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Housing in Dublin

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HOUSING IN DUBLIN

Paper delivered on
6th. Nov. 1971.

This paper is an attempt to show the following;

- (1) That significant and widespread poverty exist at present in Dublin due to the shortage of adequate housing at a price people can afford.
- (2) That the situation is deteriorating rapidly and will continue to do so unless drastic measures are taken.
- (3) That the Fianna Fail Government are unwilling to face up to the problem for the following reasons;
 - (a) Their economic policy of attracting foreign capital prevents them.
 - (b) It would hurt the vested interests within their own party, and many of those outside it who support them in power.
 - (c) It would interfere with their use of patronage as a means to maintain power.
- (4) How legislation and the state machine are used to safeguard the interests of a wealthy elite against the interests of the community.
- (5) The use of slum dwellings as a means to punish those who try to buck the system.
- (6) How the problem can be solved.
- (7) Lessons learned from the old D.H.A.C.
- (8) Tactical and organisational suggestions for a revived D.H.A.C.

Proof of housing shortage in Dublin.

Statistics and on the spot surveys prove that the housing situation in Dublin is far worse now than at the height of the D.H.A.C. agitation in 1969. This is something which will be borne out by anyone who has recently tried to rent or buy accommodation, or is relying on the Corporation to solve their housing needs.

In their white paper "Housing in the Seventies" the Govt. estimated a need for 12,000 - 14,000 new houses per year up to 1970 increasing to 15,000 - 17,000 per year by the mid seventies.

In an article reproduced in Build magazine in Nov. '68 Michael Green, Housing and Economic Officer of the Federation of Building Contractors estimated a need of 27,000 - 23,000 new houses per year between 1968 and 1980.

Actual output of new dwellings for the last three years averages at 13,450 per annum. Looked at in the light of the Govt.s own estimates this level of output seems reasonable. Compared to Mr. Greens it certainly is not. However one way or another factors operate nationally and in Dublin which make the situation far worse than these figures would suggest. These factors are;

- (1) A steady increase in the overall population is aggravated in Dublin by large scale migration from rural and other urban areas.
- (2) A more rapid increase in the marriage rate than allowed for.
- (3) Higher rate of demolition and conversion of living accommodation than allowed for.

At present indications are that these factors will continue to operate. In addition the present unemployment situation in Britain causes further problems.

The present stock of houses in the country is exceptionally old (over half were built prior to 1918).

In 1966 44% of Local Authority dwellings had more than one family living in them. If anything things have got worse since then.

Recent Housing Surveys

Surveys carried out in Corporation dwellings, caravan sites, and privately owned tenements in recent years clearly show the sub-human standard of accommodation available, and the appallingly high prices being charged. Two such surveys were carried out in Benburb Street Flats by the Sean Ruiseail Cumann of Sinn Fein, and Voluntary Service International. Both revealed appalling conditions. Likewise surveys conducted by the D.H.A.C. at the Portmarnock Caravan Site, and by the Labour Party in privately owned tenements reveal further squalor and exploitation.

A House of Your Own

As is clearly shown in their booklets, "Housing in the Seventies" and "A House of Your Own", present Govt. policy is to burden as many people as possible with the risk and expense of buying their own house from private builders. This is a policy which isn't even accepted by the more advanced and affluent countries in Western Europe. In Western Germany for instance only 35% of dwellings are owner occupied as against 60% in Ireland. How feasible is it for the average worker in Dublin at the moment to buy his own house. The cost of the average house being built in Dublin to-day is £6,500. Assuming that a worker is lucky enough to find one involving a total outlay of £5,000 (i.e. including stamp duty, solicitors fees etc.) and has managed to save a deposit of £1,000, and again assuming that he can get a loan of £4,000 @ 10% interest he will pay £8:61 per week for thirty five years before the house is paid for. By this time he will have paid a total of £14,469. In addition he will be paying at least a further £6:50 per week for Rates, Ground Rent, Insurance, and Repairs. Can the average worker afford to pay over £15 a week out of his wage packet and still have enough left for, fuel, light, food and clothing for his family?

Why Fianna Fail Cannot solve the Problem

In the last ten years or so Fianna Fail's policy has been to attract foreign capital into the country to create industrial expansion. This has meant giving grants and tax concessions to foreign industrialists on their terms. In Dublin this has resulted in (1) the soaring price of building land and (2) Massive demolition and conversion of living accommodation in the centre of the city (i.e. mainly working class areas). In the conflict which arises between the needs of the community for proper housing, and foreign business interests the community comes off second best.

It is far more profitable to build offices in Dublin than to build houses. Office space is now letting at £2 per square ft. and developers are talking about breaking the £2:50 barrier. 52 St. Stephens Green which recently came on the market as office space is expected to rent for £90,000 per annum. It is not hard to understand why the Green Property Co. weren't interested when families squatting in their property on the Green offered to pay a reasonable rent.

