

A Battle for Affordable Housing in D.C.

*Jesse Zarley reports from a housing struggle taking place blocks from the White House.
Socialist Worker Online
July 25, 2010*

RESIDENTS AND activists have taken over a parcel of land in Northwest Washington, D.C., and erected a tent city to protest the broken promises of developers and city officials to build affordable housing in a city suffering badly in the economic crisis.

On July 10, some 200 people, including activists from the ONE DC (Organizing Neighborhood Equity) and the People's Property Campaign of Empower DC, plus residents of the Shaw neighborhood, occupied Parcel 42, the site of a promised affordable housing apartment complex. The action was kicked off with a "Housing is a Human Right" block party on July 10.

The action came after it was learned that the administration of D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty and the developer Harning Brothers were backing away from a commitment to provide units for no- to low-income households at the complex planned for Parcel 42, which sits at the corner of 7th and R Streets in Northwest D.C., the wealthiest quadrant of the city.

Parcel 42 has been the subject of a multi-year affordable housing fight spearheaded by residents and ONE DC. According to an account at the Tent City blog, after feeling the pressure from this campaign, in November 2007, Fenty announced the city's plan to "subsidize 110 apartments affordable to families making less than \$50,000 a year"--at a cost of \$7.8 million to the city.

According to ONE DC, officials promised the affordable units in the complex would be available at various tiers of income--30 percent, 40 percent and 50 percent of the D.C. Metro Area Median Income--but that the city has since declared it wants all the units available to anyone with less than 60 percent of the D.C. median income. That's well out of reach for many D.C. residents.

When it became certain that Fenty intended to renege on his promise for Parcel 42, resident and activists took action.

Since the occupation began, the Tent City has hosted workshops on topics ranging from urban gardening to "know your rights," and events for kids such as kickball and drumming. The Tent City has a meeting space and a library, and the fence surrounding the liberated community is adorned with messages of solidarity: "Land and Liberty," "People's Property," "Fenty broke his promise," "Parcel 42 is Ours" and "Fight for our right to housing," in English and Spanish.

Ca'Vonn Ellis-Smith, a leader of the occupation, has lived in the Shaw neighborhood for over a decade. Ca'Vonn sees the attempt to develop luxury housing while refusing to deal with the lack of affordable housing as coming straight from the mayor's office. "Mayor Fenty's idea of affordable housing is 63 percent of AMI [Area Median Income], which is over \$60,000 for a family of four and is based on the incomes of the entire D.C. Metro Area," Ellis-Smith said.



The Tent City encampment at Parcel 42 in Washington, D.C.

The metro area includes such places as Bethesda, Md., where median annual family income is \$170,000 and the median home price \$725,000, according to a CNNMoney.com article. The average annual income for a family of four in the Shaw neighborhood, on the other hand, is \$35,000.

Though Ca'Vonn and her family currently have housing with the help of Section 8 vouchers, the situation for her family is precarious at best. Her current building could potentially "go co-op"--and opt out of a contract that subsidizes Section 8 housing, something that happened to a building across the street from Parcel 42. So Ca'Vonn faces the threat of her housing subsidies being taken away. When she has applied to other apartments that accept Section 8, she has been consistently denied because of the size of her family.

Parcel 42 and the surrounding area show quite clearly the need for more affordable housing in D.C. Just a block down the street from the Tent City is a large, boarded-up apartment complex. Many families from Shaw have seen loved ones forced to move to Maryland or Virginia.

According to a Washington Post report, before the economic crisis hit in early 2008, the D.C. Housing Authority had nearly 57,000 families on its waiting list for housing aid. The vast majority of applicants had an income of less than \$30,000 for a family of four.

Ca'Vonn says that the seizure of Parcel 42 was a "political statement and strategy. My hope is that others see [what we're doing], and start their own occupations in their own neighborhoods, all over the whole city, and that they stop taking it lying down. It's a dictatorship, and it's out of touch." Brian Tierney, Sam Waite and Brian Ward contributed to this article.