

## The GLC Story Oral History Project

**Interviewee:** Hilary Wainwright

**Interviewer:** Claire Perrault

**Transcribed by:** Claire Perrault

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Start 00:00:14

Hilary: Well, my name is Hilary Wainwright and today is the 2nd of April 2017. And I worked for the GLC's economic, well initially it was called the Economic Policy Group and then it was called the Employment, officially it was the Industry and Employment Committee from 82 till the abolition of the GLC in 86.

Claire: So just to start with could you give me some information of your background before you started working for the GLC and how you ended up in the role?

H: Yes, so I'll give you information that's relevant to my work at the GLC. I think maybe the most relevant piece of information is my first job really, was a research job in Durham University, and I began doing research with shop stewards in engineering and the research was initially a classic sort of sociological research about them. It was actually about their wage demands and what shaped the level of their wage demands and then as I was interviewing one of them, a convenor at what used to be Vickers (sic), it's now been completely demolished. It was making armaments, his name was Jim Murray, and he said look 'Hilary why don't you work for us?'. And he and his fellow shop stewards across the Vickers Corporation, it was a national corporation, were setting up what was called a combine committee. Setting up shop stewards from different committees in order to have stronger bargaining power and anyway he wanted somebody, a researcher who had time that could just as well be spent working for them as for a slightly abstract academic project and my boss at Durham University was happy for me to do this. And so I ended up working with the research officer voluntarily with the shop stewards committee. Anyway just to cut a long story short, they eventually, faced with redundancies and rationalisation which was going on across British industry around the early-mid 70s, decided in order to fight this they should begin to extend collective bargaining to look at the products they were making and what alternative there were. You know, to get some control over the investment so they could influence the company's investment in that plant, in that factory and they led them, particularly that they were making armaments, led them to draw up or be interested in the idea of an alternative plan. Meanwhile there was another group of shop stewards at a company called Lucas Aerospace that were already embarking on such a project. So I got to know them and the end results after writing about the Vickers experience, with a brilliant sociologist called Hugh Bainham, we wrote a book called 'the Vickers Report' and it was about shop stewards, combine committees and responding to rationalisation. Anyway after that I was sort of in touch with the Lucas Shop stewards and they wanted a researcher on actually a more elaborate scheme provided research money through the ESSRC as it is now, the economic and social science research council, to work with them on problems they were facing on the trade union movement, so I did that and it was based at the open university. Anyway as a result in that I

got very interested in the nature of the plan and the whole idea of planning from below, and workers knowledge, and how it was organised and socialised, and the political support they had from Tony Benn. In the end that was defeated by a labour government and became increasingly under the pressure of the CBI and the treasury. And so it was a sort of an important story that got defeated and was in danger of being lost, but many people had been influenced by it including the chairman of our committee, our councillor, Michael Ward, who in a way was my political boss at the GLC. And he and another councillor called Val Wise, who was also very influenced by the Lucas experience, partly through her mother Audrey Wise who was an MP who worked with the Lucas Aerospace shop stewards. They were really keen to follow that example in London and use the GLC to give support to workers who were developing alternatives, as an alternative to redundancy and closure and the deindustrialization of London. Anyway when they won the election, they set up this economic policy group and they encouraged me and a colleague Robin Murray from the Conference of Socialist Economists who was based at Sussex at the Institute of Development Studies to apply for jobs. And after the discussions I had with Robin we thought it would be good if I applied with Mike Cooley who was the leader of the Lucas Aerospace shop stewards who'd been sacked by Lucas so he didn't have a job, we thought if this idea of worker's plans is going to be a crucial part of the work we'd be doing, then why not have the most expert person doing it. So we did a joint job share application, and I didn't assume I'd get it but we did and so then we started work. So that's basically a slightly complicated story, but which led to me ending up at the GLC.

C: And the Lucas Aerospace, I've read a little bit about it, did that have a big influence on the way in which you structured some of the economic planning, especially in relation to the People's Plan?

