

REBEL CITY

London's anarchist paper | Issue One | Free/Donation



Make London the Rebel City

More skyscrapers, fewer homes. Entire estates torn down, new ones being built for new occupants. The rise of shopping malls and sanitised, uniform chain stores, food shops and cafes. Cuts in social services and social housing, soaring rents and property prices. Attacks on the poor- cuts in benefits, the bedroom tax, low wages and precarious jobs. Rising level of evictions and homelessness, councils forcing the homeless to move out of London. Fewer green and open spaces, development of tourist attractions, overcrowding in private rental accommodation, increased pollution from traffic, police violence and 'law and order' crackdown- the list could go on.

All of these things have one cause- the transformation of London from a place of homes, neighbourhoods and social networks to a cash cow for the rich and powerful. Like elsewhere in the world, we are witnessing social cleansing on a mass scale as London is turned into an investment opportunity and playground for the increasing number of the super-rich both home-grown and

foreign, with local and national politicians firmly behind them.

This process has been going on for several decades. There have been pockets of resistance as individuals and groups fight back: against workfare, benefits cuts, the bedroom tax, hospital closures, estate evictions, luxury developments, police violence and racism. However, the attack on London continues, seemingly unstoppable. But recently more and more people are realising what is happening and are beginning to link up struggles and winning some important victories against property developers, landlords and councils. The future of London now hangs in the balance. It is up to us to fight for the kind of city we want to live in. This puts us in direct opposition to wealthy investors, property developers and construction companies, the financial institutions of the City and Canary Wharf, estate agents and landlords as well as politicians in Westminster, City Hall and local councils and their servants in the police. It will be a hard fight; but we cannot afford to lose.

London as a place to make and spend money

Throughout its history London has changed as a result of new rulers and economic forces. London was never created by and for ordinary people. Working class people had some influence on the shape of the city, such as the growth in building of council homes after the war. What is now at stake is the very presence of ordinary people in the city. The goal seems to be to turn London into an enclave for the rich, with the workers pushed as far out as possible, as long as they are close enough to commute in and do their low-paid jobs that are still needed by the rich. Capitalists have always used the cities as places to make money. But the massive increase in the amount of very wealthy individuals has changed the scale of what is happening, thus having a bigger impact on the cities.

In 2009, after the financial crisis had passed, there were 115 **billionaires** in China, 101 in Russia, 55 in India in addition to 413 in the US and 32 in Britain. The incredible amount of wealth accumulated by some individuals is due largely to a transfer of wealth from the mass of the population. One percent of the population now own 50% of the world's wealth. This was seen most blatantly in Russia as the resources once owned by the State were gradually bought up at knock-down prices by a few individuals. The Russian oligarchs came with suitcases full of roubles to London. Now it is the turn of the Chinese. The privatisation that took place in China has meant that some individuals have made big money through a combination of corruption and ruthless exploitation of their workforce.

These people need somewhere to put their money. They are not interested in putting it into something to help raise living standards of the world's poor or even into producing a product. Apart from spending large amounts of their wealth on lavish lifestyles, they want their money to be safe and to make more money. The city offers them such an opportunity. This is happening all over the world.

The London Experience

Though many of the forces at work to turn cities into enclaves for the rich are the same everywhere, London has its own special conditions.

London has always been a world financial centre. It is a place for the rich to invest their money, allowing the banks to do what they want with it, as long as they make more money. The role of the financial sector in the British economy has increased in the last few decades. London is the ideal place to put money, more so than any other major city. Its deregulated financial system means that investors can get away with practices they wouldn't be able to elsewhere. It is closely associated with the off-shore banking network in places like Jersey and Guernsey. The taxation system favours the rich, with very low taxes on income and is also very favourable to foreign investors. They may be making money as a result of their investments but if they can show that these investments are based elsewhere or that they are not permanent residents in Britain, they have to pay little or no tax. And, in case they are liable for tax, London has a booming tax avoidance industry.

Britain's role as head of an empire has also played a role in attracting the world's wealthy to London. The life style of the English aristocracy seems to be one that is sought after by many. Most of the world's wealthiest people, both corporate executives and celebrities, have at least one property in Britain, usually in London where they can come and play at being a lord or lady. The Russian oligarchs, arriving in force in the late 1990s, have managed to revitalise the yachting industry and increase sales in the luxury goods shops, not to mention the increased demand for private school places and nannies and butlers.

The 2008 Crisis and the property boom

The crisis in the banking sector in 2008 had only a small impact on the fortunes of London's financial sector and its investors. The banks were bailed out and the government made sure that the average Londoner paid for the banks' greed and mistakes. In this way, London as the centre of international finance, is in fact the cause of the austerity measures we are experiencing.

The crisis did mean, however, that investors became more wary. Property is considered a 'safe' investment and therefore it became a popular option for those with cash to spare. This has had a devastating impact on the lives of ordinary Londoners and is the major cause of the

problems we are facing. The problems have been fuelled by the policies of central government, Boris Johnson and local councils who have encouraged foreign investment in property and buy-to-let rather than building social housing or taking over the many empty homes.

