

The Industrial City and the Working-Class: The Glasgow Rent Strike of 1915

Few historical events offer such a direct link between social struggle and urban policy as the one observed between the Glasgow Rent Strike of 1915 and the intervention of the British state in the housing field. Under the pressures of war, the social tensions accumulated in the second largest city of the British empire⁵⁷ and exploded in 1915, taking the form, among other conflicts, of one of the most important rent strikes in urban history. Starting in April 1915, it involved, at its peak in November, some 20,000 households, primarily concentrated in the working-class communities of the Clydeside area. It was organized by tenants' committees and women's associations, with the full support of the trade unions and left wing parties.

On 25 December 1915, a Rents and Mortgage Interest Restriction Act was approved, establishing rent control for low-cost housing. Under even more pressing claims, with particularly militant mobilization in the industrial areas throughout the country, Parliament passed a Housing and Town Planning Act in 1919, mandating local governments to build housing for the workers and providing the necessary funds. For the first time in history, housing was considered a right for the people, and the state was held responsible for it. Public housing was born.

To be sure, the Glasgow Rent Strike by itself could not produce such a dramatic shift in the urban policy of the British state. Municipal housing had been a demand of the Labour Movement for many years,⁵⁸ and C.G. Pickvance rightly reminds us of the convergence of different social interests and historical circumstances in the formation of a reform oriented housing policy: first, the convenience for industrial capital to deal with a housing shortage that was putting pressure on wages and provoking workers' unrest; second, the general high level of working class militancy; and third, the effort of national unity and steady production required by the war, something that had created a favourable attitude in the government towards urban renters' demands aimed at correcting speculation.⁵⁹ Yet the process of working class mobilization in Glasgow, and its powerful expression in the Rent Strike, seems to have been the immediate historical factor imposing a new housing policy against financial and real estate interests.

In spite of the fact that the housing crisis was a source of problems for the industrialists, any attempt by the state to interfere with the market forces had been successfully opposed until 1915. It was only when a social challenge appeared at the grassroots level that the power relationships were altered and the state was forced to intervene in the provision of housing.⁶⁰ How responsive this intervention was to the fundamental issues raised by the strikers was another matter – that we will discuss in a further step of the analysis.⁶¹ We need first to recall some of the basic trends of the Rent Strike in order to consider the manner in which a conscious working class movement, in the very core of the process of capitalist industrialization, dealt with the city under the new conditions of urban industrial growth.

Such an analysis is apparently an easy task, at least from the point of view of the sources, since the Glasgow Rent Strike is a classic subject in the scholarly tradition of British social history. Yet only recently, historical research has attempted to deal with the questions that are relevant to an exploration of the relationships between social movements and the evolution of

cities – the role of the working class, the connection with the women's movement, the influence of socialist parties, the interaction between the struggles in production and those in consumption, the role of the state *vis-à-vis* different factions of the propertied classes, and so on. We are now able to answer many of these questions on the basis of reliable evidence thanks to the invaluable research carried out by Joseph Melling, of the University of Glasgow, whose findings have been partially reported in a series of papers, some of them still unpublished.⁶² A synthesis of existing research on the rent strike by Sean Damer⁶³ offers an interesting alternative view to Melling's interpretation while still converging toward the same empirical description of the phenomenon. It is on the basis of this very rich historical material that we will attempt some reflections on the interaction between class struggle and urban movements under the conditions of early industrial capitalism.

The Rent Strike

Around the turn of the century, the boom in shipbuilding and naval engineering production required by imperial expansion, dramatically accelerated industrial and demographic growth in the Clydeside region. Housing construction did not follow at the same pace. Furthermore, in 1911, in the midst of the urban crisis, 11 per cent of Glasgow's housing stock remained vacant for reasons of speculation. As a result, housing conditions rapidly deteriorated in Glasgow. Workers lived in overcrowded flats which were built on speculation over a very short period in the nineteenth century. In this sense, the housing crisis in Glasgow was particularly acute. Local landlords and rentiers obtained more benefit by overcrowding existing habitations with the masses of uprooted Highlanders and Irish people coming to the city in search of jobs, than by building new housing with longer and uncertain rates of return. For instance, between 1912 and 1915, while the population increased by 65,000 persons, only 1,500 housing units were built.⁶⁴ Since 70 per cent of the population was already living in overcrowded one or two room houses which were becoming increasingly dilapidated, the landlords found themselves in a situation of virtual monopoly. The rents rose to such a degree that even stable and well-to-do communities, including artisans and engineers, came under pressure and joined the slum areas in their anger over residential conditions. Their move highlighted an issue to which the British working class had been very sensitive for several decades,⁶⁵ particularly in Glasgow.⁶⁶ As early as 1885, at the time when the Royal Commission on Housing of the Working Class was discovering the gravity of the problem, socialist militants in Glasgow were demanding legislation and subsidies to build municipal housing. Supported by the Glasgow Trades Council, the Scottish Housing Council was organized in 1900, in connection with the Workmen's National Council founded in England in 1898 by three members of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation.⁶⁷

