



UNIVERSAL PUBLIC HOUSING

A PAMPHLET FROM COMMUNITY ACTION TENANTS UNION

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“Our cities can never be made really habitable or worthy of an enlightened people while the habitations of its citizens remain the property of private individuals. To permanently remedy the evils of city life the citizens must own their city.”

(James Connolly, Workers' Republic, 18 November 1899)

A note on terminology: CATU Ireland is an all-Ireland union of tenants, those in precarious living situations, and more. When talking about housing across the 2 different jurisdictions on the island of Ireland it can be useful to distinguish between them alongside describing the crisis in general terms. It is a fact that the language used to describe these distinctions is not value free. For this pamphlet we have opted to distinguish between the jurisdictions known as the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland primarily using the terms '26 counties' versus 'six counties' respectively, as it describes the objective geographical situation, regardless of any other association. This is not to denigrate any political tradition on the island of Ireland and the stylistic choice in this pamphlet does not indicate a general stance of the union on the nomenclature.

Background: Why do we need a change in our housing system?

Across the island of Ireland there is a growing housing crisis. In the 26 counties the policies of neoliberalism have led to the worst homelessness crisis since the foundation of the state. In the six county region of Northern Ireland the crisis may not be as acute in official terms but homelessness and housing stress is growing, meaning that housing is on the same crisis-driven trajectory as elsewhere on this island. (Smyth, S. 2020).

The default position for governments on this island (of all political persuasion) over the past number of decades has been to allow the private market to provide housing solutions, with the experience that those with little or no income have no choices but to live in cramped, unhealthy, unsuitable and precarious housing. However, this experience now extends itself to those formerly deemed as 'well paid' with large swathes of the population submerged perennially in high rents and no hope of home ownership. Gentrification and sectarianism is also having a detrimental effect on communities across Ireland.

CATU Ireland believes in a model of housing for all when it comes to the housing question, founded in opposition to the private housing market's profit motive and lack of accountability.

Statistics:

- **The six counties:**
 - 60 per cent increase in those officially recognised as being homeless in the last five years with almost 20,000 presenting as homeless in 2019 (McClements, F., 2020).
 - By December 31st, 2020, the social housing waiting list stood at 42,665. 26,387 were seen to be in "housing stress" (Butterley, L., 2021).
 - Rents have risen by 19% between Q1 2013 and Q2 2020 (Housing Executive, 2020).
 - There are more than 20,000 empty homes (Monaghan, J., 2016).
- **The 26 counties:**
 - 7991 people were homeless in the week of the 24th – 30th May 2021. This figure includes adults and children (Focus Ireland, 2021). This is missing the 'hidden homeless' - people

- living in refuges, Direct Provision, institutions, or those forced to couch-surf or live in overcrowded homes with several generations of the same family - so the actual homeless figure is much higher (Fitzgerald, C., 2017).
- Number of homeless families has increased by 232% since July 2014 (Focus Ireland, 2021).
 - Almost one third of people in emergency accommodation are children (Focus Ireland, 2021)
 - 61,880 households were assessed as being qualified for, and in need of, social housing support as of 2 November 2020 (Focus Ireland, 2021). Those who are in receipt of HAP, rent supplement, or similar schemes are marked as no longer in need of social housing support, despite the issues with these schemes, meaning the real figure of those in housing distress is much higher (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2021).
 - Standardised average rents are now €1,320 a month, with Dublin significantly bringing up the average (Residential Tenancies Board, 2021).
 - There are somewhere between 92,251 and 183,000 vacant dwellings (excluding holiday homes) (Fitzgerald, C.,2021).
 - Large scale landlords own more than 31,200 housing units. Ireland's biggest residential landlord, IRES REIT, owns more than 2,500 apartments in Dublin alone with annual rental income of €36m in 2017 (McCárthaigh, S., 2019).

What is universal public housing?

Universal public housing, as the name suggests, is designed to be accessible by all and publicly owned.

This would mean state-owned housing be made available to anyone who sought it, regardless of income. Public ownership would mean removing the profit motive from the provision of a basic human need in housing, making it more affordable as one would not have to pay above the odds for the benefit of a private individual or large corporation.

Publicly owned housing would have the added benefit of allowing tenants to have more control over their communities through local democracy, rather than the unaccountable profit driven private sector. It would also mean more sustainable communities, as people would not be evicted at the whim of a landlord seeking to make a greater profit.

