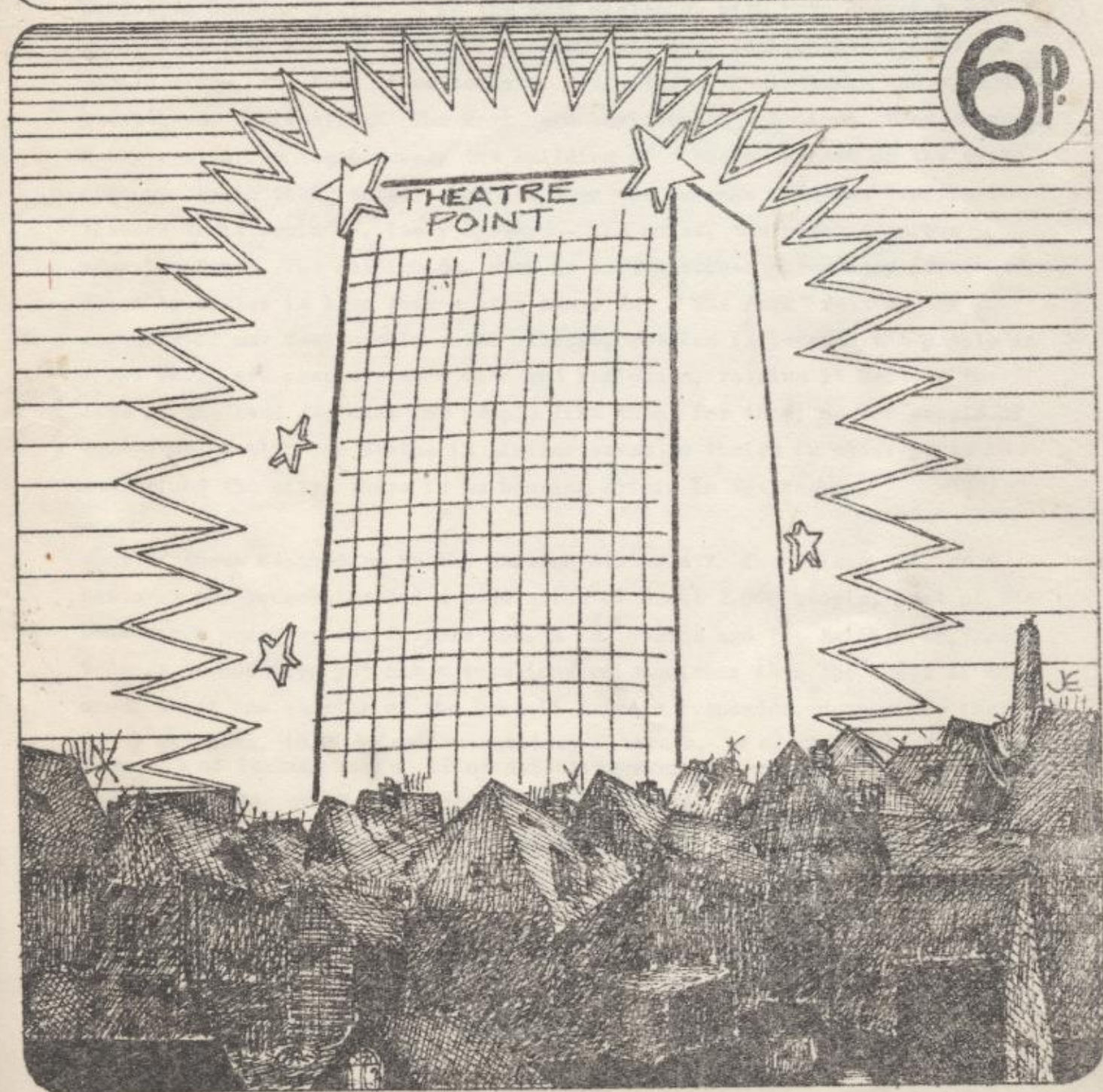


THE HOUSING CRISIS IN NOTTINGHAM - TWO NATIONS



NOTTINGHAM INTERNATIONAL MARXIST GROUP

THE HOUSING CRISIS IN NOTTINGHAM.....TWO NATIONS !