Under pressure from the trade unions, a House Letting and Rating Act was approved in 1911. It gave some legal protection to the tenants and allowed monthly lets for low-income dwellings. Letting by month was a long-standing demand from tenants, who were previously forced to commit themselves to a year's rent payment while unable to foresee the stability of their jobs. Yet landlords immediately took advantage of the new law to increase rents more often. Housing protests mounted. In 1911 a City Labour Party was organized with housing reform as the main point in its programme. In 1913, John Wheatley, a Labour Party Town Councillor, published a leaflet, *£8 Cottages for Glasgow Citizens*, which proposed subsidized housing for workers on the basis of revenues obtained by the city from the municipalization of tramways. More radical were the measures requested by John McLean, Glasgow's Marxist

leader, whose party, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), organized in 1913 the Scottish Federation of Tenants' Associations to fight against rent increases and to ask for state provision of housing. Yet the major pre-war organizational effort came in 1914 when the Independent Labour Party (ILP) Housing Committee and the Women's Labour League formed the Glasgow Women's Housing Association, which became the driving force of the Rent Strike under the leadership of women such as Mary Barbour, Mary Laird, Mrs. Ferguson, and Helen Crawford.

The war sharpened the angles of industrial and urban contradictions in the city. The location in Clydeside of the munitions industry brought 16,000 new workers into Glasgow and 4,000 others into the suburbs. The landlords again took advantage of the new housing shortage to increase their rents by 23 per cent in the industrial areas of Govan and Partick surrounding the shipyards, where the impact of rent increases was particularly severe.

As labour unrest increased in the factories in defense of the workers' union rights threatened by the government's new war-time disciplinary measures,⁶⁸ the abuses practised by the landlords appeared to be an intolerable provocation. The ILP took the initiative of the protest, and in January 1915, under the leadership of Andrew McBride, organized a Housing Conference attended by 450 delegates who supported the Wheatley proposal for subsidized housing and opposed rent increases. To implement the demands, a Glasgow Labour Party Housing Committee was founded, with the full support of the Glasgow Trades Council. Yet the transition from this central initiative to the Rent Strike was operated by a series of grassroots organizations that was created in working class communities, generally as a result of initiatives taken by women. According to Melling, '... the vital links between the local housewives such as Mary Barbour and the Labour Party were the network of committees which emerged at this time. The Ward Committees were already functioning in the late nineteenth century, and Labour Representation Committees were being established, but to these were added the committees of the Women's Housing Association and the Tenants' Defense Committees.'⁶⁹ The same fact is confirmed by Sean Damer and Iain McLean. On the basis of this grassroots support, the Rent Strike started in May 1915 in the heavily industrial area of Govan, where many skilled workers lived. From its beginning the Strike comprised the refusal to pay the increase in rents, mass protection against evictions of strikers, if necessary through violent confrontation, and street demonstrations in support of the Labour proposals for a new housing policy. A contemporary witness, Gallagher, cited by Damer, reports the intensity of popular mobilization: 'All day long in the streets, in the halls, in the houses, meetings were held. Kitchen meetings, street meetings, mass meetings, meetings of every kind. No halt, no rest for anyone, all in preparation for the sitting of the court when the test case came on. As in the streets, so in the factories, will we allow the factors to attack our wages?'⁷⁰

This powerful mobilization took place in a very peculiar context – the initial stages of the First World War, whose effects were keenly felt in a city that claimed some of the key military production sites. In fact the impact of this context on the movement proved a contradictory one.

