

INTRODUCTION

READ THIS if you're homeless, have left your husband (or man), or left your parents; if you're sick of High Rise living or Low Rise living....

READ THIS if you're active in some kind of housing group or tenants association; if you're interested in womens and gay liheration....

This is a description of one particular squat - how we found it, why we squatted, how we lived together, the struggle to hang onto the house and some of the lessons that might be drawn from the eviction.

The description is followed by an outline of some work on housing, squatting and class struggle.

As this introduction is being typed, the debate on the Queens Speech is taking place in Parliament. Among the Bills to be presented this session is THE CRIMINAL TRESPASS BILL which will make occupations of all kinds subject to criminal law and the actions of the police. The Bill comes with a background of, HOUSING CUTS and many other cuts at a time when the SOCIAL CONTRACT between the Trade Unions and the Labour Party version of capitalism has had a dramatic effect on working class struggle.

The need to take militant action such as occupations of factories and squatting is very clear yet the organisation and ideas to help that action are barely visible.

This pamphlet - or rather this emergency edition for the CRIMINAL TRESPASS CONFERENCE (NOVEMBER 1976) - is to encourage discussion and contact over some of the problems of living and working at the moment.

The <u>outline</u> towards the end tries to show how housing struggle is about more than just getting a roof; it's about many things: who we live with, what kind of group we live in (usually the small nuclear family), where we work and what it is that keeps getting us back to work etc.

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DANCING HOUSE SQUAT

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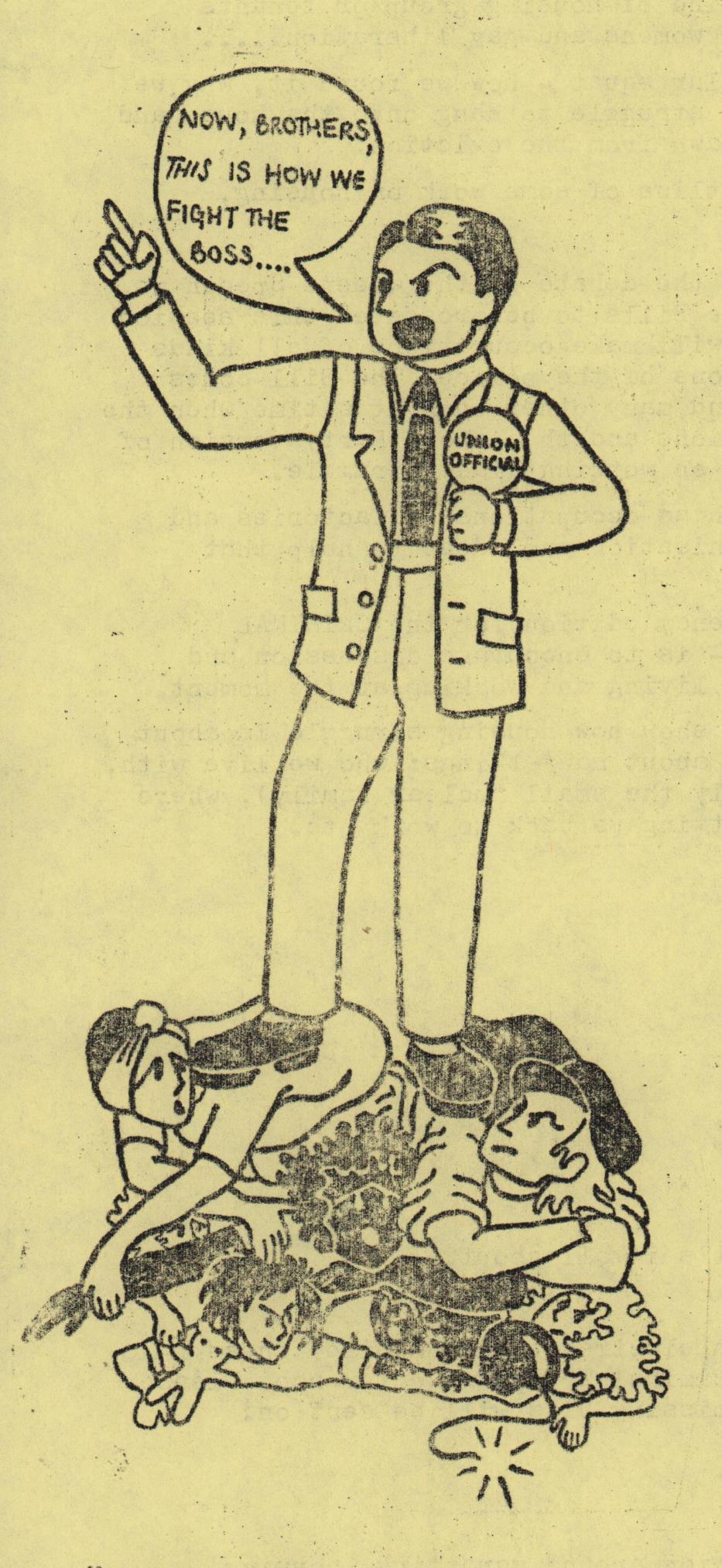
* Due to a technical problem (with an electrostencil machine) these sections are not available for the Criminal Trespass Conference. Please leave your name and address and the missing bits will be senf on.

GET IN TOUCH!

Some kind of discussion and organisation around squatting, housing, industrial organisation etc would be very useful. It seems likely that quite a few people are doing working and taking action in isolation. Get in touch if you want to offer comments, send material etc.

K.V. 24th November 1976

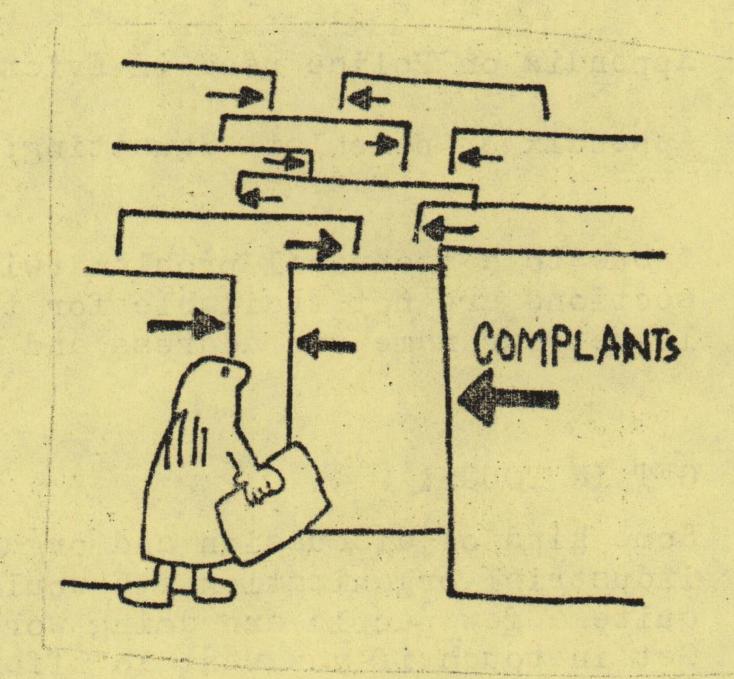
Dancing House Squat, c/o Box 2, NV, People's Centre, 33 Mansfield Rd, Nottingham.



"IS THIS A VALID VIEW OF OFFICIAL TRADE UNIONISM?"



"AREN'T OUR POLICEMEN WONDERFUL!"



"I WOULD LIKE TO SEE ABOUT GETTING MY ROOF FIXED".

