellers, convenient for expunging venom and such like. Walk around for ages but don't see anyone we know; it's pretty big, couldn't have been one this big since CND and the muesli types came up from the suburbs to be all moral with everyone.

Try to get out of the park and there's a huge sea of people in the way, trickling out like sand in an hour glass and pushing its way into this mass a large group of scruffy anarchists from god knows where (a soap manufacturers' nightmare) banging drums and tins and anything else to hand, a trance-like din that's probably guaranteed to last the entire way!

Well, as is our wont you test your toes first, walk on the pavement and have a look (after all you might not want to be involved with it!! and it does introduce a slight bit of uncontrollability at an early stage). It must be said though, there's hardly any police and not a steward in sight, so it's not so much like a march as a rabble (a good sign) but more of that later. Anyway, we get up as far as Kennington Lane and here are a number of familiar faces, out of the woodwork with the prospect of entertainment!!! Sitting on the sidelines, pondering the possibilities inherent in the day's proceedings, contemptuous so far, but soon to be

uplifted as events far surpass our expectations!! Brief discussions and then onwards in the direction of Westminster. In no time at all we find ourselves in Parliament Square and at a standstill for some reason I don't know, thousands of people milling around, confusion (for the police as well as anyone else), this brief rest goes on for a few minutes before the police decide to block off Whitehall and redirect the second half of the march down the back of the Ministry of Defence and who should be at the head of this little unpoliced and unstewarded bit of the march but some people with a Class War banner who promptly take it down the side of the M.O.D. and back onto Whitehall to huge cheers from the crowd, a slight coup for Class War! At this point it starts getting interesting, being as there's thousands of people milling around, to all intents and purposes immobilised, it's only a matter of time before "trouble" starts and sections of the crowd and the police introduce themselves to each other.

Adventures Part 2: Anyway, we're on this bit of grass opposite Downing Street, going around acquainting ourselves with the various troublemakers, some of whom we know and some of whom we haven't seen for years, some idle chit chat and then, god, all hell breaks loose!! Mayhem everywhere. A push, a shove the odd boot in here and there and then a running battle on the grass, everyone running this way and that, chaos, and in no time at all, horses appear. It's some sweat trying to rip up paving stones (would have stopped them dead!!) - no luck. We're pushed up Whitehall before it happens. Northwards it goes dispersed down the side streets, bump into some familiar faces (from Wapping), "seen it all before" say they. The street party regroups in the Square, magic sounds, smashing glass, an off licence goes in, cleared within minutes, (law and order watches helplessly), hundreds refresh themselves, illicit alcohol for all!! Lines drawn once more — demonstration in the Square - police at top of Whitehall — more confrontations on an historical location!!

The riot cops arrive, straight in they go, silly fuckers, is it worth 215,000 a year getting battered for the ruling class? 'Cos they do get battered, severely! From every side, boots, fists, steel poles, rocks, bottles rain upon them and like the dregs of humanity they surely are, they retreat in a sorry state, in front of which is (for the most part) venomous punks and squatters, the ignominy!

Back and forth it goes, for ages, a distraction black smoke rises in the sky, flames from on high, scaffolding poles fly down, from afar we look on amazed, tourists click their cameras it's proof an amazing place for a holiday! Slowly though it's pushed backwards, north (a costly mistake), the scene is now St. Martin's In The Field, witness of righteous discontent, cops run round in circles thick as pig shit, their chain of command broke, by the church over a fence they climb (for what reason I don't know), the last one over for a moment helpless, consider a boot to help him, but it's lost, he's over, shieldless though, stuck to a traffic beacon it goes a trophy. For a moment a fantasy goes through the head, a rampage through the National Gallery? Now that would be some real damage!! Some real costs, more than a few poxy windows!! At this point a large group departs, bids goodbye to the police and off we go intent upon destruction, up Charing Cross Road, into the West End everything a target, everything subject to our rage and deep down surely a demonstration of how hated this world is.

Joined now by numerous people not initially part of this Poll Tax thing, just out for the day enthusiastically they come along, Barclays gets smashed (as always), numerous other shops get wrecked, a restaurant with kids by the window, bad, not like this please! An American car turned over (TransAm), rubbish bins bounce off it into the gutter, it survives untorched. The Hippodrome gets smashed, repeatedly, object of particular bile, inside the bouncers hide sheepishly!! The windows all gone, the demo meets in mutual bliss with the city's glaziers!!! Like a whirlwind it heads into Covent Garden, a showroom of expensive cars wrecked, grids

are ripped off a jewellers, frantically a stamp shop smashed, stamps litter in the sky, the street covered, across them we tramp, Senegal and Lithuania stuck to feet!!

Adventures Part 3: A few doors down, a flash car showroom BMW's the lot etc wrecked completely, may never have one but neither will anyone else! Proceed eastwards, Long Acre now, with such speed and fury does this mob attack Covent Garden that it's difficult to find your own window.! Sprint up the road, but still lag behind those at the front...Full of clothes shops, a spontaneous fashion show occurs, old clothes swapped for new, 30 40 50 people? Go to Cecil Gees, virtually cleared, clothes litter the street, cast aside. Into the mayhem strolls an unsuspecting special (part time cop), fuck off, piss off, physically he's pushed aside, boots fly in his direction but mostly miss 2 minutes later, he's lucky to be alive.

A sunglasses shop attacked, £150 Georgio Armani's lifted, rioters not only furious but now cool! The Rock Garden goes, tables over, HP sauce flies through the windows. Into the covered area, 200 300 people every shop smashed, some rather becoming porcelain ducks lifted, discarded a moment later (through a window).

Police arrive - 12 police chase 200 rioters, wait a minute what's going on here? About face, immediately they cotton on, retreat, bottles and rocks follow them, alone again, but momentum lost, dispersed, wonder off in search of regroupment. Charing Cross Road again, the dopey riot police have finally arrived (too late). On the corner we stand, 12 pass by, into my bollocks the last one's truncheon goes - "Sorry" — "Cunt" (anti-sexist defence mechanism breaks down). Could have been a Swedish tourist for all he knew! Wander away now, knackered from the day's exertions, not too tired to take the piss out of the cops though, "you lost, wankers". Stony faced they stand and take it, uncertainties racing through their brains. And with that satisfaction, go to the pub tonight, to discuss the day's events and contemplate the day they really will lose - everything...

