

PART ONE

Drug Politics in Liverpool

a personal account

Allan Parry

Liverpool is Britain's only example of what can happen when drugs becomes a key political issue in a no-holds-barred confrontation between opposing ideologies. Cynical exploitation with drug users' welfare bottom of the agenda became the order of the day as Militant fought to retain its hold on Liverpool's voters. Allan Parry was at the heart of the health authority's response and before that of its bitter opponent, the Militant-dominated city council. This is the first part of his personal account of drug politics in Liverpool.

'LIVERPOOL WATCHERS' will remember the images on TV at the beginning of April as bitter Militant councillors and activists labelled the majority of Labour councillors 'class traitors' for voting through a budget which approved widespread redundancies.

But their real anger was in the realisation that Militant really had finally lost control of party policy in Liverpool and were being manoeuvred into committing political suicide by ignoring the party whip.

Not just the Militants are outraged by the proposed cuts. Among the people of Liverpool it is widely appreciated that the Labour council had no choice – but while the voters blame the Tories, Militant blame their comrades.

But there was hardly a murmur at this March's closure of the city council's Drug Liaison Office (DLO) with its nine full-time staff. Even the most rabid Militant knows that closure of the DLO is a very popular decision. There is to be no Militant-organised 'spontaneous' community campaign to save it.

Why would a local authority, arguably host to the worst drug problem in the UK, get rid of its drugs office? Surely a team of experts is needed by a city where almost any type of drug is widely available and where high quality heroin is sold at competitive prices in the thriving new 'street markets' springing up around the city?

But the response from nearly all of those involved in drug work in a tired city ranges from quiet relief to jubilation. Closure of

the DLO means the end of a 'drug service' that many feel has kept its local authority in the dark ages of prevention and drug education, and campaigned using every dirty trick in the book to undermine the local drugs/HIV services that have helped the area remain at the bottom of the national 'league table' for HIV rates among its local injectors.

The realisation is emerging that for ten years the local authority has not been fulfilling what should have been a major role in enabling the city to come to terms with its awesome drug-related problems. Preoccupied with their struggle to keep the city above water, fighting the Tories, and more recently fighting Militant, most 'moderate' Labour councillors simply accepted the views and reports from their now discredited drug unit.

It started in the early '80s when the unprecedented heroin 'epidemic' in Mersey-

side caught the Militant theorists with their analytical trousers down. At first their reaction was promising. How the party eventually opted for the simplistic 'off the shelf' view that it was all the fault of the Tories, and how its leaders' one-track political drive led them to op-

pose important health authority initiatives, is the subject of this two-part story.

Militant rattled

In 1983 I went to a public meeting in Croxteth called by the local Labour wards. It was packed. For the press Croxteth was now 'Smack City' (having beaten the former title holders, Wirral, in a television and newspaper play off!). Croxteth is the Militant power base in Liverpool. Local labour councillors usually received massive public support for their various fights with 'Thatcher'.

At this meeting, things weren't going as smoothly as usual. Usually loyal local supporters were screaming at the experts and councillors on the panel. "What the fuck are you doing about these drugs all the kids are using, they're all on the heroin and they're all going to die, aren't they?" There was desperation in the voices of parents, some of whose sons and daughters had sold everything in the house to buy heroin. Their panic was fuelled by grotesque media imagery of dying teenage junkies hooked after one smoke, of drug-crazed fiends prepared to murder to get that fix.

After the meeting local parents described their ordeals and fears to the much respected Militant MP Terry Fields. He listened intently, visibly unnerved at hav-

The author is a freelance consultant currently acting as a drugs/AIDS adviser to Mersey Regional Health Authority. Until last year he was the authority's HIV/Drugs Coordinator. From 1983-5 he headed the local authority-sponsored Merseyside Drug Education Training and Research Unit.

September 1984: "No apologies" from the *Liverpool Echo* as it puts a blowtorch to Mersey parents' fears over heroin.