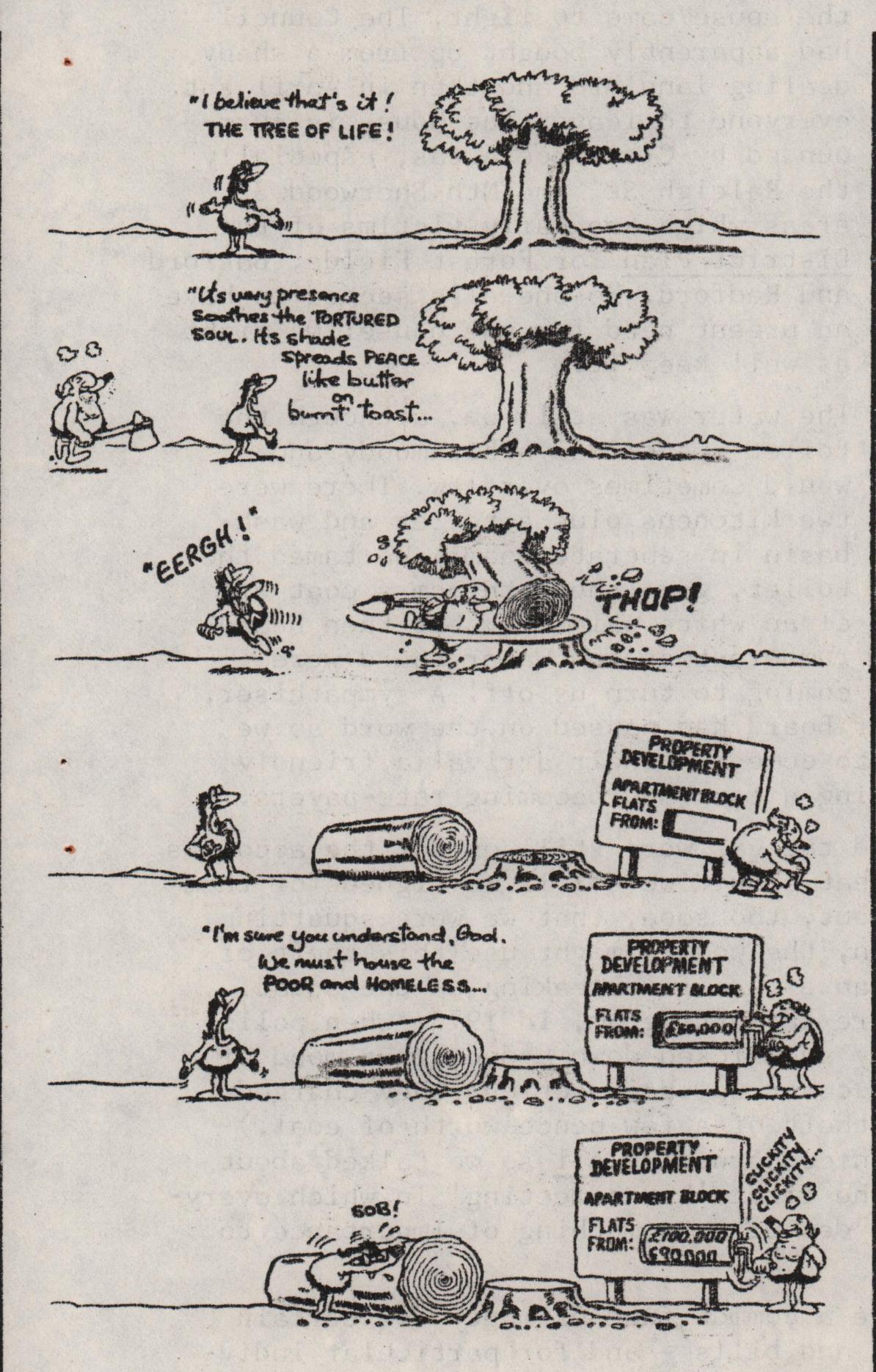
A CAUTIONARY TALE.

Squatting is not 'illegal'. One day in June 1974, a number of people moved into a house in the north of Nottingham city. It had been set aside for office building but had been empty for months. Each of us needed somewhere to live, either because we had nowhere at all, or lived in an overcrowded house, or wanted to choose who we lived with.

An open window made entry possible without 'breaking and entering'. So far no criminal law had been broken. The house was very large, rather musty and without working electricity.

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However, after less
than a week the
estate agents sent
two employees to the
front door pretending
to be housebuyers
while three or four
more sneaked in
through that open
window.

OUT! they said.

We went. At that time it didn't seem worth a fight.

That large house remained empty for six months then a sign went up.

"SOLD FOR PRESTIGE OFFICE DEVELOPMENT TO COSTAIN HOMES".

It is still empty, unused and certainly unlived in.

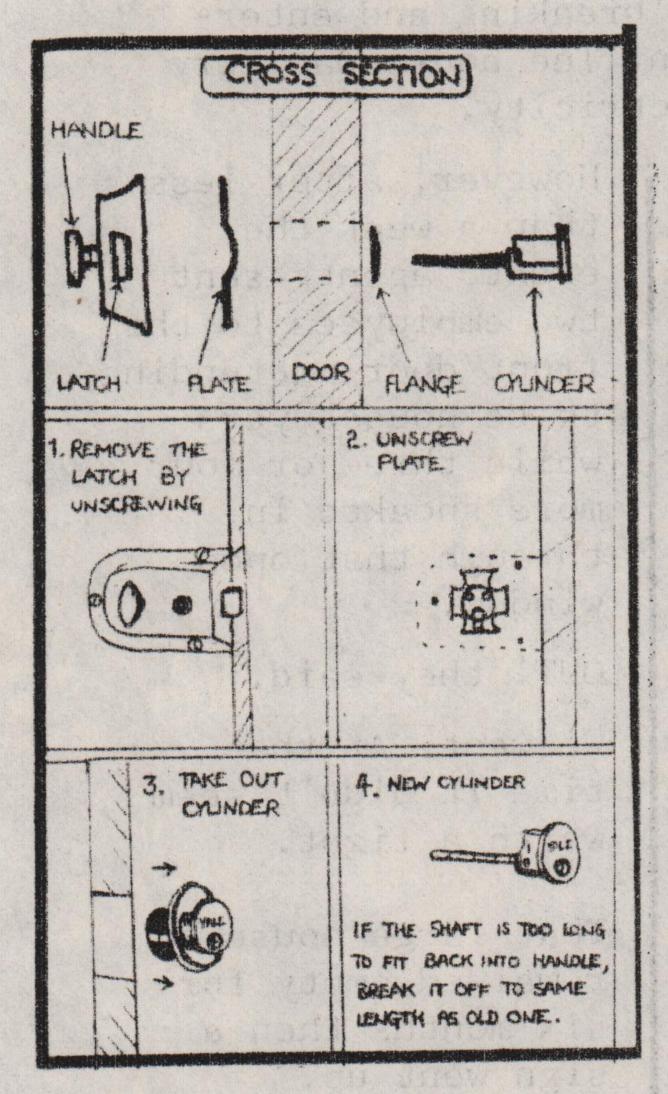
There are many legal arguements about occupying an empty house (more of this later). As always, however, when it came to the crunch, it was not THE LAW that was the main issue but the balance of power.

THE HOUSE WAS A GOOD ONE.

We still needed somewhere - there were hundreds of empty houses - and squatting was still the only reasonable choice. After looking around for a few days we moved into a house near the centre of the city.

Once in the house we changed the lock from the inside and put curtains up. Any casually passing copper would soon know we meant to live there and not strip the lead.

CHANGING THE LOCK



Some furniture had been left behind by the previous tenants - from this we discovered their names and after a visit some of the previous history of the house came to light. The Council had apparently bought up from a shady dealing landlord and then in April got everyone to leave. The house is surrounded by Clearance Areas, especially the Raleigh St. and Nth Sherwood St. areas which are early victims of the District Plan for Forest Fields, Basford and Radford. No-one else seemed to have an urgent need for the house: we might as well keep it.