H: Yes, it did really, because I expect what I learnt, and I think a lot of other people learnt, is really that the whole idea of planning raises the question whose knowledge is relevant to planning, and the tradition on the left had been that the state really does the planning and the knowledge that the state can centralise the expertise that can be codified and turned into social scientific laws and be the basis of planning from above as we call it, the overview. Whereas the Lucas workers were saying actually we're the people who are doing the designing, we're the engineers, we actually know what's possible but our knowledge is not necessarily codifiable, it's not necessarily statistical, it can't necessarily be put into documents, it's things we know but can't necessarily tell, which is what's called tacit knowledge. There's a whole body of theorisation, initiated by a guy called Michael Polanyi, I know that's another discussion, but anyway, this whole idea of tacit knowledge, or practical experiential knowledge, which had a lot of echoes for me because of the experience of the women's movement, which also tried to share quite tacit knowledge through consciousness raising groups and so on. So in a way what the popular planning unit, which is what I initiated with the support of Robin and Mike Ward, was really to develop that idea and make it the basis of a different kind of economic policy from below as it were. So we call it popular

planning rather than worker's planning because we knew that in London it wouldn't always be about the workplace, it would be about communities that were under threat from speculation and office buildings being built in central London locations, there are one or two examples near Coin Street Waterloo, where the local people had a plan, an alternative plan. Some big corporate speculator was wanting to buy the land and the GLC, once it was the left GLC, once it had been elected, blocked that speculative project and instead of in a classic traditional leftist way, taking over the land and planning it itself. It did take over the land and made it public, but then shared it, or handed it over effectively to a local community trust which then implemented their plan with some GLC support, expertise, finance and so on. So we wanted that broader idea of popular planning but whether it's popular planning or worker's planning in the workplace it was about giving a platform to and resources to and sharing the practical and tacit knowledge of ordinary people, so it was starting from a respect for that knowledge.

C: In these situations but maybe with particular reference to the Docklands People's Plan, what was the interactions like with the local communities, because the GLC had recently got a radical manifesto but before that the GLC was quite involved with lots of those communities maybe in quite different ways, I'm just wondering about that first interaction, or those moments of meeting those communities.

H: Yes, it's a pity you can't interview one of the people we worked with, who sadly died, a wonderful woman called Connie Hunt who if you talked to her she would really curse the GLC. Historically they were up against it, they were fighting it, because it was often their landlord and a very bad landlord. I mean it had done some good things in terms of house building and it had got an honourable tradition with Herbert Morrison wanting to use municipal power to bring about a redistribution of wealth. But I mean the GLC is based on quite a big redistributive principle because it's taking the funds from business rates and so on in Hampstead and redistributing it to the people of Docklands and Tower Hamlets and Newham, the poorest areas. But there was a weariness of the GLC and it was important that in the popular planning unit our approach was very much about going directly to meet people. So I went down to Docklands and sat in on the meetings of the people organising against the airport. So I didn't go down heavy handedly or even sort of philanthropically saying we've got bag loads of money, we can support whatever you want. I just sat there and listened and then at a certain point said sounds like you've been thinking about alternatives to the airport as well, I'm just here to say the GLC's behind you and supports your campaign because the manifesto, which was like our framing document was against any sort of airport development there and was wanting to support some kinda local transport hub, some modest dock facility linked to rail facilities and so on, and some reprocessing. So I said this, we'd be willing to support you developing your plan for the area, but what do you need? How do you want to do it? Then gradually we built a relationship and Ken Livingstone came to open the People's

Plan centre, as I remember. So I kinda gently, not too impositional way, the GLC rebuilt a relationship, based on support rather than imposition or domination.

C: In terms of the structure, or the process that the people's plan took, how was it organised? Especially coming from now, trying to imagine how that organisation would look both obviously in some ways state opposition but also still in a government structure acting on those more grassroots communities?

