

20525
P

Peckham Ryoter

No. 8.

your Anarchist Broadsheet

1
2p

"Asses, swine have litter spread,
And with fitting food are fed,
All things have a home but one--
Thou, oh Englishman hast none."

--Percy Bysshe Shelley
('The Mask of Anarchy')

THE LEWISHAM FAMILY SQUATTING ASSOCIATION

and how it operates

These notes are written for those who are interested in the way the Lewisham Family Squatting Association works, and in particular for the benefit of individuals and groups in other areas who are interested in implementing similar schemes. We will be glad to elaborate and discuss with such groups.

THE BASIC AIM OF THE ASSOCIATION

This is to involve families who are in desperate housing need to organise themselves with others to utilize empty houses loaned to us by the Council as short term accommodation.

THE BASIC AGREEMENT WE HAVE WITH THE COUNCIL

Is that they will give us free of charge all the empty houses they have acquired for redevelopment, that have a life of at least one year before demolition and that the Council itself does not wish or feels unable to use. On these conditions (a) that we use them to help Lewisham families; (b) that we undertake to vacate each house when it is required for clearance; (c) that this does not incur additional expense for the council. We accepted condition (a) only because there are more families in need than empty houses in Lewisham.

THE MEMBERSHIP

There had to be a small nucleus of reasonably capable committed people. Around them the association has developed. Every volunteer can become a member and attend meetings. Every adult squatter, and would be squatter, automatically becomes a member on payment of their first pound to the association, and is expected and encouraged to attend the weekly meetings.

The Peckham Ryoter. Subscriptions & enquiries to Jim Huggon,
Kropotkin's Lighthouse Publications, 247 Peckham Rye, London, S.E.15.

THE GENERAL MEETING

Volunteers, squatters and would be squatters, meet every Tuesday night at the Albany at 8 p.m. At this meeting work parties are arranged for the weekends to repair houses, allocations of houses ready for occupation are announced, reports are given and particular problems and repairs are discussed. This general meeting plays a very important part in creating and maintaining the essential attitude of togetherness and co-operation. Inevitably, some families do not attend, but many do, and there are usually between 60 and 100 people present.

THE COMMITTEE

Elected by the general meeting, this consists of Secretary, Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Minutes Secretary and 5 or 6 others. One representative from the social committee attends committee meetings and there are 2 co-opted members. The paid co-ordinator attends all meetings which are held weekly sometimes fortnightly. Roles are flexible. The Committee discusses all matters of principle and policy, and makes recommendations to the General Meeting, but its main job is to assess applications from new families and decide which ones we can help. 4 committee members are themselves squatting and we are trying to work towards a situation in which squatters form a majority on the committee.

WHO NEEDS TO SQUAT

In Lewisham the Welfare Department already use empty houses as part III accommodation, so that any literally homeless families are taken there. Those who squat are people who were previously living in extremely bad and overcrowded conditions. Initially, we set out to make contact through leaflets and a survey with questionnaires. That was soon discontinued as families began to come to us in increasing numbers. Many are referred by the Children's Department, others from the C.A.B., Welfare clinics or friends. More than half our families are black, because black people have less choice in the private sector. Most come from one or two furnished rooms and have three or more children.

THE PROCEDURE FOR SQUATTERS

Each would be squatter is given an application form and explanatory leaflet. They are asked to complete one side of the form themselves and they are then visited as soon as possible by someone - usually a committee member - who confirms the housing situation and makes a recommendation. Although we try to involve as many people as possible in visiting, in the interest of consistency, it is important that the visitor should be experienced and informed. New volunteers usually go on a few visits with someone else before doing them alone.

Each applicant is told exactly how the association works and what will be expected of them. It is stressed that the relationship will not be that of landlord and tenant; and that they will be expected to take equal responsibility with everyone else; to pay rent to finance future work: to join working parties and to vacate when required. The possibility that there may not be other accommodation available to us at that time is overstressed, and they are required to give a firm undertaking that they will leave even if that is the position. They are also asked to attend the general Tuesday night meetings.

After a family has been visited the form is returned to the office and the co-ordinator checks with Lewisham Borough Housing Department:-

- (a) that the family is on the Lewisham housing list (if they are not we insist that they apply).
- (b) that the Housing Department have correct details of their housing conditions, number of children, etc., (very often these have changed since they registered), and that they have been given the maximum points for their conditions and circumstances. Where necessary we arrange for a special visit to be made by the Housing Department to reassess their points.
- (c) What are their chances of getting permanent housing if they stay where they are. The Housing Department agreed to provide this information and although they are reluctant to be specific, they often inform us that a family have a good chance of an offer within so many months or that they are likely to be nominated for a G.L.C. house in the near future.

