

HOMELESS!

“HALF-WAY HOUSE”
TENANTS SPEAK OUT



introduction

This pamphlet describes how human beings are living, in London, at the end of 1962. It describes life in the 'reception centres' and 'half-way houses' provided by the L.C.C. for London's homeless.

Nearly all the articles were written by tenants. These tenants live in two L.C.C. 'short term accomodation centres' in Battersea: Durham Buildings and Battersea Bridge Buildings.

The articles are not the work of professional journalists. This is a distinct advantage. They describe people and life as they really are. The polish of words does not here mask the reality of facts.

In Britain today there are thousands of fully employed people who don't have a home of any kind. This pamphlet is about these people. It is about husbands and wives forced to live apart, about mothers and children sharing a single room with a score or more in a similar plight, about squalor and what it does to people. It is about things which those with homes of their own often prefer not to know about. It also describes how people fight back to retain their self-respect as human beings.

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The conditions described at Newington Lodge are well-known to the authorities. They are not the result of administrative neglect. Essentially they are deliberate.* This is to encourage the occupants to get out and find themselves somewhere to live. The whole approach is typical of the mentality of the powers-that-be. How can a family of any size - let alone families numbering up to eight or ten people - possibly find accommodation for less than £10 a week? This has yet to be explained by the Government and L.C.C. bureaucrats responsible for these 'homes'.

The 'half-way houses' (to which people are moved after a spell of weeks or months at a 'reception centre') are a form of deliberate and cynical cruelty to children and adults alike. During the past few weeks I have myself spent a considerable amount of time in the two Battersea blocks previously mentioned. I say it is impossible for any mother to bring up her children respectably in such surroundings.

The first time I wandered into the courtyard of Durham Buildings a little girl, aged three or four, came up to me and whacked me on the backside. 'Why did you do that' I asked. 'Because I don't like you' she replied, as she whacked again.

* See Stanley Alderson's 'Britain in the Sixties: Housing', p. 111
Penguin Books, 3/6.

Less than a minute later I was approached by a small boy. 'Got any money, Mister?' was his only comment. Meanwhile a gang of kids, the oldest about six, were amusing themselves leaping from a wall at least ten feet high, onto the asphalt below. It was a miracle half of them hadn't broken their legs or necks.

Walk into Battersea Bridge Buildings at any time of the day or night and it's quite likely you'll be pissed on from the staircase above. Kids of three or four are playing on the rails with a twenty-foot drop below. Is it fair to blame the mothers? Can any mother with up to half-a-dozen kids really be expected to keep the whole family locked up in one room, day in, day out?

The vast majority of tenants in these places are doing their best to bring up their children decently. But what chance have they got, crowded into these tenements... with the woman who had six blokes queuing up outside her flat... with the tenant who could not be bothered to go to the toilet at night, and just did it in a sheet of newspaper and threw it from the window... with the tenant who piled her kitchen scraps in the corridor, breeding maggots? Only a minority of tenants may behave like this, but their effect on others is very bad. Children brought up under such conditions start life with the greatest possible handicap.

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These articles tell appalling stories of rejection, squalor and dehumanisation. It is impossible however not to read even more into them, not to see through them the constant features of life under such conditions. Human beings are consciously brutalised by their situation and by all those responsible for it. Some turn in on themselves and become selfish. They react to their difficulties by a carping criticism of those in the same plight. Bad conditions are blamed on one's homeless fellow-workers, not on those who misadminister Newington Lodge or the 'half-way houses', not on the bureaucrats, not on the capitalist system responsible for all these things.

Divisions are created, nurtured, and used to bring about even greater demoralisation among the tenants. Under these conditions, solidarity and collective resistance, which alone can bring an end to this misery, tend to lessen. This is exactly what those in authority want. The dirt and squalor of Newington Lodge and of the 'half-way houses' are means to their ends. This pamphlet shows that some tenants at least have not had their spirits broken, have seen through it all, and are thinking of how best to fight back.

But enough from me. Let the tenants speak for themselves.

BOB POTTER.

NEWINGTON LODGE - 1

FOUR MONTHS

I was one of those unfortunate enough to live in Newington Lodge for four months, from November 1961 to March 1962. We had been evicted from a furnished room and kitchen with a rent of £3.5.0 per week. Believe me, these four months were the worst experience I've ever had.

The outside of the place is enough... You don't have to see the inside... dull, dreary, and dirty. My husband had to pull me through the gates. He was then promptly told to leave as husbands are not admitted after 9.30 pm. My husband did manage to get in, and we made our way to the receiving centre, which we found to be the dining room. It was dirty and smelly. The floors looked as though they had never been cleaned, and the tables were as bad. I was six months pregnant at the time, and by now I was exhausted.

I sat down and was given a cup of soup and a slice of bread. The soup was a greeny colour and tasted vile. The bread was hard. I was in tears by now, and to make things worse, people kept saying how horrible it was in there. If it wasn't for my baby I would have walked out. But I stayed knowing my boy needed shelter.

I was given my bed-linen and shown to the 'lounge'. This was one big room. In this room were six families; myself made seven. There were nineteen children and seven mothers. The room was filthy and the smell was worse. The children were wetting in the fire, and one boy was being sick. We all lived and slept in this room which was on the top floor. There was no sleep for me or my baby that night. Most of the children were still running about at 1.30 in the morning.

We were called at 6.30 the next morning. When I went to have a wash I found the basins were filthy, the water cold and the floor flooded. When I saw the toilets I was almost sick. There was mess up the walls, over the pans and on the floor and they smelt vile.

Breakfast was at eight. The food was awful. Every day, my husband walked from Brixton to see me. The money he would have spent on the fare, he gave me so that I could buy one meal each day. (I did not find out he was walking until some weeks later).

We had to wash our own dishes and take them to the kitchen where they were supposed to be washed again. The same water must have been used throughout. It was filthy.