## **8. THE FINAL STRAW**

It was a day to remember. It took a while for the sheer enormity of the events to sink in. It also took a while for the political lessons to sink in, to move beyond the politics of excitement to the politics of revolution. But all good stories should start at the beginning. It was a beautiful day — the bourgeoisie must really learn their need to sabotage the weather! The sun was shining. The demonstration was simply massive, enormous, a sea of people filling up and overflowing out of Kennington Park. And the atmosphere was wonderful: like a carnival. People were happy, but this wasn't an empty, superficial happiness. This was happiness based on strength and power. And it was happiness that grew and developed as people realised the sheer size of the demonstration and thus of the whole movement against the Poll Tax. The collective was growing, flexing its muscles for the first time in years. No more individualised, atomised discontent. No more feelings of powerless anger. This was it: thousands and thousands of people out on the streets, angry and strong.

The political rackets on the left have desperately tried to contain, control and divert this enormous movement. But the limits on their pathetic plans were shown up by the vast array of banners and placards: "Bollocks to the Poll Tax", "Bikers Against the Poll Tax", "Tax The Rich", "I exist on £46 a week", "Yorkshire Miners Against the Poll Tax", "Communities...Charge!" After ages spent waiting around, the march started to move off, like a vast snake coiling its way around the streets of London. From the beginning it was obvious that many people were unwilling to accept the boundaries that normally constrict and control us. The bollards and white tape erected by the police to hem in the masses were soon knocked over and cut to shreds. The march joyously spilled out across the road, leaving the few police to stare in bewilderment and fear. Suddenly, the aura of their uniforms was melting in front of

our eyes. They were human after all! We walked past Parliament, with some shouts but not much else ...

One of the racketeers tried to pin a sticker on me. I refused: "Not with Militant on it". He replied "We built this". My abuse against his lies was lost on his retreating back. The lies of the left are still sickening, despite years of exposure to them. Sure, Militant have played an important part in helping to build the movement against the Poll Tax - but so have many other groups and people. And this vast movement against the Poll Tax would still be very much alive and kicking (probably even more alive actually!) if Militant didn't exist. At least their narrow-minded arrogance is a reminder of the traps of hierarchical parties.

The march - or at least the part that I'm in - gets to outside Downing Street. Lots more shouting and a growing crush of people, particularly between Parliament and Downing Street. Some people have stopped outside Downing Street. I move out of the way onto the grass besides the Ministry of Defence. A few objects, placards, sticks and the like are thrown at the police lines. Then there is a bit more action, with some pushing and shoving, leading to hand-to-hand lighting. From my position it all looks very ritualised and symbolic — "well, we've got to do something". Something might be better than nothing but that's not much of a recommendation. One person gets hit on the head by a bottle thrown from behind. Stupid bastards! If missiles are thrown, then they must hit their intended target. When excitement totally replaces thought, then we're treading on thin ice. We've got to think about what we're doing and be aware of the general situation. If not, then we're mindless hooligans. That said, I'm sure that everyone has been a mindless hooligan at some time or other (I certainly have). We all make mistakes, but as Marx said "if you don't learn from history, then you're condemned to repeat it". So fucking learn!

I get tired of the ritual and move up towards Trafalgar Square. The police have sealed off the road and are diverting people via the Embankment. Trafalgar Square is totally packed out - and there are still thousands of people behind us. This must be the biggest march for years. We move around, via side streets, onto the Strand, besides the South African Embassy. There's an impromptu band hammering away on drums and people are dancing. The few cops stand around looking bored. I want to get into Trafalgar Square to see what else is going on, but can't due to the enormous mass of people. I stand around in the sun, listening to the rhythms and chatting to people. I come across someone selling 'Living Marxism'. Time for a political argument: "Fuck off you parasitical scum". It's the only way to talk to the robotic cadres of the 'Revolutionary' 'Communist' Party. Then everything starts to go slightly crazy.

I have no love for the state of their Aunt Sallies, the police. In fact, I have nothing but total contempt and hatred for them. Most people might believe, to a greater or lesser extent, in the myths of bourgeois democracy, but the ruling class certainly doesn't! Our rulers believe in the class war, make no mistake about that. They're not benevolent, nice individuals who occasionally make the odd mistake. Their system is one long mistake for the majority of people. The sheer uselessness of much of our lives is in sharp contrast to the potentials and possibilities of human existence beyond capitalism. I believe in taking the offensive, in attack as the best form of defence...and more. We can't and shouldn't wait for them to attack us (as they inevitably do) so it's on their terrain and on their conditions. But where I was, on the Strand, it was the police that started the trouble. Suddenly, for no reason, four riot vans drove into the crowd. People were startled, shocked, frightened and then fucking furious. Missiles started to fly amid screams of anger and hatred. Why did they do it? Is it simply because they cannot accept people being on the streets, whether it's at a football match, a rave or a demonstration?

The first couple of vans managed to get out without too much damage but the last two got severely attacked - as they deserved without any doubt whatsoever. Crash barriers were pushed underneath them to slow them down and a torrent of bricks, planks, cans, whatever came to hand was poured down on them. The last van very nearly got caught; the cops must have been absolutely shitting themselves. Amongst the crowd, there was opposition to the attacks. There were cries of "Stop" and someone with a megaphone was urging people to "go home". Let's ignore the fact that the police had themselves caused this particular trouble. Let's look at why quite a few people fucking hate them. To deny that hatred is to place yourself very firmly on the side of the ruling class. That hatred stems from simple dispossession, from the powerlessness arising from marginalisation, from despair, from past meetings with the guardians of law and order, from straight forward class understanding of the role of the police: to protect the ruling class from the working class. Forget about burglaries, muggings, rape. That's just the superficial coating that the filth need to justify their existence. Their real purpose is to guard the few against the many. If this is untrue, why can't they solve any fucking crimes? Well, not many anyway. But when it comes to the property of the wealthy in Hampstead or some bank in the City, then suddenly hundreds of coppers materialise out of thin air. One of the first things that Thatcher did when she became Prime Minister was give a bloody big pay rise to the cops...I wonder why? After the Battle of the Vans, all hell started to break loose. For a lot of people, the Poll Tax is the final straw of the last decade and now was their chance to let rip. All the accumulated anger, hatred, frustration and powerlessness came boiling out in a torrent of fury.

But it was much more than just the last decade. It was about the tedium of work, the bosses' orders, the coppers' intimidation when having one last drink before closing time: it was fucking everything. It was about the individual humiliation of surviving under capitalism. The degree of this humiliation varies, from person to person, job to job, area to area. Most people don't realise it, pass it off as a personal problem and get pissed or depressed or kick the cat or take some valium or alcohol or nicotine or smack. Capital is living humiliation: selling our souls to survive, buy a few trashy goods and watch crap films. In Trafalgar Square thousands of people were overcoming their survival and living: rather than being passively part of history, people were making history. The powerless had become powerful for a change. For the coppers, this was bad news indeed. People climbed on nearby scaffolding and started to bombard the Old Bill with planks and lumps of metal. The traditional British sport of cop bashing had returned once again.

