**The ‘East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy’**

Politics is of course dominated by what happens at the national level, and beyond that the global. But the local level of politics – the region, the city, the town - is not simply the national writ small. Demography, history, the economy and the state, take locally specific forms within that national context. The local level is where they are experienced in people’s daily lives, embedded in social relationships of production and social reproduction. And it is where understandings, challenges and working class solidarity can develop.

That is the framing of this critical analysis of and response to two recent reports about local area development in East Birmingham. The first, ‘East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy’, is Birmingham City Council’s most ambitious project for place-based green economic development. [1] The population of East Birmingham is about the same size as Nottingham, and includes some of the poorest areas of Birmingham. The EBIGS project is the context for the second report, ‘Strength in Common: A Just Transition and Recovery – in a Post-COVID World’ by Lisa Trickett and Bryan Nott, in association with Birmingham University, which advocates ‘Community Learning Platforms’ as a collective policy process to empower communities and build consensus in East Birmingham. [2]

This paper ends with making the case for a radical joint community-trade union strategy for East Birmingham based on social movement unionism. It is organised in three parts:

Part 1: The ‘East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy’

Part 2: ‘Strength in Common’

Part 3: Collective action for radical change

**PART 1: THE EAST BIRMINGHAM INCLUSIVE GROWTH STRATEGY**

The 48 page report ‘East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy’ was adopted at Birmingham City Council’s Cabinet meeting on 9 February 2021. This is Birmingham City Council’s priority project for green economic growth.

East Birmingham is a growing place; a place with great potential. It is home to more than 230,000 people and forms a crucial part of the city and region’s economy. Major growth is coming which will deliver more than 60,000 new jobs and 10,000 homes within and near to East Birmingham over the next ten years. With the coming of HS2 and the proposed Midland Metro East Birmingham to Solihull extension, East Birmingham has a once in a lifetime opportunity for positive change. (p3)

The East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy (EBIGS) covers an area including Castle Bromwich, Coleshill, Washwood Heath, Yardley, Sheldon, Marston Green and the adjacent area of Solihull. It is the largest such project in the West Midlands.

The Council’s March 2021 Update report at the Economy and Skills Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 24 March lists the following workstream areas that the East Birmingham plan covers: [3]

Health and Wellbeing improvement

Skills review and investment plan

Schools and Early Years improvement

Expand business support

Local places and green spaces

Transport improvements

Housing and development

Climate change and green technologies

Localism, community development and engagement

Social value and community wealth building

A key theme of EBIGS is tackling climate change. Birmingham Council Leader Ian Ward’s Foreword to the ‘East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy’ says:

Climate change is a key priority for the whole city and East Birmingham will be at the forefront of our efforts as a new centre for sustainable and low carbon technologies which will make a major contribution to achieving our target of a zero-carbon Birmingham by 2030. (p3)

East Birmingham is the home of Tyseley Energy Park where excellent work is already underway to develop new sustainable technologies, including ways of generating clean energy. This has the potential for significant expansion and will play a key role as the city develops a new waste and recycling strategy. There is an opportunity for this growth sector to be one of the ‘industries of the future’ which will attract future investment to East Birmingham, creating skills and employment opportunities for local people. (p25)

But the waste strategy represented by the Tyseley Incinerator has been strongly criticised by Birmingham Friends of the Earth in a Briefing titled ‘‘Why waste incineration is not the future for Birmingham’ in January 2020. [4] It says

‘The plant became the property of the City Council in 2019 and approaching in 2024 is the end of the waste contract with Veolia plc, which operates it. We argue that the changes required for an end of incineration should begin in 2021, and must not be put off until 2034. There is a tremendous opportunity right now to rethink and redesign the waste system, both disposal and collection…’ (p1)

Another key theme of EBIGS is community participation:

The publication of this draft document for consultation has been the first step of a continuous process of engagement through which residents of East Birmingham will be empowered not only to shape and influence the strategy and decide how it is to be delivered, but also to play a leading role in that delivery. (p7)

Public participation in the policy process has emerged over the past year or so as a recurrent and prominent theme in the policy discourse of Birmingham City Council. It is exemplified by the following statement by Cllr Ian Ward in the ‘Birmingham City Council Delivery Plan: 2020-2022’, adopted at the Cabinet meeting on 10 November 2020: [5]

People also expect a much greater level of involvement in decisions that affect their lives. Be they the big things that have a bearing across the City as a whole, or the little things that have a big impact in their street or neighbourhood. People want to be heard and when they are not, they will mobilise. We are all activists now. The question for the Council: do we bring those voices in and help shape the fortunes of our city and places; or do we seek to keep them out? We need to bring them in. (p6)

But this is not to be put into practice in East Birmingham. The governance of the EBIGS excludes trade union and community representatives.

**The East Birmingham Board**

EBIGS is run by a new local government structure, the East Birmingham Board. [3]

In total the Board consists of approximately 20 people, chosen to represent the key partners, service areas and local stakeholders. Members include:

Chair: Local MP [Liam Byrne, MP for Hodge Hill]

Deputy Chair: Leader of the Council [Cllr Ian Ward]

Cabinet Member, Transport and Environment [Cllr Waseem Zaffar]

Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, Community Safety and Equalities [Cllr John Cotton]

Ward Members (nominated by WM Forum) [i.e. Councillors]

CeX of the Council

Director, Public Health

Director, Inclusive Growth

Director, Adults and Social Care

HS2 Ltd.

