

THE 'SQUATTERS'

ILFORD -

A REPORT
AND CRITIQUE

BY SOLIDARITY SOUTH LONDON

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"I don't believe in nothing
I feel they ought to burn down the world
Just let it burn down baby."

This is one of the several messages which, in 1969, are daubed on the walls of houses in one of the worst slum areas in London. Although some of us do not see these messages as being as negative as they might appear, they nevertheless show a depth of despair among people existing there which is only too obvious if you talk to them.

The living conditions of the nine million people in the slums are often worse than those of the increasing number of families officially described as homeless and who are living in council welfare accommodation.

The recognition of this, and that the situation was getting worse, were the reasons why a group of about 15 people met in East London last autumn to discuss what could be done about it in terms of direct action.

A CAMPAIGN - ITS AIM

After a few meetings, it was decided to launch a campaign. The aim of the campaign was to start a movement among the millions of badly-housed people by suggesting action that they themselves could take. The discussion centred on the fact that there were a large number of good, habitable houses and flats all over London which had been standing empty for a long time. One kind of action that people themselves might take was squatting. The group decided to call itself The London Squatters' Campaign.

It was agreed that squatting in itself, even if taken up on a fairly large scale, would not solve the housing problem. But it would be an action with very radical potential. It was in harmony with the basic political beliefs which the group professed to hold.

They all professed to believe that people's reliance on others (T.U. officials, local councillors, parties, M.P.s, do-gooders, etc.) to act in their interests has led to defeat after defeat, that real victories depend on working people taking action themselves, that all political activity must aim to strengthen the confidence of people in their ability to run their own lives, and that any kind of action which does not do this, reinforces their illusions, their apathy, their cynicism, and must be ruthlessly opposed and exposed.

* "Official" figures are:- 1950: 6,254, 1965: 12,411, 1968 (Dec.): 18,689.

** Some reasons why housing is so bad are given in the appendix.

IN STAGES

The group planned that the action was to be in three stages. One, to draw attention to empty flats and houses and to publicise the idea of squatting. Two, a token occupation of a large empty house. Three, to assist a couple of families in moving into empty houses and remaining there as squatters.

It was agreed that we should go out of our way to avoid the rise of personalities, and that every advantage should be taken of publicity to show that people themselves, the ones in real and urgent need of decent housing, could and should take similar action. The dangers of substituting ourselves for these people were said by all to be fully appreciated. They also expressed complete agreement that if people themselves did not take the idea up, thus showing that they were not yet ready to move, we should abandon it as quickly as possible precisely to avoid contributing to the very illusions we sought to dispel.

We shall examine the development of the Campaign in the light of its originators' professed political beliefs. This examination will show that not only has it failed in its original aim, but also that, after ten months, it no longer seems possible that squatting, as a form of direct action, will be taken up on any effective scale by working people themselves.

In trying to describe some of the reasons for the failure, we would hope to make a positive contribution to the general struggle in modern class-divided society.

SQUATTING '46

Squatting, in one form or another, is not new. It is in the historical tradition of mass radical action by ordinary people stretching back over the centuries (e.g. The Peasants' Revolt of 1381, The Levellers and Diggers of 1647/49).

But the taking over of empty houses by homeless and badly-housed people first appeared on some scale in 1919. Then, it was the angry direct action of ex-servicemen returning after World War I to find that there was nowhere for them and their families to live.

This was repeated, but on a very much wider scale, after World War II. Squatters had in fact been active during this war, but it was confined mainly to Glasgow where the slums were probably the worst in the British Isles. In 1946, the squatters' movement swept the country.

Immediately after the war ended in 1945, groups of ex-servicemen began occupying large empty houses in seaside towns on the South East coast which had large working-class populations, such as Southend and Brighton. Even today, many such houses are kept empty for most of the year so that they can be let at high rents during the short holiday season.

