

Britain at Work

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It's not what they say but what we do that counts: Holloway occupied

This issue features the history of squatting and occupations in London. Starting immediately after the war with immediate shortages in housing, it reappeared in the 1960s and became a huge social movement involving mass squatting throughout London and occupations of empty office blocks like Centre Point. Squatting and occupations have never gone away and

today the occupation of the old Holloway Prison by Sisters Uncut shows that it is still an important part of housing struggles. The feminist direct action group Sisters Uncut have occupied the Prison Visitors' Centre at the recently closed Holloway Prison to demand that the government fund domestic violence centres and calling for the prison to become a women's centre.

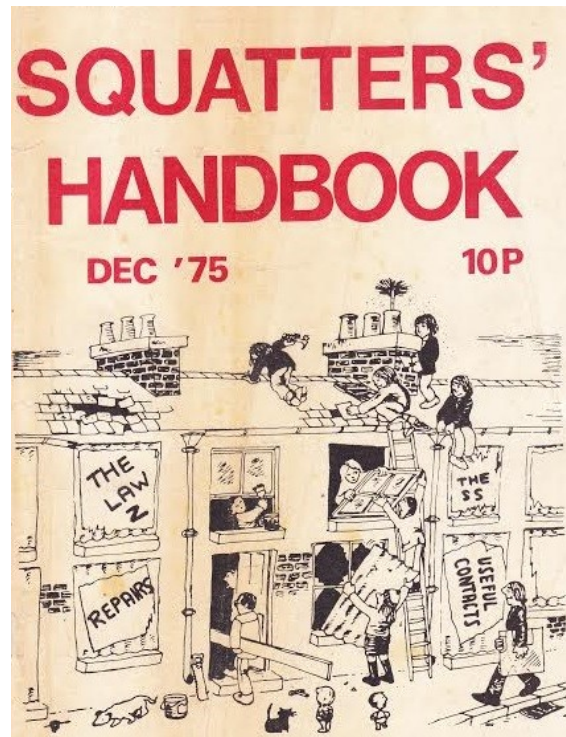
Family squatting in 1960s and 70s London

While the counter-cultural squatting movement of the 1960s and 70s in Britain is familiar, less well-known is the family squatting movement of the same period. Housing in London was a perennial problem in the post-war years, and grandiose urban redevelopment plans meant some councils bought up areas of housing and then sometimes left them vacant for years. Against this backdrop the family squatting movement began in 1968. Two key figures were Ron Bailey and Jim Radford, who had already been involved in direct action housing campaigns. They were aware of the waves of family squatting that followed both world wars, when returning soldiers and their homeless families squatted in disused military buildings. They now planned something similar.

The movement called itself the London Squatters Campaign (LSC), and their aims, though not formally written down, were: to improve the immediate situation of inadequately housed families by rehousing them from hostels or slums; to spark a mass squatting campaign; to start an all-out attack on the housing authorities, with ordinary people taking action for themselves, and to radicalize existing community organisations like tenants' associations. They first drummed up some publicity with two short 'demonstration' squats in a block of luxury flats in Wanstead and an empty vicarage in Leyton. Then they moved on to squatting homeless families. The first two were installed in Redbridge, in vacant houses owned by the council, in February 1969.

What sort of situations led families to participate? Olive and Ricky Mercer and their children were living in a privately rented and severely substandard flat in Stamford Hill; their landlord was threatening them with eviction, and had cut off their water and electricity. Margaret and Ben Beresford had seven children and had been living for four years in a Camden council hostel; the building was opposite a rubbish tip, it was damp, rarely had hot water, had only a coal fire for cooking, and it was possible to sit on the toilet and cook a meal, so close together were the lavatory and the cooker. Small wonder these families decided to take their chances with squatting.

