Sheffield is in the middle of a housing crisis. Every year a city the size of Sheffield requires an extra 3,000 households and local authorities continue to fail to meet this demand. This is while existing housing has also trebled in price since the mid-90’s. This creates an impossible situation for those unable to “buy-in” to the overpriced system or stress and hardship for those who try. A ‘Housing Needs’ survey of 2004 found that 12% of Sheffield households have incomes less than that needed to afford the cheapest available mortgage. Today’s house prices are almost 50% higher. Recent “regeneration” projects (such as those proposed for Woodside) only seek to deepen this problem. The council is insisting that only 7% of the planned 283 council housing is now four times larger than that needed to afford the cheapest available mortgage. Today’s house prices are almost 50% higher.

In the past this problem was at least partly solved by our local council providing affordable social housing. However, this option is increasingly coming under threat. For the most part the expansion of home ownership in the last twenty years has been sustained by the sale of council housing. This approach has worsened the problem, with the state only able to sell housing once (and from a limited stock) and construction of new housing at historically low levels. In Sheffield alone the active waiting list for council housing is now four times larger than it was six years ago.

As many of us know, this waiting list is divided between “priority need” and “general waiting” cases. Many on the right will claim that the huge backlog of people on “priority need” (further lengthening “general waiting”) is due to immigration. They will claim that poor immigrants are “bumped up” the list due to large families and poor incomes. In reality, this is a gross stereotype and deliberate distortion of the true facts. Asylum seekers and other vulnerable immigrants do not get social housing. The council is encouraged to sell at least its worst housing to private providers on juicy NASS contracts from the home office. Immigrants are not “taking the housing”, the private sector is. In Sheffield the true cause of the lengthened priority list has been the addition of thousands of former tenants moved due to the demolition (or sale) of their properties. The city lost 30,000 homes under “Right to Buy” and a further 8,000 due to demolition. The council is unable to provide homes for its current tenants let alone those entering the system.

Sheffield, as the largest industrial city’s, has also large areas of land and industrial space that are now falling into disrepair - most of which could be adapted to provide affordable housing. However, the vast majority have been sold for future “development” to private firms making them way beyond the reach of local people. This results in vast areas of the city wasting away while owners wait for their investment to become “profitable”. Attempts to force constructive use of abandoned space have also been strongly opposed by local authorities.

The truth is that the state is the wrong person for this job. It has been tenants groups, not councils or political parties, that have been leading the charge against any further offload of social housing. The government admits itself that its plans to expand council housing over the next few years fall far short of the projected increase in the demand for new households. As the Woodside case demonstrates, affordability will never be a priority when the bottom line for the state is profit, not housing.

Free working class organisations must be the bedrock of any future system for the management of social housing and the basis of community cohesion. These groups have proven highly successful in the past at accessing the needs of the community and forming constructive solutions to local issues. There are many examples of this in practice; Haringey Solidarity Group, founded in 1990 represents a network of local resident’s associations seeking to promote working class solidarity, tackle anti-social behaviour and support worker unionisation. When developers tried to close a café in Broadway Market in East London, locals joined together to co-ordinate the building. When the developers evicted and smashed the place up, locals re-occupied and repaired the damage. In Cologne, in opposition to the destruction of the “Barmher Block” estate residents during the Spring of last year occupied the building and ran it along democratic lines. All of these represent prime examples of the strength organisation can bring to our communities and the true power we have to bring a halt to this crisis.

JARGON BUSTER!!!

Priority Need - a sensible idea to give housing to those in difficult circumstances, e.g. women escaping violence, people with poor health problems.

Right to Buy - A Thatcherite policy designed to fleece poorer councils or political parties, that have been leading the charge against any further offload of social housing. The government admits itself that its plans to expand council housing over the next few years fall far short of the projected increase in the demand for new households. As the Woodside case demonstrates, affordability will never be a priority when the bottom line for the state is profit, not housing.

Regeneration - demolishing council houses and handing over the sites to developers, pricing us out of our homes.

