

ANGRY COUNCIL TENANTS SPEAK OUT ABOUT PROBLEMS
AND HAZARDS IN THE MUIRHOUSE
HIGH RISE FLATS

THE SIX BLOCKS

ISSUE 4 SEPTEMBER 2020

MOP-HANDED AND MAD

On Thursday 27 August the quadrangle outside the Council's City Chambers rang with chants of 'Clean up the Council' and 'Sack ISS' as 25 protestors including Muirhouse low-rise tenants and members of Living Rent's Muirhouse, Gorgie and N. Edinburgh branches armed with mops and buckets handed in a letter with a list of demands to the Housing Committee

IN THE LAST ISSUE of *The Six Blocks* we reported how tenants in the Muirhouse low-rises were up in arms at the council and their hired cleaning company, ISS. Tenants who pay a compulsory cleaning fee are angry at not getting what they pay for – one tenant timed ISS 'cleaning' a 3-storey staircase in 1 minute 37 seconds. Often they leave the stairs looking dirtier than before. During lockdown from March to July council-contracted ISS cleaners didn't visit the low-rises at all despite government guidelines for enhanced cleaning in high-density housing – but tenants continued to be charged the service fee, totalling £52.50 per household. (Adding to their anger is the fact that owner-occupiers in the stairs don't have to pay the cleaning fee and are expected to take their turn at doing the stairs. But some don't, so council tenants, in effect, are paying for home-owners' stairs to be cleaned.)

THE LETTER

Research by Living Rent tenants' union revealed that the cleaning company is part of the huge ISS multinational, a corporate body currently involved in an industrial dispute in Hackney over pay and working conditions. Their contract with the council expires in October. The union prepared a letter listing low-rise tenants' demands. 1. All affected households to be



Living Rent's 'Clean up the Council' protest at the City Chambers

reimbursed the sum of £52.50. 2. The council's contract with ISS to be scrapped in October. 3. Tenants be allowed to opt-out of any future cleaning contract by doing their stairs themselves. LR members and tenants then went chapping on doors in the low-rise blocks. Over 40 households signed the letter.

Living Rent organiser Elle Glenny said: 'While the government guidelines on hygiene were welcome, Edinburgh City Council have done all they can to sidestep their basic responsibilities on sanitation during lockdown. Today, Living Rent Muirhouse members have turned up "mop-handed" to clean up the council's mess.' (continued on next page)

BRINGING YOU NEWS FROM MAY COURT, FIDRA
AND GUNNET, BIRNIES, INCHMICKERY, DXCARS,
AND THE LOW-RISE BLOCKS ROUNDOFF ABOUT THEM

(cont.) After the letter was delivered the protest set off for the council offices in nearby Market Street to give a symbolic mop-salute to Joe Public. Joe's statue represents the citizens of Edinburgh, the people the councillors are *supposed* to serve. No wonder he stands with his



Saluting Joe Public

MIND THE ROAD

Police Scotland statistics reveal that Muirhouse Parkway (30 mph) is one of the city's two most dangerous roads for speeding, recording the highest speed – an Alpha Romeo doing 81 mph while a Ford was clocked at 71 mph and a BMW at the same speed.

Readers will remember how last year a 20 year-old on a stolen high performance Yamaha smashed into the back of a car at between 80-100 mph, injuring the three children in the car while escaping with only a broken elbow and a lacerated penis (no jokes please). But we still have morons aplenty doing wheelies along the Parkway.



Speeding on the Parkway

back turned to the council building.

Living Rent Muirhouse thanks our fellow members from the union's N.Edinburgh and Gorgie/Dalry branches who turned up to show solidarity. Good to meet you. 'It was great being part of the demo,' said Muirhouse low-rise tenant and new LR member Lauren. 'On your own you just get ignored. When there's a lot of you it's a different story. It was empowering.'

RESPONSE

The demonstration was reported on various social media. The following day Living Rent received an email from council housing committee convener Kate Campbell agreeing to a video meeting to discuss the situation. And Councillor Campbell was not the only one who contacted LR. 'No sign of ISS in Leith either since March,' wrote Steve G. 'Fed up paying for nothing. Before the lockdown they spent exactly 2 mins sweeping and washing a 3-storey stair - that's if they *did* turn up.'