Housing shortage?

Politicians argue that there is a housing shortage and that they cannot afford to build new social housing because of the austerity measures. (They of course refuse to consider actually taxing all the wealth that has flooded into London, making the banks pay for their mistakes or cutting down on their war expenditure). The only way they say we can get new housing is by attracting private sector investment, either foreign or domestic. Private investment certainly has been behind all the new construction work around London. The problem is that very little of this new housing is within the income of the average Londoner and certainly out of reach of the poorest.

So who is buying up these properties? It is mainly foreign investors who are looking for a safe place to put their money. They may rent some of the units out to the lawyers, accountants, bankers, other well-off professionals, and even tourists, but many of the units will remain empty, now known as 'buy-to-sit'. There are whole streets in Chelsea and Kensington that have no lights on at night. It is estimated that 20% of this borough consists of empty properties.

Therefore, the demand for cheaper housing by everyone else, including councils for their large homeless populations, is higher than supply. As a result private landlords step in and charge the maximum they can get away with, cut back on repairs and improvements and/or squash more people into the property than it can reasonably hold. If anyone is made homeless, the council is quick to try and move them out of the central London boroughs or out of London completely. Housing benefit levels are too low to be able to rent properties in most parts of London.

What to do?

We all recognise this description of what is happening to London and the terrible effects on the lives of individuals and families. So what to do?

Cities are constantly changing. New people arrive, others go. Neighbourhoods change. Buildings go up and are taken down and new ones put in their place. We cannot expect the city to stay static, as if there was some Golden Age when London was the ideal city. However, we can challenge the fact that we have no control over how the city changes. Instead of accepting that it is an elite and 'economic forces' that shape London, we need to go on the offensive and fight for the kind of city we want to live in.

The offensive has already begun. It can't be seen in the London Assembly, local council chambers or the Houses of Parliament. Instead, it can be seen in the growing number of grass roots campaigns that are spreading across London. These campaigns are organised and led by local people. Rather than relying on politicians, these campaigns focus on gaining mass support and taking direct action. There have been important victories against evictions, workfare and closures of public services. Increasingly, these campaigns are linking up and supporting each other's actions. These are the tactics that will help us to take control of what is happening to London and to turn the tide.



What Boris did next

Property Development

London Mayor Boris Johnson rose to power off the back of a jokey, blokey public persona. Known widely just as “Boris,” his appearances on TV shows such as *Have I Got News For You* meant that more people knew Boris for his ‘banter’ than they did for his politics. But behind this fluffy outside beats the heart of a ruthless political operator dead set on speeding up London’s transformation into a playground for the rich and powerful. In many ways, this isn’t surprising. With his education at Eton College and Oxford, Boris is something of a stranger to the world that most of us live in. After all, this is the man who left the clock running in a cab he took from City Hall to Elephant & Castle and back (a journey of three miles). Luckily for him, he could claim the £99.50 it cost on expenses – even though his salary as London Mayor is £143,911 and he ‘earns’ an estimated £300,000 a year from his journalism.

In the last year alone, Boris has been behind three massive property deals (that we know about!), which will transform three areas of London – and not for the better. These are the Royal Docks “floating village”, Mount Pleasant in Clerkenwell and the plans to “rebuild the Crystal Palace.”

First, the Royal Docks “floating village.” Despite the name, it’s not the kind of village that people can live in. According to the development’s website, the plan is to build “a new business district with over 3.2 million square feet of high quality work, retail and leisure space, including 2.5 million square feet of prime office space.” In other words, a second Canary Wharf in the middle of Newham, one of London’s most deprived boroughs. And while the developers claim that local employment will be “boosted by 30%,” we should remember that similar claims were made about the wonders of the Olympics in Stratford – another Boris bonanza for the developers. There, visitors were ushered from the tube straight into the new Westfield shopping centre and through that to the Olympic Park – an experience more akin to an airport departure lounge than a visit to east London, with some local traders reporting a 40% drop in business.

Meanwhile, questions have been asked about how exactly this £1billion property deal with Chinese developers ABP was done – especially after an investigation by Channel4 late last year. They discovered that ABP shared an office with Boris’ London & Partners agency in Beijing, and also that Tom Keady – who had worked for the Greater London Authority (GLA) to assess the different bids for the project – had got a job with ABP six months after the decision was made. When even LibDem members of the London Assembly are talking about “the smell of a semi-corrupt arrangement,” you know that something dodgy is going on.

Second, the plans by RMG (the privatised Royal Mail group) to convert the old Mount Pleasant sorting office and the surrounding area into 700 flats. Most of them will be “luxury flats,” and way beyond the means of ordinary Londoners – certainly beyond the means of the postal workers who continue to work nearby. Local residents are opposed to the Mount Pleasant scheme, especially as the number of “affordable” homes (not actually affordable but 80% of market rents) in the proposal has been slashed from 20% to 12%. Conveniently for RMG, Boris intervened just as this cut was announced. As long-term housing campaigner Dave Hill says, “Could it be made any plainer that RMG fully expects the mayor to bulldoze the local democratic process and give it whatever it wants?”