"It is about time something was done, we are choked up with rubbish. We have had the health inspectors round and the house is in a terrible state and still there is nothing done. We are fed up with complaining. All they want is the rent".

These were the words of a tenant of Nottingham Corporation living in the Raleigh Street clearance area. The Raleigh St. area is between Alfreton Rd. and Waverley St. Just a few hundred yards is "The Park", one of the most exclusive housing districts in the East Midlands, with high Georgian and early Victorian houses, acres of spacious gardens, fashionable tennis and squash clubs, the home of solicitors, consultants, businessmen and managerial executives. Residents of "The Park" are environment conscious. They successfully resist, by legal means, the building of "cheap" houses on the ample open spaces in their estate. Not for them the passage of urban traffic through their secluded, leafy byeways - the noise, the noxious carbon monoxide fumes. The Raleigh St. area is only a stones throw away from them. The city centre is less than a mile away. But "The Park" retains the serenity of any fashionable rural village, retains it because the people in "The Park" are people with wealth and influence, retains it because the laws of the land are made for people like them. For them, as for people of equivalent wealth and status in similar areas to theirs in other parts in and around the city, there is no housing crisis in Nottingham.

What of their neighbours in the Raleigh St. area? The Raleigh St. area has over 600 households and a population of about 2,000 people. Most of the houses are owned by the Corporation. A few months ago the Raleigh St. Area Tenants Association put out a questionnaire enquiring into the needs of the area. About one quarter of the Council tenants responded. Complaints included 31 of dampness, 18 of defective sanitary fittings, 32 of defective windows or doors, 13 of leaking roofs, 12 of defective drainage and so on. These figures give little idea of the real dimensions of squalor. Most of the people who received the questionnaire did not respond, because they had lost hope long ago. In the words of the tenant above: 'We are fed up with complaining'.

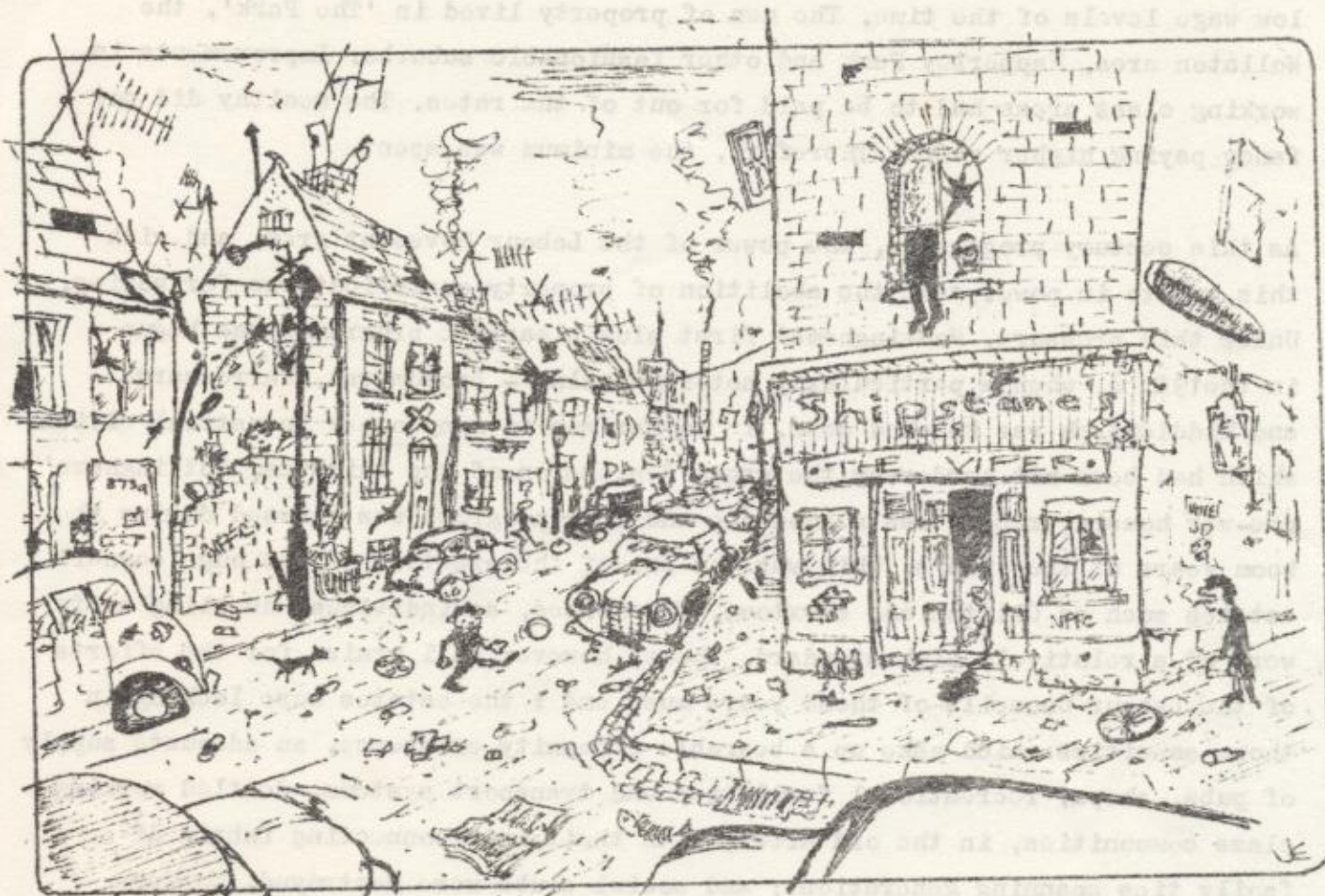
There is a similar tale of delapidation in the houses owned by private landlords. The inspection of the Tenants Association discovered one house, whose landlord was on holiday in South Africa at the time, which had a gaping hole in the roof, 4 windows completely missing in the top floor, no flush mechanism to the W.C., the washing basin in the bathroom smashed, the electrical connections made by taping live wires together, the basement door propped up against the front door and the waste water gullies and drains blocked - so that all the

