

Declaration: "For town and housing policies that focus on the citizen"

The declaration was approved during the second Russian Social Forum on July 14th.

"We, the participants in the conference "For town and housing policies that focus on the citizen" of the second Russian Social Forum, declare:

As left-wingers and human rights activists pointed out at the time, the housing policy reform, the final phase of which began two years ago with the adoption of a new Housing Code, was in fact an attack on the social rights of the majority of the population. Today, the Russian ruling class is not the only one to adopt an ultra-liberal housing policy. G8 and other such summits propagate an antisocial housing and civic ideology which is felt worldwide, in which basic social rights are no longer guaranteed if they interfere with the profits of big corporations.

Thus the Russian authorities flatly refuse to take responsibility for the deterioration of housing estates, while very low wages mean that people cannot afford to maintain their own property. In many buildings throughout the country elevators do not work, roofs leak, sewerage is increasingly inadequate and electricity has become a luxury. Yet this decline in the quality of housing is accompanied by a constant increase in utility charges and a drastic reduction in social aid for those that most need it.

At the same time the reform aims to transform the housing sphere into a source of profit, primarily for the corrupt officials and the commercial organisations that they are linked to. When the goal is the generation of profit at all costs and the authorities are deeply corrupt, a systematic violation of housing and urban legislation takes place. The result is not an improvement in living conditions, as promised by the neoliberal reform ideologists. What does result is very much a lack of rights – unauthorized constructions, deterioration of sanitary and ecological conditions, increase in rent and utility charges, deterioration of quality of community services and housing maintenance, privatization of public spaces, confiscation of property for non-specified 'needs of the State', evictions and relocation of residents to remote suburbs.

The privatization of "natural monopolies" (a Russian term used for public services - water, electricity, heating, public transportation, etc.) began in a hushed manner through long-term public concessions. All of these services could be utilised effectively to develop the public sector, yet they are becoming a means by which citizens are exploited in their own apartments and houses.

Lauded by the authorities, the national "Access to housing" program ignores the real needs of society. Tens of millions of citizens who are looking for housing are in a financial situation that doesn't allow them to even imagine saving up enough money to obtain it. Loans are not an option.

In imposing the new Housing Code, the federal, regional and local authorities did not bother to inform the public of their rights and new housing management conditions. Almost everywhere the possibilities of self-management have been wiped out, as local political-economic clans manipulate public opinion. Funds are frugally distributed to the municipalities with the intention of catching votes, and as a result, housing problems themselves become a way to blackmail people. Through this, regional elites secure the loyalty of the municipalities, and implement a "ladder of power" at all levels of society.

We believe that in these conditions it is imperative to intensify the battle for a housing and urban policy that would actually serve the interests of the public. The massive campaign, "For town and housing policies that focus on the citizen", carried out between February and April of this year by the Soviets Coordination Union (SKS), has to be taken to a higher level of organization and coordination. Therefore we believe that the creation of a "Russian inhabitants' movement", that regroups already existing regional coalitions for inhabitants committees, committees of self-management, and other citizen-led groups, is imperative. This movement will operate through and with the Soviets Coordination Union (SKS) as a thematic ally, in the same capacity as the Temporary Housing Movement. We have decided to cooperate with similar movements in other countries, in particular with the International Alliance of Inhabitants. A global world requires a global resistance! To defend our rights, and to ensure a housing policy that focuses on the citizen!"