

UK: Labour-led Lewisham council attempt land-grab involving football ground

By Simon Whelan
18 March 2017

In September 2016, Lewisham borough council approved a compulsory purchase order (CPO) on the land surrounding the Den ground and Community Trust facilities rented by Millwall Football Club. This was part of a major redevelopment of the “New Bermondsey” area in south-east London.

The redevelopment would involve the demolition of Millwall’s Den ground, surrounding community facilities and swathes of surrounding public housing.

Earlier this year Lewisham’s mayor, Sir Steve Bullock, said in an official statement that the CPO on Millwall’s land “should not proceed.” Yet at a council meeting only days later, in early February, the order was said to have been only postponed and not cancelled.

The Labour-run council is said to be taking legal advice regarding other avenues for securing the CPO on the Den, and council cabinet members will decide how to proceed after a “review.” *Private Eye* magazine reported that Millwall FC, fearing the worst, are continuing to explore relocation options outside London in nearby Kent.

The plan by Lewisham council to seize Millwall’s ground and sell it on to an offshore-registered developer has clearly only been put on hold. Tellingly, no binding policy change has occurred regarding the CPO, threatening Millwall’s more than 100-year presence in south-east London.

The “New Bermondsey” development, like all “urban regeneration schemes,” is a policy of gentrification, transforming a historically working class district with large amounts of public housing into a district of upper middle class housing.

A correspondent for the right-wing *Daily Telegraph* described newly built Bermondsey apartments as “plush yuppie flats.”

While badly serviced by public transport, Bermondsey is only three miles from the centre of London and the capital’s grossly inflated property bubble has driven

speculators into the last remotely affordable land within walking distance of the City of London. Gentrification has proceeded apace in southeast London—Peckham, Camberwell, New Cross and much of Bermondsey.

Lewisham council leader Nick Stanton has spoken of the area currently occupied by the Den and the local working class community being transformed into a retail centre like “Bath or Chester,” towns associated with the wealthy middle classes. Stanton speaks of wanting to attract shops such as Waitrose and John Lewis, retailers favoured by the more affluent.

The removal of Millwall’s ground and community facilities, together with the presence on home match days of the club’s overwhelmingly working class support, and their replacement with “luxury apartments” is seen as crucial to the £2 billion 2,400 home gentrification of the land by the property developers Renewal.

Local Bermondsey residents like 72-year-old Willow Winston have repeatedly called the scheme a secretive land-grab on behalf of developers. Sports writer Brian Glanville wrote of the “moral squalor” of Lewisham council’s plans for Millwall FC.

The developers, Renewal, are owned and administered behind a veil of secrecy in the British Virgin Islands and the Isle of Man. Renewal’s scheme would be part publicly funded under the Housing Zone programme of previous Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson.

Millwall have played football in east London since the late 19th century and, before adopting their nickname “The Lions,” was known as “The Dockers” in recognition of their local fan-base. Millwall currently rent the land under threat and have offered to buy it in order to secure the club’s London future. The club have put forward their own regeneration scheme with the club at its heart, but Lewisham council instead chose to partner with Renewal. Renewal have never previously carried out a major development project.

Millwall's plan for the area involves some "affordable housing," but like Renewal's scheme has no public housing and offers 50 percent in profits to the local council.

According to its records at Companies House, Renewal was originally set up and is part-owned by the previous mayor of Lewisham, Labour's Dave Sullivan. He was replaced as mayor by current Labour incumbent, Sir Steve Bullock, in 2002. Sullivan was also previously a director of Millwall FC, a role he still held when his company, Renewal, first started buying up land around the Den.

Connections between the local council and Renewal do not end with Sullivan. Bullock is director of a company called Surrey Canal Sports Foundation (SCSF), which was set up by Renewal and is backed by loans from the developers. The two organisations share a registered address. The mayor's fellow board members include Renewal director Jordana Malik. Last year Lewisham council, which recently closed five libraries, pledged £500,000 of public money to SCSF in order to assist in building a new sports centre.

The "charitable" foundation SCSF has not raised any funds for three years out of the last five and is in debt to the private developer, Renewal, which is its landlord. Directors of Renewal also sit on the board of SCSF.

In light of recent revelations Bullock's role as head of both the council and the foundation at the heart of the Millwall land-grab scheme became untenable, forcing his resignation as a director of SCSF. Bullock, knighted by then Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2007, has told Labour party insiders he is to quit at the next local election in May next year.

Bullock's resignation only came after Lewisham pledged to conduct an independent external inquiry into SCSF, after performing a dramatic reversal on their own plans to CPO the Den. Millwall FC believe the terms of the inquiry should be widened and involve a thorough investigation of how Renewal came to be the sole company to tender for the scheme. The local authority inquiry will not cover concerns the club has over the secrecy surrounding Renewal's record and finances and their relationship with the council.

The campaign against the Millwall CPO has led to a number of revelations in the press, including that SCSF made a false claim that £2 million in funding from Sport England had been pledged. Bullock's Labour cabinet awarded half a million pounds of public money to the SCSF, based on a report that contained the false claim.

SCSF maintained the inaccuracies over funding even after it been asked to stop making the £2 million claim by Sport England.

Lewisham Council and Renewal have since admitted making a series of false claims on "funding pledges" which they described only as "jumping the gun"—while securing a £20 million grant from then Mayor Johnson to implement the land-grab scheme. Closer examination has revealed the housing zone bid application contains a series of false and inaccurate claims submitted "in partnership" between Renewal and Lewisham council.

Under its nominally "left" leader Jeremy Corbyn, Labour remains a party of big business. Labour-run Haringey Council is pushing forward with plans to place £2 billion of public property into private hands. Council leader Claire Kober intends to establish a "Haringey Development Vehicle" (HDV)—a private company half-owned by the council and half by a private developer.

The council will put up land to secure its share, which the developer will match with equity. The council's assets will be transferred to the HDV on long leases for a 20-year period. Among the short list of corporations the council plan to work with in privatisations are Lendlease, Morgan Sindall with Affinity Sutton and Circle, Pinnacle with Starwood Capital and Catalyst.

The Labour council in Islington—where Corbyn is the local MP—has imposed £220 million in cuts over the past decade, with plans for a further £70 million in cuts. The Labourites there have set up a council-run private company, called iCo, to charge for services.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>