

RENT STRIKES — DIRECT ACTION AND THE WORKING CLASS

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Introduction

THE modes and significance of British working class radicalism have not been extensively discussed or documented outside the rise of the Labour movement. Yet there have been times when sections of the working class have taken militant action outside the 'normal political channels' to confront some aspects of British society usually borne with indifference or resignation. Industrial strikes are the best known and the most documented of these forms of direct action but they do not exhaust the range. This paper is a note towards the study of another form of such militancy—the rent strike.

Rent strikes typically involve the collective refusal of a group of tenants to pay an increase in rent, although we have come across one case where the total rent due was withheld. In this paper we attempt to sketch a history of this form of direct action, although the story is inevitably somewhat fragmentary. We also include some results of a survey carried out in May 1970 amongst tenants on an East London estate who were involved in a rent strike against their landlord, the Greater London Council.

One reason for examining forms of direct political action such as squatting or withholding rent is that, unlike voting behaviour, they are likely to be highly significant for those involved; they demand of participants not only involvement in illegal behaviour but also a normative commitment quite different from that necessary to sustain the ritualistic placing of a cross on a ballot paper every four or five years. We also suggest that the material we have gathered is not only of intrinsic interest but has significant bearing on theoretical issues concerning the class consciousness of British workers.

The concluding volume of the 'Affluent Worker' study¹—the most sophisticated attempt to date to penetrate the attitudes and social imagery of British workers—points to a situation of the 'new' working class which is an 'open' one in which a variety of possibilities are inherent, though these have unequal chances of realisation. Whilst this view marks a distinct departure from the views which have prevailed in academic discussion in the 'fifties and 'sixties (and, indeed, a

departure from the tone of earlier volumes in the *Affluent Worker* series) it still envisages the parliamentary system as the only outlet for working class protest. According to this view, later echoed by Parkin², the best hope for radical social change lies in some radicalisation of the leadership of the Labour Party though the possibilities of this happening are acknowledged to be remote.

This view of the working class as an inert, passive mass has been challenged by Westergaard³. In a searching critique of the themes of interpretation in the *Affluent Worker* study (and some other major surveys) he suggests that the consciousness of British workers is essentially ambivalent—an unsynthesised mixture of contradictory elements with attitudes of acceptance and resignation coexisting with a diffuse but socially critical 'counter ideology'. Secondly, he argues that *one* possibility for future development is that the working class might take an active, not passive, role in effecting social change through the creation or recreation of collective organisations for the expression of common discontents.

A study of the G.L.C. rent strike, then in its final stages, and of the history of rent strikes seemed to us a good way to clarify some of the points at issue and to provide some useful new evidence for the debate.

Although the historical material is thin and the survey in connection with the G.L.C. rent strike was small-scale and no more than exploratory, this paper is offered as a preliminary record of a virtually undocumented and undiscussed element in the radical tradition of the working class, an element which we believe may well come into greater prominence as the 'seventies unfold.

Rent Strikes In Working Class History

One of the greatest difficulties in studying working class political protests such as rent strikes is that they tend to go unreported and therefore unrecorded though, of course, details of the tradition are often verbally transmitted from generation to generation within the working class community. Obtaining satisfactory evidence is difficult because such forms of protest are frequently not considered 'news' by the mass media. If they are reported it is usually either in a highly anecdotal manner or in such a way that the most significant details are not made clear⁴. Consider the virtual absence of detail in the mass media in Britain at present (1971) regarding the estimated 140,000 people living in council houses who are withholding the total rent in certain Catholic communities of Ulster⁵ and the 35,000 families withholding rent and rates in Eire⁶.

Another difficulty of research is that such grass roots movements tend not to leave behind them well rounded, unbiased accounts of their activities. There may well have been many large scale rent strikes

which we do not mention; certainly the four rent strikes we do describe in detail are far from being the only instances of the phenomenon. In 1967-8, for example, there were rent strikes in Sheffield, Walsall and Liverpool⁷. We outline the course of four examples in an effort to illustrate regularities of action and attitude to this form of protest.

The Clyde: 1915⁸

The best known rent strike of all is that which flared up in Glasgow in 1915, a foretaste of those turbulent years of 'revolt on the Clyde' which were to bring government tanks rumbling into the city in 1919.

The strike apparently began in May but did not become widespread until October, when *The Times* reported that eight hundred 'women and children of the respectable working class type' had demonstrated against rising rents in Glasgow and that a campaign was being organised to withhold the threepenny and sixpenny a week increases. The strike was strongest in those areas of the city which clustered around the shipyards, where a government survey later showed that increases ranged from 11% to 23%⁹.

Rising rents, symptomatic of a general increase in working class budgets, were not only resented on the Clyde, however, and soon similar actions broke out in Northampton, Birmingham, areas of London (including a thousand on strike in Edmonton) and in Birkenhead, where two thousand women marched to the Town Hall behind the slogan :

"Father is fighting in Flanders,
We are fighting the landlords here."

But it was not so much the plight of soldiers' families as the desire to ensure the steady output of its most important munitions centre—the Clyde—which forced the government to intervene. After threats of industrial action a departmental committee was appointed by the Secretary for Scotland on October 18th, which began sitting on the 26th and reported on November 9th 1915¹⁰. While the government was taking action one landlord served summonses on eighteen of his tenants. This provoked walk outs in 'six great works and shipyards', mass demonstrations in sympathy with those threatened with eviction, and the following resolution to the Prime Minister :

"That the meeting of Clyde munitions workers requests the Government to definitely state not later than Saturday first, that it forbids any increase in rent during the period of the war, and that this failing, a General Strike will be declared on Monday, 22nd November"¹¹.

In fact a bill was introduced on the 25th November and the Increase

of Rent and Mortgage Interest (War Restrictions) Act became law in December. The passing of this act meant that :

"To all intents and purposes the rents of the houses included in this control were fixed at the rents at which they were let at the outbreak of the war".¹³

This rent strike carried out in an occupational community¹³ so that it was easily linked to the threat of industrial action, in general conditions highly favourable to the strikers, brought direct monetary rewards, not only to the Clyde tenants, but to all the working class. Moreover it forced the government to intervene in the private sphere of housing and to control prices. So far no government, whatever its ideological flavour, has been able to disengage from this commitment.

