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The hidden history of squatting in Ireland

Alan MacSimóin

1996

TWENTY YEARS ago Dublin Corporation was forced to give tenancies of hundreds of squatters. Those people got themselves housed, not by pleading with politicians, but through direct action. Alan MacSimoin, who was one of the organisers of Dublin Squatters Association, remembers how they did it.

In 1976 there were several hundred families squatting in local authority flats in the Corporation area. Waiting lists were long and increasing numbers were housing themselves in flats which had become vacant or were due for rehabilitation work.

Evictions were common, with most being put out within a few months of squatting. Nobody was jailed or even prosecuted under the Forcible Entry and Occupation Act as this would have been politically embarrassing for local councillors. In the private sector, however, there had been jailings. So what usually happened was that after being evicted families would squat another flat. And this process would repeat itself again and again.

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The Williams family in Dolphin House, a large south inner city complex, were served with an eviction order. The offer made by the Housing Department was the Legion of Mary hostel for the wife and child, nothing for the husband. They decided to resist.

An information picket was held outside the local rent office and we also went door-to-door in Dolphin House, where there are 400 flats, asking people to help. On the morning of the eviction we went around with a megaphone asking the locals to stand with the Williams family. By the time the sheriff, his bailiffs and the cops turned up we had 400 locals blocking the landing, stairwell and courtyard. It was amazing.

After a feeble attempt to execute their order the eviction crew withdrew in defeat. Two further unsuccessful attempts were made. The Williams family were then offered a flat in a complex across the road, Fatima Mansions. All of this was carried on the front pages of the evening papers.

On foot of this victory we were approached by squatters from other areas who wanted our help and advice. The Dublin Squatters Association was formed, with about 40 squatters regularly attending meetings in Killarney Street. The DSA built up a membership of about 100, mainly in Joseph's Mansions and Mary's Mansions in Sean McDermott Street, Phil Shanahan House and St. Bridget's Gardens in Sheriff Street, Dolphin House and Basin Lane, off James's Street.

Our first task was defend squatting as legitimate. This we did by convincing squatters and many local associations that it was a direct way to force the Corporation to increase the housing stock. We were quite successful, in the areas where we had a base, in winning the argument that families should not have to spend a couple of years on the waiting list or have additional children to build up their points.

Leaflets making this argument were widely circulated in the north inner city flat complexes. We went door-to-door in Sher-

iff Street and brought over 80 squatters to the May Day march under a DSA banner.

The next threatened eviction that we were asked to organise against was in Phil Shanahan flats in Sheriff Street. Through door-to-door canvassing and a meeting in the local community centre we won the support of the majority in the flats. When the day of the eviction arrived the sheriff found that the entrance to the flats was closed off to cars (we had placed some pallets across the road to stop the cops and bailiffs driving right up to the door) and that groups of women and teenagers were waiting. The eviction was called off.

Next came a threatened eviction in Basin Lane, behind James's Street. A teenage couple and their baby were due for eviction. The woman suffered from heart trouble. The Corpo was offering only hostel accommodation. We organised, once more, on a door-to-door basis. On the day of the eviction about 100 locals faced about 60-70 cops and eviction crew. Time after time they dragged us away from the door. Finally they got us clear but little did the bailiff with the axe know that we had nailed a metal grill to the inside of the door and connected it to the mains electricity. When the axe struck the door the bailiff went flying back across the courtyard, extremely shocked but not injured.

At this stage we got the ambulance crew from James's hospital to break through the window and take the young mother out on a stretcher. While this was a preventative measures in case the excitement got the worse of her heart condition, people in the area thought it was more serious. A very angry crowd pushed the cops back. One cop even broke ranks and announced he was not going to evict anyone, before walking away while his inspector impotently yelled at him.

This victory received front page coverage in the evening newspapers. Squatters from Ballymun wanted to join the DSA. Confidence was rising all the time. Panicky officials even talked of bringing in the army to assist bailiffs. The

bureaucrats decided that things were getting out of hand. People, the most difficult people to organise, were defeating the Corporation and the gardai. They were doing it in public, and it could spread.

The Corporation responded with an amnesty. All squatters would be rehoused as tenants. However anyone squatting after that date would go to the bottom of the housing list if they squatted a local authority dwelling. With evictions being called off and tenancies offered the DSA rapidly ceased to exist. That particular phase of the housing struggle was over.