

CHARLIE DUNN

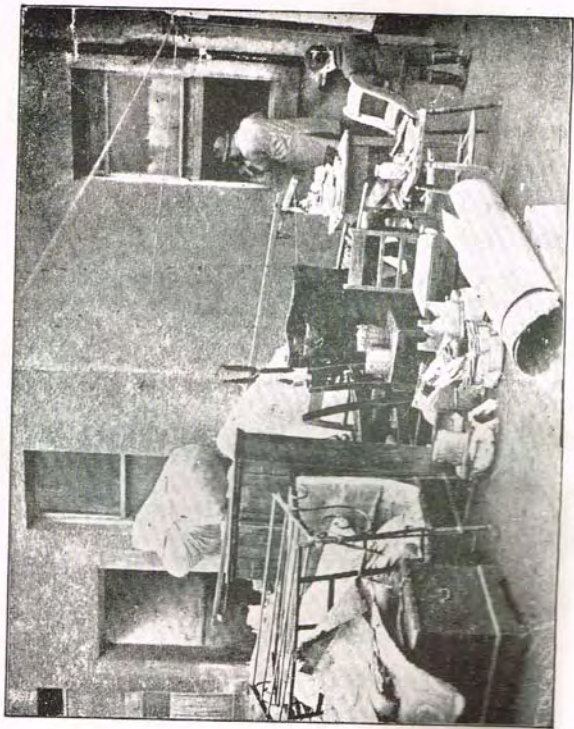
RENT STRIKE!

THE CLYDEBANK RENT STRUGGLES OF THE 1920's



SEÁN DAMER

A CLYDEBANK PEOPLE'S HISTORY PAMPHLET



An Eviction in Clydebank during the Rent Strike.

T/508/6/7/67

RENT STRIKE!

The Clydebank Rent Strike of the 1920's

by

SEAN DAMER

©1982 SEAN DAMER

Published by Clydebank District Library, Dumbarton Road, Clydebank.

Cover design: Bob Starrett

ISBN 0 906938 00 7

Printed in Glasgow by W.J. Ross Reproduction Services.

from: Robert Burns: The Twa Dogs.

But then to see how ye're negleckit,
 How huff'd, and cuff'd and disrespeckit!
 Lord man, our gentry care as little
 For delvers, ditchers, an' sic cattle;
 They gang as soucy by poor folk,
 As I wad by a stinkin brock.

I've noticed, on our laird's court-day, -
 An' mony a time my heart's been wae, -
 Poor tenant bodies, scant o' cash,
 How they maun thole a factor's snash;
 He'll stamp an' threaten, curse an' swear,
 He'll apprehend them, poind their gear;
 While they maun stan', wi' aspect humble,
 An' hear it a', an' fear an' tremble!
 I see how folk live that hae riches;
 But surely poor-folk maun be wretches!

FOREWORD

This pamphlet aims to record the history of a Clydebank working class struggle from the point of view of the working people who were involved in it. It originates in my general research interests in working class history, politics, and culture on Clydeside over the last century, and in my belief that with the exception of notable memoirs like that of Willie Gallagher and Harry MacShane, and biographies like that of John Maclean by Nan Milton, there is a remarkable absence of good literature on a most important section of the British working class. More precisely, it has its origins in work I did on the Glasgow Rent Strike of 1915. This work forms part of an academic debate about the extent to which that Strike, and its outcome, constituted a "gain" or "loss" from the point of view of the working class. While in a sense this pamphlet continues that debate, it has a much more important purpose. It is specifically intended to be a contribution to "People's History" - history, if you like, from the bottom-up, for a change. It is meant to be read by ordinary people, both on Clydeside and further afield, and also, hopefully, by school-children. It is my intention to produce a longer, more theoretical article on the Clydebank Rent Strike for a forthcoming book on Clydeside Working Class Culture.

So many people have helped me in the course of my research for this pamphlet that it is hard to know where to begin acknowledging their assistance. First of all, I would like to gratefully acknowledge the work of Kathleen Clark, Irene Macleod, and Janice Stewart in both transcribing the interviews, and typing various drafts of this paper. Their patience and good humour in meeting impossible demands has been truly staggering! Then I must also thank the library staff who have helped me. Firstly, Pat Malcolm and John Hood of Clydebank District Library, who have made this whole project possible, and secondly, Joe Fisher and the staff of the Glasgow Room of the Mitchell Library in Glasgow, who have cheerfully lugged huge dusty volumes of old newspapers out for me, and tracked down obscure sources. I am sure that they were all cursing me behind my back, and will only be too pleased to see this project completed! Finally, I have met nothing but interest and courtesy from the people of Clydebank; it is they who are really behind this pamphlet.

I would like to thank the following Bankies for their time and assistance: Mrs. Hyslop; Mr. Lambie; Mr. Henry; the late Mrs. Pickles; Mr. McKernan; Mr. Manson; Mr. & Mrs. Black; Miss Bilferty; Mr. Sinclair; Mr. Docherty; Mr. Marshall; Mr. Middleton; Mr. Gillespie; Mr. Murphy; Mr. McCafferty; Mrs. O'Neill; Mr. Yull; Mr. Hart; Mr. Barclay; Mrs. O'Brien; Mr. Edwards; Mr. Crawford; Mrs. Farquharson; Mrs. Woods; and Mr. Cunningham. If I have inadvertently omitted anyone, I trust that they will accept my apologies. Further, it was not possible to use all the material I taped, so again, I trust that people will not be offended if they are not quoted - the sheer mass of material I have accumulated has forced me to be drastically selective. With the consent of the people involved, I have made a cassette of the people quoted in this pamphlet, so if anyone would like to listen to the original interviews while reading the pamphlet, it is held in the Local History section of the Clydebank Library. To conclude my acknowledgements, I would like to thank Mr. Douglas Leiper of Mount Forest, Ontario, for sending me the photographs of his grandfather, Andrew Leiper; and Helen Turner, Bert Moorhouse, and Alan Middleton for comments on an earlier draft of this pamphlet.

There is still much about the Clydebank Rent Strike which remains obscure - maybe forever. But perhaps reading this pamphlet will prompt people's memories. If anyone remembers anything else about the Strike, I would be delighted to hear from them.

Finally, a word of explanation to non-Scottish readers: the "factor" whom Burns lambasts in the frontispiece, and whom I discuss at length in this pamphlet, is not a landlord or property-owner in the conventional sense. The term "factor" is peculiar to Scotland, although his function is not. Factors are the managers of property which is owned by someone else. Their duties include the letting of tenement houses; rent-collecting; paying the rates for, and the care and maintenance of, the properties they factored. Their income derived from the commission, the interest, they charged on each transaction. They would be called "Agents" in England. Historically, factors were highly unpopular among the Scottish working class, particularly on Clydeside.

A "Sheriff" in Scotland is a Judge roughly equivalent to an English County Court Judge, but with a much wider range of duties and powers, while a "Sheriff Officer" is the Scottish approximate equivalent of the English Bailiff, the person who carried out evictions once a decree had been given by a Sheriff, and the decision to evict taken.