The Clyde: 1921-26¹⁴

The situation at the end of the war was such that the government could not simply repeal the rent control measures. It was certainly kept informed of the explosive potential of the issue. The Directorate of Intelligence told the Prime Minister in September 1919, for example, that :

"The unrest caused by the housing space difficulties has frequently been alluded to in my reports: it is certainly increasing. In fact there is probably no more active cause of discontent than this. There is an outcry against the proposal to legalise increased rents and my correspondent at Leeds states that if rents are raised there will be extensive 'rent strikes'.¹⁵

The pressure to increase rents was considerable, however, and in February 1920 a Committee was appointed to report on the operation of the 1915 and subsequent acts. It recommended that graduated increases should be made in net pre-war rents not exceeding 40% during three years extended operation of the acts. These recommendations were enacted and the increases paid in most parts of the country but they were opposed along the Clyde, and by December 1922 *The Times* reported that at least 20,000 householders in Glasgow and tens of thousands more in West Scotland were deliberately withholding rent, most only the new increases, some hundreds the total rent due.

The situation hinged on ambiguities in the act concerning the formal means by which owners or their agents were to inform tenants of the increases. The Clyde tenants fought a prolonged and skilful legal battle in the courts contesting the legality of the orders in Scotland, culminating in a narrow but favourable verdict in the House of Lords in November 1922. In effect this judgment invalidated all increases up to that date—a considerable victory for the tenants¹⁶—but they still continued the strike.

In April 1924 arrears of rent in Glasgow amounted to over £1,000,000. Much of this, however, was attributable to the mass unemployment in that city. The real storm centre of the rent strike was the shipbuilding town of Clydebank where, according to the factors, (property agents), though unemployment had never risen above 13% since the introduction of the rent increases, arrears represented 60% of the annual rent due¹⁷. The burgh's population was 46,000 and 12,000 tenants were withholding rent. The Clydebank Housing Association—"a kind of local Jacobin Club", reported *The Times* correspondent sourly--continued to exploit the ambiguities of the act and were aided by the willingness of the Dumbartonshire Sheriff Court to obey the letter rather than the spirit of the law¹⁸.

The avowed aim of the Housing Association was "to bankrupt the landlords" and, surmised *The Times* correspondent, to keep up its demonstration until the expiry of the Rent Restriction Acts in March 1925 and so face the government with a condition of chaos which would demand a much deeper involvement in housing¹⁹. Certainly this was becoming a possibility because the non-payment of rent was having a disastrous chain reaction on municipal finances through the non-payment of rates²⁰.

In late 1924 the owners began evicting defaulting tenants with the aid of large numbers of police who clashed with crowds of tenants summoned by bell ringing bicyclists. The intimidatory purpose of such displays was rendered farcical as the displaced tenants were invariably reinstated in their homes as soon as the police left. Various attempts were made at mediation by, for example, the local Town Council, the local M.P., the Scottish Labour M.P.s and so on²¹, but all foundered on the varying conception of what constituted a 'legal' rent, the Housing Association being adamant that this could only mean rent at pre-war levels.

The strike continued, mass meetings were held, eviction truces made and broken, and appeals launched for destitute property owners. *The Times*, searching for reasons for the longevity of the strike, put it down to "Communist influence working on a population which is largely of Irish origin". Finally the deadlock was broken by the government. At the end of 1924 a deputation of property owners went to see the Secretary of State for Scotland and in early 1925 the factors called for legislation to end the strike. In January 1925 the government appointed a Clyde Rent Commission to enquire into the administration and operation of the Rent Restriction Acts on the Clyde and to make proposals to be embodied in the new rent bill.

The Commission began sitting in February. In evidence it was stated that £47,000 had already been 'lost' as a result of court decisions while £160,000 was still owed as arrears in Clydebank. The Chairman

of the Commission soon made it plain that :

"This business of fighting the landlords in the Law Courts cannot go on indefinitely",²²

and characterised the situation in Clydebank as one where :

"The community has arrogated to itself the right to say whether or not any person should be evicted no matter what the law says".²³

The Commission reported in June 1925. The majority report recommended a simplified notification of increases and it was suggested that a bill should be introduced to effect this. According to *The Times* the strike was already breaking up because an influx of orders at the shipyards had brought a new prosperity to the town. A more likely cause seems to have been the reversal in early 1926, in the Court of Sessions, of a lower court decision favourable to the tenants (an appeal against this reversal by the tenants to the Law Lords was rejected later). This 'test' case appeared to show that the tenants were now liable for arrears stretching back over the years since the rent strike began. Despite this, in February 1926, the sixth year of the strike, the defaulting tenants were still estimated to number 3,000 and a meeting to 'revive' the Tenants Association could still pack the Town Hall. Even so there seems little doubt that this reversal at law broke the morale of the strikers, and despite some defiant words by the leaders, the strike petered out through 1926 in a series of cases in the local court, which sometimes found completely for one side or the other, but more often split the arrears at issue by about half.

The results of this prolonged rent strike are less dramatic than those of 1915, but, if nothing else, it seems that the tenants of Clydebank retained by their action several tens of thousands of pounds which they would otherwise have paid in increased rent. It also reveals that what is almost inevitably a slow and uncertain form of struggle can extend over long periods.

St. Pancras, London: 1959-61²⁴

Rent strikes continued to occur in the inter-war years (one in East London in 1938-39 has been documented²⁵), but for some time after the second world war there seems to have been a lull in the use of withholding rent as a means of working class protest²⁶. In 1960 there was another major example in the inner London borough of St. Pancras.

In May 1959 the Tory party won control of the local council and announced their intention of introducing a differential rent scheme in January 1960 in order to balance the housing account. The scheme involved a means test of tenants and immediate rises of up to ten

shillings for ~~some~~ of them, with more to follow. Delegates of thirty-five tenants associations in the area met and decided to resist the increases under the slogan (which had been popular on the Clyde in 1915 and was to reappear in the G.L.C. strike) "not a penny on the rents".

Though there were various demonstrations of hundreds of people both in and outside the local Town Hall, the scheme was introduced as planned. In January it was officially announced that of the 4,200 or so tenants affected 1,400 had not paid the increases. Protest marches and demonstrations at the Town Hall continued throughout the early months of 1960 and, after councillors had been pelted with eggs, the public gallery was closed for council meetings.