National Health Service (Bsol CCG)

Transport for West Midlands

West Midlands Combined Authority

Children’s Trust

Solihull MBC

Business representative(s)

Education representative(s)

VCSE representative(s)

The Board will work closely with the West Midlands Combined Authority, Transport for West Midlands and Solihull Council’s Solihull Together partnership which is responsible for delivering inclusive growth in the North Solihull area. (p4).

The Board meets four times a year. Meetings are not open to the public. At present the papers, minutes and actions are not even in the public domain, though apparently there is an intention to make them available online in future.

The ‘key partners’ are defined as BCC lead officers, leading representatives of local public, private (including HS2) and voluntary sector institutions and the West Midlands Combined Authority.

This is the governance structure of the EBIGS, according to a slide on ‘Setting up the Governance’ in a presentation titled ‘East Birmingham Inclusive Growth March 2021 Update’: [3]

‘East Birmingham Board (EBB): accountable for the delivery of the Strategy, providing the East Birmingham Delivery Board with political direction and support.

East Birmingham Delivery Board (EBDB): […] with responsibility for drawing in resources and for the prioritisation and co-ordination of delivery.’

The Delivery Board is supported by the Rapid Policy Unit and Secretariat, and it is this body which is responsible for ‘Engagement with Stakeholders and Ward Members Forum’. The Ward Members Forum comprises the 26 councillors serving the wards in the EBIGS area. It first met in November 2020. The ‘Stakeholders’ are undefined.

**No community representatives on the Board**

There are no community representatives on the Board, where the key strategic decisions are made, nor on the Delivery Board, so there is no direct community input into them. The ‘East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy’ says:

To help the communities of East Birmingham achieve their aspirations we will support local groups and organisations by:

* Supporting Ward Forums to create Ward Plans setting out their priorities and aspirations.
* Providing information and advice.
* Help communities develop their capacity to actively build the social and economic potential of their area. (p7)

The Council Leader, Cllr Ian Ward, said ‘do we bring those voices in and help shape the fortunes of our city and places; or do we seek to keep them out? We need to bring them in’. But the East Birmingham Board keeps them out from where the key strategic decisions are made, confined and fragmented in the 26 Ward Forums.

While there is a collective Members Forum bringing together all the local councillors, there is no equivalent body, no Community Forum, bringing together lay representatives from all the Ward Forums. What they are offered is no different from the existing structure of Ward Forums and Ward plans that already applies throughout the city, including in East Birmingham itself. The only access that citizens have to where the strategic decisions are made is indirect, mediated and controlled by their local councillors, who cannot be mandated. This is not empowerment. Genuine participation would mean some elected representatives from the Ward Forums, or from regular East Birmingham-wide Forums comprising representatives from the Ward Forums, able to participate directly in the Board discussions.

**And no trade union representatives**

Trade union representatives are also excluded from participation in the governance of the EBIGS. There is not a single place on the Board for a trade union representative to speak on behalf of the tens of thousands of workers and trade unionists in East Birmingham and the thousands of new employees that the Strategy aims to create jobs for. They too are not regarded as ‘key partners’.

It is symptomatic that in both the 48 pages of the Council’s February Cabinet Appendix 1 and the 22 pages of its March Update the only mentions of the word ‘union’ are with reference to the Grand Union canal.

In short, a model of governance has been imposed on East Birmingham which, far from being inclusive and participatory, is deliberately hierarchical, exclusionary and, at the community level, divisive.

**PART 2: ‘STRENGTH IN COMMON: A JUST TRANSITION AND RECOVERY – IN A POST-COVID WORLD’**

In the autumn of 2021 (it is dated only with the year) the University of Birmingham published a 48 page report by Lisa Trickett and Bryan Nott titled ‘Strength in Common: A Just Transition and Recovery – in a Post-COVID World’. [2] It is published jointly by Places in Common and the Birmingham Energy Institute at Birmingham University.

Places in Common describes itself on its website as ‘a collective that aims to be a disruptive promoter of system change’. Lisa Trickett is Labour councillor for Moseley and Kings Heath ward in Birmingham, Advisor and Co-convenor of the City Council’s Route to Zero Climate Assembly, Vice-chair of the WMCA Scrutiny Committee, Chair of The Active Well Being Society (TAWS), a member of the University of Birmingham’s City Region Economic and Development Institute (City-REDI) Advisory Board, and a member of the EC of SERA, Labour’s environment affiliate. She has been working for several years on issues in East Birmingham (see her 2019 report with Chris Smith, ‘Power To The People, An Integrated Approach To Clean Energy And Climate Innovation’. [6] Bryan Nott is a lawyer and community campaigner.