Picture Acknowledgements

The cover photograph and that of the Sheriff's Officer at the eviction are reproduced from the long defunct Workers' Pictorial International, and appear courtesy of Audrey Canning and the Scottish C.P. Library. The photos of Messrs. Lambie and Leiper appear courtesy of Mr. Claude Lambie. All the other photographs are from The Bulletin, dates as follows: back page serial photo, August 24, 1920; Kirkwood addressing rent strikers, September 30, 1924; celebrating women, August 16, 1924; vigilantes having tea, September 12, 1924, and appear courtesy of George Outram & Co. Ltd.

SEAN DAMER
Department of Politics & Sociology,
Paisley College of Technology,

September, 1982.

INTRODUCTION

CLYDEBANK

Clydebank - unlike the city of Glasgow - was a 'new town' of the late 19th century. It was established in 1871 when J.S.G. Thomson moved their 'Clydebank' shipyard down river from the overcrowded Govan Waterfront. By 1881, the town had 3,000 inhabitants and in 1882, Robert McAlpine started building the giant Singer's factory. This was completed by 1886, employing 5,000 people, and produced 10,000 sewing machines per week. In this year, Clydebank obtained Burgh status, and contained some 6,000 people. Thereafter, it expanded very rapidly, attracting a series of new industries. By 1902, it contained 18,000 people, the Bothesay Dock was founded, and Beardmore's had established its shipyard and engineering works in the Burgh. Clydebank was proud to call itself "the risingest Burgh" in Scotland. By 1904, Singer's employed 9,000 people, and John Brown's (which took over Thomson's), 5,000. By 1910, Beardmore's employed 6,000.

During this period, these major employers started to build housing for their workers, as thousands had to commute daily to work from Glasgow. Beardmore's built housing in Dalmeir, while McAlpine started to build on "the hill" - Radnor Park - above Singer's. These tenement houses were for Singer's workers, and by 1904, 1,700 had been constructed. These tenement blocks had flat roofs, and the area soon became known as the "Holy City". The story goes that a returning Clydebank seaman was reminded of Jerusalem when he saw the new flat-roofed development. It is worth noting that from the beginning, this development was controversial. McAlpine, by building just outside the Burgh boundary, avoided its Building Regulations, and consequently these new tenements had several dubious features, such as low ceilings. The tenants complained that they were damp, and in 1905, some went on rent strike. The next year, some 200 tenants brought an action against McAlpine, and the whole development was thoroughly discussed in an official inquiry in 1906. The upshot was that Radnor Park - the "Holy City" - was annexed by Clydebank Burgh, and McAlpine stopped building this

type of tenement. From 1908 onwards, he confined himself to model cottage-type tenements. But by then, the "Holy City" was well-known in the Burgh as a controversial housing neighbourhood.

ORIGINS OF THE RENT STRIKE.

The origins of the Clydebank Rent Strike of the 1920's lie in the Glasgow rent strike of 1915. Briefly, in a situation where the city was packed with war-time munitions workers, the factors opportunistically put up the rent. This resulted in widespread discontent, and a city-wide rent strike. When the factors tried to prosecute some of the rent-strikers, a crowd of more than 10,000 people demonstrated outside the Sheriff Court. A general strike on Clydeside was threatened if the rent-strikers were convicted. The outcome was that the charges were dropped, and the Government hastily passed the 1915 Rent & Mortgage Interest (War Restrictions) Act.

This Act froze the rents of all small houses at the 1914 level. While there is no doubt that the Act was a great victory for working class tenants, the provisions of the Act were purely temporary - they ran only until six months after the end of the War. So when the War was nearing its conclusion, the factors and property-owners were demanding substantial increases in the rent. They said that the costs of repair, maintenance, and management of tenement property had increased at least by 100% since 1914. Working class tenants rejected this argument, saying that there had been no repairs or maintenance done since 1914, and that anyway, many tenement properties were slums. So they were against any increase in rents.

The whole business was investigated by a Government Committee, the Salisbury Committee, whose report recommended that rent restriction should be continued for a further limited period after the end of the War, but that thereafter, an increase in rent should be permitted. This compromise did not really resolve the tension between factors and tenants, and subsequent legislation, and another Committee, only confused the issue further. The factors were furious, because although the War was over, it hadn't been formally declared ended by Parliament, and so they couldn't get any increase at all! But a new Act was necessary to nullify the provisions of the 1915 Rent

Restrictions Act. Eventually, the 1920 Rent & Mortgage Interest (Restrictions) Act was passed. This Act permitted an immediate increase of 15% over the 1914 rent, and a further increase of 25% a year later, if essential repairs were done.

The factors were reasonably happy with these concessions, but working class tenants - who lived in the single-ends and room-and-kitchens affected by the legislation - were most unhappy. There were meetings and demonstrations against the Act all round Scotland, but particularly on Clydeside. The opposition was led by the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.)-based Scottish Labour Housing Association, which was well-organised among local housewives. The leaders of the Association were Glasgow I.L.P. Councillors John Wheatley, David Kirkwood, and Andrew McBride. The leaders of the Labour women included Mrs. Barbour, Mrs. Crawford, and Mrs. Laird. A 24-hour general strike against the rent increase was called on Clydeside for August 23rd, 1920. (The aerial photograph shows tenants arriving for the huge demonstration on Glasgow Green). A parallel meeting was held in Dalmuir Park in Clydebank. Speakers included Davis Kirkwood and Paddy Dollan. As at the Glasgow Green demo, resolutions were passed by which working class tenants pledged themselves to pay only the "standard rent" - that is, rent at the 1914 level. Singer's had not come out on strike, and at dinner-time, when some women were returning to work, they were pelted with stones and dirt by the demonstrators.

When rent day came in Glasgow, there was little resistance in spite of the big demo on Glasgow Green. Most tenants paid the increased rent, if reluctantly. But in Clydebank, things were different. Although they had issued 'Notices of Increase of Rent' many tenants only offered the factors the "standard rent". This meant rent at the level it was in 1914, just before the start of the War. This happened all over the town. The 'Clydebank Press' for the period carries reports of housewives following factors' clerks around and heckling them, and one woman who was alleged to have paid the increased rent was beaten up. Notices appeared in windows: "RENT STRIKE ON HERE." While "Bankies" went on strike all over the Burgh, it seems to have been particularly strong in Dalmuir, and in the "Holy City". The "Clyde Rent War" had started.

One question arises here: why should the Rent Strike have been so solid in Clydebank, compared with Glasgow - or indeed anywhere else in Scotland? The answer lies in the industrial structure of the town. Local workers were employed in the big yards and factories in the Burgh: Beardmore's, John Brown's, Singer's. And there was a tendency for workers in the same enterprise to live in the same neighbourhood. Hence, as was noted earlier, the "Beardmore houses" were in Dalmuir, while the "Singer's houses" were up the hill, in the Holy City. Political organisation in Clydebank appeared strongest in districts containing co-workers from the same yard or plant. Furthermore, Clydebank was almost totally a working-class town, with no large middle-class to divert workers from their purpose. And there was a strong socialist tradition, well-represented by the I.L.P.: the S.L.P. (Socialist Labour Party); the Co-operative Women's Guild; and later, the Communist Party. Finally, the housing stock of Clydebank was both poor, and over-crowded.

