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Tenant Organizing, Rent Strikes and the Workers Movement

Rent Strikes and Building Class Power

Mike Davis

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Although Marx wrote little or nothing on the housing crisis, and Engels pointedly dismissed proffered solutions as utopian, rent gouging amidst a universal lack of affordable shelter was a central grievance of the urban working classes everywhere. By 1915, moreover, the rent strike had become a familiar weapon in the class arsenal and played an important role in fermenting revolts against the war.

The proletarian families crammed into New York's deadly "dumbbell" tenements, Barcelona's dark "beehive" slums, or Berlin's equally miserable "rent barracks" would undoubtedly have joined lustily in the chorus of the song that poor Parisians liked to sing at the turn of the century: "If you want to be happy / In the name of God / Hang your landlord!"

From midcentury, when Napoleon III unleashed Baron von Haussman and his *démolisseurs* on Paris, most of the great cities of Western and Central Europe were violently reshaped

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by great waves of speculative real-estate investment coordinated with publicly financed infrastructure mega-projects. These developments unhoused entire proletarian neighborhoods while generating huge profits for the landowners, banks, and builders who typically reclaimed the sites for middle-class residences, offices, and up-market shopping. These trends, warned Engels, threatened “to turn the city into a luxury city pure and simple.”

But Paris was only the most famous example of Victorian redevelopment and gentrification. “The spirit of Haussmann,” Engels wrote in *The Housing Question* (1872), “has also been abroad in London, Manchester and Liverpool, and seems to feel itself just as much at home in Berlin and Vienna. The result is that the workers are forced out of the centre of the towns towards the outskirts; that workers’ dwellings, and small dwellings in general, become rare and expensive and often altogether unobtainable.”

The resulting low-income housing shortage, which Engels regarded as an integral and inescapable aspect of the Industrial Revolution, necessarily gave tremendous market power to the owners of the restricted supply of tenement housing; their rack-renting, in turn, drove working-class families to take in boarders or double up in apartments. In the worst cases humans were sometimes crammed together in densities like the cargo in the holds of slave ships. In Barcelona’s Raval district (barrio chino or “Chinatown” to locals) one quarter of the Catalan working class was crammed into 2.5 square kilometers, and the narrow streets were in perpetual shadow from the jammed-together tenements. The result, not surprisingly, was Europe’s highest rate of tuberculosis—a disease that everywhere scythed down slum-dwellers, especially young adults. No wonder Raval was called a “Nursery for Revolutionaries.”

Engels and most of the founding leadership of the Socialist International considered the housing problem to be intractable under capitalism, with no reformist solution. It was, he wrote,

tions of immigrant radicals, the major New York and Buenos Aires rent strikes, as well as smaller stubborn movement ultimately prevailed, forcing the legislature in Albany to introduce rent controls in 1920—a major and enduring working-class victory.

with rather odd understatement, “one of the innumerable smaller, secondary evils which result from the present-day capitalist mode of production.” But the “inevitable slum” was nonetheless contested vigorously by socialists in New York and Vienna, syndicalists in Paris and Glasgow, and anarchists in Barcelona and Buenos Aires. “In Paris, for example, tenants went on strike in the 1880s. Led by Socialists, they withheld the rent and, to cries of ‘Long Live the Commune,’ attempted to block evictions.” A generation later, the “decidedly revolutionary” Union Syndicale des Locataires, whose “members saw the fight against landlords as a crucial part of the class struggle in general,” became a potent force in Belleville (19th and 20th arrondissements) and other proletarian districts.

In New York, the tenants’ movement in the Lower East Side was galvanized by the apartment shortage and rising rents that followed the construction of the Williamsburg Bridge in 1900, which displaced 17,000 residents. The socialist *Daily Forward*, the Yiddish-language newspaper of the Lower East Side, instigated the United Hebrew Trades, the Workman’s Circle, and the Socialist Party to organize a tenants’ movement that, after a preliminary strike in 1904, regrouped under more strictly Socialist leadership for the “great rent war of 1907,” in the midst of a short but severe national recession. Jewish tenants in the Lower East Side, Harlem, and Brownsville (a “Socialist stronghold”) hung red flags in their windows, battled police to prevent evictions, and mobbed the schleppers (movers).