water from the kitchen sink, bath and roof flowed into a marsh in the back 'garden'. Next door 5 children (aged 6,5,4,1 $\frac{1}{2}$ and 3mths) lived with 2 adults in a house with no bath, a toilet without a flushing mechanism and with the only source of water in the house a makeshift rubber pipe from the ground floor to the kitchen. Before the rubber pipe was rigged up, the tenants used to walk down to the basement with a bucket.

The April 1971 Census revealed that 34.2% of the population of Raleigh St. was aged 14 years or under. The play facilities provided by the Corporation amount to a single deserted Play Street used for access by the lorries of a coal merchant. This summer, the Raleigh Street Area Tenants Association, despairing of shaming the Corporation into action, took over a derelict house and converted it into a makeshift play centre. They have not received one penny of aid from the Corporation in this venture.

Given the inadequate play facilities most children play on the streets, on dangerous rat-run roads used by through traffic. Like their neighbours in the 'Park' the people of Raleigh St. area are environment conscious. Surprising as it might seem to some, their ears, noses and throats are just as sensitive to engine din and carbon monoxide. In particular they dislike the situation whereby cars, driven in the main by residents of Nottingham's affluent suburbs, hurtle through their streets and from time to time knock their children down, producing one of the highest road accident rates in the entire city. The Tenants Association has organised several demonstrations, consisting of blocking off the through roads by establishing human chains across them. These actions have never lasted long before they have been broken up by the Police, who have threatened the participants with arrest if they dared to continue to defy 'the law'. For unlike their neighbours in 'The Park', people in the Raleigh St. area know from bitter experience that Police, laws and courts are not on their side. They are not people of wealth.

When the children do not play in the street, they play in peoples' tiny gardens or on derelict sites. On the terraces, the concentrated energy of hundreds of children wrecks garden fences, railings and gates. Gardens become mere patches of dirt adding to the drabness. Virtually every house has windows broken by the stones thrown by children. The area is a 'Clearance Area'. Once a family leaves a house, the Corporation usually 'tins them up', and it is these empty buildings which are the most exciting places in which to play. The tins are ripped away from the windows and doors, so that the process of demolition can continue inside.



NOTTINGHAM'S SLUM CLEARANCES - A BRIEF HISTORY.

