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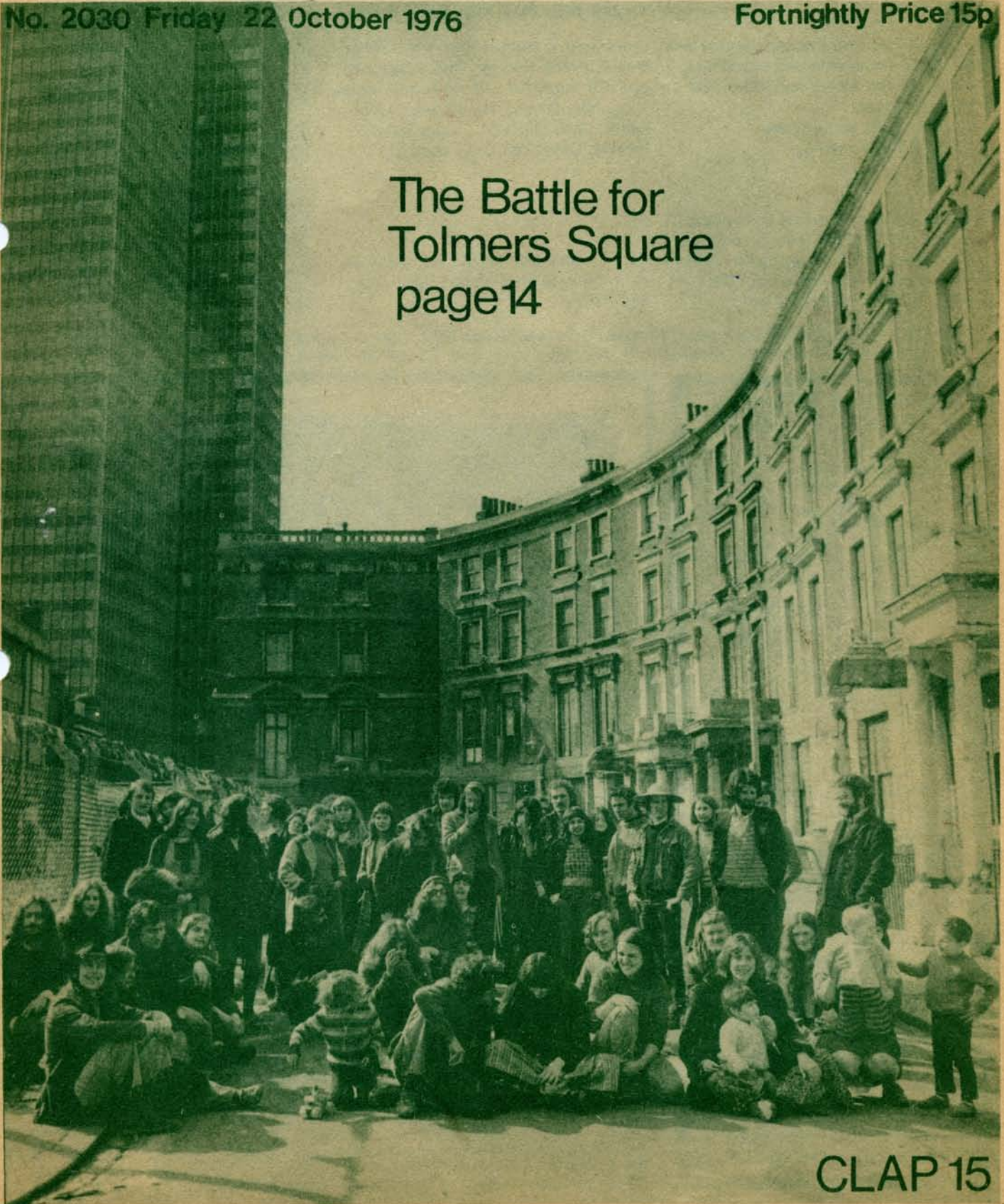
# peace news

## for nonviolent revolution

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The Battle for  
Tolmers Square  
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# The Battle for Tolmers Square

**The Battle for Tolmers Square, Nick Wates (Routledge & Kegan Paul) £2.95.**

Tolmers Square is part of a 12 acre site on the corner of Euston Road and Hampstead Road in Central London. This book tells the story of how a motley array of opposition groups fought the property speculators over its redevelopment. Nick Wates has done a good job. He has compiled a clear and thorough account (with over 200 photos, maps, and charts) of the ruthless, cynical process by which the developers tried to make £20 million profit at the expense of the people who lived there, and at the expense of low cost housing in London.