THE RENT STRIKE TAKES OFF.

In the beginning, the resistance to the rents increase in Clydebank was led by the local Housing Association, a constituent branch of the Scottish Labour Housing Association. The key figure in the Association was its Organiser, Andrew Leiper, an unemployed iron turner from Dalmuir. Other important figures were the Association's Secretary, Mr. William Sinclair, and Parish Councillor Bobby King.

Andrew Leiper, a self-educated man, worked closely with a brilliant Labour lawyer from Dumbarton, an ex-serviceman called D.D. Cormack. They decided to contest the legality of the factors' 'Notices of Increase' in the courts. A legal flaw had been found in these notices, apparently by an Old Kilpatrick solicitor called W.G. Leechman. The law required the factor to issue a 'Notice of Removal' before he could issue a 'Notice of Increase' of rent. What this referred to was the practice whereby tenement houses were let. Once a tenant had rented a house from a factor, s/he stayed on in that house by a contractual understanding known as "tacit relocation". S/he just communicated his/her wish to stay on in the house by continuing to pay the rent. But if the factor wished to end this contract, either

to get rid of the tenant or to put the rent up. Scots Law required him to issue a legal document called a "Notice of Removal" to the tenant. The tenant could not be evicted, nor could the rent be increased, unless this document had been served on the tenant. In other words, the law said that the factor had to indicate to the tenant that the contract between them was at an end, before he could raise the rent in what amounted to a new contract. This the factors had not done, yet they persisted in trying to get the increase in rent out of Clydebank tenants.

When tenants continued refusing to pay the increased rent, the local factors - particularly Hacking & Patterson, and James Stewart - started taking them to Court. But on November 26th 1920, Sheriff-Substitute Menzies of Dumbarton Sheriff Court held that rent increases allowed by the 1920 Act "... are invalid where no terminating notice had been issued... also... that any excess rent paid beyond the standard rent is recoverable right back to 1915". In other words, the Court agreed with the position of Leiper and Cormack, that the rent increases were illegal. Not only that, but any tenant who had paid the increased rent could claim back the amount represented by these increases. (Oddly enough, on the same day, the Glasgow Sheriff Court had given a completely contrary decision in an identical case involving Emanuel Shinwell, who was then evicted for arrears.) The Clydebank Housing Association promptly mounted a campaign to bring this legal decision to the attention of all local tenants. Many more Clydebank tenants now joined the Rent Strike. 1921 saw the beginnings of mass unemployment, particularly in ship-building and associated industries. Clydebank was badly hit. Thus there was a substantial increase in the number of tenants who had difficulty paying any rent. As arrears mounted, so the factors got more and more angry. They went for eviction decrees in an effort to frighten tenants into paying their arrears of rent. But D.D. Cormack and Andrew Leiper - by now recognised by Dumbarton Sheriff Court as a tenants' representative - kept winning cases on the "Invalid Notice" argument.

The factors' professional association was the Glasgow Property Owners & Factors Association and they decided to fight a test-case. This became nationally famous as the "Kerr versus Bryde" case. The factors took Mr. Dougald Bryde of 6 Union Street, Clydebank, to Court for arrears of rent. (Kerr was the person who owned the tenement where Bryde lived.) D.C. Cormack defended the case on the usual grounds that the 'Notice of Increase' was invalid because a 'Notice of Removal' had not been served first. Sheriff-Substitute Menzies agreed with Cormack and dismissed the factors' case. The factors promptly appealed this decision to the Sheriff-Principal, who upheld his colleague's decision. The factors then appealed to the Court of Session in Edinburgh and to their horror, that Court upheld the original decision. By now in a panic, the factors frantically lobbied the Secretary for Scotland, and sent deputations to London. They further appealed the case to the House of Lords, which heard the appeal in a remarkably short space of time. On November 3rd, 1922 the law Lords issued their judgement on Kerr vs. Bryde, and they upheld the previous courts' decisions, in favour of the tenant. Another victory for the Clydebank tenants!

The implications of this legal decision were very far-reaching in Scotland. It meant that all the increases the factors had claimed were illegal. It also meant that any increased rent they had got had been got illegally and the tenants could reclaim it. The factors complained bitterly that this decision, while complying with the letter of the law, ignored the spirit of the law. They said that the spirit of the 1920 Rent Act was that they were to get an increase in their rents. But in arguing this, the factors were being thoroughly hypocritical, because members of the Glasgow Property Owners & Factors Association had appeared before the Salisbury Committee investigating the whole issue of rent restriction in 1920, and had specifically admitted the legal necessity of terminating the old rent agreement before the increased rent could be charged. In fact, the person who spoke on this point was Mr. James Stewart, who was a major Clydebank factor.

The Clydeside I.L.P. reacted very quickly to the Lords decision. It made the rents issue a central plank in the platforms of Labour candidates in the impending General Election. "If Labour wins, the tenants will win", said John Wheatley and Davis Kirkwood. James Stewart in St. Rollox, James Maxton in Bridgeton, McDougall in Tradeston, Kirkwood in Dumbarton Burghs (which included Clydebank), Wheatley in Shettleston - all had the rents issue as a central plank in their platforms. The result is well known - the I.L.P. won 10 seats in Glasgow alone, with Kirkwood running away with Dumbarton Burghs with a 7, 290 majority. Further, four I.L.P. Councillors were elected in Clydebank, plus Andrew Leiper as an Independent.

At the beginning of 1923, the I.L.P. argued that tenants who had paid the increased rent were entitled to get the increases back, as they were illegal. Those tenants were urged not to pay any more rent until the amount represented by the increases had been eaten up. Other tenants - probably most - tendered only the "standard rent", the unincreased rent at the 1914 level. Some paid the "standard rent" but put the increases aside against new legislation. Others again refused to pay any rent at all until the legal situation was clarified, while there were clearly a few who took advantage of the situation and just abandoned the idea of paying any rent at all. It is hard to estimate the number of people who were involved in the Rent Strike at this period, but it was clearly a few thousands of tenants, rather than hundreds.

The Government was clearly worried by this situation, and appointed yet another Committee to look into the whole business of rent control. This Committee, the "Onslow Committee", recommended that the rent increases permitted under the 1920 Act be allowed, and that rent restriction be ended, but not immediately. It also recommended that the increases be made payable retrospectively from December 1, 1922. These proposals resulted in uproar from the Labour M.P.'s in the House of Commons. The subsequent Rent Restriction Act appeared in June 1923, basically containing the proposals of the Onslow Committee. (It is important to stress that the increases were payable retrospectively only to December of the previous year. Some Clydebank people erroneously

think that the increases were made payable right back to the end of the War). But throughout the year, Davie Kirkwood was calling on his constituents to "pay no rent", and to raise "home guards" against eviction. As the Act didn't give the factors the scale of increase in rent which they wanted, and as many tenants were still on rent strike, and many more didn't have the money to pay their arrears, the factors resorted to their traditional weapon: eviction.

At this juncture, we can now let Clydebank tenants of the period take up the story in their own words. We start with the origins of the strike. (*)

"THE CLYDE RENT WAR!"