No apologies: This is only the end of the beginning

Echo Comment

NEVER before has the Echo devoted so much space to a single issue as we have this week to the problem of drug abuse on Merseyside.

Never before has there been such an instant and overwhelming reaction to an Echo investigation.

Our pages made shocking, gloomy reading but they also touched a nerve among parents throughout our area.

Letters from drug users and from drug-blighted families began to arrive with the first post on Tuesday. The telephone of Peter Trollope, who led the Echo investigation, has scarcely been silent.

Many calls were moving but, without exception, they have contained messages of gratitude and of hope.

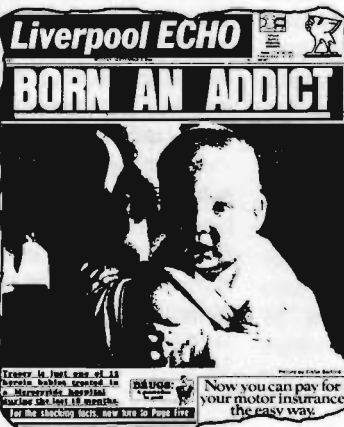
The mother of an 18-year-old Noc-torium youth whose son has been hooked on heroin for the last two years said: "Words cannot express the grati-tude I feel.

"For the last two years I have felt so terribly alone. Nobody seemed to care. I have spent thousands of pounds actually buying heroin for my son to try and control how much he takes and to try and get him off it and keep him out of trouble.

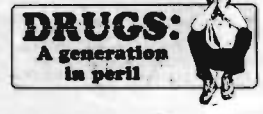
"They have been sheer hell. They have all but destroyed me, and then I saw the Echo this week. I cannot tell you how your courageous work has made me feel. You have given me hope and the inspiration to go on.

"I would ask every Wirral mother to support your campaign, after all, it could be their child next."

If this series achieves nothing else, it will have been worthwhile — a



The Echo Page One, Monday.



problem shared is not a problem cured — but it is a burden eased.

There is no doubt that publicity is the first step in countering drug abuse.

Our investigation has taken the problem out of the shadows; stripped it of the false glamour that immature young people sometimes mistakenly invest in drug taking.

But it is only the first step on a long road — and a road which no country or city has yet travelled with real success. In American cities, for example, where drug-taking years ago reached the level Merseyside is now approaching, none of the remedies tried from intensive policing to greater welfare help has proved the complete solution.

That is a cause for concern, but not a cause for despair.

One mother rang to say her son had broken down in tears when he read Monday's Echo and confessed he had been taking heroin.

"I was absolutely shattered. I couldn't believe it. He is seventeen. We sat down and talked and read the Echo all week and he told me he was going to stop. I am so grateful to the Echo because imagine what might have happened if I had not found out until it was too late. At least we can face the problem together now.

Merseyside police said in our series yesterday that drug abuse is a matter not just for them but for parents in particular and for the community as a whole.

They are right. Only parents and a community that co-operates with the police and that makes its disapproval of drug-taking crystal clear, can hope to turn back the tide.

Dr. Griffith Edwards, the head of the drug addiction research unit of the Institute of Psychiatry, has said: "In no country that I know of is drug use not related to culture and economics, to the state of the nation. If we don't get society right, heroin is going to be rife in the ghettos of our cities."

