

Fighting Neoliberalism at Home: lessons from 100 years of housing campaigns

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It might seem odd at first glance to begin a talk on **neo**-liberalism by going back into history, but as new neoliberalism is an incarnation of old free-market capitalism, past campaigns against some of the worst inherent injustices of that system can still have a lot to teach us. Of course history never repeats itself exactly. The pace of globalisation has added new dimensions and new pressures, and we now have new tools in the form of the electronic media, but the idea that past history is less relevant today is just spin concocted by the Brave New World of the likes of New Labour.

Decent housing is a basic need – and today recognised by the United Nations as a basic human right – but that does not make it easy to fight for. Because it is such a fundamental need, campaigners are put under a lot of pressure not to do anything that may jeopardise the immediate requirements of affected households. Nevertheless there is an impressive history of housing struggle and some notable successes. What I want to do is attempt to analyse some of those successes in the British context, drawing out the keys to and the limits of their achievements. And I will end by trying to apply the lessons learnt to some current campaigns in Britain and France.

The bigger battle

Like all fights against the impacts of an economic system, housing campaigns are carried out at different levels, and, as I will try and show, where they have had the greatest affect is when these different levels have been combined. First there is the everyday grassroots work that helps ensure that existing legislation is complied with, that buildings are kept in decent repair, and that services are functioning. As well as immediate benefits, this can also help to generate involvement and organisation and give campaigners credibility. Then there are single-issue based campaigns, which might be fought against landlords – often over rent increases or poor conditions – or for legislative change. Besides the immediate issue, these can also develop new forms of organisation, involve new layers of people, and demonstrate the possibilities of fighting for change. And beyond this are campaigns to change the underlying system, applying a wider political analysis and building on the momentum – the mobilisation, organisation and impact – of more limited actions. The changes may be limited to housing, as in the introduction of state-subsidised public housing, or linked to other issues and the strengthening of involved political organisations. This broader linking of housing to other social issues can produce direct impacts for housing itself – as with the frequently acknowledged link between the fear of unrest and Bolshevism, and the housing legislation that followed the First World War.

The risk of focussing on key moments is the tendency to forget all the struggles in between that made these possible: that built up organisation and knowledge and kept up the pressure for change. Some of these achieved their immediate objectives, some resulted in a compromise, others in failure and disillusionment; but all are part of the bigger battle for decent housing, and many still have lessons of relevance today. One

of these must be that the fight is never over: while each individual struggle may succeed in helping those immediately involved, any campaign for significant improvements in housing needs to be much bigger and sustained over a long period. This was brought home to me when I was researching among the news-clippings of Tower Hamlets library. I found reports that showed that the same mansion block, Grosvenor Buildings in Poplar, had rent strikes and protests in 1915, 1939 and 1963, before the LCC was persuaded to serve a compulsory purchase order and redevelop the site under slum clearance in 1964. Another pair of cuttings show Waterloo Buildings in 1962 and 1975. In the first tenants are celebrating the council's compulsory purchase of the building from its private owners after months of protests including a refusal to pay a rent rise on the 'two-roomed, no-bath homes'. These tenants were re-housed elsewhere and the building scheduled for demolition; but, it was still standing empty 13 years later, at the time of the second cutting, when desperate squatters with no homes of their own were glad to break in and work hard to make it fit to live in again – if only temporarily¹.

Glasgow 1915

I want to begin by looking at the lessons of the rent strikes that took place on Clydeside in 1915. The story has been often told, but I will quickly outline the main events. During the First World War, workers crowded into Glasgow to take up jobs in the munitions factories and engineering and shipbuilding works. Housing was soon in short supply, and the landlords took advantage of the situation to raise the rents. This fell particularly harshly on the elderly and on the families of the soldiers and sailors who were away fighting. And if they could not pay, the factors (the agents who manage rented housing in Scotland) were ready to evict them. The mounting anger at what was happening was organised through work-gate meetings and, crucially, through groups of women from the tenements, who rallied together to prevent evictions and protest their cause. Tenants went on rent strike, refusing to pay the increases, and they organised mass demonstrations. The government agreed to set up an enquiry, but the landlords, anticipating that they would be asked to compromise, got in first with notices of even bigger rent rises. Instead of more money, they got greater resistance from the tenants and strike threats from the munitions workers. When the landlords tried to force the issue by taking 18 tenants to the small debt court to get the rents deducted from their wages, a demonstration of thousands gathered outside the courthouse, including all the men from five shipyards and an ordinance works. A deputation informed the sheriff that a decision in favour of the factors would result in a general strike, and the demonstrators telegraphed their resolve to the prime minister in London. The case was dropped, and eight days later, with 1,000 men still on strike, the Government brought forward a bill to freeze rents at pre-war levels.