The Raleigh St. area is one of the smaller clearance areas in the city. Like most other industrial cities, Nottingham's housing problem is rooted in its past. During the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early part of this one, Nottingham's commercial prosperity grew. The owners of lace and hosiery factories and coal mines reaped their fortunes. The Players family opened their tobacco factory. The Boots empire blossomed and a host of engineering factories sprang up, the largest being the Raleigh cycle factory. Nottingham became a commercial centre, with banks, smart shops, streets and bright lights. But out of reach of these bright lights lay suburbs like Sneinton, the Meadows, St. Annes, Radford and New Basford, where the people who had created all this wealth, the working class, resided. They lived in houses built at the behest of the factory owners, houses which took up the minimum of space and provided minimum standards of comfort, sanitation and shelter, in areas which were ill lit, unplanned and unhealthy. Until well into this century, property qualification prevented the working class from voting in Council elections and Nottingham Corporation was dominated by the 'rate payers', the same oligarchy who owned

the factories, the commercial interests, and usually also, the houses in which the workers lived, from which they extracted ample rents, bearing in mind the low wage levels of the time. The men of property lived in 'The Park', the Wollaton area, Mapperley Park and other fashionable suburbs. Improvements in working class areas had to be paid for out of the rates. The wealthy did not fancy paying higher rates. Therefore, the minimum was spent.

As this century progressed, the power of the Labour Movement grew, and with this growth in power came the abolition of property qualifications for voting. Under this pressure, Nottingham's first slum clearance programme was begun in the 1920's, when a particularly notorious slum - Broadmarsh, Warrowmarsh and Middlemarsh was knocked down. In comparison to many other industrial cities which had been hit harder by the great depression of the thirties, Nottingham's pre-war housing record was a good one and this progress was resumed during the boom years of the 1950's. This was the era of the erection of the huge council estates such as Clifton and Broxtowe. The houses, as individual dwelling units were of a relatively high standard. There, however, all praise for the efforts of the Labour Councils of those years must end: the estates were lacking in those amenities which make up a bearable community existence, an adequate supply of pubs, shops, recreational facilities and transport systems. Settled working class communities, in the old areas, with their interconnecting fabric of family ties spanning generations; and social clubs were destroyed. Workers were hearded by bureaucrats and administrators into the new working class ghettos, into the neat rows of almost identical, pink or grey dwellings. They had no say in the planning of their areas. Separated from their old friends and social ties, they were treated as units. As if to rub in their lack of status, the new council tenants found themselves subjected to all kinds of rules and regulations, forbidding them from doing this, forcing them to do that, all designed to keep people in their place.

These rules and regulations still exist. Clifton estate with a population of 40,000, 4 miles away from the city centre still has no Cinema and its young people have only one youth centre. Hardly surprisingly, the area has a high crime rate and one of the worst records of vandalism in the city.

During the early and mid 1960's there was a distinct fall off in the extent of slum clearances, down to a figure of 2 to 3 hundred demolitions a year. The rising cost of building land; plus tight fistied financial policies followed by successive Tory and Labour governments; placed considerable strain on the finances of the Corporation. Nottingham's rates were very low, relative to those in Cities of a comparable size. Increasing the rates substantially would

have gone part of the way towards raising necessary cash for council house building. But Conservatives dominated the Council for most of this period and for them such a course was anathema. In fairness, it must be said that the brief periods of Labour administration saw little change either. When money was raised, it was borrowed on the open market, at ever climbing interest rates, drastically inflating the costs of building. Therefore the minimum number of council dwellings were built, and the minimum amount of cash was spent on those that were built.

