



Housing – Critical Futures.

Statement by: Eileen Short

Chair of Defend Council Housing / Co-orgainser The March for Homes

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The March for Homes

On the 31st of January thousands marched in London against the housing crisis

On 31 January 2015, over 5,000 people from across the capital marched on London's City Hall to demand solutions to the housing crisis and better housing for all.

The *March for Homes* was initiated by Defend Council Housing and the South London Peoples Assembly. It drew wide support from tenant groups, trade unions and housing campaigns and was led by grassroots campaigns. This marks the emergence of a new housing movement, uniting council and private tenants, squatter and homeless campaigns, Bargee Travellers, housing workers and many others. A radical force is beginning to actively challenge political policies causing soaring rents, loss of social housing and rising homelessness. With confidence raised by the 'Focus E15' and 'New Era 4 All' campaigns, more people are challenging the writ of landlords and the threat of eviction, with protests and direct action.

The *March* made, and continues to make, seven clear demands for action to end the housing crisis:

- Rent controls
- Cut rents, not benefits
- Scrap the Bedroom Tax and Benefit Cap
- Affordable and secure homes for all
- Stop demolishing quality council homes and build new council houses
- Better pay & conditions for housing workers: better housing services
- Stop scapegoating immigrants and end discriminatory immigration checks for tenants

Participants in the *March for Homes* were and are overwhelmingly young and militant. The under-40s have joined the poor, sick and disabled in the firing line of the Coalition Government's war on tenants. A new generation, often renting ex-council flats at exorbitant rents, are joining council tenants to champion the idea of public investment in a new generation of council housing as an alternative to market-led crisis.

Our experience of building the *March* was that people had been waiting for this – they often said so! In the January event, two sections, from South and East London, converged, with perfect timing, at Tower Bridge, and marched to the headquarters of London's Mayor and Assembly. Another section of the *March* went directly to the Aylesbury estate in South London where an occupation continues against plans to demolish another 2,400 council homes. Since then a week of action and two further occupations, in South and West London, are hardening the cutting edge of the fight for homes. A *March for Aylesbury* on the 14th of March is a further step in keeping a collective front to our many battles, and building the mass support we need to challenge the current political orthodoxy on housing.

Government, the Mayor of London and too many Councils, tell us developers must be allowed to build for market sale and rent on public land, and that this is the only way to finance any improvement of existing and new council or housing association homes. The public is all too aware that this is a Con. In fact it means social cleansing, evictions and increasing numbers in private renting paying more for less. For many the only question is, what's the alternative?

In Britain we now pay more for housing, as a proportion of our income, than at any time. Housing has become a means of increasing inequality. So it's not good enough to call for 'more house building'. The question is what homes, who for, and at what cost? Luxury homes often sit empty and bring in more profit for their backers than investments in industry or even in bonds and shares. Those behind these projects are often non-UK citizens but the problem is not the nationality of the investors – it's their profiteering. The blight of empty homes and insecure private renting destroys communities, driving life from neighbourhoods.

And politicians are colluding to encourage this process. Almost the first act of the Coalition Government was to cut 60% from council/housing association capital investment, followed by attacks on tenancies, rents and benefits. The Bedroom Tax, benefit caps – with rents of up to 80% market value replacing council rents – and demolition of council estates are all policies driven by Government. In his foreword to a Saville's Report, part funded by Government, Communities Minister and Cabinet member Eric Pickles describes council housing as 'brownfield estates'. Subsidy now goes to developers, lenders and the 1 million private landlords across the UK.

None of it builds the really-affordable, secure and decent homes we need. To win them we need a united movement, combining political demands with mass direct action. Generations before us won council housing, rent control and secure tenancies through rent strikes, protests, marches and occupations. We are learning those lessons in the fight for homes.

Supporters:

Supporters of *The March for Homes* include: Defend Council Housing, People's Assembly (London); community campaigns New Era, Focus E15, Fred Wigg & John Walsh, Our West Hendon; renters campaigns Generation Rent, Hackney and Tower Hamlets private renters; trade unions BECTU and Unite Housing Workers; Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers, Radical Housing Network, Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) and the London Green Party.

Film maker Ken Loach, London MPs Diane Abbott, Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell, and London Assembly member Darren Johnson supported the January march and a 'student bloc' from London universities joined to add their voice to calls for rent controls and more council housing.

Quotes:

Eileen Short, National Chair of Defend Council Housing, said: 'We took to the street to show the united demand for urgent action. Tenants from all tenures, public and private, campaigns and trade unions are determined to organise together to resist evictions. The growing housing movement will not swallow hollow promises and more empty luxury housing. The London Mayor and councils must act now to control rents and invest in council housing.'

Alastair Stephens, People's Assembly (London), said: 'Polls show that most people support rent controls, greater regulation of the private rented sector and a return to the mass building of council housing. Only these actions will solve the housing crisis. These are the demands we took onto the streets on the 31st of January.'

The March for Homes was held on the 31st of January 2015. Housing activists, unions and campaigners joined together to march on Boris in City Hall and demand better housing for London. The March for Homes saw over 6,000 people take to the streets. It is developing a network of activists and planning other actions.

<http://marchforhomes.org/>