Putting the campaign in context

The events in Glasgow were the culmination of a wave of housing protests that had developed over the previous three years, not just in Glasgow, but across Britain; and there were other strikes at the same time – including the Poplar strike mentioned above, where the local MP took an active part in the rent debates (Hansard). These actions, in turn, had built on previous battles from the start of the century and earlier,

¹ See *East End News* 30th November 1915, *East End News* 5th May 1939, *East London Advertiser* 8th February 1963, *The Daily Telegraph* 23rd September 1963, *Daily Herald* 2nd August 1962 and *East London Advertiser* 14th March 1975

including mass riotous protests that helped persuade the new Liberal government of 1869 to reintroduce English landlords' responsibility for paying rates, in what Englander describes as 'the first major victory for collective tenant action' (Englander 1983:86). This history, and especially the experiences of the most recent years, which included rent strikes in Wolverhampton and Leeds, was important in building organisation and inspiring later protesters (though in places where big campaigns had previously ended in failure it could also discourage further involvement for a period). The extent of the protests, and the sense that they were part of a growing movement, added enormously to their impact, and protest did not stop with the 1915 Act. Afterwards, across Britain, tenants were fighting evasions of the new legislation. Around crowded centres of war-work tenants were fighting for more accommodation and greater security of tenure, and in new, government-built war-workers' housing tenants were fighting poor standards and high rents. Action ranged from detailed legal work, to rent strikes and mass demonstrations, and all this helped to force appeasement of tenant unrest onto the government agenda (Englander 1983).

Besides considerable action in the major campaigns against rent rises and around other specific issues, activists were getting increasingly involved in grass roots work, especially after the government was persuaded to bring in emergency legislation in 1914 to restrict evictions of families suffering hardship due to the war, and it was left to activists to try and ensure it was publicised and acted on (Englander 1983:196-7). Such bread and butter legal work helped build organisation and understanding.

Scottish housing conditions were exceptionally bad, even for the period, and landlord tenant relations in Glasgow were characterised by individual conflict, and increasingly by collective action. The extent of this conflict in the late 19th and early 20th century is evidenced by the frequent recourse to sequestration of goods for non-payment of rent and the extraordinary number of court cases for summary ejection (affecting on average 1 in 54 inhabitants of the city each year in the late 1880s (Rodger 1989:42)). In the pre-war years individual tenants, with the aid of grassroots labour movement activists, were increasingly fighting their position in the courts (Melling in Rodger 1989:60). At the same time, tenants collectively were being mobilised over the prolonged campaign that finally brought a legal end to the missive system of yearlong tenancies in 1912, and then in subsequent campaigns to prevent landlords using this as an excuse to raise rents. Tenants in Govan and Partick, at the core of the 1915 protests, had been further mobilised by the campaigns to stop their landlords pocketing the savings on rates when those areas became part of Glasgow. Glasgow tenants included seasoned campaigners and others well accustomed to the possibilities of organised tenant action, and landlords were well acquainted with the potential for co-ordinated protest.

Looking at the bigger picture

Although the rent strikes arose from the immediate issue of profiteering rent rises, tenants were aware that this was just one battle in a longer war. If they were to avoid repeated conflicts with the landlords, then they needed to press for a change in the system that would free them from the landlords' monopoly. The solution lay in state subsidised municipal housing.

There are examples of municipal house building from as early as the 1860s (in Liverpool), and between 1890 and by 1917 there were some 28,000 homes built by

over 300 local authorities across Britain. These were expected to run at a profit, but it was found that it was not possible to provide decent homes without extra funding from the rates, and this made up $\frac{1}{4}$ of all running costs by 1916-17 (Morton 1991:16 & 28-9). Municipal housing had become an increasingly important demand in the Labour Movement and was a campaign issue for Glasgow tenants even before the turn of the century (Englander 1983:172). The ILP dominated Glasgow Labour Party put housing reform at the centre of its campaigns and was especially dominant in promoting the issue of state funded housing (Melling in Rodger 1989:62, Englander 1983:164). In 1915, the demand for municipal housing was spelled out on protesters' banners.

Government acceptance of the need for significant interference in the sanctity of the housing market through the introduction of state subsidies, which can be dated from discussions about industrial unrest and post-war reconstruction in 1917, demonstrates an official acknowledgement of these demands. A market-based housing system might theoretically have been possible, but tenants had shown that they would not tolerate the conditions that this produced. Subsidy also came to be seen by government as an unavoidable consequence of the 1915 introduction of rent controls, which discouraged private investment in new homes, and could not be lifted - without risk of profiteering - until more homes were built. Support for municipal housing was also facilitated by the already existing government involvement in the economy necessitated by the war (including the provision of homes for war workers) and the widening franchise, which developed a momentum for further reform.

