

# Resistance Housing

## Stay Put And Fight

This special insert is meant to be a general introduction to the topic of resistance housing in urban North America. It can't cover all the technical, legal questions that need to be answered by individuals or groups who want to practice resistance housing, because they vary from Canada to the USA, province to state. The insert is meant only to scratch the surface of an exciting terrain yet to be fully explored by direct action activists.

Feeling squeezed between rising rents and crumbling ceilings, eviction notices and 'no vacancy' signs? Give landlords the slip - think 'resistance housing' and house yourself for a change.

Resistance housing means taking direct action with others to get and keep what is rightfully yours: decent shelter at an affordable rent, or, better still, for no rent at all. It means saying good-bye to passive housing consumerism and shoving aside all the landlords, speculators and faceless bureaucrats who stand between you and home-sweet-home. It also means challenging that time-honored feudal right of landlords to do what they want with their property at the expense of tenants, the homeless, and the community.

Above all, resistance housing means fighting for 'dweller control', for self-managed housing.

Resistance housing could be anything from organizing with other tenants to prevent a rent increase or reduce the rents, or taking over the building to resist and eviction. The actions could be used to force the authorities to act in favor of tenants or the homeless, or to solve an immediate problem directly without appeal to any authority. (see O.R. #15) Housing takeovers can be symbolic to call attention to a housing shortage, or for real, to house the homeless. Whatever the action, resistance housing relies on face-to-face organizing, without leaders, involving as many participants as possible. It's the anarchist alternative to paying up or packing your bags quietly and moving on.

Most of all, resistance housing is about tenants, the underhoused and the homeless, organizing themselves. Housing yourself today in North America is not easy:

- many tenants pay as much as 50% or more of their income towards rent;
- because tenants income tends to be lower than homeowners, and because tenants tend to be minorities, elderly, poor and low wage workers, they end up paying a higher portion of their income for lower quality



housing;

- there are an estimated 2 million homeless in the USA;
- even the Canadian State admits an estimated one half million Canadians can not afford decent housing.

No low rent housing is being built. Overcrowding in substandard dwellings is becoming the norm.

With a worsening housing picture throughout North America, choices for tenants are getting fewer and fewer. More than ever before, tenants find themselves at the mercy of the market: gouged and underhoused simply because they have no other place to go.

While Reaganomics continues to force people onto the unemployment rolls, thousands are forced to make their last stand where they live now, unable to afford to move on.

With few exceptions, North American tenants basically enjoy no rights while landlords - lords of private property - can almost always count on the powers of the courts to back them up.

We know that housing, a basic necessity, is just another commodity on the market for the private profit and control of those who own, manage and invest in it. To dream of eliminating speculation and exploitation of housing for profit under capitalism is hopeless. But to imagine a concerted effort to challenge the prerogatives of private proper-

ty while thousands swell the ranks of the homeless each month is to agree to a survival strategy for the years to come.

Resistance housing is fundamental to that strategy.

Resistance housing recognizes that tenants have the right to be secure in their apartment, to use it as a home, free from the

resolve them. And the homeless still need places to live.

Like any popular initiative searching for alternatives to a dependency on the State or capital, resistance housing ultimately runs into the problem of money. Free housing is the ideal, but rare is the home not privately owned which stands completely independent of any State assistance. Long-term, non-profit, self-managed housing costs. Where does the money come from?

Union financing maybe, but independent community funding is another story. Even for resistance housing, some form of dependency on the State become unavoidable (unless we are talking wilderness homestead), but it's no argument against actively searching for ways to give tenants and the homeless control over their own housing.

Occasionally, even a squat has to decide whether it wants to negotiate with the authorities for housing concessions, if not for direct control of the squatted building, and some squats in the US have turned into secure, low-cost long-term housing projects.

Whether its cooptation in the long term, or a good deal, the net result is housing for the homeless won through direct action. Any popular direct action initiative that results in reduced rents or stimulates low-cost housing programs is resistance housing that works.

