The Rise of Slum Housing in the UK

Original article

2023-12-19

3 min read

According to data compiled by local councils, there are almost 160,000 people residing in 32,000 unlicensed houses – where the squalid conditions are only limited by the cruelty of the landlord. In addition, according to the Resolution Foundation, one in six British 18 to 34-year-olds (a total of 2.6 million), and one in 10 people nationwide (6.5 million in total), live in poor-quality housing. Poor quality housing was defined as homes in a state of disrepair, where heating, electrics or plumbing are not in working order, and where damp or mould is present.

While housing and living conditions continue to decline, rents continue to rise, with the average rent having increased by 26% since March 2020. The average tenant in Britain spends 35.3% of their income on rent – a figure that increases to 42.5% for the average Londoner. This is the case for those lucky enough to have a permanent residence, as there is an ongoing shortage of affordable housing (while many luxury developments remain empty). Homelessness is also increasing for the same reasons, contrary to previous statements by the former Home Secretary, who described it as a “lifestyle choice”.

For example, a single landlord exploited the living conditions of 18 tenants, extracting an exorbitant sum exceeding £5,800 monthly. This exploitative and unlicensed arrangement encompassed 11 rooms situated in a squalid, rat-infested former hotel. The dwelling lacked a functional kitchen, rendered toilets unusable, had a compromised gas supply, and suffered from blocked drains and partially obstructed fire escapes. This slumlord was eventually fined £175,000 after an investigation by the authorities, for not having a license and for breaches of the Housing Act. Last year, in conditions not dissimilar to this, a two-year-old boy, Awaab Ishak, died due to inhaling the mould growing on the walls of his family’s apartment.

A representative of the government announced an allocation of £11.5 billion for the construction of "tens of thousands" of residences available for both sale and rent. Additionally, a social housing legislation, known as "Awaab's law," (named after the toddler that died) is in the works. This proposed law will mandate landlords to address issues such as damp, mould, and other hazards within a specified timeframe.

There are already laws against these conditions, and they are indeed occasionally enforced as shown in the example above. However, these conditions cannot be abolished by passing more laws criminalising them or allocating more funding to the construction of housing (even assuming that there is no corruption with the allocation of the funding and it actually goes towards its stated purpose). These situations arise out of a systemic cause – namely the capitalist system.

The class of people who own nothing but their own labour – the working class – exist by selling said labouring power to the class that owns the means of production – the capitalists. The capitalists in turn renumerates the workers according to the market price of their commodified labour, which is inevitably less than the value created by the workers. Compelled to increase their profits by market competition with other capitalists, the capitalist seeks to remunerate the worker less and less, consequently reducing the workers' share of the social wealth.

As such the trend is for the workers as a class to grow poorer and poorer, while more wealth is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Workers in Britain (especially the

younger generation) generally now struggle to afford to rent single-occupant housing and normally share their domicile with many other housemates. As their share of the social wealth decreases, what they can afford also dwindles in quality. And among the most deprived workers, these resurgent slum conditions are becoming more and more prevalent.

At the same time, the housing industry itself is for profit and thus concentrates on producing more luxury developments which are more lucrative to let or sell. However, most people cannot afford these new homes.

This is why, despite the investment in constructing new homes and the laws criminalising unsafe residences, these slum-like conditions are only becoming more and more prevalent.

Therefore, the only way to overturn this situation is by changing the system that causes it. Workers should strive to organise themselves to resist the assault on their lives and livelihoods and form a genuinely communist party to lead the struggle into the political sphere in order to enact real change.

Sources:
https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/nov/19/bedsit-britain-160000-people-in-england-crammed-into-unlicensed-housing

https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/apr/15/young-adults-uk-housing

https://www.theguardian.com/money/2023/nov/28/average-rent-great-britain-properties-interest-rates-savills

https://www.southend.gov.uk/news/article/2784/unlicensed-hmo-owner-and-operator-gets-175-000-fine-for-squalid-home

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-63635721

Original article