

URBAN RENEWAL-

SHAM CAPITALIST REFORMS

General Background

The idea of urban renewal, i.e., inner city revitalization and slum clearance, was an invention of government officials and petty-bourgeois social reformers alike. Hailed as a panacea for physical blight and substandard housing, it has now turned into a curse for a majority of Third World and working class communities that it has touched. At worse it has destroyed the livelihood of the people; at best it has engendered frustration and rampant poverty-pimping and cooptation of community "leaders." The importance of urban renewal lies in that it has aroused the masses to organize around community issues --i.e., primarily, defending the standard of living (democratic rights). It has been an area which has exposed the bourgeoisie as crooks just buying time and buying off. It has tempered and educated many Third World and working class people through experience in struggle. It has shown them that even poverty programs don't help the poor, only the capitalists, as usual. Urban renewal, a tool of the ruling class, is naturally executed in their best interests. Urban renewal and housing programs have been the concern of the bourgeoisie only when politically expedient and have always benefited the petty bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie more than the working class and poor.

Even public housing, government-owned housing for the poor, was built during the New Deal years [1933-37] after the Depression in order to make work and boost the economy and satisfy the housing needs of the petty bourgeoisie who had been pushed into the ranks of the unemployed by economic crisis. The bourgeoisie was forced to help its closest allies--the so-called "undeserved poor"--who remained the buffer between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In 1949 Congress passed a Housing Act which stated its purpose to be the "realization as soon as feasible of the goals of a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family." Of the 810,000 public housing units to be built in six years, only 460,000--a little over half--were built in 18 years. What was built looked like barracks or high-rise prisons, islands in asphalt. Most of what exists is decrepit, rat and roach-infested housing where elevators are broken, broken plumbing leaks constantly, and corridors are dank and offal. This is what the government considers "decent housing" for the people! Some "models" like Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis became so dangerously unfit for human habitation that they had to be razed. In Philadelphia, Newark and New York tenants have waged major protracted rent strikes to fight for better living conditions and to stop government abandonment.

Today the housing need is estimated at over 10 million dwelling units. What has been done about it proves that bourgeois laws give only lip service to serving the needs of the people. Yet during all these years the capitalists have been spending billions militarizing the economy, paying depletion allowances to oil cartels, and cutting the "middle class", i.e., the petty bourgeoisie who can afford to own their own homes, tax breaks on FHA mortgages--at the same time attacking the livelihood of the working class through shifting the burden of the economic crisis onto their backs.

The Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement of the 60's raised the consciousness of the masses to the national oppression of Black and other Third World people. The riots of the mid-60's climaxed the country's attention--especially the bourgeoisie's, on the plight of the national minorities. In response to the militant struggles in the Black community, the demonstrated failure of the Housing Act of 1949, and the inadequacy of social welfare programs, the Housing Act of 1968 along with other reformist legislation was passed by Congress. As usual, the criteria for eligibility for subsidized housing were so stringent few people could qualify. Of those that did, maybe 10% obtained housing with subsidized rents or mortgages. Moreover, the token monies the ruling class was willing to appropriate were terminated when Nixon imposed a moratorium in January 1973 about the time he also cut back on welfare programs. These acts have served only to arouse the indignation of Third World and working class communities where either housing is being continuously destroyed and not replaced or working people are being priced out of their neighborhoods by the influx of petty bourgeois professionals returning from the suburbs. Bourgeois reforms are empty talk aimed at appeasing the exploited and oppressed.

How It Works

Basically urban renewal allows a government agency to exercise the power of eminent domain¹ to condemn land in an urban renewal area²--i.e., a "blighted"³ part of the city. It authorizes the use of government funds

¹ eminent domain: the right to take land for projects promoting the "public good."

² urban renewal area: an area of a city designated by public ordinance to be blighted according to certain set criteria concerning rate of vacancy, building conditions, etc.

