

Rent Strike in the Gorbals

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Collective action to withhold rent payments represents one of the more militant responses which tenants, in either the public or private sector, can make to housing problems.¹ Britain has a long and, in terms of outcome and results, chequered history of rent strikes. This history embraces such well-known and mass strikes as those in Clydeside (1915 and 1921-26), St. Pancras, London (1959-61) and East London (1968-70)² through to numerous, ill-documented, localized actions which were not part of broad-based campaigns and which, invariably, lacked the active political support of the labour and trade union movement. For very understandable political and sociological reasons the existing British literature on rent strikes has concentrated, almost exclusively, on these big events and, as a consequence, the prescriptions for action and organization have tended to emphasize the need for mass mobilization, joint action with trade unions and the rent strikes as a weapon in class confrontation.

“A rent strike . . . must be backed up by industrial action if it is to be effective”³

For tenants' leaders and community workers these historical experiences can be a source of inspiration but, at the same time, they can also be a powerful source of political self-paralysis when it comes to responding to immediate housing problems. Is a rent strike a non-starter as an action strategy if it is not part of a city, regional or even national campaign? Is a rent strike doomed to failure if there is no prospect of anything more than token rhetorical support from the labour and trade union movement? Are selective and localized strikes, which are aimed at winning reformist concessions on repairs and slum conditions, only a form of 'pseudo' event⁴ when compared with mass strikes?

This article describes a selective rent strike over dampness which is still, after six years, being organized in the Gorbals district of Glasgow. During this period the Gorbals strike has lacked all the classical ingredients for 'effectiveness'—such as trade union support and being part of a city-wide movement—but it has achieved, along with a battery of other pressure group and legal strategies, a significant series of gains and victories for the local tenants—rehousing, financial compensation, a rates reduction and the promise of a remedial programme for the damp flats.⁵ The article describes the salient characteristics and stages of the Gorbals rent strike and concludes with a brief note on the value of the strike as a local response to housing problems.

Gorbals: Damp Flats

Gorbals was once notorious for its overcrowded, insanitary, slum tenements. Today, parts of the 'new' Gorbals are becoming equally notorious for insanitary conditions in damp-ridden, modern flats. One in five of the area's housing stock suffers from some

1. Rent (and rates) strikes need not, of course, only focus on housing problems. One of the largest recent rent and rate strikes in Britain, occurred in Northern Ireland as a protest against internment. It has been estimated that, at its peak, 25,800 tenants were on strike. See: J. Darby and A. Williamson (eds.), *Violence and the Social Services in Northern Ireland*, Heinemann, 1978, p. 107.

2. For brief details see B. Moorehouse, M. Wilson, and C. Chamberlain, *Rent Strikes—Direct Action and the Working Class in the Socialist Register*, Merlin Press, 1972.

3. Cowley, J. et al., *Community or Class Struggle?*, Stage 1, 1977, p. 244.

4. This phrase is used by Moorehouse et al. (*op. cit.*), to describe selective, localized, strikes organized by community workers in the U.S.A.

5. For details on this campaign see Bryant, R., *The Dampness Monster*, Scottish Council of Social Service, 1979.

form of dampness. In the worst affected district, the Hutchesontown 'E' Scheme, over 60 per cent of the flats are damp.⁶ This Scheme consists of 12 blocks of 7-storey low-rise and two 24-storey high-rise blocks. In all, there are 1,143 flats in the scheme and they range, in age, from eight to ten years old. The flats are constructed of prefabricated, dense, heavyweight concrete panels: solid pre-cast concrete floors, walls and ceilings. This prefabricated design is known as an industrialized building system and the proprietary name, in the case of the Gorbals flats, is 'Tracoba'. This system was developed in France and the sole concessionaries in Britain are Gilbert Ash (Structures) Ltd.⁷ Industrialized building systems were introduced into the United Kingdom in the early 1960s and they were seen as a cheaper and speedier response to the housing demands which prevailed at the time. They also offered the prospect of increased profitability for private contractors, especially in terms of cutting labour costs and increasing site labour productivity.