By the middle of 1946, the movement had spread all over the country and hundreds of empty army and air-force camps had been occupied by thousands of people. (Official government figures issued in October 1946 put the number of camps in England and Wales at 1,038 in which there were 39,535 squatters - and there were another 4,000 in Scotland.)

By this time, militant members of the Communist Party had broken out of the 'official line' which had condemned the movement when it started, and were active among squatters in London who had taken over large blocks of flats and hotels.

LABOUR POWER

The Labour Government, with its massive majority in Parliament, tried to check the movement. That darling of the left, Aneurin Bevin, like all left 'leaders', showed his true colours as Minister of Health. He sent out circulars to all local authorities instructing them to cut off the squatters' gas and electricity. Owners of empty buildings not yet occupied were told to take precautions necessary to keep squatters out. This, from a 'Socialist' government at a time when homeless families were being brought before the courts for 'sleeping rough'. What else could the government do, pledged as it was to safeguarding the rights of ownership for profit making? Such rights were the corner-stone of the system (just as they are today) and the threat to them was now taking on serious proportions.

So the Government was eventually forced to make concessions in order to keep some control of the situation. Local authorities were given wide powers to requisition empty properties for use by homeless families, and the Ministry of Works offered Aneurin Bevan 850 former service camps - 'to help him in his emergency housing drive'.

Twenty-three years later, in a relatively worse housing situation, where they can't point to the bombing as a reason for it, it was not unreasonable to hope that the idea of squatting in some of the country's half-million empty buildings (official figure) might fire the imagination of people with real housing needs to take action themselves; that squatting in 1969 might become the form of direct action it was in 1946; that housing therefore might get placed nearer to its correct position around the top of the list of priorities.

It was with these hopes in mind that we chose for ourselves the name 'The London Squatters' Campaign'. It was not an accidental choice. It came about as the result of considerable discussion. It was to be a campaign to promote the idea of squatting.

The answer to the question of whether people were ready for such action depended on the campaign showing clearly that it could be taken by the badly-housed people themselves, that they could organize themselves, that they must not rely on an outside organisation nor on 'leaders' to act on their behalf.

TOKEN OCCUPATION OF LUXURY FLATS

Last year, on Sunday December 1, we occupied a block of luxury flats in Wanstead (East London). Most of the flats had been empty for years, which is not surprising as far as the nine million slum-dwellers are concerned - they cost nearly £16,000 each.

A banner announcing the London Squatters Campaign was mounted on the roof. Although the occupation lasted only a few hours, it all made good copy for the press and television. On the Monday, nearly every national

newspaper carried front-page pictures and reports. On Monday evening, four members of the Campaign appeared on the Eamon Andrews programme. In answer to a question from the oily Andrews, one of them made the basic aims of the campaign quite clear. He said, "We don't represent anybody. Unless badly-housed people soon take up the idea of squatting themselves, we shall consider that the campaign has failed."

In the following days, there were articles in the press, even a question in Parliament, concerning the large number of buildings standing empty. Thus, the first stage of the campaign had been a success.

STAGE TWO

Church property became the target of Stage Two. At 2 p.m. on Saturday, 21 December, about 20 people, including two young mothers from a homeless hostel in Poplar (East London), occupied a 25-room Victorian vicarage in Leytonstone. This house was in very good condition and had stood empty since the vicar had moved into a brand new house nearby over three years earlier. The police arrived early on the scene but failed to get us out, since we had stoutly barricaded ourselves in two rooms on the first floor. There were several scuffles with the police outside and four campaigners were arrested.

A couple of Campaign representatives trailed by T.V. cameras and about a dozen reporters went to see the vicar. The Reverend, who was accompanied by his boss, the Venerable V.D. Wakeling, had little to say when asked to let the house to those in real need. The Ven. Wakeling took up the question. He said that the house was empty because it was going to be pulled down to make way for a church hall in the early 1970s and that people's spiritual and religious needs were greater than their housing needs.

As planned we all filed quietly out of the house exactly 24 hours later. But publicity was only a shadow of what it had been following the luxury flats episode.