Simultaneous with the last New York struggle, an even larger tenants’ strike broke out in the tenement (conventillo) districts of Buenos Aires, and by October 1907 an estimated 10 percent of the city’s population (about 120,000 residents) was refusing to pay rent to their landlords. The largely immigrant Argentine working class was the fastest growing in the world at the turn of the century, and Buenos Aires, which doubled its population in the decade after 1895, was an overcrowded boom-

town where rack-renting was profligate. The more energetic of the country's two labor federations, the anarchist Federación Obrera Regional Argentina (FORA), had decided at its Sixth Congress in 1906 to encourage the formation of a tenant strike movement. The strikes a year later were largely unsuccessful in their immediate objectives, but, as James Baer emphasizes, were strategically important in mobilizing proletarian women and non-union workers for general strikes that were soon to follow.

The major New York and Buenos Aires rent strikes, as well as smaller struggles in dozens of contemporary cities, were propelled by sudden rent hikes and their ad hoc organization did not survive the immediate struggles. But the food and fuel shortages of the First World War, affecting non-belligerent as well as combatant countries, generated a deeper, more organic subsistence crisis, lasting years, that made all cost-of-living issues explosive. When landlords in Glasgow, for example, hiked rents in 1915, they were soon faced by resistance on a scale hitherto unimaginable. "The movement was particularly strong in Govan," writes James Hinton, "where a women's housing committee led by a previously unknown housewife, Mrs Barlow, organized constant propaganda meetings (including factory gate meetings), rent strikes and physical resistance to evictions." In October a general rent strike was declared. When landlords' agents ("factors") took the female strike leaders to court, workers poured out of the shipyards and 15,000 angry protestors surrounded the Courthouse. One of

the rent strikers accosted the Sheriff: "You hear the voice of the people out in the street. That is the workers of the upper reaches of the Clyde. These men will only resume work in the event of you deciding against the factors; if you do not, it means that the workers on the lower reaches will stop work tomorrow and join them." As Hinton notes in his history, "legal niceties tumbled before the blast, and the Sheriff did as he was told." When the movement spread to Birkenhead and London,

the Asquith government capitulated and froze rents at the 1914 level.

Two years later, a new cycle of cost-of-living and anti-landlord protests was an integral part of the great labor revolts of 1917–19. New York, with the Socialist Party in a leadership role, was again in the vanguard of these struggles, along with Petrograd, Berlin, Barcelona, and Paris. What aggravated the situation to the breaking point was the acute fuel shortage in the winter of 1917–18, the result of the near breakdown of the eastern seaboard rail system as the Wilson administration rushed arms and supplies to the ports to re-equip European allies while simultaneously building huge stockpiles for an American expeditionary force. In the face of these priorities, there was simply not enough rolling stock to supply adequate quantities of coal to the big cities. In the midst of the bitterest winter in a generation, landlords turned off heat while refusing to reduce rents or, in some cases, brazenly raising them. "Life in the tenements was 'beyond description,' said a social worker. 'Gas is frozen, homes are dark, no water in the toilets, sanitary conditions unspeakable, faces blue and pinched from the bitter cold and ever so many kiddies down with pneumonia.'"

A massive rent war was fought out in a series of battles from 1917 to 1920, and spread across the East River from Harlem and the Lower East Side to Williamsburg and the south Bronx under the aegis of the Greater New York Tenants League. As news of the revolutions in Russia electrified New York's tens of thousands of Socialist Party supporters, the "Bolsheviki rent strikes," as landlords began to call them, sometimes took on the air of revolutionary rather than merely reformist struggles. "At a mass meeting of the East Side Tenants League," for example, "several Socialists spoke out in favor of taking the tenement houses from the landlords and turning them over to the tenants." Despite the continuing repression of the Socialist Party, followed by the infamous Palmer raids and the mass deporta-