Key to the decision to support subsidised municipal housing, was the widely acknowledged link between housing issues and wider unrest, exemplified in George the 5th's speech to the local authorities in April 1919, when he observed: 'If 'unrest is to be converted into contentment, the provision of good homes may provide one of the most potent agents in that conversion.' (Burnett 1978:215). The scale of response was new, but this was an old idea, and the Earl of Shaftesbury, part founder of one of the earliest housing associations is reported to have commented in 1848 'Ay, truly, this is the way to stifle Chartism' (White in Goodwin and Grant 1997:10-11).

Housing and the Labour Movement

The link between housing and other issues is crucial to both understanding and tactics. Labour activists, conservative employers and workers who had to find money from their wages to pay the rent all realised the importance of decent housing to the reproduction of labour; and improvements to the quality, cost and security of tenure of working-class homes was a key constituent to improving working-class life more generally.

The impact of housing tenure on the bargaining power of the working class was recognised early on by both sides of the political spectrum. In the nineteenth century, wealthier artisans attempted to escape the tyranny of the landlord through mutual-aid societies dedicated to the self-help route of private ownership. This could provide a degree of independence from landlords, which was especially important in places where the landlord was also the employer (Forrest et al 1990:58), but Engels warned in 1887:

Give [workers] their own houses... and you break their power of resistance to the wage cutting of the factory owners. The

individual owner might be able to sell his house on occasion, but during a big strike or a general industrial crisis all the houses belonging to the affected workers would have to come on the market for sale and would therefore find no purchasers or be sold off far below their cost price. (Engels 1936: 46)

The problems, from the workers' perspective, of being tied to one locality through home ownership, and unable to move to new employment were still being discussed in 1919 (Forrest et al 1990:60). And from a more conservative viewpoint Samuel Smiles observed as early as 1864 that 'the accumulation of property... weans [thrifty men] from revolutionary notions, and makes them conservative' (Cowan and McDermont 2006:165): a view later famously espoused by Neville Chamberlain who promoted home ownership in the 1920s (Forrest et al 1990:60). Today, workers committed to the repayment of large mortgages will be especially unwilling to risk losing their job and income through industrial action. Housing is intimately linked to other socio-economic and political issues.

At an immediately practical level, the wider labour movement can help housing campaigners through organisational support, linking different campaigns across time and space, developing theoretical understanding, and helping tenants to see the wider picture. In 1915 Glasgow - with its powerful trades council, strong ILP and active British Socialist Party - tenant groups were the driving force of the action, but they were supported in all these different ways.

The Labour movement was also able to apply its experience and contacts in lobbying government and media. Even when such lobbying met a negative response, as in John Wheatley's attempts to prevent eviction of servicemen's families through town hall debate and an appeal to Kitchener (Englander 1989:219), and Andrew McBride's appeals for action to the national Labour Party (Milton 1973:88-9), this was important in demonstrating the need for escalating protest and was part of the process of building up pressure. The Labour movement had its own journals, and campaigners also attempted to win public support through judicious use of the wider media. Women and children fighting unpatriotic profiteering landlords ('the Prussians of Partick' and the 'Hun at Home') made good copy, and, inevitably, campaigners' estimates for numbers involved in the strikes erred on the morale-boosting generous side (Englander 1985:223 and 225).

Individual tenants were able, too, to draw on their own experiences as trade unionists, which had taught them the importance of combination and organisation and of campaigning for the common good. Glasgow workers had been radicalised through active resistance to the 1915 Munitions Act and its attack on workers' rights (Milton 1973:91, Melling in Rodger 1989:67), and many had developed a socialist understanding through the Sunday afternoon classes and Sunday night meetings organised by John Maclean and the British Socialist Party (Milton 1973). The Glasgow campaign gained enormous strength from directly supportive industrial action, and, as already noted, the case for government intervention in housing more generally was heavily influenced by the climate of wider industrial unrest.

Beyond the obvious rewards of better housing and a more comfortable and prosperous working class, housing campaigns contributed to the wider labour movement through the mobilisation of new layers – especially women (whose key role in the Glasgow

strikes is well documented) – and through strengthening wider working class organisations such as the Glasgow ILP. Although the vital grass-roots networks of women were outwardly apolitical, socialists played an important part in their organisation and training. All those involved in the strikes learnt a quick lesson in radical politics and the possibility of forcing change, and for more revolutionary campaigners a successful housing campaign was regarded as a possible first step to bigger mobilisations and more radical change. Maclean wrote in December 1915:

It should be noted that the rent strike on the Clyde is the first step towards the Political Strike, so frequently resorted to on the Continent in times past. We rest assured that our comrades in the various works will incessantly urge this aspect on their shop-mates, and so prepare the ground for the next great counter-move of our class in the raging class warfare...
(quoted in Milton 1973:104)

Although the Clydeside revolutionaries were to be disappointed, housing campaigners kept up pressure on government and landlords through the interwar years, ensuring that the hard-won laws were complied with and that it was impossible to return to a system with no rent control.