Building land prices were soaring, due largely to private speculation and profiteering. So what was the answer? Flats! Flats, to provide a high rate of population density. And how could costs be reduced even further? By employing industrialised building techniques. We had high rise flats built at Willoughby Street and Basford Crossings, huge grey tower blocks, similar in appearance to Players' bonded warehouses. The difficulties that parents have in supervising their children out playing, when resident in high rise flats are well known. Both these developments took place immediately adjacent to busy main roads. It would be unfair, however, to say that these high rise flats presented the only choice. In 1966, the Denman Street development was completed in Hyson Green. This development consists of concrete maisonettes on three or so floors. Each concrete block is joined to a similar concrete block by huge concrete bridges or ramps. Looked at from a distance, the whole thing looks like something between a hospital and a prison. Tenants have, however, claimed that the area does have one advantage and that is that you are not cut off from your neighbours. Sound proofing between dwellings is virtually non-existent. The sound of your neighbours flushing toilet comes over particularly strong. The complex is favored by a communal heating system. Heat emanates from a central tower, similar in appearance to a mill chimney. The principle upon which each dwelling is heated is unique. Hot air enters the room through vents located high on the walls. Therefore, because hot air rises, you get blistering hot ceilings and a cold room below. Even one year after construction, the grey concrete blocks were showing signs of decay. Cracks were appearing in the walls amongst other structural faults. Most of the nineteenth century slums remained standing for over 80 years. How long Denman St. and other housing developments like it can possibly last will be a problem for another generation, but not a very distant one! Meanwhile it stands as a thoroughly botched building job, built with the maximum economy and the minimum regard for comfort, privacy or taste, built on the principle that anything will do for working people.

Meanwhile, vast areas of nineteenth century style slums remained, the tiny grimy terraced houses, without indoor toilets or bathrooms, getting more decrepit with each passing year. Chief among these areas were St. Annes and 'The Meadows'. Most of the houses in St. Annes had been condemned as unfit for human habitation for many years ; a mixed blessing, because once peoples houses were condemned it became impossible for the to obtain improvement grants from the Council, and if they owned their own house, as many people in St. Annes did, they got next to nothing in compensation when their houses were finally pulled down.

The demolition of St. Annes began in 1967, and due to the researches of Notts. University students, some important lessons were learned by those who didn't already know :

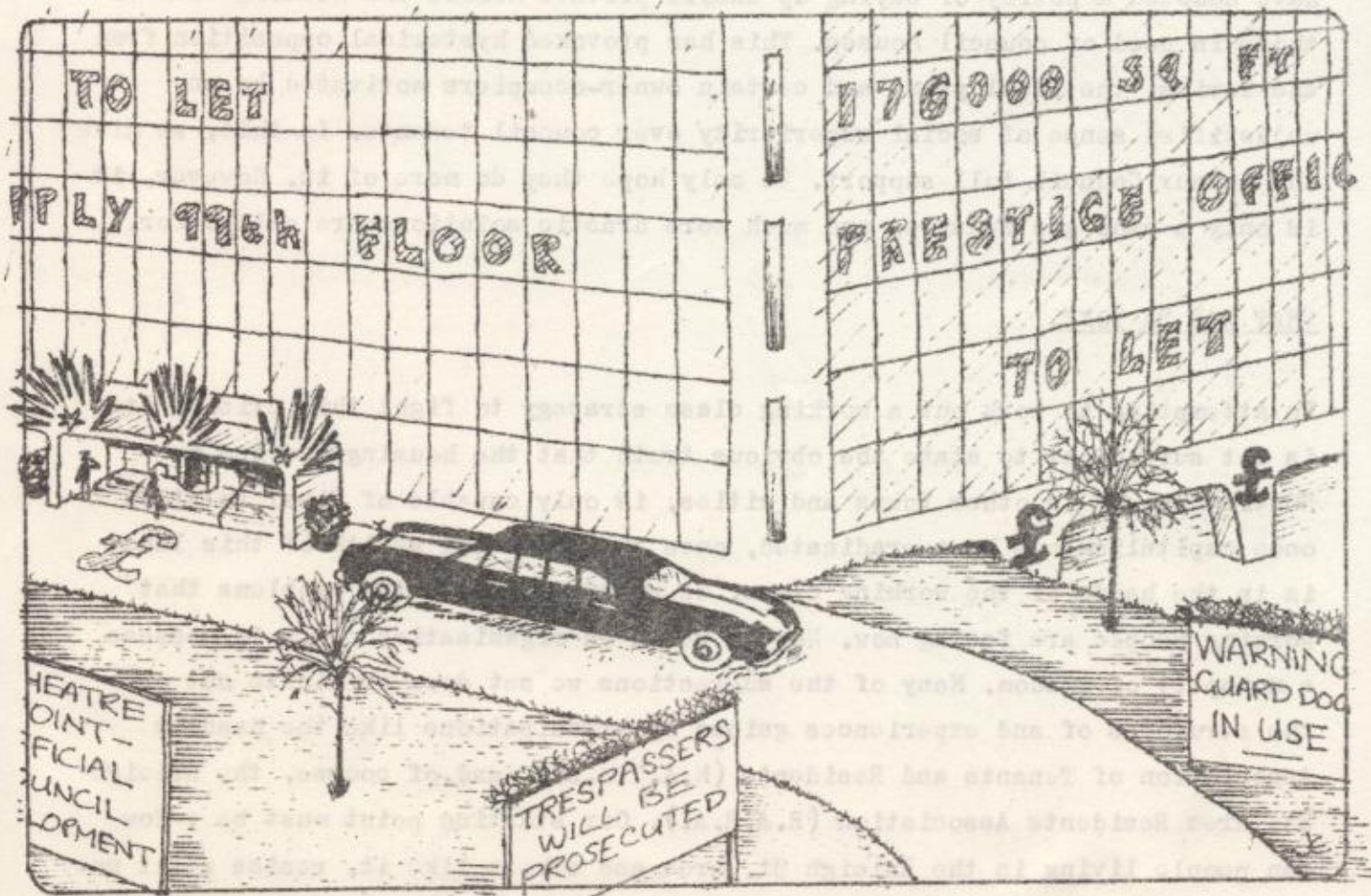
- 1, The housing problem was inseparable from the problems of low wages. People did not live in slums so much out of choice, more out of a necessity to obtain houses at relatively cheap rents.
- 2, The rents of new council houses, at present they stand at around £6 or £7 per week, were too high for many families to bear. Therefore, people moved from the clearance areas tended to drift away from the new houses, back into older areas of the city, in search of cheap houses.
- 3, Knocking down old houses does not solve 'the housing problem' it moves it. Due to a greater demand for cheap houses, and an ever diminishing supply of them, the poor areas that remain are subjected to even greater pressure, often bringing about a rise in rents in the areas concerned.