This is just one example of Boris using his special powers as Mayor to make planning decisions over the heads of local communities and local councils if he decides they’re “strategic.” For which read, “a massive money-making opportunity for the developers.”

At a mere £400million, Boris’ plans for Crystal Palace are small in comparison to the Royal Docks. But from the scale of his ambition, it looks like this is what he has his eye on as his legacy to London. In December 2013, architects were invited to enter a competition for who can come up with the best plan “to reconstruct the Crystal Palace [the original burned down in 1936] in a way that is faithful to the spirit of the original, in all its ingenuity, scale and magnificence, to create an internationally recognised landmark building.”

The project is being bankrolled by the Chinese ZhongRong Group (ZRG). How they came to be in that position is where things get interesting. After an open letter from residents, Bromley Council was forced to reveal a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the GLA,

Bromley Council and ZRG in March 2013 concerning the development of Crystal Palace Park – six months before any announcement was made to the public. And without giving anyone else a chance to bid for the contract – or even to know that the contract existed. The secret memorandum further required that the parties agree to hold their discussions in private and noted that “...any information which reaches the public domain prematurely could have a negative and disproportionate effect on the future of the park”. Or, indeed, a negative effect on ZRG’s profits, and Boris Johnson’s reputation as the go-to guy for global development opportunities.

Now that things are out in the open, ZRG’s plans to rebuild the Crystal Palace are still as vague as they were secretive. A “cultural asset/visitor facility,” whatever that is. An “observation deck” (or a big room with windows, as it’s also known), and a six-star hotel. At least that’s clear – and what’s also clear is the kind of punter that a six-star hotel will attract. Luxury hotels aside, what’s going on is the transfer of public land to a private developer who don’t really know what they want to build, they just know they want to make money.

So that’s what Boris has done. What Boris didn’t do since he was elected in 2008 is much for those in London’s “cheap seats.” The number of children living in temporary accommodation has gone up 5,000 to almost 67,000. There are now 25,000 fewer council homes than there were in 2008 – 410,000 in a city of 8.3 million. And last year fewer than ten thousand completed homes were “affordable,” compared with 13,000 in the year before Boris came to power.

What will Boris do next? If we don’t challenge him and the class he represents, he will continue to neglect the housing needs of working people in London, while turning our city into a luxury theme park for the super-rich.

Attacks on Dissent: Boris’s new toys

Boris bought three water cannons back in June 2014. These three run-down bits of machinery are 23 years old and one has already broken down and had to be repaired. They cost £218,000, which is paid to the Metropolitan Police via the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) and which has a budget of roughly £3.5 billion and which is partly funded by central government and partly by money raised through council tax. In other words, Boris’s very big water pistols are being financed by taxation and that means out of our pockets.

When he was so eager to buy the cannon back in June, he said that if he didn’t buy them, someone else would snap them up. This turns out to be not quite the truth, as it was revealed that no other serious buyers ever materialised at the time.

The London Met’s chief cop, Bernard Hogan-Howe was put into place by the Tories as the top bulldog of their law and order policies. He is an advocate of “total policing”. He has rigorously enforced this with his heavy-handed controlling of demonstrations and other actions, with kettling, surveillance and criminalisation of protestors. He is an enthusiastic supporter of water cannon, stating “Water cannon is a tactic the British police can be trusted with.” Ha!

Boris is keen to be seen as the Met’s best friend. He is also trying to outmanoeuvre Teresa May by saying “I’m harder than you on law and order” in the forthcoming battle for leadership of the Conservative Party after the upcoming election.

Boris goes out of his way to cultivate the loveable buffoon image he believes has won him votes in the past. By beneath the carefully arranged and artificially messed up barnet and behind the buffoon mask is a cold and calculating politician keen on crushing any outbreaks of disorder in the capital and beyond.



The Cost of Human Space

The National Housing Federation warns that you will need a salary higher than £ 100,000 to afford a typical 80% mortgage. The price of houses has risen by 20% every year and so has the cost of living. On the other hand, wages are stagnant and that leaves most of us unable to imagine a future where we will be able to afford to buy a house.

In London £100,000 is three times the average salary, so for the majority of us the dream to buy a house will stay just that: a dream. Of course an option could be to earn big money and make your wish come true but unfortunately the UK is not a paradise of social mobility: recent research found that almost three-quarters of those on low pay in 2002 had not been able to escape by 2012. Another study found that – staggeringly – only one in four moved from the bottom 20 per cent to the top 60 per cent of incomes – most stayed where they were or nudged up only slightly. Low earners are unlikely to significantly progress up the income ladder and it is virtually impossible for them, or for those on an average salary to obtain a mortgage.

