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SHORT STORY

Philadelphia Housing Action: Covid-19 pandemic and negotiating our survival

Sterling Johnson

ABSTRACT:

Philadelphia Housing Action is a group of experienced housing organizers formed at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. While the U.S. government made funds available for emergency housing, the city government refused to use it all while continuing to sweep homeless encampments from place to place. In response, Philadelphia Housing Action embarked on a housing takeover campaign to help homeless mothers on the streets using unused vacant public property. To keep the houses, they held space, with a massive encampment in the middle of the city demanding that the houses be delivered to them and for the city to secure safe housing for these vulnerable Black and Latino families.

KEYWORDS: Covid-19, housing, homelessness, United States, abolition

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Philadelphia Housing Action, a collection of housing activists, began a series of actions in the beginning of 2020, even before knowledge of the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2019, I had met Jen Bennetch or #OccupyPHA when she started a five-month occupation in front of the Philadelphia Housing Authority's headquarters. We joined with other housing activists, that had been involved with direct action, to start a new campaign.

We were inspired by Bay Area Activists, Moms 4 Housing, that were able to connect the issue of evictions, housing and homelessness, racial and gender justice (Hahn 2020). Earlier in the year, Moms 4 Housing occupied a house and were able to force a deal to transfer it to the Oakland Community Land Trust. Our work was also inspired by black abolitionist feminist thinkers,¹ like Mariame Kaba, Ruth Wilson Gilmore and

¹ U.S. Abolitionists advocate for abolishing prisons and policing. They historicize their role in the dispossession and violence committed against racialized peoples, mainly Black and Indigenous peoples, whose land and labor was used in the formation of the U.S. settler colonial state.

Dorothy Roberts. Their work discusses the organized abandonment of Black and Latinx neighborhoods by the state and the intentional use of criminal punishment as a solution to surplus labor (Gilmore 2007; Kaba 2021; Roberts 1999). We would use this theoretical framework to ground our organizing.

Philadelphia has a long history of housing activism being a post-industrial "rustbelt city" in the U.S. Northeast. At its height, Philadelphia's population was around 2 million, but successive waves of white flight, now leaves it with 1.5 million people and with a majority Black and Latinx population. Now, there is a vast amount of vacant unoccupied housing abandoned by the city. They sit empty sometimes to become re-natured, sometimes used as a space for illicit activities or squatted by people living outside of the mainstream. I make these remarks to say that squatting vacant properties is nothing new to Philadelphia's leftist scene. Throughout the 80s, there were several squatting campaigns. In the early 90s, University of Pennsylvania students started "Empty the Shelters," an explicit indictment of the system, focusing on the presence of homeless shelters while vacant viable houses remained empty (Parmley and Kische 1991). These campaigns became more relevant as the global pandemic became a reality. Our Mayor announced that the city would be going into a lockdown with a stay-at-home order starting on March 23, 2020.

For so much time, encampment removals were an accepted part of the city's process. The sweeps were viewed as a form of care (Briggs 2020b). For about two years, we had all spent a significant amount of time showing that forcibly destroying people's homes was violent and counterproductive. The first removal was completed on January 6th on Vine and 18th Streets where they targeted about 20 people living along the Ben Franklin Parkway (Lubrano 2020a). Our strategy was to be present, provide resistance and make it newsworthy. We were successful at drawing media attention, but could not stop them.

We were then given information that the City would be focused on the Convention Center where about 80 people regularly stayed at night. We had been reaching out to people to find out what they wanted. Two things were clear: more time and actually housing, not shelter. We had a meeting on February 12, 2020, and were told that there was no possibility of moving back the date of removal and that there was enough space in the shelters for everyone.

On the eviction day, we asked for supporters to come down and it was only us without any institutional support. The homeless service industry was involved in the removals, cajoling and coercing people into the deadly shelters (Lubrano 2020b). Activists confronted Homeless Services about their role.² The U.S. Centers for Disease Control had released guidance to support outdoor encampments rather than sweep them, in which, the City government chose to ignore (Orso 2020).