Similar messages came from around Edinburgh and it soon be-



'Clean up your act'

came obvious that this was not just a 'little local difficulty' but a city-wide problem.

2,500 STAIRS

Research by Living Rent found a council report that states, 'The stair cleaning contract with ISS UK Ltd provides regular cleaning of common stairs in around 2,500 wholly Council-owned, mixed tenure tenement blocks.' That's about 25,000 households paying good money in return for sweet FA . . .

(See back page for campaign update)

LIVING RENT MUIRHOUSE STATEMENT

Living Rent Muirhouse and The Six Blocks news-sheet would like to make it clear that our denunciations of Edinburgh City Council for the deplorable state of housing in this area are not in any way a criticism of ordinary council workers. We are sorry if our news-sheet has been taken as a criticism of concierge staff – this is not our intention. We appreciate that you are doing a hard and thankless job and that you continued to work during the pandemic. We also appreciate that a minority of antisocial residents make your job harder by dumping rubbish, and this is something we are also trying to change.

We hold the councillors and top council management responsible for the bad housing conditions. We wish to make common cause with council workers to fight not only for better housing but also for more council staff, better pay and conditions. This will benefit workers and tenants as both have long been under attack from cuts and 'austerity' and we should be fighting on the same side. Specifically, about the articles in issue 3 of Six Blocks concerning cleaning, we are clear that it is the responsibility of the council management to bring in specialist cleaners with all the appropriate protective gear to clean up the pigeon/bird droppings. It would be dangerous for concierge staff without such PPE to attempt to clean bird droppings which can spread disease. As our article "Don't Feed the Pigeons" makes clear, the council must investigate and implement means to stop the pigeons and birds entering the blocks, such as greatly improved netting. Such moves would remove a hazard faced by tenants and workers alike.

We would be happy to meet concierge and any other council workers to discuss how together we could act to improve conditions for both tenants and workers. We look forward to hearing from you.

AT LAST!

WE ARE HAPPY to report that the promised £7.5 million refurbishment work on the six high-rise blocks, scheduled to start last October, has at last commenced. Inchmickery Court, whose roof has been leaking for 15 long, wet years (the Muirhouse Deserves Better Campaign succeeded in getting some Inchmick tenants decanted from their wet flats and emergency repairs done for others) has now been fully scaffolded in preparation for re-roofing to begin.

THE BIRNIES BLOWBACK

In Birnies Court work has also begun in repairing the waste pipes that during strong winds blow effluent out of lower floor toilet pans (see *The Six Blocks* issue 2)

It's a start, but there's a long way to go. Living Rent's local branch elicited promises from the council to also replace the flimsy side-panels in the flats' front doors in Birnies and Fidra and to insulate the balcony walls in both blocks; and major works are promised for the 'open deck' blocks like May and Gunnett, including measures to prevent infestation by pigeons.

BUY CHEAP, PAY DEAR

A major problem with council refurbishments, as we know, is that they always buy the cheapest available and the work is very often shoddy (remember when Mitie got the contract to replace our kitchens and bathrooms and the result was a mighty shambles?) The council buys cheap, and we the tenants pay dearly for their scrimping.

We will be keeping you fully updated on progress.

SOLIDARITY NOT CHARITY

THE FIDRA COURT COMMUNITY KITCHEN

THE COVID PANDEMIC has seen governments put money and business interests before health – but people in the community have stepped up to meet others' needs. Here in Muirhouse the Fidra Court Community Kitchen is an outstanding example.

The lockdown forced the closure of the thriving Fidra kitchen that provided cheap, substantial sit-in meals to local people. But the kitchen workers carried on and each week volunteers make dozens of bags of food and essential supplies available for local folk in need. Bags are delivered direct to the homes of those too vulnerable or ill to venture out, while others pick up the bags from the Community kitchen. The service was continued throughout the lockdown. Supplies are provided totally free, and the work is 100% by volunteers. No-one is paid a penny.