The Birmingham Energy Institute says it ‘is developing and applying the technological innovation, original thinking and new ways of working required to create sustainable energy solutions and support the regional, national and global transition to a zero carbon energy system’. On 1 September 2021 it announced that ‘the Birmingham Energy Institute has been awarded a £123,900 grant from the country’s largest gas supplier Cadent Foundation to develop a new collaborative approach for engaging local communities in the transition to net-zero’. (The Cadent Foundation is a charity established by Cadent Gas, the country’s largest gas supplier. It owns and manages four Gas Distributions Networks in the UK, including the West Midlands.) ‘The Birmingham Energy Institute will work in partnership with Places in Common, a public policy co-operative working to drive systems change, and The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWS), a community benefit society and cooperative focused on developing healthy, happy communities living active and connected lives.’ [7]

**‘Strength in Common’ as a strategy for community empowerment**

The Executive Summary of the ‘Strength in Common’ report begins:

This report poses a challenge to those who are the incumbents of the current system of improving the lives and life chances of local people, developing communities and regenerating neighbourhoods. Too often the need to make big changes leads to action on a scale that fails to reach and engage the whole community. The inherent differences between the various actors involved in a process in terms of power, knowledge and experience risk skewed processes that have the appearance of impact but which it is either difficult to sustain or to make pervasive. Problems that beset marginalised and poorer communities have not been solved despite many decades of trying. This report seeks to persuade the reader that there are radical options for the way in which communities achieve local economic success and resilience – in this case, how East Birmingham does so. (p4)

The recipients of community development, especially ‘communities who are marginalised or disadvantaged’, often have little say in what happens. ‘Those who exercise authority or control – the incumbents – need to cede power to those communities’ (p5); ‘For action on climate change, in time those with least choice and control need to shape the agenda, own the problem and benefit from the solutions.’ (p6).

**Community Learning Platforms**

‘Strength in Common’ says

Approaches that rely solely on existing structures inevitably reflect the interests of those who currently hold power and whilst welcome attempts are made to make these approaches ‘inclusive’ if they are driven from the point of view of one community of interest, for example the big utilities or property developers, they are not going to reflect the complexity of requirement or the cross sectional range of interests that need to be understood and reconciled. (p26)

The solution offered by ‘Strength in Common’ is Community Learning Platforms (CLPs), which will give ‘Frontline communities and businesses whose voices are not currently heard and whose experience is not reflected in the policy dynamic a chance to tell their stories and participate as equals in the policy development and decision-making process.’ (p27).

CLPs will offer a space for residents, workers, innovators and industry to explore opportunity, share knowledge and define future approaches and innovation. CLPs should provide for a learning framework that will allow policy makers and participants to look at key social and economic issues in a holistic way. This will entail the sharing of knowledge, negotiation of outputs from proposed activity and an increase in skills on the part of all participants. Learning from the activities (test and learn) is as important as the activities themselves. (p5)

Of course the opportunity - and the right - of local residents ‘to explore opportunity, share knowledge and define future approaches and innovation’ is vital. The emergent design logic of the ‘test and learn’ strategy of co-production contrasts with the imposition of top-down planning that is often characteristic of urban governance. But ‘Strength in Common’ makes a much more ambitious claim: that Community Learning Platforms can enable ordinary citizens to challenge and overcome the dominance of ‘those who currently hold power’.

Local programmes can and often do offer to create a strong community input with local control but wider structural influences can still heavily outweigh the agency on the part of the local community. One intention behind community learning platforms is to address the imbalance of power relationships within such activity. (p27)

**‘Strength in Common’: a strategy for consensus between the powerful and the people**

The concept of ‘community’ is not analysed in ‘Strength in Common’, but East Birmingham has a population approaching a quarter of a million comprising numerous communities of geography, identity and interest. There is no explanation of how many CLPs are envisaged to cover the population of East Birmingham, how large they might be, or how often they would meet. But the most important omission is their relationship with the governance structure of the EBIGS.

‘Strength in Common’ says that ‘It is envisaged that the development of the community learning platforms will be a test and learn process and would be linked to the evolving governance arrangements within the East Birmingham Board and policy secretariat’ (p28). This anticipated link is not explained. Most importantly, the report makes no demand for the opening up of the Board to representatives of the community and local trade unions in order to democratise the governance structure of East Birmingham where the strategic policy decisions are made by those who command the powers of the local state and local business. There is no recognition that there are different and conflicting class interests at stake –and Lisa Trickett and Bryan Nott avoid the language of class politics – between those who hold power in the local economy and the working class communities of East Birmingham.

‘Strength in Common’ is based on the premise that through discussion on Community Learning Platforms those interests can be reconciled, and consensus can be constructed between those in power and those without it. They make their theoretical position explicit:

As an economic frame this report draws upon Kate Raworth’s Doughnut Economics. In addition, CLES’s work on local wealth building in Birmingham and beyond, and the RSA’s Inclusive Growth Commission have informed the approach taken. (p10)

All three of these have been subject to critique of their class consensus standpoint. This is the journal *Jacobin*’s assessment of Raworth’s programme for economies:

‘doughnut economics fails to confront the power relations that stop the economy from serving most people’s needs.

If there is an implicit notion in doughnut economics of how the status quo will change, it’s that capitalists, ostensibly presented for the first time with the idea of a more sustainable and socially just economy, will arrive en masse at the rational conclusion that business can’t go on as usual. … It’s a dubious theory, but it goes a long way toward explaining why doughnut economics is palatable to so many so-called progressive CEOs and other liberal elites, who rightly don’t perceive it as a threat.’ [8]

CLES – the Centre for Local Economic Strategies – is an organisation based on a programme of Community Wealth Building (CWB) that works with many local authorities, including Birmingham. This is what I wrote about CWB in June 2021 on the Birmingham Against the Cuts website (later republished by Anti-Capitalist Resistance): [9]

‘CWB is based on the role of local councils and therefore avoids advocating measures which challenge council regimes, including Labour ones. But local councils are the local instruments of national state policy, bound by the combination of national government control of funding and legislative regulation. Mass popular action would be required to effectively challenge it, including active movements of resistance by community campaigns and council workers to oppose further government-imposed cuts being implemented by councils themselves, Labour as well as Conservative. Thus, CWB provides social democratic councillors with an ideological rationale and political programme for limited progressive reforms while avoiding overt class conflict.’

