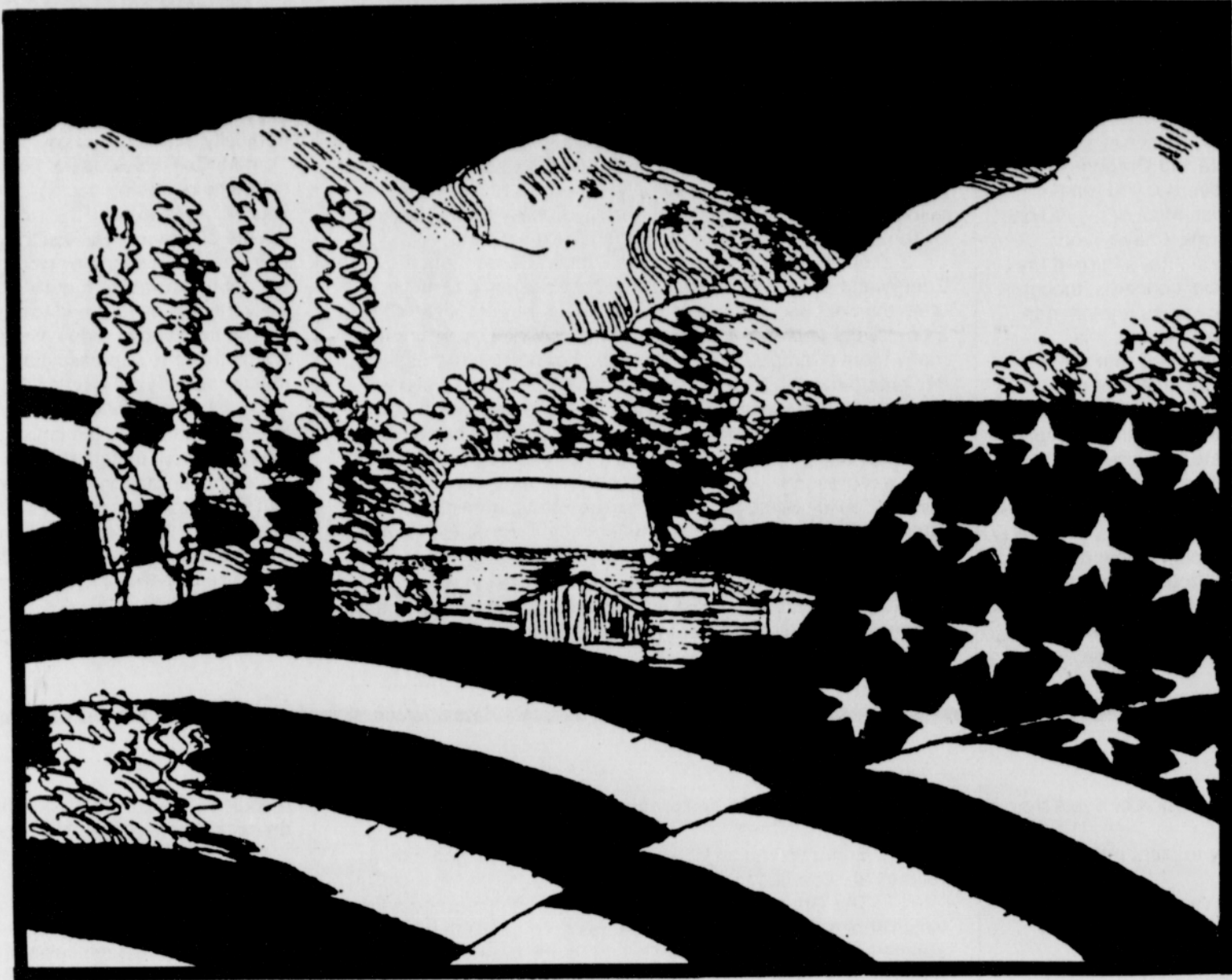


HOMES FOR ALL



BUILDING TOWARD AN INTERNATIONAL RENT STRIKE & SQUAT

BY EUGENE NELSON

The right to a home is as basic as the right to live. Even the birds of the air have homes — except for a few cuckoos. Shouldn't humans fare as well?

Palestinians and Israelis have been killing one another for decades over the question of homes. Hitler started World War II largely because he wanted more "living room" (homes) for Germans. Poor people in southern Mexico have been fighting the government because their land and homes are being taken from them. Many of the greatest catastrophes of history have been due to the quest for the fulfillment of, or the denial of, this basic right. It's about time the people of the world stopped this eternal and tragic conflict by recognizing the right of every inhabitant of the earth to a home — or at the very least the ownership of enough of his or her share of the earth on which to build one.