³ blighted: substandard but still habitable; afflicted with signs of physical decay, but not yet dilapidated.

(tax money wrung out of the American people) to buy land, raze buildings, prepare it for construction, or offer financial advantages to a developer or financier. Generally, land for sale at a below market rate is the plum from which the capitalists pluck their profit.

Although purportedly in the interests of the poor and "moderate income," i.e., the majority of Third World and working people, more urban renewal money disappears into the pockets of large real estate corporations, developers, and banks under the guise of slum clearance and inner city revitalization. Even money legislated for the Neighborhood Development Program (NDP) to build housing and community facilities has been seized by agencies tied in with real estate interests for subsidizing large central city office buildings and shopping complexes. Who profits from this? Clearly not the people. Real estate corporations, banks, big time contractors, and developers (who combine various functions of the other three) profit from the use of public money which subsidizes their schemes. Public agencies such as redevelopment authorities condemn and assemble land (i.e., buy up numerous small parcels to combine into large ones) at no cost to the developer. Moreover, in most cases the cost of the land is also underwritten to sell for a fraction of the real value so the capitalists pay even less than the market rate. In addition, tremendous mortgage advantages, such as extremely low rates, longer terms, and smaller down payments, are provided as "attractions." This has happened in every sizeable city across the country from projects like New York's Coliseum to the Golden Gateway development in San Francisco to Boston's Charlesgate development and the proposed Market Street East complex in Philadelphia.

As Engels states in the Housing Question, As long as the capitalist mode of production continues to exist it is folly to hope for an isolated settlement of the housing question or any other social question affecting the lot of workers. (p.71)

Thus, when housing is built in communities, it is inevitably only a token attempt to satisfy the housing needs of the people. Community people are learning that bourgeois law does not promise anything; nothing is gained without intense struggle. The capitalist bureaucracy takes at least three years to get subsidized housing constructed. Meanwhile, families dislocated have to find housing outside the community or that they can't comfortably afford. Usually because of bureaucracy and funding snags land is allowed to stand vacant for as long as ten years! More and more housing is destroyed and less and less put up so the increased demand and limited supply aggravate the hardship of the working class family who in the end pays higher rents for more crowded quarters. It is not unusual for families to have been shuttled from one home to another because of the creeping hand of urban renewal over the neighborhoods in the center city. Moreover, programs for rehabilitation are designed with impossible requirements so that only a minute percentage of community residents can benefit. Just as with the other housing programs, mainly the small number of the lower stratum of the petty bourgeoisie who live in the community rather than the majority of working class residents benefit. Even high rise housing for

the elderly mainly benefits the private investors who get a fat tax shelter.

Other Solutions to the Housing Problem

The housing shortage is "a necessary" product of a bourgeois social order; [that] it cannot fail to be present in a society in which the great labouring masses are exclusively dependent upon wages." (Engels, p. 41) As Engels points out, the housing shortage is not a problem peculiar to any one period, but that all oppressed classes in all periods suffered from it.

Today the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie continue to try to "solve" the housing problem. Some recently publicized "solutions" to the housing problem include using special revenue sharing money, giving families housing allowances, and urban homesteading.

Revenue sharing--a lump sum grant from the federal government to the locality--shifts the responsibility for providing decent housing to the local government. Instead of federal programs the focus is on "decentralized" local programs. However, there are no stipulations that this money necessarily be used for social welfare programs or housing; it is completely up to the discretion of the city or the state to use it to pay off budget deficits or give its city council pay raises. It relieves the localities from conforming to federal regulations written by bourgeois liberals for housing grants which in writing demanded plans for supplying adequate low and moderate income housing. It is reactionary in that people like Daley and Rizzo can use this money for enlarging the police force as well as anything else besides housing. The only "advantage" is that the revenue sharing money is a potential city-wide issue around which to agitate. The masses can be organized to confront the local bourgeois politicians.

