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Housing and Squatting

Workers' Solidarity Federation

The housing crisis in South Africa is massive. About a fifth of the population live in squatter camps. Millions more live in broken down hostels, or in overcrowded formal housing. By contrast, the rich live it up in houses which are far too large for their needs.

The housing crisis also reflects the effects of capitalism and the State, particularly in their brutal Apartheid form. Low-cost urban housing was deliberately neglected by the State in the 1960s and 1970s. The aim was to prevent African people from settling in the cities, the idea was that African workers' "real" homes were in the homelands and that they were thus just temporary visitors to the towns and did not "need" proper housing. Secondly, the collapse of the peasant economies of the homelands sent millions fleeing from rural devastation to try get a better life in the city. This crisis was largely due to the racist and unjust land reservation system which gave 87% of the land to White capitalist farmers, and the migrant labour system which drained labour off the land. At the same time, the capitalist farmers have been replacing farmworkers with machines such as combine harvesters (provided cheaply by the State) and, as a result, evicting further numbers of people.

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When the pass laws were abolished in 1986, these people were able to come to the cities, but the State and capital have consistently not provided adequate housing. Reason one is profit: the companies do not want to spend their money on providing basic facilities to the unprofitable poor, whilst the State does not want to increase taxes on the companies to fund a housing programme. In addition, three other factors come into play: firstly, under capitalism, the right to private property is seen by those in power as more important than the right to life, and thus squatters are typically chased off the land by the police if they are residing in defiance of some blood-soaked (colonially derived) land deed; second, the State always panders to the rich, and thus is happy to evict the poor when they live near the rich, and maybe affect property values; thirdly, the State is an inefficient bureaucratic monstrosity that is quite effective at deploying police, defending capitalism etc., but hopeless when it comes to providing for the basic needs of the masses. Instead, much of the (already inadequate) money gets “eaten up” by the bureaucracy, consultants, corrupt officials and so on.

In terms of immediate demands, we support squatting, land invasions and takeovers of unused buildings. Also important, however, would be to take mass action to put pressure on the bosses and rulers to provide housing. This housing should be of a decent quality, should provide jobs for local people such as the homeless, and should meet the needs of the people concerned. In the course of such struggles and actions, it is important to build links between squatters and other sections of the workers and the poor such as unions in the workplace, and working-class people in formal housing.

We also argue that the issue of homelessness needs to be linked up to other popular demands such as lower rents and the struggle against unemployment. Building these links is important because it prevents the struggles of the homeless from being isolated and picked off one by one, because it links squatters to the power of the organised working class in the workplace, and because it makes it

difficult for the bosses and the rulers to divide and rule the class by playing off squatters against other workers (something which has already happened). Ultimately, however, we do not think that the housing question can be fully solved under the current system.