

REPORT OF THE MEETING IN BRUSSELS 17 > 20.02.2022



EUROPEAN ACTION COALITION
FOR THE RIGHT TO HOUSING AND TO THE CITY

The European Coalition for Action on Housing Rights and the Right to the City (EAC) held its first physical meeting in Brussels last February, after two years of dissemination in virtual space.

Despite the war, despite the ongoing pandemic situation, this long-awaited physical meeting had a very positive effect on our movements as it strengthened our will to continue our struggles together.

PROGRAM

17.02	18.02	19.02	20.02
09H00- 11H00 WELCOMING SESSION	09H00- 11H00 W.4 > RISE IN HOUSING PRICES W.5 > HOW TO MAKE OUR DEMANDS HEARD	09H00- 11H00 PLENARY - 1	09H00- 11H00 PLENARY - 4
11H30- 13H30 W.1 > STRUGGLES W.2 > COLLECTIVE ORGANIZATION AND ACTION	11H30- 13H30 W.6 > STOP GENTRIFICATION W.7 > ANTI-EVICTION STRUGGLES	11H30- 13H30 PLENARY - 2	11H30- 13H30 PLENARY - 5
LUNCH BREAK / PAUSE MIDI / PAUSA PARA COMER			
15H00- 17H00 HOUSING ACTION DAY W.3 > STRUGGLES OF PEOPLE WITHOUT HOMES AND/OR PAPERS 2	15H00- 17H00 MEETING ON WORKING GROUPS	15H00- 17H00 PLENARY - 3	ACTION
AFTER 17H30 ... PLANNING THE ACTION OF SUNDAY	PUBLIC EVENT		



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WORKSHOP 1: STRUGGLES IN EUROPE



We started the workshop with a brief review of the struggles in the last period: the struggle against evictions seems, not surprisingly, to be the most urgent.

Participants expressed their concern about the phenomenon of “renoviction” (eviction organised through renovation). In the course of the discussion it became clear that there are two main modes of action against evictions: campaigns that aim to raise awareness (via mapping, reports and symbolic actions), and direct action via the organisation of anti- eviction fronts.

Other struggles include those against luxury real estate development projects. Others are to promote alternative ways of living. Some groups campaign against racist housing policies. There are also those fighting for lower rents, for more social housing, or against temporary tenancy agreements that undermine tenants’ rights. Airbnb also remains a huge problem in many cities, as does indebtedness. And while some are trying to prevent new “anti-squatting laws”, others are engaging in squatting, which has recently been successfully combined with the creation of housing spaces for so-called homeless people.

The Berlin referendum to expropriate large housing companies was mentioned, which led the discussion to more generic questions about how we raise awareness and mobilise (particularly in the context of the pandemic) and what approaches seem to be transferable to other contexts. Indeed, depending on the range of issues discussed, there is a wide variety of ways to fight, from lobbying political actors to direct action. Many comrades stated that the combination of different strategies and tactics is the most promising.

Another important tool that we will have to discuss more in the future is ‘storytelling’, i.e. how we politically shape the perception of socio-economic conditions and ultimately change the discourse.



WORKSHOP 2 - COLLECTIVE ORGANISATION AND ACTION



This workshop focused on the question of how organisations, with their structures and tools, participate in the struggle for the right to housing and to the city and achieve or fail to achieve their objectives. We had to take into account that some members of the EAC are federations of associations or local groups (DAL, PAH) and others are smaller groups.

The discussion showed that the legislative context is a determining factor in the ways we do things. The level of police repression is a significant factor that has a direct impact on our ability to mobilise, to claim our rights and to achieve political results.

Participants briefly mentioned the way their groups organise themselves: some create “toolboxes” for different types of struggles (for organising tenants in a neighbourhood, for homeless people or for requisitioning and/or occupying empty buildings), some organise trainings/actions, others create collective lives in squats or go door-to-door to organise solidarity. There are also federations that are created at different levels (local, regional, national), and alliances that are developed with other groups (unions, artists, intellectuals), etc.