There was mass to-ing and fro-ing up and down the road. The cops would charge, then we would charge and the cops would retreat under a hail of hate and varied missiles. Then things started becoming slightly momentous. A large Portakabin on the building beside Trafalgar Square was set on fire. Black smoke plumed into the sky. People stood and cheered as the fire eagerly licked its way up. The cops were speechless and stunned. Things were getting out of hand. Democracy was being negated.

Later that evening, Roy Hattersley, a leader of the Labour Party, demanded that the rioters be given "severe sentences". By the next day, he was calling for democrats to "unite across party boundaries" against this threat to democracy. Politicians from both Tweedledum and Tweedledee were talking democracy, a sure sign that they were worried. But the democracy they talk about is a load of bollocks. It means absolutely nothing more than the right to vote once every few years — and nothing more than that. Big deal. It means that when decisions go against them, the rules are changed. For the ruling class, democracy is merely the most efficient way of running society. Any doubters should look to Northern Ireland or Chile or even the abolition of the GLC. What we are calling for is power. Power to decide our own lives. The power to throw away all the trivia and trash of capitalist society and keep its

productive forces. The power to live and not work every day just making a different brand of biscuits. It's no good just criticising the democratic process, calling for a Labour government instead of a Tory government in the dismal desire to "radicalise" people (that old Trotskyist chestnut, the transitional demand). Such calls only reinforce capitalist democracy because they strengthen the illusion that there is a difference between Tweedledum and Tweedledee, that voting can really change things. Ask some top boss if it can. If they're honest (which of course they're not!) their answer would have two letters, the first one 'n' and the second one 'o'. That's capitalism for you. A social system based on accumulation of wealth by a tiny minority.

While the building burnt, the battle continued. Planks and scaffolding poles were rained down on the cops from above. They were under attack from all directions, but just about managed to hold their ground. About this time the South African Embassy was attacked and one room set on fire. More cheers. There were a lot of old scores that had to be settled. There was a lot of alienation that needed expression. Slowly, with the help of the police horses, the cops regained control of the area and fire engines moved in to dampen the flames. We moved up to the north end of Trafalgar Square besides the National Gallery. There was a face-off between the police and the proletariat. A few things thrown - better aim this time. People were obviously learning all the time: "Ideas change in struggle" (Marx). After a while, the balance of forces started to decisively shift in favour of the cops. Time to make a move. Time to go home? It looked as though the energy and explosive anger of the demonstration had gone. Rioting takes a lot out of you! We headed for Piccadilly Circus in search of a tube and found instead a spontaneous march heading into the avenues of the wealthy. Shops and commodities denied to the vast majority were suddenly at our mercy. Makes a pleasant change.

The police were fucked. All they could do was meekly follow behind, picking up the pieces. But their presence did lessen the level of looting. It was just destruction instead. Windows smashed by bricks, bins, anything that came to hand. People stood and stared or joined in. History was being made: the acceptable patterns of behaviour were being quite literally smashed. No-one who saw those scenes of destruction would forget them. At Oxford Circus, the South African Airlines office was totally smashed in. They might have released a symbolic Mandela, but they hadn't changed the socio-economic relations within South African society. The rampage continued on up the road. Because I was at the back, I went down a side street to try and catch up. I didn't fancy being too close to the cops. I knew that when their time came, they would extract maximum revenge. Walking past (I think) Vine Street police station, up to a dozen cops were outside it, guarding it. They looked nervous and unsettled — their world was in turmoil. I noticed a man in his early 30s behind me, jeans, trainers, casual top. I was getting severe bad vibes off him. I stopped to tie my shoe, letting him pass. Up the road, he did the same. But I managed to give him the slip; even if I wasn't doing much, I still didn't want to be followed by a plainclothes cop. They are a real problem who have to be looked out for and dealt with.

Past Oxford Circus, more police vans, someone lifted. I thought that the balance of forces was again swinging in their favour - at least, from where I was standing. I decided to take a stroll down Oxford Street, seeing what was what. There seemed to be no signs of major destruction unfortunately...until I came across Ratners (a jewellers' shop). It had been cleanly and decisively looted. Further down Oxford Street, I bumped into some friends who had just come up from Charing Cross Road. Their stories had me reeling: burnt-out cars, fierce battles. There had been so much going on. I was desperate to see the sights, despite my aching tiredness. We walked down Charing Cross Road - it's a pity that Collets (a trendy left bookshop) wasn't looted. The manager has a huge poster of Marx besides his desk — I

wonder what he would say if the proletariat had looted his shop? More scenes and sights of destruction. Then the police stopped us from going any further. There was obviously more trouble (it was now about 7pm). Fire engines were standing by, cops were looking tired and worried. We swung away to the left and down St. Martin's Lane, a quiet street in the centre of London. Three cars idly overturned, completely on their roofs, wheels swinging in the air. And, oh what a glorious sight, a Porsche utterly burnt out. The next day the papers said that it was worth £35,000. Beside it, another car had met the same fate: death by fire. The sheer enormity had me stunned. I could only look on and stare in amazement. Class anger had come into the belly of the beast with true vengeance.

We walked down towards Trafalgar Square: more lines of cops stopping entry. All the tube stations had been closed. The whole area was in total confusion and crisis. The odd shout of "No Poll Tax Here" could be heard. Maybe this time they had taken on something bigger than them. Maybe this time people were not going to be so easily bought off by talk of the next election. There was still smoke drifting up from the building site. Whatever anyone had dreamed of, this surpassed all dreams. The cops had lost it. The rich had been directly terrorised. The disinherited, the dispossessed, the alienated, the angry, the militant had risen as a unified whole to confront the ruling class with its crimes. Nothing more seemed to be happening, although there were stories of other areas of fighting. We heard that Carnaby Street had been done - smiles all around. That was it, time to go home and rest aching limbs and listen to the ritual condemnations of politicians.

Back at home, swapping stories and celebrating victories, checking who had been lifted, who had been injured and who had got what. Someone had looted a teddy bear for a baby. The media were already starting to blame organisations — they can't accept people getting it together for themselves. They can't accept that a lot of ordinary people are totally pissed off. If they did, then that would break down the silence surrounding our anger, help it develop and grow even further. Yes, people are angry so your anger is more than an individual situation — it's a social problem. Capitalism survives (thrives!) on individualism — once collectivity is even half realised, then capital is under threat. The Battle of Trafalgar Square was a sign of things that could come. It was certainly a sign of the reality of struggle: a battle for human dignity. But excitement should not substitute itself for analysis and clear thought. Let's go forward and build a movement that can shake the foundations of the ruling class and create a new world.

