

Vigil for the Valley – the Occupation of Collina Street

Paul Inglis, of *ecosocialist.scot*, reports from Glasgow from the occupation of Collina Street. This article was originally published by [Bella Caledonia](#).

On Friday the 15th of January, a gazebo went up on a patch of vacant land at Collina Street in Maryhill, Glasgow, and a group of local residents settled, as much as one can settle anywhere on a cold and wet day, into an occupation. Their goal: To remain in place on the land until either the city council comes to the negotiating table to speak with them, or they are forcibly evicted. What is it that has led a group of people to take up position on a windswept hill not just in the middle of a damp and frosty winter, but in the middle of a global pandemic? Such conviction suggests that a keen political struggle is in progress. So to get an idea of why Collina Street is being occupied, I got talking to Norman Cunningham, a resident of Maryhill's Wyndford neighbourhood who helped organise the action.

Norman began by explaining the background to the Collina Street issue. Years ago, before it was a patch of vacant land up for sale, this part of the neighbourhood hosted social housing and was known by locals as "the Valley." But in 2007 the houses were demolished, and the land they stood on has been empty since. Shortly before demolition, the old social housing even ended up in several episodes of *Still Game*, standing in for the fictional streets of Craighlang. That was it for Collina Street, at least until November 2020- This was when Wyndford residents first became aware that the site was soon to be sold off. One day a sign went up on the land announcing a sale organised by City Property, Glasgow City Council's real estate branch, and that was the only indication

given to locals that the land was up for grabs.

Later a City Property brochure was found advertising the sale, stipulating the Collina Street land would be marked for a private housing development- four hundred houses, one hundred and five of which are to be made available as "affordable housing for first time buyers." Norman noted that this sort of marketing language about "affordable homes" tends to be a euphemism for the more cheaply-built housing, and as for the remaining two hundred and ninety five houses, there are no restrictions on who can buy them, leaving them prey to be snapped up by buy-to-let landlords with the money to outbid Wyndford locals.

Unhappy with this sudden sale and unconvinced that one hundred and five "affordable homes" would fulfil the council's social housing obligation in any case, residents of the Wyndford area, organised in a tenants union affiliated with Living Rent, decided to get talking and work out what action could be taken to change the terms of sale and get a social housing option on the table. First off they put in some freedom of information requests to the city council and found that back in 2007 the council had conducted, via an outside agency, a community consultation about the Wyndford area in general as part of the Maryhill-Springburn Transformational Regeneration Masterplan drawn up in the early 2000's. This consultation queried just sixty nine people over the course of five meetings, and there was no record of who attended or how many people came to each individual meeting. Nevertheless, those few who were consulted voiced a wish for more social housing, and for better disability access. What struck the Wyndford residents however, was that no consultation had been carried out about the Collina Street land in particular at any point in the intervening years. Norman argued that because *some* social housing had been built in the area since 2007, the council felt that their original consultation had been met long ago, and that they could press on with the

selloff at Collina Street now.

The next action of the Wyndford Living Rent members was to hold a “Vigil for the Valley”, which took place on the 14th November and saw around thirty locals turning out for a socially-distanced demonstration at Collina Street calling for the sale to be stopped and for the council to do a new, more comprehensive survey of the Wyndford community about the Valley’s future. Some progress forward was made with the council deciding to delay the sale until the 15th January 2021, which gave the Wyndford Union breathing space to mount a campaign and raise awareness.

Unfortunately, despite consistent requests for a meeting with the council, the campaign received no response until the evening of Tuesday 12th January, when Patrick Flynn, head of housing for Glasgow city council came to a public zoom meeting put on by the campaign. However, he did not give any definite answers to questions about why the council was selling the land for private development. Entirely unsatisfied with this response, the Wyndford Tenants Union proceeded to announce their occupation at the end of the meeting. In addition, the next morning the campaign put up an online poll with three options: 1. That the council continues to sell the land for private development, 2. That the land is used for social housing in partnership with local housing association or 3. That there is a community buyout of the land, with plans for social housing and community enterprise. Just two days later, this poll had gathered 103 responses, with 96.2 percent of people voting for the second two options. Overall, 68 percent voted for the community buyout option and just 3.8 percent agreed with the council’s private selloff. This poll was simply done as a sort of provisional show of feeling, not as a binding consultation. Even so, it managed to exceed the official 2007 consultation in scope in a matter of days, and it demonstrates clearly that the appetite for social housing

in Wyndford has not yet been met.

As of the morning of Thursday 14th the council were still briefing journalists that the sale was going ahead, but later that afternoon it was suddenly announced that the sale would be postponed once more due to COVID-19. Even so, a postponement is not a full halt, and the goal of negotiations and a new consultation had still not been met. So the next day, the occupation of the Collina Street land began.

With the background of the occupation established, I then asked Norman to go into detail on the goals of the Wyndford Union. The initial goal of the union, he told me, was simply to stop the sale, get the council to talk, and hopefully win a social housing development instead of a private development. But it was realised fairly early on by the campaign that just saying "no sale, no private housing" was not enough, and that a positive alternative needed to be provided in place of private housing. Calling for social housing from the local housing association was one option, but this of course depends on whether or not the housing association is willing to buy the land. There was another option, however, and one that would allow the community itself to take a much more active role in shaping their future. This is the idea of a community buyout, and by the beginning of the occupation it had become the union's goal for Collina Street. I was curious to find out what this entailed, and Norman was very enthusiastic to tell me all about it.

