

Russia – National Day of Action for residents of workers’ housing

On Saturday 30th September, on the initiative of the Russian Workers’ Housing Movement, and as part of 2006’s “World Zero Eviction Days”, demonstrations took place in fifteen different towns, bringing together several thousand people. The protests were backed by the Soviet’s Coordination Union (SKS) and the International Alliance of Inhabitants. In Russia, several million people live in largely unsanitary “workers’ housing”, originally intended as a temporary measure. However, most residents will have lived there for anywhere between ten and thirty years. And now the new Housing Code, introduced early this year, has deprived these residents of their right to housing. Such residents were therefore among the first to get involved. The Russian Workers’ Housing Movement was created in July 2006, at the Russian Social Forum. The National Day of Action that took place on the 30th September was in fact the second of this type, and serves to highlight the significant advances that the movement has already made – notably the adoption on first reading of a series of amendments to the Code, following vociferous demands. These initial victories were followed by a certain ‘calming down’ and as a result, the demonstrations have been less well-attended than those that took place at the beginning of the year. Nevertheless, protests took place in Moscow, St Petersburg, Izhevsk, Perm, Yaroslavl, Tomsk, Omsk, Nijnevartovsk, Saratov, Ufa, Ekaterinburg and a number of other towns. Participating in the protests was a significant number of residents whose housing had been illegally privatised in the 90s. Current legislation does not take such housing into account, effectively meaning that in official terms, its residents do not exist.

Demonstrators demanded that the right to housing be respected, that there be a radical revision of the new Housing Code and the definitive adoption of the amendments which the opposition rejects, that evictions be made illegal, that the illegal privatisations of workers’ housing be revoked, and that those that live in workers’ housing have their right to housing guaranteed, or that they be able to privatise their own housing, free of charge (now considered legal thanks to other campaigns, although the housing must belong to the council).

In the centre of **Moscow**, around 300 people from 20 local housing blocks participated in the protest, organised by the Moscow Workers’ Housing Movement (DOM). Unfortunately, only delegates attended, as opposed to large groups of the residents themselves.

Attendees carried placards bearing the slogans “The new Housing Code makes us homeless”, “NO to arbitrary power” and “NO to slavery in our own homes”.

Irina Bergalieva, president of DOM, called on residents to continue the struggle.

“There is a lot of work left to be done – those living in non-municipal privatised housing are still without rights. We are still being crammed into bedrooms. Council tax increases without justification. Some residents have already been evicted; others have only managed to avoid eviction thanks to the intervention of neighbours and militants. Even our very reasonable amendments to the Housing Code have only been accepted on first reading – we must stick together and continue to fight!” she declared at the meeting.

In **Izhevsk** (Udmurtia), several hundred demonstrators, led by Izhevsk Workers’ Housing Movement, marched from the Presidential Palace to the Office of the Attorney General of Udmurtia, which they laid siege to. Most of the attendees were residents of privatised housing, or of housing owned by federal structures. Demonstrators chanted “NO to the whims of the Attorney General!”, “YES to the right to privatisation of property!” and “Freedom for the residents of workers’ housing!”. The resolutions made in the closing meeting were immediately communicated to the Attorney General.

The authorities found themselves under a certain degree of pressure following the various protests that took place early this year, and therefore promised to respect the right to privatisation of those living in council housing. However, they seem somewhat loathe to keep this promise. Particularly shocking is the fact that attempts to evict residents are still made, and that such attempts have to be foiled by the residents themselves. The issue of residents of private housing remains unresolved.

In **Ufa**, the demonstration was coordinated by various groups of residents. All face eviction since their inner-city housing is due to be demolished. In addition to the demands made by the housing movement as a whole, demonstrators in Ufa called for the resignation of the town’s mayor, and for an end to evictions.

The resolution adopted at the meeting denounces the new Housing Code as an attempt to deny the majority of the population their right to housing, and as an effort to render homeless the poorest members of society.

In **Tomsk**, where the problem of housing is still very serious, the protest was organised by the Tomsk Workers' Housing Movement. Nearly a thousand people came out to display their anger at local authorities continued lack of concern about residents of workers' housing. In Tomsk, the majority of housing belongs not to the council, but rather to private firms, or to the numerous federal scientific institutes that are found everywhere in this university town. In spite of a large number of protests, and various court cases in which they have been found guilty of violating the right to housing, local authorities appear reluctant to make any changes.

"They make promises and claim they're helping us, but what do they do? Nothing. There are actually more and more evictions these days" complained one of the movement's militants.

For several days now residents in **Ekaterinburg** have been on hunger strike, tired of waiting for promised legal recognition of their right to live where they do.

In **Saratov**, only a hundred or so participated in the demonstration organised by the Russian Communist Workers' Party (the RKRП), and most of those were RKRП militants. Banners demanded the retraction of the new Housing Code. A residents' protest had taken place a few days before, during a session of the town council.

In **St. Petersburg**, two demonstrations took place. One, backed by the Movement for Citizen Initiatives, was held in front of a block of worker's housing, property of the 'Kompressor' factory, and most of the attendees were residents themselves. The aim was to make authorities aware of this illegally privatised housing, and the plight of its residents, who are considered 'non-existent' in official terms.

The other demonstration was organised by the local workers' housing coordination committee, and involved nearly five hundred people. Residents, brandishing placards with their addresses scrawled on them, demanded that their housing become municipal property, and that they retain their right to it. They chanted "Give us back our homes!".

Even though the demonstration was largely populated by women and children, two OMONs (the Russian CRS) vans were present, along with twelve police cars...

In **Omsk**, over 300 people attended a public meeting organised by the Omsk Workers' Housing Movement. Those present professed their support for the demands of the Housing Movement as a whole. The local authorities in Omsk already recognise workers' housing residents' right to privatisation. Court cases are beginning to yield favourable results. A number of privatisations have been officially recognised as illegal, which means they can be de-privatised, and that residents' right to housing can be properly established.

There is, however, a new threat on the horizon: the offensive against workers' housing led by private trust companies, with the support of local authorities.

In **Nijneartovsk**, because of the cold (around 0 degrees), and because the council had prevented it from taking place in the town centre, only a hundred or so attended the demonstration. However, local council representatives were present, as were a number of journalists.

In **Perm**, several hundred people came out in support of the Perm Workers' Housing Movement and the local Soviet resistance network. The most common cry was "Give back stolen housing!". According to Anastasia Maltseva, a coordinator of the Soviet, even the police seemed to be asking themselves questions, worrying about their own situation – since many of them live in workers' housing themselves...

Yaroslavl town council recently gave in to the movement's demands, recognising the right to privatisation of residents of workers' housing. As a result, few residents participated in the demonstration. However, a number of residents of privatised accommodation were present, and for most of them, it was their first time at such a protest. It was decided that a large information campaign would be launched, targeting residents most threatened by eviction.

Note that local authorities were not present at any of the demonstrations, with the exception of that of Nijnevartovsk. However, the media covered most of the Day of Action, and we can but hope that this will speed up the adoption of the amendments discussed at the State Duma. Additionally, since housing problems in Russia stretch far beyond those of the workers' housing, the Soviet's Coordination Union (SKS) is busy organising another National Day of Action for the end of October, forming part, as always, of the international campaign against evictions.

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