One of the consequences of these figures is that a lot of young people between 24 and 34 cannot leave their parents' house to access the housing ladder, and another is that the waiting list for a council house is now longer than ever. What happens to the rest of us? What happens to those workers in a low paid job or to those who earn an average salary but are perhaps single, in a relationship with someone who simply earns less, people not entitled to council housing or young couples that want to live independently?

As buying is out of question, private renting remains the only possible option. However, those accessing the private renting sector will soon realise that here too, rents in London are too high for people in low or medium income. The average rent for a studio flat in zone 3 is £800, and £1,300 for a one bedroom flat so that you have to be prepared to spend more than 50% of your monthly salary.

With wages dropping and rent rising the chance of tenants being able to save for a deposit gets ever slimmer, which in turns pushes up demand for rented properties, which in turns pushes up rents. Adequate housing will be more and more difficult to afford and households may be forced to live in environments that constitute a risk to health such as overcrowded housing or housing in poor conditions.

According to the ONS (Office for National Statistics) more than three million people live in households with at least five other individuals. In London alone there are 240,000 overcrowded households, an increase of 20,000 over the last decade. It is calculated that 24% children in the capital live in overcrowded households, half of which are in social housing.

Dan Wilson, spokesman for the campaign group Generation Rent said: 'Our broken housing market is creating deep division in society so that wealthy property owners can afford to leave houses stand empty while more people who can't buy are forced to squeeze into overcrowded private renting'.

It is Section 326 of the 1985 Housing Act that lays the statutory overcrowding standard. However, when the standard was originally devised in 1935, it was aimed at dealing with overcrowded conditions in the private rented sector before the Second World War in a time when people did not have so many personal belongings. These standards still apply today.

The standard requires:

- *That a room occupied by two persons should be at least 110 sq. ft. in area but, for this purpose children under the age of ten count only as half a person, and babies under the age of one are disregarded. According to the standard then a room could host husband, wife two kids under ten and several babies and that would not be considered overcrowding by the law.*
- *The Act expects that occupants can sleep in a living room and that a kitchen can be considered as a living room provided it is big enough to accommodate a bed.*
- *Adults of the same sex can share a room. Potentially two unrelated people could share a room provided that is big enough.*

The standard also sets guidelines for space so that for example a room less than 50 sq. ft. is not suitable as a sleeping room, whereas in reality rooms where you can hardly fit a bed is the norm in 2015 London. Because the standard set out in 1985 Act it has never been updated,

many people find that they do not live in overcrowded condition even though their living conditions are very cramped. For example a kitchen big enough to contain a table and few chairs it is often the only communal space in many house shares. To have a lounge it is considered a luxury.

Research show that overcrowding can have a profound effect for children: underachievement at school caused by lack of space to do homework, illness caused by cramped living conditions and lack of privacy leading to depression. The government says it will ease overcrowding for those on the lower rungs of society with market mechanisms: a mix of coercive policies that cut benefits if people do not respond to them. The first idea is to cut the benefits for those under-occupying social housing if they do not move to smaller properties. The second will cut housing benefit to ensure only those who work can afford to stay in the private rented sector, only to find overcrowded households in exchange for cheap rent.

Londoners evicted!

The scale of the problem

The number of tenant households evicted in England and Wales between July and September 2014 reached a record figure of 11,000 - the highest since 2000 when records began. Evictions are exceeding 100 a day. By the end of September 30,000 tenant households had been evicted. Shelter found that 25% of private renters had been victims, which is 213,000 people. Recently there has also been a large number of possession claims made by social housing landlords such as councils and housing associations. A breakdown of the July-September figures shows evictions by social landlords outnumber those by private landlords 4:1. Two thousand, eight hundred and five mortgage borrowers lost their homes in the same period. A leading figure in Shelter reported that there were 80000 homeless children at Christmas.

Reasons for Evictions

The general reason for the increase in evictions lies in the shortage of social housing. People are forced to become private renters. Landlords are making the most of this increase in demand and putting rents up as high as they can get away with. When there was such a pressure on rent rises because of shortfall of supply, the government introduced rent controls. Not now! Landlords can get away with charging massive rents because people have to have a place to live. Londoners on average pay over half their income on housing. This makes them very vulnerable to changes in their own circumstances, such as prolonged sickness, leading to evictions.

The lack of social housing causes other problems because councils are forced to put homeless families in private rented accommodation. This accommodation costs much more than social housing so the bill is enormous. Housing benefits often do not cover the cost of this housing and/or people find that they get further and further behind in rent payments, leading to evictions. The Tory-led councils of Hillingdon, Croydon and Westminster have admitted exporting tenants or said they were preparing to. Labour-run Newham plans to move 500 families 160 miles to Stoke-on-Trent. It claims it can no longer afford to house tenants on its waiting list in private accommodation. It says that rent rises linked to the Olympics and the demand for housing from young professionals has caused east London rents to rocket. The Chartered Institute of Housing estimates that Newham must have at least 1,500 families affected by welfare cuts.