If you wanted to see the doctor, surgery was at eight. If you saw the doctor you missed your breakfast. If you had your breakfast, you missed the doctor. No matter how sick your child was you had to carry him across to the surgery, through all kinds of weather. In the waiting room you sat next to people with all kinds of diseases. The doctor would not come to the patients.

The doctor wasn't worth seeing. He didn't know what was wrong with you. I told him my boy had pneumonia. He said it was just a common cold and to put him to bed with an aspirin. I almost lost my boy through him. My husband had to ask for a letter to take him to hospital on the grounds that his diarrhoea might be infectious. At the hospital, they said my baby had bronchial pneumonia. I have no confidence in the doctors or nurses at Newington Lodge. I don't think they should be on the doctors or nurses list.

After breakfast you cleaned your own rooms and did a job given to you. I was paying £4 per week for my keep, and also working for it. Bed linen was collected from the dining room, in return for the dirty linen. Washing was done in the wash-house, where there was never any hot water.

I had to shovel and carry my own coal. I was told by the nursing sister that it was one of the hardships there. I had to carry it up to my room, three floors up, although it was now almost time for my confinement.

When Christmas came..... talk about Christmas Day in the workhouse! The T.V. people came. We were ordered to make the place nice and tidy for them. Certain people were told to make their rooms especially tidy so they could be interviewed. The Warden asked me if I'd like to appear on television. When I said I'd tell the truth about Newington Lodge, I wasn't asked again. Those that got interviewed were paid for it. After the men left, the place got filthy again.

While at the Lodge I saw some disgusting sights. Some mothers would empty their babies' dirty nappies, rinse them and wash them in the same sinks used to rinse dishes in. They also bathed their children in these sinks. The cots and beds and mattresses were never cleaned. They were given to you just as they were, even if the baby or mother who had just left them had been sick with some infectious disease. I know this, as I was given a blanket for my own boy with a shit-stain on it. You could smell it. I gave it straight back.

By now I had been shifted out of the general room, and was in a smaller one. But it wasn't any quieter. I was always having to complain about the noise. I was told nothing could be done. I never had a good night's sleep.

My husband had many an argument with the staff there about the laziness of the porters and the heavy lifting I had to do. He also

objected to another mother being put in the same room as me with her six-year old son. We were told that I was lucky to have a room and should be only too pleased to share it. I was getting near my time to have my baby, and it wasn't funny having to get dressed and undressed with a boy of six watching me, or amusing himself throwing lighted matches at my baby. They finally moved the mother and her boy to another room.

Someone told me that if I managed to get an even smaller room I wouldn't have to share it with anyone. When the room next to me became vacant, I asked to go in there. But no sooner was I in there than they moved another woman and her three-month old baby in with me.

I was taken into hospital to have my baby. A few weeks later I was back again in Newington Lodge - once again on the top floor, and once again carrying coal up the stairs. After further complaints they moved me to a room with a gas fire... but this room was so dingy and dirty that I just couldn't help crying. I was so depressed. And I had to shift all my things into the new room. It was almost funny to think that when I had first arrived at the Lodge, I had been told not to worry about anything, not even about my husband who had spent the first few nights sleeping on Euston Station.

The people who lived near the Lodge treated us like criminals. When they passed us in the street they would spit at us. If the children looked out through the railings they would be spat upon. Nearby was some sort of an Alms House for old people. Even the old people would spit at us. I have known children spit at one another. But I didn't know that adults could act in this way.

I have never seen a more disgusting, dirtier place than Newington Lodge. I had four months of it. During this time I experienced nothing but filth and sickness. In my opinion the only way to clean up the place is to burn it down.

After what seemed like years of unhappiness I was shifted to a 'Half-way house'. I was given a bed-sitter, consisting of one small room, a kitchen and a toilet. The walls were damp, unhealthy, but it was like heaven after Newington Lodge. We now had a front door of our own. But four in one room isn't healthy, even if the walls weren't full of damp. We asked the supervisor to see if we could get a larger flat. I was told that I did not need a larger flat. It was only after pestering County Hall, getting doctor's letters, etc., that we were shifted into our present one-bedroomed flat in Battersea Bridge Buildings.

Some of the tenants here think the place is no better than Newington Lodge. But I think it's important to have your own front door, even if it shares the same corridor with six other flats. Some of these places haven't been decorated for years. Not that they would stay clean for long, anyway, with Morgan Crucibles next door pouring smoke and dirt into the air. There is also a lot of dirt coming from the over-filled dustbins in the courtyard.

My husband is an active supporter of the local tenants' association. We are attempting to get some improvements done to make the place better to live in. We are also organizing a party for the children at Christmas. There are 163 children under the age of 15 in the buildings.

JOAN WREFORD, housewife.

NEWINGTON LODGE - 2

NO ESCAPE

There are many reasons for evictions. A great number are through no fault of the tenant. But the solutions are not so many.

A small family has a fair chance of finding a furnished or even unfurnished flat; not that this is necessarily a permanent solution, for there is always the possibility of another eviction. But if the family is large, like ours, your chance is almost nil. You find yourself forced to take advantage of one of the L.C.C.'s reception centres. My family is nine strong. We found ourselves on the street when the landlord emptied the place prior to selling it. And so we came to Newington Lodge.

Such a reception centre is in many cases the first break in married life, as these places only provide for the wife and children of the family. The husband is left to find whatever accommodation he can for himself. He probably finishes up in a place like the one I did.... Parkview House, near the Elephant and Castle. There, for 4/6 a night, you get a bed and a straw mattress. An extra two bob gives you a slightly better room. But you don't sleep much with all the noise from the drunks and so on. This place takes in several hundred men each night.

In many ways the husband is better off than his missus. He can at least pick and choose. He can move to somewhere else if he so chooses.

The wife however does not have this freedom. From the moment of entering a reception centre, she is subjected to all sorts of revolting situations which any decent woman would be appalled by. She has to mix with all types... prostitutes, thieves and those filthy in mind and body. Swearing becomes an every-day occurrence. Even very young children swear.