PLANNING THE ILFORD MOVE-IN

The Campaign then held a meeting to discuss arrangements for a family to move into an empty house and remain there as squatters. A committee was elected to arrange with as much secrecy as possible which empty house was to be used and the general tactics and strategy. This committee decided on a house in the Ilford area, mainly because the local authority (Redbridge Borough Council) had planned a large redevelopment involving the demolition of a number of houses. Although this was not to take place until the middle of 1970, the Borough Council had already compulsorily-purchased several houses, and some of these were empty.

It was agreed that one family should move in as quietly as possible and the fact kept secret for as long as possible. The squatting family was to be maintained and defended, in siege conditions if necessary, and demonstrations of support were to be organized if the authorities later made any attempt to evict them. During subsequent general campaign meetings, this decision gradually got changed out of all recognition.

Certain individuals had made the mistake of inviting all sorts of other

people along who either were not committed to the basic ideas of the original group or were opposed to some of them. For example, there were people from Shelter, the Young Liberals, Christian groups and the International Socialists. Consequently, the original aims were gradually being submerged under a mish-mash of attitudes. This was to affect adversely the publicising of these aims, particularly since some people seemed more concerned about publicity for themselves.

To make matters worse, various T.V. programme teams were touting around to get material for programmes they wanted to do either on housing in general or on squatting in particular. They wanted to film meetings and interviews. They wanted to film the practical work - collecting furniture, food, etc. and preparing barricades.

The result was that meetings which should have been discussing activities strictly within the context of the group's original aims, became befuddled by the intoxicating atmosphere of spot-lights, clapper boards and cameras.

HORSE DEALING AND SUBSTITUTION

Agreements with T.V. teams, involving payments of relatively large sums of money, were being made by a tiny handful of individuals (even formal contracts were signed) without reference to a proper meeting of the group known as the London Squatters' Campaign. Indeed, the word 'Campaign' had now been virtually dropped and people were referring to themselves and, consequently seeing themselves as 'the squatters'. They were substituting themselves for the real people in need.

Some of the original campaign members had begun to drop out. They were dropping out because they could find no way of bringing the campaign back to its original aims. Attempts to do so were met with incomprehension on the part of some of the 'new' mish-mash. Liberals and Shelterites were concerned with keeping the image 'respectable'. International Socialists talked, of course, about 'politicizing the movement'. Some of those who remained of the original group said they fully agreed with the original aims, but they went on to act in accordance with different priorities. Some of them actually said things like 'it is time for the poor and dispossessed to think and act for themselves' and almost in the same breath they would talk of the Squatters installing families.

THE MOVE-IN

On the morning of Saturday, 8 February, three homeless families were to be moved into three houses in Oakfield Road, Ilford. But on arrival, it was discovered that the landlords (Redbridge Borough Council) had made one house uninhabitable. Furniture, food, fuel, etc. was then moved into the two remaining houses. While windows and doors on the ground floor were being barricaded, the police turned up, burst their way into one of the houses and evicted the family with seven young children together with a number of campaigners. However, this house was again occupied the same evening.

About 200 people met for speeches at Manor Park the next day (Sunday) then marched to Oakfield Road in a demonstration in support of the Squatters already installed. From then on the campaign began to deteriorate.

LEADERS OF ILLUSION

Certain individuals have allowed themselves to be regularly referred to in the press as 'leaders'. Maybe the press used the term simply because they behaved in the traditional manner of leaders. In any case, these 'leaders' have made no serious attempt to get the term changed. We see this as reinforcing people's illusions in the need for a leadership outside of themselves. This, as we said earlier, is precisely what the original group had been determined to avoid.

But it has gone even further than that. Some of the published statements of these 'leaders' have also added to the illusions. They have said that dozens of homeless families are waiting to be housed by them. A widely circulated list of instructions entitled "Do's and Dont's for Squatters" began: "Don't move families in without careful planning."