Shelter spokesperson Campbell Robb said: "This is the terrifying reality of our housing crisis today – hundreds of families potentially forced to move halfway across the country, uprooted from schools, support networks and employment opportunities. Most worryingly, this is only the thin end of the wedge, as further reductions in the safety net start to bite over the coming months. The dangerous cocktail of cuts to housing benefit and spiralling rent is making finding a decent home increasingly unaffordable for families across the country. Those unable or unwilling to move away from their local area may be forced to overcrowd or accept a home in appalling conditions to make ends meet".

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The problems that poor households have in paying their rent has caused some estate agencies and landlords not to rent to people on benefits or people on zero hours contract. Housing experts estimated that over 60% of private landlords would not take tenants on benefits. There has also been an increase in ‘revenge evictions’. These evictions occur when a tenant complains about something in the rented accommodation, such as lack of repairs, and the landlord then finds an excuse to evict them.

Evictions from council and housing association properties are caused by the increasing tendency for these landlords to try and make money by selling some properties off to private developers. This has happened at Blafron Tower in Tower Hamlets, is in process at Aylesbury Estate in Southwark, and is being threatened to the tenants of Fred/John Towers in Waltham Forest. The New Era campaign successfully fought off the attempt to sell the estate to private developers.

The fight-back

All over London, tenants and campaigners are fighting evictions. Here is a list of some of the campaigns that are going on. There is bound to be

Focus on Lewisham



What’s the best thing about Lewisham? Is it the fruit and veg market? Maybe it’s the South Indian restaurants where you can have a sit-down meal and a drink and still have change from a fiver? Or is it the way that tens of thousands of Lewisham residents marched through the streets when their hospital A&E department was at risk?

For the developers who have turned the area near Lewisham station into a construction site for the last couple of years, the answer is “None of the above.” For them, the best and most important thing about Lewisham was summed up in the slogan on the hoardings they put around one of the sites – “9 minutes away from London Bridge. 15 minutes from Victoria.”

Nothing bad about having decent transport links, of course – even though many people, especially those from north of the river, seem to think that Lewisham is somewhere on the Kent coast. But when we put this single new development in the context of what else is happening in the Borough, it looks like there’s more at stake.

Designed by an architect who clearly enjoyed playing with different-coloured LEGO bricks as a child, the *Renaissance SE13* building is certainly eye-catching. Even the name of it is interesting for a number of reasons. It continues the trend for building things in south east London that seem like the developers are keen to hide where they actually are. The marketing of the *One SE8* development in nearby Deptford, for example, made more of the fact that it was handy for the DLR than it did of being in Deptford.

But branding aside, look at the cost of the place. There are 788 one- and two-bedroom flats in *Renaissance SE13*, and the cheapest one costs £297,000. This is almost £50,000 more than the average in Lewisham, and way beyond the means of most residents of a borough where the average annual wage is a little over £32,000.

Meanwhile, Lewisham Council loves the new residents of *Renaissance SE13* so much, it’s moving the town centre to that it’s handier for them to get to. The council’s flagship “Lewisham Gateway” project, again built near the train station, will feature pedestrian walkways and shops, all very convenient for the new residents. Sadly, there won’t be room for any “affordable homes” in the new fifteen and twenty-two storey buildings, even though the developers’ original target when planning permission was granted was that 20% of the 550 flats would be “affordable.” And anyway, what does “affordable” really mean when properties described as such were on the market for £240,000 in Deptford five years ago?

It’s not that the new residents of *Renaissance SE13* and the Gateway developments are pushing people out of Lewisham – they’re new builds, after all, with no existing residents to displace. What we’re seeing here

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is not the kind of gentrification that happened, and continues to happen, in places like Brixton, where working class people are priced out of their own neighbourhoods by people looking for somewhere “edgy” to live. It’s more like Wapping in the 1980s and 90s, where the new residents don’t mix with the existing population, and their lives are centred around the Overground station rather than the high street.

What we’re seeing in Lewisham is part of a London-wide trend where a whole neighbourhood, with its local government, economy and infrastructure, is made to revolve around generating maximum profits for property developers. This creates a housing crisis driven not only by naked profiteering, but also by the neglect of the housing needs of working class people.

And make no mistake, the London-wide housing crisis is especially acute in Lewisham. The number of council homes halved in the three years to 2013, dropping from over 32,000 to 15,100. London-wide, the drop was 25%. Only 240 so-called “affordable” homes were built last year, the lowest number since 2008. Yet there are more empty homes in Lewisham now that there were ten years ago – 1,894 compared with 1,586. This compares with the London-wide trend of fewer empties – 59,313 now, compared with 86,733 in 2004.

