

Special Report

SPECIAL BRANCH

12 day of August

1976

SUBJECT

Squatting

The following has been received from a reliable source and is based on twelve months acquaintance with the squatting field in London.

Reference to Papers

"There are a great many misconceptions about the so-called squatting movement. First - it does not exist as a movement as such. The organisations which are supposed to lead it have very little influence on squatters, though they issue publications which suggest that they speak for squatters as a whole. These organisations are Squatters Action Council (meeting once every two weeks on a Sunday night at various public houses in the Tottenham Court Road area), Advisory Service for Squatters (offices at St Pauls Road, Islington) and Campaign against the Criminal Trespass Laws. However, the inter-relationship between these organisations is very close and very often the same people are activists in more than one. Indeed, the real activists in all three organisations are probably limited to not more than about a dozen persons but they can however usually raise some support for marches etc from anything from two to five hundred other people, mainly from the areas where the leaders of ASS, SAC and CACTL live. The SAC has undoubtedly one leader Piers COREBYN. This is mainly through his work at Elgin Avenue and also because of his small group of politically active International Marxist Group and International Socialist workers. Other political parties and groups are on the whole indifferent to the squatting field, probably seeing it as a lost cause and also as a tactic which would split the working class. Few workers would agree at this stage with the usual squatters cry of 'free housing for all'. However, on a local plane, there is a strong and vigorous anarchist movement. This is reflected in the activists of many organisations with affiliations to Iberia and South America, who derive a lot of support from squatting areas, and also the constant movement of people from squatting areas who travel to Portugal, Spain and other continental countries. In certain areas, South American anarchists have moved in and taken over commanding positions in the local squatting field from British nationals. Examples of this can be seen at north Kentish Town (Haverstock Hill), Archway and Swiss Cottage areas.

At the moment, our native Anarchists tend to act as a dividing force rather than a unifying force. This may be because of their relative inexperience. They do not appear to have the character or ability which would permit them to find unity with any other groups and because they are outlandish they have little real ability to unite with ordinary people. The foreign variety, on the other hand, do have this ability and experience and their

further growth may result in a situation where the whole squatting field could change. It remains to be seen where their leadership will take the squatters. They are militant in the extreme and know how to manipulate a situation to their own advantage. One gains the impression that there is some kind of central direction to their activities. Although most of the members appear to originate from Brazil with a few from Chile, they also appear to have contacts with others in Sweden.

The second point on squatters is that they are basically individuals who are determined to get the most they can for nothing, or at least, for as little as possible. In reading the publications such as Islington Gutter Press, SAG Bulletin, even Time Out, one gains the impression that squatters are merely those people unfortunate enough not to be able to get Council Housing for one reason or another. The truth is that over 80% do not want council housing because it would require that they meet certain obligations. In the case of houses that were licensed for squatting by various local authorities, it was with the utmost difficulty that the payment of the rates - a matter of anything from £1.50 to £2.50 could be obtained. In most cases they were in arrears and they were reluctant to meet commitments for gas, electricity, and water.

Since 1 January this year to 1 April, it was possible to house some 56 people in the Archway area. For this purpose couples are treated as individuals, i.e. one couple equals one individual.

The breakdown is as follows:-

Married with children	1
Single parent families	1
Women (over 21)	7
Girls (under 21)	8
Couples - with apparent stable relationships	11
Couples - without apparent stable relationships	9
Singles (male)	19

But added to these figures must be something like another 30 single males, who were introduced into houses by the occupants usually under the excuse that they were only staying a night or two and then these in turn became permanent residents. This is the usual way in which squatted houses become overcrowded and unsanitary.

Of the people mentioned above the work pattern was as follows:-

In regular employment at time of moving into squatted house	17
In casual work (usually cleaning or catering)	23
No apparent work whatsoever	16

and, no less than 43 were in receipt of Social Security benefits, even those apparently in some kind of full time work.