The first tenants moved into the new flats late in 1971 and, within months, complaints about dampness were being reported. The term 'dampness' has been used by the Gorbals tenants to describe the conditions in their flats—wet, black walls, fungal growth on furnishings and musty smells. The cause of this dampness is excessive condensation due to design faults in the flats, which create areas of 'cold bridging' and exposed wall surfaces which are difficult to insulate and heat adequately.⁸ The social and financial repercussions of the problem have been devastating—damage to furniture and clothing, loss of living space, social embarrassment and adverse effects to both physical and psychological health. The health hazard has been clearly underlined by local doctors:

"This woman suffers from recurrent Bronchial and Urinary infections which in my opinion are being aggravated and caused by the dampness of her present home due to condensation . . ."

"The block of flats in which these people live is in my opinion dreadful, i.e. considering its age. I have been in many of these flats including those occupied by X and Y and they are certainly damp and most of the time VERY damp. It is my opinion that being in constantly damp surroundings is acutely uncomfortable, frustrating and damaging to the quality of life . . ."

The Rent Strike: Key Stages

(i) *Getting Organized*

Early protests and representations about the dampness issue were made on an individual basis and were rebuffed, by officials of the Labour controlled Glasgow District Council, who argued that the problem was one of 'life style' and 'living habits'. It was not until early in 1975 that tenants living in the Hutchesontown 'E' Estate began to explore the possibilities of collective action. They were supported in this action by two local tenants associations and the staff of a Gorbals based community work agency—the Laurieston Information Centre. The first months of the campaign were almost entirely concerned with building an organization and attempting to convince the tenants that their dampness problem was not due to 'living habits'. This process involved organizing public meetings, undertaking surveys, getting advice from building specialists, distributing information through the local community newspaper ("The View")

6. These figures are taken from surveys undertaken by the Gorbals Dampness Campaign.

7. For details of this building system, see Diment, R. M. E., 'Tracoba', *The Architect and Building News*, 26th June, 1963.

8. National Building Agency, *Technical Report on Hutchesontown 'E' Scheme*, April, 1977.

9. Quoted in 'The Dampness Monster' (*op. cit.*).

and, most important of all, establishing personal contact with a wide range of tenants in the Hutchesontown scheme.

(ii) *Strategies: Resistance to Rent Strike*

By the Autumn of 1975, a basic organizational structure had been established and the campaign began to embark, in earnest, upon a programme of action which was aimed at obtaining 'dry, habitable homes' for the Gorbals tenants. Contact with the local authority revealed a reluctance to acknowledge the existence of a dampness problem and, even amongst the local Labour councillors, there was a lukewarm response to the issue. Only one councillor provided committed and enthusiastic backing for the campaign during its early days. Others tended to react, at best, in a lethargic manner or, at worst, appeared, by their actions, to underwrite the 'living habits' argument. This lack of a positive response was influential in determining the future tactics and strategies of the campaign. A policy of attacking 'on all fronts' was adopted and this embraced a combination of pressure group, legal and direct action initiatives: sustained letter-writing, persistent lobbying of councillors, attempts to obtain mass media coverage, public demonstrations and a threat to take the local authority to Court under the Scottish 1897 Public Health Act.

The leaders of the campaign were, however, reluctant to advocate and promote a rent strike as part of this broad based campaign. This resistance to calls for a rent strike stemmed from a variety of sources and experiences; the natural fears which many tenants had about eviction and victimization, memories of previous failed strikes which had damaged the credibility of local community organizations and the concern, which was expressed by the Information Centre workers (including the author), that a rent strike was a high risk tactic at a time when the Gorbals was the only area in Glasgow which was seriously committed to campaigning around the dampness issue. For the community workers the situation lacked the classical ingredients for a successful rent strike.