Lewisham Council’s response to this has been to announce that 250

council homes will be built. Better than nothing – but not much better, when no new council homes have been built for over thirty years. Immediate plans are for a “pop-up village” where the old Ladywell Leisure Centre used to be. According to the council, this will provide temporary homes for 24 families, and after four years “will be deconstructed, moved and reconstructed elsewhere in the borough.” Pop-up village? We used to call them prefabs. No ordinary prefabs, these, however. It looks like the architect loved LEGO almost as much as the one who designed *Renaissance SE13*

Lewisham Council isn’t so much a Labour administration – more a one-party state, with only one Green councillor by way of opposition in the council chamber. It’s been under Labour control for 44 of the past 50 years. While Labour councils love a moan about how their “hands are tied” by government policy, 250 council houses in thirty-odd years is a shameful response to a housing crisis. Across London, people are coming together to show the politicians, landlords and speculators that they’ve had it their own way for far too long. Lewisham has a proud tradition of standing up for itself – against the far-right National Front in the 1970s, and more recently against those who planned to shut down Lewisham A&E. Time to act for ourselves, and turn Lewisham into part of the rebel city.

Heathrow villages fight to save their homes and stop the third runway

written by a member of Transition Heathrow



Most readers of this magazine will be aware of how the over consumption of air travel has led to the aviation industry growing at a wildly unsustainable rate. Airports are multiplying and expanding in size, emitting more and more toxic breath and gobbling up anything that stands in their way; whether it be people’s homes, small businesses, ancient buildings or the earth’s resources, in so many cases the airports get their way. In the far west of London, the village of Sipson is a community that has faced up to the aviation industry with courage and strength to stop this troll of brazen expansion digesting them, with support of the activist group, Transition Heathrow.

After witnessing first-hand the plight of communities around Heathrow airport at the 2007 Climate Camp, in late 2009 a group of climate activists decided to establish a support group for community-based action in the local villages ear-marked for demolition resist the third runway.

The first move was to ‘adopt’ a resident: pairing up with local residents to support them in the campaign to save their homes. Then, six activists rented a flat in Harlington and established Transition Heathrow,

continuing their outreach to the community with events such as film screenings and meetings to draw attention to the value of the community and the sustainable alternatives to airport expansion. On the 1st March 2010 Transition Heathrow members occupied an abandoned market garden in the centre of Sipson, creating Grow Heathrow.

Overall the residents felt very happy with their new neighbours. The site had previously been regularly associated with anti-social behaviour. Soon after moving onto the site, 30 tonnes of fly-tipped rubbish was cleared and nearly five years later the site has been rejuvenated into a productive community garden and project space. Having been transformed from a derelict mess into a beacon of community strength, it is also a great demonstration of how to live sustainably without hierarchy.

While all of this was happening just months before the 2010 general election, Heathrow Airport Holdings Limited (HAHL, formerly BAA), who operate Heathrow Airport, announced that it would buy Sipson homes at 2002 prices under a bond agreement. HAHL was bought by the Spanish infrastructure giant Ferrovial in 2006 and is now owned by a consortium that also includes 6 sovereign fund investors from Qatar, Québec, Singapore, the United States and China. Since the announcement of plans to build a third Heathrow runway, property prices in the Heathrow villages had plummeted, leaving many residents with homes that were worth less than what they paid for them.

In total, 247 out of a total of 548 homes in the village were bought through HAHL’s bond scheme, with many tempted by HAHL’s added index link to the original price and also cover for all surveys and solicitor fees; potentially equating to an increase in value of 56%. A local resident born in the village, describes how one friend received £311,000 for her house valued in 2002 at £191,000.

More and more people leaving their homes and giving into the money temptation has severely impacted local businesses. A local resident, who previously co-managed the salon with their partner, was forced to get another job with British Airways (BA) as half of their client base has left. The Sipson garden centre was hit even harder, people simply didn’t feel secure enough to spend money on their homes or gardens, which resulted in the garden centre closing down.

Yet HAHL’s bold move backfired. With the third runway still without approval, the company was forced to rent out these houses as they were not making any money from their huge investment. At first they would only rent to employees. They offered the properties on a short term tenancy agreements and staff were offered a 20% reduction in rent. An employee of BA moved to Sipson attracted by the offer of cheap rent. However, two years later she was forced to leave again when the 20% discount was halted and despite being a HAHL employee she could no longer afford the rent. Consequently there were not enough employees who wanted to move to Sipson and HAHL had to offer their properties to the public.

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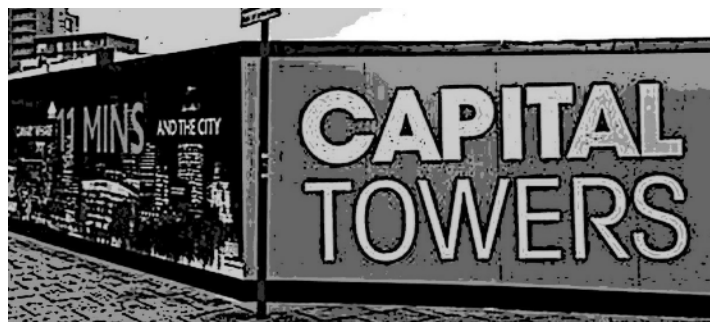
Short term tenancy agreements are an increasing problem, due to the tenant's lack of control and security. Glenn, an activist at Tower Hamlets Renters explains, "The problem with short-hold tenancies is that tenants live in a permanent state of insecurity unable to plan more than six months ahead. They are also less likely to request essential repairs knowing the landlord could evict them with a few months notice instead." HAHl's policy is further contributing to this UK wide problem.