The RSA ‘s 2017 report ‘Inclusive Growth Commission: Making our economy work for everyone’ says ‘The UK government has set out an ambitious goal to create an economy that works for everyone, not just the privileged few’. (p12). [10] Essentially the report accepts this statement uncritically. ‘In this final report of the Inclusive Growth Commission, we set out how we can create an economy that works for everyone. It is […] a framework for how leaders – in business, civil society, public service and government – can make inclusive growth our working definition of economic success.’ (p13).

The RSA report represents the progressive wing of mainstream economics which, as the Marxist economist Michael Roberts comments, ‘aims at ‘inclusive economics’, based on the assumption that market and capitalism are best, but require management and the involvement of people. There is no policy for removing the ‘market’ causes of inequality.’ [11] There is only one mention of the word ‘capitalism’ in the RSA report: ‘We need to understand that modern capitalism is messy and does not produce predictable winners and losers’. (p12). (On the contrary, they are entirely predictable!). The word ‘profit’ does not appear at all. The report proposes that ‘Central government establish a new independent UK Inclusive Growth Investment Fund’. […] The Fund would be overseen by a multistakeholder board, including city leaders, private sector leaders, Whitehall officials and the chair of the National Infrastructure Commission.’ (p11). There is no mention of trade union or community representatives on the Investment Fund board.

If these sources provide the economic basis of the strategy of Community Learning Platforms, its basis in social theory lies in what Jamie Gough describes as the tradition of ‘deliberative democracy drawing on Habermas’s strategy of ‘communicative rationality’’:

‘Local networks, including but not limited to those involving the local state, should involve all social groups with their potentially conflicting needs, but should aim for consensus on the way forward. This can be achieved through clarity of communication between the different interests, where relevant information is shared and views are reasoned. This approach promises to generate a particularly strong sense of local belonging and community.’ [12]

But as Gough says, ‘Transparent communications between social actors cannot argue away the conflicts of interest between them, which are rooted in relations of power’.

**Strength in Common, or Strengths in Contention?**

‘Strength in Common’ opposes the dominant model of economic development:

Do we look through the lens of those at the top and, as they argue, protect our ‘assets’ by supporting major businesses and continuing with the competitive city? These are development-led approaches to growth that it is arguable follow the ’grow, produce, consume, discard’ trajectory that has done so much damage to our climate. […]

Alternatively, do we test out a new direction that accepts clear social and environmental limits to the way we drive economic resilience and inclusive growth? (p19)

‘Strength in Common’ specifically rejects the ‘competitive city’ approach of the WMCA leadership:

Traditional approaches and thinking within the Mayor’s Economic Impact Group highlights the importance of ‘supporting and protecting the existing assets‘ along with financial and professional services. We are thereby continuing with competitive city approaches to building economic recovery on the survival of these sectors and on an infrastructure which it is argued will encourage the diversification and development of local growth. In the words of one leader, ‘we can do inclusive but let’s get growth right first’. We should look for a more nuanced approach that facilitates growth but one that first looks to build and protect local assets and stay within the carbon and other boundaries we have set out above. It is our contention that there will be no economic resilience and inclusive growth if huge swathes of the region’s geography are isolated and excluded from participating in that opportunity. (pp19-20)

The question is what strategy ‘Strength in Common’ advocates to challenge the dominance of the ‘competitive city’ model. What ‘Strength in Common’ attempts to do is to construct a compromise between these two options, enforcing social and environmental limits to economic growth while supporting businesses in the context of the competitive city. I am not arguing that progressive reforms cannot be implemented on the basis of agreement between communities and those in power. On the contrary, there are positive measures that feature in the programme of the EBIGS which should be supported. But the limits of the consensual policy between the classes apply from the very beginning to restrict progress to what the market will accept.

**The problem of lack of funding for EBIGS**

The limits set by the market are exemplified by the crucial issue of funding. Will it depend on private investment for profit?

The EBIGS report ends with a table which ‘summarises some of the work which will make up the action plan’. Many of the actions will require additional funding:

‘We will work to explore opportunities to secure additional funding for East Birmingham to accelerate and expand the employment and training offer in East Birmingham.’ (p30)

‘Many of the things in this list are either already in progress, or can be brought forward quickly, and will be delivering benefits while we are working to develop and fund our longer-term proposals.’ (p38)

‘Following on from these initial activities we will continue to work together in partnership and with the local community to find ways to offer better services which meet local needs.’ ‘Funding status: to be identified’ (p39).

‘In the longer term we will: Continue to work together to explore opportunities to secure additional funding for East Birmingham to accelerate and expand the employment and training offer.’ (p40)

In the table of actions eleven of them are tagged ‘Funding to be identified’. The ‘Strength in Common’ report recognises the problem:

* ‘Funding should be sought to bring forward the approach and process set out in this report.’ (p5)
* ‘Upfront funding or new forms of financing will be needed to ensure a just transition.’ (p6)
* ‘Within existing educational curricula and established funding routes there is limited scope for developing the skills needed to work in a co-operative or commons-based economy.’ (p26)
* ‘Barriers to Retrofit [include] National level: Lack of long-term planning for funding. City level: Lack of long-term strategy – short term funding and annual budgets.’ (p31)
* ‘A comprehensive funding bid to government is required which will unlock funding for both the infrastructure and the retrofitting of low efficiency housing in areas of high economic deprivation.’ (p35)

Where will the additional funding come from? There are two possible sources: government grants and private investment.

