

HOME ON THE STREET

(TO THE TUNE OF HOME ON THE RANGE)

Chorus:

Home, home on the street;
Where the poor and the down-and-out meet,
Where never is heard
An encouraging word
And the skies are gloomy and bleak.

O give me a home
Where the panhandlers roam
And the chow isn't crawling with mold;
A floor mat will do,
With a cockroach or two,
Will beat the wind and the cold.

O I lost my job
To a robot named Rob,
He works much harder than me;
He never takes breaks
For coffee or cakes,
And don't stop to shit or pee.

I was left in the lurch,
So I went to the church,
But first had to kneel and pray;
When my head it was bent
Some down-and-out gent
Took my bread and porridge from me.

Pollution ruined my fishin'
So I went to the mission
In search of some grub and a bed;
But they ran out of bacon
And the last bed was taken
Lawd, I might's well be dead.

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-- EUGENE NELSON

or 70% of their meager income for rent of some hovel and who see the luxurious often inherited homes of the rich, feel hopeless and demoralized and turn to a life of crime. And it is a well-known fact that people who own their homes, no matter how modest, usually keep them up much better than tenants of rented homes, thus ensuring a longer life for those dwellings and serving more people.

Even some right-wingers favor home ownership for all. When conservative Republican Jack Kemp was the head of HUD he initiated a process whereby tenants in government housing projects could buy their own dwellings. The concept of homes for all transcends traditional political ideology.

Since many people receiving welfare payments pay a very high percentage of this income for rent, home ownership would allow the welfare burden on taxpayers to be much less, while recipients could receive more for other necessities of life.

Some people object to a system of guaranteed home ownership because this would mean owners and their families could not be evicted for nonpayment of property taxes. But there are other ways of raising tax money besides taxes on homes, and taxes could still be levied on very large and luxurious homes and on second homes. *No one should ever be driven out into the cold by failure to pay taxes.* The cost to society is apt to end up being much greater. When the homeless suffer, all of society suffers.

The first thing anyone working toward a rent strike and squatting -- international or local -- should be aware of is the danger of eviction and arrest. A rent strike, like a labor strike, is more apt to be successful the more people are involved. If large numbers of tenants participate, the landlord and police do not have the resources to evict everyone. Perhaps a good general rule is to not attempt to join a rent strike in your town or city unless at least one-third of the tenants pledge to participate. Local tenants and organizers can best judge this.

Organizers and tenants should be aware of the pertinent laws of their areas well before the proposed Homes For All rent strike, May 1, 1995, and attempt to have legal help available and, hopefully, alternative shelter in case of eviction. (They should also encourage people to participate in any activity or group which is helping people to have homes, such as Habitat for Humanity, Homes Not Jails, the Catholic Worker houses of hospitality, various coalitions for the homeless, and encourage elected officials to help solve the problem.)

In many places, with the use of proper legal defense procedures, it takes one to two months for a landlord to evict a tenant. It may be that in some areas the mere threat of the proposed rent strike will bring concessions from landlords, without the threat of eviction. Another possibility is that after large numbers of tenants have withheld one, two or three months' rent, some landlords at that point will grant concessions. Of course the end result hoped for, if enough tenants participate, is total ownership of the premises by the tenants, but it is to be expected that some people, for whatever reason, will settle for more minor concessions such as lower rent or renting with an option to buy. But all participants should be aware of the possibility of eviction or reprisals by owners.

(It should be emphasized that the proposed strike is not aimed at such landlords as elderly retired people who augment a modest income by renting out a room or two in their homes, but at owners who make a full-time living off the housing needs of others.)

In the case of squatting, which has been highly successful in some parts of the world, it is important for those interested to check out as thoroughly as possible the building or open land for a squat, striving to choose locations where eviction is least apt to occur, because the owner is absent or because the site has been abandoned for a long period of time and therefore it is easier to gain popular support for a squat. Squatters are more apt to gain popular support, or in some cases even local government support, if they are prepared to



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make any necessary repairs, have chemical toilets if needed, etc.

To make the rent strike and squat proposed for May 1, 1995 successful, it is important that everyone interested begin spreading word of the event and attempt to get others involved through any means possible -- verbal communication, correspondence, involving the media, the printing of leaflets, decals, posters, bumper stickers announcing the event, and the formation of democratic local Homes For All groups to promote the event.

It is impossible, of course, to predict the effects of the Homes For All campaign. If few people participate it may have little or no effect. If large numbers of people participate it could have a number of effects, probably varying from place to place. Possible effects include:

Legislators could decide to provide more government-sponsored housing, low cost and/or free.

Legislators, pressured by fearful landlord and real estate interests, could make things even more difficult for the homeless.

Many landlords, fearful of a growing Homes For All movement (or perhaps in some cases becoming more enlightened and charitable) might lower rents, treat tenants better or make rents applicable to purchase of a renter's dwelling.

Fearful landlords and real estate interests might organize to fight Homes For All and make things worse for tenants, in some cases with the support of government entities.

Large-scale forced evictions might occur, perhaps in some cases resulting in violence -- although the Homes For All movement is pledged to nonviolence except in self-defense.

Some governments might provide the ownership of land to homeless people -- new Homestead Acts? -- upon which they could build their own dwellings. Even living in a tent on one's own land is better than being run off in the middle of the night and freezing to death in the cold. And, after all, the land like the air is a natural resource that should be for everyone. Anyone with an IQ over 50 can build some sort of shelter. The Mad Housers of Atlanta and Chicago are helping homeless people build one-room huts out of recycled materials for \$200 or less. In some cases government officials and private owners allow these

dwellings to remain on unused land; in many cases they are removed or destroyed. The Homes For All campaign could help promote this activity and cause governments to be less apt to thwart it. (Land trusts can be good if there is a guarantee participants cannot be evicted.)

Governments might be more apt to provide land for homeless people for subsistence or small-scale farming. In the case of the U.S., the government allows rich cattle barons to stampede their livestock over public land at very low cost. Some of this land could be provided for small farming and dwelling plots. Many homeless want to remain in high-tax base urban areas because of welfare and other services, but no doubt many would like to try subsistence farming; why not give them a chance to find out? It would both help them and ease urban congestion. If there is enough water for cattle in these areas there is enough for humans. U.S. politicians in recent decades have been ballyhooing agrarian reform for "third world" countries; how about some agrarian reform for poverty-stricken U.S. citizens? And settlers in or near public forestland could help preserve these beautiful and valuable forests.

Rents would drop. Many landlords, seeing the handwriting on the wall, would start renting with an option to buy.

Many developers would stop building housing developments for rentals. But many people would rather build their own homes the way they want anyway, and in many cases they would no doubt be better built. There are numerous low-cost classes for carpentry and other home construction skills. With fewer developers buying land, land costs would drop. More non-profit housing organizations and projects would help fill the void. And governments can expand programs for housing for the disabled and elderly. With the Cold War over this is possible in the U.S., especially with land and structures available on closing military bases. The Homes For All campaign, if it attracts large numbers of people, should accelerate this process.

Last but not least, the Homes For All campaign will provide a sense of worth, pride and purpose for its participants, and these qualities should flourish among all those formerly disinherited people who hopefully will soon have the security and freedom of their own homes.

Providing homes or land for all is a complex and difficult problem, but not nearly as difficult as freezing to death out in the street.

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