

TV review Britain's great housing scandal exposed

Paul Kershaw

Unite LE 1111 housing workers' branch

Channel 4's campaigning series of programmes, *The Great British Property Scandal*, has struck a chord with a wide audience. By Monday 12 December, one week after the first programme, over 100,000 people had signed up to support the campaign via the internet.

Starting with a heartrending programme on 'landlords from hell', Channel 4 moved on to highlight the waste of empty homes, mostly privately owned.

A mass of statistics highlighted the scandal of housing in Britain and viewers were shown the delight felt by homeless individuals helped in to housing by the programme presenters.

The series showed that homeless people are 'more like you than you realise'; a combination of life events can quite easily push people without large amounts of money into homelessness. They are then locked in a spiral: if you don't have a home you can't get a job, without a job you can't get a home.

Research published since the programme shows that this is not just a matter for disinterested sympathy for many viewers.

A YouGov poll for homeless charity Crisis shows that a quarter of people in Britain are worried about

losing their home. Three quarters felt there should be a change in the current law so that councils have to provide advice, assistance and emergency accommodation to single homeless people.

Everyone will be moved by seeing people housed by the programmes, but TV programmes alone cannot reverse the rise in homelessness.

Regulations

The programmes did call for councils to make better use of their powers to regulate private landlords, but you have to stop the cuts to do that.

They did note the decline in social housing; the real solution would be a massive programme of building more of it.

Ironically, a series that started with an exposé of bad conditions and insecurity in the private rented sector, also tries to boost that sector and convince potential private landlords they can make a profit.

Far better would be a campaign to cap rents, reintroducing rent control, and to reintroduce basic security of tenure in the sector, stopping arbitrary eviction, as emergency measures.

The Channel 4 campaign has raised key issues but avoids challenging the cuts and austerity; that is the role of trade unions, socialists and anti-cuts campaigns.

www.channel4.com/programmes/the-great-british-property-scandal

Homelessness application increases 2010-11:

Haringey 83%
Hammersmith and Fulham 92%
Bromley 99%
Leeds 181%

- 17% rise in homeless households in one year
- According to Shelter, an estimated 35,000 people across Britain face the prospect of losing their homes between 1 November and Christmas
- 700 Birmingham families are in desperate need of large homes. Only five suitably sized properties become available each year
- Over one million empty properties in Britain, 88% of which are privately owned

"Local authorities have the powers to tackle rogue landlords but too many aren't making the most of their armoury. They must follow the lead of those councils taking a zero tolerance approach to rogue landlords, and support tenants who are suffering by cracking down on the worst offenders in their area," commented Shelter. Local authorities should use their powers to oppose cuts to Environmental Health and housing departments!

Councils and bad private landlords	Local authorities admit there are 1,477 known landlords who are giving them continued cause for concern and repeatedly making tenants' lives a misery	Complaints about serious and potentially life-threatening hazards, including dangerous gas and electrics, have risen by 25% over the past two years	Overall complaints about landlords have increased, taking them to 86,628 in the last year
			Despite the sharp increase in problems, just 270 successful prosecutions have been made by local authorities against landlords during the same period

Pensioners and workers - united fight needed

Terry Pearce

Thames Valley National Pensioners Convention (personal capacity)

When I addressed 2,000 striking public sector workers on 30 November in Reading, I brought greetings of solidarity and unity from the Thames Valley National Pensioners Convention (NPC). Public sector workers and those of us receiving the basic state pension are involved in the same struggle with the coalition government.

In their response to George Osborne's Autumn Statement, the NPC outlined the depth of the government attacks on the pensions and benefits of pensioners.

For example, the government's decision to link pension increases to the CPI index instead of the higher RPI index next April will cut pensions by between 15% to 20% over the next 20 years. Winter Fuel Allowances are being reduced in 2011 by £100 to £300 for householders over 80, by £50 to £200 for householders under 80, and then frozen at this level for the lifetime of this parliament.

The state pension retirement age is rising to 67 from April 2026



photo Paul Mattsson

to 2028, this will affect about eight million workers born between April 1961 and April 1969. This will have a big effect, as the life expectancy gap between the richest and poorest can be as great as 17 years.

Last winter over 25,000 older people died from cold related illnesses, therefore the reduction in Winter Fuel Allowances and soaring heating costs from profiteering energy

companies could lead to a hike in this figure.

Higher VAT, food prices and reductions in housing benefits are also bearing down heavily on those people trying to get by on the basic state pensions. It is vital to forge unity between all those fighting the coalition, young people, students, public and private sector workers as well as pensioners.

Occupy London tours Canary Wharf

Duncan Money

East London Socialist Party

Despite being one of the capital's most recognisable landmarks, Canary Wharf is not exactly on the regular tourist trail.

In fact, since Canary Wharf Group was recently granted an injunction banning protest across the entire site, which is private land, you would almost think the area had something to hide.

Spotting an opening in the market, some of us from Occupy London organised the first Occupy Tour, a guided walking tour explaining the recent history of the area and visiting local sites of interest.

These sites include a number of financial institutions internationally famous for sucking up taxpayers' money through bailouts and splurging out on gigantic bonuses while trying their best to pay as lit-

tle tax as possible.

What makes this even more obscene is that Canary Wharf is in the London borough of Tower Hamlets, the local authority with the second-highest rate of child poverty in the country.

The level of interest generated by the tour was an incredible surprise for us. The tour was joined by journalists from across the globe.

We were also surprised to find a large number of Canary Wharf security staff joining the tour, obviously eager to learn something about their employers.

There was some confusion when the head of security seemed to suggest the injunction would also apply to walking tours but this misunderstanding was soon cleared up and he too joined the tour.

The astonishing response we got means that the tours may become a regular fixture and branch out into other areas of the City.



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The offer applies for Monday to Saturdays at 7.30pm until Friday 23 December (including a matinee on Friday 23rd at 2.30pm), and for Saturday matinees at 2.30pm.

Arcola Theatre. 24 Ashwin St, London E8 3DL
www.arcolatheatre.com