

Housing struggles in Ireland: A historical perspective

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This article does not pretend to be a comprehensive account of the housing struggles that have taken place on the island of Ireland since partition; instead, historical examples are explored to highlight the differing forms, tactics and strategies of previous housing campaigns. The aim is to learn lessons from these campaigns, to avoid mistakes made and take inspiration from the successes. In this respect, this article seeks to answer the call of the participants in the ‘68 Revolutionaries’ session at Marxism 2018 to discuss our own history so that our movement can learn and grow.

This article explores examples of three different (but related) forms of housing campaign – rent strikes, squatters’ movements/anti-eviction actions and defence of public housing/anti-gentrification campaigns. It will become clear in the discussion below that there are not clear lines between these forms and that, in practice, a combination of different forms is often employed by housing campaigners. The article finishes with a discussion on what we can learn from these struggles and apply to our current circumstances both North and South.

Rent strikes

The withholding of rent payments by tenants has been an important feature of many episodes of social change in Irish history. In the 19th century, the Land League organised rent strikes and boycotts from paying rent to absentee British landlords. The 1919 general strike in Belfast was accompanied by a rent strike in working class districts. The examples explored in this section concern the rent and rates strike that was sparked by internment in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s and the York Street rent strike in Dublin in 1934.

In the early 1970s, with the increased repression of Catholic/Nationalist communities by the British Army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), came a reaction of civil disobedience from the civil rights campaigners and increasing violence from Republican groups. This in turn led to the Prime Minister of NI, Brian Faulkner, introducing internment without trial in August 1971. While presented as an attempt to restore order and peace, internment was specifically targeted at the Nationalist/Catholic community, from which 90% of those interred came.

In response, the Belfast branch of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) issued an emergency bulletin on the first day of internment which called for a ...

...total withdrawal by non-Unionists from every governmental structure, rent and rate strikes by the people, barricades for defence where necessary and total on-co-operation with a regime which has been stigmatised by the British establishment itself.

This call was also backed by the SDLP, the Nationalist Party and the Republican Labour Party – parties generally considered reformist in orientation.

The call was successful, starting with 25,000 tenants on strike in early September 1971 and with over £500,000 withheld by early October. This level of support for the strike not only had a political impact but also held the potential to undermine the public finances of NI more broadly. A NI Cabinet report in October 1971 stated that the areas with the strongest support (over 50% of public housing tenants were on strike) included the big working-class estates in Belfast, Strabane, Newry, Warrenpoint and Derry.

While the NICRA emergency bulletin was issued as internment came in, the rent strike – and, particularly,

how quickly it spread across NI – was more of a spontaneous reaction by local campaign groups, who formed resistance committees. These actions led People’s Democracy to claim that the NICRA/SDLP call was simply ‘ratifying a fait accompli’.

In response, the NI state started to explore ways to undermine and control the strike. The main solution that was developed came in the form of the Payment for Debt Act 1971. This Act allowed for the redirecting of welfare payments to settle outstanding debts (including rent arrears). By the end of 1972, the reach of the Act included those in work, where deductions for debt payments could be taken straight out of pay packets.

Despite the enactment of this legislation in February 1973, there were still 26,000 tenants on strike. However, as the year wore on and the impact of the Act grew, those numbers fell to 13,000 by October. By April 1974, despite 11,000 still being on strike, the strike was effectively over, as only 1,500 were not having deductions from their welfare payments or wage packets.

Two important issues arise from this rent strike. First, that the composition of those on strike – public housing tenants – and the issue involved meant that the strike and the state’s response took a long time to work through – over two and a half years. The legislative approach adopted by the state towards the strike also had the impact of setting the precedent that the receipt of welfare benefits was conditional on behaving like ‘good citizen’. This principle has been a consistent theme in justifying welfare reforms by British and Irish governments since the mid-1970s.

The second point relates to advice given by campaign groups advocating rent strikes, about what to do with the money that is withheld. In this case, People’s Democracy advised tenants on strike to spend the money so that there could be no question of trying to recover it once the strike was finished. As we will see below, the opposite advice has been given in other rent strikes.

In Dublin 40 years earlier, private tenants in York Street and the surrounding area organised a rent strike. This time, the cause was the appalling conditions of the tenements they lived in. As one newspaper report at the time described,

In Magee’s Court there are 7 small cottages (42 rooms) enclosed in a court 10 feet wide. In these cottages live 36 families—156 people. The air is

practically unbearable. The rooms at night are walking with sewerage beetles. Mothers have to remain up until day-light walking to and fro from bed to bed to protect their children from these loathsome insects. And then many of these mothers have to be out to their daily work the following morning!