## **9. SUPERB!**

I'm writing this partly to let people know what happened in Trafalgar Square on March 31st and partly to counter some of the rubbish put out by the media, police etc since then. I went to London with a group of friends that day because I was against the Poll tax, not because "a riot had been planned". Leaflets had been circulating suggesting that anarchist groups should march in one big contingent, but that happens on all big demo's and is no evidence of 'conspiracy'. It was obvious from early on that this was going to be a huge march; motorways were full of coaches covered in anti-Poll Tax placards and when we got to London, the only people not wearing stickers were the cops! The march assembled at Kennington Park and we went to that part of it which had been suggested as the anarchist meeting place (near the Oval). When we got there, there were only 150 of us, standing around watching a band.

In fact the park was so crowded and things were so confused that the anarchist 'block' never really came together. The march began to move off and people just joined the massive column in small groups. I wanted to be part of a big anarchist contingent, but it was just not there! We got behind a few Class War banners and were carried along by the mass of people coming out of the park. The media said there were around 40,000 on the march, but that was

well out. I'd go for 200,000 - about the same size as the anti-nuclear demo's of the early 1980s. The march itself was uneventful and we got a packed Trafalgar Square at about 2.30pm. Preferring not to listen to the speeches of Labour MPs, we stood away from the stage, chatting to friends and waiting for the rally to break up.

At 2.55 all thoughts of going home vanished when someone shouted "Look down there". Mounted police could be seen pouring out of a side street half-way down Whitehall and charging into the marchers. The sight of the enemy attacking our demo had a dramatic effect on the crowd in the square and the mood changed from one of "this is boring" to "let's fucking get into them"! I ran down Whitehall in a mob and we picked up more people on the way. Behind us the police formed a line across the road to block the crowds who were now streaming away from the stage towards the action. In the two minutes it took us to get there, the mounted police had ridden off towards Parliament leaving injured marchers behind them. The situation now was that almost all the police were behind crash barriers on the Downing Street side of Whitehall, while we controlled the other half of it. In the street from which the cavalry had charged from, people were busy putting half the contents of a skip through the windows of a nearby government ministry while the rest was passed forward to keep the police at bay. A TV camera crew arrived at this point but were pushed away before they could film anyone.

I don't know whether the cops deliberately provoked trouble on the march for reasons of their own, or whether they were just too heavy handed to deal effectively with the small sit-down outside Downing Street (they baton charged it, sparking a day of rioting), but either way, once it had begun, they rapidly lost control and had no clear plan of what to do. The first sign of this was the return of the mounted police. They cantered up 'our' side of Whitehall, getting pelted all the way. Then, unsure, they turned round and ran the gauntlet again, before disappearing out of sight minus a few injured colleagues. What was the point of that! By now sirens could be heard and police transits arrived in the side street behind us. Several dozen 'short shield officers' (riot cops to you and me) spilled out and charged us. If the Downing Street sit-down had been the spark, this action made the fuse which was to ignite the powder keg waiting up the road. Pausing only long enough to give the oncoming cops one last volley, we all took off towards the Square.

Cast your mind back to the bobbies who'd lined up across the top of Whitehall. Well, they were still there! They were already having trouble holding off the massive crowd in front of them, and had drawn their truncheons, but that wasn't much good against the missiles beginning to rain down. Imagine their horror on finding another baying mob coming up behind them. I was near enough to see the fear on their faces as they turned. The realisation that they were about to become the filling in a 'Blakelock sandwich' was too much for them. The police line broke and as they fled down Whitehall through the oncoming crowd, hand to hand fighting erupted. Some cops kept their wits about them and tried to slow the retreat but most just put their heads down and ran into kicks and punches. Those that fell were dragged away along the ground by their colleagues.

In all the demo's I've been on, seeing those coppers run was the most empowering moment ever. I wasn't taken over by some sort of bloodlust, for me it was revenge, pure and simple. I've seen the police in action for years: making arrests for no reason, lying in court, smashing picket lines, beating prisoners - there's no end to it. So given a chance, I want to get them back. People don't attack tooled up coppers for no reason - it happens because we've been on the receiving end of their shit for far too long. The police aren't just about helping granny across the road - they're the first line of defence for the system, they're there to keep us in our place. And don't they know it! They deserve everything they get.

And don't let the press tell you it was just "the anarchists" getting stuck in - it was all sorts. Face it - every genuine lefty will have a pop at the police if they think they can get away with it - no matter what their party leaders say! Also it wasn't just politicians who were involved - loads of people there probably hadn't been on any demo's before. Afterwards it struck me that the reason that this turned riotous and the big CND marches didn't was that it was the outraged middle classes on the streets then, worrying about the effect on careers and house prices should the bomb go off. This time the people present had no vested interest in the system and no qualms about fighting back. I bet you won't find many lecturers, priests or social workers among the 341 arrested that day.

By now, lines of police had moved up Whitehall and there was a stand-off. We didn't have enough ammo to drive them back and they didn't have the numbers (yet) to charge so many of us. What happened was that the two groups stood only feet apart and every now and then scuffles would break out and fighting would spread along the line. Police would try and snatch someone, or some brave souls would grab a riot shield and drag the attached copper into the mob. On both sides gruesome 'tugs of war' happened when an unfortunate cop or rioter would be pulled to and fro by us and them until one side or the other gave up. Injuries were happening: coppers kicked in or felled by missiles, and rioters hit by batons. Whereas wounded cops went to the rear, most bloodied demonstrators stayed in the crowd - this, after all, was not one to be missed!

Gradually, as police numbers grew, they were able to push us back into Trafalgar Square. But, as it turned out, this was a mistake. In Whitehall you had a relatively small 'front', but as the police line came into the square, more and more demonstrators were able to get at them. By now Trafalgar Square was completely in the hands of the marchers - all police had been withdrawn. This meant that hundreds of people were able to climb up scaffolding on a building opposite the South African Embassy, giving them a good view of the fighting. Apparently the march organisers were using their PA system to tell everyone to go home - but the square was still totally crowded, so obviously no-one was listening. At this point the police made their biggest mistake of the day. For some reason the left hand side of their line (as we looked at them) was ordered to charge into the Square while those on the right remained motionless. As they went forward they got hit from three sides and the charge slowed in a hail of missiles. They never made contact with the crowd, who just opened up and let them in - then let them have it with anything to hand. Instead of retreating the cops tried to form a shield wall but were rapidly getting thinned out.

But still they didn't move up the other half of the line, and more cops were sent into the 'beach head' and tried to push further forward. This just meant that yet more people had access to them and it brought them in range of the people on the scaffolding - poles, bolts and fire extinguishers were rained down and it was here that most police injuries occurred. I was near the right hand side of the police (near Nelson's Column) and here we had very little to throw. People chucked what they could and the crowd roared when direct hits were scored. Those at the front were running towards the police and having to pick up the missiles thrown by other sections of the crowd. Every now and then dazed and unconscious riot cops would be dragged from the fray. All we could do was cheer! It was then some bright spark on the scaffolding decided to set some Portakabins alight (you must have seen this on the news). Then flames could be seen coming from the South African Embassy. More cheers!