In some ways the world has made progress toward a happier life for many people. But in many parts of the world, such as the United States, the housing situation has been getting worse and worse. Fewer and fewer people are able to build or buy a home, or even to rent a decent dwelling. At the end of World War II the United Nations declared the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that every person on earth had the right to a home. Yet today, 49 years later, there are more homeless people than ever. (The term "homeless" is used in its true sense: to denote people with no shelter at all as well as those living under the landlord system which is becoming more and more oppressive.)

Many organizations are working to help solve the problem of homelessness and in many cases they are making modest but steady progress. These admirable efforts are but a drop in the bucket compared to the massive effort that is needed. At the present rate of progress it will take forever for everyone to have a home.

An immediate large-scale worldwide campaign to end the primitive and inhuman landlord system is necessary if every citizen of the planet is to own a home or at least his or her share of the earth on which to build one. The disaster of homelessness is becoming ever more extreme which calls for extreme but desperately needed measures to solve this urgent problem:

nothing less than a massive international rent strike and squat in unused buildings and on unused land until everyone has a home or land. Such a strike is tentatively called for May 1, 1995, although of course anyone is free to participate in such an action at any time.

The landlord system especially is an unnatural, unequal and unfair master/slave relationship, good for neither tenants nor owners. Owners are more or less continually worried about damage to their property, and tenants are usually worried about accidentally damaging it, changing it to suit their own tastes, having rents raised beyond their ability to pay, or being evicted. It is an abnormal and unhealthy situation.

When you stop to think about it, it simply is not natural or right that some people inherit beautiful homes while others are forced to live in buildings owned by someone else. And the situation has been getting worse. Most of my life paying more than one month's rent in advance or some deposit or cleaning charge was unheard of. Now in some places tenants are required to pay *three* months rent in advance and often deposits are never returned. Often children or pets are not allowed and racial discrimination in renting is widespread. Rents in many areas have skyrocketed, depriving many people of the ability to rent, throwing them out on the street, uprooting their children from a stable and secure environment and the company of friends and familiar teachers. In the 1970s, due to the irrationality and cruelty of the speculative real estate system, home prices doubled and tripled some places, and when this happens, landlords demand more too because of bigger mortgage payments. Tenants are not only paying for their landlords' taxes, but a "speculators' tax" too. Speculating for profit in this basic people's need is immoral and should be illegal. A home should be a place of one's own to spend one's life in security and happiness, not a bargaining chip in a system irrevocably bound to deprive many people of homes. Under the present irrational system, the more people who can afford to buy homes, the more prices of land and housing rise, guaranteeing that many people can never have a home.

(Government housing is often as bad or worse than privately owned rental housing. Managers break into apartments to spy on tenants and steal from them in their absence. Inner-

city government housing "projects" are nightmares of drugs and random murders.)

In many so-called primitive societies the concept of rent was unknown. All people in a village or in a tribe shared communal land or dwellings. No one went homeless. In Oscar Lewis' book *Pedro Martinez* the protagonist told how in his Mexican village in the 1930s rent was unheard of. If a house became vacant due to death or other reasons, anyone needing a dwelling was allowed to move into it free of charge. But in the "modern" United States, when Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, only slightly more than two-thirds of U.S. citizens had homes; now, 13 years later, more than one-third do not. We are going backward.

William Saroyan in one of his books expressed the opinion that every citizen, upon becoming an adult, should be given some land and some money. Robin Lee Graham, who at age 16 began an around-the-world voyage in a small sailboat, encountered some islands west of Australia where, on entering adulthood, every person was given a home, a boat and a sewing machine. Why can't we do that? Why can't every nation? (Of course, in most places not everyone would need or want a boat.)

As World War II was coming to an end Walter Reuther, the late head of the United Auto Workers union, proposed that war factories be converted to production of prefabricated houses so that returning military personnel and other unemployed people could have jobs and everyone in the U.S. could have a home. His plan was rejected. Landlords and the real estate industry opposed it, as well as some construction unions. (But those unions had a largely false argument, since most or all prefabs would go to people who could not afford to hire union workers to build a home.) War production to kill people was all right, but not production to fill the needs of the people. In Japan today, small prefab homes are built and assembled in a week's time; why can't this be done for all the homeless in the U.S. and other nations?

Home ownership for all people would go a long way toward solving some of the other grave problems of society, such as crime and the burden of welfare. Statistics show that the crime rate has been consistently much lower among home owners. This is not hard to figure out: naturally, people with something good in life are more satisfied with their lot and less apt to risk being thrown in jail. It is not surprising when children growing up in ghettos who see their parents paying 50%, 60%



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