The water was still on, although the toilet system was a bit moody and would sometimes overflow. There were two kitchens plus a toilet and washbasin in seperate rooms. We tamed the toilet, gave the bathroom a coat of clean white paint ... but then heard rumours that the Water Board were coming to turn us off! A sympathiser,

connected with the Water Board had passed on the word so we waited for the workmen to come. On their arrival a friendly chat ended with us signing a form and becoming rate-payers.

Both the electricity and the gas were still on but the accounts were not in our name. What should we do? If we signed for them the Council might find out, too soon, that we were squatting there. If we didn't sign, the police might use this theft of electricity and gas as an excuse for breaking up the squat. (This had happened before in Nottingham, in 1973, when police exceeded their authority and kicked down a door in a mood of confusion and panic. To cover up their actions they charged the squatters with the theft of a few pence worth of coal.) Obviously, this decision concerned us all so we talked about it together. This was the first 'house meeting' in which everyone in the house met to decide on something of importance to us all.

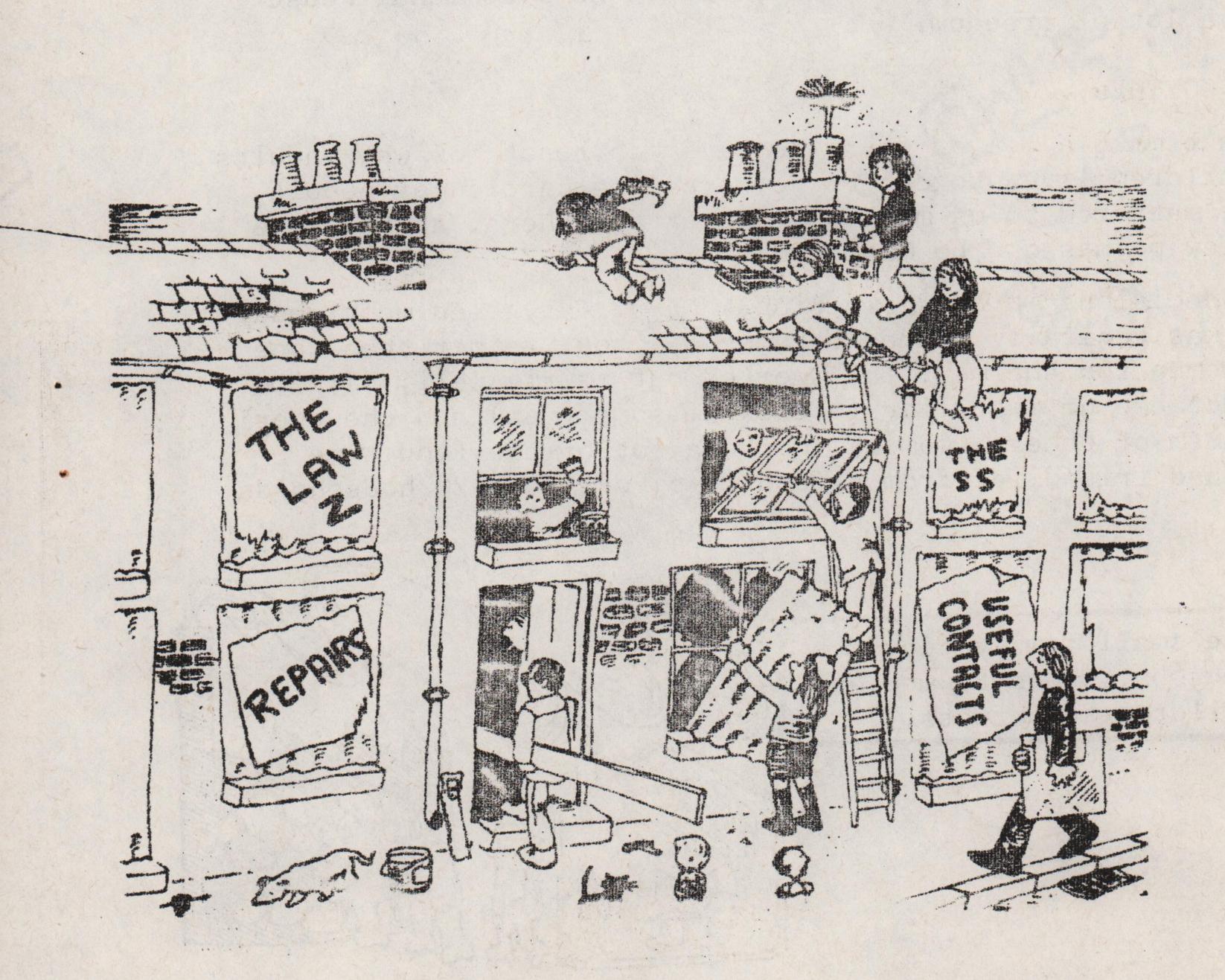
Our decision was to have a common fund of money for certain things - basically food and bills - and for particular individuals to sign for the accounts. On other occassions we also tried to discuss such problems when everyone was together.

Another squat which started later and ended much sooner didn't have the same approach to decisions. People moved in without proper discussion with those already there, major problems like getting the lights turned on were investigated by just one or two people acting like missionaries. A lot of bad feelings developed so that when it came to organising a realistic defense - either in Court or on the street - they couldn't work together and the whole thing immediately folded.

From the first day we always tried to have someone in. If the police or Council found the place empty our lever that squatters can only be evicted through a Court would have been irrel event. Just like our first, short-lived squat they would almost certainly broken in and boarded us out.

MAKING A HOUSE INTO A HOME.

Now that we had somewhere to live there was a lot of work to do.



Disinfectant, dustpan, nails, brushes, glass, putty, hammers, tables and chairs, beds, mirrors, cooking pots, wiring, switches ... all of these and many more were needed.

The work got done unevenly. One or two jobs like clearing out the spare rooms took months to get together. Of course, we didn't spend all our time on the house. A couple of us went out to (waged) work, another devoted his time to an information centre in the city. Others worked in the house (housework) - although there was some group responsibility for this.

Our friends came round and made use of the enormous amount of space available (fifteen rooms). When there's a house with such a variety of rooms a lot of things can go on at once without people disturbing each other. Cooking, dancing, reading, playing with the kids, sitting talking, making love, using the workshop, learning to play the guitar....

"The modern tendency for small family houses restricts the use they can be put to."

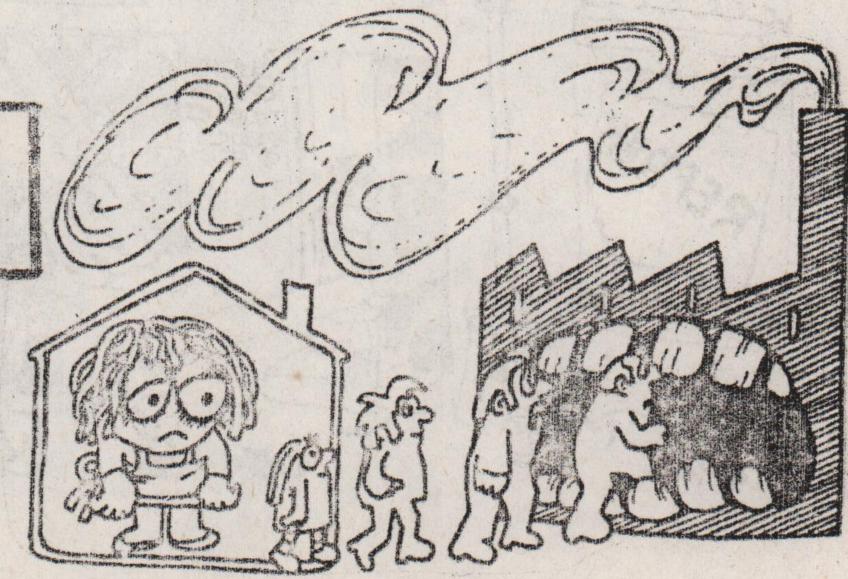
The modern tendency for small family houses restricts the use they can be put to. Our large, old house had probably been built for the gentry and later come under multi-occupation and then left empty and unused. Our use of it as a communal house gave us a lot of freedom.

