



City Life / Vida Urbana, Boston

ngsquattingsquatting

Not that long ago, squatting was considered as an exotic approach to housing practiced only by crash-helmeted Dutch or German punk anarchists who were always clashing with the police in the streets.

Today, squatting in North America is breaking through the fantasy barrier and becoming a genuine resistance housing alternative for the desperate and the homeless. The question is no longer, 'Can we squat?' but 'How do we squat more effectively and what are we squatting for?'

Squatting, simply put, is people taking direct action against the absurdity of a system that allows empty housing and homelessness to co-exist. From Vancouver to New York, San Francisco to Toronto, where-ever empty housing is abandoned and boarded up, the homeless already, on their own, are moving in quietly out of desperation, and turning it into their own living space, rent-free. People squat without any concern for organizing or being organized into long-term housing struggles, or they squat as part of broader campaigns to secure affordable housing.

When anyone seeks out abandoned or empty housing and moves in and fixes it up it shows that when neither the State nor the housing market can provide the homeless with affordable housing, the people will house themselves. Squatting is also a strong statement asserting the right to housing. It shows that human rights take precedence over property rights and directly challenges private property relations.

Squatting can be seen also as a logical extension of a rent strike, where tenants will 'occupy' or squat their own home, refusing to pay rent, or as a defensive move, to resist an eviction, to fight to stay put. It's been used as a means for groups working with the homeless to get people accommodation and at the same time, to help pressure local housing authorities.

In New York City, home to an estimated 10,000 squatters, squatting had been an ongoing part of resistance housing strategy for years. In the '60s, the squatting community was so well organized, even the city

Meanwhile, another community group, the Harlem Reclamation Project squatted other homes with 16 families and held them for months despite police harassment and arrests. This was part of another national housing campaign, already active in four cities and with plans to squat in eight more.

Unlike ACORN, the aim of the HRP was to assert community rights to control housing in its neighbourhood and to use community resources, not government assistance to develop safe affordable housing and to provide jobs and job-training at the same time.

Some of the squatters are wary of State initiatives to recuperate squatters victories through measures like New York City's 'sweat equity program' (see next page) that offers the possibility of legal title to a building if the tenants/squatters agree to rehabilitate the houses and the neighbourhoods making them profitable again.

The squatters know they sometimes can successfully negotiate with the city to secure limited homesteading grants and loans, but



of relief.

For others, squatting not out of desperation, but to make a political statement, the legal debate is irrelevant. These squatters want to live outside the laws of property, outside any traditional landlord/tenant relationships and prefer instead to develop alternative living arrangements. They take their cue from the European squatting movement that has a highly developed alternative political perspective on the housing front, integrating it with other daily political activity.

The small but dynamic squatters movement in San Francisco typifies this approach. In one eight month San Francisco squat, the 30 or so squatters had converted the lower floor of an abandoned building into a skateboard rink, and renovated the upstairs to include kitchen

facilities, hot showers, and had even set up a free food program that collected donations from local grocers and distributed hundreds of pounds of free food to the hungry.

San Francisco squatters published their own newsletter called 'Brix and Bottles' (see next page) and consider themselves part of a loose city-wide network of 'political squatters.' As one of them said it: 'Squatting is a political movement in its own right. It's not just a punk-rock-junkie-crash-pad thing like it used to be.'

'We've learned about the necessity of a strong community and developing a process, as a group for making decisions and dealing with crises, the tactics and strategy of living a guerrilla existence on the front lines.'

Rent Strike

Are you and your neighbours getting bullied by a landlord who refuses to make needed repairs to your apartment despite your reasonable pleas?

If you are tired of polite talk going nowhere, then it is time to get tough and talk rent strike. For tenants ready for the resistance housing warpath, no weapon is more powerful than a well-organized rent strike. Where other approaches like picketing the landlord's office, occupying it, or harassing the authorities fail, a rent strike can get results.

A rent strike can be anything from tenants refusing en masse to pay any rent increase, paying only the old rent, to paying no rent at all, depositing it in a safe account until tenant demands are satisfied. The rent money could be deposited in a third party or 'escrow' account in or out of the country, or used directly to pay for neglected building maintenance. Either way it is beyond the landlord's hands.