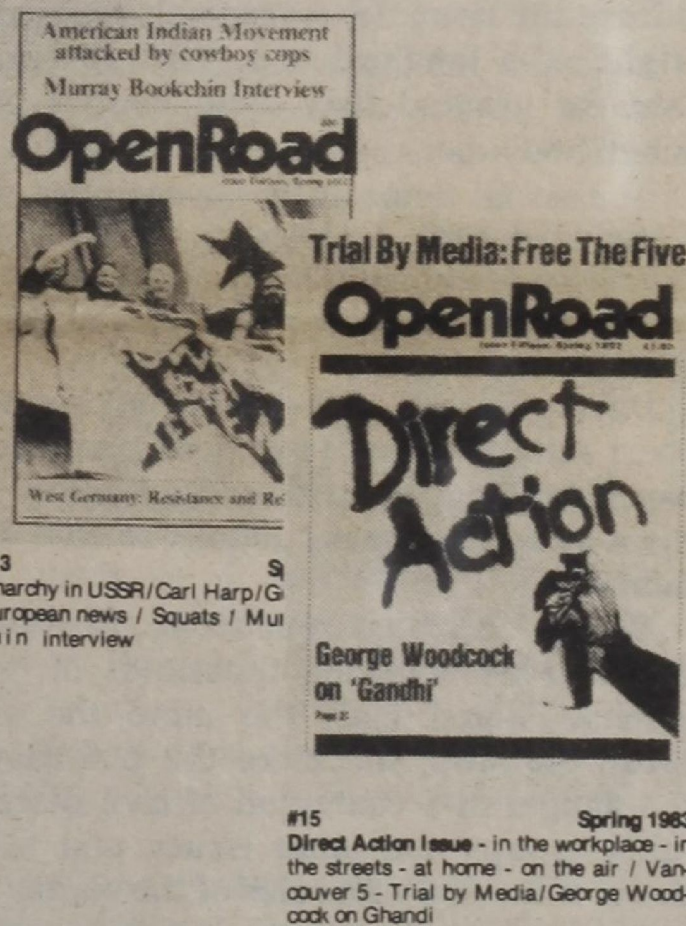
What is more, dweller control advanced through rent strikes or a building takeover (coops, too) can satisfy not only basic housing needs, but also, can lead to the preservation of threatened neighborhoods and their eventual revitalization. This is especially true for inner-city residents tired of getting displaced from their homes and their friends to make way for condos for the rich.

Once secured, resistance housing forms a base for further organization in the community, developing links, broadening the struggle and the vision to include urban issues in general, the quality of life in the city. Dweller control is the prerequisite for neighbourhood control.

As an arena for testing new ideas, for taking on the 'right', housing offers as much room to manoeuvre as any workplace or missile base, if not more because of the natural constituency and its vested interest. Everyone needs to be housed well. Everyone wants good housing. Tenants generally prefer to stay put in the homes of their choice, in the community of their choice, their chosen refuge from the madness outside. Resistance housing offers a radical vision to pull them together on the block or in the building to defend that interest.

For the vast majority, 'housing' is never seen as a political issue, but as a private matter. Most tenants prefer to pay their rent on time keeping up their half of a feudal relationship. Who ever questions the right of a landlord to collect the monthly rent?

Resistance housing suggests the possibility of a landlord-free future, for those who put 'home' on the direct action agenda.



## Lessons Learned

When the low-rental housing stock of Vancouver BC came under attack by EXPO 86, the world's transportation fair, hungry for prospective tourist accommodation, Vancouver's downtown core saw some desperate but organized squatting activity, unprecedented locally in recent years. What follows are some observations by some of the people who participated in it.

What did we learn:

- "If we ever did this again, it would be very important to be very clear and focussed about who you want to squat with. It's better to find a group of people to squat with before you enter a building. The next time, if other people came along, we'd open up other buildings to house them.
- "If the focus is saving the building for social housing, then you really have to

organize with people in the community to ensure you don't get kicked out right away. A crash pad and a long term housing fight

are separate goals."

- "When anyone and everyone can enter the squat, it becomes unsafe for the women and security for the women is important. A squat by its very nature eliminates lots of young mothers with children who need a secure place."
- "With 30 homeless people you don't know, it's very hard to get a collective atmosphere going. It might help if prospective new squatters went through a process of meeting with the original core group of squatters to discuss what their needs are, and maybe work out an agreement as to what's expected of everyone in the squat.

• But that's hard. How can we develop a means to activate a commitment to the squat, something to help define and maintain it?"

"Our squat wasn't a highly organized communal space because we were with people who were not used to living communally."

landlord's abuse, intrusion and intimidation. It recognizes that the homeless or the underhoused have the right to decent housing, and that when that right is denied them, they are justified in taking direct action to secure homes for themselves.

Resistance housing allows tenants and the homeless to challenge the existing relationships with landlords and property owners and that means expanding the zones of freedom for the traditionally powerless.

It goes beyond traditional 'reformist', and short-sighted approaches of housing activists who believe in electoral solutions (getting 'political'), petitioning the authorities, or relying on 'Mr Fix Its' and legal experts to get things done. Instead resistance housing is based on a commitment to self-organization and education and action taken directly by the people concerned.

Of course, any direct action approach like a rent strike or blocking an eviction involves a high personal risk; that's because the alternatives offer less.

Short-term strategies that aim for rent and eviction controls and basic reforms in the landlord and tenant laws are useful, but just do not go far enough. Legal strategies have clear limits. The courts and the entire legal system itself rest on a foundation of property rights. Legal action is no substitute for direct tenant action.

Nothing less than resistance housing points the way to a 'landlord free' future. En route, though, tenants are still confronted with daily rental problems and the need to