LIVING TOGETHER.

It doesn't make a lot of sense to say much about how we 7 adults and 2 children lived together. We were nine particular people and what mattered to us mightn't matter to others. At the same time a few points can be made.

Sharing decisions in house meetings has already been mentioned. Cooking was generally shared between us, too, rather than done by the women for the men. This worked out fairly well, despite the reluctance or inability to cook of some (men) and the over enthuisiasm of others (women). Quite a lot of the food came cheaper and friendlier from a food co-op of about 20 households

"The small family ties men to jobs, women to men and children to parents."



we took part in. Most people are expected to live in the small family unit: mum, dad and a couple of children. Houses are built

to keep this unit in, cars are designed to carry it around, taxes are paid from it while 'personalities' are moulded around it. However, many people walk out of it (wives, young people etc) and refuse to accept its limits. The small family ties men to jobs, women to men and children to parents. In some ways our squat offered us a different way of life for a while. How far can it be said that squatting helps people to escape the clutches of the small family? What are the signs across society that show this?

SITTING TIGHT.

Our landlord, the Council, would one day want to evict us. Despite the rapidly increasing amount of homelessness and the fact that our squat was housing half a dozen people it seemed unlikely that they would look kindly on us and leave us alone. They have a bad record for such things.

However, at the moment, we were in no immediate danger and preperations for the day when we would be told to leave began without enthuisiasm.

We produced a simple leaflet explaining our position and asking for support. We spoke to most of our near neighbours, many of whom were living in guest houses. The response was good. None were against and some gave us a lot of encouragement. Certainly, no-one local minded us being there.

The leaflet encouraged people to come along and chat. A silk-screen press (for posters) and a duplicator (for leaflets) were set up, along with a dark room. We were prepared to help people use these facilities and teach those who wanted to learn. Two local tenants associations were among those who did make use of the duplicator.

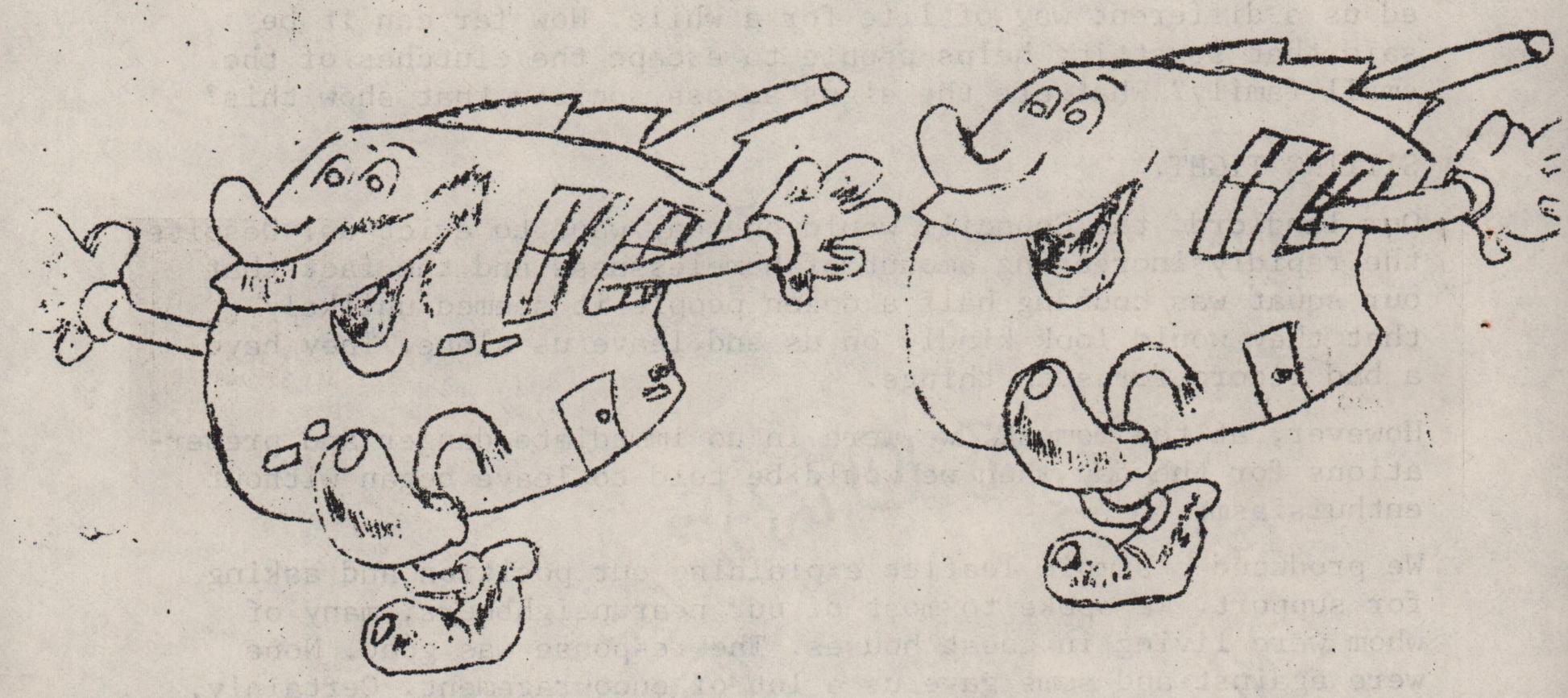
A meeting took place involving some local tenants and other interested people. The discussion was an interesting one, ranging over "Are squatters the sort of people who always like to be on the move?" to "How do we get beds and gas fires for future squats?". Not much else came out of it, however.

"...squatting seems to have started in most towns ... redevelopment schemes, ring roads, fly-overs were being fought against ... to understand some of these developments would be crucial to organising support for our squat."

What were the Council's plans for the house? (we didn't want to deprive anyone else of a home) In the short-term they seemed to have no plans at all. An arguement was going on within the Council whether the nearby Polytech (of several thousand students) should be expanded across the area where we lived or near Clifton a massive outlying council estate. The decision went to Clifton.

The future use of our house was tied up with educational policy and redevelopment schemes. In London at this time there were estimated to be over 15,000 squats, squatting seemed to have started in most towns in this country while redevelopment

schemes, ring roads, fly-overs were being fought against every-where. In Italy, hundreds of building workers and their families squatted a recently finished block of flats. To understand some of these developments would be crucial in organising support for our squat. In the meantime, however, it was summer and there was a whole lot of living to do:



We are a group of poople squatting in . St. What does this mean? It means we have taken rover a house that has been empty since April. Contrary to popular belief this is not illegal. The recent news shows how squatting is not a criminal matter at the mement but may be in the future. SQUATTING (civil trespess) is an argument between the landlord and the squatter IN A COURT. It shouldn't have anything to do with the police.

We are sick of living in bad or over crowded conditions, and paying high rent for drummy little rooms. Problems like this concern most of the people living in this area. Squatters are tenants, live in your area

and have similar problems to you. Squatters and tenants need to stick together for better housing and community facilities.

- * WHY AREN'T THERE ENOUGH SAFE PLACES FOR KIDS TO PLAY?
- * WHY ARE SO MANY HOUSES STANDING EMPTY? (Evon though the Polytoch clearance area has not been confirm -od yot, many tenants nearby have al ready moved out.)
- * THE RALEIGH STREET CLEARANCE AREA
 HAS 2000 people living in it. After.
 'redevelopment' there will only be
 500. WHERE WILL THE REST GO?

DANCING HOUSES SQUATTERS GROUP

We have a place for making posters, a printing machine, a bookshop that you are welcome to use.