The early months were difficult. Redbridge Council employed bailiffs to evict families illegally, using excessive violence. Council employees destroyed the interior of properties to render them uninhabitable. But ultimately, the LSC got parts of the national press on its side, and used the publicity generated by the illegal evictions to put pressure on London councils to cooperate with them. By June 1969, negotiations were open with Lewisham council, and by December the LSC was moving the first families into licensed squats, with the agreement of the council, and a short-term contract for the squatters. The LSC developed into the Family



Squatting Advisory Service (FSAS), which facilitated the setting up and operation of more local groups. For some activists this cooperation with local government was controversial: they wanted the LSC to remain independent and radical. The family squatting movement didn't achieve all its aims—it didn't start a mass squatting campaign or uprising against local councils, but it did achieve a huge amount for individual families living in terrible conditions in the 1960s and 1970s. **Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite—Front page pictures Sit-down protest against evictions in Charteris Road, Finsbury Park in 1976 by Martin Slavin; street theatre with bailiff; and occupation of Holloway Prison by North London Sisters Uncut.**

Britain at Work London activities and plans In 2017-18 we will continue to do interviews across London recording working lives and trade union activities. We plan to publish a booklet entitled 'Talking about your Workplace: unions at Work and in the Community' in 2018 and to hold a south-east regional day school in order to support the setting up of a new social history network. A Norfolk-based oral history project supported by Britain at Work London is under discussion. In London we have interviewed about 30 people including those who worked at Liverpool Street and Waterloo stations, at the ambulance station in Park Royal (now closed), in social work, housing and union work for Unison in Camden, London Underground train staff and ticket office staff, LGBT activism in NALGO, post office work in Islington, secondary school teaching in south London, disability rights activism across London, etc.

Goats, crowbars, floods and bailiffs in no particular order

Goats, crowbars, floods and bailiffs in no particular order! Squatting spread like wildfire across London in the 1970s. Prince of Wales Crescent, Elgin Avenue, Brixton, Finsbury Park, Bethnal Green and Haggerston were just the main centres where dozens of houses were squatted, forming a vast network of people, skills and resources. The squatters were inventive, innovative, playful, and at times explicitly political. They lived in communes, set up shops and co-operatives, did massive DIY, held street festivals and fought bailiffs and police attacks.

That squatting happened in the capital was testament to the housing crisis that Ron Bailey described in his 1977 book 'The Homeless and the Empty Houses' except he called it a 'disaster'. There were literally hundreds of empty (mainly council) houses and shops as whole streets were left empty with toilets filled with concrete or smashed, windows corrugated over and gas and electricity cut off. Hours were spent re-wiring, reconnecting gas, repairing bathrooms and kitchens, decorating and gardening. In some squats fresh paint dripped off the walls because of dampness, in others, powercables ran from adjoining squats. Squatters shared and learned skills including cooking, screen-printing, plastering, installing ring-mains and woodwork. Whilst an organised mass movement did not materialise, squatting did form part of a London-wide network that offered alternative living situations, a real commitment to communal and collective action and a support network (with crowbars) that could house people, fight evictions and expose the scandal of empty homes.

One ex-squatter recollected: 'We squatted a Camden Council house and had to rebuild the entire interior-bathroom, kitchen, the lot. The goat we had escaped onto the main road one morning to the consternation of rush-hour motorists. We performed a play based on the Burston strike with kids from the local council estate. After defeating the council's attempt to evict us in 1975 we squatted a shop nearby and on the same day a huge flood cascaded down from the heights of north London but it parted like the Nile to allow us to crowbar the corrugated iron off the front windows and change the locks with no interference! The shop became 'The World Turned Upside Down' bookshop supporting many campaigns including the Chile Solidarity Campaign and later became a vegan café.

After eviction we moved to Finsbury Park in Islington which had become a squatting hub near the New Beacon Bookshop and the Rainbow. All the posters for a big Chile Solidarity demonstration in London were screen-printed in the basement of our house. In the hot summer of 1976, 10 bailiffs and 200 policemen arrived to evict 5 houses on Charteris Road and 17 people were arrested as protests erupted.



Ron Bailey being interviewed

You can still see the faint outlines of the huge murals that had been painted on the house fronts that summer. Other evictions finally cleared the area of squats as well as the other major squats across London'.

Housing fightback in London If housing was in crisis in London in the sixties and seventies, it's even more the case today. **Hackney Digs** is an organisation that has been set up to fight for people renting in Hackney who are facing huge rent increases, rip-off letting agent fees, discrimination, poor quality housing and generally bad treatment. They aim to build a grass-roots movement of renters across the capital which will help to make housing available for everyone to live in and not a commodity to be bought and sold.