In August eviction notices were issued against two tenants, one the secretary of the United Tenants-Association—a tenant since 1947 whose rent was to be increased in three stages by well over 100% in one year. Both men barricaded themselves and their families into their flats. Distress rockets and cars equipped with loudspeakers were used to rouse the tenants against the bailiffs, one 'false alarm' bringing over 1,000 people into the area around one besieged flat after midnight.

After the two tenants had been barricaded in for six weeks they were ejected, amid violent scuffles, by bailiffs supported by large numbers of police from as far away as Lewisham. This strike had already received sympathetic industrial action by council painters and Covent Garden porters, part of the general protest against the Rent Act of 1957. The evictions led to an unofficial twenty-four hour strike by most of the staff at a nearby railway goods depot, while, as soon as they heard the news, a hundred men came from the Shell office building site on London's South Bank and led a march of between one and two thousand people to the Town Hall, which was guarded by a force of seven hundred police. There were violent struggles between the demonstrators and the police and at least fifty people were arrested, five of whom were later sent to prison.

This violence brought swift results. National figures in the Labour Party, including its leader, were at pains to disassociate themselves from the disturbances. Meanwhile the Home Secretary, acting on advice from the Commissioner of Police, prohibited all public processions—except religious—in the borough for three months.

The leaders of the tenants called for a total rent strike but almost immediately rescinded this and began negotiations with the council. These soon broke down and, it was reported, the council intended to send a letter to all 8,000 tenants saying that if rent was withheld tenants would be prosecuted and probably evicted.

In February, when arrears resulting from the strike were estimated at £18,000, the council began taking out possession orders (under a law of 1838) against 500 tenants said to be still involved. These were

suspended as negotiations were resumed between the tenants and the council, but these broke down again and in June 1961 the council renewed its policy of proceedings against the tenants and, it was reported, many private agreements to pay off accumulated arrears were being made between defaulting tenants and the council.

This rent strike was on a smaller scale than the others detailed here and does not appear to have been particularly effective; nonetheless it is notable for the overt violence it provoked between tenants and 'authority'—action unusual in the British context.

The history described above reveals working class people in an innovatory and active role. It is of course true that rent strikes are exceptional and are also basically defensive; nonetheless this type of action clearly illustrates the capacity and the willingness of sections of the working class to act outside the normal political channels in response to a direct assault on their living standards. In addition they reveal that working class spontaneity and organizational ability did not disappear once they had created the Labour Movement. The Trade Unions and the Labour Party may express the collectivist orientation of the British working class, but they do not entirely encompass it.

The East London Rent Strike: 1968-70^{††}

History

The next major rent strike in London of which we have knowledge was also a confrontation between council authorities and council tenants but on a much wider scale than at St. Pancras in 1959-61. In April 1967 the Tory party won control of the Greater London Council by an overwhelming majority of seats. The G.L.C. is, of course, the largest housing authority in the country with a stock (at that time) of almost a quarter of a million dwellings. Part of the Tories' success was due to the unpopularity of the Labour government, then wallowing in the depths of an economic crisis. The period of 'freeze' in the latter half of 1966 was followed by six months of 'severe restraint' during which time wage and price increases were to be severely curtailed. The housing policy of the Tories, victorious at local government level, ran counter to these aims. They had promised, as well as selling off council houses, to balance the housing revenue account and so eliminate the rate subsidies for council houses. To do this, they proposed to introduce a 'fair rents' system for council housing: *viz.* to relate council rents to the rents established, under adjudication, in the private market under the 1965 Housing Act. Though a new rebate scheme was to cushion the blow for the worst off, the rest were to pay increases totalling around 70% over the next three years.

Organized tenant opposition to these proposals began in 1967

immediately following the Tory victory. Activists leafleted their own estates calling for mass meetings of tenants. From these meetings representative committees were elected. The first ten estates to organize formed the Tower Hamlets Federation; later, a further nineteen estates affiliated. From the Hackney Federation and some individual estates the United Tenants Action Committee was formed, while the Becontree Co-ordinating Committee represented tenants in Dagenham. A march and public demonstration at Tower Hill launched the tenants' campaign as a mass movement.

Meanwhile the government, while agreeing that rents must rise, thought these (and other councils') increases too steep and referred the proposals of several councils to the Prices and Incomes Board, with special reference to the situation in the Greater London Area. The P.I.B. report of April 1968³⁹ said that while in the long term rents should approximate more closely to the cost of providing council houses, the inevitable rise in rents should be more gradual than that proposed by the local councils. Acting on this report the government announced it would not accept yearly increases of over 7/6d. per week on average or 10/- per week for an individual tenant.⁴⁰

During May and June there was a succession of demonstrations in the public gallery during G.L.C. council debates with the police ejecting those involved. During the summer there was a demonstration by 4,000 people outside County Hall, and smaller marches were made to Downing Street and to the home of the Tory leader of the council. Two thousand tenants lobbied a meeting of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in an attempt to secure from the Labour council not only expressions of sympathy but also a commitment to rehouse any G.L.C. tenant evicted for non-payment of the increase; while realising that the council did not have the resources to rehouse tenants evicted on a mass scale, the leaders believed that the pledge itself would be sufficient to make the strike solid and secure the withdrawal of the increase. They were not successful, although a number of Labour councillors voted against the whip or abstained. Then, just before the increases came into effect, a mass rally of between ten and twenty thousand people⁴⁰ was held in Trafalgar Square. Other demonstrations and marches were held throughout the rent strike period, some at least with union support.

It is worth emphasising the fact that the tenants used normal political channels, often to great effect, as well as being prepared to work outside them. The rapid creation of committee structures clearly owed a great deal to trade union experience. At the same time tenant leaders were concerned to ensure that their members were fully informed and involved in what was going on. The pattern in the estate we studied was fairly typical: meetings were held weekly to

report back from the Federation and the Action Committee (and later the Anti-Eviction Committee) and at these committees the views of the estates were given in full. Tenants were responsible for leafletting their own landing and collecting the 6d. per week subscription. On this estate there was no check of rent books by the officers of the tenants' association; a mass meeting of the estate decided against this procedure. Motorcades were held on Saturdays to publicize action and win support. The estate was also able to involve young people and vandalism was said to have dropped noticeably. Fund raising events such as jumble sales and socials were held as were parties for old age pensioners. Complaints about maintenance and repairs on the estate were taken up and dealt with, in many cases for the first time. The strike produced genuine participation by tenants in the affairs of their estate and how it should be run.