As it will be seen the actual number of families who squat is very small in relation to the whole, though squatters try, if possible, to get a family into a house with them. This is because they think that a local authority will be more tolerant of a house with children in any future eviction proceedings. At the same time, families usually can find some acceptable form of housing through the local authorities.

Referring to the 56 cases mentioned above, one would have expected that they would have made some efforts (thinking of the future) of trying to get permanent re-housing. The first stage for this would be to get on the housing list. In only two cases was any effort made by any of these people to do this. It is interesting to reflect that of the 56 people, not less than six of them were in regular employment, earning salaries or wages in excess of £2,500 a year nett. Though this information was carefully hidden at the time when they first asked for help.

There is always an element of the people in the squatting field that show signs of mental disorder. The squatting field demands little of people and in consequence they feel few demands being made on them. At some stage one wonders if they might not suffer from the fact that they are living in a very unreal world.

The incident of drug taking in the squatting field is very high indeed, probably amounting to something over 40% at a very conservative estimate. The effect is often spread from the squat into the surrounding community through the young people who become befriended by the squatters. The general attitude of squatters is that even if they do not participate themselves they should do nothing either in word or deed to upset the applecart. The squatting field is so extensive now and spread throughout London that there would appear to be a ready supply of suitable bases from which to sell drugs. Behind the scenes, this drug selling appears to be linked in some way with the local squatting scene and does have some organisation, though the leaders keep well out of sight making their presence felt mainly through their motor cars. They obviously use such channels as community bakeries, community stores, cafes, etc, as distribution points. One will never attend a community social or other social activity outside the area without there being an ample supply of dope being available, if wanted, indeed the squatter who does not participate is viewed with suspicion.

[REDACTED]

Because a fair proportion of squatters have to exist on Social Security of £9.70, they have to find alternative means of obtaining money which usually means the stealing of lead piping or other metal from the house occupied.

There is some talk in the squatting field of building an alternative society. It is interesting to consider what they see as this alternative society. In discussions with over 100 individuals (mainly single males) and groups of people in attendance the following questions were asked:-

How do you see your alternative society organised?

No organisation at all. Everyone would do what they want in their own way.

Would people in your society work?

Only if they wanted to or if they felt like it.

If people could do just what they wanted, surely there would be a lot of ripping off?

No. People would just help themselves to what they needed.

Would there not be a need for some form of policing?

The Police are the greatest criminals in this country today and we will have nothing to do with them.

How about food?

We will grow our own.

But what about those people who don't help to grow it?

Well, they will probably be doing other useful things.

At this point, I feel that there is little point in trying to find any logic to their thinking other than the obvious anarchist tendency.

The general attitude towards the Police is one of complete non-co-operation. Even to be seen talking to a policeman is considered to be dangerous. There is always an element of people who are wanted by the police and who find the squatting field a convenient place to hide. Many of these people are channelled through BIT Information Service to smaller groups and organisations. Also Short-life Community Housing at Camden Town equally act as a clearing house for such people. It should also be remembered that because of the political affiliations of the secretary, Privacy Short-life Community Housing could well be used by Irish elements.

The general conclusions that one gains of the field as a whole are:-

[REDACTED]

1. That squatters are people determined to take what they can without paying in any sort or kind of way, either in terms of money or of work.
2. That they have little intention of trying to obtain, through recognised channels, proper rehousing. That their efforts to obtain rehousing, in Higin Avenue, are purely political manoeuvres of the IMG or IS.
3. That there is a steady movement at a level for a small foreign inspired anarchist group to gain control of community enterprises and groups.
4. That the future activities of squatters will become more limited because of the shortage of suitable houses available. This may result in more direct confrontations with authority at evictions, because direct threats of evictions have the effect of uniting squatters.

However, with a very few exceptions, the Hornsey Rise type squat will not be possible in the future and consequently it is reasonable to suppose that it will be a case of small groups of houses. These will require a special tactic to be developed in view of the fact that they will be County Court cases rather than High Court cases. It remains to be seen what tactics squatters will develop as an answer.

