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Ireland

The Irish government needs to stop protecting property developers and start looking out for its people

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Rents are soaring and the government is hand-in-glove with property moguls. Oliver Eagleton reports on the activists fighting for a fairer housing system.

Ten years after the financial crash, Irish politicians have doubled down on the narrative of ‘recovery’. The centre-right Fine Gael government claims to have beaten the recession and established a ‘Republic of Opportunity’, wresting economic sovereignty back from the IMF after years of punitive austerity. Yet, with the country’s official homeless population reaching 10,000, an acute housing crisis threatens to undercut this optimism.

Rent prices have risen by 12 percent this year, with the nationwide average now at €1,261 per month. The rate of illegal evictions has jumped to five per week, but the government refuses to pass anti-eviction legislation or fund social housing projects. Instead, it sits on 350 vast – yet dormant – sites with no plans to develop them, and allows 198,000 homes across the country to lie empty. In lieu of affordable accommodation it has approved the construction of 79 luxury hotels throughout Dublin, and in 2017 it sold one of the most apposite areas for social housing to private energy company, which proceeded to build an expensive, inefficient and environmentally damaging incinerator.

Meanwhile, the state’s Land Development Agency – tasked with tackling the crisis – has stated that only one in ten new homes will be social housing, whereas 60 percent will be reserved for commercial development. Last month, it did nothing to stop the sale of 15,000 mortgages to Cerberus Capital and Lone Star – vulture funds with a history of enforcing mass evictions and accelerating gentrification. Ireland’s largest housing charity has estimated that at least one family is pushed into homelessness every day by these disastrous policies.

Fine Gael’s strategy is motivated by its desire to attract foreign investment (which would decline with the introduction of stricter rent controls or tenants’ rights) and its middle-class voter base, many of whom are single-ownership landlords. So far, the party has shown that these imperatives outweigh the costs of a protracted housing shortage.

But now, as a network of housing activists begins a campaign of large-scale civil disobedience, the government’s complacency is being tested. On August 7, a coalition of student groups, migrant organisations and renters’ unions gathered in Dublin. With the support of leftist parties such as Solidarity and People Before Profit, they marched to an inner-city property from which 40 Brazilian migrants were evicted last May, gained entry, faced down police officers, and reclaimed the vacant house.

Their occupation marked the inception of Take Back the City – an activist movement which is fighting the effects of FG’s manufactured crisis by seizing buildings and combatting evictions across Ireland. Although the rate of tenants defying eviction orders has risen by 25 percent in 2018 alone, these acts of resistance have been mostly local and spontaneous. TBTC promises to translate such energies into a coordinated political intervention. They have pledged to target empty properties until the state brings them into public ownership through compulsory purchase orders, builds social housing to meet demand, and caps rent prices at 20 percent of income.

Once a court injunction ordered the protesters to leave the inner-city house, they staged a sit-in at the offices of housing minister Eoghan Murphy and occupied a second property on Frederick Street. This time, TBTC’s widespread endorsements from charities, community groups and local residents emboldened them to ignore the landlord’s eviction notice. They stayed there for three weeks, with hundreds turning out to support their efforts, until a gang of security guards descended on the residence. These private-hire enforcers wore balaclavas and used electric saws to force their way inside the house, assisted by a police riot squad and public order unit. One activist had his hand cut open with an angle grinder after being thrown down the building’s stairwell. Another suffered a concussion and tissue

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damage to his neck after he was assaulted by five policemen. By the end of the evening, six activists were arrested and four needed medical attention. This pattern repeated itself over the following days, as militarised police units were deployed to turf two families out of their homes. When footage surfaced of the riot squad violently beating Frederick Street occupiers, the Irish justice minister announced plans to criminalise the filming of policemen.

This intimidation of peaceful protestors is reminiscent of Ireland's anti-water charge movement, which saw 188 people arrested between 2014 and 2015 for campaigning against the new domestic tax. Last year, 23 anti-water charge activists narrowly escaped life sentences for 'false imprisonment' after they led a sit-down protest in front of a government minister's car. But just as this shamelessly political policing galvanised popular support for Ireland's anti-austerity movement (forcing the government to abandon its water charges policy), the attacks on housing activists have been equally counterproductive.

Since the Frederick Street eviction, support for TBTC has surged, with rallies attracting thousands and offshoots emerging in Belfast and Waterford. Numerous families in precarious accommodation have contacted TBTC, which has been leading grassroots resistance to evictions, providing occupation workshops and raising awareness in the national media. At the time of writing, a countrywide 'day of action' is underway, with dozens of marches calling on the government to tackle the crisis. Activists have occupied two new houses in the capital, and assembled for a major demonstration on October 3.

If TBTC maintains this momentum, it could increase support for Ireland's progressive parties, reshape the housing debate, and pressure councils to issue compulsory purchase orders. Last week, an independent report commissioned by the Department of Finance recommended the urgent use of Compulsory Purchase Orders to buy up vacant homes. FG has already introduced legislation to increase the state's capacity to forcibly acquire property. The problem is that this measure is often used to transfer privately owned farmland to multinational corporations; when it comes to housing rough sleepers, the government is far more reluctant to exercise this right.

As pictures of homeless families sleeping in police stations circulate on social media, the government's steadfast protection of landlords is stoking public anger. Only through TBTC's brave and inspiring use of direct action – supplemented by parliamentary efforts from left parties – can we challenge this alliance.

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