H: Well firstly they, it was very much driven by them, they set up a committee to run the process and they asked me to be on it in some advisory capacity at least, i'm not sure if i had a vote or not and my approach was always to say so 'what do you think, how do you think it should be done?' So they first said I think we need a place that people can come with their ideas, so they were thinking much more about what did it mean, how would it work in terms of their knowledge or people's willingness to participate so that was clear. They wanted somewhere that was part of people's daily lives, they wanted somewhere in the shopping centre where people could just drop in and share ideas, so that's what led to the idea of a People's Plan Centre. This woman, Connie, she knew the Woolwich Pier Parade and she knew which shops could be got cheaply, so we rented a shop and set up this People's Planning Centre and then they said well we're all quite busy. These were mainly retired women, but they were busy, they'd become shop stewards of the area really as well as having their families and their grandchildren and so on. So they thought we ought to employ somebody who could do this work for us, who could go out and stimulate ideas. So we developed an idea of who we wanted, we wanted someone who could work with local businesses, somebody who could work with young people, somebody who was more community based. So we got four people, one was a guy who worked with businesses, another was a young woman who'd just left school, another was a mother who mainly based at home but was wanting to go back to work and the other was a young guy, I can't remember much about him, Gary I think he was called, but he was just like a young streetwise guy. So the committee then worked with them on a plan to visit all the local, wherever there were people, so the guy that was responsible for contact with businesses his job was to see whether those businesses wanted to expand, if there was any room for expansion and to discuss what they'd need to do so, and then the young woman she would just think of ways to contact people. I remember going to the bingo with her and halfway through said can we have a bit of a discussion about this, it wasn't her favourite idea but they were willing to do it. And others would organise smaller meetings in their streets and so on, so that was the sort of process that was both locally based but GLC supported and had got some capacity to go deeper, through these people that were employed. And they were employed out of the people's planning centre, most of them would be half time I think, from what I can remember.

C: In terms of deciding what the outcomes was, how was that decided? In terms of creating an actual final presentation, who did it get presented to?

H: Well there was a bit of pressure, because there was an enquiry going on in to whether or not there should be an airport, sort of government backed enquiry, for which we needed to get the plan done to present and there was a lawyer Tony Gifford, who was very sympathetic. He was the lawyer for the campaign and he was very sympathetic and wanted the plan to be an important part of the campaign against the airport's argument. So we had to get it ready for them, so the meetings of the campaigns against the airport, kind of agreed broadly what should be in it. And then I worked with different people to write it up and then a graphic designer designed it with pictures that they, the local community, had gathered. So it was sort of done with them but also with this external expertise both in terms of design and with me in terms of the writing.

C: Do you think there was an optimistic feel about it in terms of its potential of success?

H Well, people were optimistic in the sense that they felt pleased with what they'd done. I think they knew they were up against pretty tough odds, the inspector was a friendly guy, but he was the employee of the government. The London Docklands Development Corporation, which was backing the airport, was a government body, so this enquiry was effectively, well if it was to say anything critical it would be challenging the government. So it was sympathetic to us. The plan, the inspector went out of his way to say he appreciated it, and actually I think it did have an impact because the end result was that the airport could go ahead but there had to be very definite restrictions on size and noise and jets, so it didn't go a head in a sort of 'gung ho' anything goes kind of way.

C: And in terms of the community and the changes that the community went through, the people's plan, what changes do you feel like happened?

H: I don't know, it's difficult for me to say, because i didn't really study that but I suppose people did become more confident and more sure they were right, because they did feel this alternative was possible so i think it just sort of increased people's sense of a common cause and a positive cause, I think the fact it wasn't just negative, put people a bit on the offensive.

C: I am just really very interested in this particular idea of the people's plan, and I guess in terms of what that idea of short terms relevance. I guess in terms of community, but also in terms of economic structuring and workers rights as well, because that's obviously so present in that area, because so many people had lost their jobs in the 20 years before.