A local resident, said "Since the third runway plans are still being debated and the village is recovering from the buy out, Transition Heathrow has been an amazing resource which has really helped lift spirits and keep the campaign alive and interesting. Transition Heathrow has become an important part of me and my family's life." Indeed when the first attempt to evict Grow Heathrow in August last

year this resident's 14 year old daughter D-locked herself to the front gate to help resist the bailiffs.

Under the new plans for Heathrow expansion that have been submitted to the Davies Commission, 700 homes in Harmondsworth village are earmarked for demolition and thousands more homes around the airport will be rendered uninhabitable due to their proximity to a new runway. Even though HAHl is now the majority landowner in Sipson, many long-term residents have not sold up and are still actively campaigning against the third runway. Sipson is still standing and a third runway has still not been approved, but the prospect of an entire community being assigned for demolition remains a constant, daily concern.

Spotlight on Developers: No.1 Galliard



Rebel City takes a look at the developers who are carving up London. Number one of this series kicks off with one of the heavy hitters-Galliard.

Founded in 1992 with Stephen Conway as its chairman, Galliard Homes is responsible for big property developments all over London and beyond. Among these are the development of the old Metropolitan Police site, Great Scotland Yard, Baltimore Tower, a residential skyscraper in Canary Wharf, the Chilterns, in Marylebone, Capital Towers and the Boleyn Stadium, both in Newham.

In addition Galliard has its eye on the old embassies in central London, many of them housed in opulent mansions. In return for relocating and a big profit, various countries have agreed to this. Already the old Montserrat embassy in Marylebone has been converted into luxury flats by Galliard. The European Council of Foreign Relations building at Old Queen Street near St James's Park was also sold to Galliard for £21.5 million. It is now earmarked for conversion into 35 luxury apartments that might fetch up to £100million. In addition Galliard are marketing 336 luxury flats at the Royal Docks in Newham and proudly boasting that there will be "no social housing". In fact this has been a recurring motif in Galliard's peddling of property. They have already sold off all the flats to investors from the Far East at Capital Towers, which is only in the early stages of being built!!! Capital Towers is located on the border of Newham and Tower Hamlets and overlooks the Bow roundabout. Galliard again gloats that the development is "fully private". It appears that Newham Council has connived with this totally private development with a spokesman for the Mayor Robin Wales stating that "The developers agreed with Newham to pay a sum for affordable housing elsewhere in the borough, and we saw no reason to overturn Newham's decision." In a feeble excuse as to why they allowed Galliard to build a development where there is no social housing, let alone "affordable" housing, Newham Council replied: "Our view was that the development approved — of one and two bed flats in two very high density tall buildings next to the busy A12 and the Stratford High Street flyover — was not appropriate for social housing." This seems rather peculiar as up the road from there on Stratford High Street are several old social housing blocks whilst just over the border in Tower Hamlets sits another social housing development, the Bow Bridge Estate. Further east in Newham, Galliard has been given the all-clear by Newham Council (again) to develop the old West Ham football stadium at Boleyn Ground in Upton Park. Again its plans do not include any social housing. Not only is this appalling in a borough stressed by its lack of council housing, it will impact on the area, leading to further gentrification and local tenants and residents being forced out.

Soho under threat



"...the sanctuary of political refugees, conspirators, deserters, and defaulters of all nations." Living London, George R. Sims

Soho has long been a vibrant and colourful neighbourhood. In the 17th century many French Protestant Huguenots fleeing murderous persecution settled in the area. More French people, primarily Catholic, joined them in Soho following the French Revolution of 1789. Later on during the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, and the struggle for Italian unity, more French immigrants settled in Soho, joined by Germans and Italians. Yet more French swelled their ranks with the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune of 1871. Jewish people fleeing pogroms in eastern Europe also settled in Soho.

As a result the area was home to many cheap French and Italian restaurants, bakeries, pubs and clubs. It was also one of the centres of London radicalism with among others Karl Marx and the famous Italian anarchist Malatesta living there. In addition, this attracted a bohemian community.

At the end of the Second World War, there were 20,000 deserters on the run in Britain. Many hid in Soho, and the police and military police conducted raids there.

The Astoria dance hall on the Tottenham Court Road was a favourite for the Jewish working class, who gathered to dance there in large numbers.

In the post-WW2 period many artists used the pubs and clubs of Soho, among them Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud.

More recently Soho became a centre for the gay community because of its tolerant atmosphere.