Finally, the discussion shifted to the strategies to be developed: is the “legal” approach the best one today or should we focus on grassroots struggles and alliance building? Then we discussed the spaces where collective struggles are conceived, where activists are able to meet and structure their actions in the territories. Finally, we asked ourselves the question of how to move local struggles to another scale.

One of the problems raised in the discussion was the rise of the far right. They try to take advantage of the housing ‘crisis’ to scapegoat ‘others’ (people who do not belong to their nationalist conception of a given territory). We must admit our difficulties in transferring our more complex analyses of the systemic failures of capitalism and its ‘housing market’ to the simplistic nationalist and racist propaganda of the far right. The EAC’s anti-fascist consensus is unshakeable but the question of how to improve intersectional struggles needs to be addressed immediately.



HOUSING
FOR PEOPLE
NOT FOR
PROFIT!



**HOUSING
ACTION DAY**

HOUSING ACTION DAY

Preparation of the Housing Action Day (discussions about the call, communication strategy, group actions, etc.) and meeting with the Belgian Housing Action Day group.



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WORKSHOP 3 - THE STRUGGLE OF UNDOCUMENTED/HOMELESS PEOPLE



This workshop aimed to highlight the struggles of groups organising against multiple discrimination.

The struggles of racialised or socially excluded people are omnipresent in the EAC and are linked to other struggles for equal rights, for the regularisation of so-called undocumented people, against structural (and social) racism, classism and beyond, often in addition to various forms of gender discrimination, against war and more generally against neo-colonial relations on a global scale. We had to admit that once again, at this meeting, we were mostly 'white' people who were not directly affected by these discriminations.

Due to the different contexts of our fields of action, some collectives are more or less confronted with police violence and state repression. Sometimes, language issues can complicate collective organisation as well as a lack of space to organise.

In the course of the exchange, we learned that homeless people have managed to squat in countries where the occupation of empty buildings seemed impossible over the last two decades. In other cases, we were reminded that private individuals or solidarity organisations can make accommodation available and thus take it off the market. Public space is also taken over by occupations or interventions. The support and organisation of legally or informally occupied spaces continues.

We talked about different ways of collective organisation and solidarity. Homeless people explained that they had created a union in which they could organise and carry out political actions. Undocumented persons explained the principle of "sponsorship", where public figures and ordinary citizens express their support for undocumented migrants. It was recalled that it is important not to fall into patterns of victimisation of undocumented or homeless people and to avoid charity. It was also recalled that alliances with other struggles, such as the struggle for the regularisation of undocumented persons, are essential.

The members of the Neutral Zone Collective – Occupation KBC who participated in the workshop strongly influenced the discussion. The planned (and finally realised) collective action on Sunday 20 February in support of the collective was also discussed and the idea of a wider solidarity campaign emerged during this workshop.



WORKSHOP 4 - RISING HOUSING PRICES



Noting that housing is increasingly becoming a “safe haven” for capital, and that households are paying an increasing proportion of their income for housing, ECA members felt it was important to have a discussion on the surge in housing prices across Europe.

Privatisation of the public housing stock, increasing investment in residential property by large landlords, lack of social housing policies, banks taking over housing through unpaid loans, renoviction, etc. are all phenomena that explain the rise in prices. Moreover, incomes are not increasing.

Rent control was seen as a necessary demand for all participants. It is also necessary to demand more social housing which, in a way, regulates the rental market. Against the financialisation of housing, it is also imperative to insist on its social dimension.

In rural areas, too, prices are rising, but the reasons are a little different. The urban exodus is the main reason for the rise in prices in the countryside.

The workshop ended with open questions: what common actions can we take? In the face of so many reasons for rising prices, what should we focus on in our demands?



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WORKSHOP 5 - HOW TO MAKE OUR DEMANDS HEARD



This workshop started with a round of specific cases. Each group expresses its demands in different ways: various actions, public relations, media and social networks, information and awareness-raising events, brochures, campaigns, legal action, political pressure, alliances with other movements, etc.

In order to define a common and specific ECA strategy, we started by asking ourselves the question: to whom do we want to address our demands? Which authorities? How to address the people affected? To other social movements, experts, academics, transnational institutions, the general public, ...? It is necessary to have several strategies depending on the groups to be approached.