This vision is not utopian! Both states on this island have historically built public housing on a large scale in the 20th century, and cities like Vienna have over 60% of residents living in public housing which also provide a large amount of amenities for their inhabitants (Ball, J., 2019).

What is lacking is political will and the pressure of people demanding better!

OK, but where will the money come from?

The government in the 26 counties budgeted to spend more on Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and related subsidies to private landlords than it did for local authorities to build social housing last year.

€800 million in public money which is currently used to shore up the private landlord-driven market via HAP and other schemes, could instead fund state-owned, public housing (McDermott, S., 2020). These figures

alone would build an estimated 2600 to 3200 typical three-bedroom public homes using the Department of Housing's own figures (Burke-Kennedy, E., 2020).

The government has also started long-term leasing arrangements for social housing from private developers. In Dún Laoghaire, one development of 34 apartments will cost the public €25 million to rent long-term as social housing only for it to ultimately remain in private hands (Kelly, E., 2021). This would build 80 to 100 homes the state could own instead, using the same figures as above!

Furthermore the combined figure of between 100,000 - 200,000 empty homes across the island could be seized and turned into public housing.

Similarly, we can nationalise large landlords like Ires REIT who make a huge profit off the backs of tenants. The Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignung campaign in Berlin shows there can be massive public support for this.

Fourthly, a portion of the initial costs could be paid through taxation, particularly properly taxing multinational corporations and the wealthy. For example, the 26 county state has fought **not** to take €13 billion in back taxes from Apple in the European courts (Brennan, J., 2020); a figure which alone could build at least 43,000 to 52,000 public homes.

Finally, in terms of new income streams, the state can borrow at a significantly cheaper rate than the private sector. Meaning that if new housing is a priority, it can be done both in a more cost-effective way (as less funds are going to line a developer's pockets) and with a greater initial loan.

While this is not as straightforward in Stormont for obvious reasons, the Housing Executive exists as a very impressive piece of infrastructure that could provide universally accessible public housing if funded properly.

All of this will fund the construction of new housing, but the housing will pay back itself! Unlike the development of private rental accommodation, which is meant to be a cash cow forever, the model of universal public housing aims to pay back any initial build cost and leave society with the social good of a public home.

As universal public housing is meant for all incomes with differential rents, those who earn more will contribute what they can and effectively subsidise those on lower incomes (National Economic and Social Council, 2014). Once build costs are repaid, any surplus can go into the funding of new social housing.

Ultimately holding onto valuable public land will result in a much greater revenue stream for future housing in the long-term than transferring it to private developers ever could.

In summary there are many avenues that could be used to build or provide public housing:

- Using existing money that is propping up the private market and boosting sham 'social housing' statistics.
- Seizing empty properties.
- Taking common ownership of properties owned by large landlords.
- Taxing wealthy individuals and tax-evading multinational corporations.
- State borrowing.

We know that if the state wanted to, it could provide funds for any number of expensive projects tomorrow, yet we languish in a seemingly permanent housing crisis. We need to build public housing now!

Social, Cultural & Economic Benefits of Universal Public Housing

Historically, the building of social housing removed the scourge of tenements and landlordism, leading to the stabilisation of communities, and played a role in countering emigration from Ireland.

Outside of the obvious improvements for tenants: affordable housing with rents tied to income, security of tenure, higher quality accommodation etc. there are several associated social and cultural benefits to schemes of universal public housing.

For instance, it allows for more deeply rooted communities that are less likely to be torn apart by evictions. It would give generations of families the ability to live nearby and not be forced to separate because of unaffordable rents.

Universal public housing should also be built with the idea of community in mind. It affords us an opportunity to build amenities directly into spaces where people live, and directed by the communities that live there.

Finally a programme of state housing building would provide an opportunity for high-quality, well-paid jobs in both its construction and maintenance and allow for skill-sharing and training in the process.

As the state has increasingly moved away from funding social housing it has become stigmatised as a form of housing provision. We want to see beautiful public housing that everyone wishes to live in!

What can I do to get more involved?

CATU is building an all-Ireland campaign for universal public housing to tackle the housing crisis.

Join CATU, catuireland.org/join, and get involved in this campaign to stop the selloff of public land and build public housing! We will be planning actions of all sorts to combat the privatisation of public goods, to insert a right to housing in the constitution, and getting out in our communities to raise awareness of universal public housing. Get involved and have your voice heard in the fight!

On top of that you can:

- Bring it up to your family, your workplace, your neighbours.
- Bring a motion to your trade union branch to support it.
- Lobby your elected representatives.

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