The war created certain constraints on social protest by making it difficult to strike in the factories under the quasi-military regulations and the potential charges of sabotaging the nations' effort.⁷¹ On the other hand, the rent strikers could legitimately argue against the rapacity of landlords who were taking unfair advantage of the housing scarcity stimulated by the war, while putting unbearable pressures on families often deprived of their young men who were serving in the armed forces. In fact, the first violent protest in the Govan district took place in April, to resist the eviction of a soldier's family. Evictions, repeatedly attempted by the landlords with the support of the police force, were the events that built the solidarity of

the residents. Women engaged in attacks against the factors and sheriffs' men who came to evict tenants, pelting them with rubbish, flour and anything else they could lay their hands on from the home. In Govan, for instance, the sheriff's men attempted the eviction of a widow and son at Merryland Street on 18 October, when Mary Barbour, of the Glasgow Womens Housing Association was addressing a meeting nearby, 'The officers were assaulted with peasemeal, flour, and whiting, and after a confrontation between Mrs. Barbour and the officers, the latter visited the house and then withdrew.'⁷²

In early summer, mass demonstrations expressed the strength of the movement that in August had reached, according to Ann and Vincent Flynn, a wide variety of communities.⁷³ Besides Govan and Partick, strongholds of engineers and skilled workers, tenants on strike were reported in Parkhead, Pollokshaws, Pollok, Cowcaddens, Kelvingrove, Ibrox, Govanhill, St. Rollox, Townhead, Springburn, Maryhill, Fairfield, Blackfriars, and Woodside. As Damer points out, 'What is interesting to note about these areas of the city is that they are markedly different: heavily industrial areas, more respectable artisanal areas, and slum areas.'⁷⁴

In October 15,000 people were on rent strike. On 7 October a massive demonstration converged on St. Enoch's Square, under women's leadership. The Municipal Corporation alerted the government of the seriousness of the situation. An official committee was appointed to report on the rent issue in the Clydeside, under the chairmanship of a judge, Lord Hunter, the former liberal representative from the Govan district. The landlords, realizing the need to negotiate, moved against the rent strikes and pressed for new legal evictions in order to arrive at the bargaining table in a favourable position. In fact they inadvertently stiffened the movement and broadened its popular support. In November 1915 the number of rent strikers reached 20,000, and the massive resistance against legal repression almost assumed insurgent proportions. On 17 November a group of 49 strikers were legally compelled to appear before the sheriff, among them William Reid, Secretary of the Tenants' Defense Committee. They were accompanied by a crowd of 10,000 people who marched around George Square and massed in front of the City Chambers to listen to several speakers, including John McLean, the Marxist leader of the SDF. The situation became increasingly explosive because the trade unions were threatening to respond with strikes in the factory if the police attempted massive repression, disregarding the war-time regulations established for the munitions industry. William Reid, both a shop steward and a tenants' leader had already notified the corporations with a clear warning in relationship to the industrial workers' attitude, 'The temper of the men was such that, in the event of wholesale evictions taking place . . . they would not hesitate not only to prevent evictions, but to influence Parliament by every other means in their power. There could be no greater calamity at the present time than any stoppage of labour by men engaged in the engineering and shipbuilding industries, but as a last resort, . . . the men would rather take that risk than see the wives and children of soldiers being put into the street by the rapacity of the housewives in Glasgow.'⁷⁵

As Melling correctly observes, 'Here lay the strength of the workers and the secret of the Rent Strike's success. Not only was there a common identity between many shipbuilding, engineering, and munition workers (often working for the same firm), but also between the point of production and the communities where the workers lived.'⁷⁶

At the end of the 17 November demonstration, all legal actions against striking tenants were dropped. The State Secretary for Scotland, McKinnon Wood, asked the cabinet to freeze all rents at the pre-war level. On 25 November, a Rents and Mortgage Interest Restriction Bill was introduced in the British parliament. It received the Royal Assent on 25 December 1915. The 1919 Act, reacting to the contained working class protest over housing, extended the

scope of state intervention, introducing the programme of council housing through which municipal governments were going to shelter the majority of manual workers in the following decades.⁷⁷ Furthermore, when in 1917, new housing for munition workers had to be built in Gretna, 100 miles south of Glasgow, it was carefully planned as an innovative garden city for working class people, apparently in response to the unrest in the Glasgow factories.

Beyond the obvious significance of this historic social struggle, and also beyond the romantic myth that surrounds it, we should characterize its components and dynamics and absorb some of the lessons it provides for our understanding of urban change.