Much of the discussion focused on how to contact the press and use them in our favour. The theme of 'storytelling' was raised, i.e. how to make an issue 'worth telling' in societies over-saturated with information. A more generic critique of the press and media was discussed.

We could see that self-training in PR is a need for many grassroots initiatives. Also, more systematic guidelines on what we can do in advance of our actions (fanzines / brochures) should be discussed collectively. As EAC, we will come back to the topic of storytelling, as it has been mentioned several times.



WORKSHOP 6 - STOP GENTRIFICATION

This workshop started with two questions: What are you facing in your territory?
What are you doing about it?

What is happening in the territories that was already there before:

- The increase in property investment and speculation;
- Public investment for gentrification (sometimes too much, too long, leading to exclusion of neighbourhoods);
- The increase in housing prices and the decrease in social housing;
- Airbnb and the phenomena of touristification;
- Differentiation between highly gentrified and very dilapidated areas.

What seems to be new (or more important today):

- Rising prices in rural areas;
- The amount of empty space produced by real estate activities (e.g. high and empty flat towers) which leads to evictions and therefore to more empty space;
- The impact on part of the middle class, also affected by the housing crisis;
- Urban renewal;
- The disappearance of commons;
- The increased protection of private property by the public authorities and the justice system.

What can be done:

- Create meeting spaces;
- Change the commercial purpose of Airbnb;
- Lower rents, regulate them and demand social housing;
- Make housing a collective issue, not an individual one;
- Mobilise, occupy (without gentrifying), ...
- Take inspiration from the Berlin referendum and the CLTB (Community Land Trust Belgium).



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WORKSHOP 7 - ANTI-EVICTION STRUGGLES



The workshop started with a round table discussion on the current situation in the participants' respective countries and the state of their struggle. Then, the question was raised as to where we could focus our energies as EAC. How can we also raise awareness about the issue of evictions. How can we organise mutual support not only at local level but at European level?

In the course of the discussion, various ideas emerged. For example, it was proposed that an EAC position paper be drafted against evictions. Also, a data collection could be used to make the problem more visible. The map as an awareness-raising tool could also be considered. Beware, evictions are sometimes realities that the people who suffer them want to hide, it will be necessary to reflect on how to make them visible.

We also talked about how each group can organise itself on the ground: being present in the neighbourhoods, organising permanencies (which makes it possible to move from an individual dynamic to a collective dynamic in the fight against evictions), getting information from the courts in order to anticipate a scheduled eviction, identifying the neighbourhoods most affected and finally trying to limit evictions as much as possible (blockade actions). Some groups carry out actions in front of the offices of large landlords to denounce their activities, while others try to publish articles in the press. The issue of rehousing of evicted people is also addressed in some way by the groups. These and other elements make up all the work done by the groups on the ground.

This discussion could lead to the drafting of an anti-eviction guide. The Bucharest group identified three types of anti-eviction guides: a legal guide for people threatened with eviction, a guide for people in solidarity (how to support people threatened with eviction) and finally a third guide addressed to the media, to make visible the extent of the problem of evictions.



WORKING GROUP MEETINGS

Legal Group

Members proposed that more people join them to take forward the work on the analysis of European legislation for the right to housing.

Research Group

This group would like to advance its research on European housing policies. It will also contribute to the drafting of a brochure and the creation of a webinar.

Anti-Eviction Group

This is a new group created at this meeting.

Action Group

Prepared the Sunday action in Brussels in support of the Neutral Zone Collective occupying the former KBC.

Communication Group

For the first time in Brussels, we decided to strengthen the communication group and an additional position was opened. The idea was to try to broaden the media impact of the ECA.

If you would like to join one of the groups, please contact the facilitators: eac-facilitator@riseup.net.

PUBLIC EVENT

Link : <https://www.facebook.com/europeancoalition/videos>



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ACTION - SOLIDARITY WITH THE KBC OCCUPATION

More details here : <https://housingnotprofit.org/recognition-not-eviction/>



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