On 24 November 2021 Cllr Ian Ward launched ‘[Prosperity and Opportunity for All: Birmingham’s Levelling Up Strategy](https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/download/4537/birminghams_levelling_up_strategy), an appeal for Government funding’. [13] The 54-page report urges the Government to support five ‘Levelling Up Accelerators’. One is ‘Back the integrated local place delivery model demonstrator, the East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy, covering 250,000 people to tackle deep levels of deprivation.’ It says, ‘East Birmingham is at the heart of where Birmingham City Council is developing and testing its approach to levelling up and inclusive growth’. (p27). This is an economic growth model of development:

Our vision of levelling up is rooted in the belief that we must encourage growth and stimulate investment in our city, whilst at the same time making Birmingham a fairer and more equal place. Economic growth makes it possible to tackle deep seated inequalities by giving more people access to good jobs and higher incomes. (p6)

Our goal is to drive growth across the city, and we recognise that this is a critical driver of levelling up as it spurs sustainable jobs and business opportunities. (p9)

**Net zero to attract private investment**

The ‘Levelling Up’ report does not include a costed request for funding, but it is certain that sufficient additional funding from government will not be forthcoming. That means that the Council’s zero carbon policy depends on attracting private investment. That is why the aim is defined as net zero, not zero carbon.

‘Strength in Common’ refers repeatedly to the aim of ‘zero carbon’, in line with the aim of the City Council’s 2020 ‘Route to Zero Action Plan - Call to Action’. But this is defined as ‘net zero’, not zero carbon. This is made explicit by the Birmingham Energy Institute in its announcement that it has been awarded a grant by Cadant to develop with Places in Common ‘a new collaborative approach for engaging local communities in the transition to net-zero’. [7]

But as Greenpeace says, ‘Within the climate debate, the biggest deception comes down to a single word: **net**. This same deceptive approach is promoted in countless climate pledges of governments and corporations as ‘Net Zero’ or ‘Carbon Neutrality’’. [14] Net zero provides the rationale for investment in economic growth which produces pollutants which can then be traded off. Iain Bruce explains in his article ‘Beyond Glasgow – What happened at COP26 and where we go next’:

Net zero is centred on the notion that rich countries and major corporations can continue to emit greenhouse gases, either because they will pay someone else not to (offsets), or because they will use some untried or non-existent technology to remove those gases from the atmosphere in the future. So in addition to these two bogus premises (that offsets can lead to real cuts in emissions, and that we will eventually be able to count on negative emissions technology), the net zero narrative depends on jettisoning any pretence of justice for those in the global south who are the main victims of climate change. [15]

**How local government’s net zero programmes depend on private investment for profit**

The WMCA’s ‘Five Year Plan 2021-26’ 87 page ‘Executive Summary’ ‘sets out how the West Midlands Combined Authority area can start to deliver net zero carbon emissions by 2041’. [16]

‘Gross extra investment required under the ‘Accelerated’ scenario is £4.3bn by 2026. However, net investment will be much lower due to operational savings.

To set the region on course to deliver the net zero target by 2041, this FYP identifies key priorities for delivery, working with regional stakeholders, including:

1. Set up a regional approach to work with stakeholders to unlock investment to deliver energy efficient homes for up to 294,000 dwellings, with low carbon heating in 292,000, at a total cost of £3.6bn, reducing energy bills, fuel poverty and creating jobs.’ (p4)

The accompanying PowerPoint presentation by WSP, the global consultancy employed by the WMCA ‘to deliver trailblazing net zero plan’, explains: ‘Taking the measures as a whole there is a positive NPV [Net Present Value], making this a potentially investable action. Though the payback period may be long.’ In other words, the WMCA’s Five Year Plan 2021-26 has set a modest target of net zero by 2041 in order to ensure that it can deliver sufficient profits to attract private sector investment.

The dependence of Birmingham City Council’s climate emergency policy on attracting private investment for profit was made clear at a recent meeting of the Council’s Sustainability and Transport Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 17 November 2021. [17] (The transcripts below are mine.) Birmingham Council has a new in-house Climate Change team, led by a new senior officer, Ellie Horwitch-Smith, Assistant Director. The theme of her presentation was the need to attract private investment.

‘We know that there's obviously a limited capability and set of funds available in the public sector, and I think that what is also clear to me from the work that I've done in engaging with private sector investment through the Green Finance Institute is just the scale and appetite to invest by the private sector from all sorts of different angles In environmental, social, economically beneficial projects.

So I think what we need to do is make sure that the projects we are bringing forward are investment-ready in terms of the clear outcomes they are achieving, what are the things that investors want to see as being outputted from the investments they make. And if we start to design that information Into the projects that we’re making from the start then we'll have a much better chance of making them investment-ready.’

Ellie Horwitch-Smith’s background is significant in her appointment. She has just joined the Council from the Green Finance Institute, which states that ‘We are an independent, commercially focused organisation backed by government and led by bankers.’

‘Our vision is a greener future made possible by finance. Our mission is to accelerate the transition to a clean, resilient and environmentally sustainable economy by channelling capital at pace and scale towards real-economy outcomes that will create jobs and increase prosperity for all.’