The revisionist view

Revisionist historians have attempted to question the significance of the housing campaigns for working-class history. Central to their arguments is the pivotal role played by skilled workers, encouraging Quintin Bradley, of Leeds Tenants' Federation, to describe the 1914 rent strike in Leeds as skilled workers attempting to retain their distance from despised slum dwellers, and to use this to question the entire concept of a radical tenants' movement (Bradley 1997). It is true, though hardly remarkable, that the Leeds strikers who were in better housing did not want to return to the slums and had a misplaced faith that their respectability would be enough to swing a court in their favour, but that is not the same as saying that their primary motive was fear of loss of status and discrimination against the un-skilled and un-employed. The Labour Party was quick to intervene in the Leeds strike and re-centre it on a demand for municipal housing, though Bradley points out that this was to be unsubsidised homes for artisans. Division of working-class interests has long been recognised, with much debate centred on the idea - first articulated by Engels in 1885 - of a privileged labour aristocracy able to negotiate for themselves a comfortable place within capitalism (Engels 1987:42). The craft-based unions had learnt to live with the system rather than try and change it, and in labour politics this began to be cut across with the organisation of the unskilled in the New Unionism of the 1880s. Englander, in a rather more balanced account, gives several examples of pre-war tenant leaders stressing their respectability and their distance from the tenant who (even without a strike) 'would not pay his rent' (Englander 1983:186). The Leeds strikers' demands failed to take account of the needs of the very poor, but did not actively discriminate against them; and protection of existing gains by better off workers need not be divisive. This is even true when it involves resisting cross-subsidy of poorest council tenants by those a bit better off, as occurred in the '30s – an example also quoted by Bradley. In the case of the council rents the demand was for the subsidy to come from government, rather than from other tenants, and there were also bitter objections to the introduction of means testing. We cannot now examine the debates that took place among the Leeds strike leaders, but it is probably

fair to assume that any recorded statements and actions emerged through internal struggles paralleling those in the wider labour movement between those who favoured a careful reformist path and those who argued for more revolutionary action. Engels outlines a radicalising of the old labour aristocrats when their privileges became threatened (Engels 1987:44-5), and this would concord with Bradley's suggestion about the significance of the impact of the retribution meted out to the strike leaders. The strike as it played out became part of a radicalising process.

In a similar vein, but with rather less evidence, Alison Ravetz has attempted to explain that since the middle class also largely rented at that time, the Glasgow strike was 'as much a middle- as a working-class movement' (Ravetz 2001:33). In fact, as we have seen, war conditions and a strong radical labour movement were able to bring together the organised discipline of the skilled unionised workers and a powerful tradition of individual working-class resistance. Although the changes that finally emerged were more reforming than revolutionary – more in line with the model put forward by Ravetz's 'enlightened middle-class' (p29) - the possibilities that had been demonstrated for the movement to take more radical directions were vital in giving both shape and force to the reformers' arguments.

Just as revisionist accounts of the labour movement focus on divisions within the working class, so Ravetz emphasises how housing can reinforce intra-class divisions, and argues that visions of a tenants' movement as an organised force for change are unrealistic (pp 154 and 170). At a time of labour-movement retreat, such arguments may seem to have the ring of truth, but history demonstrates that this view is as one sided as the activist optimism it ridicules. Class unity of workers or tenants is not, of course, automatic, but it can be consciously and actively developed.

Growth of a National Movement

This is demonstrated by the next great surge in housing activism, which took off in the late 30s and was cut across by the Second World War (Glynn 2005). The importance of the housing campaigns of the thirties was founded on their ability to co-ordinate activities at all the different levels – from grassroots concerns to the wider political perspective – and to co-ordinate geographically across Britain. Local groups supported each other and combined together to form regional and then national structures. Vital to this, was the role played by the organised left - the Communist Party and many Labour Party and trade union organisations - in strategy, tactics and co-ordination, and in overall theoretical analysis and development of alternative policies. At grassroots level, tenants became sufficiently well organised to begin to take on issues pro-actively: as well as responding defensively to the actions of the landlords, activists went out to look for things that needed improving (Piratin 1978:36). At a more conceptual, as well as practical, level, professionals contributed their expertise, including experts in property law and a radical group of architects around Lubetkin. The scale of the activity and its co-ordination meant that parallels can be drawn with the TUC. As in industrial action, tenants united behind campaigns even when they were not directly affected. This was exemplified by tenants who were paying controlled rents not just demanding that landlords respect those controls, but that they bring down all rents – controlled and uncontrolled - to more reasonable levels (Graves 1938).

The vigorous campaign in Stepney has been described by Phil Piratin, elected Communist MP for Mile End in 1945, in *Our Flag Stays Red* (Piratin 1978). This somewhat airbrushed account, written to serve as a handbook of grass-roots activism, nevertheless manages to portray the essential events and nature of what happened. He explains how, as the movement grew and spread, more people realised what was possible through organisation, and how people gained confidence and organising skills. At one point he describes tenants' committees 'acting as a kind of shop stewards' committee'. What was developing – until it was cut across by the war - was a sort of trade union for tenants.