We are propared to tell people about squatting....to help with housing problems like getting repairs done, rubbish removed, playgroups started. We know a bit about social security and have an interest in factories, schools rising prices.....

COME ALONG TO OUR INFORMAL MEETINGS overy Tuesday and Thurs, there's usually tea or coffee.

"We produced a simple leaflet, explaining our position and asking for support."

CLOSING OFF THE ROADS.

It may have been summer for us but for the residents of the near-by Raleigh Street Clearance Area summer meant trouble. The school holidays were fast approaching, releasing hundreds of children onto the very dangerous local streets. A quater of Nottingham's population is children, but in this area almost half are children. The older inner-city estates of the city are being replaced by new council estates on the outskirts; the first major one was Clifton, built with Boots factory in mind. As the rehousing takes place those who don't easily 'fit' into the new scheme often get dumped into places like Raleigh Street, then moved again later on. This was one reason why there were so many children, and also accounts for the neglect of the area.



Nottingham city is destined to become a clean and beautiful office and shopping centre. A contoversial road scheme is meant to help towards this by reducing traffic inside the centre and making work journeys easier. Parking control had forced cars onto Raleigh St. and surrounding roads while traffic raced through these streets as a short-cut.

Some residents planned to stop the traffic to counter-act this. A meeting invited members of Raleigh Street Resident's Association (RARA) and some squatters to help devise

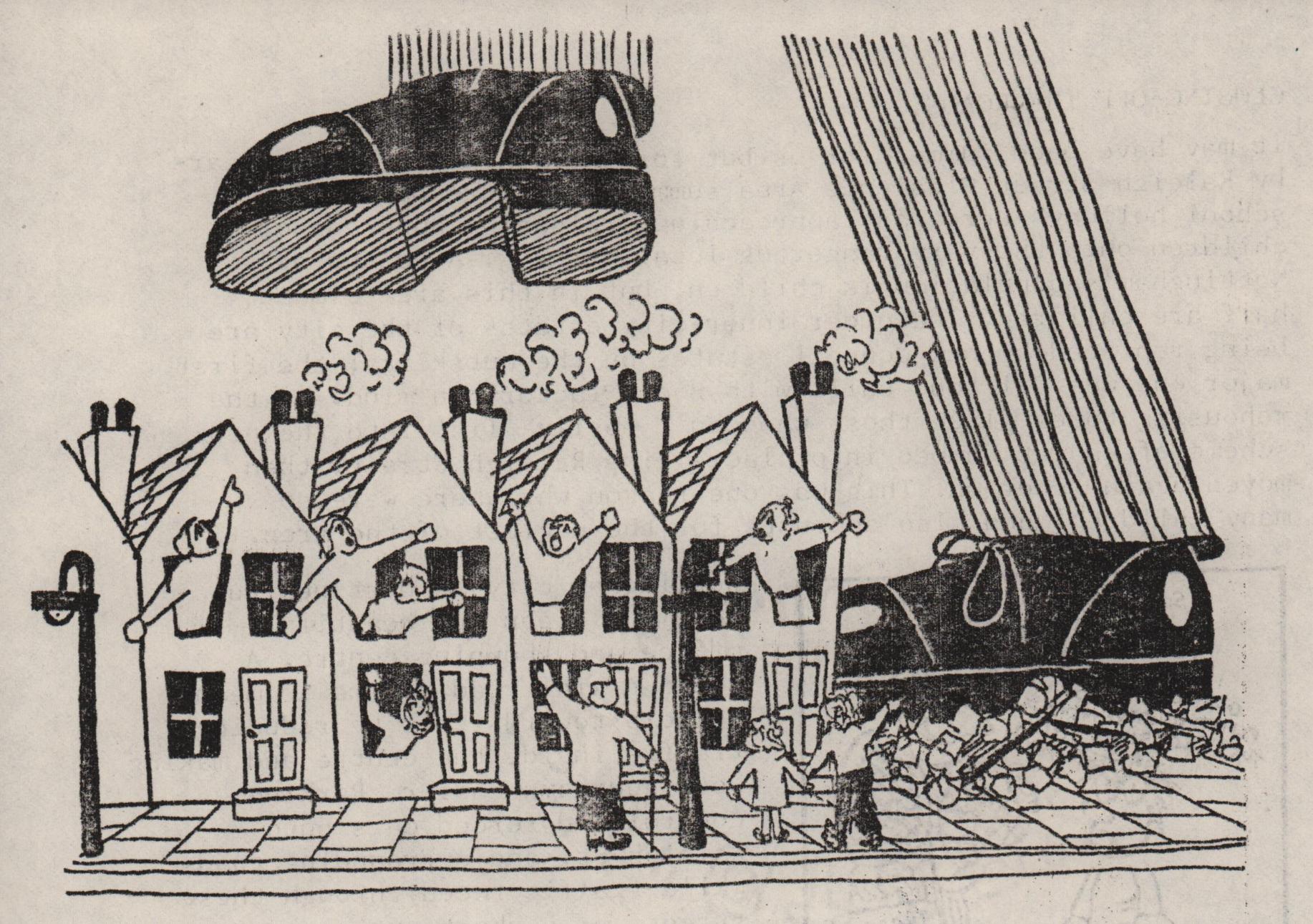
action. Unfortunately, the police got advance notice of the road block idea and threatened to arrest anyone daring to do it. Instead they suggested an orderly procession around the houses, and that is what happened.

It seemed very clearly in our interests, as squatters, to support this. They were faced with similar problems to us with city plans causing homelessness, overcrowding, shortage of facilities, confusion... The same system of landlords and Council was to blame. Later on, this contact was to help intthe attempt to prevent our eviction.

"It seemed very clearly in our interests, as squatters, to support this. They were faced with similar problems..."

The 'orderly procession' hadn't helped, of course. RARA put signs up asking drivers to drive slowly and this seemed to have some effect.

However, a more effective step was planned. The main danger came from traffic before and after work. A picket of THE CARS was arranged, with leaflets and placards. This lead to a bit of bother with one particularly rude driver getting a few dents in his car from



from kicks. The police were called in. However, out of this came a proposal to investigate a way of redirecting the traffic to make the roads safer.

SQUATTING THE 'FREEHOUSE'.

The roads remained dangerous. Just before the school holidays, an old off-licence (a 'Freehouse') was taken over as a squat for the children to play in. Somewhere <u>safe</u> and off the roads. When the police came they found a group of local mothers, people from RARA and some squatters who knew all about squatting and were prepared to argue it out. We stayed ... and the police left.

After a summer of decorating and use by the children the 'Freehouse' was bought for £70 and could be used now for just about anything. It is fairly certain that if it hadn't been taken in the first place then it would never have become available for the control and use of local people.

"It is fairly certain that if it hadn't been taken in the first place it would never have under the control of local people."

The way the discussion developed is well worth discussion elsewhere (see note 1 at end of this section.). Particularly interesting (or horrible, it depends how you look at it) was the influence of well intentioned community workers, employed by the local authority to get people committed to 'Action' over harmless and charitable issues. This became one major part of a lot of confusion and conflict. Amidst all this disorganisation effective militant action

ceased. As a consequence, with the pressure off them, the County Council didn't bother to bring in the <u>Safe Roads Scheme</u> until almost a year later, when more action was taken. Meanwhile, back at the squat...

TWO FALSE ALARMS.

Late one evening there came a loud knock on the door.

"Who is it?"

"Police" came the gruff reply. "Let us in!" General panic ensued while we pretended to be calm.

"What do you want?"

"Never mind, just let us in. Come on. It's the police. If you don't let us in there'll be trouble!"

"Go away. We know our rights. We're squatting, and you can't come in without a court order."

We talked among ourselves. What should we do? They were banging pretty hard. We mustn't open the door. Speak to them through the window. While some stay at the door, others go to the window.