In the late 1850's, when the struggle started, the area contained a "diverse patchwork of buildings and activities" which had grown up around the original terraces of Georgian and Victorian houses. There was a fairly even mixture of residential housing (over 1,000 people), light industry, shops, commerce and offices. Rents were low and the residents were working class of various nationalities. Because of its position it attracted the attention of developers who wished to buy up the area, demolish the existing buildings and erect offices; just as they had done along the north side of Euston Road for a mile between workshop in community house

the mainline stations. One of these companies, Stock Conversion and Investment Trust, effectively run by Joe Levy, started buying into the area from 1962 onwards. They were just finishing the massive Euston Centre office complex across the road. In 1960 however, partly as a result of pressure from the Tolmers Square Tenants Association, led by Rose Gavin, the London County Council had rejected applications for office development around Tolmers Square and had started plans for comprehensive housing development. They never materialised.

## OFFICES OR HOUSES

The Council (which became Camden in 1965) wanted to build but they were prevented by just two of the lunacies of a market system motivated by the endless quest for profit—exorbitant prices of development land and the fact that offices are more profitable by far than any other development. If they bought the land therefore the Council would have to build offices as well as houses in order to pay back the money. It was a compromise they thought would at least enable them to provide some houses. But Central Government would not allow offices to be built, nor would they grant loans so that the Council could at least buy the land. Levy just kept buying the land, knowing he couldn't lose. He couldn't. In 1962 he bought land worth



**beginning work on the village garden**

£140,000 an acre, and in 1966 offered it to the Council at £460,000 an acre; in 1965 land that he bought was valued at £420,000 an acre and in 1975 he sold it to the Council for £1,000,000 an acre. In the early 1970's he knew they'd either have to buy him out or co-operate with him on a deal. They co-operated in another compromise with even more offices.

Meanwhile however, the area was all but destroyed. All the houses Levy bought he either demolished or let run down (with or without people in them). The pictures and the quotes from residents tell the story irrefutably. The confused plans of the Council led to unnecessary clearance. People became demoralised (as was intended) with the uncertainty and the decay, and between 1961 and 1971 the population was nearly halved.

## JOE LEVY DEFEATED

Levy came unstuck, however. Tolmers Square refused to lie down. After the original Tenants Association, the Council itself tried for years to put its own development through and when they failed, two enterprising journalist-businessmen launched a counter-deal and then a furious media campaign. Students from University College helped to form a new local group—the Tolmers Village Association. The Asian Community especially hung on, and from 1973 onwards were joined by the squatters who physically and psychologically restored the area, and politically took many initiatives. What really defeated Levy however was the response in the local Labour Party to all this pressure. Property speculation was a fashionable cause at that time for a Labour Party in opposition, and the local wards were instrumental in the final rejection of the Levy deal in October, 1973. Levy was compensated in the end and lost nothing but the chance to make £20 million.

Back in Tolmers Square exactly the same factors that made Levy interested in the first place, the rising land prices and the profitability of offices, now forced Camden to put forward their own proposals with 50,000 sq. ft. more office space than the Levy deal, and more of the existing buildings demolished.