Different struggles against high rents and poor conditions were brought together with a political campaign for better housing, including the continuation of rent control and more investment in municipal housing. Actions included rent strikes against private landlords charging high rents for poor conditions, and a massive rent strike of council tenants in Birmingham against using a rise in other council rents to pay for subsidies to poorer means-tested tenants. The movement even extended to the new lower-middle-class home-owners. Elsie Borders, who famously took her building society through the courts for allowing and enabling the supply of substandard homes through the builders pool system, was a member of the Communist Party and her actions were tied into the wider campaign for better housing.

The explosion of activity was made possible by more general growth of left forces and action, and it fed back into that growth. Again, housing issues were able to mobilise new layers, who were then helped to make the link to wider politics. Although outsiders might regard this as opportunism, communists and socialists argued that without a wholesale change in the social system, significant and lasting improvements to housing would not be possible. The well-organised Communist Party was a major beneficiary of this mobilisation, and so were many local Labour Parties. For political activists, housing campaigns were not just ends in themselves, but part of a wider campaign of politicisation, though it is worth recording that the Communist Party did not immediately recognise the significance of the tenants' movement and the role it could play in the wider class struggle (Glynn 2005:530-2, Jacobs 1978:282). Housing campaigns were acknowledged to be an important way of recruiting women (*Daily Worker* 6th October 1934); and were also used as a strategic weapon in the fight against Fascism. It is well understood today (especially by MPs with large numbers of immigrants in their constituencies) that provision of more low cost housing can cut across the racist scape-goating that results from competition for scant resources. As well as attacking the social and economic conditions on which Fascism thrives, Communist-dominated tenant campaigns in pre-war Stepney brought Jews and Gentiles together to fight a united battle. Important tenants' campaigns were deliberately organised in the areas in which the Fascists were recruiting so as to demonstrate the strength of working class unity in action, and of the Communist Party as a force for change. The housing campaigns were seen by the Party as one front in a bigger interconnected battle (Glynn 2005).

Squatters

Britain has not since seen housing campaigns of this scale and intensity, but despite major investment in council housing after the Second World War, there have always been more battles to be fought. I won't try even to outline these, but before examining some of the attempts to arrest the impact of today's neo-liberal tide, I want to continue

to look backwards briefly, in order to highlight examples of different forms of action: specifically squatting and the protest by elected councillors exemplified by Clay Cross.

Squatting can be seen as the ultimate example of individual self-help, but there have been times when co-ordinated groups of squatters have been able to affect wider change beyond their own home. Squatting has to be carefully planned if squatters are not to be accused of queue jumping and trying to put themselves ahead of others who may have greater needs. Squatters and legal occupants need to be able to make common cause, and avoid conflicting interests, which are easily exploited. Many squats have little or no impact on other households and can take pressure off immediate demand, and organised mass squats can provide an important source of pressure in campaigns to force government action and legislative change.

The most pervasive and persuasive squatting action in Britain arose as a result of appalling housing shortages following the Second World War, when it was clearly going to be a long time before the government's ambitious plans for municipal house building had any affect. Then squatters were able to find and organise a temporary solution to at least part of the housing crisis, relieving immediate need but at the same time, as Paul Burnham explains, 'put[ing] pressure on government and councils to keep housing high on the policy agenda' (Burnham 2006:41).

In 1946 mass direct action spread across the country as thousands of families without their own home moved into disused army camps, anti-aircraft gun sites and prisoner of war camps, mostly living in Nissen huts. Crucially, the squatters got themselves well organised, forming estate committees, and even paying rent into a collective fund ready for when they would be given official tenancy rights. In some of the camps organisers were non-political, but others had a large Communist Party, and also Labour presence. An embarrassed government was forced to accept the position and the squatters were tolerated as a form of council tenant; though the government also sent troops into the camps that were not yet occupied, including demobilised Polish troops who did not want to return to Poland – which caused predictable tensions. In the following years the squatters, and sympathetic supporters, were able to persuade local authorities that their best option was to make major improvements to these homes, so that they had proper bathrooms, cooking ranges and internal walls, and the government provided considerable sums to make this possible. Gradually families were moved from the Nissen huts into new council estates, but the last of the huts were only emptied in the sixties.

Squatters in late-sixties London looked at this mass movement as a model. Small groups of activists worked together with families from the notorious homeless hostels – the type featured in *Cathy Come Home* - and some of the worst slums, who were desperate for a decent place to live. Their squats were chosen with care: council-owned buildings that were lying empty and unused waiting redevelopment. Ron Bailey, one of the activists involved, has described their carefully planned operations and judicious use of the law and the media (Bailey 1973). Squats of this period were notorious for attracting 'outsiders', including students – and they did not all share the aims or political canniness of Bailey's group - but the majority of squatters were local people who had exhausted all other options and were able to win considerable sympathy for their position. The movement spread across London, with the first hard

won successes encouraging similar actions and quicker capitulation, and squatters were able to force councils all over the capital to accept the idea of using their empty housing stock as short life accommodation.