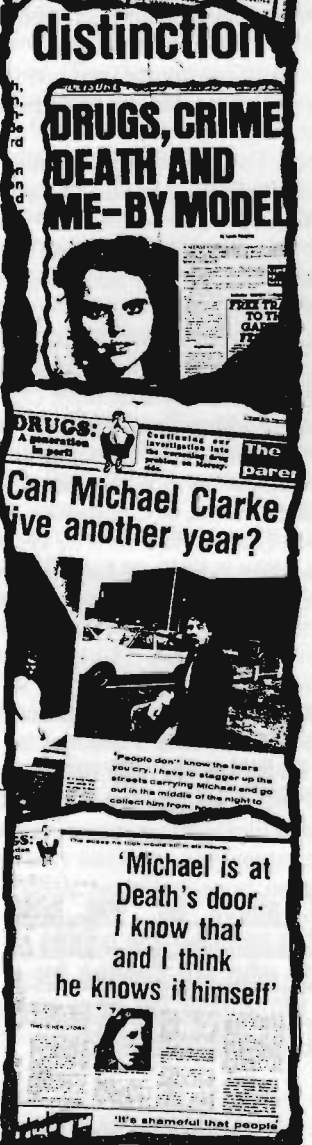
Authorities are slow to acknowledge a positive link between the hopelessness of unemployment, lack of education, poor living conditions and drug-taking coupled with crime to finance the addiction.

Commonsense says that, while drug abuse now permeates all levels of society, the boredom, aimlessness and the lack of self-respect of many of our young people makes easier the work of the drug merchants.

The Echo cannot change the country's economics. It cannot bring about alone and overnight the changes in society that are necessary to make tolerable the dole-queue world in which thousands of youngsters find themselves.

But, as we said on Monday, we would be letting down very badly baby Tracey — one of 12 born addicted to heroin at one Merseyside hospital — and other vulnerable youngsters like her if we merely reported on the drug problem for a week and left it at that.

We do not intend to let Tracey down. Turn the page and you will see the positive steps the Echo now plans.



Turn to next page

ing no remotely satisfactory answers. Asked what the party was doing about this issue, he admitted ignorance, but was now determined to tackle it. I offered to assist as I was once a chaotic user, had worked in the field, etc, and I was on the left of the party – essential if one wanted to be listened to at all.

Soon he'd contacted the Merseyside Trade Union and Unemployed Centre in Liverpool – which the party regarded as its 'community action' wing – asking them to shape a 'community' response to the issue. One of Militant's most experienced community activists, Phil Knibb, was to monitor the new venture.

Promising start

For the next few years I was convinced that, under its socialist leadership, I would witness Liverpool becoming a model of sound municipal planning leading to pragmatic, humane and effective drug policies and practices.

In 1983 'Degsy' Hatton (deputy leader of Liverpool city council and *de facto* in charge) and Tony 'Snapper' Jennings (leading Militant councillor responsible for protecting the DLO) allowed me a lead role in establishing the Merseyside Drug Education, Training and Research Unit (MDETRU) – a unique attempt by the regional and local trade union and labour movement to educate itself and draw up strategies for dealing with the dramatic escalation of heroin use.

Now heroin has come to Croxteth, like one of the plagues of Ancient Egypt, to add to the impact of mass unemployment, poor housing and poor standards of health.

But it has come, many people there feel, to a community that has already begun to fight back.

For Phil Knibb, still one of the leading figures in the running of Crocky Comp, there seems little doubt that the last two years—including the fight for the school and Liverpool's budget crisis—have raised the consciousness of local residents.

"People are much more aware of their environment—and they are prepared to fight back," he says.

And for Tony Jennings, the county councillor for Gillmoss Ward since 1981, the attempts of local people to organise against their heroin problem are part of the same process that began with the occupation of the school by parents in 1982.

"The turning point was the situation at the school," he says. "People really came together over that. Then there was the drug problem—there is no doubt that it is very big in Croxteth.

"But people have decided that they are not going to let their children suffer at the hands of the pushers."

At first everything went superbly. Training courses for shop stewards, councillors and party activists were very well attended; it seemed the trade union and labour movement locally had finally responded to its fear and confusion surrounding drugs. I made it clear that scaremongering was not on our agenda and that some painful truths had to be faced – that drugs are here to stay and that much of their fear had been generated by the media and by 'war on drugs' propagandists. It looked like a sensible political analysis would be arrived at and acted upon by the council.

Attempts to cash in on our drug problem were swiftly dealt with. In 1984 'professional fundraisers' conned a local drug agency into putting their name to a lottery to raise 'hundreds of thousands' of pounds for the agency. We soon discovered that the people responsible for this venture were notorious for their exorbitant 'administrative costs'.