A housing allowance program which is being proposed will grant families additional money to enable them to rent market rate units. Because this plan does not provide for the construction of any new housing to displace existing substandard units and because it will place working class families in competition with the lower stratum of the petty bourgeoisie for housing, it will in effect jack up prices for housing in neighborhoods where people live now. It is unlikely especially with the economic conditions as such that at the scale it would probably be implemented that it would have any stimulating effect on the construction industry. Furthermore, it threatens to disperse communities. Since housing is not being replaced as it deteriorates, families will have to move out. This program only offers another way in which administrators can embezzle money.

Urban homesteading, a popular idea, transplants the idea of frontier homesteading to the inner city. It attempts to deal with the large number of abandoned houses which exist in the inner city. It is a contradiction of capitalist society that there are thousands of vacant houses while on the other hand there is a housing shortage for working class and poor families. The concept is to turn over publicly-owned vacant housing to families at nominal cost and let them renovate them in return for the deed to the property. This has great appeal--even to politici-

ans--because it costs relatively little and embodies the "self-help" approach. This is a thoroughly utopian approach incorporating the petty bourgeois ideal of each individual owning his own home. However, not only will the economic crisis and inflation make it increasingly difficult for working class and poor families to borrow money (the rate is already 9 1/2%) to make improvements--in which case they stand to lose all the labor they have put into the house and the opportunity to obtain the deed, but also real estate interests are directly opposed to more working class and poor families gaining a foothold in the city. Through political maneuvering for a "blighted" classification, they lie in wait for real estate killings. They have been waiting to land bank blocks of abandoned buildings in order to eventually rebuild whole sections of the city into high cost housing and luxury apartments and shopping malls to attract the upper stratum of the petty bourgeoisie back from the suburbs--in effect to eliminate any kind of housing anywhere for poor or working class families who by and large are priced out of the suburbs. The bourgeoisie can make a profit out of workers' housing but makes more out of constructing more expensive units. The band-aid approach of urban home-steading will be thwarted by lack of financing, overly stringent building codes, and the basic opposition of real estate interests.

Third World and Working Class Neighborhoods: Most Vulnerable to Destruction

In the 1840's Engels wrote about the bourgeoisie's "Hausmann" method of settling the housing question:

By "Hausmann", I mean the practice, which has now become general, of making breaches in the working-class quarters of our big cities, particularly in those which are centrally situated, irrespective of whether this practice is occasioned by considerations of public health and beautification or by traffic requirements, such as the laying down of railways, streets, etc. No matter how different the reasons may be, the result is everywhere the same; the most scandalous alleys and lanes disappear to the accompaniment of lavish self-glorification by the bourgeoisie on account of this tremendous success.

(p. 69)

Today the communities of the oppressed people--i.e., the Third World and working class neighborhoods--fall victim to "Hausmann" under a different name, "urban renewal."

Why have highways, luxury high-rise apartments, and shopping centers disrupted and destroyed our communities? Because the capitalists' economic logic of profit demands it and they have been considered the path of least resistance--lacking in political organization, money, and prestige. Agencies often break laws thinking that communities don't have the wisdom or resources to threaten litigation. For inner city communities adjacent to the central business district land values have consistently risen over the years so that the capitalist market now finds it more profitable to buy up or have urban renewal lend its hand in condemning and razing

homes and small businesses for real estate corporations and banks. The bourgeois politicians sometimes have additional motives: destruction or dispersal of the ghetto means a dispersal of a hostile voting bloc. This has the same effect as gerrymandering but the advantage of a "justifiable" disguise.

Third World and working class neighborhoods are often classified as "blighted"--i.e., they are run-down, ill-maintained, and substandard. They are, in fact, physically lower grade communities because not only have the people been exploited as workers but the community itself on account of its population--particularly, in the case of the oppressed national minorities--has been neglected in terms of city services, schools, and playgrounds. Moreover, absentee slumlords--often straw men for banks and other large corporations--abound and profit from cheating people by selling and renting out deteriorated properties, not maintaining them, and from taking tax write-offs for depreciation and upkeep (another way the law favors the rich and propertied). The capitalist system has instituted this de facto discrimination by class. Once classified as blighted, communities are vulnerable to condemnation and demolition by public authorities. Even the fact that there may be a high percentage of homeowners does not move the government and business interests to uphold the sacredness of private property for Third World and working people. Their profit comes first.