The result was not only an immediate improvement of living standards for the many families involved in the campaign and for the many more who continued to benefit from the use of short-life housing, but also a powerful contribution to the pressures to improve homelessness legislation. These are no mean achievements, but what the movement of the 60s and 70s failed to do was make a link between the concerns of the squatters and those of the wider labour movement. It contributed to the growth of some independent housing associations, which managed the short-term housing, but it did not link with wider campaigns for more council housing, or make an active connection between housing and wider economic and political forces. This was partly a result of the aggressively negative role played by Labour councillors in the areas involved, but also of the anarchist sympathies of the leading activists, who saw themselves as creating an 'alternative housing force' (Bailey in Goodwin and Grant 1997:89). Such links might have helped cut across the inevitable conflicts that were to arise through competition between homeless families and long-established residents for limited council housing. The squatting movement also missed the opportunity to follow pre-war example and use housing activism to bridge the new racial divisions that were emerging in London's East End. In fact it helped concretise these divisions through the development of a separate Bengali organisation (Glynn 2005).

Councillors in revolt

My last historic example has been chosen not so much for what it achieved but for what it showed might be possible. In 1972 the Conservatives' Housing Finance Act required all councils to bring the rents of their houses into line with those in the private sector. By that time council rents were generally significantly lower, so this meant large rent rises as well as the loss of council control in rent setting. There were widespread protests and over 100 councils announced their intention not to implement the new system. However the Labour Party National Executive refused to back such illegal action, and one by one the councils fell away, until all that was left was one in South Wales, where the Government put in a commissioner, and Clay Cross in Derbyshire (Malpass in Goodwin and Grant 1997). The eleven Clay Cross Councillors were not only all Labour, but they had an established record of following an independent socialist programme that prioritised their council tenants (Mitchell 1974). They were prepared to fight the government to the end, which meant personal surcharges and debarring from office, but also no rent rises until 17 months after the passing of the Act. Clay Cross demonstrates that councillors can resist unpopular legislation. If more had had the courage to carry their promised intentions through, then the end result might have been different. As it was, the new rent system was withdrawn when Labour came back into government in 1974, however, subsequent legislation has put councils under increasing pressure and given them little (legal) choice but to raise rents.

The battleground today

In today's neo-liberalism, the pre-eminence of the market puts housing under attack at many levels, and the battle for better housing, or even to preserve something of previous victories, has to be fought on many fronts. Housing activists hardly need to be reminded that the fight is never over. Besides outright privatisation - through the

sale of council buildings and land to private developers, tenants taking up the Right to Buy, and the transfer of council housing stock to 'not for profit' but nevertheless privately-run housing associations - we have seen more and more areas bowing to the demands of private finance. Even within the already private world of housing associations, which are still the recipients of considerable government subsidy, the demands of business lenders are increasingly paramount; and business priorities are penetrating every level of government. Audits emphasise measurable financial performance, quasi markets introduce cost competition, services are contracted out and distinctions between public and private are blurred. In expanding areas of organisation, the control of ailing democracies has been replaced by new forms of governance based around a consensus dominated by business interests. Unwary protest groups – including those run by tenants and residents – can find themselves incorporated into these structures, their voices effectively neutralised by the more powerful interests involved (Geddes 2006). It is neo-liberalism that has pushed growing numbers of people to rely on the private housing market as owners or tenants, and it is also neo-liberalism that, through the liberalisation of the financial markets, has enabled competing finance capital to push up house prices way beyond incomes, and made Britain a nation of debtors (Zacchaeus Trust 2005). Today, some of the most blatant attacks on the housing of poorer households have come under the guise of regeneration, which has opened the door to wholesale destruction of working-class and lower-middle-class homes (especially public housing), widespread gentrification, and a new physical exclusion of the less well off to least desirable peripheral estates.