By now the action had moved past the Embassy and up towards St. Martin's church. A line of 'ordinary' cops had formed in front of us and things were pretty quiet. One incident showed though that people were still willing to have a go. A punk, who was totally pissed, picked up a rock and walked to within about three feet of the cordon. He threw it straight at a copper and then staggered back into the crowd. Two seconds later 3 plods and a flat-hat ran in after

him. The punk started to run but because of his condition, he fell over. The cops pounced on top of him and one of them got a pair of handcuffs out. People crowded ` around and someone shouted "Well come on then" and everyone piled in. The cops jumped up, forgetting their would-be prisoner, and I kicked the one with the handcuffs as hard as I could. They got battered and had to physically fight their way back to the cordon minus hats and radios - you could see the blood on their faces. Everyone was buzzing after that - this was our bit of the Square and we weren't going to have pigs running round nicking people. As for the punk, he stayed on the floor a while, savouring his liberation in a drink and riot induced stupor.

After that I went up past St. Martin's church. It was 6.30pm by the clock and I was separated from my mates and wondering if/how I was going to get out of London. But there was still rioting to be done! I walked through the furthest line of police and into the narrow streets of Covent Garden, an area where no cop had yet ventured. Most shops had been well and truly looted but it was by no means indiscriminate. For instance a kiosk was still open, selling food to the rioters while two doors down Barclays Bank had been trashed. Sports cars were forming a burning barricade across the road but 50 yards away motorists were being waved through the crowd. It was wealth that was the target - Stringfellows night-club, car showrooms, jewellers and West End yuppie shops - these were the victims, not small shopkeepers or passers-by as the gutter press would have you believe. For once it was the rich who got a taste of our anger - we should take it to the West End and Whitehall a lot more often. I had to leave after that, tired but happy. When I got home and turned on the news, people were still at it. Superb!

#### **10. MR. SWEENEY AND ME 1**

As I lay face down in a gutter in Whitehall, with a policeman's boot in the back of my neck and his two mates wrenching my arms from my shoulders, their macho sergeant bawling instructions on how best to incapacitate me, I briefly pondered my 'wrongdoing' in trying to prevent someone I'd never met before from being arrested for shouting his opposition to the Poll Tax. The kick in the forehead diverted my thoughts and I was bundled into one police van, manacled so tightly my hands went blue, then dragged across the road, booted and thumped as I was pushed into a second van. We sped off horns, sirens blaring madly, through red traffic lights, along the wrong side of the road and up pavements. I was sure that the guy I had tried to help who was being trampled upon by his captors must be the world's most wanted fugitive. None of it, this was just members of the world's finest police force maintaining the Queen's Peace.

I was one of the thousands and thousands of people who had left Kennington Park about an hour earlier. I was with a group of friends, all much like me, not really poor but no spare cash at the end (or beginning) of the week. Some of us were working, some of us on the dole, some on housing benefit, some squatting because they couldn't afford to pay for a reasonable home, others because there aren't any homes available, some folks had worked all their lives to provide for their families, some had never been able to find work. We all had something in common - we were all working class, and in today's wonderful British society we had become part of the growing, but powerful underclass. The Poll Tax was another financial burden to us, like all the other benefit and welfare cuts we've experienced, particularly in recent years. We've got no money left to pay now though, but nobody seems to listen or care. Well, we came to bloody shout it loudly enough so that we couldn't be ignored, and didn't we shout?

I was surprised by the huge, vast crowds who had turned up to demonstrate their opposition to the Poll Tax. Sure, there were many politicians espousing the virtues of other forms of extremist control. But overwhelmingly those present were ordinary families, pensioners, community groups, disabled folk, there were musicians, there was dancing, there were

balloons, there was anger, annoyance and frustration - but our march was peaceful. There were 'suits' in the crowd, there were cops in the air, they were high on buildings with their telescopic sights and their focused binoculars, their videos were running - and soon so were they, for this was going to be our day.

Such was the enormity of the crowd that the march eventually bottlenecked from Trafalgar Square to Lambeth Bridge. And then the realisation - we were stopped opposite Downing Street, the home of our democratic leader, "dear Maggie". Nevertheless we stood in reverence, the occasional ribald comment of course, but there were no bricks, there was no barrage, there was no onslaught on the thin blue line guarding the entrance to No. 10. After all, we had no weapons, no truncheons, we had no specially designed riot overalls, no helmets and visors, no jackboots, no leaders directing operations, we didn't come charging on horseback, our dogs were strictly anti-Poll Tax mongrels. I remember children spilling onto a nearby glass verge, somebody uncoupling fencing to prevent us blindly falling over it, people sitting in the roadway, nowhere to move, penned in by barriers manned by cops. In front of us thousands of marchers, behind us many thousands more. Obviously the Metropolitan Police Force's expertly trained riot cops couldn't handle such a confrontation. Passivity could not be tolerated. A foray by six brave Constables led by an Inspector was easily repelled. We weren't \_ going to be arrested for sitting on the bloody ground. Not to be defeated (not yet anyway), a charge by about 20 cops, truncheons out, fists, boots flying into kids, women, the old, whoever got in their way - I was soon to meet the gutter.

There were five of us in a cell made for one; 63 on a corridor of cells cosily constructed for 10 people. Food, no problem there. We each got a packet of custard cream biscuits after seven hours - shame I don't eat them! Drinks, yep as much water as your bladder could hold, because the toilet didn't flush. Air, sure, we swapped the contents of each other's lungs for about 14 hours. Solicitor. I'm definitely allowed one of them, just a shame he wasn't bloody interested. He reassured me that I could be charged with causing an affray even if I was acting on my own. There was nothing he could do for me however and it wasn't worth his while coming to the station (his words). He must have known I'd be on legal aid. What about speaking to the lay visitors? Well, why not. Why indeed, these middle aged arseholes clad in Harrods' latest fashions, blue rinses, adorned with jewellery, 1 lb. of plums in their gobs, just out of the "Upstairs..." part of Eaton Square, they'll understand how I feel, they're in touch with local issues. The scumbags could hardly bring themselves to inhale the putrefied air in the cell corridor. Someone further along just beat me in telling them to go back home, only I think she said "why don't you fuck off?"