The York Street strike was supported and led by members of the Republican Congress. The Republican Congress is more well-known on the Irish Left for organising Protestant workers from the Shankill in Belfast for a short period of time in the 1930s, based on the call for a socialist united Ireland. The founding manifesto of the Republican Congress stated, ‘We believe that a republic of a united Ireland will never be achieved except through a struggle which uproots capitalism on its way’.

One of the tactics employed by supporters of the Republican Congress was to survey areas of poor housing, recording living conditions. This tactic had previously been used by Victorian philanthropists in Britain and by Frederick Engels when he wrote *Conditions of the Working Class in England* in 1844.

The descriptions (such as the one quoted above) were then used to highlight the plight of the poor in ‘polite’ society and as a basis to agitate among workers and others for action to form campaigns for better housing conditions. As with many housing struggles, the York Street rent strike was only one of many forms of housing campaigns that Republican Congress supporters were involved with.

The York Street rent strike was the first in a wave of such strikes that spread across inner-city Dublin. The demands were two-fold, as encapsulated by this quote from the Republic Congress newspaper:

Extend the area! Broaden the struggle! Compel the Corporation to house the workers, whether they are able to pay or not. Houses first; talk of rent afterwards...

And learning from the experience across the Irish Sea, the paper goes on to argue: ‘Already it is done in English cities controlled by Labour Corporations’.

Over the period from 1934 to 1936, housing campaigns supported and led by the Republican Congress won some significant victories. For example, a two-month rent strike around the Westland Row area won a 25% rent reduction, and tenants in Magee Court won rehousing

by Dublin Corporation from accommodation that was considered only fit for vermin.

The rent strikes around 1930s Dublin raise two key tactical issues. First, in contrast to the advice given by Peoples' Democracy during the anti-internment rent strikes, the Republican Congress advised striking tenants not to spend the money they were withholding. At the time, some supporters of the Republican Congress recognised the difficulty in holding to such a course of action for many families who were living on the breadline and regularly suffering from starvation.

The call by People's Democracy to spend the withheld rent was not based on recognising this difficulty but as a tactic to make it more difficult for the state to recover the rent. This meant that, even in the middle of the 1980s, a significant amount of outstanding debt was still being collected from the rent strike over 10 years earlier.

The second issue concerned the relationship between housing campaigns, including rent strikes, and the trade union movement. We have already seen that the Republican Congress made demands on local government (Dublin Corporation) to become a vehicle for alleviating housing distress in the city. However, there was a discussion among Republican Congress members about the focus they should put on bringing the trade unions into the housing campaigns. For example, after a march by the York Street rent strikers to the Mansion House and a meeting with Lord Mayor Alfie Byrne led to no progress, a high-profile Republican Congress member stated, 'that was one of our mistakes. They ought to have marched on the Trades Union Council'.

Given that one of the demands of the housing campaign was for a greater role for Dublin Corporation, it seems that to not place pressure on the Lord Mayor would be a tactical mistake. Further, it is not clear what would have been gained by shifting the focus of the march and campaign onto the trade unions.

However, the aspiration to bring organised labour into the housing movement is correct and one that was crucial in arguably the most high-profile rent strike in the history of these islands. During the First World War, unscrupulous landlords across Clydeside in Scotland sought to profiteer by implementing exorbitant increases. In early 1915, a rent strike broke out and saw a number of evictions, each one being fought by local

tenants. Glasgow-wide demonstrations were held, and the campaign against the rent rises culminated when workers in the local ammunition factories walked out on strike in support of the tenants.

By the end of 1915, the government introduced rent controls for the remainder of the war. As we will see later, trade unions can and have played crucial roles in other housing struggles.

Housing the homeless: squatting campaigns

Often, housing campaigns do not just use one tactic in isolation but will combine different tactics because of the specific nature of the housing crisis at a given time. Two such tactics that have been combined on several occasions are stopping evictions and organising squatting.

One of the most well-known cases of squatting is the Caledon Affair in Dungannon in June 1968. Housing in NI at that time was controlled by local councils and '... discretionary powers of allocation of houses [were used] in order to perpetuate Unionist control of the local authority'. The specific case in Dungannon concerned the allocation of new council housing in Caledon to Unionist voters, including a family home to a single woman who worked for a local Unionist politician. This despite many Catholic families being on the council's waiting list.