The strike could involve all the tenants of one building or, spread to several buildings across a city, owned by the same landlord. It could last for a year (like the longest and largest rent strike in history in 1975-6 in New York City, when 85 percent of 15,372 families withheld over \$25 million in rent in the Coop City rent strike), or rotate as a monthly on-again-off-again tactic (to keep the landlord honest with agreed upon commitments).

Depending on the location (Canada or US, it varies from province to province, state to state), it could be entirely legal based on rights won by earlier tenant struggles, or groundbreaking and illegal.

Either way, a rent strike means tenants are willing to take on the landlord as an organized group conscious of their interests, and capable of direct action. When tenants control the flow of rent money and even stop it, they attack the centuries old feudal right of a landlord to that rent.

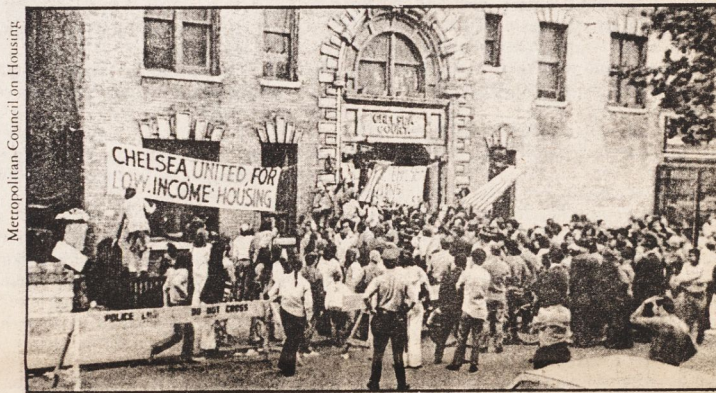
Sometimes, just the threat of a rent strike has worked to goad a landlord into doing needed repairs or withdrawing a rent increase. Rent strikes are used mainly to improve building conditions and to fight rent increases, but they've also served to get rents reduced, to reverse evictions, to obtain better leases, and even as stepping stones towards actual self-management of the building.

They also give once passive and powerless tenants more control over their housing.

A rent strike presupposes existing tenant organization. Floor committees, building committees, inter-building committees (for same landlord), social housing project committees (public or private sector), tenant unions or associations, etc., all form the backbone of any strike initiative. To be truly effective, a rent strike demands a high level of involvement by all the tenants concerned. No tenant can remain inactive. The strike also demands a lot of work to provide unity and to prepare for the inevitable legal complexities.

People are risking eviction from their homes

Rent Strike



Metropolitan Council on Housing

tenants will eventually have to use the strike to legally defend their members from eviction while they are temporarily withholding their rents.

Do not forget, rent strikes, like workplace strikes, have a 100 year history in North America that has seen them evolve from revolutionary threats to, depending on where they occur, becoming just another mechanism to redress grievances recognized in law and official programs.

In some states of the US, it is legal for tenants to carry out their own repairs to their apartments and deduct the amounts from their rents. Elsewhere, an unofficial 'repair and deduct' practice exists, and tenants, like in NY, prefer it that way fearing full government control would hamper its flexibility.



Barrabridge House, Brommney, 1979 Dave Wellesley

Early rent strikes in large US cities in the late 19th century were short, infrequent mass actions involving hundreds of buildings on strike simultaneously to protest rent increases. Today, rent strikes are more localized, longer (several months) and more frequent.

The focus has changed from fighting rent increases to improving conditions and services (a building by building issue) to, coping with abandonment and advanced building decay.

The most common form of rent strike in New York today, for example, involves tenants spending the rent money on needed repairs themselves. The success of this action has resulted in the incorporation of tenant control and plans for tenant ownership in 'official' housing programs that recycle buildings. Elsewhere, tenants are still withholding rents to force their landlord to negotiate particular grievances with or without the consent or cooperation of the State.

Just as excessive legalism can kill the enthusiasm of rent strikers and weaken the strike, so can excessive rigidity around just the one tactic.

Variations of the rent strike include:

- a rent slow down: where tenants hold back rents until the middle of the month when one tenants hands them all in to the landlord at the same time as a show of tenant solidarity and as a warning of more to come;
- a rolling rent strike: tenants retain control of their rent money until threatened with eviction, when they contest the eviction in court, then pay the rent due to the landlord, able to return home and withhold the next month's rent, thereby forcing negotiations through lengthy court fights.

