

Sumner House

In September '74, half a dozen homeless families, who had been put in touch with each other through the Stepney Law Centre, moved into an empty block of flats called Sumner House, in Bow East London. Within a couple of weeks, there were thirty families there, and now there are sixty. Many of the original families who moved in, and the Law Centre who helped them, had a tenants control conception of the occupation. They wanted to prove to the Council that they could repair and modernize the block more cheaply and efficiently than the Council. In this way, they hoped that the council would let them keep the block, and give them some money (not as much as a private contractor), and allow them to run it themselves. With this aim a committee was formed which set a subscription (they weren't allowed to charge 'rent') of £2.50 per week. On top of another £2.50 for rates, this comes to a lot for a rundown flat. Basic repairs were to be financed out of this money for all the flats that needed them; and the remainder was to be spent on publicity, and above all, the show flat.

The show flat is a derelict, vandalized -by the council- flat, which is to be completely modernized and converted by the money and labour of the Sumner House people into a luxury flat. It is to be the final proof that the tenant's co-op can do the work, better, and more cheaply, than the council.

Right from the start, the show flat was a cause of dissension. People resented their money being spent on it. As the months passed and repairs on their houses weren't done, resentment grew more acute. Soon it became clear that nothing about the show flat was being done either. Two successive treasurers absconded with the money, in total about £400. Only two people on the committee knew what was going on. The place was rife with rumours and power struggles, and seemed ready to fall apart at any moment.

Meanwhile the wider-scale publicity had been going well. There had been two or three television reports, and many write-ups in the local newspaper. (Again the media accelerated the process of making certain people 'stars' and 'spokesmen'.) Tower Hamlets Council, in its monumental folly, decided to hold public bingo-type ballots of flats, for young

Summer House, cont'd.

couples. (10 a month for 7,000 on the waiting list*.) People from Summer House and other squatters organized a protest demonstration, which was a shambles in itself, but that attracted a lot of publicity.

One result of all this publicity was that when the first families were served with possession orders, and appeared in court, the judge spoke of homelessness as a blot on our civilization, and forced the Council, to sign a favourable agreement with the squatters. -They should be allowed to stay until a week before the contractors moved in, after 28 days notice. They should also be given adequate alternate accomodation, not hotels. The committee interpreted this as a victory -which it was- and decided to go ahead with the showflat, and persuading the council to let them stay.

Others weren't bothered by all that, they just wanted a secure place to live. The committee tried to put pressure on people who had stopped paying rent, (mainly cause repairs weren't being done), by threatening them with expulsion, and saying that they wouldn't be covered by the legal agreement to be rehoused. This was untrue. The landlord-tenant relationship between the committee and others was becoming clearer, and more polarized. Many families continued paying because they thought a home was worth the money, and compared it with higher rents somewhere else. For others it fostered the illusion that they were not really squatting - an illusion encouraged by the committee, which played on peoples fears of the law. But many people began to realize that paying rent did not offer them any extra security. When the council solicitors found they had been paying rent, they interpreted it as a racket (which it partly was - there are hundreds of housing rackets in this area) and encourage people to take legal action to get their money back. People felt ripped off and taken for a ride.

For the first time the non-rent payers began to get organized, and demanded a reduction in the rent. There was a terrific fight in which the chairman got punched by two women, only two people voted to keep the co-op, and a section of militant women declared UDI. Then the guy from the law centre turned up, and cooled everything out. There was still a hard-core of co-op believers. They formed themselves into a new co-op dominated still by the two original men. The opposition, consist mainly of very angry and vocal women, many who had been squatting for years. They were more concerned with money for themselves and a roof over their heads, not with legality. They're starting to organize now. That's the state of play, until next time.....