On entering the centre the wife is usually placed in one of the larger rooms containing up to 14 beds and 2 cots or more. Often as many as twenty persons share a room, including children, both boys and girls, whose ages range from one month to seventeen years.

The women in the room are responsible for keeping it clean. But some are too lazy to do their share and so it is left for the more conscientious to do. It becomes very annoying to find you are continually cleaning up someone else's mess.

Husbands are allowed to visit at specific times, namely from 6.00 pm - 9.30 pm, Monday to Friday, and from 2.00 pm - 9.30 pm on Saturdays and Sundays. It's no uncommon sight, on visiting your wife, to find other women's husbands lying about the beds, some even sleeping. There is an excuse for them as in these big rooms there are no chairs provided.

The children are often allowed to roam at will fouling the staircases and passages with their toilets. When I reprimanded a fourteen year old boy I caught in the act on one of the staircases, he answered me with the filthiest language I've ever heard. Children as young as eight-years old can be seen openly smoking in various parts of the building.

I must say that I do not think the fault for all these things lies entirely with the authorities. It is rather that of some of the illiterate types that appear to form the larger section of the community.

The food that could be quite reasonable if it was cooked and prepared properly becomes unpalatable at the hands of the cooks. While talking of food, my wife was horrified on several occasions to see women collect a child's breakfast, place it between bread, and take it to the front gate where the husband would be waiting. Husbands, or often just men friends, could be seen hanging around the gate at all hours of the day. In the dining room itself the manner of eating and the noise that accompanied it reminded one of the zoo.

There is a laundry provided with gas-heated drying cabinets, but one dare not leave one's clothes for fear of losing them. It can be quite a lengthy process for one has no alternative but to stand guard throughout. Even pillow cases are stolen from babies' prams.

There is no escape from being in close contact with these people. You are not even allowed to have a wireless set in the room, just to get away from it all for a while. And it's against this background of filthy language and behaviour and of stealing that the wife must try to keep her children untarnished.

Should there be any strain on the marriage, the wife's stay in Newington Lodge would be the final straw that broke it. Your stay can vary from a few weeks to nine months or even longer. The next step is a 'half-way house' or partly-furnished flat, where you are at least together again as husband and wife. But in these places you come up against the same problem: the mixing of clean, decent living families with those that just don't seem to care.

B.W. , bus conductor
Battersea Garage.

DURHAM BUILDINGS

DREGS? .. OR DECENT PEOPLE?

What is it like to be in a L.C.C. Short Stay Accommodation Home? Believe me, after being separated from your husband for several months, and living in a hostel that only caters for mothers and children, it's a great improvement. Once again you're a family. To the children their father ceases to be just a visitor who calls for a few hours every evening.

In my case the short term accommodation is Durham Buildings, Battersea. And as I've already said, at least we are together again. And that's about the only good thing I can say about the place if I am honest. Indeed when we were offered the place my husband wasn't even permitted to look the flat over - it was just take it or leave it. After all the L.C.C. wasn't worried. There were plenty eager to grab anything offered. But I think a man is entitled to look over the place where his children are going to live!

The flats are situated next to a glucose factory. We get plenty of dirt and plenty of smells. I'm not very good at writing things down, but if you want to see real dirt and grime, come and have a look at Durham Buildings. For the first time in my life I feel ashamed when visitors call, for they have to walk through dirt and stench to reach my door.

And that's not all. The odds are that the same visitor will have to feel his way up the staircase. The light bulb will probably be missing. But I must be fair about it: I think that it's the tenants who are often to blame... they steal the bulbs from the landings. The steps are very dangerous at night, especially when there are no lights.

I would favour the council clamping down on some of the people who can't be bothered to clean the stairs. And the dustbins in the backyard need proper lids. They become toys for some of the children (and there are over 200 of them on the estate). The rubbish gets thrown all over the place. It's a very small backyard and very dirty. There is nowhere else for the children to play. In front of the estate runs York Road, a very busy road, serving heavy traffic into Central London.

Please don't get the impression that it's only the dregs that live in these places. On the contrary most of us are decent working class folk, whose only crime is to be without a home. It's impossible to settle

down properly in a place like this, if for no other reason than that you are not allowed to have all your own furniture. Most of the furniture belongs to the L.C.C. Your own stuff has to go into storage. This means extra expense and it makes it impossible for the tenant to be really comfortable. You get better furniture in the forces than the L.C.C. often provides.

All things considered the worst thing about living in Durham Buildings is the fact that it is a terrible place for the children to be growing up in. They are surrounded by dirt, filthy smells, and people who don't care about anything. It is a great battle to try and keep the children respectable.

When it comes to building atom bombers this country seems to have plenty of money, but when it comes to building houses they are broke. There are more than a hundred families living in Durham Buildings. As far as I know during the last six months only four families have been re-housed.

And just to rub salt on the wounds, the rumour doing the rounds at the moment is that these flats are going to become permanent accommodation instead of short-term. If this is the truth, our hopes of a new home will fast disappear.

K.C. , housewife.

BATTERSEA BRIDGE BUILDINGS

HALF-WAY HOUSE

These flats are for families who have lived in reception centres for anything from two weeks to two years. Needless to say, the getting of a flat does not mean it will be big enough to house the family adequately.

The flats vary from bed-sitters to two-bedroomed flats. They all have the tiniest of kitchens, with room for one person only - and that's squeezing it tight. None of us have bathrooms. All cooking and washing, of both clothes and people, is done in the tiny kitchen. Parents with up to six children are living in two rooms. In the great majority of cases the toilets are outside the flats, on the landings.

In Battersea Bridge Buildings there are only three dustbins for 65 flats. There are only ten pram sheds. All the furniture belongs to the L.C.C. Each tenant is only permitted two armchairs of their own furniture. T.V. and washing machines are permitted, if you are lucky enough to own same. Very few of the flats have been decorated since previous occupation, and those that have are distempered yellow over the wall-paper.