For millions of North American tenants still figuring out how to get more heat or hot water now in run-down, poorly managed apartments a landlord-free future is still light years away.

For tenants who especially want to stay put in their apartments with affordable rents and basic services, but who are not ready to take over the building, a rent strike brings them a whole lot closer to self-managed housing.

referred the homeless to them for shelter. In one case, nine years after 80 families of squatters moved into three vacant building, the city finally bought the buildings and provided the needed money for rehabilitation of the property.

Today, NY squatters and their support groups are debating whether people should squat to force the State to provide more affordable housing programs, or if squatters should instead rely on the community to develop this housing and maintain it without assistance from the State.

One of the groups, ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) a national organization that has spearheaded squatting drives across the US during the past several years, organized hundreds of New York squatters this summer who were repeatedly arrested for taking over city-owned vacant houses. The city even took out a restraining order against ACORN to keep them away from 30 houses they claimed.

ACORN was hoping to pressure the city to give the squatters legal title to their buildings and develop a 'gift property program' of vacant housing give-aways to low income people. ACORN won such a program in Philadelphia recently. There they forced the city to turn over 200 homes a month to low income families under a 'Walk In Urban Homesteading Program' that opened up abandoned single family homes for the homeless.



EVICCTIONS

Unless there is a publically organized attempt to resist an eviction with good media coverage, or violence or firepower, you seldom hear about the valiant efforts of beleaguered tenants in North America trying to fight off the sheriff, police or landlord's hired thugs.

But for ordinary tenants threatened with the loss of their homes, resisting an eviction can be a necessary last resort especially when legal appeals or negotiations fail.

Resisting an eviction makes sense for more than one reason:

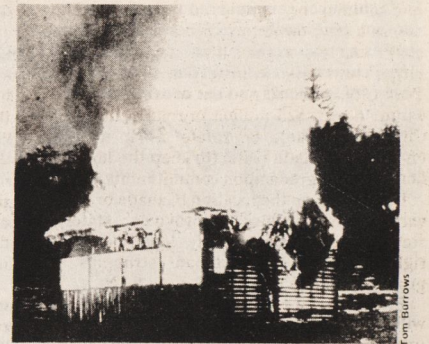
- it helps to buy more time to work out an alternative solution (like developing a self-managed housing proposal);
- it can be part of an effort to gain enough favorable publicity to embarrass the landlord or authorities into rescinding the eviction (especially when whole families or elderly people are involved);
- it helps dramatize the point and gain publicity for the right to housing;
- because there simply is no other place to go, no other choice to make other than to stay and fight;
- to encourage others in the same building, or neighbourhood to do the same.

There is a long and noble tradition of resisting evictions in North America. The rent strikes of the 1920's and 1930's in New York City and elsewhere, were characterized by massive resistance to evictions.

Once the police evicted the tenants, tenant groups would move them back in, after the police had left, or under the cover of darkness.

The fierce International Hotel tenant fight in San Francisco during the 1970's saw thousands of supporters of the elderly immigrant tenant residents surround the hotel and block the sheriffs and police who repeatedly tried to evict the tenants.

Resistance can begin by just ignoring multiple eviction notices to boarding up or barricading windows and doors from the inside, living in a prison of your own design, with a well-stocked pantry, physically resisting



The authorities in Vancouver, Canada, end a long battle with a squatter on the seashore by burning down the house while the squatter is out 1974.

eviction and the forces used against you. Some resistors prefer a flexible approach of flowing out, the back in, after each physical expulsion, preferably with the support of others.

During one highly organized Michigan state rent strike, soon-to-be evicted tenants could call on a 'Tactical Mobile Defense Unit', set up by the strikers, to help tenants physically prevent their landlords from entering their apartments. The defence unit was on call day and night, to reinforce individual tenants, to help them turn the water and gas back on or even to expel the landlord from the apartment.

Anyone planning to resist and eviction needs a minimum of good organization and has to deal with the element of risk and danger from the sledgehammer blows of either hired landlord thugs or agents of the State. But as one real estate broker put it after being confronted with a messy eviction scenario, complete with publicity, 'developers are scared shitless of having problems like this one (People refusing to move). It's a human problem, a political one.'