This attitude was responsible for the state of affairs in which squatting families in Ilford fully expected these 'leaders' to carry out some of the most simple jobs around the house, such as repairing broken windows. But with their professed beliefs, these 'leaders' should not have been surprised by such a development even if they were unaware of the perfect example seen in the squatters' camps of 1946. Then, there was a sharp contrast between the attitudes of those who had taken over the camps on their own initiative and those who had eventually been placed there by local authorities at the behest of the Government. A report in the NEWS CHRONICLE of January 14, 1947, described how workmen put up partitions and installed sinks and numerous other conveniences in the huts of official squatters, whereas the unofficial squatters had to fend for themselves. But the latter "set to work with a will, improvising partitions, running up curtains, distempering and painting... The official squatters, on the other hand, sat around glumly ... bemoaning their fate, even though they might have been removed from the most appalling slum property..."

VICTORIES AND HEART TRANSPLANTS

The Ilford 'leaders' have also publicly described events as 'enormously significant', 'tremendous breakthroughs', and 'tremendous victories'. The description of one such 'victory' suggested that all the members of Redbridge Borough Council had undergone the most modern operation in heart surgery - a transplant. This particular 'victory' occurred on March 19 when the Redbridge Council told the press that they were writing to all the London Boroughs to offer them empty houses in Ilford for use as temporary accommodation for the homeless families of their areas. This said the squatting leaders' press statement, was a victory because it showed that the Councillors had had 'a complete change of heart'.

Even if the Redbridge Council had had 'a complete change of heart' and intended to do what they had said, it would merely have been a move to enable them to regain complete control of the situation in Ilford. The nine million people still living in squalid slum conditions had not noticed any change of heart going on anywhere, complete or otherwise. It is significant that the campaign's original emphasis on the fact of these millions of slum dwellers had, by this time, almost disappeared. Most of the talk now was about action on behalf of homeless families in local authority accommodation.

COUNCIL'S INTENTIONS

As for the Redbridge Councillors' intentions, many people now know what they amounted to. They decided to regain control by a show of force. They hired a gang of neo-fascist thugs under the leadership of a friend of Mosley and of the National Front - Mr. Barrie Quartermain.

During March and April, the Council's mercenaries made violent raids on three houses and evicted the occupants including homeless families.*** On two occasions during June, they made further attacks on houses at 23 Audrey Road and 6 Woodlands Road. Although wearing steel helmets, carrying shields and throwing bricks, the mercenaries were beaten back and forced to give up each time.

The gangster activities of Quartermain are not new. They include strike-breaking and go back some years. But they were certainly brought into the lime-light again by the events in Ilford. Those who fought them are quite right in regarding this as an important achievement. It was an exposure of something very sinister and it was a defeat of vile and vicious methods of eviction. But it had been gained at considerable expense - to the family in 23 Audrey Road. By the middle of July, the father of this family (there are three young children) had had a nervous breakdown. The mother, after much argument, succeeded in persuading the "squatters" to take down the barricades and barbed wire and move out. (It is significant that one of the leaders, who was not present when the 'squatters' finally agreed to do this, said later that if only he had been there, he felt certain he could have persuaded her to continue the fight.)

AGREEMENT WITH COUNCIL

Leading Squatters then had discussions with leading members of Redbridge Borough Council. An agreement was reached about calling off the campaign in Ilford. This agreement was ratified by a simple majority vote at a meeting held in the 'Squatters' office' (a shop in Ilford) on 25 July. It is not known how this meeting was called or who was invited to attend. However, the agreement was signed the following day, Saturday 26 July, by Ron Bailey. It is said that Mrs. Fleming and one other also signed it. So far as we have been able to discover, no copies of the text of the agreement have been produced. But press reports stated that the 'Squatters' had terminated their activities in Ilford. They had agreed to leave three houses by noon on Thursday 31 July, and to refrain from occupying any other houses. The Council, for its part, had agreed to provide accommodation for the families involved; to examine its empty property in Central Ilford with a view to providing short-term housing for local families only; to carry out this examination by 16 August and to inform the 'Squatters' of their findings.

