

THE CAMPAIGN FOR A LIVING WAGE, 23.6.14

Peter McColl (Greens), Alex Lunn (SNP)

Peter said the campaign originated in London, during the last Mayoral Election. The two major issues had been the Living Wage and Congestion Charges. The Living Wage campaign pointed out that the Minimum Wage was too low to live off, and some workers had to take three jobs to survive. The campaign commanded wide enough support that even the successful Tory candidate, Boris Johnson, bowed to this.

Then Maggie Chapman, Green councillor, took up the issue on Edinburgh City Council. The Liberal group opposed this, so it was not taken up. However, Glasgow Labour leader, Stephen Purcell took up the issue, and thus it came back on to the political agenda.

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he reason we need a Living Wage is because the Minimum Wage is far too low. The main form of poverty today, is poverty in work. This does not correspond to the *Daily Mail* view of the world. No do they point out that there are also fewer jobs than there are unemployed.

We need to transform the economy from its current model of a small percentage of super rich at the top - the London plutocrats – and a huge number of low-paid and relatively unskilled at the bottom; to one where there are many more well-paid and skilled jobs, with a more even income spread.

Things have got so bad that even George Osborne wants to lift the Minimum Wage. He is not doing this for any altruistic reasons, but because the state has to pay out so much to subsidised low wage employers. Boris Johnson supports higher wage levels for similar reasons.

I suggest a Living Wage level could be £14,000 p.a.

It is easier to force public rather than private sector employers to concede this. When the issue was raised at Edinburgh University, they backed down.

It needs community campaigns to back those inside workers inside low wage workplaces.

Alex is the SNP councillor for Craigentiny.

He said that when living in Gilmerton, where he had been brought up, he had been forced to sign on in 2001. He was told that if he wanted a flat he should move in with his girlfriend and try to find a job. He benefitted from the New Deal Scheme and was able to rent a flat in Albert Street. That would not be possible now.

His friend, Paul, has been working at Sainsburys at Cameron Toll since 1996. He rented a small house in The Inch. However, he can no longer afford to stay there, because rents have become so high. He has had to move out to Dalkeith, considerably further from his work. Paul is not on the Minimum Wage, but earns £12 an hour as a manager, yet he still can not afford to rent a flat in Edinburgh.

Alex still works 2 days a week at a local bank. His manager earns £19,000 p.a. but still faces considerable problems making ends meet.

Therefore, the Living Wage needs to be set at a proper rate. However, there also needs to be laws to control rent levels. Renting can be quite an attractive option. As a young person I did not want to shoulder the responsibility for repair. But the government also need to ensure there is affordable housing.

Eventually, my rent went up so much, I was forced to take out a mortgage, because it was £200 cheaper per month.

Therefore a Living Wage is not enough. It would be a useful symbolic event, a sign to employers that they had to take more care of their workers. However, we need housing controls as well.

Discussion

Eric said that the reason for escalating property prices and rents is all the money created by private banks. We needed a land value tax to prevent property prices from rising. Not only is property not properly taxed at the moment, but agricultural land received large subsidies from the EU, and the more property you have the more subsidies you get.

Pat said that poor people don't buy stocks and shares. They have to spend money on commodities and services. In the past, the way better pay and conditions were won was by workers in trade unions organising and exerting pressure. The way that rents were brought under control was through rent strikes. Social housing was a post-war gain. Rather than more affordable housing we needed more social housing.

Andy said there is a trade union dimension. He had worked in Macdonalds for 3 years. Here you are on the minimum wage and work up to 50 hours a week. It is very hard to try and organise under such conditions. You are so exhausted all you want to do after you have finished work is to go out and get pissed. The company's profits and our lives are in contradiction.

RIC hasn't gone out to workplaces and job centres. We should be doing this as part of the independence campaign.

Chris said that it possible to organise workers in such workplaces. In the School of Oriental and African Studies in London cleaners had won a Living Wage. They included many migrant workers. The Bakers Union has organised a Fast Food Rights campaign. It is targeting Macdonalds and Burger King.

However, these campaigns also need outside support. There is currently a campaign to organise some cinema workers in London. They are working for the same group, which owns the Cameo in Edinburgh. We could organise some solidarity support.

Aly said that £14,000 p.a. was too low a figure for a Living Wage. In Edinburgh is tough for a family to live on £20,000 p.a. and there is also very low pay in the public sector, particularly the NHS.