The rent increases came into effect in October 1968. By November the G.L.C. reported that around 54% of all tenants (over 11,000 families)¹¹, mostly in the council's eastern districts, were withholding the increases. The council adopted a 'wait and see' policy, but in January the Director of Housing wrote to 9,500 tenants warning them that the council would take action if they did not begin to pay the increase. The reaction of the organized tenants was to hold a series of demonstrations in early 1969: 3,000 gathered outside the Hampstead home of the Minister of Housing and Local Government; a number of stink bomb 'attacks' were made on the council chamber; a flour bomb 'attack' on the Tory housing spokesman; and a thousand people gathered at a meeting and lobby of M.P.s at Westminster.

It was the Minister whose house had been the centre of a large demonstration who, in April 1969, rejected the G.L.C.'s proposal to increase rents again in October 1969. Somewhat naturally both the tenants and the G.L.C. attributed this action to the strikers' activities.

In July the G.L.C. wrote to the 6,000 or so tenants who were still withholding saying that unless they paid their arrears they would be asked to leave their dwellings in three weeks. This provoked an immediate demonstration at County Hall which was barricaded and heavily guarded by police. To counter the eviction threat the tenants set up an Anti-Eviction Committee, whose operational arm was a seven hundred man 'flying squad', threatened industrial action (which had already been promised by dockers' leaders) if there were any evictions, and launched a £5,000 fund to finance legal action.

In November 1969 the government introduced a bill to ensure that the G.L.C. kept to the norm of no more than a 7/6d. average increase in any one year. All other local authorities in the country had agreed to do this voluntarily. In the same month the first case arising out of the rent strike was heard at Bow County Court with a demonstration

by 1,000 'rent rebels' outside. The G.L.C. applied for possession against four tenants. This was granted, with possession in seven weeks unless there was an appeal. This was later lodged in the case of one man.

The appeal centred on the legality of the method by which the 1968 increase notices were served on the tenants. There seems to have been some doubt among tenant leaders as to the wisdom of this tactic. As one of their publications put it at the time :

“ there is no doubt that since the introduction of legality, the Action Committee has lost its sense of direction. We have abandoned our original policy and strayed into legal thickets which few of us can understand. Maybe we had to fight this way. But it has certainly demoralised a lot of people.”

Demonstrations continued in the council chamber, especially when a new increase was announced for March 1970, but there seems little doubt that support for the strike was waning. In January 1970, amid talk of the elks and beavers due to the King under a charter of 1670, the appeal was lost in the High Court and the 3,000 tenants still withholding the increase (after fifteen months) were advised by their leaders to settle with the council. The legal costs of the County Court case and the appeal to the High Court were met and the Legal Fund Sub-committee ended with a surplus which was re-distributed to the tenants' organisations. Considerable sums (some £5,000 to £10,000) had been raised by the strikers from tenant subscriptions, social events and donations from trade union branches. Some estates wound up their organization once the strike ended but others remained in existence and continue (at the time of writing) to hold fund raising events in preparation for future action.

This rent strike ended in some disarray. There is little doubt that a lot of the efforts and hopes of the tenants became centred on the legal action and once this was lost the rent strike began petering out as the fear of the consequences grew. Still it seems likely that this rent strike did benefit the tenants; it was probably a factor in the Labour government's decision to bar the full rent increase proposed in October 1969; and the tenants claimed, and undoubtedly had, several successes in brushes with the council over related matters, e.g. maintenance.

The Survey ■■

As part of a higher degree course in sociology at L.S.E. a survey was carried out on a G.L.C. estate in East London. We hoped to explore the reasons why people turned to direct action to provide some fresh evidence for the debate about the attitudes of the working class. The existence of a Labour government that had almost abandoned even the pretence of being a working class party might it seemed, have demonstrated to many of its usual supporters the limits

of **parliamentary** action and the 'normal channels' as effective means for achieving their aims. We wondered if the rent strike in East London might indicate heightened class consciousness.

The estate was chosen because it was known to include sections with both high and low rates of participation in the rent strike. This meant that comparisons between strikers and non-strikers could be made. If the rent strikers represented one of the most class conscious groups within the working class one might have expected to find important differences between strikers and non-strikers and also evidence of a coherent, and politically radical, beliefs amongst strikers. If, on the other hand, this was basically pressure group politics conceived of as within the 'rules of the game', one would have expected to find high commitment by the strikers to the core institutional order and procedures of the political system, and, amongst non-strikers, similar high levels of commitment but without the specific grievances over rents. A third possibility could be that the working class world was of the type suggested by Westergaard in the article referred to in the introduction to this paper. Westergaard's hypothesis is that many British workers have essentially ambivalent feelings about the society in which they live : a *Weltanschauung* involving contradictory elements of acceptance and resignation coexisting with a socially critical counter-ideology. All three world views would of course be consonant with sporadic outbursts of direct action such as withholding of rent.

Our findings, we suggest, indicate support for Westergaard's hypothesis. We found very remarkable similarities between the strikers and non-strikers, not only in material circumstances but in political attitudes and awareness. The strikers were rather more radical in their responses but a considerable dissatisfaction with existing political processes was apparent also among the non-strikers, suggesting that given the right circumstances they too might take part in radical action.

Participation

The obvious first question to be answered is who were the participants in the strike and how numerically strong were they. The question of numbers involved in any rent strike is usually a matter for dispute. The G.L.C. quoted very low percentages for withholding rent based on all their 250,000 tenancies. The strikers' figures for particular estates excluded those unable to withhold because their rent was paid by Social Security and thus claimed 80-90% in some cases.

On the estate that we studied one-third of the respondents took no part in the strike because they had no reason to : either because they had moved in after the rents had been raised (one-sixth) or else because they were **in receipt of some form of social security benefit**

(one-sixth) which paid part or all of the rent and also paid the increase. Of the remaining two-thirds of the tenants interviewed on the estate 70% participated in withholding the increase.³³ Even if we make the extreme and implausible assumption that all non-respondents were not withholders, the effective rate of participation would still be almost 40%. Our comparisons between strikers and non-strikers will exclude from the latter group those who took no part simply because they had no occasion to do so.

