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Obituary

Alan Walter

Union activist and tireless campaigner for council housing

Austin Mitchell
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Alan Walter, who has died aged 51 after a heart attack, was a master of the arts of the agitator and organiser. He was involved in grassroots politics throughout his life, but it was in the area of council housing that he had his greatest successes. In 1998 he founded Defend Council Housing (DCH) to fight the privatisation of social housing and to campaign for direct investment.

Almost singlehandedly he brought an issue which both political parties were anxious to bury back to centre stage; that the campaign is now on the brink of success, with both the prime minister and the housing minister having given their backing to more council housing, is in no small part due to his efforts.

Walter was born in London . In the 1970s, he was one of the squatters living in Tolmers Square in Euston, central London, campaigning to prevent the square from being demolished to make way for offices. In 1982 Walter joined the Socialist Workers party and, a Camden council worker, became an activist in the National Union of Public Employees. Moving on to British Telecom, he joined the Communications Workers Union. During the 1984-85 miners' strike he frequently took food and money to the coalfields of Hatfield, south Yorkshire. After the racist murder of a white boy, Richard Everitt, in King's Cross in 1994, Walters became involved in local activism to stop the British National Party capitalising on the situation. Camden: Action Now campaigned for youth groups to build community cohesion.

But Walter's main efforts were focused on council housing. He was a Camden council tenant who believed that good, affordable council housing was the best way of improving the lot of the people – education and health care would be meaningless without it. His first success was the Daylight Robbery campaign, which highlighted the iniquitous system of paying the housing benefit of the poorest council tenants out of the rents of less poor council tenants, which took £13bn from housing revenue accounts before it was stopped in 2004. Then came the founding of DCH. This became a national campaign against the government policy of encouraging councils to privatise their council housing stock. Walter persuaded trade unions to finance the campaign and organised tenants all around the country. DCH was not a one-man band, but, despite a sometimes crippling bad back, Walter did most of the research and propaganda work. He dragged the issue on to the national stage, working with the council housing group of MPs and organising public consultations in parliament. Now the campaign, which unites council tenants, trade unionists, councillors and MPs, is on the brink of success; the prime minister has acknowledged the need for more council housing, a review of housing revenue accounts is nearing completion, and councils are being given money to build. Walter put the campaign well on its way; it is tremendously sad that he will not be there to see the final victory.

He is survived by his partner, Anne Drinkell, and his son, Joe, from a previous relationship with Candy Udwin.

• Alan Walter, political activist, born 8 October 1957; died 7 March 2009

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