

”You cannot disperse communities and expect people to be fine with that”

Protesters denounce social cleansing by Southwark Labour council

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to some of those protesting the gentrification plans being carried out in the Elephant and Castle area of south London.

Adrian spoke to the WSWs as the protest assembled outside the London College of Communication (LCC). “I’m here today to protest against the redevelopment of the Elephant and Castle shopping centre to make way for houses for rich people to buy,” he said.

“At the moment, it’s a community centre. All the shop owners are independent—it’s not like a big shopping centre such as Westfields. People have been here for years, it’s lovely.

“I moved here to go to South Bank University. The accommodation is cheaper, nicer and has all the facilities you need. But they’re going to tear it down. For students and workers, it will be very bad. For those who work in the city it will be fine, they can go to the retail giants. Workers who work in the area will have to go miles away to get what they want at a price they can afford.”

“The council say they will help independent shopkeepers, but I doubt it. Everywhere is being gentrified and there is no regard for anyone who cannot earn above a certain amount of money. All the council think about is those with money.

“There are always people who think the Labour Party is much better than the Tories. Most of Labour is Tony Blair and New Labour. If you support them they are Tories in a red jumper. Labour is not as great as some people think.”

Speaking of the ongoing protest at the London College of Communication campus of the University of Arts London (UAL), Adrian said, “I think the occupation is good. They want to sell off the university, get a new building. There is such a huge amount of problems being thrown at us by the government. They are doing it all at

once. People are working more to pay for all the attacks on them.

“After the Grenfell Tower fire, the government started to make noises, saying ‘That was bad, was it not!’ It was on the news for a few weeks then it is back to the attacks. The government does not care. People from Grenfell do not have a home and are forced to live in one-room hotels or hostels. That is disgusting.

“Until something revolutionary happens, a revolt against the government, nothing is going to change and we will stay in this horrible situation.”

Georgina was with her friend and explained, “We are journalist students from UAL. We were part of the occupation against the gentrification of Elephant and Castle. I have lived in and around London, in Hayes and it has not been gentrified yet. I am sure they will though, as London is getting bigger.

“My mother is from Chalfont St. Peter in Buckinghamshire. That is supposed to be a middle-class area, but she lives in one of the few council houses there and I would not be surprised if the council properties in that area go.

“Here in Southwark they want to take down the Elephant and Castle shopping centre, the oldest in Europe. They want to replace it with a new UAL campus, but we think we don’t need to have it at the expense of the small businesses ... And rent is going to go up because of that.”

Asked about the record of the political parties over the issue of social cleansing, she answered, “None opposes it.”

When reporters pointed out that the main social cleansing plans in London were being carried out by Labour-run councils such as those in Haringey, Newham and Southwark, Georgina responded, “Wow! I did not

know that. I am a big supporter of Jeremy Corbyn. I feel really bad about that because I get it, these parties want to make money for the country, but they are doing it at the expense of the people.

“I just feel that there is another way. Now after what you said, I feel hurt by the Labour Party doing that, though I was never passionately fond of them. I just think there must be another way to sort this out, so that we can still be a wealthy profitable country, bringing tourism in, etc., without moving out the poor.

“Where are they going to go? Why are the people poor?” she asked. “People who lived in these communities for years are being driven out. Those are the people who built the city in the first place. Their forefathers built all these historical things. It is very sad and I hope these protests get bigger to make a difference.”

At the protest outside Southwark council offices Patrick, a resident of the borough since 1999, explained, “My mother and I were given a flat by the council, in a place in the borough where nobody wanted to live. But over the years, Southwark has become fashionable among people, and recent developments have pushed out the old residents due to rent increases beyond their means.

“The Shard tower and all these glass building developments are mostly empty, where owners wait for the prices to go up. The same thing that happened at Elephant Park and Warwick Road is now coming to my area.

“You cannot disperse communities and expect people to be fine with that. Some of my school friends lived in Warwick Road, and after the destruction of their council housing a friend of mine was relocated to Morden, further south at the edge of London. I have not seen him nearly as much, so we lose these community links.

“The council is voting on what the parameters of this redevelopment will be: originally it was supposed to have 35 percent social housing as part of the building of flats, but now they announced it was down to 3 percent. What made the council decide that? Profit!

“They know the importance of the shopping centre and social housing in Elephant and Castle for people who have not had money for as long as I have been living here. This borough, Southwark, is controlled by Labour Party councillors. Some of them oppose the new measures. I am here in the demonstration to protest and hope to put pressure on the council to sway the vote in favour of us the residents.”

Claire, who lives in Lewisham, said, “All over London, it has been more and more difficult to remain in, let alone

find, social housing for normal people. I am here to protest against yet another regeneration project which will destroy what remains of social housing in this area for the benefit of the rich and property developers.”

Lilly said, “I’ve come down to support people who are affected by this, but also everyone who is suffering from gentrification all over the city and around the country.

“I go to Goldsmiths University and live in Hackney, but come from Brighton. Near where I live in Hackney a lot of good warehouse community housing got torn down to make way for the stadium and Olympic Park.”

Asked why she was fighting the Elephant and Castle gentrification, Lilly said, “Because its moving communities who have been there years and workers who work really hard and made their life there are just being carted out shamelessly. I think it is just greed that is causing this. It is rich people who just don’t care.”

Asked what she thought would happen, she said, “I think it [the Delancey gentrification] will go through, if I know what rich people are like. I think we can just warn the next areas to be gentrified about it.”

Amy is studying at SOAS University in London. She said, “This is just about getting working class people out of London and getting rich people in who can afford luxury flats. People need shelter and its one of our rights and needs. If you don’t have shelter you can’t go to work and function as a human being.

“Even housing for students is now unaffordable. I’ve got a lot of friends at university who have to work at the same time as studying because they can’t afford the rents. So there are a lot of movements for rent striking in the student movement.”



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