During COP26 ‘The Green Finance Institute is partnering with the City of London Corporation to co-host the Green Horizon Summit, a five-day hybrid event to mobilize private finance in the transition to net zero’. [18]

Ellie Horwitch-Smith is right to say that there isn’t nearly enough public funding. But her strategy for the Council is to rely on investment for profit by the private sector in Council climate projects – and more profit than they can make elsewhere.

The decisive role of private profitability in restricting local government policy, even the limited aim of net zero, was confirmed by a second presentation at the Council’s Scrutiny meeting, by Rachel Brothwood, Director of Pensions at the West Midlands Pension Fund. Birmingham Council’s policy since 2017 has been to divest from fossil fuels by 2030. This includes the West Midlands Local Government Pension Fund. But the Fund continues to invest in fossil fuels. Rachel Brothwood explained why: ‘There are no credible pathways for investors at present that lead to net zero.’ In other words, without investment in fossil fuels the Pension Fund would not deliver enough profit for finance capital to invest in it.

**PART 3: COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR RADICAL CHANGE**

Of course Birmingham Council will need to seek external investment to make up for the lack of sufficient government funding, but it has to ensure that the private sector isn’t driving the agenda. That can only be achieved by a strategy of public mobilisation in communities across the city not just for more government funding to tackle the climate emergency but also for radical change in the whole system. But ‘Strength in Common’ has no strategy for collective popular mobilisation. It says:

‘For there to be greater community involvement the community needs to be given the knowledge, tools and expertise to engage. A starting point is to organise the community in a way that fosters that approach.’ (p25);

‘there is a need to develop the skills of communities, particularly marginalised communities, if they are to be able to ‘compete’ with the pre-existing power structures that surround them.’ (p26).

Knowledge and skills are certainly necessary, but they are not at all sufficient to challenge the dominant power structures unless they are mobilised in collective action for radical change by the communities and workers in East Birmingham. And without a radical democratisation of the arrangements there will be no opportunity for community members to directly input into the decision-making process.

‘Strength in Common’ says

Approaches that rely solely on existing structures inevitably reflect the interests of those who currently hold power and whilst welcome attempts are made to make these approaches ‘inclusive’ if they are driven from the point of view of one community of interest, for example the big utilities or property developers, they are not going to reflect the complexity of requirement or the cross sectional range of interests that need to be understood and reconciled. (p26)

But ‘Strength in Common’ makes no demands for the democratisation of the governance structure of East Birmingham to enable public participation by opening up places on the Board for representatives of trade unions or the community (which might include representatives of Community Learning Platforms themselves).

**Forces for change: communities and unions**

Clearly representation of communities and workers on the governing body of the EBIGS is an elementary democratic right, but to challenge the EBIGS policy framework of the combination of net zero, lack of funding and reliance on sufficiently profitable private investment requires organised mass pressure for radical change. Trade unions must play a leading role, but to do so requires them to adopt two new strategies. One is local place-based inter-union collaboration, the other is collaboration between unions and communities - social movement unionism.

**Local place-based inter-union collaboration**

Unions are used to dealing with issues in their local workplace. In some cases this may involve coordination between unions, perhaps a joint union committee. But the EBIGS is on a very different scale. Its workstreams cut across the sectoral areas of every single union with members in East Birmingham. It is not primarily workplace-based, it is place-based. The climate emergency is a critical case in point. It is a global issue, a national issue, but it is also a local place-based issue – on the scale of the city, the town, the region. Take for example retrofitting homes: it involves a whole range of workers from construction to insulation and heating engineers. The policy-makers and the companies they contract are organised on a collective East Birmingham place basis through the East Birmingham Board and its management structures. That is an example of why workers and their unions will need to do the same and coordinate on an East Birmingham basis.

An East Birmingham Joint Union Coordinating Committee is vital in order for workers to be represented on the East Birmingham Board to have their say in policy at the top level. There are many unions involved but there is no chance that they would all be offered a seat at the table. In fact it would be unlikely to be more than one. One option should be rejected straight away: representation handed over to the Midlands TUC. It is not rooted in the area (it stretches from the Welsh border to the Wash), and it is too under-resourced, as its lack of capacity to contribute to the Birmingham Council’s Route to Zero Taskforce demonstrated. The only effective way to tackle these place-based cross-sectoral issues at the local level is cross-sectoral union organisation through a Joint Union Coordinating Committee.

A transformational collaborative plan of action developed by the unions working together in East Birmingham would begin to put into practice what the New Lucas Plan working group are saying: ‘The Lucas Plan sets out a plan for socially-useful production within one organisation but this approach can be used to produce plans for new jobs for one local area, such as at a community or city scale’. [19]

**Local community organisation for radical change**

East Birmingham also needs effective community organisation for radical change. We have recently seen an upsurge in locally-rooted social movements all over the country calling for change: around the climate crisis, Black Lives Matter, and mutual aid campaigns in response to Covid. Building on these we need community campaigns for radical action across East Birmingham.

Community campaigns are also union campaigns. For example, climate issues are both union issues and community issues. Take the case of local transport policy, a key climate issue. It affects not just bus and tram and train workers but every worker, every trade unionist living in the local area, and every member of the local community.

The question then is what should be the relationship between place-based union and community organising? There is a history of collaboration between trade unions and local communities, in Britain and other countries, to draw on. It goes under the name of social movement unionism.