Mr. Claude Lambie:

The rent strike started as a result of the evictions - the eviction decrees that the landlords were starting to take into court... The 1920 Act laid it down that where a valid notice of removal was sent the landlord was entitled to impose a new contract, he was entitled to increase his rent. But he had to terminate his old contract first. So they put up their defence: 'No valid notice to quit - Kerr v. Bryde.' And said Dougal Bryde was an old man doon one o' the side streets doon by Bon Accord Street. But that case went right on and on until it went to the House of Lords, and we won.

S.D.:

What was the case about, Mr. Lambie?

Mr. Lambie:

In the 1920's increase, they couldn't increase the rent unless they terminated the contractual tenancy that existed by 'Tacit Relocation' - I don't know if you understand that one - an agreement existed and by Tacit Relocation it kept on and on until terminated. And the termination medium was a Notice of Removal.

S.D.:

Yes. Which had to be legally valid?

Mr. Lambie:

Yes. A valid notice. So the first defence was 'No valid notice'. And the Kerr v. Bryde case went on from there.

In passing, Mr. Lambie was a twenty-three year old unemployed riveter, and ex-serviceman in 1922. A woman who was four at the time recalls it thus:

Mrs. Cathy Black:

Well the issue in my memory at that time - and you've got to remember that I wasn't even at school at this time - the issue in my memory was about houses that had a rent on them and that rent, which I now realise was a controlled and decontrolled, that rent when the houses were coming vacant, they put the rent up again before the next tenant came in. And when the tenant got the missive for the house their rent was higher than the rent of the tenants' rents. And this went on and on because there was a number of houses vacant. And I realised at this time that anyone coming into these houses must be made to understand that they don't pay a higher rent than the tenants that were in the house previously.

This was made unmistakably clear to incomers:

Mrs. Jenny Nyslop:

It used to be that you'd pay a month's rent in advance, but when I came to Clydebank and took this particular house - as I say, the neighbours chinned me right away - that the rent was such and such, not what he was going to charge me, you see. So, I don't like paying rent, but you've got to! But anyhow, I said, "Oh well, that suits me fine. I'm not paying the extra rent." Well, he took me to court - took us to court.

On the flaw in the law:

Mr. John Gillespie:

A rent act was passed by Government - and an Old Kilpatrick lawyer, I think Leachman was his name, he thought he'd found a loophole in the Rents Act and he said that only the 1914 rent applied. So a Dalmeir man, Andrew Leiper - he was an apostle of Farnell, you know, the Irish reformist - so Andrew took the question up.

(*) All the subsequent quotations are taken from tape-recorded interviews with tenants.

Mr. John Gillespie: He formed a wee rent committee and at no time was 'pay no rent' advocated, it was pay the 1914 rent. There was Kirkwood, Maxton, every hamlet in Britain, they all jumped on the bandwagon! Anti-parliamentarians, anarchists, nihilists, everybody, all converged on Clydebank.

Mr. Sinclair recalls Andrew Leiper well, as he lived in the same street.

Mr. Sinclair: ... Mr. Leiper's house was a single end. But it was like an office. And he had all the data concerning housing - the Acts that should have been fulfilled by the factors, which they ignored. Such as... a factor should decorate a house before a new tenant came in. And they must leave a bed, that's the time of the bed-boards and straw mattresses. They had to leave that or renew it. Then came the controlled rents and the decontrolled rents. Well, he had all that at his finger-tips. And when it started with the factors going to decontrol them... he took out a blackboard into Stewart Street - he lived in Stewart Street. And he wrote it all down and tried to explain to the people, who owed money, who the factor owed money to. Which meant that if you withheld rent you either had to pay it, or the factor would have to give you a rebate. And all this was done on the board, and then they formed the Housing Association against the factors. So my father then was the secretary.

Then the evictions started. And so did mass resistance:

Mr. Johnnie McCaffery:

But as soon as it became known, the people concerned or the neighbours weren't long in raising the alarm when an eviction was to take place. They knew in advance in most cases when it was taking place. And if there was sufficient time they got the band out - the band attached to the National Unemployed Workers Movement. We rounded up as many of the band as we could at short notice and marched to the scene of the eviction. Very often the band wasn't there, but they all got word round and went to the scene of the eviction with a chair or a stool or something to stand on, and we would denounce those who were responsible for the eviction. And when the Sheriff's Officers came along to carry out the evictions the house was crammed. And they were unable to carry out an eviction. There must have been times when the evictions were carried out, but there again my memory may not be serving me very well. But I can't remember any case where evictions were actually carried out.

That NUWM band is very well remembered in Clydebank.

SICK CHILD PROTECTS A FAMILY



Clydebank mothers and children happy at an unsuccessful Eviction attempt.



(left to right) Provost Robertson, Mr Neil McLean, M.P., and Mr Duncan Graham, M.P., at Clydebank Municipal Buildings, where Provost Robertson was in conference with the authorities.

INCIDENTS AT

THE BIG RENT STRIKE

AT CLYDEBANK



Robert Miller, an unemployed official, is addressing the rent strikers. The crowds paraded before the Municipal Buildings.



The Vigilantes get their tea after a night patrol.



Claude Lambie at the time of the Rent Strike.



Andrew Leiper at the time of the Rent Strike.

Mr. Willie
Murphy:

Right, what I can remember as a boy was marching behind the NUMM band, you know, the National Unemployed Workers Movement Band. Whenever there was any trouble, that is to say when there was any people liable to be getting thrown out, they all congregated, especially the women, as you say, and the children, us... the boys and that. And when the bailiffs came up, they used tae come up in a big lorry, a horse-drawn lorry, by the way. They used tae get the use of a coalman's horse and cart, and we used tae say: "Don't buy coal off him again".

S.D.:

Why did they come in a lorry?

Mr. Murphy:

Tae fling some of the furniture out, and they thought they could remove everyone's possessions, you know. So, before this happened the people had been warned that they were being evicted and used tae come in - some of them didnae - they resented it, some of them wanted the law to take due process, more or less. They didn't want involved in any fights and things like that. They didn't barricade themselves in - the idea was to barricade the doors and barricade the windaes. But those who didn't allow this to happen, usually their stuff did come out. The bailiffs pulled it out, but the militants outside - whether the people in the house liked it or not, the people who were being ejected, you know - whether they liked it or not, it was going back in again. And so you had a sort of - you had the women running about. I remember this woman, she said: "Leave the stuff alone, let the man take it away, I don't want any trouble", you know, things like that. Then these others that allowed - that fought, fought against it, you know - actually allowed their houses to be barricaded up.

One of the housewife's leaders remembers this type of organisation:

Mrs. Byslop:

Well, whenever we knew there was an eviction on and the Sheriff's Officer was coming, I had a big bell - not a wee toasty thing like that, but a great big bell. And I just out and rang the bell and everything was dropped. And we set the Sheriff Officers. Sometimes we discussed the matter through the letter-box, we didnae let them in the house. But our aim was to prevent an eviction and we were very successful.

S.D.:

Yes. Now, who's "we"?