The lottery sheets appeared in a major local department store. Our delegation of community and political representatives explained the situation to union representatives in the store who made it clear to the store's management that action would be taken unless all the lottery sheets were instantly removed. That day they were removed and the fundraisers were dumped by the now embarrassed drug agency!

This type of community action led many of us to think that the trade union and labour movement could be a fruitful area for development, and that working class organisations could rise above the usual hysteria and respond pragmatically.

Political fight for Phoenix

My first real clue that 'integrity' as a malleable concept had entered Liverpool's drug politics was when I organised negotiations over the possible establishment of a Phoenix-managed therapeutic community in Liverpool.

The Militants wanted a therapeutic community but, like any other project they became involved with, they also wanted control over its local management committee. I pointed out that they did not have the necessary skills or experience. Their response was that I could advise them on the 'therapeutic' content of the programme while they would manage the 'political' aspects.

It was soon obvious that they wanted to use Phoenix to attract funding; then via management committee control and my knowledge, they would design a 'socialist' programme with 'educational' sessions that would help clients achieve a political analysis of drug problems and come out the other end as activists!

They moved quickly, aware that such a venture would achieve enormous publicity for a 'caring council'; a property was allocated, councillors briefed, and it looked like we would soon have a therapeutic community in Liverpool.

But when Phoenix became aware of these plans, they ran a mile. In fact, a couple of miles, over the Mersey to Wirral, where the Tory-controlled council were just as keen to expand their new drug prevention empire, and as aware as the Militants of the political mileage in being seen to be doing something about drugs.

The discovery that the Executive Director of Phoenix had been meeting representatives from Wirral enraged the Militants; some offered their 'services' as persuaders to bring Phoenix back to Liverpool.

Phoenix's Director had let it be known that he was active in his local Labour Party ward somewhere in London. The plan was

Liverpool Echo, September 1984: Militant leaders ally the community's response to drugs with the fight against cuts and unemployment

And, above all, you hear about the people—the people of Croxteth who are fighting for a better life amidst the new poverty of the nineteen eighties.



to contact the Militants in his ward or branch and expose the fact that a socialist had preferred to put Phoenix under the control of a Tory council rather than a good socialist council like Liverpool! I suggested that in the final analysis, did it really matter where the community was based, as long as it was accessible to all Merseyside users.

They looked at me as though I was stupid. I'd failed to understand that their motivation in seeking to bring Phoenix to Liverpool was to achieve sympathetic publicity for a beleaguered Council. They lost Phoenix, and my less than rabid support for their threats led them to begin to regard me with suspicion. Until then I had viewed their manoeuvres to gain control of the new trade union drugs centre as probably a sound move. Wasn't it better to have committed working class socialists running agencies rather than middle class professionals?

I was beginning to have my doubts: one of the councillors on the management committee demanded that the unit should not work on the Wirral, as a bizarre way of punishing the Tory council which had enticed Phoenix away. I pointed out that the unit was funded by the county council and had a Merseyside-wide brief; his response was, "It's their [Wirral Tories] problem, let them deal with it!" For many of the Militants I came to know well, it was bitterness and hatred for anything Tory that appeared to drive them, not compassion for their class or a desire actually to create a humane socialist state.

'War on drugs' exploited

Shortly after the Phoenix debacle I was invited to another meeting with senior councillors (who I subsequently discovered were now the 'new management' of the MDETRU). I was being honoured with an invitation to lead a youth campaign highlighting "Thatcher's plan to sedate working class youth" by allowing drugs to swamp the city. Such blatant exploitation of an issue then causing acute distress to the whole of Merseyside came as a shock.

Seeing me as one of them, the Militants overseeing the development of the MDETRU frankly presented their dilemma. Extremely politically astute, until then they had been very supportive of the pragmatic harm-reduction orientation of our training.