On looking through the window we discover a group of our friends (some friends!) just out of the pub. It was all a joke.

Things could have been different. It's always worth checking on strangers by looking through the window.

In July two council officials called to find out who lived in our house and what was going on. They didn't get much out of us and we didn't get much out of them. They left and nothing more happened for some time.

- * SQUATTERS PUT THEIR HEADS TOGETHER.
- By now there were more squats and an increasing interest in solving problems by squatting. A few squats came together to discuss common problems. Our discussions were dominated by a letter to one household threatening 'further action' in one week. Fortunately, we knew what 'further action' meant; it was a bluff, intended to get them to leave. They sat tight. The end of the week brought no eviction, just the expected letter from the owners (the Council) seeking action in Court. Many other squatters must have fled under such a threat.

"If nothing was to be expected from the Council then how could we organise enough support so that they DARE NOT EVICT? ... We were faced with a fundamentally political problem; did we have enough power to make them back down?"

In the meantime, we were making a specially equiped playroom for the children in our house. It was while the paint was being splashed onto the walls that we recieved a similar threatening letter'.

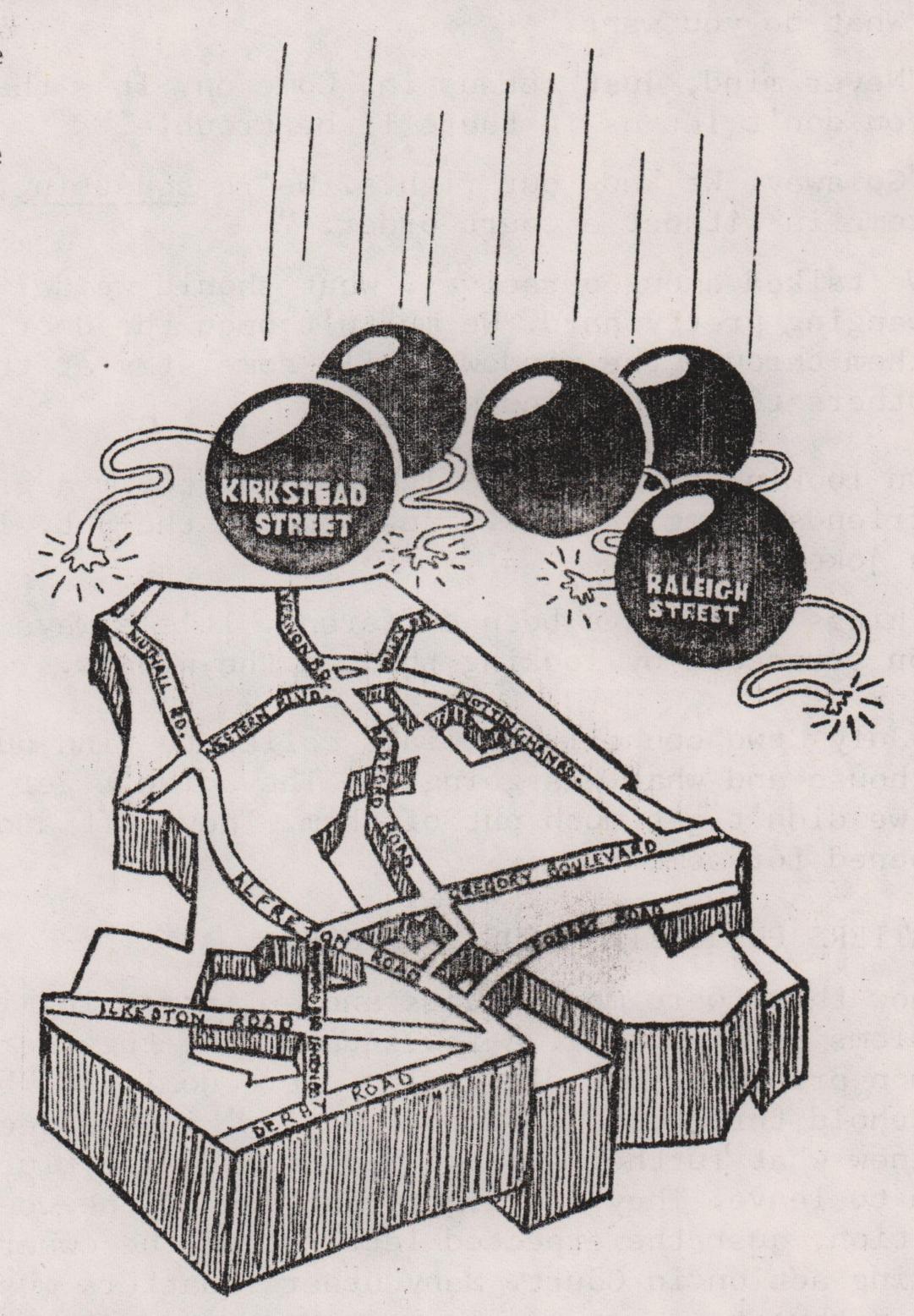
What were we to do? Would the Council accept an offer of rent? Was it right to offer rent anyway? Could a better house be obtained by co-operating and leaving now? If nothing was to be expected from the Council then how could we organise enough support so that they DARE NOT EVICT?

With such a few squats and very different needs it was difficult

to establish joint aims and have much confidence that we could win.

Several ideas did emerge but the meetings eventually folded and it became each house hold for itself.

We were faced with a fundamentally political problem; did we have the power to make them back down? What action, if any, would save us?



Nottingham Clearance Programme:

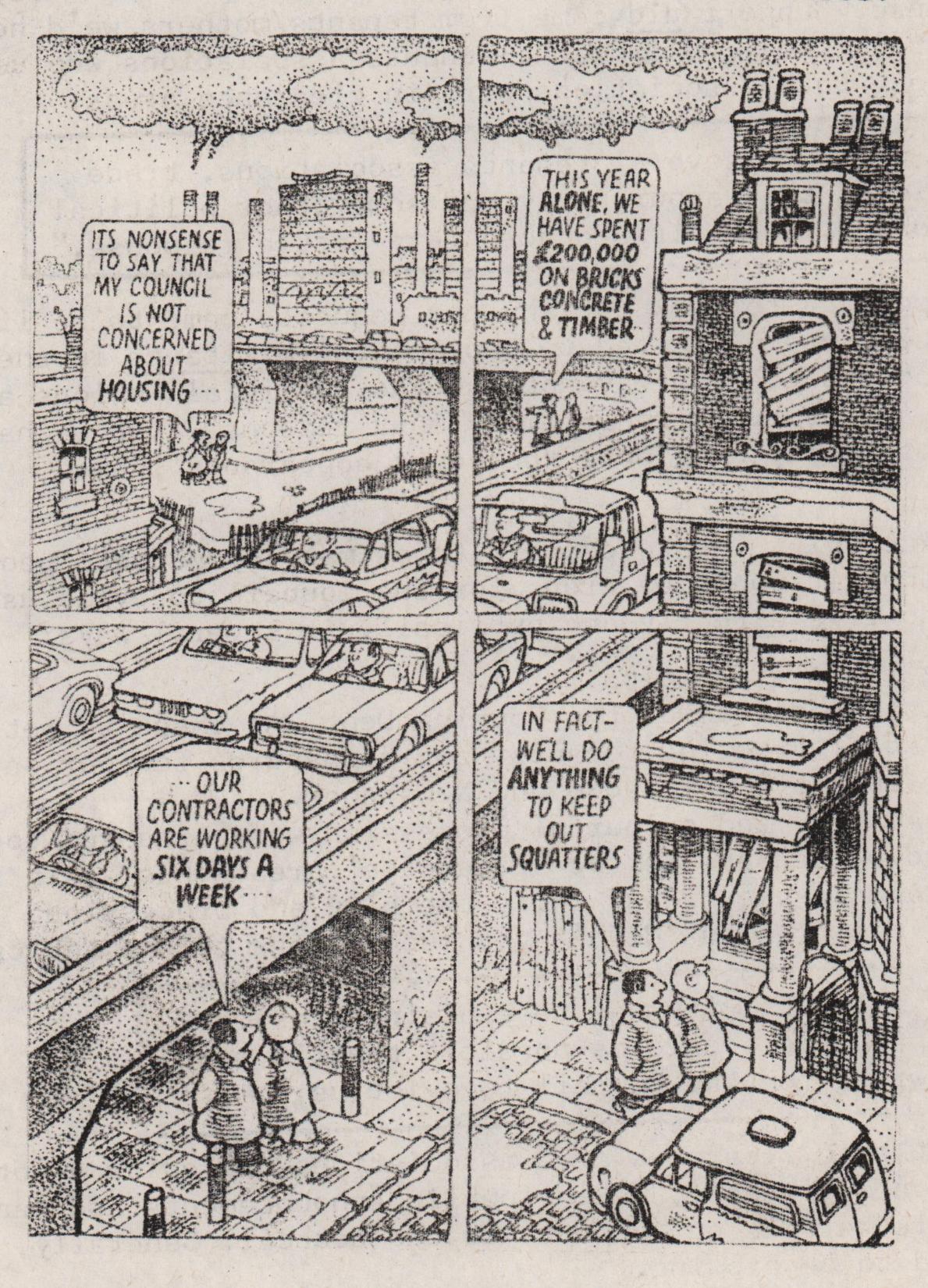
AN EXPLOSIVE SITUATION?