The furniture, chairs, wardrobes and chests of drawers are falling apart. The beds are of the old iron type. All the beds are single, but you may be lucky enough to have two of the same length, in which case you can make up a 'double' one. The mattresses are all hard and uncomfortable, and rarely clean.

The rents are £1.2.6. for bed-sitters, £1.5.0. for one bed-roomed flat, and £1.7.6. for two bed-roomed flat. These figures may sound reasonable, but don't forget that most tenants are paying considerable sums each week to have their own furniture stored... sometimes up to £3.10.0 a week.

The smallish yard at the back provides space in which to hang out the washing, and somewhere for the children to play. But as this yard backs on to a carbon factory (Morgan Crucible Company), it means that both washing and children are black by the time they come in.

Some tenants are quite content with these conditions, and in a way, who can blame them? After paying £5 a week or more for a couple of furnished rooms and sharing a kitchen, after being evicted, after having the family split up, with the wife and children in a reception centre, and the husband anywhere he can get, they are at least united again with a roof over their head.

After such experiences, a place like Battersea Bridge Buildings seems ideal. But after the novelty of being together again, as a family, has worn off, we start to yearn for a decent place to live in. And that's why we have started to form ourselves into a tenants' association.

Getting ourselves organized is uphill work. Quite a few of the tenants are terrified that if they participate in our activities in any way at all, they will be turned out of the temporary accommodation and find themselves back in Newington Lodge, or some similar institution.

We ask our neighbours to join our Association, firstly to fight for a decent home to live in, large enough to accommodate all the family, and at a rent we can afford to pay. At the same time, however, we fight to improve our existing conditions. We have won a few minor concessions from the L.C.C. to date. A new toilet has been installed. Deep sinks have been provided, the original ones being only a few inches deep.

Now we are fighting for hot water, and for the redecoration of the flats. The authorities argue that we can redecorate our flats if we wish. We feel that as these flats are allegedly short-stay flats, it is most unfair to expect us to spend money on redecorating. After all, a week or so after redecorating we could be moved elsewhere. The money we had spent would have been wasted... money which we will obviously need when we eventually get a place of our own. At least half the families here were evicted from furnished accommodation. They need every penny they can get for their future homes.

A couple of families with only two children have been rehoused. Goodness knows when the same will happen to the rest of us, who have more mouths to feed.

People seem to think that we are destitute, but this is not so. The majority of us are in the £10 - £12 per week wage-group. But we simply cannot afford to pay £4 per week or more for rent, even if we could find a suitable place. Most of us were evicted from furnished rooms with rents up to £5 per week. The landlords demanded more, and it was just impossible for us. Others were chucked out as the place was being sold and a better price always goes with vacant possession.

The situation is getting worse, not better. In July London's homeless families numbered 896 (4136 persons). Creeping decontrol is spreading at the rate of 20,000 homes a year. The rents of these houses have risen to 5 and 6 times the gross value. Landlords are competing in taking advantage of the tenants. Even where tenants' associations are prepared to negotiate 'reasonable' rents their efforts are ignored. The Minister recommends compulsory purchase orders as a solution. But he then refuses to grant many of them to local authorities.

The building of new houses and flats to let continues to drop. But the building of houses for sale, of luxury hotels and of huge office blocks continues to expand. The government refuses to control the price of land or to grant requisitioning powers to local authorities to rehouse the homeless. Its demand for higher council rents is increasing. There is growing concern and opposition amongst L.C.C. tenants at the Government's reorganization proposals for London which, if carried out, will take housing out of the hands of the L.C.C.

I feel that there is an urgent need for all who are concerned about London's housing and rents crisis to discuss what action can be taken to end it and to ensure that housing is regarded as a social service.

We in the Tenants' Association are demanding the repeal of the Rent Act, the ending to decontrol, the stopping of evictions, and more homes, less offices. Cutting the interest rate to $2\frac{1}{2}\%$ and a speed up of compulsory purchase are other demands that have been suggested.

We have participated with others in a similar plight in poster parades and in deputations to Parliament and to County Hall. What good, if any, will come of these actions we have yet to see. But at least we are having a go.

To some of us it is beginning to be clear that if we want anything done we will have to do it ourselves. The L.C.C. tries to keep these places as terrible as possible to prevent others taking advantage of the 'facilities' provided. An imaginative and selective breaking of the artificial L.C.C. rules might be an effective method of protest.

What would happen for instance if a group of families got together and decided to bring their own furniture in to replace the L.C.C. stuff? Would the L.C.C. wardens call the police in? Imagine the reaction throughout the London Labour Movement - and wider afield - if the L.C.C. were to take disciplinary action against tenants whose only crime was that they had tried, at their own expense, to make living conditions more bearable for themselves and for their children.

Such methods might both ease our own plight and draw much attention to our problems.

SHEILA JONES, Secretary,
Battersea Bridge Buildings Tenants Association

GOOD THINGS COMING... PERHAPS

London's homeless should be pleased to hear that the Mall is to be repaved at a cost of £10,000. It doesn't need it. As a matter of fact the present road surface is absolutely flawless. Which is more than can be said for the consciences of our supposedly humane and Christian government.

Surely a government as generous as ours is will shortly be alleviating the miseries of the homeless. If their generosity towards Princess Margaret and Lord Snowdon can be taken as an indication, they'll do us well. They gave this particular couple £65,000 to spend on redecorations plus a further £2,000 for a new wall around their home. Generosity on such a scale should result in something pretty spectacular for the rest of us.

We don't think.

Inmate, Battersea Bridge Buildings.

MORNING LANE, HACKNEY

HOW WE GOT THERE

I was married at sixteen. I know some people will say that I was too young to get married but I was married! At first, we lived in one room which we paid £3.10.0 a week for, in Earls Court. After about seven months I found I was expecting a baby. I was allowed to stay on in this room after the baby was born, but I wanted more for my child.

So I got a caretaker's job at no. 1, Emperors Gate in South Kensington. There I had 2 unfurnished rooms and a weekly wage of £2.0.0. Then the inevitable happened. I found myself expecting again. I was then evicted. I walked London with my other baby in a pram. This was November 1960. My baby was due to be born the following March.