Mrs. Hyslop: The people around the tenant. I mean, the women folks came out - it didnae matter if it was dinner time and hubby was coming home for his dinner - there was a possibility of an eviction, so hubby would have to wait. And we could marshal a big number of women. And there was one or two - as a matter of fact it was Marshall Love (*) who was the main Sheriff Officer who used to come. And he told us, he just didn't like coming to Clydebank, because it was the only place where he had organised opposition.

Another woman had similar memories:

Mrs. Pickles: Oh I knew everything about it. Leiper - he was the leader. He led the people and we demonstrated on the streets. And we had meetings everywhere and had social evenings as well to try and get the money. And I was in that Strike for ages.

S.D.: You were supporting it?

Mrs. Pickles: Oh, yes. I was walking in the streets. See. I'm a socialist.... I was a member of the I.L.P. while it existed in Clydebank....

S.D.: Now, when you were out demonstrating with Andrew Leiper, what were you demonstrating about? What was the issue?

Mrs. Pickles: We were demonstrating about the rents. They were increasing the rents....and we didn't want this increase and we werenae going to have it... I've been in terrible demonstrations. And my husband had to come in and do the work...

S.D.: Now, what sort of tactics was Leiper using? How did you conduct the Strike?

Mrs. Pickles: Well, we went out speaking on the street corners, we had social evenings, and we had the propagandas there at the social event. You know, in the middle of it, we had a wee talk...

S.D.: Tell me exactly what would happen if a neighbour was going to be evicted. What would the people do?

Mrs. Pickles: Well, you got together. We had a trumpet and we blew the trumpet and got the bell rung so they would know that an eviction was on. And we all got ready and ran out to protect the man, he got protection. They didnae evict many folk in Clydebank.

(*) The Glasgow firm of Sheriff Officers, Marshall Love, was the outfit responsible for many of the Clydebank evictions. They were bitterly detested.

More on the organisation of the resistance:

Mr. Gillespie: So the NUMW, the National Unemployed Workers Movement - it was hell of an active - they were the driving force. The Rent Strike would never have become known unless for the NUMW. Andrew Leiper was looking after the administrative side, and we were in the NUMW. So we decided tae look after the other side. People were getting evicted and we decided tae stop the evictions. Of course, we knew we couldnae stop them, but what we did was - oh, we'd a great movement - the shopkeepers gave us free grub, beef and all the rest of it, and a lot of Labour women, they cooked the grub in the ILP rooms, and we sent out an SOS for bikes. The bicycles came pouring in, so we formed a bicycle-patrol. They patrolled the boundary and when any Sheriff Officer - see there werenae too many motor cars on the road then - and when the Sheriff's Officer came in the bloke cycled down and told us over here. We got to know who they were going to evict, so crowds gathered in the place, filled up the closes, went intae the houses, barricaded them up and the Sheriff Officers had tae retire, and they had a police escort. But some people were evicted that couldnae pay any rent. It was a Labour Town Council - a Labour Government and a Labour Town Council. So the Labour Town Council, they didnae want to defy Ramsay's crowd, (*) you see, but they were terrible sympathetic towards us. So some of the people who were evicted - we persuaded the council tae give them tents tae live in. So we put up tents. And I went down to see the tents and it was bloody freezing and the men and women were in them. So I went back to the council again and persuaded them tae buy railway carriages. Well, they bought the railway carriages and the people were kind of more sheltered.

The woman quoted earlier again recalls this from her early childhood:

(*) i.e. Ramsay MacDonald, the Labour Prime Minister.

Mrs. Black:

... actually my first realization of 'there is a working class you belong to' was Sheriff Officers coming round with bowler hats and other men, and in the streets my father and quite a number of them came out and they had a big bell that the milkman used to ring, and ring this bell and all the working people gathered - women and all. And they would barricade a house and stand round the close, stand in the stairway not to allow the Sheriff Officers to come in. They'd come even at 9 o'clock at night. You had to put a 24 hour vigil on - not one house - but numerous houses in a very small area. And some people did get evicted. Just across the canal was a big park, McLean's Park, and I've got very vivid memories of going with my father and Johnny Monaghan and Johnny Monaghan's son, on a Sunday morning, across to McLean's Park where they lived in bell tents - families and children, in the winter time, snow and ice and everything else. Even the butcher's in Dalmut on a Saturday night used to hold back the bones and my mother and her friends collected the bones and made soup to take across to McLean's Park on a Sunday.

But the resistance continued, more and more imaginatively:

Mr. Lambie:

When an eviction decree was granted, it's granted 0/1, 0/2, 0/3.

S.D.:

What does that mean?

Mr. Lambie:

The close, first door, second door, third door, 0/1, 0/2, 0/3, and your name on the door. So when an eviction decree is granted it's granted against your house. Mrs. - we'll say Mrs. Hyslop, 0/1. And there were two women in this - there was one in the close 0/1, that was the first door on the left hand side going in. And that was Mrs. Hyslop. So we took Hyslop's name-plate off 0/1 and we put them on McEwan's 1/1. And when the Sheriff Officer... arrived, we changed the woman. We didn't change the furniture, we changed the woman. And when the Sheriff Officer came, we'd go to the door and he'd say: "Mrs Hyslop?" "No, I'm Mrs. McEwan". Then he'd go up the stair, knock at the door "Mrs. McEwan?" "No, I'm Mrs. Hyslop" So, that was then bugged. So they'd go back to the court and get it changed and of course the people just changed back again and when he came back it was no bloody good again. That was the Vigilantes that were doing this. That was one. Now when they did succeed, they took the doors and windows off. So we started a scheme that we went to all the builders and we bought up windows...

Mr. Lambie:

..as soon as the Sheriff Officer put them out we put the stuff back in again and we got the windows and the doors back on again - not the same ones, the ones we had. So that was another way. So they had to go (to court) again... This is the sort of thing that was going on. And over and above that we had the people with the bells. The streets were jammed - all the streets. The people were more revolutionary than.

There were odd arrests, and on one occasion some tenants decided to sort out a local joiner who was working with the Bailiffs on evictions.

Mr. Gillespie:

There were arrests made. One wee bloke got three months - a very quiet, very inoffensive man - it was his windows which were taken out. And he was charged with obstruction and all the rest of it. There was this fellow Logie that took the doors down and removed the windows - there was a wee plot getting hatched to blow up his workshop. Well, I put the boms on that. They were all out there with dynamite and -

S.D.:

- Is this the Sheriff Officer's Workshop?

Mr. Gillespie:

No, Logie - the joiner.

S.D.:

Oh, I see - that had taken the windows out?

Mr. Gillespie:

The man that took the windows out, yes.

S.D.:

They were going to blow his shop up?!

Mr. Gillespie:

Oh, they were going to blow his shop up, yes!

But in fact, although a few hot-heads may have been going to dynamite the blackleg joiner's shop, and while there were a few arrests, on the whole, these mass pickets were non-violent. The range of tactics the tenants used against evictions infuriated the factors, who would have liked to have seen the whole crowd locked-up. But a Clydebank policeman at the period put it like this:

S.D.:

In general terms, Mr. Henry, how did the police view the rent strike and the rent strikers?

Mr. Charlie Henry: Well the rent strike, I mean, they weren't interested as far as not paying the rent. It didn't affect them. That was a civil action between the factor, the owner of the property, and the occupier.