The standard answer to eviction at the moment in North London is the telephone pyramid developed by Short-Life Community Housing at Camden. By this method it is possible to contact, very quickly, something like thirty other groups and organisations and so raise an anti-eviction force readily available. In the West London area a similar pyramid is based on Release and BIT and in South London on the Camberwell squatters. These can work very efficiently and usually when there is a threat of eviction the SCE office is manned from day break.

The whole experience of the squatting field is a very sad one. The most unfortunate being that as time goes on, more and more people are joining it. Far too many students are first joining the squatting field and then dropping their studies in response to unconscious and conscious pressures of other squatters. The ethos of the squatting field militates against working and the casual attitude towards property and possessions makes people wary of leaving their own rooms unguarded. Their refusal to call in the police if offences are committed adds to this and at the same time, the police tend to under-police squatting areas - probably believing that they are just wasting their time. Besides the obvious offences which are committed by squatters and the number of offenders within the field with the desire, at all costs, to avoid police involvement, the anti-social aspects of squatting increases.

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So far no answers to this problem have been suggested and to hit on any one correct answer is difficult. Believing that 20% of the squatters would prefer to be in acceptable housing then at least this 20% could be filtered out of the scene without a great deal of difficulty. This could be done by a staged programme using short life housing in an organised way. This would include families, single parent families, handicapped people and the older squatters, at the same time a more liberal type of hostel accommodation may be of help. At the moment, hostels as such, tend to be too authoritarian to be acceptable to anyone who has lived in squats.

However, as there are very few places which would accept the late rising and generally disorganised life of squatting areas, much greater thought needs to be given to preventing further recruits joining the squatters. Much more active work by local authorities must be undertaken to provide reasonably priced accommodation especially for single people and students.

The squatting movement is being subsidised by the Social Security and by local authorities and the majority of squatting publications are printed at subsidised prices on presses and equipment provided by the local authorities through organisations such as Islington Bus Co, Interaction etc. How it would be possible to restrict this is impossible to say.

The attitude of the local authorities appears to be one of ignoring squatters unless an eviction is pending. There appears to be no real channels to help wean people away from the field. Initially people are frightened to squat, but they soon lose this and once they appreciate the advantages of free accommodation (often much better than they have enjoyed previously) and the very libertarian regime that they are able to live within, they are very unwilling to return to normal rented accommodation. Consequently, there is growing up a considerable number of young people, often from middle-class backgrounds, who are adverse to returning to their previous mode of living. They pose a threat for the future because they see any kind of authority an enemy and the State as merely a provider of Social Security. They are not unintelligent in any sense of the word but lack any real central direction. If this was provided they could be most dangerous as their group ethos is such that any attack on authority is correct, any defence of authority is wrong. It almost appears that in their minds, they have turned the world upside down.

The obvious pattern they see for the future, is reflected in their attitude towards any form of acceptable housing. Their refusal to get on to council lists and ignoring such

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channels as the Housing Aid Centre and the Housing Associations prevents their escape from squatting. Why should they? It provides free accommodation, an atmosphere where they are at liberty to break every law that they want with impunity, a defensive situation where they know that the group ethos will be on their side against authority and possibly because the squatting field provides the largest single market for drugs in London. They feel that the authorities will act cautiously towards them because of the possible bad publicity. They in turn are adept at using publicity to their advantage and always have open channels to the media."

NOTE:

Squatters Action Council	ment. 400/75/113 371/76/61 400/75/12 400/76/77 371/76/86 346/76/7
Advisory Service for Squatters:	347/74/14 400/72/99 400/75/118
Campaign Against the Criminal Trespass Laws	400/75/12
International Marxist Group	400/76/58
International Socialists	400/76/106
Islington Gutter Press	347/74/7
Time Out	347/71/21
BIT Information Service	400/71/64
Short-life Community Housing	400/72/99
Release	400/67/150
Interaction	400/72/55
Piers CORBYN	RF 402/69/

Deputy Assistant Commissioner