In December, after about 6 weeks of staying at Bed & Breakfast hotels while my mother kept my little girl at nights, I found a furnished room in Ladbrooke Grove. I paid £4.10.0 a week for it. We had a tiny wash-basin, two single beds, a table and two little chairs. That was all there was room for.

After I had been there about a month, the landlord told me he could let us have two unfurnished rooms and a kitchen (share bathroom and toilet) for £5.18.0. To me this was a god send. I jumped at the chance. My husband was in a good job so we could afford this rent. Everything was fine. We were very happy. My second baby was born. I now had two girls.

Then as they say 'All good things come to an end'. My husband changed his job. He was now earning about £8.0.0 per week. Have you ever tried to keep two babies and yourselves on less than £2.0.0 a week?

We had an electric fire as the landlord ('Mr. Benjamin') did not allow us to use coal. Every drop of hot water had to be boiled on the gas. The bath, although fitted, had only cold water running into it. It was up to me, the landlord said, if I wanted hot water, I'd have to buy an Ascot. I stuck it as long as I could. I had to listen to my babies crying with hunger.

By this time my nerves were haywire. I was living on capsules. These capsules put me in a state of suspense. It was then that I walked out. The next thing I heard was that my children were in custody and my husband had nowhere to go.

It was now October 1961. I went back to my husband and we went and got Rosemarie and Helen. We went to a reception centre at Morning Lane, in Hackney. We arrived at about 9.0 o'clock. They kept us waiting in the hall for an hour and a half. Both babies were thirsty and tired and were crying their eyes out. Eventually they admitted us but told us we would have to leave the next morning. We were given a cup of tea and a ham sandwich each. The babies were given milk and cereals. The next morning we were turned out promptly at 9.30. We went to an Admitting Officer in Warwick Row, Victoria, who gave us a form to sign and sent us back to Hackney.

This time we were admitted. The Morning Lane Reception Centre was new. It was spotlessly clean. My husband, myself and our two daughters, Rosemarie (now 20 months) and Helen (7 months) were taken up four flights of stairs to a little room. The beds were old but there were clean mattresses and covers. There were two new cots but no cot mattresses. We had pillows, 1 table, two chairs, a tiny chest of drawers and a little cupboard. We had swabs taken from us (they said that this was a precaution against dysentery). There were two dining rooms. We were in the larger one. There were new high chairs for the babies. The table and chairs were new. As far as cleanliness was concerned, I could not have asked for anything better.

The meals? Well, that was a very different matter. Breakfast was at 8.0 am. Husbands going out to work were either allowed early breakfast or sandwiches to take to work. Our first breakfast consisted of Cornflakes, 'scrambled eggs' on toast. The scrambled eggs were made with egg powder, bread and cooking marga. There was also a horrible brew they called tea.

Lunch or dinner was at 12.30. A man at work could order one to be kept hot for him. Our first one was boiled rashers of bacon, soggy potatoes and pease pudding. Babies under two had the same every day: minced meat, mashed (lumpy) potatoes and strained peas or cabbage. Followed by a cup of tea. Sometimes I waited in the dinner queue for 20 to 30 minutes.

Tea was at 5.0 pm. It consisted of spam. It was so greasy that you could turn the plate upside down and it would stay there. Also bread and marga, jam and tea. That was it.

After I had been there for a while we started getting supper at 7.0 pm. This consisted of coffee or cocoa, very sweet and lukewarm. Also cold Cornish pasties or meat pies or soveloys. For children under two, there were biscuits.

The rooms had to be cleaned by ten o'clock every day. The matron came round every morning, except Sundays.

There was an indoor playroom for the children as well as an enclosed yard. On the ground floor there was a laundry with boilers and electric irons. On each floor there was a sluice where babies nappies could be washed. In the sluice there were two electric dryers, but if you left any clothes for a minute they disappeared, especially nappies.

We were allowed to make a cup of tea upstairs, but we were not allowed to cook. I admit that I did cook. We couldn't eat the food given to us downstairs. Luckily I was never caught.

I saw that place go to wrack and ruin. Some parents just didn't care what their children did. Toilet chains were broken off. Bath and sink plugs disappeared. Taps were left running and flooded the floors. Children messed just where they liked. Some of the men and women were just as bad. Unmentionable things were thrown out of the windows. Language from children was at times even worse than in the grown-ups.

While I was there my two daughters were in and out of hospital. Children with milk books were allowed a pint each per day. This had to be collected by 8.0 am, or the store keeper became nasty. The doctor came any time after 8.0 am.

My eldest girl was taken to the doctor's surgery for 2 weeks with diarrhoea. I then took her to Hackney Hospital. She had a temperature of 103° and was admitted to the Eastern Hospital with dysentery.

Christmas was the worst I have ever spent. At 10.0 o'clock on Christmas morning the Assistant Matron came round to inspect the rooms and asked why they hadn't been cleaned.

Just after Christmas my husband was stood off work. He never bothered to get another job. He never paid the rent which was £7.9.0 if working, £6.9.0 if on National Assistance. If anyone went into Hospital they were charged 1/- a day less. In the end we were evicted. My eldest girl was in hospital. She had a dislocated hip.

I had to get out of the Reception Centre by 12.0 o'clock on July 2. We had been there 9 months altogether. I had nowhere to go. So my little girl had to go into care. She went to the Ladywell Nursery, at Lewisham. I got myself a living-in job and left my husband. I have been offered no accommodation since. My husband wants the children adopted. I don't. But I will have to, if we can't find something within the next six months. I can't find anywhere where I could have them with me. But I don't expect that will bother the council much.

What kind of Christmas can we expect? This is the time when children need their mother, not some stranger. I shall be 21 next January. For Christmas I would love to have my children with me. For my birthday I would like to have the key to our own home.

The L.C.C. is always saying they have no room in their council homes. They say that the children's homes are overcrowded. They also say that it costs a lot to keep the children. All I want is a home. I am willing to carry on working to support my children.

