

Mass squatting in Tower Hamlets, London

Starting last September, 50 families have taken over a whole block of flats (Sumner House) belonging to Tower Hamlets Council. As the old tenants were moved out, allegedly so that the flats could be renovated, homeless families from the borough moved in, despite the council's attempts to vandalise the remaining flats. Nearly all the families have young children and have been living with in-laws, or in hostels and hotels; some have been on the "waiting list" for more than 10 years. The squatters have started renovating the flats themselves - they formed a committee to organise the work, to collect money from the families, and to negotiate with the council. This committee has some women on it but is dominated by the men. A public meeting was held before Christmas to publicise and get support for Sumner House and to link all local struggles round housing - a housing action group has now been formed, involving tenants' groups and community groups as well as squatting groups. Sumner House has been very important locally - it has meant that squatting is no longer seen as a "hippie" or "student" activity; it has exposed the council and the farce of the waiting list; it has shown how successful squatting can be with large numbers of people, as people cannot be picked off individually.