There was some trouble with the people occupying 6 Woodlands Road. They refused to get out. So the supporters of the deal, now calling themselves the East London Squatters, issued a statement 'publicly' dissociating themselves from the Woodlands Road group, and accusing them of being 'would-be martyrs' who had set up a permanent communal doss house. This, said the East London

* For an account of Quartermain's background, see SOLIDARITY (South London) Issue No. 4.

** A pamphlet 'EVICTED' contains a well-documented account of these evictions. It is obtainable from 128, Hainault Road, London E.11. (3s., post paid)

Squatters, was contrary to the aims of their campaign which were to 'fight for the basic human rights of those who are denied a decent place to live.' They appealed to political groups, and to all those who agreed with their aims to put some sort of pressure on the occupants of the Woodlands Road 'doss house' to persuade them to leave. Those who complied either sent letters in or visited the house and harangued the 'would-be martyrs'.

We hold no brief for the Woodlands Road group, regardless of whether what is said about them is true or not. But then, neither do we hold any brief for the others. We think that this episode simply reflects the inevitable degeneration of a campaign that lost its direction when the Ilford occupation began.

CRUCIAL VICTORY?

One should no longer be surprised therefore when the 'Squatters' hail the agreement with Redbridge Council as a "crucial victory". It is of course no kind of victory in terms of the original aims of the London Squatters Campaign. It might be some kind of victory for the newly-named East London Squatters' aims of fighting for other people's rights - provided, of course, that Redbridge Council do use their empty houses as short-term accommodation for homeless families.

We have strong criticisms of Shelter, the charity organization which raises funds for housing homeless families. But at least it does not pretend to be anything but reformist. Whether or not one agrees with Des Wilson (director of Shelter) that the Squatters' main achievement has been in keeping the question of homeless families before the public, it is difficult to disagree that 'victories' - in concrete terms of how many homeless families have been reasonably well housed - can more legitimately be claimed by Shelter than by the 'Squatters'.

TOO TAME?

One 'Squatters' leader, presumably anticipating criticism, recently wrote that what they are now doing "may be too tame for revolutionaries". Our criticism is not that their activities are too tame.

Our criticism flows from the aims of the Squatters' campaign when it was first set up. Read them again on pages 1 and 2 of this paper. We felt that an attempt to achieve these aims was a worthwhile activity for revolutionaries. Do-gooding was not involved. Nor was there any question of becoming adjuncts to local authorities and welfare agencies who were 'failing in their responsibilities to the community.'

It was understood that if a fairly large-scale squatting movement developed among the millions of slum-dwellers, the authorities (national and local) would have tried everything to stop it. As it turned out, the 'Squatters' themselves stopped us discovering whether people were ready to move. They stopped it soon after the first occupation in Ilford. Maybe a substantial number of those in dire need of decent housing were not prepared to take up squatting by themselves as they were in 1946. But we really do not know.

Because the great amount of publicity, particularly that of T.V., had

gone to the heads of several of the activists, the picture presented to ordinary working people was not one of people like themselves who were fed up with living in slums and who had therefore decided to move into better empty property in Ilford. Instead, they got the impression of an efficient professional organization with its experts in law, in local affairs, and of course with its experts in leadership, who were acting on behalf of homeless families.

THE REAL PRIORITY

Consequently, this image underpinned the very things that some of the originators of the Campaign had consistently warned against. People all over the country may well have felt that without such an organization, they could not act. After all, this illusion is strongly rooted. It is the one which we believe must, as an absolute priority, be broken down.

The nine million badly-housed people and the 20,000 officially homeless are all working-class. The question of the conflict of interests involved in the housing problem is part of the whole struggle. The answer to this, to the conflict in industry, to the conflict in what is called education, to the host of others that make up the total conflict in our everyday lives, will be found ultimately and only through the direct action of people themselves, outside parliament, outside local authorities, outside political parties, outside unions, and outside any other organization which claims to be acting on behalf of working people in their struggle to be rid of exploiting class society.

