

# HOUSING, HOMELESSNESS & WORKING PEOPLE

The fight against homelessness and for housing justice is one that is fought on many fronts, through demonstrations, tenant and community organizing, rent strikes, self-help projects, and so on. But a front that it has not to a large extent been fought on is within the labor movement. Sad and ironic, since in a way working people have unwittingly helped bring about the current crisis. Think about it, as you travel through Manhattan and the surrounding areas of this city and beyond, you see new office space and luxury housing springing up. You see older building being renovated for use not by the people who need them most but by those with the most to spend. Fancy retail stores and art galleries replace the places many of us used to work in. Yet people like us do all the work--the construction, renovation, moving and hauling--that makes this all possible. Other working people become displaced from jobs, lose their homes and wind up on the streets or in shelters. Yet none of us can afford to enjoy the products of the labor we put into this process.

Over in Australia some years ago the labor movement came up with a tactic called the "green ban". Workers refused to work on, boycotted and picketed any construction or work project that they felt threatened their physical or social environment. Yes, you ask, but how can any of us afford to do that here, when jobs are so few and each of us struggles with a mountain of debt?

The answer is that no one person can change the system by making an individual "moral" protest, however good their cause is. Collective action, however, action that includes working people, unemployed, the homeless, and others can force the politicians and bureaucrats to change their tune. Further, workers who work for institutions like universities, hospitals and public agencies should challenge their employers' actions within the very communities in which they live.

The whole labor movement should keep in mind that the bankers, real estate developers and institutions who try to seduce us with nice phrases about "creating jobs" are ready to toss us into the waste basket once we've done their dirty work. Besides, their the ones who put so many of us out on the street in the first place. We need to learn to fight them not only on the job, around working conditions, wages, and so on, but as a social class as well.

The best means we have at our disposal are those which involve direct action--strikes, boycotts, demonstrations and occupations. Tactics of compromise like elections, lobbying and pursuing "common interests" with our enemies just won't cut it. Gentrification and displacement are not going away unless we ourselves get rid of them.

The best type of movement to put these means into motion is one that is fully democratic, without self-appointed "leaders" to mislead or betray us. We need to develop new forms of organization that allow us each to participate and make decisions collectively without manipulation or domination. The kind of organization we build should serve as a model for the kind of world we want. We believe that this is a world in which no one should be displaced, in which society's resources are devoted to meeting everyone's needs fairly and equitably, in which communities and workplaces democratically make the decisions which affect everybody.

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