In response, several housing activists and a Catholic mother, Mrs Gildernew, of three young children, occupied and then squatted homes on the same street. In response, the local council forcibly evicted the young family in clear view of television cameras:

The television cameras showed horrified viewers the bailiffs breaking down the front door; the family being dragged out, Mrs Gildernew clutching her infant child; and her mother receiving cuts from broken glass.

These actions, alongside others by the Derry Housing Action Committee, fed into the civil rights protests later in 1968 and into the following year, which, in turn, led to the creation of the NI Housing Executive (NIHE) in 1971.

The late 1960s and early 1970s also saw a wave of housing protests across the rest of Ireland. In April 1970, the *Irish Socialist* reported on rent strikes in Ballymun and Cork by corporation housing tenants against the

introduction of a new rent-setting scheme that would have resulted in significant increases. The Cork strike involved up to 10,000 tenants.

However, the more acute issue of the time was the lack of decent, affordable housing and related evictions – much as today, when landlords seek to flip tenancies to increase rents. At the same time (and again with similarities to today), Dublin was littered with empty homes. In these circumstances, the Dublin Housing Action Committee (DHAC) helped organise squatting of these empty homes by families who were facing homelessness.

In June 1969, the DHAC produced the first issue of the *Squatter*, a newsletter that ‘... will report on the latest developments in Landlord racketeering, evictions, squatting, etc., as well as publicising the numerous successful agitations we are waging on behalf of the homeless and rack-rented workers of Dublin’.

For DHAC, squatting was both a political act and a pragmatic attempt to address an element of the housing crisis. There were homeless people, and there were empty houses: ‘Unfortunately, not enough homeless families are squatting as yet. Not enough of us are organised’. However, there was also a recognition, if somewhat in the abstract, of the limitations of squatting as a tactic: ‘We admit that there cannot be a solution – that is a final solution – to the housing problem until the Capitalist system in the 26 counties is destroyed by force’.

While it is long established in the revolutionary socialist movement that capitalism needs to be overthrown before we can establish a housing system that will provide decent and secure housing for all in our society, it is necessary to understand the role and potential of particular tactics at any one point in time. Squatting, in and of itself, will not lead to the transcending of capitalism.

A more nuanced understanding was advanced by Máirín de Burca, one of the founding members of DHAC, during the 2016 Apollo House occupation:

I am sure that they know quite well, as we did in the 1960s, that this is not a long-term solution but in the short-term it puts a roof over the heads of families. There is absolutely no reason why support is an either-or proposition. It is possible to support the short-term option while fighting fiercely for the basic

right of citizens to a permanent secure home.

So, in housing campaigns, the strength of squatting is to raise the political aspects of the housing crisis, with the provision of short-term relief from homelessness as a secondary impact. We saw the short-term relief highlighted by the experience of the Apollo House squat/occupation, and we saw the political contradictions being brought to the fore in the forcible eviction from North Frederick Street in Dublin in September 2018.

While squatting is a response to being homeless, anti-eviction actions seek to stop people becoming homeless in the first place. Over the past months, Fr Peter McVerry has been a strong advocate of changing the law to stop all evictions for a three-year period, as a necessary step to stop the housing crisis from continuing to deteriorate.

In recent years, grassroots groups like the Dublin Renters Union (DRU) and others have taken direct action to stop tenants from being illegally evicted. DRU’s Facebook page shows a video record of the type of anti-eviction action that is taking place across the country. These actions fall in the same tradition as the Housing Action Committee – in Derry, Dublin, Cork and Limerick – from 50 years ago, when they fought against the Gardaí and private security firms to defend families who were squatting.

The limitations of squatting and related actions lead to the question of which other social groups and forces can bolster housing campaigns. Here again, there are examples of the role that organised labour can play. The DHAC’s *Squatter* carried an extended report over its first two issues about a family squatting in a vacant cottage connected to the Fiat car factory in Grand Canal Street in Dublin.

In April 1969, the Maher family moved in desperation into the cottage on the advice of DHAC, as the family would get some housing respite while the local management at the factory sought a court injunction. However, the local management pursued a much more aggressive move, instructing a couple of employees to forcibly remove the family.

When word of these actions spread across the workplace, 120 workers downed tools and marched to the cottage to support the family. Faced with this opposition, management backed down and did not apply for the court injunction.