H: In the docks

C: Yeah in the docks, so i guess what the short term impact but also what you might think about the longer term impact of a project that looks at economic restructuring from a grass roots level?

H: Well it, I'm not sure it had much impact. It brought together the small businesses and that could have been important, whether it led to any of them expanding, doing more, applying for grants from the GLC of the LLDC I'm not quite sure, I never followed that up, but that's quite likely. In terms of workers it did get the support of TNG and the workers, some of the ex-dockers gave evidence and I think the docks had gone, so the jobs would more be public sector jobs, we didn't really go into that in enough detail, looking back that's something we should have done. So that side of it, I mean I think in any new project I would urge that sort of involvement of public sector workers because i think that's such a crucial area of new jobs, and such a crucial area of improving existing jobs, but that wasn't really much of a dimension, so I can't really say there was much impact on fighting for jobs or defending jobs that had a real impact of the nature of the jobs.

C: Do you feel like there's any long term impact? Or influence?

H: I just don't know really whether it had enough depth of support and participation for that to be the case in Newham. There was quite a lot of hostility towards it from the politicians, well mainly from the civil servants who kinda thought 'the people planning? That's not really acceptable'. The head of planning came to the GLC and complained about the fact the GLC put a copy of the plan, that big plan, through everyone's door, which to me is a big confidence builder, because it's saying look you can do it, it's not a council document it's your document. And they were furious and came to the GLC and Mike Ward, the councillor, had to summon me and I think they thought he'd give me a bollocking, but he didn't he was just very supportive and they had to go away with their legs between their tails really, but I think that meant the People's Plan was a bit marginalised to the Docklands area, to the Royal Docks Area, which is a very beleaguered sort of area, so I think it's great that this project can sort of revive it a bit.

C: Can you tell me more about the interactions between the GLC and the council, in terms of what those interactions were like, or how often you came into contact with the people's plans, but also maybe the Popular Planning unit in general, because there must have been some potential conflict?

H: Well I think the Docklands thing is specific, because there the government had taken away the planning powers of the local authorities so they were very sensitive, they didn't want the GLC taking away their powers as well, whereas in fact the GLC was trying to support them but I think as a result they were a bit weary of initiatives like the People's Plan because it seemed like yet another, coming from different sources, challenge to their authority, so I think that would be the source of the problem. And I don't think they ever cover that. I mean, I don't think the GLC made it a priority to liaise with the council, they were more concerned with developing the people's plan, and I don't think, there probably would be some councillors who'd be sympathetic, I don't remember, but there were definitely some, I don't remember who, a woman called Pat Ollie, who I think was sympathetic, but that was a pretty conventional labour council, quite right wing, quite weary of popular initiatives.

C: And was that true across projects that the popular planning unit was involved with?

H: No not wholly, it just depended on the council. There probably be some councils that would be quite sympathetic and would be working with us, Islington was quite radical at the time. We did a lot of work on childcare and I think in that we had a lot of liaison with local councils. So it depended on the politics of the council, cause the Livingstone GLC was definitely seen as a left phenomenon, so given how factional and divided the labour party can be than right wing councils were quite hostile

C: Could you give me some other examples, because I only really know about the Docklands one, but some others examples of other projects that had an influence or similar strategies.

H: Well one that involved workers that I'm not quite sure about where it led, was around the the furniture industry, which was important industry in London and was being decimated by deindustrialisation and closures and so on. And our approach to that was to start firstly from the fact we recognised workers didn't have time generally to think and draw up plans, and sometimes they weren't strong enough to bargain for that time, like the Lucas workers did. But we're now ten years on and those organisations are quite weak. And so actually what we did was say 'we've got the public funds to fund people to have time off to think' so we funded a series of workshops with furniture workers, and we got a WA tutor called Mary Davies, who'd done a lot of work with furniture workers, she was a trade union education person and so she came and sort of helped facilitate workshops where they'd discussed what was needed in the industry, their alternatives and we'd published that in a little pamphlet called *Beneath the Veneer*, then more importantly that had some influence on the investment on the GLC Greater London Enterprise Board that was there to save factories to work with workers on alternatives and bargain with management to stop closures and redundancies and I don't know whether that worked. We did the workshops and they did very well, but whether it was translated into actual



factories being saved. I think there were one or two but I'm not sure what was the result of that, but certainly that was an important development.