FOOD FOR THE PEOPLE

The efforts of the kitchen volunteers are mirrored by many local groups organised in the North Edinburgh Covid-19 Foodshare group. In fact this has been a global phenomenon, showing that the future lies with communities organising ourselves from below and taking direct action – we cannot rely on the authorities. The funding for the Fidra kitchen food bags runs out at the end of September but the kitchen will continue supplying free food to the community as best it can (donations welcome). While funds last, there is one bag of groceries/ supplies per household per week, plus an additional bag of fresh fruit and vegetables on request. We hope this can continue into the autumn, so if you could use this support, get in touch.

Visit Fidra Court Community kitchen – Ground floor Fidra Court, Pennywell Medway EH4 4SE, access at back of the block. Currently open Wednesday and Friday 9.30am – 1pm and Thursday 10am – 12 noon. Or contact via Cara (Community Renewal) 07701 380928



The busy Fidra Community Kitchen before the pandemic struck

Block by block and street by street right across Scotland the Living Rent tenants' union is organising the fight-back against landlords, including the City of Edinburgh Council. We protect and defend our members. So come and join us. Our waged members pay £5 a month union dues, unwaged £3 – or if you're really skint you can join for only £1 a month.

Contact: livingrent.org/join

Right after our City Chambers demo the council contacted us to say they were willing to meet and discuss the low-rise cleaning fiasco. Our tenant-led negotiating team of Muirhouse low-rise tenants and Living Rent union members Grace and Laurence, backed by union organisers Elle and Jack, has been very busy. Elle G reports:

“Hygiene kills the virus!” We’ve had this drilled into us daily as the government tells us to *wash your hands, wear a mask, disinfect surfaces*. But the council and its ISS cleaning service seem to have forgotten this basic formula – throughout the lockdown cleaning to all communal spaces in Muirhouse’s low-rise blocks ceased, but residents continued to pay for this non-service. So, in August, Living Rent member Grace and some neighbours chapped low-rise doors throughout the area asking tenants to sign a letter addressed to the council demanding changes to this unacceptable situation.

DEMANDS

The demands are:

Reimbursement of the service fees charged to tenants between March 18th and July 1st (= £52.50 per household)

An option for tenants to opt out of the service charge (given the substandard level of cleaning and the fact that tenants already carry out communal cleaning),

Scrapping the system by which some of the ISS cleaning visits are replaced by owner-occupiers taking a turn to clean the stair (which some never do, so council tenants are subsidising cleaning services for home owners)

Copies of all timesheets of ISS visits to Muirhouse low-rises during 2020.

The LR negotiating team met with four city council officials on 14 September and learned that the council had *officially suspended* the cleaning services during lockdown – but had failed to inform thousands of tenants that their stairs would not be cleaned. We also discovered that current policy allows entire blocks to ‘opt-out’ of the ISS services and clean their own stairs

and communal spaces. Members successfully negotiated that there be greater communication of this option to residents. But when asked about reimbursing the £52.50 service charge the council said that this would be a difficult process – to which we pointed out a recent reimbursement of cleaning service charges to residents in Cube Housing Association in Glasgow under similar circumstances.



Campaigning: Low-rise tenants Claire and Grace

We scored another couple of successes, with local housing office manager George Norval agreeing to a walk-around with low-rise tenants to hear their complaints and, importantly, councillors agreeing to include Muirhouse residents in the procurement process ahead of the new ISS contract. This will give members an opportunity to shape what any future ISS communal cleaning will look like. So we have some planning to do! ‘Cleaning Complaints’ posters will be posted in all low-rise entries in the week commencing the 21 September for residents to write down problems, suggestions, and feedback to the council re ISS cleaning over the past few years. Living Rent members will also be contacting the Unite union reps for ISS cleaners to emphasise that our dispute lies with Edinburgh council and ISS - and not the workers!

CONTACT:

We anticipate that both meetings with council officials will occur in late October in the run-up to the ISS contract being renewed. To prepare for this, come to our next Living Rent branch meeting on October 7th (outside Fidra Court Community kitchen) or online if the virus gets worse, and get in touch with Elle on 07783888290 or elle.glenny@livingrent.org

https://www.livingrent.org/muirhouse_deserves_better