(iii) *Individual Strikes and Court Action*

Despite the declared policy of the campaign a handful of tenants decided to withhold rent on an individual basis. Amongst these tenants were some of the worst affected families, including one family who had abandoned the use of a bedroom because of the severity of the dampness. In April 1976 one of these tenants was summoned to appear at Glasgow Small Debts Court because of rent arrears. The threat of Court action and the demoralizing effect an eviction would have on local support prompted the campaign to review its policy on rent strikes. A decision was made to support the tenant and the campaign assisted in the preparation of a legal defence, briefed expert witnesses (e.g. an architect and a thermal heating specialist) and organized press publicity and a demonstration. On the day of the Court hearing the District Council withdrew their action before the Sheriff could consider the case. The tenant was awarded a decree of absoliter (acquittal) with expenses. Over the next six months three other tenants were taken to Court for withholding rent and in each case the District Council withdrew before a full hearing could take place. These cases represented significant moral rather than legal victories for the campaign.

(iv) *The Strike Spreads*

The success of the individual tenants prompted the campaign to make the strike 'official' and caused the leadership (and the local community workers) to revise their views. The Chairman of the campaign reflected this change of mood:

"We never intended it at the beginning—I didn't think it was a good thing myself

because I thought it might get people into a mess—use their rent money and never be able to make it up. Mr. A was the first to do it, and then another lady was taken to court and we won—then another tenant, so then it began to seem a good thing—maybe they'll take notice if we withhold their rent. So we put it to the people—it was entirely up to them—if they wanted to withhold their rent and put their money by, by all means do so. We also started the dampness clinic one night a week. We felt it was very, important that the people had somewhere to go where the advice was immediate and accurate—a week isn't long, but it can be a long time for someone sitting with a warrant to be out of their house. It did make the Council sit up—it wasn't just half a dozen people—lots of people not paying rent or rates—they were getting nothing so why should they pay rent? I think it was a good thing''.

After the change in policy the campaign vigorously organized and promoted the strike as an integral part of its overall action strategy. However, no attempt was made to make the strike a compulsory condition for being a member of the campaign and it was recognized that, for some tenants, withholding rent represented an uncomfortable form of action which could cause considerable personal and domestic tension. Those tenants who joined the strike did so on their own volition and in full knowledge of the possible implications (e.g. court action etc.). All these tenants received the full backing and support of the campaign and considerable preparation was put into providing a defence for the tenants when they began to receive eviction notices and other forms of harassment from the authorities. This preparation included the following:

1. Ensuring that each tenant banked their own rent money and was in a position to produce this money, if it was called for by the court. The campaign did not organize a central fund for the strike.
2. Providing a briefing sheet for tenants who wanted to go on rent strike and a model letter which could be sent to the authorities once they had decided to go on rent strike.
3. Arranging for regular contact to be maintained between the tenants who were on rent strike and the organizing committee of the campaign, e.g. weekly meetings.
4. Organizing legal representation for the tenants if and when they were brought to court because of withholding rent.
5. Providing support for tenants when additional problems arose over their withholding rent. This particularly occurred with tenants who were in receipt of Social Security payments.

By the end of 1976 the strike was slowly spreading, with around 50 tenants withholding their rent.

(v) *The Strike as a Way of Life*

The early success in preventing evictions boosted local confidence and resulted in the gradual spread of the strike. This confidence and support was further reinforced in 1977/78, when the campaign began to achieve a series of political victories; rehousing for tenants, a rates reduction, an experimental remedial programme and an offer of compensation for damage to property. On the issue of rehousing a crucial concession was won when the District Council agreed to re-house rent strikers without insisting on the payment of arrears, a decision which was without recent precedent in the history of the city's housing management policies. The rehousing of strikers removed one further barrier to the spread of the rent strike—the fear that withholding rent would prevent or delay the rehousing of tenants. By 1978 around 250 tenants were withholding rent and the strike had become, for many tenants, a way of life—a natural and

legitimate response to living in damp housing conditions. The campaign maintained its support system but the earlier excitement and action—court cases, press publicity, demonstrations etc.—had ceased to be a regular feature of the strike. Everyone, including the authorities, had settled into a routine.