C: What do you feel now, in terms of the work of the popular planning unit, what wouldn't be here, or what's remained?

H: That's a good question, but I think it's more ideas about what's possible, I think like the idea of a collaboration between civil society and the state is an important legacy that wasn't really thought about before. Before the state did everything with managers really, not with the people organised, themselves organised. Even unions often didn't get a share in thinking about planning, they were on various corporatist formal bodies but they often didn't have really influence. So I think it's more an idea, that wasn't invented by us, but we certainly developed it, of recognizing the knowledge of the people, I think that's very more in Corbyn's commitment, I suppose in a way you could say that Corbyn and John MacDonald, their rise, their success in the labour party is a kinda legacy, John MacDonald he was like the deputy leader and he gained from that a knowledge of a different way of doing politics in alliance with workers, with citizens, rather than the arrogance of the left. And so I think that's been crucial but it's still got a long way to go. It hasn't been developed enough yet that idea. But because of abolition, little of our actual institutions have been able to survive. I mean another important idea coming from Mike Cooley was the idea of opening up universities, well opening the university so that inventors and technologists could work with people on their day to day issues facing problems of disability, problems of mobility, needing technological capacities, needing inventions that would help them solve their problem. And he did this in practice, he started a whole lot of technology networks around green technologies, around transport technologies, and did prototypes of things, I think the famous one was the electric bike, which I found very useful in Tuscany, I mean not the one that they invented but the idea of a bike that could move into automated gear when it went up hills. So there were various ideas that were illustrated, the other idea that was important was the idea influenced by feminism, like Sheila Rowbotham and others, who worked with the GLC are really saying domestic labour is part of the economy, so our industrial strategy must include supporting launderettes and other kinds of socialised domestic labour. Cause it was a very fertile sort of area where we looked at different sorts of social citizen groups rather than just sort of twiddling our own thumbs. So it was very much turning politics round. But we started with the idea of the intelligence of local people and as a result it opened up in contrast to the old GLC. We had an important grant giving strategy, so we gave grants to local groups, campaigning groups, groups with alternative ideas, groups that were working with workers who were quite precarious. So we created a sort of infrastructure of support, probably most of which has been destroyed with the abolition, in a way the abolition was related a bit to the popular planning approach in the sense that I think that Norman Tebbit put it in a speech in the United States, where he said 'this is

modern socialism, and we'll kill it'. And it was a different idea of the social, the social wasn't just the state, it was social collaboration, and cooperative operation, I think maybe some of the infrastructure of the co-op movement we supported are still around. I know the Hackney co-ops unit or some project and that's still here and is obviously getting money from somewhere else. So ideas like that, and there were also some very interesting ideas about food, alternative strategies of food production that weren't totally profit driven and The London Food Commission was set up under the leadership of Tim Lang, who is seen as a real expert of alternative approaches to food. So a lot of ideas got into the mainstream through the GLC, like equal opportunities, then it was seen as like way out, we supported a lot of feminist projects, gay liberation projects, police monitoring was another area now recognised widely among, particularly black groups, but other groups who have been up against the police now recognise and realise that they could play some role in monitoring the police and the working with sympathetic local authority to put their monitoring into practice.

C: Do you feel like there's been any negative outcomes from the GLC?