In fact, a typical redevelopment agency proclaimed a Black and white ethnic working class neighborhood as being "blighted"; at the same time they proclaimed it a "historic district" and passed laws so that only people who could afford to restore these houses to their original historical condition could own them. As a result all the original residents had to sell out to the redevelopment agency who in turn offered 3% loans (below market rate) to petty bourgeois professionals who moved in and "renewed" the downtown. All the working class tenants were forced to leave their community--their friends, clubs, schools, and institutions. What was once a neighborhood of poor and working people became a bourgeois showcase of urban renewal for the rich. Whether it is building luxury housing or highways, the bourgeois interests always step on those in the way on the pretext of raising the city's tax base to make way for the influx of upper stratum petty bourgeoisie. The government officials and business men who "plan" and "finance" these schemes to "revitalize" the inner city not only feel gratified that they have been able to get rid of a "lower class" eyesore, but also profit more from assisting the local bourgeoisie and upper stratum of petty bourgeoisie.

A look at the Asian communities in the U.S. reveals what looks like an attempt at systematic extinction. The economic and political laws of capitalism have signified the destruction of Japantowns and Chinatowns as well as Black and Latin communities. Detroit's Chinatown was totally wiped out. In Chicago and Boston, institutional expansion or highway construction has halved Chinatown. Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown is threatened by the construction of the Eisenhower Convention Center--as planned, it will demolish practically all the Chinatown businesses. In Philadelphia, highway construction and urban renew-

al in the form of a big commercial complex threaten to choke the community from further growth and destroy its major community facility. In San Francisco, most of the original Japantown has been replaced by a huge Japanese capitalist tourist center. More demolition of homes is imminent. Little Tokyo in Los Angeles is threatened also by the destruction of homes and small businesses for the erection of a multi-million dollar hotel complex financed by overseas Japanese capital. In the Japanese community the issues of community destruction as a manifestation of national oppression are obscured by the influx of international Japanese money but the class contradictions become more evident. Furthermore, housing conditions and the encroachment of the downtown business district have left only the elderly Issei (first generation) besides small restaurants and shops. Because much of the destruction had already begun before the widespread upsurge of spontaneous mass actions and community struggles, only a few tenant families remain in Japantown, San Francisco.

In the Asian communities that still remain, militant mass struggles are going on to fight to preserve and expand the community. United fronts have been formed linking the working class, the students, the lower stratum of the petty bourgeoisie (shop keepers, restaurant owners, etc.) and the upper stratum of petty bourgeois professionals. Asian people are beginning to recognize more deeply their common oppression and struggle with other Third World and working class people.

Sham Reforms

Urban renewal and housing programs--like all other social reform--are a sham under the capitalist system. Their intent is to appease and divert the attention of the masses. These programs encourage in-fighting among community groups over money, isolate issues within communities to prevent widely based coalitions, and alienate many community people who see corruption and their so-called leaders coopted and programs grossly ineffective. Bourgeois reforms will never solve the problems of housing or poor living conditions and community destruction--which will all worsen as the imperialist crisis worsens and superprofits are extracted from the workers at home rather than from the Third World countries. Because of the cries of the reactionary sectors of the petty bourgeoisie and the labor aristocracy against increased tax burdens and giving "charity" to the oppressed minorities and the poor, politicians have axed social welfare programs. As we have seen, the capitalists have cut social welfare programs because they are "inflationary"; yet the capitalists will do all they can to prop up the economy through increased military spending. Over the last ten years, government expenditures on housing and urban renewal have averaged about 2% of defense spending. Ignoring the declining living standards of the working class, the capitalists are proceeding to implement fiscal policy which will raise unemployment and aggravate the exploitation of the working class. The front for workers' struggles will not only be on the job but in the community after work--this is especially so for Third World people. It is necessary for Communists to be involved in the struggle for democratic rights in order to provide leadership for the mass struggle.