POSTSCRIPT - SQUATTERS GO HOME

Under the agreement between the 'Squatters' and Redbridge Council (see p.7), the Council leaders promised that by 16 August they would (a) carry out an examination of their empty property in Central Ilford with a view to providing short-term housing for local families, and (b) inform the 'Squatters' of their decisions.

Some of the 'Squatters' who were in favour of signing the agreement now believe that the Council welshed on it. Even the few who are still prepared to defend it will not go so far as to say that the Council kept their side of the 'bargain.' Although the Councillors carried out their examination by 16 August, they did not inform the 'Squatters' of their decision as promised and the 'Squatters' have not pursued the matter. They seem to have complied with the Council's slogan "Squatters Go Home!" We have seen subsequent press reports and Council minutes. Apart from a motion heartily congratulating the Town Clerk, Mr. Kenneth Nichols, on the way he handled the whole squatting business (Nichols called in Quatermain), information about accommodating badly-housed and homeless families in houses acquired for demolition in the 1970s is hazy.

They have said that most of the empty houses will not be used as temporary accommodation because in some cases the ground is needed for car parks and in others the cost in making houses habitable would be too high. This implies that at least a few houses will be made available. We have made enquiries at several places, including the Town Hall, but nobody knows which houses are to be used and no families, local or otherwise, have been offered temporary accommodation in them. What a 'crucial victory'!

APPENDIX

SOME REASONS FOR THE WORSENING HOUSING SITUATION IN LONDON & THE SOUTH EAST

Following World War II, London's economic, social and political lead increased greatly in comparison with the rest of the country. Economic policy, making exports the high priority, has helped in increasing London's dominance. As the demand from expanding markets abroad for the coal ships, textiles and heavy engineering products of the North lessened, demand increased for motor cars, plastics, electronic and electrical equipment, and for all kinds of products from the light industries which have sprung up in and around Greater London.

Together with these changes, the country's economic system has undergone a transformation which is expressed by the great increase in bureaucratic administration. Property developers have not been slow to see the opportunities for amassing large fortunes. Hence, the 'office boom' of recent years which has spread well outside the Greater London area.

During the last few years, in Greater London alone, some 20 million square feet of office space have been added - enough for more than 200,000 workers. Development plans for London and surrounding areas will add many more millions of square feet in the next few years. (For example, the development plans for Ilford by Redbridge Borough Council include several large office blocks by 1974) There will then be enough space for several hundreds of thousands more office workers. The increasing number of office workers creates other new jobs in related or service industries, e.g. transport, catering, shops. Obviously, the demand for housing increases.

In the years immediately following the war, the experts looked at their balls and predicted that homelessness would decrease and the housing situation would improve. They said that National Assistance would help people who could not work to stay in their own homes. They predicted that the birth-rate would go down and, therefore, so would the housing shortage. But the reverse happened. In addition, people began to marry younger and were no longer prepared to live with their parents. When slum clearance began in the mid-fifties, almost all of the new council houses had to be used for those whose homes had been demolished. At the same time, the living conditions of families got worse as their numbers on waiting lists grew.

It's a fact that house-building has been hopelessly inadequate whatever the party-political shade of the government. Successive governments have, at the same time, encouraged the building of houses for sale rather than for rent. This has been at least as much a political decision as an economic one. They know that when working people are compelled to put the weighty millstone of a mortgage around their necks in order to satisfy a need as basic as decent housing, such people will be much easier to control. The mortgage is yet another of the weapons used by our rulers to undermine people's will to struggle against them. And of course, rents, house prices and interest rates have continued to rise sharply. For example, houses in slum areas such as Islington and North Kensington now sell for between £4,000 and £6,000 where they cost £2,000 to £3,000 ten years ago, and £350 to £600 in 1947. All this operates progressively to the disadvantage of lower-paid manual workers.