A Working Class Struggle for the Reproduction of its Labour Power

As with all major social movements, the significance of the Glasgow Rent Strike has many facets.⁷⁸ Yet the most salient feature is its character as a movement of the industrial working class defending its living conditions in the sphere of consumption. This is not the case for many urban conflicts, even in the period of early capitalist industrialization. As John Foster usefully reminds us, London could hardly be considered primarily an industrial city at the turn of the century, and its urban problem was more dominated by the accumulation and management of capital than by the reproduction of labour power.⁷⁹ Glasgow, on the contrary, closely resembles the model of the capitalist city as formulated by some Marxist theory.⁸⁰ This is one of the most interesting aspects of the study of the Glasgow Strike on a more general, theoretical level.

The rent strikers were industrial workers, men and women, and their families were residents of workers' communities directly linked to local labour markets dominated by the shipyards, engineering factories, and munitions industries, most of them huge units of production. These plants were heavily unionized, and by the time of the Rent Strike had become the stronghold of the shop stewards' movement. Furthermore, the backbone of the movement was formed by areas such as Govan and Partick which had a majority of artisans, engineers, and craftsmen, namely the labour aristocracy.⁸¹

This observation is crucial when related to a major trend taking place at the same time in the factories. Because of the war, the government, in agreement with the industrialists, was breaking down the old privileges of the craft unions, simultaneously provoking a determined resistance from the traditional skilled workers and the homogenization of the working class. In so doing the government also, unwittingly, laid the ground for the new form of labour organization around elected shop stewards.⁸² Since the craft unions were organized on the basis of the community, and since artisans and skilled workers were the main support of the ILP⁸³, we could easily sustain the hypothesis that the Rent Strike was a form of manifestation of old labour unionism in a sphere where the confrontation was less dramatic than in the factories under war-time government discipline. As a matter of fact, the industrial revolt that developed in the same period, under the leadership of the radical Workers' Committee, was severely repressed in 1916 and some of its leaders were imprisoned or exiled.⁸⁴ We are not contrasting here, as some authors have done, a radical shop stewards' movement centred on production issues with a reformist, craftsmen-inspired protest focused upon consumption.⁸⁵ In fact some of the tenants' leaders were also active shop stewards in the factories. What we are saying, instead, is that the Rent Strike provided a broad common ground for the unity of the different segments of the working class at the community level, and at the very moment when workers were weakened within the factories both by the recomposition of the work process and by the dramatic altering of the procedures for unionization and labour representation. Yet the

success of the Rent Strike was due largely to the clear support of the trade unions and to the potential threat of industrial strikes. As a demonstration of this crucial point, when some years later, in 1922, about 20,000 tenants went on a rent strike again in Clydebanks, they suffered a severe defeat because the local trade unions did not provide their support to this struggle.⁸⁶

Thus the 1915 Rent Strike was overtly a working class mobilization, but in dealing with the harsh social conditions that had been imposed on workers for decades, was mainly directed towards consumption issues. Besides suffering overcrowding, dilapidation, and poor sanitary conditions, workers were subjected to continuous rent increases each time a new wave of industrial growth tightened the housing market. Non-payment of rents was severely punished by eviction and confiscation of the renter's property by the landlord under the hated 'Law of Urban Hypothec', leading to practices that even hardline landlords considered to be '... really barbarous and absolutely unproductive.'⁸⁷ Furthermore, the housing struggles had been connected from the beginning of the century with the opposition to increasingly high payments of municipal rates for public services such as gas, water and the police.⁸⁸

Thus the struggle for decent, affordable housing and convenient public services, as a citizen's right enforced and satisfied by the state, clearly addressed the basic issues that recent research has characterized as the key elements of the process of collective consumption.⁸⁹ An organized and militant working class fighting for the reproduction of its labour power, and appealing to the state for the provision of its collective welfare, represents the first major social trend underlying the Glasgow Rent Strike.