The Autonomous Nation of Anarchist Libertarians (ANAL) highlights the 'social cleansing' that has swept London in recent decades. They squatted a £15 million Belgravia mansion owned by Russian billionaire Andrey Goncharenko and used it as a homeless shelter and community centre. They also briefly squatted in Admiralty Arch in 2015. The **Focus E15** campaign started in 2013 when a group of young mothers were served eviction notices by East Thames Housing Association after Newham Council cut its funding to the Focus E15 hostel for young homeless people. They demand 'social housing not social cleansing'. **The Radical Housing Network** is made up of groups fighting for housing justice, based in London. Local groups have fought local authority sell-offs, called for prison land to be used for social housing and to stop deportations of rough sleepers and local councils' refusal to house migrant families.

Greece 1967 Colonels' Coup

Dictatorship in Greece 21/4/1967-23/7/1974. I was 9 years old in 1967. My school had scheduled an educational excursion for April 21. All 6 classes of the junior school would participate. The instructions from our teachers were to be at school very early in the morning, with some sandwiches and water. I and my 12-year-old brother were excited. The night before the excursion, my mum and dad were in the kitchen and I went to say goodnight.

When I was approaching, I heard them talking to each other. Their voices didn't sound as usual. They almost murmured, and I felt that my mum was afraid. I heard my dad saying: "Don't be afraid, Maria, they aren't going to do it! People won't let them!" And Maria: "Are you sure? My cousins are leaving the country with their children! By tonight they will pass the frontiers." Dad: "Maria, please, tomorrow I want you to take the children to school as early as possible. Don't worry, but I am afraid that I have to leave the house before you." I was happy nothing had changed. Tomorrow we would take those huge buses and go on the excursion. So, I went in and said a very good night.

Next morning, we left home almost at dawn. My father was not there to say goodbye. We walked without talking and my mother kept a tight hold on our hands, my brother's and mine, and it was so strange because the streets were empty; no people, no buses and cars, nothing. We arrived at school and only another 10 children and 3 mothers were there. No buses, no teachers, nothing. After a while, the headmaster arrived and started to shout: "Why have you come? Didn't you hear the radio? Traffic is prohibited! Take your children and go home as quickly as possible. A military dictatorship has been declared!" We returned back home and from then I started to make questions as part of my life, and as my way of thinking...

Where was my dad? Where is my teacher? Where are my friend's parents? Where are the parents of so many of my classmates? What is a curfew? What is a constitution? Why do we need new books? Why do we have to write and speak the old language? Why do we speak in whispers? Where are all these people? Why are so many leaving Greece? Those 7 years of dictatorship in Greece were a very educational 'excursion' for me. I learnt to put questions, but also to give or seek for answers. During those 7 years, Greek people suffered



torture, imprisonment, exile, police and military violence. A lot of people were looking for political asylum in Britain, France, Italy and Scandinavian countries. A lot of people emigrated to Canada, Australia and Europe. More than 400,000 young people emigrated just to Germany; out of a total population of 8.6 million people. A huge resistance movement developed in Greece and abroad. For the dictators, their collaborators and their friends, everything was great. The statistics showed that there was no unemployment and the economy was at its best ever. They had saved Greece from communism.

On 17 November 1973, all those opposed to the dictatorship came together and the uprising erupted in the Polytechnic University of Athens. Students, pupils, workers and farmers, from all parts of Greece, came to Athens to demonstrate and shout "Enough!" The fall of the dictatorship had started, though a lot of people died and were injured that day. The fall continued until July 1974, but another disaster took place—the invasion of Turkey into Cyprus. When the politics of the 'powerful' are above the people, the snake's egg is hatched! **EBG**

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Please visit www.britainatworklondon.com featuring an interview with John McDonnell, information about our book 'All in a Day's Work', all of our newsletters, information about the London project, special features and short extracts from our interviews.

Contact: rima@britainatworklondon.com or phone 0207 2727649 if you would like to be interviewed. The 'All in a Day's Work' book with foreword by John McDonnell is available for £12.85 with post & packing.

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