S.D.: So, are you saying that the police didn't see this as a serious criminal matter?

Mr. Henry: No. The prosecutions had to be taken as a private prosecution. The only time that the police would be involved was if the factor came along and said: "Look I evicted X, he's back in the house."

The situation worsened through 1924 into 1925. It was so bad that the Labour Secretary for Scotland, Willie Adamson, made several personal visits to Clydebank to negotiate with the factors and the Housing Association. Mr. Gillespie among others feels that the Labour Government was thoroughly embarrassed by the whole situation and that Adamson had ordered the Police to go easy on tenants resisting eviction. But the politics of the situation began to change. In Parliament, Tory M.P.'s were giving the Clydeside Labour M.P.'s a hard time for encouraging tenants to break the law. Kirkwood in particular was attacked for telling the tenants to 'pay no rent', and resist eviction. Kirkwood began to bluster, but in fact this is precisely what he had said. A Dalmuir man remembers it distinctly:

Mr. Docherty: Well I always remember him getting up - he was up on a small box - and he was saying 'Pay No Rent', you see.

Further, John Wheatley had been having a lot of trouble getting his own Housing Act through Parliament, and had had to abandon ideas of radical legislation to prevent eviction.

The situation was not helped by the stubborn stand taken by Andrew Leiper and his colleagues in the Clydebank Housing Association. Although a constituent branch of the Scottish Labour Housing Association, Leiper argued that it was a "non-party" Association, meaning not affiliated to any political party. Needless to say, this enraged local socialists. Further, Leiper had organised a "Rent Control"

fund, whereby he encouraged tenants to pay "standard rent" into this fund which was then put in the Bank. Local activists again attacked this as a stupid tactic, arguing that some rent increases were inevitable, and that these funds would be seized by the factors to pay off arrears. But the people who hated Leiper the most were the factors. It was his stand on a total return to standard rents which infuriated them. Further, and curiously - given his insistence that the Clydebank Housing Association was "non-party" - there was his demand that the Town Council "expropriate" (seize without compensation) all the local tenements, as the factors were unable or unwilling to run them for the benefit of the people. Clydebank Town Council was also embarrassed. The Burgh was owed over £24,000 in rates arrears for 1924 which the factors had said they were unable to pay, as the tenants were paying little or no rent. The Town Council had established a Committee, containing representatives of factors and tenants, to negotiate cases where there was hardship of arrears. This wasn't working, as it was plainly seen by the factors as a method of getting as much out of the tenants as possible. This wasn't acceptable to the I.L.P. Councillors.

So 1925 started with more evictions and more re-instatements of tenants. A Dalmuir man remembers it well. (He is talking about the evictions of a neighbour).

Mr. Docherty:

The Sheriff Officer came with two men and maybe half a dozen policemen. He just went in, forced the door open - if the door wasn't open, he forced it open. All her stuff and all her furniture was put in the back court - just as if it was yesterday I remember it - on the back court, the door was nailed up, and that was her out... Then things got from bad to worse. It was evictions nearly every day... There was a Committee formed - and one of the nicest fellows, he might have been a Communist - a Mr. Monaghan his name was... (*) And actually he was a gentleman - tall fellow, slightly stooped, spoke meekly, tried to reason with the Sheriff Officers. He formed a Committee, you see... The Police were all lined up. The Sheriff Officer came along - you know, bowler hat on. Mr. Monaghan approached them - "Please, what about letting this go?" "No, we can't". Up the stairs, battered the door, burst their way in. They'd come down with an old wardrobe, put the wardrobe out.

(*) Johnnie Monaghan was in fact a Communist Party activist.

Mr. Docherty:

Come down with the chest of drawers - that went out. And then the crowds - twelve policemen could easily handle two hundred civilians in these days because people were scared of the law.

Things did indeed go from bad to worse, with Press photographers and reporters getting beaten up by tenants, large numbers of police from the County force being drafted in, and more pickets being arrested. The Government's response at the end of January 1925 was to appoint a Commission under Lord Constable:

"To inquire and report on the economic and other difficulties in carrying out the provisions of the Rent Restriction Act which have arisen in some districts of Scotland, with a view to more efficient working during the continuation of said Acts, and to simplifications of them."

The "some districts" of Scotland were essentially Glasgow and particularly Clydebank. The tenants' representative on the Commission was Councillor Paddy Dollan of Glasgow. The Constable Commission's Report appeared towards the end of May. The Report alleged that there was a spirit of conciliation in the air. It said that many tenants were totally confused about what rent they did owe. Several Labour Party Councillors and officials were reported to have accepted the need to put an end to the endless "dog-fighting", while the point was also made that in these hard times, owners and factors must be prepared to make some sacrifices, and tenants who were unemployed should not have "extreme measures" taken against them. The main Recommendations of the Committee were that an amending Act be passed to refer to Scotland alone, allowing an overall increase of rent, and that this Act should simplify the procedure of the Notice of Increase of Rent. Further, the Courts should be empowered to take the circumstances of tenants into account when hearing eviction actions. Paddy Dollan issued a lengthy Minority Report disagreeing in emphasis from the majority on the Committee but actually agreeing that a new Act should be passed to put an end to the litigation. (*)

(*) Dollan's Minority Report was printed as an I.L.P. pamphlet with the title: "The Clyde Rent War!"

But he did want rent control continued for another ten years, and the rents of controlled houses immediately reduced by 25%. It is worth noting that several Clydebank tenants, in evidence to the Commission, reported that they could not afford the rents. They estimated that it took £3/9/0d per week to feed a family of four - while the Old Kilpatrick Parish Council allowance for a family of four - the highest in Scotland - was £1/14/6d per week.

This Report signalled the beginning of the end of the Rent Strike. It really said nothing about the political and economic issues underlying the private ownership of working class housing and the need for rapid and large-scale State provision of such housing, as continuously argued for by Wheatley. It did not face up to the issue that for many Clydebank tenants, the increased rents were unacceptable both on economic and legal grounds. The Report in fact served to defuse the struggle in a clever way. Kirkwood had always argued that the Clydebank tenants were not paying the increased rent because they could not afford it. The Commission got an economist from Glasgow University to survey Clydebank, and he reported that the hardships in Clydebank were real, but no worse than in Port Glasgow, or in Anderston in Glasgow. So the Clydebank tenants could not argue that they had a special case in terms of lack of money. This had the effect of forcing Kirkwood on the defensive, and gradually coming to the position of asking tenants to pay the legal rent, whereas before he had said pay no rent, or only the 1914 level of rent. In other words, if the Courts changed their minds on Kerr vs. Bryde, and made a higher rent legal, then Kirkwood was telling his constituents to pay it.

The factors saw the Report as supporting their position, and slowly began to step up the evictions. Clydebank Town Council held a stormy meeting in which the movement to resist increases was shattered, with contradictory resolutions and accusations flying about. Andrew Leiper and the Housing Association representatives walked out. The evictions were stepped up. By about November, Leiper, in the Sheriff Court, rather than fighting eviction cases on the invalidity of the factors' 'Notices of Increase' of rent, was simply asking for continuation so that the tenants could make some deal with the factors about paying off the arrears.