Most of the old St Annes has now been demolished, and replaced by a new housing estate. Large parts of the Meadows have also been demolished or are in the process of demolition. All in all, recent years have seen a marked upward shift in demolitions, roughly 1,600 to 2,000 houses per year since 1970. There has been one big snag however. Since 1971, the number of council houses built has been less than the number of demolitions. On present projections, the situation looks like getting worse. In the early part of this year, serious delays took place in the building programme, due to the three day week and chronic shortages of building material. Re-development in the Meadows virtually ceased. Such a state of affairs did not prevent the Council from granting outline planning permission for the building of a multi-story office block on a site near the Theatre Royal, to property developers by the name of Bentrax Investments. The luxury offices, when completed, were intended for the use of Corporation Staff and the Corporation would have paid Bentrax Investments a rental of £200,000 per year at today's prices. This was also at a time when acres of office space was already available in or around the City centre. Only a determined campaign by a hastily formed action committee, made up of organisations

from the clearance areas, individual members of the Labour Party and revolutionary socialist organisations such as ourselves, forced the Corporation to shelve its plans. However, this was a very partial victory for us. On its present figures the Corporation intends to demolish 16,990 houses in the clearance areas between 1973/4 and 1980/1. Plans exist for the building of only 10,660 new council houses - a difference of 6,330. These plans presumably assume no delays in house building brought about by economic crisis, which in itself is outrageously optimistic, given the prevailing state of British Capitalism. And that is not all!

THE CRISIS IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR.

For many years, better off families in the working class had a possible option of finding an individual solution to their housing problem - that of buying a private house through a Building society or local government mortgage. Even as late as 1969, a three bedroomed semi-detached, pre-war house could be bought in a suburb of Nottingham for around £3,500. At interest rates prevailing then on a 95% mortgage over 25 years, this would work out at a monthly mortgage repayment of between £25 and £30, with tax concessions thrown in. The owner-



occupier would end up paying little more than a council house tenant, with the added advantage that the sale price of the house would increase with inflation.