Defence of public housing and anti-

gentrification campaigns

Once working and poor people have secured housing, there are often battles to maintain the communities that have been built. In 1968, for example, members of DHAC supported tenants in the Dublin district of Sarah's Place, Inchicore. The tenants had blockaded themselves into their homes in a fight to prevent the fracturing of their community through transfers to Ballymun.

More recently, the experience of St Michael's estate in Dublin highlights how wave after wave of gentrification proposals can undermine and hollow out an existing working class community. After a long-promised redevelopment plan failed to materialise, as the public-private partnership (PPP) with developer McNamara collapsed, local Fine Gael TD Catherine Byrne and Housing Minister Eoghan Murphy are now trying to outbid each other in handing the estate over to private developers with little or no commitment to providing social housing. In the interim, the working class community that was there has been torn asunder.

From the late 1990s, the community at St Michael's had organised themselves to engage with the redevelopment process. As the years wore on, it became increasingly clear that the redevelopment process was geared towards the priorities of the private finance providers, not the existing community. When the PPP collapsed during the global financial crisis in 2008, protests took place aimed at the Dublin City Corporation but were ultimately unsuccessful, as the government prioritised bailing out the banks.

A more positive development has emerged in NI over the last two years, with a successful campaign to defend public housing. We have already seen that the establishment of the NI Housing Executive was a result of the housing campaigns in Derry and elsewhere across NI in the late 1960s. Once the NIHE was established in 1971, it was largely left outside of the reforms that swept across other public services in Britain and Ireland over the following decades.

This position led the management consultancy firm, PwC, to state in 2011:

NIHE is one of the success stories from Northern Ireland's recent history. Since its introduction nearly 40 years ago it has delivered significant social benefits throughout Northern Ireland with the quality of the housing stock having moved from

one of the worst in Western Europe to what is now regarded as best quality stock. It is rightly regarded nationally and internationally as a leading authority on 'best practice' on both housing management and community building.

However, the last six years have seen an attempt to try to privatise the NIHE through a scheme known as stock transfers. Stock transfers occur when public housing is handed over to organisations outside of the public sector, often housing associations, as the borrowing of those organisations does not count towards the overall government debt.

In 2013, then-Minister for Social Development, Nelson McCausland, announced his intention to take the NIHE out of the public sector. As a start, there would be a programme of small-scale voluntary transfers (SSVTs). As an SSVT involves a change of landlord, it has become custom to hold a ballot of the tenants concerned to establish if they want to transfer to the new landlord.

During 2017 and 2018, the first two ballots took place in the Grange, Ballyclare, and Ballee, Ballymena, and were overwhelmingly rejected by tenants. Crucially, these ballots saw a coordinated campaign against the transfer led by housing activists and members of the NIPSA trade union.

Speaking after the rejection by over 90% on the Grange estate, Paddy Mackel of NIPSA summed up the importance of the result: 'It is a direct challenge to government to halt years of neglect ... It is a call by citizens to properly fund the Housing Executive ...'.

Significantly, in November 2018, the result of these ballots forced the Department for Communities to suspend the remaining transfer programme. For the moment, the forces trying to privatise public housing in NI have been forced back, but this is only one battle and there will be more to come.

Conclusion

The foregoing examples are far from a comprehensive account of the housing struggles in all their forms that Irish workers and poor have pursued over the past century. The aim of the article was to review the history of some housing campaigns to identify the successes, weaknesses and differing tactical issues. This review has highlighted the need for housing activists to think tactically and strategically in each individual housing

campaign. For example, the advice given to tenants on rent strikes differed between the York Street strike in the 1930s and the anti-internment strike in the 1970s. Neither tactic is right nor wrong but is dependent on the concrete circumstances of the campaigns.

We can, however, make some general observations based on this review. First, that housing campaigns are both political and economic in nature. The spark for the campaigns could be political, such as an expression of civil disobedience against internment, or economic, such as a reaction to proposed rent increases like in the Cork and Ballymun rent strikes in 1970.

Second, many successful housing campaigns have organised labour and trade unions as an important (sometimes leading) element. We see this from Red Clydeside to the workers at the Fiat factory to the NIPSA activists defending the NIHE in recent years. Trade unions have resources – in terms of both finances and personnel – that can be the difference between success or failure for a campaign. They can also mobilise their membership in workplaces, where workers have more power to change society.

The logic of this analysis is to recognise the challenge of finding ways to include trade unions in each housing campaign.

Finally, when we consider what makes an effective housing campaign, it is useful to think not in singular terms but in dynamic dualities. Here, there are two key dualities: first, campaigns need to be local and national at the same time; second, campaigns need to mobilise people on the streets and have advocates in the council, Dáil and Stormont chambers.