The final blow for tenants' morale came at the beginning of December 1925, when the Clydebank Press printed a crawling and abject letter from MacAlpine's tenants in the Holy City. They pledged themselves to do their utmost to pay their arrears of rent, and the increased rent. MacAlpine's lawyer accepted this, but imposed crippling conditions on the tenants. This sell-out resulted in bitter recriminations, including a letter from Leiper attacking the MacAlpine tenants, and further letters attacking him. The factors rubbed in their victory by evicting six families on Hogmanay. This had all come about because MacAlpine's tenants were in the main workers at Singer's. And in what was quite clearly a set-up job with Singer's, MacAlpine's the Factors said that they would go after arrestment of wages if the tenants did not pay-off their arrears. Although the tenants capitulated to this pressure, the Housing Association did not. Mr. Lambie, representing the Clydebank Housing Association, went to London to see the Scottish Secretary about this. David Kirkwood refused to accompany him, presumably because the stubborn stand of the Association against any rent increase was a political embarrassment. Mr. Lambie recalls the occasion:

Mr. Lambie:

Joe Sullivan (*) got me the interview and I went in and I had my brief case with all the summonses, and I stated my case. And of course the Secretary for Scotland said, "You'll understand, young man, that where you come from is just one little minute speck in this great British Empire". So I started to get rid of my shyness and backwardness, and I said, "For the people I represent just now it's their world". I said, "All the great surround that you talk about is nothing to them. That is their world". And of course I had given him some papers - a sort of précis of evidence. He said, "Give us about a quarter of an hour, twenty minutes to come back and see you." Well, they came back and they said that I was talking nonsense. That was the finest fillip I ever had in my life. I knew I was talking the truth. I'd just come from people that were literally on the verge of suicide, because they had lost their jobs at Singer's. So I just took out - I hadn't told them I had the summonses and all that there - I just took out a bundle of them and I didn't hand them over, I threw them at one of the bloody legal men who said I was talking nonsense - and I just threw the bloody things at him.

(*) Joe Sullivan was the Labour M.P. for Bothwell.

Mr. Lambie:

I said, "You just read that and tell me who's talking nonsense." And that was the finish.

It wasn't the finish but it very nearly was. A critical decision was made in an Appeal to the Court of Session. In this case, the Marshall case, (*) the tenant had not been paying the increases on standard rent on the usual grounds that the Notice of Increase forms were legally invalid. But the Court ruled that the Notices were as legally valid as it was possible to make them, and called upon Sheriffs to interpret the law in their own words - "benignantly and not malignantly". In other words, the Court of Session was telling the Dumbarton Sheriff Court that the law really meant the factors to get their increased rent, and to stop finding cases for tenants on the basis of the Kerr vs. Bryde decision, or any other ingenious defence which Leiper and Cormack could dream up.

Mr. Sinclair's father, the Housing Association Secretary, worked in Singer's as a turner, and was also threatened with arrestment of wages if he did not pay off his arrears. In the event, after another Court of Session Case, he had to pay arrears off at a rate of 1/- per week. Mr. Sinclair remembers that this took several years.

Mr. Sinclair:

Well, they took my father to Court and made an agreement how much he could pay a week. It was a shilling. And it took - oh I mind well, I was only twelve then - I can mind I was working in the same place as my father and my father said, "Well that's the rent clear."

E.D.:

When would that be?

Mr. Sinclair:

Well, I started work in 1925, it must have been '28 or '29.

E.D.:

Did your father withhold all the rent?

Mr. Sinclair:

All the rent, aye.

(*) Mr. Frank Marshall was active in the N.U.W.M. Vigilance Committee.

The factors began to take more cases to the Court of Session in Edinburgh, and now, in 1926 and early 1927, the Court was consistently finding in their favour.

Then on July 21st, 1927, Andrew Leiper was knocked down by a car, was badly injured, and died in the Glasgow Western Infirmary on August 9th. The factors capitalised on Leiper's death very quickly. They said that now that Leiper had gone, the Housing Association was finished, and promptly served 48 hours Notices of Removal on a large number of tenants in the Radnor Park area of Clydebank.

To all intents and purposes, this was the end of the Rent Strike, although the Housing Association continued fighting cases, including another lost Appeal to the Court of Session, until at least the end of the year. The NUMM, which had provided so many of the Vigilantes, continued to fight rent cases, particularly for their members, right up into the 1930's. Mr. Finlay Hart, a Communist Party militant, on returning to Clydebank in 1928, defended numerous cases in Dumbarton Sheriff Court, which had their origins in arrears contracted during the Rent Strike. As Finlay puts it:

Mr. Hart: There was as much as £100 arrears of Rent - a staggering figure for the period. For many people the only way out was a moonlight. Like many others, I helped in this process.

The NUMM continued to resist evictions until the mid 1930's although on a much reduced scale compared with the heyday of the Rent Strike. By this time, industry was retooling for the impending War, and the worst effects of the Depression were over.

SUMMING UP

In summing up, we must ask: who led the Rent Strike? The quick answer is - no one group or person. It was a genuinely popular struggle. I think that there were three distinct strands in the organisation of the Strike. Firstly, there were local women, housewives, socialists, like Mrs. Hyslop and Mrs. Pickles, organised in the I.L.P. and/or the Co-operative Women's Guild. They organised and fought against

evictions. They led the overnight bicycle patrols of the Vigilantes, and took in or helped their evicted neighbours. They endured. I can find nothing critical to say about them!

Secondly, there was the National Unemployed Workers Movement. This was a militant movement, which organised the Vigilantes, propagandised the Rent Strike, and fought evictions. While the NUMM was openly more political - socialist and communist - than the Housing Association, it failed at the end of the day to organize a successful political campaign around the rents issue. This was probably due to the fact that its main purpose was, of course, campaigning around unemployment. At least half of the people who originally set up the NUMM in 1920/21 were, or had been, S.L.P. members. While fighting evictions, they also used the issue to make propaganda for socialism.

Finally, there was the Clydebank Housing Association, which clearly started the Rent Strike, organised the collection of money, and fought Court cases for the tenants. Its failure was to deny the necessity for a political rather than a legal struggle. Its own politics were populist rather than socialist.

Working class tenants of Clydebank who went through the Rent Strike remember it in different ways, usually according to which of the three strands with which they were associated, although all have strong memories of solidarity. Mrs. Hyslop remembers the strength of the women.

S.D.: ... and if you were to try and sum up the Rent Strike period's most outstanding characteristic for you, what would it be?

Mrs. Hyslop: Oh, I think it would be the unity of the women folks. Because, as I say, the bell would go and they were there, even if it was dinner time and the men were coming home from their work.

Mr. Gillespie, socialist and NUMM activist, points to the connection between the socialist tradition in Clydebank and the spontaneous resistance by tenants against the factors:

This was a great socialist town - there were S.L.P.ers, I.L.P.ers, Labour women - even the British Legion and shop-keepers supported us. And of course, young C.P. members in the NUM were the driving force. The people - they weren't socialists - but a great support came from the ordinary people. You know, the Scots and Irish - "Here's the rent collector coming, hand me down my blunderbuss!" - you know that carry-on. Scottish people have been famous for being anti-rent. Rent's a bug-bear, you know.