This position has drastically changed. Due to land speculation, profiteering by the building industry and the fact that for a time the Building Societies made the obtaining of mortgages easy by disgorging surplus funds, house prices soared. The same 3 bedrooomed semi would now cost well over £8,000. Mortgage interest rates have also increased, so that monthly repayments on the same kind of mortgage would now be in excess of £70; utterly and completely out of the reach of the vast majority of working class families. People living in overcrowded conditions outside the clearance areas, newly married couples, working people in general, who urgently need houses, have taken the only option left open to them - to put their names on the council house waiting list. There are at present over 9,000 people on Nottingham's waiting list. If we add our other statistic, the 6,330 gap between houses scheduled for demolition and the number of council houses projected between now and 1980/1, we begin to understand the magnitude of the crisis.

The Labour Council have shown some awareness of the situation. Recently, they have adopted a policy of buying up unsold private houses and letting them to those in need of council houses. This has provoked hysterical opposition from the Tories, the local press and certain owner-occupiers motivated by an unjustified sense of social superiority over council tenants. In this, we give the Labour Council full support. We only hope they do more of it. However, it is only a stop gap measure, and much more drastic solutions are called for.

WHAT CAN BE DONE.

In attempting to work out a working class strategy to fight this crisis, it is not sufficient to state the obvious truth that the housing problem in Nottingham, as in other towns and cities, is only capable of final solution once capitalism has been eradicated, once the power and wealth of this land is in the hands of the working class. We must start with the problems that working people are facing now. Nor do we as an organisation claim to possess a monopoly of wisdom. Many of the suggestions we set down originate out of the struggles of and experiences gained by organisations like the Meadows Association of Tenants and Residents (M.A.T.A.R.), and, of course, the Raleigh St. Area Residents Association (R.A.R.A.). Our starting point must be : How can people living in the Raleigh St. area and others like it, resist right now the problems of further decay, inbetween the present time and when the houses

are finally pulled down. To come up with ready answers is far from easy. The Corporation has designated the area for future clearance and this provides a convenient excuse for inaction on their part. It is their policy that properties due for demolition should only be kept up to a standard whereby they are 'wind and weather tight' and repairs of an urgent or emergency nature should only be dealt with under this standard.

Of course, local residents are supposed to be protected under various laws - in particular the Public Health and Housing Acts. Thus, under the Public Health Act of 1936, the local authority is obliged to suppress 'statutory nuisances', defined to include 'any premises in such a state as to be prejudicial to health or a nuisance'. Under sections 93 and 94 of the 1936 Act, where a local authority are satisfied of the existence of a statutory nuisance, they shall serve an abatement order requiring the appropriate persons to abate the nuisance. In the event of failure to comply with an abatement order, the act obliges the local authority to refer the matter to the magistrates for them to make a nuisance order. Failure to comply with this is a criminal offence.

Since the Corporation is the largest landlord in the clearance areas, we can hardly expect it to take itself to court. In fact, in a recent court case in Nottingham, the Chief Public Health Inspector admitted, while giving evidence, that he was not applying legal standards in at least 8,000 houses in Nottingham

Recently one victory was won using legal channels. Mrs. Ivy Newton, with the help of M.A.T.A.R. accused her landlords : the Nottingham Friendship Housing Association Ltd., and Nottingham Corporation, of failing to abate a 'statutory nuisance', namely her house, which had 103 defects. Before her case was finally won, however, the Labour Council appealed against the original verdict of the Magistrates.

Whilst legal victories are possible in individual cases, clearance area dweller in general, can only hope to win when backed by large Tenants Associations. Even then the legal process is costly, long winded and in any case we must be in for bigger stakes than individual victories.

Mass action, mass harrassment of the Corporation and private landlords is the only answer. They, and their employees must be plagued by constant telephone calls and public demonstrations, demanding that necessary repairs be carried out, that rubbish be cleared, that protection be given against passing, through traffic and that play facilities be provided for children. Let us ignore their

excuses about 'lack of resources', 'shortages of staff'. Those are their problems not ours. For such actions to be viable, we need, not only stronger, more broadly based Tenants Associations. We also need the help of the Trade Unions and other Labour movement organisations.