A Women's Movement

All observers and historians agree – the Glasgow Rent Strike was organized, led, and enacted by women. Between the creation of the Glasgow Women's Housing Association in 1914 and the end of 1915, they had recruited over 3,000 members. Women were on the offensive regarding the housing issue. They were the ones leading the demonstrations carrying the banners of the great march on St. Enoch's Square on 7 October 1915 which read, 'Our husbands, sons and brothers are fighting the Prussians of Germany. We are fighting the Prussians of Partick. Only Alternative: Municipal Housing.'⁹⁰ They were also the women who launched the violent attacks against House factors trying to evict families.⁹¹ The women were also the ones who called for the support of factory workers when it was necessary, 'Mrs. Barbour *got the men* from the shipyards in Govan to come to the street where the House Factor's offices was located, and they met with the woman and demanded a return of the money. On the Factor being shown the thousands of black faced workers crowding the street, he handed it over.'⁹²

Who were these women? Many of them were housewives, or wives of skilled workers such as Mary Barbour. Others were widows of soldiers, left to sustain a family. A large number of them were factory workers themselves, called to work in industrial jobs to replace the men who had gone to war. Some were suffragettes, such as Helen Crawford, who had been in jail three times for her militant actions before the war.

Yet no feminist demands have been recorded as having been expressed by the movement. Women were the actors, not the subjects, of the protest. They claimed the right to live for their families and they were the agents of a consumption orientated protest, as a continuation of their role as consumption agents within the family, even when they were workers at the same time. They did not address the issue of sexually-based inequality in their demands. To be sure, the process itself probably transformed women's perception about themselves as well as their



Plate 4.1 Rent strikers at St. Enoch's Square, Glasgow, October 1915. (Originally printed in the *Glasgow Bulletin*. Photography supplied by the Mitchell Library and the *Glasgow Herald*.)

role in the community. Nevertheless if a social movement needs a conscious self-definition as such, we can describe the Glasgow strike as a women's movement that fell short of being a feminist movement.

But the fact that the movement was women-based was decisive to the unification of work and residence, factories and housing, and created the conditions for a successful social struggle. Women understood the social character of the consumption process, going beyond the shortcomings of a wage-directed demand at the point of production. And they organized and mobilized politically, mainly through the Labour Party, for municipal housing. Such vision and tactics – linking the factory, the community and the state with a combination of direct action and institutional politics – is a rare occurrence in the early stages of working class mobilization, and our hypothesis is that they were related to the women's perception and consciousness of social experience.

Why did women have such a powerful and ultimately decisive role in the Glasgow Rent Strike? Some of the conditions seem to be ideological and political, with early feminism and socialism developing among the younger generations. But, at the level of the thousands of women who participated in the movement, the basic factor seems to have been the massive entry of women into the work force to replace men at war. Not only did existing privileges have to be forgotten, but women were in a stronger position because they were the

breadwinners of many families. Furthermore, with the men far away, the social world of single women was suddenly enlarged, which made it possible not only to become aware of the social problems but to have the individual autonomy to deal with them. In fact the end of the war represented a serious setback both for the women's movement and for their contribution to social struggles; as Melling writes, in a very perceptive passage, '[After the war] if authority relations were to be restored at work and in local settlements, then the imagery of tranquil domesticity and the sexual division of labour was one step towards 'normalcy'. The renewal of rent strikes and violent direct action involving women after 1918 again demonstrated the deficiencies in this cultural offensive, but the mass unemployment of females pressed them back into customary defensive positions. There could be no return to the practices of pre-1914, as widespread aversion to domestic service in the twenties showed, but women undoubtedly lost much of their bargaining freedom with the declaration of peace and the resurgence of the sectionalism in industry and unions.'⁹³

The Glasgow Rent Strike showed the possibility and the potential of combining production-based struggles and consumption-orientated issues in a comprehensive social movement. It also showed that women were the strategic agents of this type of social mobilization. But their continuing role as such seems to require the explicit assumption of women's specific goals by their movement, something that did not happen in Glasgow.

A Left Wing Political Movement

A very popular movement with its base in the working class, the Glasgow Rent Strike was not a spontaneous uprising. It was prepared and organized by left wing political parties that had agitated about housing issues for many years. The most predominant force was the ILP, whose growing influence between 1906 and 1915 was clearly related to its housing campaigns, particularly after Andrew McBride founded the Labour Party Housing Committee in 1913. In 1914, Mary Laird, of the Women's Labour League, became one of the founders of the Glasgow Women's Housing Association. And, as we wrote, the launching of the housing campaign that led to the Rent Strike took place in the Labour Party Housing Conference in January 1915. It was largely on the housing issue that the ILP built up a basis of municipal power that, along with the support of the trade unions, brought it to national government in 1923 and 1929.