I know I am not the only person in this predicament. But to me, I am, of course, the most important. Every mother wants her children and every child wants its mother. What does the Council care? With them, it is a definite case of 'I'm alright, Jack!'. If your face fits with them, then you're in. If not, well...

Still, 'while there's life, there's hope'. Who knows? May be one day the Council and private house owners may develop a conscience.

PATRICIA LEE, housewife.

DIRECT ACTION

The 'Observer' of September 23, 1962, carried an article by Jeremy Sandford entitled 'London's Homeless Revisited'.

'A year ago' the article began, 'I wrote in THE OBSERVER about the homeless families in London. A fortnight later the BBC T.V. programme "Panorama" took up the story. Soon representatives of most newspapers were to be seen clamouring round the austere cast-iron gates of Newington Lodge, gates which were reputed to open only for ambulances and for taxis arriving to deposit the homeless with their suitcases and brown paper parcels.

There was a national outcry. A year later I have been back to Newington Lodge to see what had come of this outcry.

I found little changed.'

So this respectable Sunday paper admits that despite all the fuss, nothing has changed. Despite the petitions, the deputations to MPs, the demonstrations, the torch-light processions of homeless led by clergy and God-knows who, nothing has been improved. All these 'stunts' have drawn blanks.

I believe that not only must the activities of the homeless be intensified, but that it is necessary for a change to be made in the character of the activities. The important lesson to be drawn from the past is that the prime work and initiative must come from the homeless themselves.

The better off people who find themselves comfortably housed aren't going to lose much sleep about us. MPs and the councillors are interested in us only insofar as the housing issue can be used for 'vote-catching'. This is the basic reason for the lack of results achieved so far. We must clearly recognize the futility of placing our confidence in any leaders, elected or otherwise. Instead, we must place our confidence in the only safe hands, in ourselves.

There is only a 'housing problem' for the working class. While working class families are trying to find even single rooms at a rent they can afford, millions of pounds are being spent yearly on the building of luxury flats and hotels, or on the converting of old houses into flats that can be let out to the nobs at £10 or even £15 a week. Plenty of decent homes for the privileged... and filthy shit-houses like Newington Lodge for the working people.

There is another important aspect to the conditions of the homeless. Conditions at Newington Lodge and elsewhere are purposely kept bad. This is in order to discourage the thousands of families who are living in terrible conditions in one or two rooms rented from private landlords from struggling. The idea is to make them accept their plight for fear of something even worse... like Newington Lodge. The reasoning of the authorities - in which of course I include the Labour-controlled L.C.C. - follows the old workhouse philosophy. Conditions at the 'reception centres' and 'half-way houses' must be worse than the worst available elsewhere to avoid creating a mass influx into the facilities graciously made available.

So we have the artificial creation of unbearable conditions, the imposition of rules with the purpose of making life so unbearable that anything else is better, so that any sacrifice is not too much to keep the family together and have a bit of privacy and self-respect.

As rents and house purchase mortgage payments increase, lower paid workers are finding it increasingly difficult to find homes. It is quite possible that the authorities will increase still further the savagery of the regime within the Reception Centres and Half-way Houses.

Homeless families are in most ways particularly defenceless. But at Newington Lodge, at least, they have an advantage. They literally have nothing to lose.

I said that I believed we should change the character of our activities. In other words I am in favour of ending this useless activity which sees its object as winning over Tory MPs and Christian priests. Rather than this I am in favour of DIRECT ACTION.

When it comes to concrete proposals I hesitate, for these are things that must be decided by all of us, and not just by me. But I'll stick my neck out and offer a few ideas which will at least indicate the direction in which I am thinking. I am putting forward these ideas for discussion and either acceptance, rejection or further development by those who will have to bear the brunt of the struggle, that is by the tenants themselves.

It seems obvious that the methods we use must take into account the vulnerability of the families at the half-way houses, but also that for those at the Reception Centres, there is literally nothing to lose. There is nowhere that the authorities could evict anyone to, from a Reception Centre, except onto the streets. And this is extremely unlikely.

Possibilities at places like Newington Lodge seem to me to be almost endless. They could include refusal to obey either particular rules or all the rules which the dignitaries of the L.C.C. have laid down. There is no reason why husbands should obey the 'curfew'. And if the L.C.C. authorities have to bring police in to separate a man from his family, so much the better. The furor this would cause throughout the working class movement would throw additional light on what life is like at places like Newington Lodge. Even a rent strike doesn't seem out of court.

For tenants at half-way houses other methods of direct action are possible. Some of these have been suggested in a previous article and include massive moving in of our furniture, collectively carried out. This would put the authorities in the same kind of cleft stick. They would either have to accept the accomplished fact. That in itself would be a victory for us. It would improve the conditions we live in. Or they would have to take action against us and call in the police to prevent us from improving the conditions we have to live in. This would show the L.C.C. up in colours they wouldn't like to be seen in. And local Party politicians are very sensitive about all this, particularly in working class areas.

There is even more we might eventually do. One thing that disgusts us all is the colossal amount of office building going up all over London. Well, what's wrong with some of us getting together and just moving in, kids and all, and taking over some of these great blocks? We don't have to leave it at that. There is always the Dorchester, or come to that, what about Buckingham Palace? The Queen and the Duke are always trying to get closer to the people. They have palaces and castles everywhere as a reward for doing sweet FA towards the country's prosperity. A few hundred

squatters moving into Buckingham Palace would give our royal parasites a chance to really get to know the people. I'm sure a few days with our kids on the lawns would be an education for Charlie and Annie they'd never forget.

There is nothing new in my suggestions. This is the kind of activity that sprang up following the last war. Indeed, we then established what came to be known as 'squatters' rights'. This is the kind of activity that will achieve real results, if only because it will frighten hell out of our betters who clutter up every gas-house from the House of Lords and House of Commons to the T.U.C.