Cellmates: a traveller got himself arrested for shouting and using a profane four lettered word. A shoe salesman who protested to a senior police officer about the manner in which a person was arrested quickly found himself on the floor of a police van with a black eye. Still, the salesman was black, so guess he must have deserved it! An engineer was amongst a group of peaceful protesters who were charged at by cops on horses, he was one of those who fell over so he must have been guilty of something. And, finally, through the cell door walked this man mountain. 18 stone, 6'4", beer belly, flash leather jacket, mohair trousers, crocodile skin shoes, Armani shirt - must be a fraudster - not at all. "I was on my way back home", his story goes, "when I walked into this riot. Never have liked cops, so thought I'd have a bit of action". This colossus found a half brick and with deadly aim caught a cop on the back of the head; out like a light he said. He was then jumped on by two riot clad officers, but our hero threw them off and eventually it took six of the bastards and burst eardrums to restrain him.

Tarzan could well understand their anger however, for he had once been a paratrooper and had served the good old British Army on the streets of Belfast, eh! A philosophical individual, but he was upset on two counts: firstly, his mum would go apeshit when she found

out, secondly, having been arrested for "incitement to riot", he was bound to lose a new job he was due to start the following month - he was to become a Prison Officer! Amongst other things, this character merited some in depth discussion, but I was halted from discovering the reasons for his actions, bearing in mind his former and intended employment, when he simply said "I fucking hate cops".

Some 14 hours after being arrested, I was taken to the custody centre where some young Sweeney type 'intellectual' asked me if I was a member of Militant, what an insult, and then suggested I must be "some sort of socialist", before letting me go, warning me not to fail to turn up at court to answer my charge. Well, I did fail to turn up, so bollocks Mr. Sweeney. As I walked home I saw iron barricades still strewn along the length of Whitehall, a crushed cop's cap lay amongst the rubbish on the pavement, hundreds of 'No Poll Tax' placards were discarded everywhere, some decorating the Cenotaph, that meaningless monolith in the centre of Whitehall. The scale of the events I had missed were becoming excitingly apparent. The stench of burning wafted down Whitehall and as I reached Trafalgar Square I saw the ashen remains of buildings in Northumberland Avenue, the smell of wasted Portakabins was now overpowering, smoke still billowing around Trafalgar Square, fire fighters still dousing neighbouring premises. The shattered windows of the South African Embassy further lifted my spirits and I couldn't resist an ear to ear grin as a mob of miserable cops walked towards me, peering out from under the brims of their helmets, hunched shoulders, literally 'plodding' along. Though I had missed it, I knew the bastards had taken a real good hiding.

## **11. OUR RIOT**

March 1990, what a month! All across the country, every night on the telly, every day in the newspapers, all day conversations on the street, Poll Tax, Poll Tax, Poll Tax. After two years of continuous hard work against the tax in Scotland, a year everywhere else, and at last we seemed to be moving. Bristol, Brixton, Shepton Mallet, Leeds, Hackney...a rolling circus of hatred against the tax, each time becoming more angry and ferocious. There was a real sense of excitement, what would happen next? Even when Hackney went up, a few points were knocked off the Stock Exchange and rumours of Thatcher's resignation started to flow. Once again we had them on the run. The March 31st demonstration felt like it was going to be the crescendo, the finale of everything that had gone before, it was the start to the long battle ahead, it was going to show the government and the councils what a fight they've got on their hands, this was where everybody would be together in the centre of "power", this was going to be the big one...and it was.

The day started off as it was meant to continue. Marching into Kennington Park and having to run the usual gauntlet of lefty paper sellers, an RCP ("no revolutionary potential in the non-payment campaign") seller loomed into vision. Swearing and spitting ensued, leaving him in no doubt as to what we thought of the cadre. Leaving Kennington Park, the police had locked a gate meaning people had to join the march in an orderly fashion. A woman pushing her baby in a pram couldn't get through, and a fence was in the way. A few moments hesitation, shall we or shan't we, fear, and down comes the fence and another. A sudden release of pressure and people stream onto the street smiling. Singing, shouting, dancing, drums and whistles playing and then boom. "Jesus, what was that? A car?" Just another yellow metal bollard being knocked over under the cops' noses. Relief, it couldn't have started already.

Approaching Parliament, one of my fantasies might come true. We storm it. But alas, only more "Maggie Out Out Out" chants with the occasional "Kill" distinctly heard. A symbol of power, "the mother of democracies", around the world being left completely alone. Outside Parliament, as the cries of "Burn it down" became even more vociferous, one of the Liverpool Militant group behind us shouted "animals go forward, human beings back here".

A 10 yard gap was created. But this little incidental was lost, as we at last turned into Whitehall. The march had slowed down to a snail's pace. Of course, Downing Street! But what to do? A sit down had started, with other people arguing with them not to be so daft. A few bottles flew towards the cops guarding Downing Street. As the Union Jack came down from outside the Ministry of Defence, a howl came up from the crowd, the flag was ripped into shreds. The national flag of India remained aloof for a ridiculous reason. A hippy meditating up the pole refused to allow it to be taken down - "Get down from that pole mate, I want to burn that flag". "No man, this is the flag of India". Well...what can you say?

The next 30 minutes were frantic, fighting with the cops, desperate attempts at lifting paving stones, desperate attempts to get more people involved, filling pockets with rubble, spectators taking vantage points, injuries (self inflicted and by the cops), and more and more people arriving as the march came from behind. A woman steward made 'heroic' attempts to keep people moving; she was just shouted at and spat at, and eventually some people tried to lift her megaphone. At this point she gave up. Standing on a corner amidst the fighting a lone Militant paper seller was trying to flog his wares. What the hell are these people about? On another part of the street stood a BNP skinhead. Unfortunately, he was left alone as there was just too much going on to deal with him. Next time though! Then the horses arrived on the green outside the M.O.D building. A total sense of panic and fear arose, until it became plainly obvious they didn't have a clue what to do. The normally marauding thugs became sitting targets, they just didn't move until the ammo became scarce.

The cops started charging into the crowd. It came to the ridiculous point that they only had to flinch and we would start. But lessons were quickly learnt, when they charged and we stood firm, they would not risk one of their number becoming isolated and given the treatment they deserve. The cop horses eventually gave up and moved around the back of Whitehall and reappeared further up. Hundreds of people charged after them, "shit we're going to get split up", but it was too late for that. The cop horses panicked and moved aside. This revealed the most amazing scene: a line of riot cops pinned between the crowds in Trafalgar Square and now us coming up rapidly behind them.

The fear on their faces, the sense of power, excitement, revenge was ecstatic. Not only had Whitehall been going up, but all the while there had been fighting in Trafalgar Square. At last we had got them!

Getting into Trafalgar Square was like coming from another planet. People high up in the scaffolding, chanting "No Poll Tax, No Poll Tax" to the heavy, sharp metallic beat of scaffold pole against scaffold pole. Then all of sudden poles, braces, concrete rained down onto the cops. The atmosphere was totally electric. It was a good chance to take a 5 minute breather and just stare and wonder. Unfortunately this little break was rudely interrupted by the cops regaining some control and pushing crowds down Northumberland Avenue. The whole party seems to disintegrate, the initial energy gone, tiredness no doubt. But then, oh Jesus, smoke drifting across our view of the Square: tear gas?, smoke bombs? Oh shit, this is getting too much, and we are not prepared. Then the message got back, South Africa House has been torched. Total wonder, celebration and renewed energy. Eventually, virtually the whole of Northumberland Avenue was pushed down to the Embankment. Only a few attacks on the police, and a few attacks on rich cars, as most people are going home on their coaches.