One interesting finding was that quite a number of non-strikers may have been on the brink of withholding—over 20% said they had given some consideration to withholding. When asked why people did not join the strike two-thirds of the non-strikers attributed the failure of other non-strikers to participate either to fear of the consequences or to apathy and hopelessness. Less than a quarter explained the failure to join the strike of other non-strikers by the arguments that either they could afford the increases or that they thought them justified. Indeed directly hostile comments from non-strikers about aspects of the strike (e.g. about Tenants Associations) were rare. This could, of course, have been because they had insufficient knowledge or interest to comment. With respect to certain social characteristics, usually thought to be important, the two groups appeared similar. Two-thirds of both groups were manual workers (the remainder being routine non-manual and supervisory) and half of both groups had lived on the estate ten years or more. The non-strikers included more of the conservatively orientated (even so they were very much a minority in this group) and politically uncommitted, and more of the unmarried and those living alone, but these differences were not great.

The strikers held out for a considerable period of time. Nearly two-thirds withheld the increase for at least six months, 45% for a year or more. Two people were still withholding when we interviewed, over eighteen months after the start of the strike. Nearly 40% referred spontaneously to the loss of the court case in connection with their eventual decision to pay. Despite the collapse of the rent strike three-fifths of the withholders, and as many as two-fifths of the non-strikers, thought that further rent increases would bring renewed tenants' action. In fact they were wrong—nothing happened when rents were raised again in May 1971—but these and other results do not suggest that many of the strikers or indeed of the non-strikers were simply reconciled to the situation, in respect of rents or other matters.

Socio-Political Views

One of the objects of the survey was to explore the extent to which the experience of a Labour government in power had altered percep-

tions of the political system. As expected, the great majority of the respondents were Labour, if they voted at all, but a good deal of discontent was expressed against the Labour Party. It was still generally regarded as 'the party of the working class', but in the view of a number of the respondents this was less true than formerly. A quite common comment was that 'it used to be for the working class'. As many as 60% of the strikers thought that the Labour government had done little or nothing for them or people like themselves. Nearly half the strikers and a third of the non-strikers thought the party had changed for the worse, whereas only 6% in both groups thought it had changed for the better. This discontent had not led them to an overt abandonment of support for Labour or conventional political action, but a very sizeable minority, 41% of the strikers and 28% of the non-strikers, thought it made no difference whether the government was Labour or Conservative.

There was also plenty of resentment on specific issues, especially rising prices, and this coexisted with a widespread sense of powerlessness at all levels of life. The overwhelming majority in both groups, 77% among the strikers and 82% amongst the non-strikers, felt their opinions were not taken into account in the way the country was run and again the great majority (over 70% in both groups) thought their opinions were not taken into account in the running of their own estate.

This feeling of powerlessness, of lack of control over matters which affect the individual, did not appear to be crystallised in the sense that any particular institution or group was clearly identified as having too much power. Indeed after being asked: "It is sometimes said that there are some people or groups who have too much power in the way the country is run; would you agree or disagree?", those agreeing (a little over half the strikers and non-strikers alike) were asked who they thought had too much power, but to the probe extremely disparate replies were given with no single group being identified by a majority of respondents. Even so, both the strikers and the non-strikers had a strong sense that Britain was an unequal society. To the question: "It is sometimes said that Britain is still an unequal society", four-fifths of the strikers and three-fifths of the non-strikers agreed. When asked to comment further, most referred to class inequality, financial inequalities or inequalities of opportunity. A very small number, in addition to these, agreed with the proposition but went on to say that inequality was in some way justified. Only a quarter of the non-strikers and a tenth of the strikers disagreed that Britain was still an unequal society.

The findings so far are suggestive of certain very basic similarities between the two groups, particularly with respect to feelings of power-

lessness and general disenchantment with the political system and their traditional representatives, the Labour Party. There appeared to be no general explanation in our data why one group had become involved in the rent strike and the other had not. Given the apparent "disenchantment" with conventional political channels in both groups, there might well be at least potential for mobilisation of the non-strikers in future militant forms of protest. Certainly the non-strikers cannot be seen as a predominantly deferential or acquiescent group, representing a distinct current of active moderation.

Our evidence also lends some support to Westergaard's hypothesis of the existence of an apparently ambivalent and possibly confused worldview amongst the working class. Two questions that we asked about industrial strike action provide evidence that could be interpreted as indicating this ambivalence and confusion. The first question was by implication critical of strikes and the second sympathetic. A majority of respondents agreed with the critical statement: "that workers are too ready to go on strike", although significantly a third of the rent strikers totally rejected this view that workers were ever too ready to strike.

TABLE 1 "It is sometimes said that workers today are too ready to go on strike. Do you agree or disagree?"

| | Strikers (N=83) | Non- strikers (N=36) | All respondent ³ (N=178) |
|---|--------------------|----------------------------|---|
| Completely disagree | 30 | 25 | 27 |
| Mixed views—strikes sometimes justified | 18 | 14 | 15 |
| Agree | 48 | 58 | 53 |
| DK/NA | 4 | 3 | 5 |
| | 100 | 100 | 100 |

But when asked much later in the interview whether they thought workers sometimes had no alternative to strike action, both groups overwhelmingly agreed.

TABLE 2 "It is sometimes said that workers have no option but to go on strike if they want to improve their conditions. Do you agree or disagree?"

| | Strikers (N=83) | Non- strikers (N=36) | All respondents (N=178) |
|-----------------|--------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Agree | 87 | 75 | 81 |
| Disagree | 11 | 22 | 14 |
| DK/NA | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| | 100 | 100 | 100 |

The differences set out above were among the most interesting of our findings. Firstly they illustrate the importance of question formulation and that the complexity of people's attitudes on a significant social issue can rarely be tapped by a single question. It would, of course, be possible simply to interpret the results as showing no more than that people will go along with any suggestion put into their heads by opinion pollsters. In our view this would be a superficial and misleading conclusion. The more reasonable conclusion is that the differences in results reflect our respondents' own ambivalent feelings about strike action. A possibility is that workers realised from their own experience that there are situations in which they have no option but to go on strike whilst, at the same time, they did not feel an identity with the struggle of other workers. In respect of the latter they may have been inclined to accept that 'many workers are too ready to go on strike'. Indeed that formulation is virtually designed to trigger off a stock response in line with press and broadcasting commentary, while a rejection of the statement may require a very conscious effort on the part of the respondent to step outside the framework of media commentary and identify himself with striking brothers. Alternatively, the emphatic agreement with the second question⁸⁴ could indicate a quite clear belief that in the last resort all workers have no other means to enforce their interests than by withdrawing their labour power. Unfortunately we did not probe sufficiently to enable us to evaluate to what extent either interpretation is correct. To do so would require not only more intensive and sensitive questioning about attitudes to industrial action, but also an attempt to place such attitudes in the context of respondents own direct and indirect experiences of industrial conflict. This is clearly an important area for further research.