But they were also sharp enough soon to realise that tolerance, harm reduction and pragmatism were hardly the messages besieged Labour councillors would want on a manifesto going into the homes of people terrified and confused by media stories. These would be the last people to wish to see tolerance and humanity shown to 'druggies', who they perceived as

"I went into the meeting regarded as a very useful ally; I came out with daggers in my back"

largely responsible for the crippling wave of drug-related crime that had spawned vigilante groups on many of the affected estates.

The Militants cynically deduced that signing the city up for a 'war against Thatcher's drugs' would appeal to the thousands of frustrated and angry heroin 'afflicted' families – increasing the Labour vote at a crucial time for the Militant leadership as they prepared to take the government head on over the city council's ever-expanding budget.

The tactic worked, producing even more support for what was still a very popular socialist council.

People who, after all the training, really did understand the issues, were now telling me that we should abandon presenting pragmatic, non-dramatic solutions to a fear-paralysed city. From now on the MDETRU was to become a propaganda unit playing on people's fears about drugs to generate support for forthcoming political battles with the government. This was the antithesis of everything we had been trying to do to help the citizens of Liverpool come to a more rational analysis of a complex issue.

In 1985 I was asked to lead a march organised by the Young Socialists, with banners attacking Thatcher for allowing drugs to "swamp" our city's youth to divert their political anger into the cul-de-sac of drug-induced stupor.

There is a case for linking the actions of a Government not particularly known for its concern for the youth of cities such as Liverpool with the high levels of drug use among their young unemployed. But presenting the issue in such simplistic terms as "Get rid of Thatcher and then we will see the back of the drug problem" is a cynical trick to play on the people who voted for you.

There was genuine surprise when I said as much at the meeting. The faces of those I had previously regarded as friends changed as the meeting went on. They had made a mistake in 'grooming' me for the position of drugs advisor to the Labour

In the next issue – the bitter feud between the city council's Militant caucus and the health authority radicals that brought Merseyside to the international leading edge of harm-reduction practice.

Group, and now they knew it!

I told them that I would rather leave the unit than agree to such political posturing on an issue I cared deeply about. I went into the meeting regarded as a very useful ally; I came out with daggers in my back. There is no middle ground with Militant; if you are not a friend you are an enemy.

What had happened was now becoming horribly clear. Our training had described how politicians all over the world historically had benefitted from media hysteria by taking extreme anti-drugs positions. In the process we had revealed a vote-winning strategy to our own local politicians, desperate to maintain grassroots support for a 'high-noon' showdown with government.

To attempt to counter media images of drugs and government exploitation of the issue, while at the same time trying to drum up support locally, was quite correctly regarded as political suicide. To our horror, we had actually shown Militant how to cash in on the drug war!

Narrow escape

Shortly before these episodes I was asked to join the city council as principal officer advising on drugs. But I had become too aware of what I'd become involved in to want to get even more involved – particularly as initially I would have been based in Derek Hatton's Central Support Unit (CSU).

Staffed by a dozen or so well-known senior Militant activists, the CSU was the coordinating point for the implementation of 'policy' in the council. Although a supporter, I was wary about joining what was regarded by almost everyone who knew about it as Hatton's 'Politbureau'.

But it was tempting. To avoid any 'interference' by other party councillors, the new Drugs Liaison Office was to be based in the City Solicitor's Office. As this was the only department not under the control of any council committee, we would be able to work without recourse to democracy. Later this was exactly how the Drugs Office was established.

During this period Militant were not a small group of international revolutionaries, but still a very popular movement in Liverpool. Most were impressive in their commitment to changing Liverpool from what Alexei Sayle once likened to a "Beirut with job centres". But within two years this commitment had, for example, been perverted enough for the Militant-led DLO to successfully threaten to evict a parent-led voluntary agency if they dared set up a syringe exchange.

In part two – how the people's council came to threaten health authority and other initiatives intended to save the lives of the people it professed to protect. ■