**Social Movement Unionism: place-based collaborative union and community organising**

The idea of social movement unionism achieved widespread dissemination through the publication in 1997 of ‘Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy’, a book by Kim Moody, an American trade union activist. [20] He argued that the changing nature of work as a result of globalisation, coupled with growing attacks on workers, put in question traditional union structures and strategies. Social movement unionism stressed the need for union democracy and rank-and-file involvement together with forming alliances with social movements and local communities. Since them we have seen many examples, especially in North America. In 2007 Michael Schiavone published an article titled ‘Moody’s Account of Social Movement Unionism: An Analysis’ which gave many examples. [21] Here are just two:

The Stamford Organizing Project in Connecticut is a multi-union drive not just to address workplace issues, but also to lead community-wide struggles for better housing’. … While there is public housing, the Stamford Housing Authority decided by the mid-1990s . . . not to build more affordable housing, but rather to ‘rehabilitate’ existing units: remove the tenants and improve the buildings, then privatize, rent at market rates, or convert housing to ‘moderate-income’ units…

This would have resulted in rents dramatically increasing. For low-income workers, it was increasingly difficult to find affordable accommodation. The four unions involved in the Stamford Organizing Project (HERE, the New England Health Care Employees Union District 1199, SEIU, and the UAW), while not always successful in its fights to keep affordable housing, have become valued members of the community. This has helped them in their organizing drives. (p287)

The second example is the campaign by the Canadian Auto Workers union for adequate childcare in Ontario in 2001, in alliance with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, against plans by the Ontario government to cut the managed childcare budget by 45 per cent. (p298)

The key point is that these are not just unions seeking community support for struggles in the workplace. They are unions getting involved in actively supporting struggles in the community.

In 2014 Jane Holgate published an article titled ‘Community organising in the UK: A ‘new’ approach for trade unions?’: [22]

In recent years a number of UK unions have been considering how to (re)engage with communities in order to rebuild the links that were so important to the origins and development of trade unionism. As such, we have seen parts of the UK union movement investing time and resources into exploring whether community organising can engage new actors and new union members in fighting for workers rights and against social injustice more broadly.

In 2010, the TUC produced a report on this initiative where it concluded:

The time is ripe for greater community engagement and partnership working between voluntary and community organisations and British trade unions. On the one hand, the Big Society agenda encourages third sector organisations to play more active roles in civil society. In particular, it allows unions to promote their unique position between the community and the labour market, which can be further harnessed to help revitalise local economies and improve social cohesion. On the other hand, developing community-based strategies in conjunction with other third sector groups will be crucial to the success of campaigns against imminent public sector cuts, determining whether unions can successfully win the hearts and minds of the broader public at national, regional and local levels.

In December 2011, Unite – the UK’s largest private sector trade union – announced it was

introducing a new membership scheme ‘to ensure those pushed to the margins of society

can benefit from collective power’ (Unite press release 2011). Unite’s new ‘community

membership’ category is aimed at students, people who are unemployed and others not in

work – categories of people who normally do not have a relationship with unions. The

union claimed that their community organising initiative would ‘organise the marginalised

and revolutionise British trade unionism’. While this may be a little overstated, Unite’s

community organising initiative is a significant development in the UK union movement’s

‘turn’ towards community organising.

There are today numerous Unite Community branches campaigning on community issues. However, in a 2018 article Holgate also pointed out the limitations:

Yet it is further argued that the rethinking of union purpose has only gone so far and that Unite is actually facing in two directions at the same time. While the UC strategy is developing a new approach to union activity (recognizing that organizing in the community requires a re-analysing of where power and leverage might be located), the main body of the union––the industrial membership––continues as it has done in the past to focus on the workplace and has a completely separate organizing strategy. In terms of the way the union functions, this means the two sections of the union are acting independently with little interaction. (p20) [23]

The theoretical basis of social movement unionism lies in the mutually interpenetrating spheres of production and reproduction, of the workplace, the home and the locality. Holgate (2014) quotes Ellem and Shields:

To limit analysis to this sphere [workplace industrial relations] is to understate the social embeddedness of capital-labor relations. What should be acknowledged is that the sphere of production – the traditional focus of attention of both traditional and radical industrial relations scholarship - extends directly into the spheres of labour reproduction and commodity consumption. The sphere of reproduction covers those social relations and processes whereby labor power is physically and culturally reproduced over time, including demography, family formation and structure, education, biological reproduction, heath and welfare, education and training and labor migration. [24]

In effect, they are arguing that it is the interrelationship of these different spheres that creates ‘community’. Together these are the social relations of work and a sole focus on workplace industrial relations limits the opportunities, not only to engage with other potentially influential ‘other actors’ in harnessing external solidarity, but also leaves to one side the issues of social reproduction and consumption that affect the lives of the working and non-working classes. (p11)

**Retrofitting homes: how social movement unionism could be put into practice in East Birmingham**

I want to end with a practical example. Retrofitting homes is one of the most important ways of tackling climate change. It was a key issue in the Route to Zero Report at the Birmingham City Council meeting on 12 January 2021:

Retrofit of Existing Housing Stock

3.9.4 Again the focus here is on the Council’s own stock as this is the area over which we have the greatest control. The City Council are part of a WMCA consortium bid for funding for a small pilot scheme and it is considered that the East Birmingham Task Force can play a role in progressing the retrofit agenda.

