

French housing report exposes government inaction

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The housing crisis in France was again under the spotlight February 1 when the Abbé Pierre charity foundation issued its annual report. It noted that 3 million people are either living on the streets (100,000 of this total) or are very badly housed. Another 6 million people are described as living in “unfit” accommodation—either too small or unsanitary.

The situation is worsening each year for the poorest in the population. Of the meagre 431,000 new houses built in 2007, only 39,300 were destined for low-rent public housing (HLM). Most of the new housing starts are for those in the upper income groups at market prices.

The report highlights government indifference in this sector, showing that “in 2007 as in 2006 less than 24 percent of housing built in 2007 corresponded to the needs of the 70 percent less well-off households.”

At the present rate of 1.2 million people applying for HLM accommodation, the report estimates it will take 30 years to satisfy this demand. The charity accuses the state of direct responsibility for the crisis: “The politicians have not always made housing a priority of government action.” It noted that public expenditure on housing is “going down...representing 1.78 percent of GDP in 2007, thus the lowest in 30 years.”

Many empty promises have been made by right-wing governments over the recent period, especially since the urban revolt of youth in 2005. Under former President Jacques Chirac, the minister of housing and social cohesion, Jean-Louis Borloo, announced a scheme of home building for families with low budgets unable to buy at market prices. Borloo’s proposal—for houses priced at €100,000 each and built at the rate of 20,000 to 30,000 a year—failed to materialise. Only four have been completed.

During December 2006, Parisians and television

viewers were horrified to see hundreds of homeless people camped in tents along the Canal St. Martin, protesting and demanding decent housing. The Don Quichotte protest group behind the action mobilised much public sympathy and support from television and film personalities, to the embarrassment of the government.

Once again, the Villepin government under President Jacques Chirac promised action in the form of a new law guaranteeing housing (the DALO). The homeless were to be given the right to take legal action against local government for failure to provide housing on demand. Don Quichotte wound up the protest, only to resume it during Christmas 2007 for lack of good faith on the government’s part. The homeless tents were rapidly torn down by CRS riot police and protesters beaten and carted off. The DALO law finally became effective from January 2008.

The current minister for housing, Christine Boutin, who raged against the Don Quichotte homeless tents and ordered their destruction, has recently come up with another scheme to alleviate the housing shortage—houses at €15 a day. She describes it as “a revolutionary product that a house buyer could pay off on a daily basis,” the sum total being €450 a month over 20 years. Once again, however, it is not the poor who will benefit. Applicant households must be earning one-and-a-half times the minimum wage of €1,280 a month. The minimum wage (SMIC) now covers 17 percent of wage earners, representing a constant progression from 11.2 percent of wage earners in 1995.

The inability of the free-market economy to provide decent housing for all has been a characteristic of capitalism since the times of Marx and Engels. But charities like the Abbé Pierre foundation, while proposing certain reforms, have always worked closely

with the government authorities. The priest Abbé Pierre, who died last year, launched an appeal in the severe winter of 1954 when 2000 homeless were near to death in Paris. He played a central role in getting a law passed forbidding the eviction of people from their homes during the winter months. Since the days of General Charles de Gaulle, his foundation has been a pillar of the establishment. The charity's last president, Martin Hirsch, is now President Nicolas Sarkozy's high commissioner for solidarity against poverty.

The inadequate measures favoured by the Abbé Pierre foundation to reduce homelessness expose why its mission has failed. It calls for tripling the fines on local municipalities that fail to meet their quota (as fixed in law) to set aside 20 percent of house construction for HLM lodgings. The rich districts such as that of President Sarkozy have always ignored this law. The foundation also favours another measure to rapidly ready 100,000 lodgings in the private sector for people on low incomes to pay rents at HLM rates, with the state and local municipalities paying the difference on the high rents charged. This amounts to public subsidising of private profiteering.



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