On the other hand, Mr. McCafferty, also a NUM member, feels that the Rent Strike was to do with tenants defending their standard of living:

S.D.: ... what do you think in retrospect was the most striking characteristic of the rent struggle in Clydebank in those years? What was its most successful feature?

Mr. McCafferty: Well, it made it extraordinarily difficult for any attempts to increase rents. And the people were really on the defensive the whole time in those days. And the defensive action that was taken, demonstrations, resistance to eviction, strikes - nobody was working, you couldn't strike - it was just a defensive action against the onslaught. If these actions, these reactions had not taken place, the plight of the people would have been much worse than it actually was.

For Willie Murphy the outcome was political.

Mr. Murphy: The Rent Strike held the people together. Since then, Clydebank has always been a strong Labour area. I believe that's what caused it.

Perhaps the last word on the Rent Strike from a local who lived through it could be left to the indomitable Mr. Lambie, of the Clydebank Housing Association.

S.D.: What did you learn from it? What was important about it?

Mr. Lambie: I became a man. I became a man who knew where I belonged in society - that's in the gutter. And I don't - knowing that I'm born of the same clay as the rest of them - I decided that my life's job would be to do all that I could to see that those who took the cream off the milk would get buggar-all but a bullet as far as I was concerned! And that's the conclusion I'm at now.

CONCLUSION

Was the Clydebank Rent Strike of the 1920's a success or a failure? If we take it at this level it can be seen that the Rent Strike achieved a considerable degree of success insofar as large numbers of Clydebank working class tenants paid only standard rent - or less - right up to, and in some cases beyond, 1927. Finlay Hart, who represented tenants in arrears from the Rent Strike from 1928 onwards, remembers that the factors would often waive the increases in rent authorised by the Act, and would settle for the arrears of standard rent. Settlements - deals - were made, and these were explicitly encouraged by the Dumbarton Sheriff Court. Clearly some tenants would be bullied into paying substantial - or all - arrears, but whether this number was large is doubtful. The factors had to face the reality of mass unemployment, and would clearly prefer to have something rather than nothing.

The Rent Strike could be judged to have been a failure insofar as the Clydebank tenants failed to broaden it. But this was not for want of trying. Speakers, including Mr. Gillespie, went all over Scotland seeking support. And some were evicted. I do not yet know the total number, but it is in the dozens. Needless to say, most of the militants were evicted - as in the case of Mr. Lambie and Mr. Marshall, who wound up living in the tented colonies mentioned earlier - and also Mr. Bryde of Kerr vs. Bryde. Mr. Marshall remembers his childhood experience there well:

Mr. Matt Marshall: ... Well, we stayed there very nearly a year. Because we came through the winter time, and when you got up in the morning the pail of water would be frozen. But we had quite a family and lying all together it was a case of the heat you produced kept you sort of warm... We came through it the hard way, there's no doubt about it... But the hardest thing of all was getting up in the winter time and melting the blooming pail of ice!

And Mrs. Pickles remembered that the factors had long memories:

Mrs. Pickles: I had a daughter getting married and I was looking for a house and I went to my factor. He widnae take her.

S.D.: Why was that?

Mrs. Pickles: 'Cause I was in the Rent Strike. They get to know, you know!

The problem was that the legal decisions backing the tenants' case were given in the Dumbarton Sheriff Court, which covered Clydebank. This poses an interesting problem: why did Sheriff-Substitute Menzies give decisions which were so contrary to the mainstream of judgements in other Sheriffdoms? I can only deduce from reports in The Clydebank Press of various testy comments of his that he was not prepared to let his court become a cockpit for bad law drafted elsewhere. Mr. Lambie is also quite positive that the Sheriff was not unsympathetic to the poverty of many of the tenants appearing before him. The purely legal aspects of the Rent Strike in fact require more research. This is particularly important as it is unclear why the Court of Session begin to find for the factors, in 1926 and 1927, in cases identical to Kerr vs. Bryde of 1922, where it had found for the tenants.

Perhaps there is a very important lesson here, with implications for today: the working-class cannot expect to keep winning political demands in the Courts - because at the end of the day, as the old saying has it: "There's one law for the rich, and another for the poor".

But "success" or "failure" aside: in class terms, two most important gains came out of the Rent Strike. In the first place, it formed the launching pad which shot the Red Clydeside M.P.s into Parliament. And these men for years remained the socialist conscience of the Labour Party, and one of them, John Wheatley, was in my opinion, the most capable and brilliant of that generation of the Party. His 1924 Housing Act stands as a major stepping stone in the provision of State housing for the working class.

Secondly, the direct mass action of the Clydebank working class was most important in the continuation of rent control right up to the Second World War, and in modified form, afterwards. I have little doubt that rent control would have been removed in the 1920's or 1930's if the Clydebank tenants had not taken the action which they did. They forced the issue right into daily heated debate in Parliament, as the reports show. They also directly affected the State's legal institutions in two ways. Firstly, they used anti-working class legislation to their own advantage. The Clydebank tenants seized on the contradiction in the Notice of Increase and burst the Glasgow Property Owners and Factors Association's case wide open - right up to the House of Lords. Having for decades cynically used the letter of the law to their advantage, the factors were reduced to hypocritically rounding on the tenants for doing the same. Secondly, they made the 1920 Act unworkable for six or seven years in Clydebank, and questionable elsewhere on Clydeside. They forced the Government to take account of their standard of living: they refused to take further cuts in their standard of living at a time of mass unemployment.

The rents struggle was related fairly directly to the contemporary class struggle over housing. The whole point of rent control was to stop high rents being levied on small houses, the houses of the poor, of which there was a substantial shortage before and after the First World War. As the State did not really take up the issue of housing for the poorest tenants until the 1935 Housing Act, the struggle to maintain rent control was vital to the living standards of the poor. Thus the struggle of the Clydebank tenants was, in fact, a struggle for reasonable rents for all working-class tenants in Scotland. Their struggle contributed in no small way to the fact that Scottish council house rents have always been lower than in England. The traditions of the 1920's Rent Strike were not entirely lost, as Clydebank tenants were involved in post-war rent-strikes in 1958 and 1972.

What is clear is that at the height of the 1920's Rent Strike, the three main groupings were in constant contact, and worked together. They learned the lessons of solidarity through their common struggle, and that solidarity only weakened under constant and very subtle pressure from the State. In the gloom of Clydeside in the 1980's, with both Council housing and the standard of living of working class people again under savage attack, their courage and commitment should be a lesson to us all.

FURTHER READING

The key source of contemporary information about the Rent Strike is, of course, the local newspaper: The Clydebank Press. It provides coverage from 1920 to 1928, and is available in the Clydebank District Library.

MR KIRKWOOD, M.P., ADDRESSES CLYDEBANK RENT STRIKERS



Mr David Kirkwood, M.P., addressing a huge gathering of rent strikers at Dalnair at midday yesterday, when he asked those in a position to do so to pay their rents. The meeting dispensed after three cheers for "Kirkwood and settlement".

RENT STRIKE DEMONSTRATION AT GLASGOW GREEN

August 23rd 1920