Along with the ILP other socialist groups actively participated in the movement, particularly the Marxist SDF whose leader, John McLean, one of the most popular speakers during the Rent Strike, became the first consul of the Soviet Union in Glasgow, before being forced into exile.⁹⁴

Furthermore, beyond partisan membership, a political vanguard seems to have been present within the Rent Strike movement, as Sean Damer has argued.⁹⁵ They formed a group, that became the recognizable and well-respected leadership of the strike and of the working class and women-based mobilization surrounding it. For some, the coming social revolution was the target. For others it was the reinforcement of the Labour Party and the winning of local elections that became the immediate task. Altogether their impact largely determined the majority obtained by Labour and Communist councillors in the 1930s in the town councils of Clydeside. Their vision of the political scene, their capacity to connect local struggles and national politics, and their relationships to a variety of constituencies, were key factors in the success of the Strike. But even more important for the analyst is the observation of a creative articulation between a highly political leadership and a grassroots movement able to set up its

own democratic mechanisms of mobilization and decision. Political leadership and grassroots democracy do not seem to be incompatible but actually reinforce each other – at least in the crucial historical experience of Glasgow in 1915.

Capital, Rents and the Working Class

A working class movement, mobilizing women and politically aimed at imposing a dramatic change in state policies on behalf of people's needs – all these trends seem to point towards a major social movement, both in terms of its characteristics and its social effects. Yet its relationship to the process of class struggle is much more complex. The great paradox of the Glasgow Strike is that, although unquestionably a working class struggle, it can hardly be considered a struggle against capital, in that it did not oppose the capitalists. The point, overwhelmingly demonstrated by Melling, and empirically unchallenged by Damer in spite of his radically different interpretation, is that the industrial employers of Clydeside actually supported the rent control demands and the programme for state subsidized housing.⁹⁶ In fact they had been concerned for a long time that the housing crisis made it more difficult to attract skilled workers and created additional pressure on wages. They were engaged themselves in the construction of housing for their workers and did not follow local landlords in raising rents beyond the limits of the workers' means. Although during the strike they were concerned by the potential growth of social unrest and the political consequences of the process, they actually supported the proposal for housing reform explicitly as a means of ensuring social peace and creating channels for the integration of a militant working class. They recognized the incapacity of a free market to successfully provide and they encouraged the state's initiatives in the field of unprofitable but necessary consumption of goods and services.

The enemies of rent strikers were not the capitalists but the landlords, and individual speculators who were actually the extension of small rentiers. Two-thirds of Glasgow housing was built by individual owners borrowing money from small bondholders who were charging increasingly high interest. This explains both the inadequacy of the housing production and the harshness of the landlords who had to collect their rents in order to pay their interest. As well as this class of wealthy urban rentiers, the strikers also had to face the building industry, a very small business sector operating on an *ad hoc* basis under the control of the landlords. As Melling says, 'Although the Rents and Housing Legislations have to be seen in one sense as working class victories against the forces of property, they were not defeats for the employers as such. The bondholders and petty investors of Glasgow were probably the real losers rather than the great industrialists who won large contracts, acquired state aid for house building and avoided major stoppages. The legislation represented concessions to workers, but they were concessions that employers could well afford.'⁹⁷

Pickvance has summarized the existing evidence on the attitudes of different groups towards the Rent Control Act in Parliament. Industrial capital clearly supported it.⁹⁸ Banks opposed it as a matter of principle against the interference of the state in the financial markets at any level. In fact they obtained some major legal corrections to protect the money lenders. The individual landlords and the building industry were most seriously hurt, and in the following years this led to an even deeper crisis in the private housing market, thereby reinforcing the need for municipal housing. In this sense the Rent Strike actually produced a rationalization of the circuits of capitalist production, in line with the strategy of most entrepreneurial capitalists whose aim was to extract surplus value from workers instead of just squeezing earnings from the families.

