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Refugee Squatters and Their Struggles

Black Banner

28th March 2023

As the Azeri state's genocidal blockade of Artsakh continues, refugees from the besieged region have found little help from the Armenian state. Unable to find any place to shelter them, many of these refugees took to squatting abandoned buildings. Since 2018, about 120 refugee families have squatted the former Ministry of Defence building, fixing it up and turning it into a home, a space for community. But last month, the Armenian government heinously evicted the refugees and the police stole their belongings. Despite the attacks, they resist, camping outside the building and holding rallies to draw attention to their situation.

Here we present an account of the tenants' struggle by Armenian anarchists from the Black Banner organisation, who continue to support their fight for housing.

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After the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, more than 100,000 Russians (including many anarchists) migrated to Armenia.

But it so happens that there is also a war going on in Armenia itself. While Putin is officially recognized as a war criminal in The Hague, Aliyev and Erdogan are killing and bombing Armenians, destroying Armenian cultural monuments and, finally, blockading Artsakh, depriving its 120,000 people of food and medicine. On top of that, Armenia has been flooded with a huge mass of refugees who have not received proper assistance from the state.

In 2018, quite a few people moved into the former Ministry of Defence, which had stood empty and derelict since 2008. Everything, from wood to wiring, had already been taken out of it and the area around it had turned into a rubbish dump. The building's new residents made repairs, planted trees, ran a farm. It was a rather unusual squat, especially since, unlike typical hipster squats in Russia, Europe or America, some of those living there are veterans of three or four wars.

But it eventually “found” an owner and, according to a decision by the Republic of Armenia's Public Expenditure Committee, the Yerevan police were ordered to evict the squat, in order to make it a centre for foreign economic activities. On 16 February 2023, 6,000 police officers came to the building and threw all the tenants out into the street. During the eviction, 130 new doors put in by the residents were broken down — the policemen did not even consider it necessary to knock.

After that, things began to go missing from the tenants — building materials, sleeping bags, mattresses, blankets, all the way down to children's socks. They even dug up and took away Christmas trees, which the squatters used buckets to water in the 40-degree heat. One of the tenants, a general, had his military uniform go missing. “Law enforcers” nodded along with the residents, but interviewees claim that the thefts were impossible without the knowledge of the police — once evicted, the squatters could only go up to the building accompanied by 2 police officers. Accordingly, the thefts have been blamed on the police.

Of the 120 families evicted from the squat: 20 live in makeshift hostels whose keys are given by the police but not by social services; dozens more have had to seek shelter with relatives and acquaintances; while the remaining 25 have set up tents near the former house and are trying to regain the right to continue living in the squat. In the first days after the eviction, the “law enforcers” did not allow the homeless people to pitch their tents near their former home and did not even allow an ambulance to enter. So, in essence, we are talking about a sit-in.

The evicted tenants periodically hold demonstrations. At one of them, the Black Banner was able to attend. It was on 23 March 2023, outside the government building. Even before the event began, officers of the “valiant” Yerevan police told us: “As sources tell us, they will not come to us today.” This turned out to be a blatant lie. Those in power simply don’t want people to know about the veteran squatters, and don’t want international media to publish materials about them.

As the squatters said at the event: “We went out during the revolution of 2018. And what did this revolution give us? We, the veterans of the wars, who have given everything to this country, are forced to huddle in the street. We are kicked out by the Public Expenditure Committee, the Ministry of Defence has brushed aside our requests. After the outbreak of war in Ukraine, it also became hard for many ordinary citizens, because the flow of migrants caused the prices of flats to rise by 200–300,000 drams — the average wage in the country!”

This problem is also acute for returnees. Some of them also had to sleep on the street. If you’re not an IT person and you’re not from upper-middle class, you just can’t rent an apartment here for a pittance. The landlords are very boorish and smug people here, who, without doing anything inclusive for the community, make money on people in need.

But the squatters remain resolute. In an interview, one of them declared: “We will stand firm to the last, and our issue will be re-

solved as follows: the building will receive residential status, there will be a kindergarten and a school, and if the state cannot help us, at least let it not interfere, plunder or ruin what we have improved. We will find money and build houses for people who have problems. Even if it remains on the state's balance sheet, people should be given the right to live here."

The anarchists from the Black Banner support the people's resistance as much as they can. They provide firewood to heat the tents, they provide informational support in the media. Black Banner plans to continue supporting the squatters, with whom they have already formed relationships of trust and comradeship.