At that point, it was quite apparent that the government was not going to help us. The federal government even provided access to funds for city governments to commandeer hotels and the city had no plan to do this. Their plan was for people to stay in the International Airport terminal. We heard that about 150 people were staying there and then began doing outreach at the terminal (McCrystal and Lubrano 2020). Through April 2020, we would continue to advocate for the city to have some solution for people, but all they had were excuses. We spoke to the media imploring them to ask the City about the federal funds made available by the Federal Government that they refused to use (Johnson and Cunningham 2020).

In one story, a mother with children was quoted in the newspaper discussing her inability to get housing through the city. Then, a mutual aid organization had to help her get a hotel room, which then connected her to our organization. Philadelphia Housing Action helped her squat a house in the middle of the pandemic. "There are families in the city that need a space to isolate. I don't think putting families into a shelter that has probably already had COVID cases is the right thing to do," I said. "They should be putting families in hotels" (Briggs 2020a).

There, she was able to be safe from the street. We provided housing where the City simply would not. The City would rather the houses sit empty, than actually use them for families. Even while engaged with traditional media and advocacy, I was wholly aware that they would never actually attend to the needs of a mother and her children during the pandemic and especially a Black mother. So, it was about Philadelphia Housing Action

² See <https://twitter.com/flufftronix/status/1242100327681318916>.

providing the support and simply taking the houses. This was done quietly and without fanfare. We would squat and support 15 houses for several months with a plan to demand that they be transferred to us.

On June 10, 2020, our group started our Protest Encampment on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway.³ The Protest encampment would grow to about 250 people and become a point of leverage as we demanded that the Housing Authority provide housing for the homeless. Once we went public with our strategy, it then became a game of cat-and-mouse as the Housing Authority attempted to find our squat houses.⁴

Even when the Housing Authority police found one, we would mount a defense. One example occurred on July 9th, Jen Bennetch and Encampment supporters confronted the Philadelphia Housing Authority. Jen could stop an eviction with her camera and by reciting a few statutes. The police would stop in their tracks by Jen's forceful speech. The Philadelphia Housing Authority had actually been engaging in an illegal eviction when they should be going through the court system.⁵ In the state of Pennsylvania, a landlord is required to go through an ejectment to remove a squatter, a process that can take from six months to a year.

Through the work of many, many activists and organizers, we were able to maintain the encampment until late October 2020, finally negotiating the safety of the mothers and children who first squatted during the Covid-19 pandemic. With our advocacy, all 15 mothers were offered to work with us to form the Philadelphia Community Land Trust or to be integrated within the Philadelphia Housing Authority. A land trust allows for community-based organizations to own property and keep it available to low-income people in perpetuity. The Housing Authority's legalization process acknowledges that #OccupyPHA and Philadelphia Housing Action were right to occupy their vacant houses.

For poor Black and Indigenous people in the United States in crisis, the government shows organized abandonment of our needs even when the resources are readily available. Our lives can involve slow violence different than the situation in many other countries, which we recognize. So for us to survive, we must remain in constant negotiation with the neoliberal state around our right to readily available resources. Even during these processes, we are under constant threat of confinement, death, family separation and exploitation.

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³ See <https://fb.watch/cDWD3rFOMG/>.

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Sterling Johnson researches in the areas of Black geographies, anti-colonialism, feminist geography, carceral and abolition geographies. Their research is concerned with laws and morality and issues of social justice and liberation. Since 2012, Sterling has been an activist and advocate for housing and harm reduction focusing on the U.S. Mid-Atlantic region (Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington D.C.). They have a law degree from the University of California Hastings College of Law (San Francisco) and a Masters in Geography from George Washington University (Washington D.C.). See <https://liberalarts.temple.edu/content/sterling-johnson>.