Future Possibilities

That there is widespread apathy, discontent and estrangement from conventional politics seems very probable, certainly it was true of this group of East Londoners. That, and the fact that a sizeable proportion of our sample had been involved in direct political action, seem to us to indicate the possibility of increased or, at least, continuing sporadic working class militancy in the future. We did try to investigate this point further by attempting to ask tenants about alternative forms of political action. To find out such information involves all kinds of difficulties concerning question design and varying interpretation by respondents. We do not claim to have solved these, but believe that if the workers' world view is to be understood, the attempt must be made to go beyond the standard questions which assume that political consciousness is limited to 'normal channels'.

Our results suggest that many tenants felt that some kind of action

outside the conventional political forms was justified. Very few specifically referred to illegal action when asked an abstract question about direct action, but a number sympathised with what were, in fact, illegal forms of direct action when concrete examples were given. The questions related to activity being given publicity in the media at the time of the survey. One concerned squatting by homeless families in empty houses, the next the action of a group of residents on the Isle of Dogs (an area in London's dockland) who closed off the roads of the 'island' and 'declared independence' to protest at the lack of transport, shopping and educational facilities in the area; the last example concerned demonstrations designed to cancel the visit of the all-white South African cricket team.¹³

Two-thirds of the strikers and half the non-strikers approved of squatting by homeless families. In contrast only a third of the non-strikers and a quarter of the strikers disapproved. Many respondents had mixed views about the Isle of Dogs protest. This probably reflected a conflict between recognising the validity of the reasons for the protest and doubt as to the purpose or realism of the 'declaration of independence'. Even so nearly half the strikers and a third of the non-strikers expressed support for the protest and another third in both groups held mixed views largely, we think, for the reasons explained above. Least support was forthcoming for the Stop the Seventy Tour campaign (which resulted in the cancellation of the South African cricket tour), but even here nearly half in both groups supported the action compared with a third in both groups who did not support it.

These results do not seem to us to indicate that there is no possibility of future working class militancy as apparently presaged in the "Affluent Workers" series. However, neither do our results indicate a clearly articulated class consciousness amongst our respondents. Rather they seem to us to suggest support for the hypothesis of widespread social criticism amongst the working class combined with general disenchantment with the political system. In our sample this would appear to be combined with support for other militant forms of political protest, although not combined with any clearly articulated counter ideology.

In such a situation as we have described, leaders may be of some importance, although it is dangerous to overstate this. Leaders cannot create grievances that do not exist; leaders can only articulate the demands of those with grievances. Something should, therefore, be said about the leaders of the rent strikes under study. Some of the leaders on the Clyde went on to form the British Communist Party in 1921, although others became Cabinet Ministers. Communists were active in the East End strike of 1938-39 and St. Pancras in 1960. In the London strike of 1968-70 some of the active tenants were members of the Communist Party and some International Socialists were involved. It seems

likely that political activists are able to suggest connections with wider issues and may, for example, in the case of London 1968-70, have been responsible for the fact that as many as a quarter of the tenants identified high interest charges as the reason for the rent increases by the G.L.C.¹⁶

Conclusion

We have reviewed some examples of a little studied form of working class direct action. Though the material is not sufficient to support any firm conclusions some tentative points can be made.

The first is that rent strikes have been quite successful in material terms. Not only have considerable sums of money been 'saved' by the tenants involved, but such action has been of great importance to the working class as a whole in forcing reluctant governments into action in the field of housing, most notably to control the operation of market forces in the determination of rents.

Historically, at least, then Hampton is inaccurate when he asserts that :

"The spontaneous eruption of feeling that can shake a city council is not a noticeable influence on national housing policy."¹⁷

This form of direct action has worked for those involved and not, as he implies, simply by its indirect effect on 'orthodox' political channels (though such action does have a galvanising effect, at least in the short run, upon national and local Labour parties).

This being said, it is also significant that rent strikes have been essentially localised phenomena rather than national confrontations between class forces as some industrial action has been. There are, of course, easily understandable reasons for this, one of the most important being the absence of a common landlord and hence of any easily identifiable common opponent. In London, for instance, the targets of any concerted tenant action would have to be divided between the Greater London Council, the London boroughs and private landlords ranging from great property companies through Julian Amery to Mrs. Raum. The interests of tenants facing such a range of landlords are inevitably divided, while attempts to establish connections through such bodies as the National Association of Tenants and Residents tend to be organizationally weak. The absence, of course, of a continuing organizational structure outside the traditional (and incorporated) institutions of collectivism is one structural as opposed to normative reason which militates against any nation-wide working class direct action.

Thirdly, it is also of interest that rent strikes have been only fitfully linked with the major working class weapon: industrial action. In general terms the absence of any linkage between industrial and other

forms of direct action reflects two important factors. To begin with workmates are now not often tenants of the same landlord in large conurbations. Backing a rent strike with industrial action would seem a strategy ideally suited to those working class tenants living in 'occupational communities'.⁴⁰ The Clyde action of 1915 showed this. On Clydebank, 1921-26, another occupational community, unemployment (regardless of any other factors) prevented any 'sympathy' action. In the G.L.C. strike (strongest in those areas of the East End which, at least traditionally, have something of the character of occupational communities) there were promises of stoppages in the London docks if evictions took place, and the Trade Union Subcommittee of the United Tenants' Action Committee went to the council at the end of the strike and declared that there would be industrial action if victimisation of tenants took place. However, it is unprofitable to speculate whether industrial action would have been forthcoming had the tenants not taken the legal route but risked confrontation through eviction.

Indeed it could be argued that the rent strike is a mode of working class protest which can only flourish, or flourishes best, in an occupational community. If so, it would seem to be a form of action unlikely to be important in a more complex age with diversified work and occupational structures. However, it is not at all obvious that rent strikes can only occur in the special and probably decreasingly common circumstances of occupational communities. (There have, for example, been rent strikes in some of the post-war new towns.)⁴¹ But it may well be that such significant strikes as do occur in the future will demand of participants greater theoretical knowledge of the cumulative nature of inequalities in British society, if only because of the opaque complexities of council house finance, the overall direction of housing policy by the state,⁴² and the weight of propaganda for 'fair rents'.