Fianna Fail are unable to take measures to ease the problem because many of their most influential members and supporters are benefitting directly from the present situation. One recalls the handsome profit made by Mr. Charles Haughey in the sale of his land and his involvement along with Messrs. Boland and Gallagher in Leinster Estates proposed development of Mountjoy Square.

More recently there was the case where Mr. Sean Mc Entee on appeal to the Minister for Local Government got planning permission to use his land in the Leeson Street area for Office developement contrary to zoning plans for this area. Party members and their frierds have access to draft developement plans which can be worth thousands of pounds. In addition their is the power which being in a position to grant favours, and pretending to grant favours, brings. Patronage provides the simplest means of retaining power.

Legislation and the State Machine

Legislation, the police and the courts, are used to protect the interests of private property and the wealthy against the interests of the community. The Forcible Entry Act provides a recent example of this. Other such laws are the Rent Restrictions Act 1960 (Section 29. 1. g.), and the Housing Act 1970. Where legislation exists which could safeguard the interests of the community it operates at the descretion of the Minister for Local Government. Examples of this are provided by the 1963 Planning and Developement Act and the 1968 Housing Act.

In addition to this "legal" coercion there is the illegal violence and intimidation of the state against those who articulate the demands of the homeless. Examples of this are the many instances where members of the D.H.A.C. were assaulted by members of the Gardai and then charged with assaulting their attackers.

Slum Dwellings as Punishment

Accommodation such as that provided by the Corporation at Benburb Street is intentionally kept at a sub-standard and sub-human level. In order to maintain the system it is necessary to punish people who either cannot pay or will not pay rent. It works out cheaper than sending them to jail and avoids the bad publicity associated with leaving people living on the street. This policy of punitive accommodation is a direct consequence of placing the main responsibility for the provision of houses in the hands of private enterprise.

A Policy on Housing

Our policy on housing should be based on a realistic understanding of the problems. The housing problem, like many of our other problems is a direct result of the economic sell-out to Britain. Therefore it cannot be completely solved without first combatting British imperialism. Then the problem needs to be tackled on a nationwide basis. A proper regional developement plan based on a scientific assessment of available resources, giving

priority to the needs of the community and not the needs of a wealthy industrial elite, is needed. In the meantime a broadly based mass organisation which will demand and agitate for adequate housing at a reasonable cost is needed. We should make a critical examination of the old D.H.A.C. and learning from our mistakes revive it on a more solid basis.

D.H.A.C. - Shortcomings

- (1) It failed to involve those with housing problems to any great extent.
- (2) No formal membership leading to dramatic fluctuations in support.
- (3) No attempt made to organise on a regional basis, necessary in a city the size of Dublin.
- (4) No short term realizable aims which could be used to give encouragement to supporters.
- (5) Chronic lack of funds.
- (6) Too closely associated with Sinn Fein, mainly due to Gardiner Place being used as office and meeting place.
- (7) Lack of organisers with a full-time commitment to housing.
- (8) Directed at a very limited section i.e. "homeless".
- (9) Ambivalent attitude to ~~the~~ squatting in Corporation property
- (10) Failure to get rank and file members of affiliated organisations involved in the work of the Committee.
- (11) Too much emphasis on easily organised dramatic action to the exclusion of difficult sloggong at propaganda, research, and organisational work.

New D.H.A.C. - Suggestions

- (1) Main objectives of the ^{existing} organisation should be drawn up. In addition to the five aims of the D.H.A.C., other aims should be included which would broaden the appeal of the Committee and allow scope for local agitation for amenities such as swimming pools, day nurseries, washeterias etc.
- (2) Alliances formed during the E.E.C. Campaign could be used to form a basis for organisation in areas such as, Finglas, Ballyfermot, and Ballymun.
- (3) Membership should be formal with a nominal annual subscription to help pay for postage etc.
- (4) Meetings and other activities should concentrate more on the problem areas and not always at the G.P.O. as has been the case up to now.

(6)

- (5) Ideally the Committee should have its own central office with telephone and permanent ly staffed.
- (6) Students should be used to carry out surveys, and other research work such as was done by the Resources Study Group on Mining.
- (7) Every effort should be made to build up files on those involved in the exploitation in all spheres of the housing racket, All available information on the corruption and patronage associated with housing should be gathered. Aim should be to constantly expose the vested interest in high places where it exists.
- (8) Great care should be taken not to alienate useful support by engaging in activity of a gimmicky or adventurist nature.
- (9) Where possible relations with other established organisations involved in housing should be carefully cultivated. Duplication of work should be avoided.
- (10) Except in instances of blatant discrimination, squatting in Corporation property should not be supported,
- (11) Until the organisational strength of the Committee is built up there should be no campaign to engage in squatting in private property. This does not mean that where it occurred spontaneously it should not be supported.

