

# The Housing Question Today

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Not a day goes by without reference to today's housing crisis. Buying a house is becoming a fantasy for more and more people as prices outstrip incomes. The privatisation of public housing means our burgeoning Generation Rent must try its luck in the resurgent yet barely regulated private rental sector. Here almost one in seven renters spends over half their income on rent, some in conditions unfit for human habitation.

This housing crisis is most acute in London, where prices and rents spiral upwards in yet another speculative bubble. But it's not just market forces driving the city's social cleansing: under the guise of 'regeneration', local authorities buffeted by austerity are profiting from rising property values by demolishing the last precious enclaves of public housing and selling the land to developers to build almost exclusively private housing.

Impoverished by welfare cuts and the precarious gig economy, households are being evicted in record numbers, leaving 120,000 children languishing in temporary accommodation. And then there's Grenfell Tower – more than 80 people, most immigrants, burned to death by neoliberalism's toxic combination of untrammelled private greed and political negligence.

Faced with such a housing disaster, how could we see anything other than the enduring relevance of Friedrich Engels' ideas on the housing question? It was Engels who, in his *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), coined the term 'social murder' to describe the early and unnatural deaths of working class communities forced to live in insanitary dwellings to which those in power turned a blind eye.

In *The Housing Question* (1872-73), Engels warned of the perils of deregulation that were creating dangerous construction standards; he criticised the local authorities charged with making homes safe as 'centres of corruption of all kinds'; and he uncovered the waves of investment and disinvestment in the built environment under capitalism that drove the periodic demolition of working class quarters and their gentrified redevelopment. All these issues are alive and kicking today.

Engels also railed against reformist solutions to the housing question that focused on outlawing only 'one single sub-species of capitalists' – the private landlord – and expanding home ownership through turning short-term rents into long-term debts. This, he argued, would simply reproduce the housing question anew when economic crisis turned a mass of mortgage-indebted home owners into tenants again.

To Engels, there was only one solution to the housing question: the revolutionary abolition of capitalism and the creation of a communist society. In the continuing aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis in which the destructive commodification of housing played such a crucial role, this idea seems more relevant than ever before. And

yet, as someone once said, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

So, what should we do? The simple but hard answer lies in ordinary people building a social movement to defend and expand the right to secure decent, affordable and safe housing for all. That means resisting the further privatisation and marketization of social rented housing, the demolition of homes and estates regardless of tenure, and the repossession and eviction of indebted home owners and tenants.

That also means actively creating new collectivist spaces of shelter and home that I call the 'housing commons'. This involves both a reinvigorated egalitarian state requisitioning empty homes, regulating private landlords and building new public housing, and local housing action groups setting up new housing cooperatives. Expanding the housing commons might not mean the immediate end of capitalism as Engels desired, but it makes it far easier to imagine in the future.