The difficulties that have to be faced to take on this all-out assault are brought into focus by the campaigns against demolition of beleaguered, but still much needed, public housing. In Glasgow, in Dundee, in Leeds, in Paris, and so many other cities, thousands of homes erected under the optimism of the social democratic welfare state have been condemned to become history. The homes concerned are of varying quality, but the focus of the demolitions is not on providing better public housing for the inhabitants – and it is no coincidence that many of the buildings involved are in areas of rapidly rising land value. Tenants are concerned about losing their homes, and also about where they may end up. The people in the front line of these battles include some of the poorest tenants with the fewest resources and least political influence. The most capable may already be doing three jobs to make ends meet and find it hard to come to protest meetings – or even stay awake. Others can find that other problems in a finely balanced existence, such as illness in the family, can quickly disrupt the best-made plans. Tenants can, and do, work together to make their case and push their demands (Glynn 2007), but what then if no-one listens? High levels of dependence on housing benefit, and only a proportion of tenants paying full rent, rule out a rent strike. In fact, housing benefit acts to divide tenants, with some rendered oblivious to rent rises that affect their neighbours. Tenants are often prepared to stay and fight their ground, but they are facing a long war of attrition, and they need some sense that they can win – the morale boost that comes from a victory, or, more crucially, the knowledge that they are not fighting alone. History has demonstrated the importance of the involvement of the wider labour movement in co-ordinating and supporting housing struggles, but now, for the first time in over 100 years, tenants feel isolated and abandoned: not so much cynical, as realistic in their lack of expectation. The Parliamentary Labour Party was always a somewhat fickle friend, but the concerted attack on council housing by New Labour has left council

tenants stranded. There has been some support from the unions - primarily passive, with some (largely financial) help for high profile campaigns - but they have been generally emasculated by their uncertain relationship with Labour, and concerned with more immediate employment issues. A decreasing proportion of their membership is made up of council tenants. If people are to be expected to fight together to force a fundamental change in policy for the common good, they have to have some hope of success. Otherwise, although a few individual families may hold on in decaying buildings in the hope of being made better housing offers for themselves, wider protest will be hard to sustain.

The left in retreat

The labour movement is fighting a rearguard action and every bit of ground lost lays it open to further attack. However sometimes that ground seems to be given up without a fight. Even some of those who express concern over the direction of modern politics are unwilling to challenge its rules, and instead limit themselves to seeking the least offensive way of carrying them out. As neo-liberalism appears to take firmer and firmer hold, this approach is increasingly common - from politicians to academics, and trade unionists to housing activists. There have always been divisions between those pushing for different degrees of change, but, with the labour movement on the defensive, the divisions have shifted to separate those prepared to concede a degree of privatisation and those not. This type of retreat can break the link between individual campaigns and movements for wider change, and is exemplified by tenant groups who have persuaded themselves that stock transfer cannot be fought, and all that is left is to get involved in the process and make sure tenants get the best deal out of it. Even the important Right to Rent campaign, which has been organised by Leeds Tenants' Federation and is now being taken up across England, has chosen not to engage with arguments about the importance of council rather than housing association ownership. Instead, they are simply 'calling on the council to resolve that for every home lost, a new social rented property must be built'².

Central to any campaign is a well-argued position backed by evidence - and this needs to be presented to the relevant authorities and gain sympathetic coverage in the media. But getting this heard is becoming progressively more difficult as the arena and terms of public debate shift further to the right. As in the past, when publications such as *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* produced an impact that is still remembered today (Rodger 1989:26), professionals have an important part to play - but without wider support this is not enough. Further, as this history demonstrates, a well-argued case can become a lot more persuasive when it is backed by direct action.

Direct Action in Paris

This has been shown again in France, where activists took advantage of the political sensitivity of the pre-election period to mount a high profile campaign against homelessness that has some echoes of earlier mass squats, not least in its well-judged use of the media. Médecins du Monde had already been supplying igloo tents to the Paris homeless since December 2005, with the joint aims of providing protection and raising the visibility of a neglected issue (www.medecinsdumonde.org), but in the winter of 2006 the issue was thrust into the limelight when campaigning organisations

² 'Right to Rent campaign goes national', downloaded from www.leedstenants.org.uk/righttorent.htm 5th July 2007

set up an encampment of a hundred red tents along the banks of the Canal Saint-Martin in central Paris, and invited sympathisers to experience a night on the street alongside those *sans domicile fixé* (www.lesenfantsdedonquichotte.com, *Liberation* 19 December 2006). Similar encampments appeared in other cities across the country, and interest in the campaign spread so that no politician dared ignore the issue, and the government brought in new legislation giving everyone a right - defensible in law - to be housed. It was an impressive and important victory, but it only brings French law more in line with that already existing in other places, such as Scotland, which is regarded as an exemplar of comprehensive homelessness legislation. This legislation has no value unless there are enough good homes, and France is witnessing similar wholesale demolitions of working-class housing to Britain (Deboulet 2006, Gilbert 2007). Now the international journalists have gone, but there are still homeless people on the streets being forced to leave their donated tents without being given an alternative solution (Médecins du Monde press release 15th June 2007). France's housing activists cannot afford to sit back and enjoy their victory. They will need to build on it with much more difficult campaigns ahead, in an even less sympathetic political climate.