The next step is for this family to be discussed by the committee along with other current applications. The form is studied: the person who visited gives a report on conditions and any other factors, and the co-ordinator reports on their prospects of council housing. Generally speaking, if there is a chance that the council will provide within 6 months or so, we do not agree to squat except in emergency - e.g. where the family is likely to break up or children to go into care earlier. Need is the primary criterion, but we are interested to know if they have been to any meetings, and that the family fully understands the responsibilities and limitations of the association, because we can only continue to function if the majority appreciate and accept their share of responsibility and work.

ALLOCATING THE HOUSES

Decisions to squat are taken irrespective of the availability of houses - but may be classified URGENT, NON-URGENT or SEMI-URGENT. When the Committee discusses allocations, the co-ordinator or committee member with responsibility for surveying houses reports on number, size and state of houses ready at that time, or likely to be ready before the next meeting. Usually 2 or 3 houses. These are then allocated provisionally by deciding which of the families that we have already decided to squat, are in the greatest need. Where there are no great differences in need, other factors such as size, capability of the family to do their own repairs, etc., may influence us. For instance, we would try to put unsupported mothers into houses that will need less decoration and maintenance.

When families are told of the house they have been allocated, they are instructed to go to the gas and electricity board themselves before moving in, to sign agreements to pay for gas and electricity. It is emphasised that on no account must they move in before the services are properly connected, or before they have signed an agreement with the association. Sometimes families are told which houses they are getting before they are ready, so that they can go and work on them, but this is done cautiously because we have had some difficulty and provoked criticism in a few cases where families have moved themselves in before services were connected, etc.

PREPARING HOUSES

Initially we were given a list of all empty houses that the council did not intend to use. We surveyed them and divided them roughly

into 3 grades:-

- (a) those that needed only minor repair to be habitable.
- (b) those that had some major defect or needed more work; and
- (c) those that were so wrecked or rotten that it would require a great deal of work and expense to make them fit.

We use all A's and some B's. C's we do not intend to use unless we have to, in order to transfer a family. The Housing Department now informs us every week or so of any newly acquired houses and we inspect these immediately, because the longer they are left empty the likelier they are to be vandalised.

One committee member takes responsibility for surveying - but the co-ordinator and other volunteers assist. The surveyor completes a report on number of rooms, condition and all repairs needed. One full-time handyman/plumber repairs the water system and gets it on. Electrical repairs are farmed out to one or two people who are capable in that field. While most general repairs are dealt with by individual volunteers or work parties, organised at the Tuesday night meetings. It is essential that someone should be responsible for ensuring that all necessary tools and equipment are there for them and someone to point out exactly what has to be done.

REPAIRS

Once the family has moved in, they are responsible for their own repairs, although it is understood that the association will help if major repairs are needed. Repairs are on the agenda at every general meeting, when we all decide whether or not those raised are major or minor. Leaking roofs and burst pipes are usually considered major - but leaking taps, blocked lavatories, broken windows etc., are minor; although individuals often volunteer to help each other with these too.

RENT

We have fixed the minimum and maximum rents at £2 and £4 a week. Most squatters pay £3. The Treasurer collects some of the rents: others are paid in at the weekly meetings, but more and more families are being given Giro books. (These cost us £10.10.6 for 50, and took some time to get, but save time and receipts etc.)

Inevitably some families do not pay regularly and 5 or 6 out of 60 have substantial arrears. We are not in business to build up a bank balance, and we do not worry if families fall a week or so behind, but we need money to finance the association and the members feel that it is unfair for some to pay and not others, so when a family owes 3 weeks we send a standard letter, asking if anything is wrong and reminding them of the use we put the money to. If this has no effect, a second letter is sent and after that, or sometimes before, one or two members, usually squatting families, call and discuss the matter with them. This has worked very well in most cases, especially in view of the fact that everyone is aware that we do not have, or would not use, the ultimate sanction of landlords and councils.

RATES

Squatters are responsible for their own rates as well as gas and electricity bills. Some pay their half yearly bills in the normal way, others have been giving a weekly proportion to the Treasurer to save for them. He keeps a separate column in his accounts for this, but since bills are often passed to him before he has been given the amount demanded, we are now insisting that families who do this must

apply for a book to pay in 10 equal instalments per year, and a duplicated letter is provided for them to obtain this.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THEY MUST VACATE

We delayed the Lewisham scheme initially because we were determined (a) not to relieve the council of their responsibility towards families, and (b) not to create a group of perpetual squatters. Finally, we persuaded Lewisham Council to freeze the housing points of any family we squatted, determined on their pre-squatting position. Since every family we squat is in desperate need, most of them have fairly high points, and we make sure that these have been correctly assessed.