NO CONFIDENCE IN THE COUNCIL.

There were 11,000 individuals on the council house waiting list at that time. About 200 people were said to sleep out every night, while plenty of homelessness was hidden in overcrowding, staying with in-laws and so on. One 'Homelessness Officer' was in operation

It was plain to see that his job was not to solve the problem of homelessness - how could it be? - but to hide it and prevent the homeless making too much trouble.

Nottingham Council, like most Councils, offered only token resistance to the rent increases brought in by the Unfair Rents Act 1972. Their policy on all council-owned squats in the past had been eviction, even when the properties weren't needed for anything else. They were not generally on the side of tenants or squatters in the city. They weren't going to rush to help neither by withdrawing the court order nor by finding us a new house - so we sent a token letter offering rent and began the serious work of gathering support from other sources.



THE CAMPAIGN TO KEEP THE HOUSE.

One point of view was that it was already too late; we should devote our energy to building up other squats while moving on.

Another view was that if we hadn't advertised ourselves in the first place we could have survived 'underground' for longer.

However, who would support us and for what reasons? Surely it would be people in similar situations, who either might one day become homeless or could see their problems - whatever they were - as part of the fight against the same system. Perhaps we would get encouragement from tenants who had suffered rent increases; from those who slept out or in tatty hostels like the Sally Army; from those who were overcrowded...Would we get support from the Trade Unions and the Labour Party?

We wrote to several tenants associations, trade unions, the Labour Party and some other political groups ... but it produced very little response. Support did come from tenants/mothers we'd helped squat the 'freehouse' and from the tenants associations who used our facilities. Both associations were in clearance areas.

"We wrote to several tenants associations, trade unions, the Labour Party and some other political groups ... but it produced very little response."

It's very important to work out why our requests came to so little: perhaps it's because we needed to contact the militants in the mortplaces and estates who may not use the 'official' unions and associations. No doubt there are many many reasons - but we had no time to work everything out, the court appearance loomed nearer.

So, our main activity was to explain to as many sympathete people as possible that it would be wrong for the Council to evict us. We tried to do this directly and publically in several ways:

1 Taking round a petition

2 Organising pickets of the Housing Dept. At these we met a hundred or so disgruntled tenants, got signatures for our petition and items on the local Radio and Newspaper.

3 A Street Play and colourful procession were arranged to get us noticed by tenants in the 'Freehouse' area. This again lead to some coverage in the press, while the play and procession attracted the children but didn't get much across to the adults.

"Our main activity was to explain to as many sympathetic people as possible that it would be wrong for the Council to evict us."

The two sympathetic clearance area associations did quite a lot of helpful work on our behalf, making public announcements and sending detailed letters in our support to the Council. Generally, the support seemed to be growing.

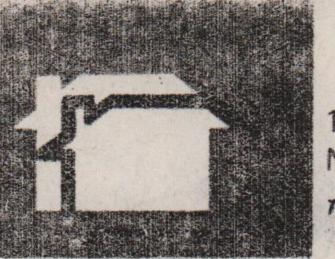
THE COUNCIL DECIDES.

Then, in October, a Housing Committee meeting firmly voted to press the court order and go for an eviction. They justified their decision on the totally irrelevent grounds that squatting is a crime



ONE OF THE PROBLEMS CONNECTED WITH TENANTS ASSOCIATIONS...

GOTTOF MOTTUMERAMI HOUSING DEPARTMENT



11 KING STREET NOTTINGHAM NG1 2BC

Tel Nottingham 47737 Repairs only 47002

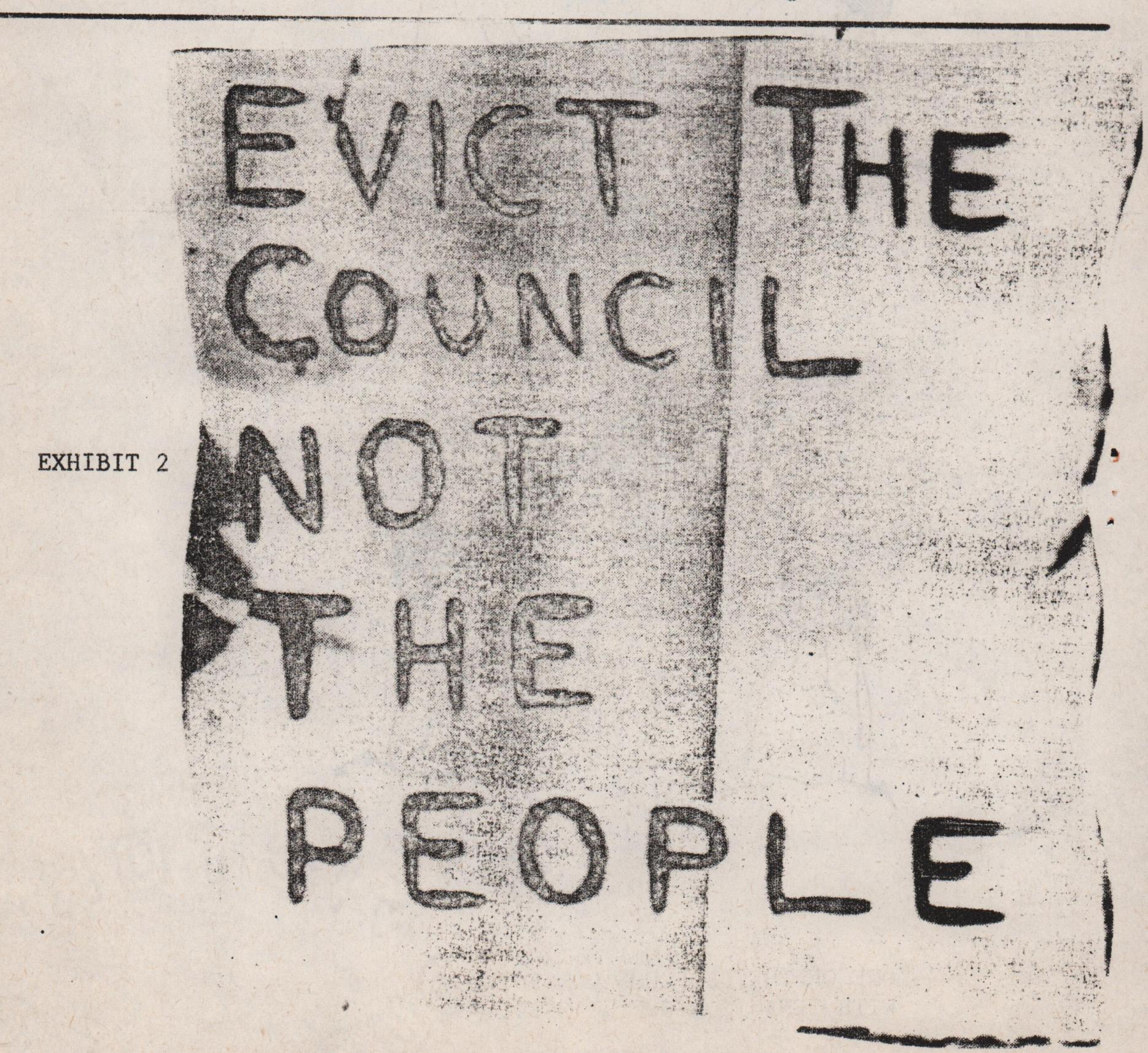
26th September, 1974.