Signs of a change came with the destruction of the Astoria in 2009 with the Crossrail development. In fact Crossrail is being used as an opportunity by developers to drastically alter many parts of London.

Already Soho is changing with many of the old clubs, restaurants, pubs and cafés frequented by artists and bohemians closing down and being replaced by bland chain enterprises.

Westminster City Council agreed to the development of the east end of Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road. As a result both the long standing Soho Curzon and the famous centre of music in Britain, Denmark Street (Tin Pan Alley) are under threat. The whole north side of Denmark street, which still has 17th century facades from before the Great Fire of London, is due to be demolished with the music stores on that side too be closed down. Already the 12 Bar Club, which has welcomed many acts over decades, has been closed down.

In the face of the threat to Soho, local groups and organisations are mobilising. One group, Bohemians4Soho, occupied the 12 Bar Club and used it to mobilise opinion against the developments. Tin Pan Alley will be destroyed and replaced by a bland and boring plaza populated by more bland boring chain stores. That is, unless a mass campaign to stop this can be mobilised. What is happening to Soho is happening, or will happen, to other parts of London unless we act to stop this happening. The developers can be defeated if enough of us say no!

A sideways look at housing

By Svartfrosk

It's a pretty strange situation when the Westminster Property Association, which is a group of big property developers, writes to the government asking them to scrap a new policy that saves developers money. On paper at least, the developers stand to win millions by reducing the amount they have to pay to offset not putting any social housing in their developments – already one development in Westminster has saved £9million.

The government introduced a "vacant building credit" that allows developers who are bringing a vacant building into use to ignore the requirement to build any social housing. It's hardly a big deal for most developers as the authorities in general and Boris in particular always let them off it anyway. But they do at least have to contribute to some being built elsewhere. The Westminster Property Association urged the Minister responsible to scrap the policy as it would lead to "a further erosion of the ability of people from a wide range of backgrounds to live in the capital".

The government's drive to make housing ever more unaffordable is very definitely ideological. It makes no sense in terms of the broader economy, as high housing costs mean shortages of certain workers as

the cost of housing in London, in particular, gives workers no choice but to put up with substandard housing or commute for up to 5 hours a day. However, there are two clear groups of beneficiaries – better off older people who have already bought their home, particularly pensioners; and the finance industry. It's not hard to work out why the government would want to appeal to potential voters and do favours for their financial backers. What is odd is why the Westminster Property Association doesn't want its members receiving such gifts from the government?

Aside from the obvious limits to how many super-rich who can afford to buy mansions in London, there must be people who can live in London to actually service the city; to keep its infrastructure ticking over. If London has no space for the people who drive the trains and buses or ambulances; or work in the shops; or clean; or hold open doors for people; or just make the place a bit less boring; who will want to live here? Not even hedge fund managers, which is why the regular threats from bankers to leave London are never carried through.

If homes in London are now a globally traded commodity – a bit like copper or tuna- it begs the question of why we are standing for it. The government say it is not possible to place limits on what capitalists can do. Even when the capitalists say they should.

Get involved!

Here is a selection of campaigns and groups that are helping to make London the Rebel City. (see article on evictions for other contacts)

London-wide

Radical Housing Network: a network of groups who are active around housing issues in their local area. Also organises London- wide events such as Block the Budget.

<http://radicalhousingnetwork.org/>

London Coalition Against Poverty: <http://www.lcap.org.uk/>

Industrial Workers of the World: <https://www.iww.org.uk/londongmb>

East London

Action East End: publishes The Howler and supports local campaigns.

<https://actioneastend.wordpress.com/>

Focus E15: very active campaigning group based in Newham. Involved in fights against social cleansing and evictions.

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Focus-E15-Mothers/602860129757343>

North London

Haringey Solidarity Group: local group that campaigns on a variety of issues, such as workfare, as well as producing a regular paper.

<http://www.haringey.org.uk/content/>

Haringey Housing Action Group: <http://haringeyhousingaction.org.uk/>

Radical Islington: <http://islingtoninciter.blogspot.co.uk/>

South London

Housing Action Lambeth and Southwark: <http://housingactionsouthwarkandlambeth.wordpress.com/>

Lambeth Housing Activists: <http://housingactivists.co.uk/>

If you would like to write an article for Rebel City about your group's work, please email us at: london@afed.org.uk

Are you interested in finding out more about anarchism?

The Anarchist Federation aims to support and make links between campaigns that empower working class people or that challenge capitalism and all systems of power. The London group of the Anarchist Federation meets twice a month and also hosts monthly discussion meetings.

E-mail: london@afed.co.uk

Facebook: London Anarchist Federation group

Twitter: @AfedLondon

Blog: aflondon.wordpress.com

We also publish the paper *Resistance* and a magazine *Organise*, as well as a range of pamphlets. For more information about these publications as well as the Anarchist Federation in general see the website: www.afed.org.uk.

**Produced by the
London group of the
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