H: Well, not really, well I guess maybe I'm biased, but I tend to feel like it was a very, well the other positive thing was, I was thinking about this the other day. It was kind of an example of changing the state, often people think the state cannot be changed, or it can only be changed from above. I mean this required a radical leadership, the Livingstone leadership was very open. It was never really about you have to support the Labour Party, it was very much more open. And it opened up the institutions of the state, there was very little secrecy, all the budgets were open and all the policies were open. A sort of democratisation was very much sort of a theme, so when Livingstone had policies he wanted to discuss with staff, or involve staff he would convene a meeting of staff and open it up and discuss. And there was a very collaborative approach across the Labour groups, so people who weren't necessarily on the left but who supported some of these ideas were welcomed. We also did a lot of work to bring the civil service on board and also to sort of push the GLC's resources outwards to the communities rather than sort of centralise. So that was an example of reforming the state, which is obviously very needed now it's focusing around Scotland and devolution but this was the good example of opening up city government so it's an idea that's even more relevant now.

C: Do you still have relationships with the people that you worked with? Is that something that has come from the GLC era as well?

H: Yes, some of them. Connie died, the women at Docklands who I most worked with. I'm going to be doing a meeting with other people from Docklands in May. And I'm in touch with, there's a guy called Bob Colenutt from the Docklands Action Group, that was a very important ally of the People's Plan and

important support for me and the GLC, because they'd worked in Docklands for a long time and many of them are still around, so i keep in touch with them. Mike Cooley is quite ill but I'm sort of in touch with him and other people in the Lucas Aerospace combine committee, and I'm in touch with Robin Murray. So there's a lot of ideas and a lot of people who continue to sort of bubble away.

C: And in terms of Docklands is that somewhere that you have felt connected to since? Just in terms of like you're still going to meetings that are based around stuff going on in Docklands.

H: Well I mean not really, I guess coming to live in Hackney takes me a bit nearer, and I feel a sort of affinity to Docklands, but I haven't really had time or opportunity to see. I went to Connie's funeral, I went to see her husband afterwards so that was quite moving and I met interesting young architectural students who are interested in the People's Plans who either did some work in Docklands. So I've kept in touch via the People's Plan really, or interest in it, but I haven't been involved in day to day work in Docklands. I have to confess I've used the airport, I always think I am gonna be struck by lightning or something cause we did campaign against it and I am against it, I do try and travel by train as much as possible in Europe but once or twice I have been there.

C: You're only being recorded, (laughs) so when you say the people's plan become one of the ways that a connection is still made, who's shown interest in the people's plan since the GLC?

H: I have contact with quite a lot of students from the Royal College of Art who are doing their thesis about it, or thesis that draw on it, not thesis about it. So there's a lot of interest among students particularly critical architectural and planning students who are wanting to see alternative ways as a more democratic, as a more responsive to social need, and for them the people's plans been a useful stimulus and inspiration, but I don't want to exaggerate its impact.

C: As a last question, what would your advice be to anybody who might want to do a people's plan in the future in the current political situation?

H: Well firstly really trust and listen to the people and work with them on ways to share their knowledge, strengthen their knowledge and also look creatively at the different sources of resources, because you need time, planning is incredible time consuming too and corporations pay huge amounts to pay people to think and to plan and we need our own equivalent, so we need to find the time, the resources to do that, so recognise there is this huge untapped capacity in people's practical everyday knowledge, and work on how to share that and build on it, and then make demands on any public institutions. Local authorities I guess are being really clobbered, but there's one or two good examples

of a councillor wanting to extend democratic control over the local economy, brought together all the public sector bodies and recognised the huge amount of spending that together they have that could be directed towards the local economy. And he's interested in how to democratise that, through co-ops, through forms of networked organising that's made possible through the digital technologies that are now available. So I think the new technologies, without romanticizing them, they do make possible a more distributed, centralised form of production that then needs co-ordination, so I think always start from what's already happening, so in a lot of areas there's a lot of social initiatives, social businesses even that could probably be stronger if they were more co-ordinated, so a sort of mapping of what already exists I think is an important starting point so you're not just imposing some rather impossible idea but you're starting from the ways the that people are already creating alternatives in their own lives, and trying to give that a platform and a greater sort of strength.

C: Great! Thanks so much.