3.9.5 In order to progress this agenda further it will be necessary to lobby Government to commit further funds, as well as to promote retrofitting and its benefits across the city. The City Council will also need to commit resources internally to working up schemes that can be ready to submit in response to Government making funding available. (p3) [25]

But the Council’s lobbying of Government has failed to secure the funds, even for a ‘small pilot scheme’. This is graphically demonstrated by the fact that the Council’s EBIGS report contains not one single mention of retrofitting in its 48 pages.

‘Strength in Common’ comments that ‘Birmingham City Council has made clear that it lacks the capacity and resources to drive forward this agenda and that this is an area where it is looking to facilitate and to support change whilst leaving others to deliver and drive key programmes.’ (p32).

‘Strength in Common’ devotes four pages to useful proposals about how to ‘pilot the domestic heat decarbonisation transition in the EBNS [East Birmingham North Solihull] corridor where there are a high number of homes in need of intervention’. (p33). But it offers no solution to the decisive problem of absence of funding, simply concluding that ‘The chance to draw together a range of investment into some form of ‘total place’ model needs to be further explored’. (p32). And it makes no mention of the silence about retrofitting in the EBIGS report.

We have already seen in the Birmingham context that private investment in climate solutions is only forthcoming if it is sufficiently profitable – that’s the net-zero deal. And Government funding won’t be won by polite lobbying by the city council – its omission of retrofitting from the EBIGS report is tacit admission of that. What is needed is an active popular campaign based on the mobilisation of unions and local communities. This is what is advocated in a very useful report published in August 2020 by Leeds TUC: ‘Retrofit Leeds homes with high-quality insulation and heat pumps:  a plan and call to action!’.

Leeds TUC is calling on all union members to support and campaign for a huge investment in home retrofitting, to high standards of insulation and with space and water heating mainly from heat pumps using renewably produced electricity. The scheme should be coordinated by Leeds City Council, in partnership with unions, practitioners, community groups and local training providers such as Leeds College of Building. [26]

A campaign in East Birmingham led by unions and local communities would be social movement unionism in practice. It could generate the mass public support for the Council to put much more pressure on Government for funding and could be the catalyst for a city-wide campaign.

It would also be the opportunity to put into practice in East Birmingham one of the commitments of ‘Building a better Birmingham: Labour’s Local Manifesto 2018-2022’:

We will re-state the case for the municipal provision of services in Birmingham, heralding a new age of municipal socialism. […]

And the Labour council in Birmingham will lead by example, calling time on the misplaced notion that the private sector always trumps the public sector *by adopting a policy of in-house preferred for all contracts*. (My emphasis) [27]

As the Leeds TUC report says:

We favour local authority insourcing of labour (direct labour organisations or DLOs), which is not only cheaper and more accountable, but also gives a unified workforce more say, more leverage in terms of pay, conditions and job-security (including, for example, parent-friendly employment conditions and stronger protections against gender-based harassment or discrimination) and potentially a structured framework for skills development. At the same time, this would enable local authorities to develop an integrated approach to training, employment and planning works for public need.

Hodge Hill, one of the two constituencies in East Birmingham, is an ideal site to launch a pilot in-house retrofitting project, structured as a community-trade union-local authority cooperative. Over three-quarters of the population live in deprived neighbourhoods (nearly double the figure for Birmingham as a whole) and are least likely to be able to afford to retrofit their homes. Two-thirds of the population come from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and are therefore vulnerable to racial discrimination. There is a strong fabric of local community organisations to draw on (including the links that Lisa Trickett, Bryan Nott and The Active Well Being Society have already established).

The MP for Hodge Hill is Liam Byrne. He was the [Labour and Co-operative Party](https://whocanivotefor.co.uk/parties/joint-party%3A53-119/labour-and-co-operative-party) candidate for [Mayor of the West Midlands Combined Authority](https://whocanivotefor.co.uk/elections/mayor.west-midlands.2021-05-06/mayor-of-west-midlands-combined-authority/). One of his election pledges was to ‘Establish a Cooperative Commission tasked with tripling the Cooperative Sector’. Hodge Hill has 9 wards with 13 councillors, all Labour. One of them is Ian Ward, the Council Leader who launched the Manifesto with its commitment to ‘a policy of in-house preferred for all contracts’. Another is Cllr John Cotton, Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, Community Safety and Equalities and a member of the East Birmingham Board.

The East Birmingham Strategy is a challenge to all three of them to seize this opportunity to turn their election promises into actions.

A community-union plan and campaign for retrofitting homes could be the first step towards a new ‘Lucas Plan’ for East Birmingham, a plan based not just on collaboration among unions but on collaboration between unions and communities, building on the network of existing relationships in the area and creating new democratic and participatory ways of working through local committees and assemblies. It would exemplify what Jamie Gough calls ‘the essential class relations of socialist local strategy’:

I have argued that the local scale is one where collective organisations of ordinary people, around production, the social sphere and between them, can be strongly built: the locality becomes the site of working class solidarities. By taking up the basic material issues of the locality, these can build collaboration and mutual support between sections of the working class between which capitalist society (consciously, but more importantly unconsciously) constructs divisions.

These connections between production and reproduction are visible at the scale of neighbourhoods, towns and cities (Gough and Eisenschitz 2010). This gives the basis for a truly radical politics which spans economy and social life, waged and unwaged work, production and consumption, and whose holistic dynamic is to fight for people’s well-being. (p433) [28]

Of course there is a long way to go in Birmingham, we are only at the beginning, but social movement unionism should be the direction of travel.

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