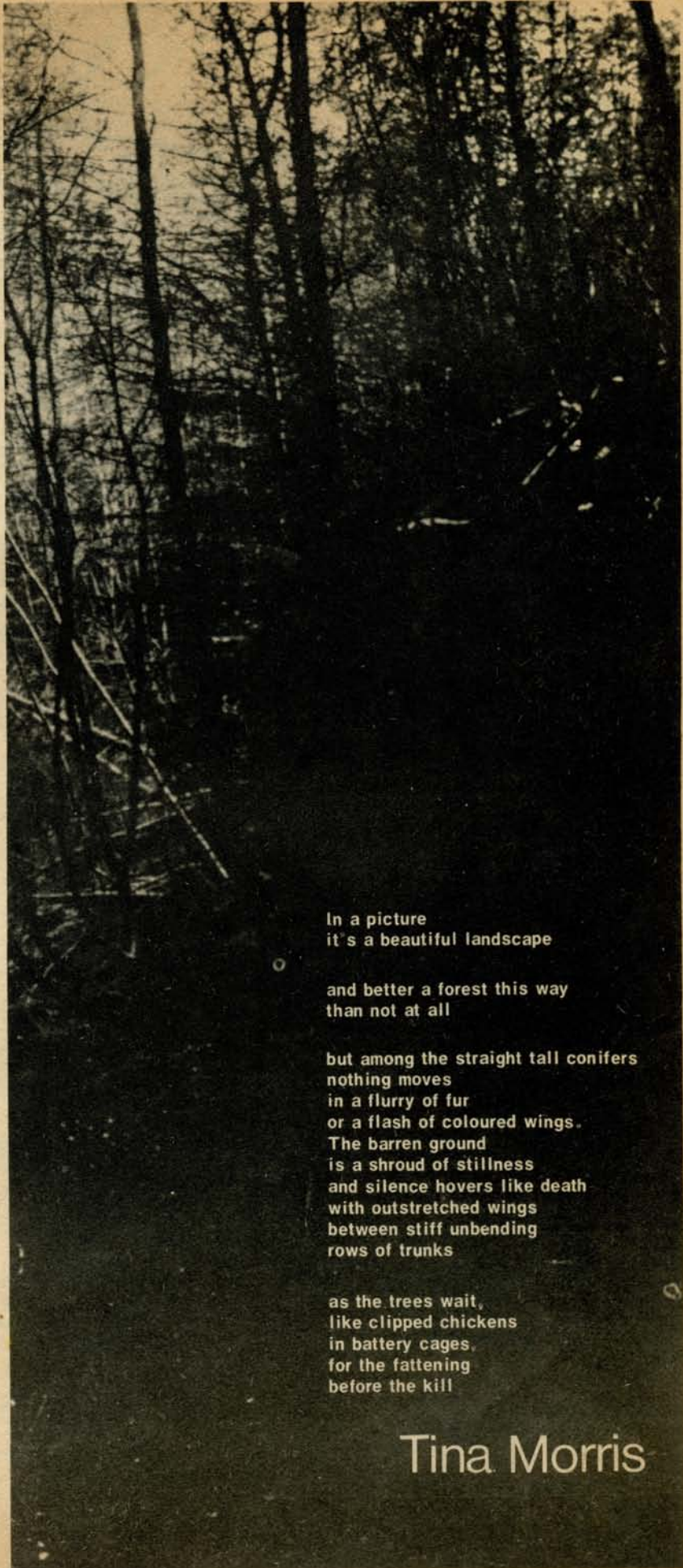
## LOCAL RESISTANCE NOT ENOUGH

This is the real lesson of the book and it is one I think that could have had more emphasis. Tolmers Square was unusual. Not because of the redevelopment—that happens everywhere. But because of the resistance. Tolmers Square was lucky to have Rose Gavin, lucky to have a labour group in control of Camden most of the time, lucky to have Booker and Gray and the media-coverage, lucky to have the students, the Asians, and the squatters, lucky to have Nick Wates. But they still didn't win. They didn't win because no one can win at this level. The enemy is the private ownership of land in conjunction with finance capital. It is obviously impossible to take on these institutions solely at the level of local communities. This certainly does not escape the author—indeed it could escape no one who reads this book. He nails the weakness of "Community Action" especially when it derives its support from such diverse interests as in this case. He nails too the inefficacy of the Community Land Act (Labour's supposed answer) which pushes Councils into a market system in which they are made to behave like the property developers. And yet his heart doesn't seem completely in it. He quite correctly begins the book with an explanation of the mechanics of property speculation but he says "the story really begins" in the next chapter. At the end he concludes, "It would appear that there will never be a rational and equitable determination of land use without the social ownership of finance capital". The tone is almost wistful; it is a tone I think that derives from the fact that the author has in the end a greater interest in Tolmers Square as a concrete place, as a "community" at the moment, than in the unavoidable political conclusions of its story. This is evident too in the very large number of photographs in the book, excellent as they are. It is I think a symptom of the dangerous introversion of much community-oriented activity.

## LINKING UP

Of course this is not to say they should not have fought. They did, indeed, gain not only a reprieve but many other concessions, and the struggle continues; but it *must* be part of a wider struggle. The book takes it so far, "The community action movement only has real potential for radical change as part of a wider movement. It remains to be seen whether this potential will be realised." But why not make the links *here*, boldly and clearly? Why was the Community Land Act watered down? Why did a bill for requisitioning of empty properties by local authorities get such little support? Why has the Home Office closed down the Community Development Project as soon as they reported that it was private profit which determined the whole housing system, private and public? Why has a Labour government made massive cuts in its housing expenditure? Why is a Labour government trying to bring in a Criminal Trespass Law? Why is the residential development that is going on in London monopolised by private developers? To have brought in these questions would have pointed out at least where campaigning must start; it would have made the book more valuable than it undoubtedly already is.

John FitzPatrick



In a picture  
it's a beautiful landscape

and better a forest this way  
than not at all

but among the straight tall conifers  
nothing moves  
in a flurry of fur  
or a flash of coloured wings.  
The barren ground  
is a shroud of stillness  
and silence hovers like death  
with outstretched wings  
between stiff unbending  
rows of trunks

as the trees wait,  
like clipped chickens  
in battery cages,  
for the fattening  
before the kill

Tina Morris