Only through their own experience will the masses see that bourgeois democracy must be destroyed in order for them to be free of exploitation and the conditions of their livelihood guaranteed. The problem of inadequate housing and community facilities for Third World and working class communities will not be solved till the advent of socialism. It is intricately bound up with the institution of private property and the fact that the ownership of the means of production lies in the hands of the bourgeoisie--the bosses. As Engels states,

The solution lies in the abolition of the capitalist mode of production and the appropriation of all the means of subsistence and instruments of labor by the working class itself. (p. 71)

The Role of Communists

As Communists we are obligated to declare the struggle for democratic rights as part of our program, as one part of a strategy in the overall struggle to overthrow imperialism. We must use this as one means of injecting the working class struggle with Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-tung Thought. We must merge the Communist movement with the working class struggle.

1. To propagandize and expose the bourgeois' hypocrisy. Show how little these sham social welfare programs benefit the working class and the poor and who reaps the profit. Show why there is no decent housing for Third World and working class families. The interests of capitalist business and its marriage to bourgeois government must be exposed and people's consciousness broadened to understand that until they are in control of both, exploitation will continue. In Third World communities destruction by urban renewal is another manifestation of national as well as class oppression. Agitate around local community issues and city-wide issues.
2. To develop mass organizations and mass support around urban renewal and housing issues. A mass base is crucial. To encourage coalitions among community groups with similar struggles. It is necessary to stress the similarities among Third World and working class struggles to point out the more clearly the common source of oppression and the necessity to see exploitation in terms of class and not just national lines. Although many community leaders are coopted by the struggle, there are honest elements who have close ties with the masses, have had much experience in militant struggles. It is necessary to give these people political leadership.
3. To advocate a militant struggle for democratic rights. To emphasize the importance of mass actions through demonstrations, picketing, disruption of meetings, forums, and public hearings, or blocking construction activity. To just go through administrative channels to demand our rights is playing the game by the rules of the bourgeoisie. To deny the power of mass actions is to deny the strength of the united will of the people. Use all legal tools to the advantage of the mass struggle. Many times the contradictions between the real intent of the bourgeoisie and some of their democratic laws can be exploited to the people's advantage. Litiga-

tion around civil rights issues, environmental protection and relocation laws and legal technicalities, extensive use of the bourgeois media, and contradictions between local politicians must be exploited. All these are tactics that can be used to direct the blow at the government and big business. This is using legal forms of struggle to intensify the illegal. Democratic rights struggles by their very nature are protracted; government welfare agencies devote full-time staff and have a huge amount of resources at their disposal. Working people have little time outside of work and are unfamiliar with the technical aspects of this situation. Strong mass organizations with committed people guided by the correct political outlook are absolutely necessary for this kind of prolonged struggle.

4. To raise just and correct demands, not pragmatic ones which sell out the democratic rights of the masses on principle. The masses' consciousness must be raised to understand that it is necessary to raise the fullest demands on the basis of principle--the issue is decent living conditions for all communities, decent affordable housing for everyone is a right--and that their struggle is not separate from others. The masses must be led to challenge the capitalist institutions and government agencies. Frequently, it is tactically prudent to advance concrete demands. Struggling and negotiating to achieve these often reveal all the clearer the machinations of the government agencies and the bourgeois politicians. However, it must be propagandized that achieving these demands is not enough and that it is only one step in the total struggle. Once advances are made through militant action, more people will be convinced that the federal government and city hall can be fought. Moreover, it must be repeatedly stated that the failure to provide just demands for decent housing and community facilities is a result --not of corruption or ignorant racist policymakers in themselves--but of the capitalist system which is concerned with profit and not the welfare of the people. Whether the local government can afford it or that it can not set a precedent by allocating so much money to one community is not the issue. The issue is the right of the people who pay taxes and are the key producers of this country to government subsidy--i.e., their own money-- and a decent guaranteed livelihood.