Despite these past and possible future limitations on the scope of rent strikes we would argue that such action is of some importance for those who would understand the nature of the British working class.⁴³ It is, for instance, of some interest that it represents a clear form of class struggle—property owners versus propertyless—which occurs outside the industrial sphere. The relationships of class are most marked, of course, at work, but they pervade all other spheres of life (in the class structuring of education, for example) and may even be perceived, as 'them against us' but rarely lead in Britain to overt struggle in those spheres.

Rent strikes are example of class antagonisms in areas of life other than the industrial and, possibly because not so institutionalised as industrial conflict, reveal three points about class conflict which need to be stressed in the light of current sociological debate.

Firstly they illustrate clearly the creative aspect of working class life.

Particularly significant here is the ability of workers to organise quickly and effectively at a local level.⁴³ Apathy, acceptance, passiveness may form part of the nature of the British working class but they do not express it entirely. Rent strikes reveal the working class in a creative, active role, involved in the determination of its own life. It was *such* creativity, of course, which built the traditional institutions of collectivism now often held to have complete directive force over the working class.

Secondly rent strikes can provoke a direct physical challenge to the upholders of existing social arrangements. This is revealed particularly by the defiant, obstructive, and often extremely violent reactions to evictions in every rent strike discussed above.

Thirdly such physical challenges arise from the normative challenge to the *status quo* which is always implicit and more or less explicit in rent strikes. It is no secret that a majority of workers feel that 'there *is* one law for the rich and another for the poor', and certainly the history of striking tenants who have become involved in legal action would tend to reinforce such a view. What rent strikes reveal is that the working class can be mobilised to support such 'deviant' attitudes with action when a particular law is felt to be unjust. This is shown by the withholding of 'legal' rent and, especially, by the attitudes to eviction discussed above. The due process of law was unable to resolve the differences between opposed groups because the tenants did not accept as valid the law's conception of 'right' and 'wrong'. It is worth remembering in this context our respondents support for illegal action in concrete situations where they perceived injustice.

But, we suggest, the normative challenge afforded by rent strikes goes beyond questions of legality, injustice, and so on. Incipient within such action is an oppositional statement about social relations in British society: about the nature of property ownership and about control over men's lives. It has recently been suggested that working class compliance in 'liberal democracies' can only be explained as a mixture of value consensus and pragmatic *acceptance*.⁴⁴ The rent strike experience would seem to show that one area where there is a lack of commitment to dominant norms, centres around the value complex associated with housing, the 'rights' of property and so on.⁴⁴ Pragmatic acceptance is of its nature contingent, though our respondents' view of their situation and the action they were taking was in many respects confused and, whatever its implications, stopped well short of a clear cut challenge to the prevailing order. Nonetheless, it does illustrate a current of dissatisfaction, a potential for *radicalisation*, without much political articulation, yet which should not be expected to disappear if not immediately mobilised by the Labour party.

In short, we suggest that while rent strikes and other varieties of ill-reported urban protest do not involve their participants in a clear vision of a new social order, they do reveal something of that muted, defensive 'counter-ideology' of the working class, which is the basis of the development of class consciousness in the classical *sensu*.⁴⁵

NOTES

- J. H. Goldthorpe, D. Lockwood, J. Platt and F. Bechhofer: *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, Cambridge 1969.
2. F. Parkin: *Class Inequality and Political Order*, London 1971.
 3. J. H. Westergaard: *The Rediscovery of the Cash Nexus* in R. Miliband and J. Saville (eds.): *The Socialist Register*, 1970.
This is an example of what has been called the 'mobilisation of bias'. See P. Bachrach and M. Baratz: *Power and Poverty*, New York 1970.
It was reported in *The Guardian* of October 7th, 1971 that "The civil disobedience campaign, which involves the non-payment of all rents, rates and bills to public bodies, has been running for seven weeks The government reckons that local authorities have lost more than £400,000 in council house rents alone Officials estimate that about 140,000 people living in council houses have been taking part in the campaign."
This was reported in *The Guardian* of December 3rd, 1971. The reporter, John Fairhall, wrote to us that the figure of 35,000 families participating in the strike was given by the Permanent Secretary of the Ulster Health Ministry and that Cork was one of the main centres where the strike was taking place.
Some documentation of one of these strikes in Sheffield has recently been presented in W. Harnpton: *Democracy and Community*, Ch. 10, London 1970. Though short lived the Sheffield strike is of interest because it was against a Labour controlled council.
 8. Information for this section was gathered from *The Times*, October-November 1915
 9. Reported in *History of the Ministry of Munitions* (1920-24) vol. 4 part ii appendix III: 'Note on the Rent Strikes on the Clyde', 'November 1915: (later M.M.) p.104. A brief report of the strike in the *Labour Monthly* vol. 22 no. 8, August 1940 estimates that 20,000 Glasgow households were involved in the strike.
 10. *Reports from Commissioners, Inspectors and Others*, 1914-1916, vol. XXXV pp.1-115. CMD.8111.
 11. Reported in M.M. p. 104-5. Most of the biographies and autobiographies of the Clydesiders merely note the rent strike without giving much detail. A one page resumé with reference to the links with industrial action is in W. Kendall: *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900-1921*, London 1969. See also T. Bell: John Maclean: *A Fighter for Freedom* p.50-55, Glasgow 1944 and B. Stanley: 'Women in Unrest 1914-18' in *Labour Monthly* vol. 22 no. 8, August 1940, p.460-461.
 12. M. Bowley: *Housing and the State* pp.5ff, London 1947.
 13. 'Occupational community' refers to a situation in which group associations at work carry over into the community so that workmates are typically leisure time companions and neighbours. See D. Lockwood: 'Sources of Variation in Working Class Images of Society', *Sociological Review* 1966, p.251.