Yet we would be mistaken to consider the Glasgow struggle only from this angle. The level of social consciousness and organization reached by the working class through the struggle, the capacity of the labour movement to impose its own conditions on the process of consumption, and the definition of new social rights to which the state should respond were all major achievements for the working class as a class. Thus, from this point of view, the Glasgow Rent Strike contributed to a general weakening of the capitalist class *vis-à-vis* the labour movement in the overall set of power relationships. Also the rent strikers often presented themselves as workers fighting against capital.⁹⁹ So both from the point of view of the movement and from the point of view of its political effects, the Rent Strike appears as an episode of the class struggle. Yet the absence of any direct confrontation with the dominant factions of the capital, the deviation of the demands towards the request for state intervention, and the actual support of the capitalists for the new housing policies, clearly challenge any interpretation of the Glasgow Rent Strike as an anti-capitalist movement. The housing crisis being a secondary contradiction under the conditions of early capitalism^{99bis} the emphasis on urban issues led to reformist orientations to which enlightened capital and empowered labour could agree, when and if both were still able to expand. Curiously enough the radical wing of the rent strikers probably pushed the housing struggle forward on the assumption of the correctness of Engels' analysis of the impossibility for capitalism to solve the housing crisis.¹⁰⁰ The Glasgow experience actually showed that, under conditions of working class pressure, the capitalist state could substantially improve the housing conditions but without being able to eliminate the urban crisis as a whole, particularly because of the continuing historical redefinition of social needs.

The consequence of the movement was therefore to give birth to some of the earliest manifestations of the Welfare State. A production-based movement, focused on consumption issues, instigated social reform within capitalism. The movement which counterposed the state against the speculators actually furthered the integration of the political representatives of labour within the historical framework of liberal democracy. The priority of urban goals under the conditions of industrial capitalism seem to have fostered social compromise and political participation more than class struggle and political revolution.

Conclusion: The Urban View of a Working Class Movement

The Glasgow Rent Strike shows clearly the intimate connection between industrialization and urbanization under the conditions of capitalist development. The housing crisis was caused by compulsory urban industrial concentration and urban rentier's speculation and triggered powerful working class struggles around the provision of shelter and public services. These urban struggles were based on the organization of labour both in the factories and in the workers' residential communities. Some of these communities had a very strong cultural identity, particularly those where artisans and craftsmen had built a pattern of social interaction around their productive skills.

Yet neither the Glasgow Rent Strikes nor the housing struggles that spread all over industrial Britain can be seen as reactions of community defense or projects for local political autonomy. The city had become dominated by the logic of industrial capital. The working class was challenging such a logic less in terms of their cultural forms than in relationship to the conditions of the appropriation of the product of its work. The rent strikers strove for control of speculators, decent and affordable public housing, convenient free urban services, and state intervention in the organization of people's consumption. The community as a cultural form,

the city as a major political setting, were never at the centre of the Glasgow movement, but labour was calling to the state against the undesirable consequences of the capitalist market. For the movement's radical wing the Strike was also the launching platform for an anti-capitalist struggle. From the point of view of labour, the city had become a matter of collective consumption, and/or a step in the process of seizing state power. Reduced to the role of labour power sellers, the workers responded by broadening the scope and raising the level of their social wage. The city was for most of them little more than the spatial setting of their exploitation. Their communities were often refuges of solidarity and places for autonomous organization. But their goals and values shifted decisively to the production process and to the political struggle over the control of the central state.

The trade union movement became concerned with municipal administration in order to deliver better services to the workers. The city disappeared as a cultural entity, to be dissolved in the general process of class struggle between capital and labour. By generalizing the process of urbanization, and by submitting it to the logic of the productive forces, capitalist industrialization dramatically altered the social role of the city in history. Industrial workers, abruptly uprooted from a recent rural past, dreamed of village-like cottages while fighting to better reproduce their labour power, both in the factories and in their tenements.

While still being at the forefront of people's daily life, the urban problem became a somewhat marginal issue for the new historical dynamics of class struggle. The urban view of the working class was clearly dominated by the struggle over consumption and by the appeal to the state. For the first time in history, a major urban struggle could be won by the popular masses and still reinforce the rationality of the system without fundamentally challenging the interests of the dominant class. Urban issues had become a secondary contradiction in the structure of society and in the politics of the state.

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The Dependent City and Revolutionary Populism: The Movimiento Inquilinario in Veracruz, Mexico, 1922

Between January and July of 1922, the majority of residents of the city of Veracruz, the first port of Mexico, took part in a massive urban protest organized by the tenants to pay lower rents and to obtain adequate repairs and maintenance of the buildings. Facing strong resistance from speculative landlords most of whom were foreigners (particularly Spaniards), the *inquilinos* (tenants) set up grassroots committees, organized a tenants' union and closely allied their struggle to the emergent working class movement, and to anarchist and communist ideologies. Using the contradiction between the central government and the socialist populist governor of the state of Veracruz, they were able to organize most of the city's dwellers around their programme. When they were on the point of obtaining a major victory in the form of a rent control law, the government decided that the *inquilinos* set a dangerous example in a