

## **The role of the city in an alternative Europe: moving towards the right to housing and a habitat**

Coordinated by Sylvie Lacroux, ex director of UN-Habitat Europe and Teresa Hoskyns of the London Social Forum, the seminar held during the ESF involved over one hundred participants from the European Union, the Russian Federation and Turkey.

The result of the unification of the proposal by the International Alliance of Inhabitants and that of the London Social Forum, the seminar was enlivened with many interventions and thought provoking ideas deriving from the variety of approaches and subjects intervening. For this reason everyone agreed that it was the most important seminar on urban issues organized by the ESF.

Michael Edwards introduced the role of the cities as the motor of the construction of a neo-liberal Europe citing London, as the capital of finances in the old continent and the main promoter of the speculative real estate bubble. Therefore he underlined the need to share experiences and develop, on the European level, a unifying theory and alternatives for the management of cities, with particular reference to housing, transportation, the environment and democratic participation in these issues. This regards both the urban social movements and the progressive local authorities.

Costis Hadjimichalis (Initiative for the right to the city, Athens) spoke about the challenge of the city/company to control urban space, citing the case of the Athens Olympic Games, where 9 billion Euros of public funding went to the real estate and the private sectors.

The mayor of Bobigny, Bernard Birsinger, described how 57% of public housing in his city can be used as an example of how to manage a city-world, by fighting against poverty, not against the poor. But this is not enough to efficiently contrast evictions caused by the globalization of the markets, and anti-eviction ordinances are not enough either, even though he himself has promoted them. Therefore he proposed the establishment of a real public service for housing and, after the positive outcome of the General Estates on Housing in France in 2005, the idea is to extend this initiative to the European level, involving all interested players.

This proposal was picked up on by Carine Clément (Coordinator of the Union of Soviets, Russian Federation), who described the battle conducted in more than 250 cities against privatization of the housing sector and against the real estate speculation tolerated by many local administrations, especially after the establishment of the new real estate code. Clément underscored the need to create an international network to give strength and a new outlook to those who are fighting against a 50% cut in income because of housing costs. On the basis of these facts and the sharing of common principles, it will be possible one day to talk about how the right to the city was conquered by its inhabitants.

Silvia Macchi, (Transform, Italy) proposed the experience of Rome, where the urban social movements participated in negotiations with the city administration, which resulted in an important deliberation regarding the housing policy. The results are not yet satisfactory however, as demonstrated by 20 million square meters of private housing, zero of which are for social structure, proposed in the new zoning plan. Therefore, questions were posed regarding the need for new rules on a national and international level and on the importance of the proposal of calling for the General Estates.

Jacquy Tiset (CNL, Francia) on behalf of the most important and the oldest French Tenants' union, discussed the need for a strong public intervention in the housing sector, an essential factor for facing the urban crisis which recently exploded in the violent revolts in the banlieues. This means the development of a real public housing service, to favor amalgamation in the multicultural society, and combat social and racial discrimination aggravated by those municipal administrations, which have preferred to pay fines rather than have public housing facilities on their territories. The CNL, a co-signer of the appeal for the European General Estates, considers this initiative an incentive and a responsibility for all.

The representative of the Turkish Chamber of Engineers and Architects has denounced the reckless competition between cities as a result of capitalism. Instead of recuperating hundreds of thousands of empty apartments, the public administrations want to attract foreign investments by destroying, with military means, the popular neighbourhoods of the refugees from Anatolia and Kurdistan, which have developed spontaneously mainly in Istanbul. Therefore the resistance against the demolitions and evictions of tens of thousands of people, does not only regard the city management but is a declaration against capitalism.

Paolo Gangemi (PRC, Italia) re-propose the General Estates as a moment in which to share experiences, compare legislation and policies on the European level, together with the various movements, associations and public administrations.

Cesare Ottolini (IAI), underlined the political and programmatic contradictions within the European Union: It denies competence in housing matters, whereas in reality the liberalization of the mobility of financial and personal capital, has a heavy influence on the norms (Bolkenstein Directive, taxation, etc), on the use of structural funds (Urban) and on the privatizations of the sector. The dramatic toll, 18 million people are poorly housed, 3 million of which are homeless. This calls for the creation of another Europe, based on rights. Therefore the European General Estates on housing rights and the right to the city will be a bridge between the different players, a place where common strategies can be developed and the starting point for initiatives to combat this state of affairs at various levels.

The fact that there was little time for debate proves that there was a substantial consensus to the need to create a more social-oriented Europe which involves the entire continent, to activate common initiatives to conquer the right to the city, intended as a place where inhabitants have rights, and the

right of the city to fight against the attacks of neo-liberal globalization.

On the basis of the above, it was clarified that the different initiatives are considered complementary, non in contrast with each other.

Therefore the seminar concluded with a calendar of the next steps which calls for the efforts of all involved to take the next steps together.

An international meeting on housing and urban issues to be held in London has been inserted in the agenda of the World Habitat Day in October. In the meantime, the initiative regarding the European General Estates continues, with the preliminary encounters at the national level to be held during the next few months. A meeting to launch it will be held during the first week of December 2006, at the European Parliament in Brussels. The aim is to organize the General Estates within the year 2007, that is, in time to lead the battle to modify the European Constitution with the request for the introduction of an anti-evictions directive, and for the financing of a public housing service.

- [Click here to see the seminar program](#)
- [Click here to read the Appeal for the European General Estates for housing and city rights \(English, Français, Español, Greek, Russian?, Deutsch?, Turkish?, Hungarian?, Rumanian?\)](#)
- [Click here to read about the Zero Evictions Campaign.](#)

International Alliance of Inhabitants, 2007



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