The Council have agreed, that when the times comes that a family would have been rehoused if they had stayed where they were, then that family will automatically go before the housing committee for consideration. If they are not offered permanent housing then, they will continue to come before the full Housing Committee at every meeting until they are. The Housing Committee will take into consideration their present situation; but they have promised that our families will not be put back for more than short periods, if at all. For instance, if a family came before the committee after squatting for 9 months, and the house they were in had another 2 or 3 months life, the council might rehouse them immediately or they might accept a rehousing commitment when the family had to move. In Lewisham the council has already rehoused some squatting families and accepted responsibility for rehousing others.

Some families, particularly those without the one or five year qualification, will not be rehoused by the council for a long time. Those least likely to find a place themselves are referred to the Quadrant Housing Association, who have agreed to consider sympathetically every nomination we make. We have an agreement with Quadrant that if they accept a rehousing commitment for one of our families, then although we continue to administer the house they are squatting in, half the rent from that family goes to Quadrant. It should be possible to make similar arrangements with other Housing Associations.

Families who are not rehoused by the council or housing associations, will be transferred to other short life houses. In view of the long term development plans for the borough and unless our numbers continue to rise indefinitely, this should not create too much difficulty. The co-ordinator/administrator has been instructed to compile graphs, list of properties, dates of acquisition and clearance, etc., so that any problems will become visible well in advance. It is essential to plan well ahead and we keep a close eye on this aspect.

THE OFFICE AND STAFF

We rent an office at the Albany. If this had not been available, we would have converted an empty house. Until now (july) we have had one full time co-ordinator, but it has become obvious that we need two people. One an ADMINISTRATOR to run the office, keep accurate, easy to understand records and graphs, liaise with council officers and other agencies: to do the forward planning and to deal with the many families who come in. (We have become an effective housing advice centre as well.)

The other need is for a FIELD ORGANISER to visit houses and families, advise work parties, investigate and sort out problems, and to negotiate and sometimes press officials on behalf of specific families or the association. In addition, the Field Organiser will spend some

... time assessing the possibility of starting similar groups in
... areas.

... are about to divide the job in this way, but new groups could
function with one full time co-ordinator supported by a voluntary
committee, until the work reached the same level.

We also employ a full time handyman/plumber. We have a register of
volunteers and their skills, including 2 or 3 electricians, but plumbing
is the most common and necessary need in preparing our houses, and few
squatters can plumb.

Both present employees are paid £20 a week, self employed, so that we do
not have to pay for stamps. We have purchased a 15 cwt van for £140
which is used to transport materials, volunteers etc. When used for
removals we make a set charge of £1. Insured for any driver, we insist
on seeing the licence, since we were prosecuted for allowing an
unlicensed person to drive.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

In both Deptford and Sydenham we have had to deal with a certain amount
of prejudiced reactions from people in the area, who, concerned about
their own housing prospects and the disintegration of their community
and ignorant of our methods and aims, have tried to use squatters as
scapegoats. We have dealt with this effectively by leafletting the area
and calling public meetings to discuss local and general housing problems
and offering advice and help to set up tenants organisations. We have
squatted one family who first came to us at such a meeting. It is ad-
visable to visit neighbours and make it clear that squatters are ordinary
families who pay rent and rates, and who are not jumping the housing
queue, as soon as squatting begins in an area.

PARTICIPATION

Apart from its obvious practical value, the major achievement of the
L.F.S.A. has been to directly involve large numbers of people in control-
ling their own conditions and environment. There is still a readiness
to leave too many decisions to the active nucleus, but the wonder is that
so many people have accepted responsibility. This is largely due to the
general meetings at which many of our families have become involved in
important decision taking for the first time in their lives. The know-
ledge that they can influence and control events has led to increased
social awareness, self respect and enthusiasm.

THE STRENGTH OF OUR NAME!

It has been suggested to us that we should no longer call ourselves
squatters since we have permission to use the houses. But we have not
changed and most members believe that we should not change the name that
gives us strength and unity. We assert our responsibility, but we do
not run after respectability, any more than we run away from it. In
Lewisham we are in the envious position of being regarded as both
respectable and formidable. Our direct action roots are known, but our
reasonableness and efficiency has been established while our effective
use of publicity has ensured us a strong voice in the community. We
are regarded as people who know what they want and how to get it.
Neither tame do-gooders nor mindless militants, we are demonstrating
the strength that ordinary people can create through genuine participa-
tion and mutual aid, and the message is spreading.

These notes are written for other potential groups. They are not meant
to be a blueprint. You may devise a better system or different agree-
ments. But if the L.F.S.A. can help with advice or information, we
will be glad to discuss our experience with others.

The Albany, Creek Road, Deptford S.W.8

Contact Jim Radford 692 2347
or Ron Bailey 539 8059