Time to leave, for a cup of tea and to try to make our way back to the Square. Carefully walking towards the peace and quiet and the commercial deadland of Covent Garden, what a shock. Windows broken, cops everywhere, people staring in disbelief. It's quite something having a cup of tea amidst gob-smacked faces, broken glass and cops without laughing and at moments crying.

On our way to Leicester Square more shop windows, burnt out cars and tourists picking their way through shop goods outside. To see the joy and secret smiles on some people's faces was beautiful. Two Chinese young men, standing alone in the middle of Charing Cross Road, surrounded by admiring onlookers, taking pot shots at the cops at their leisure. The liberation and sense of achievement on their faces was great: "God, this is brilliant, hand me another brick". The next few hours were spent cruising the streets, shouting and sniping at the occasional cop, and at moments just taking in the whole scene, trying to get to grips with what had happened. And then home to the welcome comforts of a bath, bed and normality.

A few weeks after the day, I saw a poster advertising a Socialist Workers Party public meeting: "Trafalgar Square Violence - Who To Blame?" I felt really irritated and angry with it. It took me a while to sort out what I felt about it. Were they going to apologise for the violence? Were they going to say it was the Tories and "their fascist" boot boys who had started it? In some ways it was, the government introduced the tax and the police are there to enforce it. But what about us taking some credit for going on the attack. We started the violence and we're proud of it. To do, rather than being done to. That's how March 31st 1990 should be remembered, not as a police riot but as our riot.

## **12. THE AFTERMATH**

The final score on the day was up to 500 police officers injured (with more than 60 hospitalised), 50 plus cars damaged, 394 shops and offices attacked (and many looted), several hundred demonstrators, 391 people arrested (and more in the subsequent weeks) and a total of 1900 crimes reported. Predictably, all newspapers, all media commentators, all politicians were united in their utter condemnation. From the 'Daily Mail' to the All Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federation, there was a torrent of outrage and disgust directed at the events that rocked central London. But we see what happened on that day differently from all the political professionals who need us far more than we need them. We see the Battle of Trafalgar Square as a positive and constructive contribution to the struggle against the Poll Tax in particular and the ongoing class war in general.

For a start, if there had been no riot then the demonstration would have got no more than a few lines in the papers and a brief mention on the telly. This is the reality imposed upon us because the media is controlled by the ruling class. This is not absolute totalitarian control - such a policy, at the moment, would be counter-productive. It is a subtle and sophisticated policy that allows 'World In Action' and Paul Foot in the 'Daily Mirror' to give the illusion of freedom of information - but still maintains a tight grip. Remember the Glasgow demonstration against the Poll Tax in April 1989? Over 20,000 people were on it, a massive display of defiance that was quietly censored.

But the riot was too big to be ignored — and they hoped to smear the anti-Poll Tax movement as well. So the demonstration and subsequent riot were spread across all front pages, on all news bulletins: nobody could now say that they did not know that there was enormous and powerful opposition to the Poll Tax. And this, of course, can only help to build mass non-payment of the Poll Tax. All the isolated, worried and frightened people around the country will have taken great heart from the undeniable fact that they're not alone in their hatred of the Poll Tax and their desire to smash it into the ground.

But Militant Tendency declared that the riot would "alienate" people from the anti-Poll Tax movement. Militant obviously don't believe their own propaganda. The struggle against the Poll Tax is not a matter of individual conscience or studied moralism. The rioting did not alienate 1 millions of working class people whose opposition to the Poll Tax is based on class interests: in plain language, less money in the pocket and even fewer needed services added to the total insult of being asked to pay the same as a millionaire. That opposition is not going

to waver because of the rioting - it is going to be encouraged and stimulated even further. This is not mere rhetoric: on the day after the Battle of Trafalgar Square, a local anti-Poll Tax stall had even more people coming up wanting to join the struggle...and only two people actually bothered to mention the violence - and both of them thought that it was good! This is after the total onslaught by the media and all politicians on the riot and everyone who was involved in it.

Of course, the rioting probably alienated a few sympathetic politicians, priests and bureaucrats. People like 'Gorgeous' George Galloway, Labour MP and ex-boss of 'radical' charity War On Want. Such individuals can only see the working class as helpless, passive, pathetic victims. We need their support like we need a hole in the head. If the Poll Tax is going to be defeated, it is going to be defeated by mass class action and mass class action alone. And such actions will inevitably come into conflict with the state and all its agencies. By mass class action, we mean struggle on all fronts: community and workplace organised non-payment and resistance to measures taken against non-payers and open displays of defiance on the streets. Does the All Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federation (and, by implication, Militant Tendency) really think that the state is going to sit back and watch mass non-payment of the Poll Tax? Of course not! The state attempted to firstly intimidate and then criminalise the anti-Poll Tax movement on Saturday 31st March. Unlike Militant and their friends, we are under no illusions about the state.

One of the main illusions about the state was voiced by the visibly shaken Home Secretary, David Waddington, who declared: "We live in a democracy". This is open to question. It is certainly the cry of all politicians plus friends in the papers every time we do something more than actually ticking a box once every five years or so. But in reality there is very little genuine democracy in this country, nor anywhere else in this world. Parliamentary democracy is simply the most efficient and effective form of rule for the ruling class at this moment in time. In the past it has been absolutist monarchy and in the future it might be military dictatorship. But real power has always remained in the hands of the tiny elite who control the economy and the state. These people can never be voted out because they never stand for election.

A theory behind this practice was expressed by Sir Ian Gilmour, a Tory MP: "For Conservatives, democracy is a means to an end and not an end in itself...And if it is leading to an end that is undesirable or inconsistent with itself, then there is a theoretical case for ending it". Such a case was made by Andrew Bonar Law, at the time leader of the Conservative Party and later Prime Minister, in 1912: "There are things stronger than parliamentary majorities". Bonar Law was speaking during a period of intense class struggle in this country and in Ireland: the power of the ruling class was being threatened.

The most important function of parliamentary democracy is to disempower the working class. It makes us passive units that have the right to one tick once every few years. It ensures that we have no real power, that we are nothing more than cogs in the machinery of capitalism, unable to have anything more than extremely limited control over our own destinies. And it creates the illusion of choice where there is really no choice at all. Against parliamentary democracy, we uphold the genuine democracy that gives all of us real power to determine the present and the future. This democracy is directly opposed to the farce of parliamentary democracy and the self-seeking careerism of politicians (whether left, right, centre or supposedly revolutionary). It is the democracy of workers and community councils, mass assemblies to organise the running of human society for the benefit of all, not just the privileged few.