14. Information for this section was gathered from *The Times*, 1921-1926 and the *Clydebank Gazette*, 1926.
15. This was part of the weekly 'Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom'. See B. B. Gilbert: *British Social Policy, 1914-1939*, p.147, London 1970.
The government commission later reported that many tenants in Glasgow were credited with nine months' rent as a result of having paid the additional rent demanded in the invalid notices.
Cf. *The Times*, April 12th and 14th and August 23rd 1924. The report of the government commission suggests that unemployment in Clydebank was over 13% at some time during the rent strike. In December 1922 5,574 persons out of the 20,000 or so on the employment register were unemployed. Figures for male unemployment in the report do, however, show that relatively Clydebank was better off than much of the rest of Scotland. The report also reveals that—
'The worker is . . . much worse off than he was in 1920, and is not so well off as he was in 1914'.
Reports from Commissioners, Inspectors and Others 1924-25 vol. XV CMD 2423 p.11-12.
18. Thus thousands of notices announcing rent increases which had been drawn up by a committee of four lawyers expert in rent matters and then vetted by a K.C. were declared invalid because the wrong address was given for the local sanitary inspector at the top of each note.
19. The tenants wanted the government to supply interest free loans to the municipal authorities to build public housing.
20. This was recognised by the tenants who tried to pressure the local council to make the landlords pay their rates.
21. The tensions the strike caused in the Labour government of 1924, centring around a 'Prevention of Evictions' Bill, are detailed in R. K. Middlemass: *The Clydesiders* p.152-5, London 1965.
22. Quoted in *The Times*, February 27th, 1925.
23. *ibid.*
24. Information for this section was gathered from *The Times*, 1959-61; the *St. Pancras Chronicle*, 1960-61; and the *Daily Worker*, 1959-61. See also P. Duff: *Left, Left, Left* p.92-96, London 1971.
25. N. Branson and M. Heinemann: *Britain in the 1930's*, pp.198-200, London 1971.
26. Though other forms, e.g. squatting, were widespread.
27. Information for this section was gathered from *The Times*, *The Guardian* and the *Morning Star*, 1968-1970. From 1969 onwards many of the events were directly observed.
28. National Board for Prices and Incomes: Report No. 62. 'Increase in Rents of Local Authority Housing'. CMD 3604.
29. The average G.L.C. rent for a post-war 2 bedroom flat was 51/2d. The three 'steps' of the rent increase for such a property would thus have been around 12/10d, 12/10d and 10/3.
30. *The Times* estimated the crowd at 7,000-10,000, *The Guardian* at 20,000.
31. The figures used concerning numbers of participants in this strike (and indeed all the others) are always the 'official' ones. The strikers always claimed much higher rates.
32. A note on the methodology of the survey is provided in Appendix 1.
33. Most tenants claimed that they were not on 'rent strike' but only withholding the increase and at various times there was a good deal of discussion as to whether a total rent strike should be attempted.

34. A formulation that has not often been used in public opinion polls on the subject, though it is no more and no less 'loaded' than the more conventional anti-strike orientated question.
35. A further question was asked relating to student 'sit-ins' concerning political files at universities, which had also received considerable publicity in the media at the time of interviewing. Nearly half in both groups indicated support for these protests. However, as the respondents could easily have identified the interviewers as students, it would seem unwise to place any weight on this result.
36. This was a constant theme of the tenants propaganda. The pamphlet 'Not a Penny on the Rents 1970' by the United Tenants Action Committee used the council's own estimates and minutes to indicate that the G.L.C. was already showing a profit on half its dwellings, that it took only about 15 years for new buildings to show a profit and that about two-thirds of the expenditure on the G.L.C. Housing Revenue Account (over £30 millions) was for debt charges.
37. Hampton op. cit. p.273.
38. The term 'occupational community' is explained in footnote 13.
39. At the time of going to press (May 1972) we know that a rent strike is occurring in Crawley (Sussex) where council tenants are withholding 50p increases imposed in April 1972.
40. On this point see P. Duff: *Left, Left, Left* p. 96, London 1971, who was a Labour councillor in St. Pancras during the 1959-1961 rent strike, and points to the legal difficulties of abandoning a differential rent scheme once adopted and the great power of the district auditor (appointed by the state) over elected representatives in matters of housing finance. Contemporary evidence from the U.S.A. suggests that rent strikes there are often pseudo-events used to panic City Hall via the mass media rather than any class confrontation. Cf. M. Lipsky: *Protest in City Politics*, Chicago 1970 and H. Brill: *Why Organizers Fail*, Berkeley 1971.
42. cf. Hampton op. cit. p.260-261; F. Bealey, J. Blondel and W. P. McCann: *Constituency Politics*, p.381-2, London 1965.
43. M. Mann: 'The Social Cohesion of Liberal Democracy', *American Sociological Review* 1970.
44. We would suggest that at least some types of 'crime' are indicative of this as are, more significantly, the number of 'work-ins' and 'sit-ins' currently occurring in British industry.
45. Westergaard op. cit.

APPENDIX ONE

The Survey (London, 1968-70): Methodology and Results

Our thanks are due to our fellow students on the M.Sc. (Sociology) course at L.S.E. 1969-1970 who planned and carried out the survey. We should also like to thank John Westergaard and Wyn Lewis for their help and advice on the methodology and, of course, the tenants of East London who answered our questions and welcomed us to their meetings.

The survey was carried out in May 1970 of all households on a selected estate in East London. The response rate was low, about 55%, and the interviewers were students, most of whom had no previous ex-

perience of interviewing. Their inexperience was no doubt one reason for the low response rate (as can be inferred from previous methodological research which also suggests that the use of student interviewers is not likely to reduce the quality of the interviews obtained as distinct from the rate of response). We suspect that the response rate was low in any case because a number of people had only just come off rent strike and did not wish to talk about the failure of their protest. This means that (1) biases may have been introduced into the overall results because of under representation of certain categories of tenants and, (2) the material available will not sustain the elaborate cross tabulations essential to any real understanding of the complexities of people's attitudes. Nonetheless the results are of some interest, if only because it is rare for surveys of social and political attitudes to be carried out amongst those who are, or recently have been, engaged in direct action of any kind.

The 178 respondents with whom interviews were completed can be divided into four sub-groups.

TABLE 1

| | Nos. |
|--|---|
| Households where tenant in receipt of social security etc. ... | 28 |
| Households that moved in after July 1968 | 31 |
| Non-strikers | 36 |
| Rent strikers | 83 |
| | <hr style="border-top: 3px double black;"/> |
| | 178 |
| | <hr style="border-top: 3px double black;"/> |

Another twelve interviews with tenants aged 70 and living alone were excluded from the analysis because their special financial and personal circumstances would have necessitated a separate analysis for this group which was not possible given the small number involved.