

The Campaign for Social Ownership in the 21st Century

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It was in the aftermath of the Gate Gourmet dispute that the campaign for the restoration of trade union rights was reinvigorated. On the back of that campaign, the TUC and Labour Party conferences passed resolutions supporting the Trade Union Freedom Bill.

Now is the time, in the wake of the collapse of Northern Rock and the wider economic downturn, to reinvigorate a debate about a new role for social ownership in the 21st century. This pamphlet looks at different models and different circumstances, but the underlying message could not be clearer: we need more control over the decisions taken by a rich elite in boardrooms across the globe.

The profit motive has led us to this recession – our private sector economy has failed to plan for the post-oil economy that addresses climate change, failed to invest in infrastructure across industries (unless underwritten by the taxpayer), and failed to build the housing needed by so many low and medium income workers.

Northern Rock was instructive for two reasons: it killed the myth that nationalisation and public ownership was distinctly old Labour and off the agenda; secondly, when Northern Rock collapsed there were few voices advocating transforming the business either into a workers' co-operative or building a national bank from the remnants.

This latter point is not surprising. It is over thirty-five years since Tony Benn, as Minister for Technology under Harold Wilson, supported workers to continue their work under their own control. The current ministers have no inclination to empower workers, indeed their department now claims to be “the voice for business across Government”.

As the credit crunch leads the UK economy into recession, and as unemployment continues to rise, this is time to restart the debate about how we protect workers, our community and our economy. We need to be creative, imaginative and bold in our demands and our actions – and that means tackling the fundamental question of ownership.

This pamphlet is designed to stimulate a debate among trade unionists and all those who want a stake in their community. From this debate, we need to take forward a campaign for a worker controlled economy, accountable to our communities, into our union branches and conferences, into our workplaces, and through the TUC, and eventually even Parliament.