It is for these reasons that we don't give a damn about parliamentary democracy, that we actively seek to "negate democracy" in the words of Neil Kinnock. We do not believe in wasting our time and effort fighting on their terrain of parliamentary democracy. This can only be a dead-end. We do not believe in encouraging any illusions that society can be changed through parliament or that parliament is in any way responsive to our needs and desires. It isn't and never will be. Parliamentary democracy is a tool of the ruling class and must be treated with the contempt that it deserves.

On Saturday 31st March democracy came to the streets of central London. Thousands of working class people expressed their opinions about the Poll Tax, the police and a multitude of other things. But when this expression became more than token, people found themselves not only against the state but the state in waiting: Militant Tendency. This organisation is one of the leading left-wing parties (although it denies that it is a party).

The politics of Militant are simple - take over the Labour Party and trade unions and then legislate socialism. This means that Militant are utterly obsessed by being 'respectable' as they base their ideology on bourgeois social democracy. So they support strikes — but only as long as they stay inside the framework of official union limits. And they support campaigns — as long as demands are made on the Labour Party.

Already, Militant are trying to use the Poll Tax to regain their dwindling influence within the Labour Party: "The biggest demonstration in Neil Kinnock's Islwyn constituency since the miners' strike took place last Friday (23rd March). It was against the expulsion of Marie Welsh and Denis English from the Labour Party for fighting the Poll Tax", ('Militant', 30th March). The struggle against the Poll Tax offers many opportunities for the working class, after years of defeat and demoralisation — but organisations such as Militant will only attempt to stifle this potential into channels of respectable bourgeois politics. On 22nd March the Labour Party won a by—election in the Mid—Staffs constituency, turning a Tory majority of 14,654 into a Labour majority of 9,449. 'Militant' hailed this as a victory and declared: "It was the (anti—Poll Tax) Federation's campaigning that ensured Labour this seat" (30th March). But what was not mentioned was the fact that the new Labour MP is a personal friend of Neil Kinnock, shares his reactionary views and has probably paid all her Poll Tax bill in one instalment!

Instead of trying to help build a mass movement that can defeat the Poll Tax and challenge capitalism, Militant work hard to clean up the extremely tarnished image of the Labour Party and get it working class support. In 'Militant' (30th March) it was declared: "The lives of the mass of people now suffering under the Tories can only be transformed by a Labour government which takes the levers of economic power out of the hands of the capitalist millionaires". This is political analysis straight from the primary school: first, the illusion that the Labour Party can somehow become 'revolutionary' and, secondly, the illusion that such changes would be meekly allowed by the state and the bosses. But Militant are not alone in these positions - the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), although sounding slightly more radical (they didn't threaten to grass people to the police for a start), share the same essential politics. In a recent issue of their paper, 'Socialist Worker' (12th May), this was written: "Anti-Poll Tax campaigners in Haringey found overwhelming opposition to the Poll Tax when they went round with petitions, but time and again found they had to argue hard to convince working class people it was worth voting".

Yet again, the working class outflanks the so-called 'revolutionary' left! It is worth remembering that the Party that both Militant and the SWP work so hard for is the same Party whose shadow Home Secretary stated after the Battle of Trafalgar Square: "I hope there've been a substantial number of arrests, I hope the people responsible for the violence will be

convicted and awarded very severe sentences" (Roy Hattersley, 31st March). Interestingly, Hattersley's words echo the words of supposedly left-wing Labour MP Eric Heffer who said after the Toxteth riots in 1981: "rioters and looters must be punished with all due severity".

What unites politicians from Hattersley to the SWP is the belief that the working class are unable to suss and sort things out for themselves. All authoritarian socialist organisations (whether left or right) believe that social change can only come through the Party: the Party is the leadership of the working class and always knows best. In the words of Leon Trotsky: "The Party in the last analysis is always right, because the Party is the sole historical instrument given to the proletariat for the solution of its basic problem". (What do you do when there's more than one Party claiming to be the sole historical instrument - toss a coin? And who "gave" the proletariat this present - sounds vaguely religious). Such an attitude as Trotsky's leads firstly to Kronstadt, where thousands of rebellious workers were murdered by the Bolshevik dictatorship and then to Stalinism. Genuine human liberation can only come through self-activity, self-organisation and democratic debate within the working class. These parties are a threat to the anti-Poll Tax movement and will only sabotage, confuse and demoralise this enormous struggle. As millions of working class people defy the intimidation of the state and the lies of the media, the best they can come up with is "It's time the TUC backed the action" ('Socialist Worker', 31st March). The anti-Poll Tax struggle has been organised against the TUC and the Labour Party - and has been massively successful considering all the problems and obstacles that it has faced. This just shows our potential, a potential that can only be undermined and diverted by these organisations.

Trafalgar Square showed what was possible. The 200,000 people on the demonstration showed the depth of anger against the Poll Tax and the level of local organisation. It also showed that people were not prepared to take shit lying down and were able to organise resistance without leaders or parties. But we shouldn't get too carried away by Trafalgar Square - there were many problems on the actual day and the struggle against the Poll Tax is much much more than just one riot. Too many people behaved stupidly and indiscriminately. Too many people were unnecessarily hurt by bricks from the back. Too many people were scared and frightened by this explosion of class anger. These problems and more have got to be acknowledged and sorted out ready for the next time. Because there will be a next time - the struggle against the Poll Tax (for a start!) is not going to disappear, although it will go up and down. The class war will certainly continue! The fight has got to be maintained and intensified - from leaflets through people's letterboxes to mass demonstrations on the streets to flyposting every available wall to talking down the laundrette to stopping the bailiffs to striking at work to...taking on the state and bosses, extending our struggles so that they're not separated and defeated, unifying to fight the common enemy. they're not separated and defeated, unifying to fight the common enemy.

The battle against the Poll Tax is much more than just the Poll Tax - and more than just the Tories. It's about our standard of living. It's about how we feel at work, at home and on the streets. It's about our lives under capitalism. The Battle of Trafalgar Square showed both the potential and the problems of working class struggle. It showed working class anger and working class mutual aid. It showed the sabotage of the left parties and the stupidity of a few idiots. We have all got to learn and build from Trafalgar Square so that we can reach the day where there is no need to batter people into unconsciousness. Let's get organised.

*Text originally from a pamphlet entitled "Poll Tax Riot" published by ACAB press. OCR'd by Linda Towlson for libcom.org*

- [1](#). Readers should be aware that, ironically, this account was actually written by someone who turned out to be a police infiltrator from Special Branch.