There has been a whole number of campaigns amongst low paid and particularly migrant workers in London. However, they have often faced obstruction and worse from trade union officials.

Stuart said that we should also be raising the issue of a Maximum Wage. Furthermore, there is a problem of unoccupied houses, only they are owned by the rich. We need redistribution too.

David said that another issue was Fuel Poverty. We could make more use of the Greenhouse Gases Reduction policy to push for the insulation of housing. Neither the private landlords nor the fuel companies have any incentive to do this. This will require a full scale campaign.

Richard said that rent controls will be opposed by private landlords. This is why we need more social housing to increase the pressure.

Willy said that Edinburgh is becoming more and more like London. If there is a little bit of a boom, then property prices will go up. Currently the Community Empowerment (CE) Bill is going through Holyrood. Companies have been involved in land banking on a massive scale. Land that is already owned by us has been put up for sale. This further contributes to rising property prices. Only the property companies can raise the development money at these prices, so a CE Act will have little effect.

If you go to Ferry Road Drive you can already see the difference between private and council rented housing. Those renting privately are paying £500 a month but get no house repairs. The roofs and roans are overgrown. However, councils can be forced to make improvements. We need to think about new ways of organising. The old IWW used music in its campaigns. Young people have become interested in the 'Yes' campaign. There was a meeting earlier this evening at Craigroyston School with 25 young people wanting to organise.

Callum said that the Living Wage was currently £9 an hour. However, there was also the problem of Zero Hours contracts

The SSP had been linking the Living Wage with Scottish independence in its campaigning. People had been asked where is this more likely to be passed - Westminster or Holyrood?

Allan said in reply to Willy on community empowerment, that to be effective, it would first need to be accompanied by the sort of land tax proposals, Eric had suggested. This would prevent property speculators hoarding unused land and property. Councils could also use land use zoning powers to ensure that land was reserved for housing or community uses.

Luke said that he worked at Macdonalds to help pay his way through university. Sometimes he had to work double shifts. This undermined his university course work.

He also thought we should be pushing for an agreed ratio between the maximum and minimum earnings in any particular company or public body. Furthermore, there should be guaranteed trade union representation at workplace level.

Jim said that taxation was also an issue. There was a real mismatch between the tax thresholds on Personal Tax set at £100,000 p.a. and National Insurance set at only £6000 p.a. The SNP had originally proposed the abolition of the Council Tax in 2007, and its replacement by a Local Income Tax, but this was opposed at the time. Westminster puts taxes into separate pots, and imposes different levels in each to hide the total taxation picture.

Peter replied that a Living Wage campaign could be a winner. There were indeed problems with official trade unions. Low paid workers occupying University College of London had found a sell-out agreement signed by UCL and UNISON. The levels of obstruction and

opposition mounted by some union officials had led to many cleaners and other low paid workers turning to unions like the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain in London.

There certainly needed to be a wealth tax on landlords. Rent controls are also needed.

Various European Directives offering some protection also need to be pursued.

To sum up – if Boris Johnson can be forced to concede a Living wage, then we can do this in Scotland. The battle begins on September 19th.

Alex replied by saying we need a mixture of social housing and affordable private housing. There were other things that needed to be brought under control to bring down the cost of living. Both the fuel companies and the railway companies should be nationalised.

There is indeed a problem with existing unions. Their officials don't share the problems of their members, Len McCluskey of UNITE earns over £120,000 p.a. There was also a case in another union, where the general secretary received a union loan at 1.7% interest to buy a second house in the Algarve.

Franklin Roosevelt and Clement Attlee are two of my heroes. Attlee was originally a Conservative supporter, but working in London's East End converted him to socialism. He was a doer. When senior civil servants said they wanted to go over some new government proposals with them, he replied that these weren't proposals but decisions already taken by the Cabinet, so get on with it.

Edinburgh has big problems with private landlords. There are also accidental landlords, who start to rent out flats because they can not sell them. They have no training and do not know what it involves. So, as well as regulation of landlords, we need training of landlords. If there is a 'No' vote in September. Cameron's Tories will walk over not only Scotland, but England too. Scottish independence can inspire workers in England.

I support a federal Scotland. Both Labour and the SNP are too centralist. More powers need to be devolved to a local level. Local councils should even have the powers to decide what form of taxation they use, just as states and cities do in the USA. Edinburgh could use a Sales Tax, to take advantage of the large number of tourists coming to the city.