There are endless other possibilities of direct action. To be effective some of these would require the creation of links, on an all-London basis, between tenants at the various half-way houses and Reception Centres, and also between these tenants and other tenants' organizations. Links could also be forged with the shop stewards committees of local factories and other working class organizations. Through concerted action I have no doubt that there could be an effective campaign, which could force an immediate improvement of the appalling conditions described in this pamphlet.

I make no apology for advocating what can only be described as 'revolutionary' activity. It is obvious that we can expect no sympathy from the police in any of these ventures. But when we talk of civil disobedience, when we talk in terms of breaking the law, we should remember that there are also moral laws... laws that to my mind are against bedding kids half-a-dozen to a room. To accept the living standards offered us by the masters of our society is, in my opinion, breaking moral laws far more important than those defended by the Commissioner of Police.

The real secret of success is UNITY. Provided we act together as one body our battle would already be won. One or two people acting alone would only let themselves in for victimization, defeat and demoralization. I believe activities of the kind I have suggested would snow-ball overnight. They could indeed be the beginning of a solution to our problems. We owe it to our children to take drastic action to get them decent homes to live in. As far as I am personally concerned no action is too drastic where my four are concerned.

I only hope that others feel as strongly as I do on these issues so that together we can form a 'Direct Action Committee' of the London Homeless.

KEN JONES, TGWU.

HOUSING, 1962

The housing problem has its roots in capitalism itself. Its origins go back to the days of the Industrial Revolution when the ruling class was only concerned that there should be enough 'hands' to work its machines. The nearer the worker lived to the factory, the more convenient for everyone. Wages, moreover, were miserably low. Hence the dirty and squalid little settlements that became the hallmark of our industrial towns.

'What is meant today by the housing shortage is the peculiar intensification of the bad housing conditions of the workers as a result of the sudden rush of population to the big cities; a colossal increase in rents, still greater congestion in the individual houses and, for some, the impossibility of finding a place to live in at all'.

Thus wrote Engels, almost a century ago, in the opening pages of his book on 'The Housing Question'. Many changes in the face of capitalism have taken place since those early times, but so far as housing is concerned the whole emphasis remains the making of profit and many of the symptoms remain the same.

It is ironical that in these days of increasing State intervention and 'planning' the man who gets the greatest State aid (through tax relief) with his housing is the well-off owner-occupier. Our rulers have slowly come to recognise that it is in their own interests to provide working people with medical facilities and free education, etc... but such fundamental needs as decent housing are still too often regarded much as they were at the end of the last century.

In the years following the second world war successive Governments, acting under considerable pressure, made half-hearted attempts to build more houses. Great fuss was made of the figure of 300,000 new dwellings a year (the number was rarely achieved, was inadequate in any case, and was certainly lower than the number of dwellings built in the years just prior to the war*).

In even more recent years Government policy has drastically reduced the building of low rent Council dwellings, for working class families. It has encouraged the building of houses for sale to better off people. The

* Between 1934 and 1939 an average of 358,000 dwellings were built each year. See Syndicalist Workers Federation pamphlet 'How Labour Governed'. Obtainable (6d) from B. Christopher, 34 Cumberland Rd., E.17.

extent of this process is shown in the following table (from 'Britain in the Sixties: Housing' by S. Alderson)

<u>Year</u>	<u>Dwellings (for rent)</u> <u>built by</u> <u>Local Authorities</u>	<u>Dwellings (for sale)</u> <u>built by</u> <u>Private Builders</u>
1951	141,587	21,406
1954	199,682	88,028
1961	92,880	170,366

Virtually no private housing is being built for rent.

According to the Government the housing shortage only exists in one of the ten regions into which the country is divided, namely the Southern region around London. But it must be borne in mind that the shortage would be far more general were all condemned properties to be pulled down. For example, 43 % of Liverpool's housing was (as far back as 1954!) officially recognised as unfit for human habitation. The figure for Manchester was 33 %. For Oldham it was 26 %. And so we could go on.

A Government survey of the age of houses in England and Wales produced the following figures:

Houses built since 1945	3 $\frac{1}{2}$ million
Houses built between 1919 and 1940	4 $\frac{1}{4}$ million
Houses built between 1880 and 1915	3 million
Houses built before 1880	3 $\frac{1}{2}$ million

Most of the houses built before 1880 are not officially listed as slums but the reader can imagine the state of most of them. In Britain there are still thousands of houses still being lived in which were officially condemned in the 1930s. If anything even more people are now living in such houses than before the war. And they are certainly paying much higher rents.

At the risk of drowning the reader with facts and figures I would like to draw his attention to some of the things brought to light by the 'Rowntree Study of Housing in England'. This showed that 3 % of families had no kitchen sink and that 4 % shared a kitchen sink. 29 % of families have no bath and 6 % share a bath. 6 % have no flush lavatory and 10 % share a lavatory. 28 % of families have no hot water supply.

It is against this background that we should look at the Government's policy of increasing grants to property owners provided they make some show at repairs. In 1958 Government grants numbered 30,000. By 1961 the figure had leapt to 123,447. Most of these are grants to owner-occupiers. But most of the really old housing belongs to private landlords who are reluctant to apply for these grants (to improve the houses that would need it most) because they would have themselves to bear part of the cost.

More and more 'middle class' families are being forced to become owner-occupiers. This is not because the houses they buy are worth the purchase, but because they have no real choice in the present situation.* The number of owner-occupiers has increased by over 2 million in the last four years. These people spend about a third of their income on housing. They don't seem to have always got much in return. Twenty per cent of these newly acquired 'homes' were built before 1914. Sixteen per cent have no bath and six per cent no flush lavatory.

The Rent Act has doubled the rate at which this class of people is being driven to buy accommodation of some kind. Before 1914, ninety per cent of houses were privately rented. Today the proportion is less than thirty per cent.

Since 1956 local authorities have been obliged to raise the money needed for council house building on the open market. Before that they could get cheaper loans. In the three years 1959 - 1961 the prices of new houses rose on an average by 25 %, while house building costs rose by only 11 %. With profit making still the driving motive, house building is almost everywhere taking second place to the construction of giant office blocks.