Plans for a massive TESCO superstore (the sales floor is set to be 80,000 square feet) on Spital Hill, as well as drawing opposition from local residents, falls over an important part of Sheffield history. Caborn’s Corner, a small triangle of land located at the junction of Spital Hill and Carlisle Street, comes within the area marked by TESCO for “redevelopment”. Caborn’s Corner represents an important part of Sheffield history. Dedicated to famous trade unionist and founder of Sheffield Campaign Against Racism George Caborn, Caborn’s Corner has long been a traditional assembly point for local political marches and rallies. George worked hard in the area both as a militant trade unionist and community activist and is still thought of fondly amongst local people.

When he died in 1982, the city council decided to turn the site into a garden to honor his dedication to equality and justice. In 1983 the Bulgarian Cultural Attaché visited the site as a show of respect for his political service and a plaque still remains on the site to commemorate this moment. The area has fallen into neglect over recent years and does demand restoration. TESCO, however, has so far made no concrete commitment for the preservation of the site’s historical integrity. In a letter to the Burngreave Messenger (15th March 2007) Max Curtis, a spokesperson for TESCO, has stated that only on the provision of enough “public interest” could keeping the plaque dedicated to the history of the site be “included in our list of considerations”. That TESCO, a company with such an appalling record of union-busting and poor worker’s rights, should even be entrusted with the future of this site only adds insult to injury (and George’s legacy).

To find out more information on TESCO’s impact on both a local and international level: http://www.tescopoly.org

If you want to see the plans for the new TESCO, you can pick up a leaflet about it in Burngreave Library or New Roots café.

COMMUNITY ACTION, COMMUNITY RESISTANCE
IT’S ALL IN THE NAME

Believe it or not, The Fargate Speaker is not the first news sheet to be produced by local anarchists. The Sheffield Anarchist, first published in June 1891, was the product of an anarchist split from the Sheffield Socialist Society (formed in 1886). The publication didn’t last long attracting prosecutions from its very first issue. Only eight issues were produced in the end, the last of which was published in October of the same year. Setbacks aside, the Fargate monolith – which also no longer exists – also used to be the regular speaking pitch for Sheffield anarchists. The group even unfurled its “No Gods, No Masters” banner for the first time at the monolith on 1st May 1891. Every Sunday, members of the group would go to the monolith to agitate local people over the evils of government and the tyranny of the church (much to the displeasure of the rowdy mob of church goers in attendance). We at the Fargate Speaker are indebted to these pioneers and like them hope very much to stay true to this city’s long tradition of radical, working class politics.

A policeman whose job involved the monitoring of sex offenders was jailed this month for grooming a 13-year-old girl by bombarding her with x-rated texts and internet messages.

PC Burton, who was working at Ecclesfield Police Station at the time of the offence in May 2006, was sentenced to two years in prison after pleading guilty to the charge.

This is not the first time Sheffield bobby’s have been caught out over acts of "sexual misconduct". In 2003, PC Richard Sweet was spared jail time after prosecution for grooming a 13-year-old girl by bombardment with x-rated texts and internet messages.

The Daily Mail reported no less than fifteen factual errors in its 6th June article on anti-G8 protests in Germany. These ranged from misinformation over the composition and motives of the marches to more serious errors on the size of the security operation, the scale of violence and number of police casualties. For example, the article reports that 427 police officers had been injured in clashes with rioters when the German authorities have stated that only two had been slightly hurt. It also claimed protestors had “squirted acid” into the faces of police. This was totally false and actually an injury sustained by two officers from accidentally spraying each other with their own pepper spray!

The liberal press proved no better. Their reports were more concerned with attention-grabbing “black blocks” and “clown armies” than the real reasons why people blockaded the summit. They choose to show protestors as either ridiculously violent or just plain ridiculous. In our local press there has been some coverage of the way with which angry people feel at the G8’s failure to deliver on its’ agreements, particularly environmental problems and commitments to tackle global poverty (e.g. The Sheffield Star’s 14th June article “G8 Summit is not fulfilling promises”). Yet, there is no mention of the mass movement that has (and continues) to oppose the summit for these very failures.

A key reason why the mainstream media has begun to see the G8 as responsible for these social problems is thanks to the determined efforts of environmentalists, anarchists, and campaigners of all kinds who oppose the G8. By continuing to protest and disrupt summits their message has started to get onto the agenda. So why does the media continue to deny the same level and quality of coverage for these people?