The examples of the anti-privatisation campaigns and the York Street rent strike highlight the importance of fighting at a local level. Winning campaigns at this level has a direct and very real impact for the tenants involved. However, it can also have a wider policy impact, as was shown with the tenants' rejection of transfers in Ballyclare and Ballymena, which forced the suspension of any further attempts to privatise Housing Executive homes.

However, the threat to the Housing Executive remains, and to eradicate that threat, a campaign focused at a NI level –not just on the local estates – is needed.

A clear example of the second duality – on the streets and inside the elected chambers – was the Raise the

RoofDáil motion and demonstration in October 2018. The laying down of that motion in the Dáil allowed for greater agitation on the housing crisis outside the parliament. It facilitated the building of a coalition that included the national trade unions, the USI and ICTU, as well housing NGOs, charities and activist groups.

The main aim of this work was to mobilise as many people as possible to protest on the day of the vote for the motion. On the day, over 12,000 joined the lobby at lunchtime and forced Fianna Fáil into a panic and to back the motion. Crucially, the point of the October 2018 demonstration was not just to inflict a defeat on the government but to act as a springboard for subsequent protests – as were held in December, February and May 2019.

Ultimately, it is the self-activity of tenants, those threatened with eviction and the homeless, alongside workers and organised labour that will form a coalition of social forces strong enough to fight for a decent, affordable and secure housing system. It is the same coalition that can form the basis for a movement that secures the Right to the City and a socialist society.

Notes

- 1 Conor Kostick, 'The Irish Working Class and the War of Independence', *Irish Marxist Review*, Vol. 4, No. 14, 2015.
 - 2 Internment powers allowed security forces in NI put whole swathes of working class Catholics in prison on an indefinite basis without charge or access to other legal rights.
 - 3 Rosa Gilbert, 'No Rent, Rates: Civil Disobedience Against Internment in Northern Ireland, 1971–1974', *Journal of Irish Studies*, No.7, 2017, pp.19–43.
 - 4 Gilbert, 'No Rent, Rates', p.35.
 - 5 'The Tenants' League of 1930s Dublin', *Come Here to Me*, 9 October 2018, <https://comeheretome.com/2018/10/09/the-tenants-leagues-of-1930s-dublin/>.
 - 6 Ibid.
 - 7 Gilbert, 'No Rent, Rates', pp.35–36.
 - 8 *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*, Report of the Commission appointed by the Governor of Northern Ireland (The Cameron Report), HMSO: Belfast, 1969, chapter 16, para. 229, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/hmso/cameron2.htm#chap16>.
 - 9 Charles Brett, *Housing a Divided Community*, Dublin, Institute of Public Administration, 1986, p.6.
 - 10 For more on the Derry Housing Action Committee, see Stewart Smyth, 'Privatising the anomaly – public housing in Northern Ireland' in *Irish Marxist Review*, Vol. 2, No. 6, 2013 and Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town*, Haymarket Books, 2018.
 - 11 *Squatter*, Issue No. 1, DHAC, 15 June 1969.
 - 12 'A Battle Fought Before: Looking at the Dublin Housing Action Committee', *Come Here to Me*, 20 December 2016, <https://comeheretome.com/2016/12/20/a-battle-fought-before-looking-at-the-dublin-housing-action-committee/>.
 - 13 This is the case in most housing campaigns, but not always, as the squatters' movement in Britain in the years after the Second World War illustrate. Thousands of ex-servicemen whose homes had been destroyed during the war squatted in decommissioned military bases and empty houses, with some staying on the ex-bases through to the middle of the 1950s.
 - 14 For example, see 'The People of No Property Rise Up', *Look Left*, 7 April 2017 (<https://www.lookleftonline.org/2017/04/the-people-of-no-property-rise-up/>) and 'Kicking Against the Bricks', *Broadsheet.ie*, 3 May 2019 (<https://www.broadsheet.ie/2019/05/03/kicking-against-the-bricks-2/>).
 - 15 John Bissett, *Regeneration: Public Good or Private Profit?*, TASC, 2009.
 - 16 Olivia Kelly, 'What are Eoghan Murphy and Catherin Byrne rowing about?', *The Irish Times*, 25 September 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/what-are-eoghan-murphy-and-catherine-byrne-rowing-about-1.3640696>.
 - 17 PwC Report, 'Review of Northern Ireland Housing Executive: Options for Future Service Delivery', 2011, p.2.
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