5. To organize and wage a struggle within the community against opportunists, poverty pimps, and the petty bourgeois liberal reformists. It is important to expose these elements publicly and defeat their actions and ideology to prevent subversion of the mass struggle.

6. Fight against the danger of fascism. In America racism and pragmatism are the vehicles by which fascism rides into power. The bourgeoisie will attempt to exploit democratic rights issues to divide the working class along national lines over racial issues. It is an attempt to deceive sectors of the working class into thinking that the interests of the oppressed national minorities are diametrically opposed to their own, rather than part and parcel of the same struggle. It is an attempt to denigrate the revolutionary role of the oppressed national

minorities in fighting for better living standards and portray them as the cause for the deterioration of living standards--thus masking the criminal role of the bourgeoisie and its economic crisis. Perpetrating division along national lines in order to weaken the working class is a tactic especially dangerous with the worsening of material conditions and the deepening desperation of the bourgeoisie in economic crisis. Under these conditions the bourgeoisie looks for scapegoats to divert the attention of the masses--including sectors of the petty bourgeoisie who are panicstricken at the prospect of sinking into the proletariat.

The bus ing of Third World school children to schools in predominantly white ethnic working class communities and attempts to place drug rehabilitation centers there which would also serve Third World people are common instances where white chauvinism and reactionary emotionalism have been provoked. The housing issue is especially susceptible to this where public housing is concerned. Because of anti-discrimination laws government policy is not to locate low income housing in so-called "racially impacted" areas. The bourgeoisie although seeming to "desegregate" housing generally makes it impossible to be built because of the fears of the predominantly white working class communities that Third World working class families and lumpen proletariat will cause the neighborhood to deteriorate. White working class communities are the only alternative to sites in Third World communities because land there is also usually relatively cheap. Using these situations the bourgeoisie plays on the incorrect ideas of the bourgeoisified and reactionary sectors of the working class. Because the bourgeoisie permits only a limited supply of subsidized housing to be built, even among Third World people the stage for in-fighting for the location of dwelling units has been set to accentuate prejudice and set national minorities against each other.

This intensification of division within the working class fostered by racist ideology sets an objective basis for the ushering in of the now rising danger of fascism. This poses a serious question in our strategy to build the unity of the class in the struggle against imperialism. We must expose the bourgeoisie's rampant propagation of reactionary ideology--racism, occultism, mysticism, and religious fanaticism, all set the foundation for justifying extreme repression and open terroristic rule. (See our article on "Community Control" in this issue for a further discussion on dealing with the danger of fascism.)

As Communists and conscious elements in the class struggle, we must be vigilant that we do not tail behind the masses and in essence worship spontaneity. In leading a struggle with correct class aims, we must struggle against bourgeois ideology often mouthed by petty bourgeois elements who by virtue of their class background, education, means of livelihood, and leisure time take an active role in community struggles. Among the working class it is important to combat incorrect ideas which are a result of the bourgeois superstructure. We must firmly grasp revolutionary theory, propagate

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it, and apply it according to the concrete conditions at hand. Our deep concern for the well-being of the masses must manifest itself in our indignation with all kinds of oppression and all signs of injustice in society.

The urban renewal struggle is an important opportunity around which to propagandize, agitate, and organize. It is one facet of the struggle to protect and improve the living standards of the working class -one facet of the struggle for democratic rights. Its significance is its potential for organizing the masses. It is one avenue by which the masses will see the duplicity of the capitalists' government and its brutal disregard for workers' livelihood. As Lenin said, the experience of the masses themselves is invaluable in raising their consciousness.