(vi) *A Financial Settlement*

By the early 1980s over 600 families had been re-housed from the estate and, almost inevitably, the social and organizational base of the campaign had been eroded by the re-housing process. Over recent years the campaign has mainly focused on supporting the remaining tenants—the 100 or so families who still await rehousing from the now semi-derelict blocks of flats¹⁰—and on consolidating upon the political gains won at an earlier date. The financial settlement of the rent strike was linked with negotiations over compensation. The principle of compensation had been established in 1977 but earlier offers of *ex gratia* settlements had been rejected as inadequate by the campaign. In 1977 the District Council formulated a revised basis for a settlement which was accepted by the campaign. This settlement had three main elements:

1. An *ex gratia* offer of a one-third reduction in net rent, backdated to the the time when tenants first moved into their flat.
2. An *ex gratia* settlement of claims for compensation for loss or damage suffered as a result of dampness. Small claims of up to £300 were to be handled directly by the Housing Department and claims of over £300 were to be handled by the legal department of the Council.
3. Any sums payable to tenants would be offset by money owed to the Council because of the rent strike or other arrears.¹¹

This offer was accepted at a public meeting, despite the fact that a minority of tenants vigorously argued that all arrears resulting from the strike should be wiped out as part of any compensation settlement. For the majority of tenants—non-strikers and those who had been on strike for comparatively short periods (e.g. a year)—the settlement represented a financial gain, but for those tenants who had been on strike for long periods (e.g. two years, or over) the settlement was likely to result in only a marginal financial gain once their arrears had been deducted.¹²

Reflections

The Gorbals action lacked all the crucial ingredients for a successful rent strike. It was selective and limited in terms of the number of tenants who were involved, it was not part of a city-wide movement¹³ and it never gained the financial and political support of the city's labour and trade union movement. Despite those shortcomings the strike has been sustained for six years (some of the tenants who are still awaiting rehousing are currently on the rent strike), no tenant has been evicted and the majority of the strikers eventually settled with the Council without being in financial debt. The effectiveness of the strike was related to the overall strategy adopted by the Gorbals campaign—attack on all fronts and avoid putting all your faith and political energies into one single tactic.

“Attempt to use a variety of simultaneous strategies when putting pressure on the authorities and seeking to gain public attention for your cause. One of the most common tactical errors which community organisations make, is putting all their

10. The council has still to decide whether to implement a full remedial programme or demolish the flats.

11. City of Glasgow Council, *The Dampness Issue: Position Statement*, March, 1980.

12. In a handful of cases the money withheld amounted to over £1,000.

13. A city-wide organization did, eventually, develop in the early 1980s.

faith in one form of action—such as lobbying the councillors, letter-writing, or even militant actions like rent strikes. If you tie up all your energy and resources in one form of action, then there is always the very real danger that, if this tactic fails, your whole campaign will collapse. The single tactic approach also makes life very easy for the power groups which you are confronting, as they can concentrate all their considerable expertise, staff and resources on handling the one pressure point. There is nothing a politician or official likes less than pressure coming in from a variety of sources, particularly when these different types of pressure are sustained over a long period of time. Your aim should be to maximise and mobilise on as many fronts as possible”.¹⁴

The two key events which influenced the spread of the rent strike—the withdrawal of court action by the Council and rehousing of rent strikers without payment of arrears—clearly illustrated the interplay between the strike and the other tactics which were used by the campaign. In the Court actions the previous legal work the campaign had undertaken in relation to public health legislation provided a ready-made basis for organizing a defence and, on the rehousing issue, a sustained pressure group campaign on the authorities—including a series of public meetings in 1977 which were attended by between 500—1000 residents—directly influenced the granting of the unprecedented concessions in the operations of the house letting regulations. Pursued as a single tactic the rent strike could well have failed and ended, as some local and city-wide strikes have, in evictions, bitter recriminations and the disillusionment of local activists.

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14. *Dampness Monster*, (*op. cit.*), p. 55.