I acknowledge receipt of petition in respect of squatters, and confirm this will be brought to the attention of my Chairman, Councillor Littlewood, for his information.

EXHIBIT 1

McConsee Lee

Director of Housing.



(which it ain't). And also that one squat would encourage others to take similar action (too right). Our view of the Council had been right all along.

THE COURT.

THE NEXT STEP WAS THE COURT. The Court represted a comlete clash of lifestyles. US: colourfully dressed, women & men, with a rather noisy toddler. THEM: Dressed in grey, all men, very dour. We presented our case - the house suited our needs well and no-one else had any plans for it; we showed a letter from a councilor explaining this. However the Judge would have none of it. 'None of this politics is relevent', he said 'The Law is quite clear in such matters.'.

We had expected at least a week to move out in but the Judge granted the Council an immediate possesion order so we rushed

back to put up the barricades and protect our belongings.

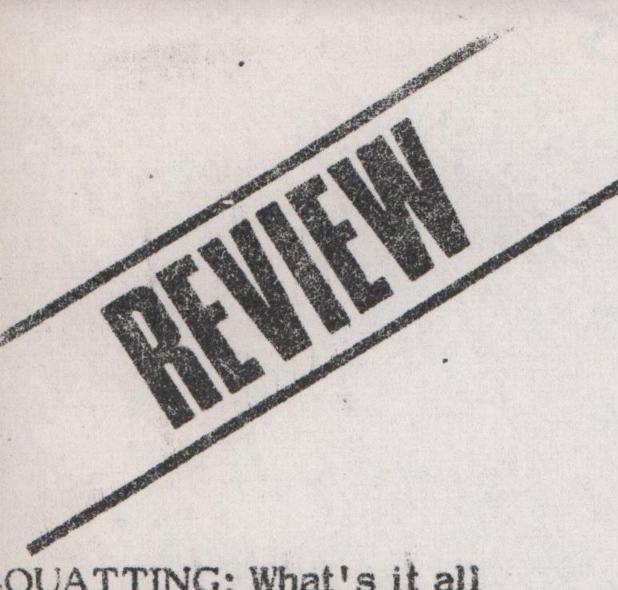
There had never been any intention of defending violently (although some men liked to talk about it) and most people prefered to find other solutions.

EXHIBIT 3

Behind the barricades it was gloomy. All the children were moved

out. An emergency phone list was drawn up so we could summon help at a moments notice. However, the bailiffs didn't come and after four weeks of boredom and nerves we moved out.

We later learned that our agitations had had some effect since the Council considered us 'too hot' to evict at that time. However, it was too late to go back now, most of us were (unsatisfactority housed elsewhere). All that what left was the need to draw some conclusions.



QUATTING: What's it all bout?

ublished by Squatters Action ouncil, 10p.

QUATTING: What's it all bout? is a sophisticated tempt to de-politicise squating. Like the "Right to Work" ampaign it simplifies and disports an important issue beyond

ll useful meaning.

My understanding is that ne strengths and weaknesses f squatting in London are not simple matter: it's around vents like at Charteris Road nd Villa Road recently that a lear theory and an active rganisation will either evelop . . . or stagnate.

How does this pamphlet fit with this need for squatting

o grow?

It is divided into three ections. The third section is ited from Sheffield Campaign gainst a Criminal Trespass aw's excellent leaflet on riminal trespass, and is robably the best thing around

n this subject.

The first section, "The ature of Anti-Squatting Itories", collects together everal stories showing how he media have deliberately rganised a witch-hunt against quatters in order to scape-oat them for the housing risis and prepare for the oming of the Criminal Tresass Law.

The "Wife who lived a lightmare" story from Notting-am Evening Post is included long with the truer story from lottingham Voice. Useful hough this may be, it is ecessary to see how the ower of squatters could evelop practically rather han get too wrapped up with he liberal idea that you can correct the media".

them explain a major threat to squatting in the Criminal Trespass Law and say what squatting is not about. How then does this pamphlet justify its ambitious (or pretentious) title - Squatting: what's it all about?

In the second section, "The Squatting Charter", we are told "what the squatting move-

ment stands for?"

Among the ten points of the Charter is the principle (no. 3):
"WE ARE NOT TRYING TO LIVE RENT AND RATE FREE.
We squat because we have to . .

This is one example of the attempt throughout the pamphlet to make squatters appear respectable, deserving victims.

Further on, "The Charter" states: Squatting is not the prerogative of "Hippies" and "people who do not want to settle down" "60% of the properties (squatted in Lamberth) are occupied by households with children".

According to the author(s) of this pamphlet, people only squat because they are physic-

ally homeless.

So, a picture is painted:
"everyone" wants to pay rent,
is deserving, really does want
to go out to work and settle
down and have children (probably getting married on the
way - after all, it's only
proper isn't it?).

What is the reality?

It's a lot more complicated. Many squatters in London are there because there aren't enough houses to rent, many long for a semi-detached suburban respectability. But there is also a significant and large minority (who knows how large?) who squat because they refuse to accept the discipline of tedious work, the psychological and sexual torture of the "nuclear family", the isolation of modern housing estates. For them squatting is a positive act, a -struggle to satisfy their needs in the fact of capitalist organisation.

Significant, too, have been the women's and gay communes (as well as the "mixed" and less formal communal arrangements) trying to provide more space for

love. Refuges for battered women all over the country have included many squats (Nottingham, for example).

Many black and asian immigrants have squatted and from that base launched important campaigns - the Bengali Housing Action Group is just one example of this.

This pamphlet doesn't mention any of this and so sidesteps the important issues of

working class power.

It would be in no-one's interest to pretend that squatting is led by people who clearly and politically reject wage labour, sexism, racism and authority; hopefully this review has hinted at the complicated nature of squatting and its problems.

At the same time to ignore the different needs of various groups within and outside squatting is to ignore how to develop real unity and collect-

ive power.

It is misguided and dangerous to suggest that "the
squatting movement stands for"
the principles of this Charter.
The Charter surfaced through
Squatters Action Council
which claims that it (the
Charter) "has wide support
from squatting groups and
involves thousands of squatters
individually",

My information suggests that although the SAC news-letter is almost the only channel for squatting news at the moment, SAC has very few real roots in squatting.

If this is true, then even the good points of the Charter - e.g. We stand for HOUSING FOR ALL as a right (no. 2) - have little real influence or practical meaning among

However, what is clear, is that pamphlets like this will do nothing to solve the real divisions that exist among squatters and within the working class as a whole. Conjuring "a Charter" out of thin air is a stroke of magic not an act of organisation.

Squatting: what's it all about?. Available for 10p from SAC, c/o 2 St Paul's Rd, London, N1 - but don't

bother!

squatters.