It has been estimated that 150,000 slum dwellings should be cleared each year, merely to keep pace with deterioration. But the actual replacement rate is 60,000 a year, or less than half. It is therefore absurd to claim, as does Sir Keith Joseph, the latest clown to be appointed Minister of Housing, that all slums will be cleared within five years or so. At the present rate of 'progress' England's housing will be quite as bad a hundred years from now. There will be places like Newington Lodge for everyone.

The British capitalist class is far behind the ruling classes of other European countries in 'modernising' this aspect of capitalism. Only some of them see it is necessary for them to provide decent housing for their workers if they are to 'stabilise' their rule, the better to dominate and exploit the working class. Today fewer homes are built in Britain (per thousand of the population) than in Holland, Norway, Sweden, France or Germany. In Western Germany twice as many houses are being built, per thousand of the population, as in Britain.

We spend something like six million pounds a day on armaments. This makes it clear that the British 'housing problem' could be solved virtually overnight were this money channelled into the direction of housing. Compared to the sums devoted to armaments how petty are the 61 million pounds a year which the Exchequer provides for housing subsidies! These are the priorities of the society in which we live.

BOB POTTER.

* See 'Democracy in Housing' in 'Solidarity' vol.I, no.10.

THE WIDER BACKGROUND

Homelessness in London has not occurred in a social, economic or political vacuum. It is one of many symptoms of the utter failure of capitalist society to arrange its national life in a way which takes account of human beings and of their needs.

A society in which the search for profit is the motive force for all economic activity must expect the sort of crisis which has for many years been developing in London and more generally in the whole of south-east England. Industrial, commercial, and 'office' expansion have been 'explosive'. And since workers are to a large extent obliged to follow where works leads there has been a growth of population in this area far greater than in any other region. The process shows no signs of coming to an end. Unless such developments can be matched by a similarly 'explosive' growth of houses (which people can afford) the demand for accommodation will become intense. Prices - unless controlled in some way - will rise in response. This trend has spread from the centre of London right out to the widest possible commuting areas.

Without a minimum of low-priced housing - to some extent guaranteed before the Rent Act of 1957 by widespread rent control - the family most likely to be denied a house in this situation will be the one needing most space and having the least ability to pay for it. In short some of the large young families with a relatively low wage will be squeezed out. What were once 'low-priced' areas with a pool of larger accommodation are being invaded by the middle classes, sucked into London by the wealth of attractive professional or administrative jobs. Traditional working class districts are perceptibly changing their character under this onslaught of improvement and rising prices. One has only to look at Islington and now Fulham to see the process at work.

The problem of homelessness in London goes much deeper than the issue of rapacious landlords, bureaucratic incompetence, the Rent Act, or even industrial location. It offers a devastating commentary on the complete inability of our society to function according to rational priorities where the ordinary individual comes first, before considerations of profit or convenience. The plight of those in Newington Lodge or Durham Buildings is not unconnected with the plight of the unemployed in Scotland or with the reluctance of private enterprise to invest in the worn-out and dying industrial towns of the North. Nor can such things as the significantly different ratios of doctors to patients in the south coast towns and in the Durham coalfields be regarded apart.

This is why neither the L.C.C. nor the Government will be able to solve the problem of the homeless. For a real, lasting and effective solution requires fundamental and radical changes in our patterns of social and economic organization.

JOHN REYNOLDS.

WHAT 'SOLIDARITY' THINKS

'SOLIDARITY' is the paper of a group of rank-and-file militants active in industry, in the anti-Bomb movement and wherever ordinary people are struggling for basic human rights and dignity.

We are not the mouthpiece of any political party or faction. Our aims are to describe facts quite bluntly, as they really are, and however unpalatable they may be to some people. We are not concerned about anyone's electoral prospects. We couldn't care less about maintaining or capturing this or that position in this or that political or trade union organization. Our only faith is in the rank and file, in people themselves. We try to help people achieve the greatest possible understanding of what kind of society we live in, of what the real issues are, so that they themselves can then determine the methods and objectives of their struggles. We seek to mobilise support where it is most needed. And, within our very limited means, we seek to help people win the struggles in which they are engaged. We believe that such struggles can only be won when the people concerned understand what is wrong and are prepared themselves to struggle against it.

If they wish to improve the conditions under which they are forced to live the tenants at the 'reception centres' and 'half-way houses' can rely only on themselves. No one will solve their problems for them. They can have no faith in the promises of Tory or Labour politicians or councillors.

The Tories stand for privilege, for the landlords, for the Rent Act, for everything that has got the tenants into their present plight. Few tenants can have any illusions left on this score. As for the Labour councillors, they are directly responsible for the administration of the 'reception centres' and of 'half-way houses'. They are responsible for the shocking condition of these places. They have endorsed the inhuman and degrading rules and regulations imposed in these places upon ordinary working people, whose only 'crime' is that they have large families and a low income. Labour's attitude to tenants in places like Dartford and Islington shows that they are just as prepared to raise council rents as are the Tories... and to denounce and slander the tenants if they dare struggle back.

Nor can the tenants rely on those who have other political axes to grind and who would take advantage of their plight to pursue political ends of their own.

All of them seek to utilise the tenants, not to help them develop their strength, their independence and their reliance on themselves.

Vote-catching slogans will solve nothing. It is not a question of scoring debating points on television or of manipulating people for party political ends. It is a question of human beings, of men, women and children living under intolerable conditions, of people requiring every ounce of genuine and disinterested help in their struggle.

The outcome of this struggle will depend on the unity, self-confidence, initiative and militancy of the tenants themselves. They have hundreds of potential allies, working class people like themselves. There is an immense reservoir of good will to be tapped.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to break down the conspiracy of silence about places like Newington Lodge and Battersea Bridge Buildings. It is to encourage thousands of ordinary people to express their solidarity with the tenants and to assist them in whatever way they can, even if it is only in making sure the facts are more widely known.

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