

Housing rights campaigners speak out on UK government's social cleansing

Our reporters

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When the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government imposed a cap on housing benefit payments available for private rented accommodation in 2011, it was widely predicted that this would lead to a policy of social cleansing of the poor, particularly in London. Those predictions were borne out with Labour Party councils leading the way.

Housing benefits claimants were sent to areas hundreds of miles away. Since then councils have been handing over social housing estates to private property developers who have replaced them with houses for sale and a small proportion of so-called “affordable” accommodation at much higher rents. The deliberate policy of destroying social housing has been accompanied by evictions of tenants.

These measures have led to occupations and the formation of campaigns to highlight the broader issues of social cleansing across the capital. WSWs reporters spoke to **Isabel Counihan-Sanchez** and her daughter **Sarah** about their experiences with eviction and their involvement in the Housing 4 All campaign.

Isabel: “Personally my experiences with a Labour-led council have been atrocious. It’s been so bad. Even with the local councillors at the time who said they were helping me. One councillor told me that he was reprimanded for helping us.”

Isabel explained that when they went to the council to protest, “they called the civic centre and said we were trying to break into their office. They sent down the head honcho and security guards. I’ve actually met the security guards before and as soon as they saw me they were smiling because they know what I’m like. I’m a passive person. I’m not aggressive.”

Sarah: “That’s not the first time we’ve had problems. When we went into a council meeting at the town hall, one of the councillors actually went under the desk and

called the police on the phone, saying ‘they’re going to attack us.’”

Isabel: “When I went to housing advice I was told to go and live in Ireland [where the Counihan-Sanchez family has a small plot of land] and live in a caravan. They asked me literally to go out to the rural countryside and live there, especially with a child with disabilities. I said that’s great. I couldn’t believe what she was saying to me.”

Sarah: “She said my dad could live in London for the week, in a B&B [bed & breakfast] or hotel and then go back to Ireland at the weekend. We were barred from the Town Hall. They had police vans waiting for us.”

Isabel expressed her admiration for Jasmin, one of the young mothers from the “Focus E15 Social Housing, not Social Cleansing” campaign, who occupied an empty block of former social housing flats in east London after they had been served eviction notices.

“I said, ‘you really inspire me’. I said to her, ‘you’re 19 and what you’re doing at your age is so hard with a young child’. And all the criticisms about single mothers. That is just brilliant because those flats were empty for, what, six to eight years? That shows you what you can do.

“We were at the West Hendon demonstration [in north London] on Saturday. They want to tear down 700 homes to replace them with 2,000. They’re going to be selling some of them off and some with ‘affordable rents’. They talk about regeneration but it’s not what the people want. They want to make money off the residents.”

Isabel explained that she told a Brent Council senior manager, “You are moving people out [of West Hendon] for regeneration. They’re not secure tenancies and the rents are higher. They’re also having to pay a water bill which they never had because it was included

in their rent. I said ‘don’t tell me you are helping people. Their rent is going up by about £30 a week. That’s a lot to a bus driver or a nurse.’”

Isabel said their problems had affected her health and that of her 16-year-old son who is sitting his exams, “I had to go to his head-of-year and say that he is not so much worried about his GCSEs [examinations]. He’s worried about being made homeless again. He used to be active in hurling and really be out there but now he’s withdrawn and anxious. No one looks at the aftermath of homelessness.”

Sarah said her younger brother had been affected, explaining how he “was chewing through his tops when he was going to bed at night. He was chewing through the duvet because he was scared. Our landlord in Ealing would turn up and he would be very rude and that would make us feel more on edge because he would just walk in and say, ‘I think I want you to go now.’”

“My sister and I slept in the living room... I would be laying there sometimes crying, thinking ‘how could we have been completely neglected by the people that are paid to care?’ I felt that we were being completely forgotten about. My attendance at school dropped dramatically because I thought ‘what is the point. No one really cares.’”

Isabel explained how her daughter was not cowed: “Sarah said, ‘I want to be out and telling people how it is from a child’s point of view.’ She was 15 when it started. She wanted to let people know what it was like. She said ‘if I can save one person’. We have stopped people from being homeless and stopped evictions. Even if someone is waiting for the bailiffs, we all make sure that someone is with them.”

Sarah explained how she had been told that based on the average person’s wages for a couple, rent should not be more than £150 a week. “You can’t get that anywhere in London. You might get maybe half a bedroom or maybe half a bathroom for that.

“It’s actually costing councils more money because of the housing benefit they are having to pay to help people stay in their accommodation. They’re actually losing more money than they are making at selling to investors.”

Isabel: “When you’re in a crisis you need to be housing the people that are in need. It doesn’t matter if they are an asylum seeker or a single person. As a family we have each other but these people are literally

told to ‘clear off’. It’s criminal. A home is not a privilege. It’s a basic right and now it’s been made into a commodity. They’re making a lot of profit out of it. Everyone should have a home.”

Sarah: “I do media studies as well as politics in school where we learn about the power of the media. The main thing is people rely on sources of media such as television to get their information and think they are getting the full story. I think that people are blind to the bias. With the march in central London organised by Anonymous two nights ago there was only a tiny box in the *Metro* [free newspaper] saying Russell Brand [comedian/actor] was there. There were thousands of people there.

“When I’m in my politics class I speak out. I said to the teacher the other day that social cleansing is being carried out in this area. People ask me to tell them about things, they want to know.

“Next May will be the first time I am able to vote because I am 18 in April. I don’t know what to do. I would like to vote because it’s the first time. But then you think: what are you voting for?”



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