The next stage that must be faced is the problem of clearances themselves, the problems that residents of the Meadows are facing very acutely at the present time. It is intolerable that communities should be broken up, that people should only be offered accommodation on distant estates, that they should be treated as units. In May 1974, M.A.T.A.R. published an excellent pamphlet entitled 'The Meadows Is Our Home', which made this very point. The results of a survey answered by 85% of the residents in Phase 3, showed that 52% of the people wanted new houses in the Meadows itself, even if this meant big delays in demolition. What is expressed here is the desire that people have to control their own lives. Clearance area residents should have the right of veto over Corporation demolition plans. They should have control over the allocation of new houses in their own areas. They should have control over the planning of these areas, the type of houses and the provision of amenities

With regard to allocation of houses, there is no necessary conflict between clearance area residents and people on the housing waiting lists. Those on the waiting lists are usually glad to move to the more distant council estates or into previously private houses bought by the Corporation. Also a minority of clearance area residents wish to move, thus leaving vacancies which can be filled by people from the housing lists, prepared to move into new houses in areas like the Meadows.

The process of democratisation should be carried even further. Corporation rules and regulations governing council houses should be abolished. Control of council estates should be in the hands of the tenants who live there.

The fight for tenants power will not be an easy one, but it is winnable. The Corporation, its officials, even the police, could not ultimately defeat mass tenants associations, backed by the Labour movement generally, and determined enough to back to the hilt those residents resisting Corporation bureaucracy. Control, however, has to be taken; it will never be conceded voluntarily. Also a clear distinction has to be made between 'control' and 'consultation'. Consultation is the practice whereby the Corporation invites suggestions, which it then accepts or disregards. To hell with that! The tenants should make the decisions.

So far, however, we have not dealt with the housing shortage itself. Building

costs could be reduced by eliminating the profits of private building firms. This could be achieved by the Corporation doing its own building, through the setting up of a large Direct Labour Scheme. We are confident that such a scheme would be backed by U.C.A.T.T. and other building workers unions, since it would help to defeat the 'lump', i.e. the incidious use of self employed casual labour. We hope that members of the Labour Party will take up this demand and force their Councillors to implement it.

Then there is the question of building land. This is really a national political question. No land should be 'owned' by a private individual. All potential development land should be nationalised without compensation and demands should be placed on a Labour Government to do just that. Locally, we should also demand that the Corporation make compulsory purchases of all available building land and that they should pay the lowest price possible, preferably nothing at all. Tied up with this would be the abolition of the right of private estates like 'The Park' to prevent the building of cheap houses. We are all for residents control, but not when middle class people exercise such control in a discriminating way against the working class.

It is obvious that if the Corporation is going to build sufficient houses at rents that working class people can afford, or buy private houses or acquire building land, much more cash must be collected from the rates in the short term. We do not advocate rate increases for the small owner occupiers, many of whom are already crippled by high mortgage interest rates. Therefore, we do not call for an increase in the general rate in the pound. We do, however, advocate the rating of expensive properties 'until the pips squeak'. Under the present system this would require a re-assessment of rateable value of properties, which would really put the boot into business and office premises, wether occupied or unoccupied, as well as the extremely wealthy and privileged.

The housing problem in Nottingham, and elsewhere, is far too serious for there to be any hope of it being solved painlessly. The pain should therefore fall swift and hard on all those that benefit from the continuation of the 'housing problem'. Tenants Associations, the Trade Unions and Labour Party members should demand that a Labour Government immediately nationalise the Building Societies along with the property 'developers' and insurance companies.

If any of the above proposals are to be implemented, one thing and one thing only is required. The working class must use its numerical and strategic

strength. The days when we could rely on M.P.s or even Counillors to solve our problems for us are long since past, if they ever existed at all. We need Tenants Associations in which the people of a given area play a full and active part. Just a few activists, however dedicated, can very little. There must be maximum co-operation between the Tenants Associations and the Trade Unions, maximum solidarity with each others straggles large and small.

However, although this pamphlet is about the housing question, there is more to it than that. Inadequate housing is tied up with low wages and pensions, inadequate hospital facilities and sub-standard schools. We live in a society where the people who create the wealth, the working class, own very little of it. A society based on private profit and greed, privilege for some and degradation, insecurity and penny pinching for the vast majority. If we are to have an end to the present nightmare, it will be only by working people realising their own strength and acting in their own interests. Only when the working people run this country will there be a final end to slum housing, and be a possibility of creating a truly just and humane society. Once we all realise that nothing can stop us!

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