

The Peckham Ryoter 1/2 p. No. 9. Your Anarchist Broadsheet.

"Shrink to your cellars, holes and cells
In halls ye deck another dwells."

- Percy Bysshe Shelley
Song - to the Men of England
(1819)

TO THE TOWN CLERK, RELEVANT OFFICERS AND ALL SOUTHWARK COUNCILLORS

FROM THE SOUTH EAST LONDON SQUATTERS

September 14th, 1970

1. Last week, with our help, three families moved into empty houses in the Borough of Southwark. These were houses that had been acquired by the Council for future redevelopment. According to the neighbours, one of them has been empty for approximately 2 years, while the Planning Department has confirmed that the site is unlikely to be required before November 1972, and that there was no intention to use these houses before demolition.
2. The purpose of this communication is first - to explain why these families decided to squat and second to outline a practical proposal that could do much to alleviate some of the misery caused by housing problems in Southwark. We would like to discuss this in greater detail with representatives of the Council.

THE THREE FAMILIES

3. Mr. and Mrs. George Anderson have two small children. Until recently they were living at 52 Lausanne Road. The accommodation was bad but they did not leave voluntarily. The landlord wanted them out and gave them notice to quit. They searched for alternatives without success. None of the official agencies approached could offer any help. Tension between them and the landlord increased to the point where the police had to be called on several occasions, and eventually they were locked out. They had nowhere to go. Mrs. Anderson was able to take the children to her mother's temporarily. Mr. Anderson was sleeping in his car, until they decided to squat. What else could they do? They are now at 38 Harders Road, S. E. 15.
4. Mr. and Mrs. Peter Williams came originally from Deal where they had rented accommodation. They also have two small children. The house they lived in was sold and they were compelled to leave. They came to London in August and stayed with friends at Albion House, Swan Lane, S. E. 16 while Mr. Williams looked for work and accommodation. This latter proved harder than they had imagined and eventually their friends insisted that they must go. Literally homeless they went to Southwark Welfare Department, who told them that they were unable to offer any accommodation. They decided to squat. They are now at 32 Harders Road.
5. Mr. and Mrs. Adeyemo have 3 small children of 5, 4 and 1. For the past 2 years they have been living in one room at 49 Talfourd Road, S. E. 15; cooking on a stove in the passage,

sharing bathroom and lavatory with up to 12 others, suffering from severe overcrowding. Under notice and pressure to quit, they were at the point of despair. They decided to squat. They are now at 15 Mortlock Gardens.

THE CHOICE FACING THE COUNCIL

6. We do not advise any family to squat if we can suggest a practical alternative. In these three cases we could not.

That is why we helped them and we will continue to help them as long as they want and need our aid. The choice now facing the Council is simple. You can take legal action to regain possession and evict the families. In which event there could be no question about their homelessness and under Section 3 of the National Assistance Act, the Council would be obliged to offer them accommodation. We are not inexperienced in such matters and would ensure that this happened.

7. The alternative is simply to let them stay where they are. If allowed to stay they are prepared to give a solemn undertaking that they will vacate when these houses are genuinely (see 9) required for demolition. What is the argument against this? They are not jumping the housing queue - since these houses were not being used for that queue. They don't want to live rent free (just offer them a rent book and see) and they will pay rates like everyone else. Unless one actually prefers the sight of derelict houses to the sound of children's laughter, there can be no valid objection to this solution, except the fear that others would follow their example. Which prompts the question, why not? and brings me to our proposal.

THE PROPOSAL

8. In spite of all that the Council is doing, Southwark has a severe housing problem. A substantial proportion of the 9,291 people on your housing list are living in terrible and overcrowded conditions and the list is growing. We don't blame you for the housing shortage. You may be doing all you can, but this problem is too big to be tackled by so few. It needs the involvement and effort of many more people. And we want to suggest one way in which some of the people of Southwark can be enabled to help themselves and the community.

9. We know that some Council members have expressed concern at the number of houses that are being left empty pending redevelopment. But your policy decision to demolish as soon as possible after acquisition, irrespective of when the site is needed - does nothing to reduce this waste, it simply makes it less noticeable. We would like your co-operation to form a responsible community based organisation in Southwark that would bring those houses into use as homes for Southwark families - at no cost to the ratepayer: no obstruction to redevelopment and with great benefit to those who need them most.

HOW WOULD IT WORK

10. In brief, by involving local volunteers and particularly the families in need, in organising, administering and repairing these houses for short term use. The association would guarantee that families moved out on time. We would expect the Council to loan the houses free, so that families housed could pay a rent to the Association that would finance the essential repairs. They would be used only for Southwark families in real need, but it would be necessary for their points to be frozen so that they did not become perpetual squatters.

11. As you will know, such an organisation already exists in Lewisham and the enclosed 5 page explanation of how it functions, should answer most of the obvious questions.*
12. The South East London Squatters were responsible for setting up the Lewisham Family Squatting Association, but the two groups are quite separate, although some of us have dual membership. If a similar organisation was formed in Southwark, we are confident that local people would quickly come forward to take responsibility and provide its direction. There are many community organisations, churches and individuals in Southwark who could be drawn in, and if a meeting is arranged, we would like to invite representatives from Shelter's national office and from the Quadrant Housing Association, as well as the Lewisham Family Squatting Association, to join the discussion.
13. Antony Fletcher of Quadrant, will tell you of his co-operation with the L.F.S.A., which is now being given G.L.C. houses in addition to those owned by Lewisham Council. Ron Bailey, the L.F.S.A. co-ordinator, will tell you of the agreement recently arrived at in Redbridge, where relations were once much worse than any of the differences we have had in Southwark.
14. We appreciate that you may be wary of co-operating with us. We did not move in these families to give us a lever; as you know we have squatted 3 families in Southwark previously, with a happy outcome in each case. But it does seem rather silly that two groups of people with presumably the same concern about housing need, should periodically come into conflict over method, without any attempt to discuss whether or not some kind of working agreement is possible.
15. Many of you already know that we are determined campaigners. We ask you to believe that we are also responsible people, and that we don't want to fight unless we have to. We do have an appreciation of the problems you are dealing with and it seems clear to us that we could do much more together than we can in opposition. Many of the 70-odd families in Lewisham would have become Welfare Department responsibility if L.F.S.A. did not exist. Many of the children rehoused would have been taken into care.
16. Please do your utmost to ensure that a meeting does at least take place, and I would suggest that any decision or action concerning the three families already in occupation might sensibly be postponed pending the outcome of that discussion.

Jim Radford

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*See 'The Ryoter' No. 8