DUBLIN HOUSING ACTION COMMITTEE:

AN ANALYSIS.

The lack of agitation and policy as regards the situation regarding housing must be unacceptable to Republicans in Dublin since the collapse of the D.H.A.C. There has been an increase in speculative building, evictions and repressive legislation against the homeless. This discussion must not be an attempt to find scapegoats and excuses but to formulate policies and tactics to renew the struggle.

Most of the people who are here tonight are aware of the activities of the D.H.A.C. The last stand of the Committee, you would probably agree, was Pembroke Road. After this unhappy event the Committee disintegrated and was left in the care of M. de Durca and Bernard Brown. At that time events taking place in another part of the country left a vacuum in Dublin which has never quite been filled. There have been several attempts to re-activate the Committee but all have failed.

The D.H.A.C. developed out of a need, the need for housing. The Committee's first duty was to organise people to agitate for housing. This they did with remarkable success. At the height of the campaign the government was seriously embarrassed and as far as the people were concerned, in the control of British financial institutions, and native gombeenism.

The Committee at that stage, I feel, should have taken stock and organised at local level to apply more pressure. The people who directed the campaign at national level were consistently and constantly called to assist families and prevent evictions etc., really the function of supporting organisations. Was there a reluctance to delegate responsibility to people of less experience or was there a lack of competent people in local organisations? This situation was never resolved and as a result people like Mairin, Sean Dunne, Eamonn Farrell and Bernard Brown, etc., were constantly engaged in fighting what I would regard as rearguard actions. The emphasis for the future must be on the organisations at local level.

The role of the papers and media in general had an effect on the policies and activities of the Committee. I remember tremendous coverage being given to all demos and public meetings and the activities of the Committee gained support as a result. As this coverage tapered off it had an effect on the attendance at meetings etc.. The Committee, realising this, began to plan activities in a pragmatic manner, reacting to a situation rather than creating one. This activity took the form of sit ins and sit downs etc., which kept the Committee in the public eye but did not engender much public support. These tactics had the effect of the Committee being consistently in conflict with the Gardai etc., and being in a position where conflict with the Gardai became inevitable.

The State were only too glad with this turn of events and prosecuted at every opportunity. Thus, a lot of time was taken up with court cases etc.. The action had been taken off the streets and into the courts where the government won hands down. Examples of these actions were the occupation of the G.P.O. and of the Customs House. The Movement in Dublin suffered; key personnel were constantly absent and we failed to develop people to put in their place. We are now recovering to a certain extent.

Should political activists and revolutionaries place themselves in a position where they are isolated and unable to engender support and leave themselves to be picked off by the State whenever the State decides. I say no! If they do this they will be destroyed.

The basis I see for future agitations must be on local organisations in areas where housing is an issue. We must educate the membership to look after themselves in any situation. We must develop speakers and personnel to look after press statements and publicity in general. This means devoting more time than ever before to the local cumann. This cannot be delayed any longer. We must have organisation.

The cumann itself must get among the people and bring them along. They must base their demands on the system that operates, going through all the channels e.g. planning authorities, civic groups, city councils, and most important of all, develop good relations with local people's organisations. This can be best achieved by perfecting our propaganda and making sure it reaches the people. By applying these tactics the Movement is getting into every home in the area. You are asking people to take a conscious decision as to whether they support you or reject you. By our actions we must demonstrate to the people that the so-called democratic institutions are not democratic and in fact work against the people.

Do not rely on the media to be a barometer of public support. It is not ^{as} easy or as simple as that. By way of petitions, leaflets, public meetings, you get a much more accurate assessment. Get out with a box and you will find out where your support is. You must consistently be among the people on every issue that affects them and it must be the local cumann who are best organised themselves to do it.

I feel that if work of this nature is carried on the Movement cannot fail to grow in strength and in influence. We call ourselves Sinn Féin and that means 'we ourselves'.

If cumann adapt themselves in this way, they must be prepared to suffer setbacks and frustration; however, it is the only way. Again, I repeat, we must have organisation. When committees of a local nature begin to take shape they can elect delegates to a reactivated Dublin Housing Action Committee. The new committee would be thus more representative and better organised at local level and in a position to make again the demands which it formulated some years ago and which still hold good.

I do not agree that the D.H.A.C. failed. It was a significant and vital force and its activities were valuable from the experience which it has been gained. It very nearly shattered Fianna Fáil and the T.A.C.A., at least their credibility. I feel also that credit is due to the people who held the committee together through thick and thin, and the tremendous amount of time etc., which they spent in all the activities of the Committee. No, the committee did not fail. The Movement failed to take advantage of the conditions which were brought about by the activities of the DUBLIN HOUSING ACTION COMMITTEE.

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