A broad campaign over a single issue

The English organisation Defend Council Housing, set up in 1998 'to fight *against* the privatisation of council housing [through transfer to housing associations] and *for* direct investment to make council housing first class housing for all who need it' (DCH affiliation form), could be on the verge of changing the law. And it also provides an example of a sustained campaign that has built up over several years and ties together different groups across the country (including links with campaigns in Scotland and Wales). Despite Socialist Workers' Party domination of the central organisation, DCH has attracted wide support on the strength of the issues it is campaigning on, including from trade unions and a large number of MPs and councillors. This is largely passive, but the unions have been able to help with the production and delivery of campaign material to the numerous council tenants affected by stock transfer proposals. Through its website and other materials, DCH is able to pass on a library of background information and lessons learned from previous campaigns, as well as broadcast news of victories won. It provides an invaluable resource for any group of tenants and activists fighting off a proposed stock transfer, whether or not they are officially affiliated to the organisation. Uniquely among privatisations, those most affected - the tenants - are given a vote on whether transfer should go ahead, and although government and councils attempt to weigh the odds heavily in favour of a 'yes' vote, this has given those opposed to privatisation something that they can campaign on - and quite often win. The hugely significant 2:1 'no' vote that put a stop to the proposed transfer of Birmingham's 84,000 council homes in 2002, was a testimony to DCH's organisation and what it had learnt from previous campaigns. The long campaign involved hundreds of thousands of leaflets, thousands of posters, estate-based meetings, active trade union support, and, by the end, the backing of the local MP and several councillors. That Glasgow, with its history of militancy, should have voted 'yes' at the same time has been blamed on a divided and less well organised campaign. It could also be a function of the city's historic and close ties to the Labour Party, with old loyalties and trust still surviving the Party's reversal of policy towards municipal housing.

In Camden, after tenants had rejected stock transfer, and also semi-privatisation through an arms length management company, the council joined with the tenants to lobby the government for the money needed for the council to invest themselves in improving their housing. They have so far not succeeded, but it raises possibilities of what might be achieved if more councils took this line. While Clay Cross may have set an example that few will dare follow, there is certainly room for councillors to take a much stronger line in representing and acting on the interests of their electorate.

DCH has achieved a lot at a time when political organisation on the left has become progressively more difficult, but it is still very much a single-issue campaign. It has not made links with other housing questions, such as those around 'regeneration', let alone with other fights against neo-liberalism. Of course many of those involved – tenants as well as political activists – are well aware of how everything links up, but this is not reflected in the organisational structures, so that the great mobilisations that have been achieved against stock-transfer have not formed the basis for further organisation, and DCH can offer little for those not already council tenants. Again, if the law is changed, the next stage of the battle will be much harder.

Looking to the future

Things are happening in housing activism – there has to be because so much that had begun to be taken for granted is now under attack – but there is still a long way to go until we can begin to see the sort of co-ordinated movement that history demonstrates is needed. There are the beginnings of geographical linkages – through campaigns such as Defend Council Housing – and the internet can provide an important tool for this, though it cannot replace hard work on the ground. But other linkages are still very rudimentary, and most of what is happening consists of isolated single-issue campaigns. Those that are successful rely on grass roots work, such as DCH's estate-based meetings or the direct action in France, but this is rarely matched up with more day-to-day involvement in grass roots problems. At the same time, new forms of partnership governance are being used to incorporate those tenants organisations that are concerned with everyday problems into the state structures, and so prevent them aligning with any protest movements.

On the wider level, different campaigns are not yet being combined together so as to form a concerted challenge to the neo-liberal hegemony in housing or beyond. Homelessness, destruction of council housing, mortgage repossessions all connect, and connect too to the growing wealth gap, poor health, rising health costs and social exclusion. These issues cannot be addressed separately. As in the 1930s, the concerns of tenants need to be linked to those of lower-income home owners – people such as the Glasgow residents who bought their homes under the Right to Buy and are now combining to battle crippling service charges of thousands of pounds imposed by the Glasgow Housing Association who factors their buildings. And, again as in the 30s, we need to be aware how campaigning for more and better housing can help cut across racial and ethnic divisions, something that is likely to be of growing importance with increased labour migration. Even a small number of migrants can have an affect on a tight housing supply – and a much bigger perceived affect. With an economy more and more dependent on investment in and borrowing against real estate, the link between housing and economic development is all the more obvious, especially through the expanding schemes of wholesale 'regeneration'. In the protection of working-class communities, the promotion of decent housing is tied to

the promotion of decent jobs that consist of more than providing mundane service tasks for middle-class incomers.

And on the wider level again, the normalisation of home ownership should not make us forget the impact that this can have on the ability of the working-class to organise and resist the demands of their employers. This becomes even more significant as the neo-liberal attack on social housing forces more people to tie themselves into mortgages at ever increasing multiples of their earnings. The ‘right to rent’ – and to rent good quality homes – is more than a housing issue.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons from this history is the importance of linking other issues into the wider labour movement, theoretically and practically, and the key role of housing within this – as we discover yet again the importance of pulling together the local and the global in both our understanding and our action.

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