The typical local housing tenant isn't aware of the community buyout option, Norman told me, but there are examples of communities running their own housing right here in Glasgow. One example is West Whitlawburn Housing Co-operative, which has existed as a community social housing enterprise for 40 years. The strength of a community buyout is that it could give locals a greater say over not only about the type of housing built on the land but possibly also the kind of energy

used to heat them. Norman's vision revolves around the potential of the Passivhaus standard of housing- These are homes that use zero carbon in construction, zero carbon in heating, and which reduce heating bills by eighty five percent. They are totally sealed, with a heat recovery ventilation system, triple glazing, and a lifespan of over sixty years. He notes that Glasgow City Council have previously given planning permission for a Passivhaus-style development in Dalmarnock, so they are not unfamiliar with them.

As to the heating system for these houses, Norman is excited by the proximity of Collina Street to the Kelvin River. This would allow for the installation of an industrial size heat pump which can, using the cold water of rivers or lakes in a heat exchanger, heat water and pump it around a district heating system. To this effect Norman has been speaking about the possibility of using heat pumps on the Kelvin with the director of Star Refrigeration, a company which set up heat pumps for Drammen, a Norwegian town of 64,000 people. A heating system of this kind could potentially heat the entirety of Northern Maryhill and, just like the Passivhaus standard, it is not alien to Scotland- Norman pointed out that that West Dumbartonshire council has now installed and commissioned a similar heat pump district heating development at the old John Brown shipyard site in Clydebank.

All of this infrastructure would certainly be expensive to set up initially, but Norman argues that the long term benefits, both ecologically and in savings on energy, are well worth the upfront costs. Not only this, but it can provide new opportunities and skills for the community. For example, the building of the houses themselves could involve the community through a programme of training in new construction skills. Additionally, the hot water in the district heating system could also be piped through greenhouses before going back to the pumps, letting locals gain new skills in horticulture

growing sustainable local produce that could be used by the residents or sold to raise money for the community. The whole point of this, Norman said, is “community involvement and leadership-” To give the people of Wyndford a decent environment, meaningful work, and the ability to take their community into their own hands. “If we actually achieved half of this it would be a showcase for the world,” he concluded.

Moving from the future goal of the Wyndford residents to the day-to-day struggle at Collina Street, I asked Norman how the occupation has been going so far and what sort of challenges they have been facing. As can be expected, the cold, damp and windy weather has consistently made things difficult. The gazebo that initially went up unfortunately was in danger of blowing away and so had to be taken down, but the occupation was soon able to get a tent set up. Quite crucial to the continuation of the occupation is getting more shelter, and as such the occupiers have been hoping to get a caravan onto the site. Since my discussion with Norman, a little wooden bothy has also been built on the site and named, quite appropriately, “Booby the Bothy” after Still Game’s Booby the Barman.

The other great challenge the occupation is facing is of course presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. As we well know by now, the pandemic and necessity of social distancing has radically changed, hindered or even made impossible what were once elementary forms of political protest, from the picket to the rally. Similarly, direct action tactics like occupations end up being severely modified by the need to social distance. While in normal times a large protest camp is a measure of strength, in the era of pandemic a gathering like that is above all a health risk, both to the occupiers and the general public. So the occupation has proceeded on a much reduced scale, with only a small number of people, two or three, holding Collina Street. As only one person can make use of each piece of accommodation, whether it be a tent or a

caravan, at any one time, this makes the securing of multiple shelters an especial priority.

The small size of the occupation has a few other consequences. On the one hand, it makes the camp significantly easier to evict by force. But on the other hand, it does also mean that the occupation is easier to maintain over time. If only two or three people can be at Collina Street at a time then this means you don't need a particularly large pool of people to replenish the occupation in shifts, which in turn allows the occupiers to be cycled out more frequently to avoid burnout. COVID may reduce the scope of the action, but it is not without elements that can be turned to the advantage of the occupiers.

Regardless of the weather and the pandemic, the occupation is continuing apace. Norman was quite enthusiastic about the way in which their cause was being received by the public, speaking of how passers-by and people out walking their dogs would stop by, initially doing so out of curiosity but then staying to talk about politics and the neighbourhood. When Norman explains that the issue isn't just about a few houses, but about what a community can do to take its future into its own hands through measures like buyouts, he reports that the response is one of interest and excitement from the locals. It evokes the way in which occupations, in reclaiming land for use of the people, have a powerful ability to capture the public imagination and provide space for new ways of seeing, thinking and living to be experimented with and worked out. In the last decade Zuccotti Park, Tahrir Square and Gezi Park have all played a role like this, not only in the lives of the residents of New York, Cairo and Istanbul, but also in the imaginations of people all over the world.

Norman evoked Glasgow's own part in that global occupying tradition by connecting Collina Street with the history of the ["Pollok Free State"](#) occupation of the early 1990's, which aimed at stopping the construction of a motorway through

Pollok Country Park. He hopes that the Collina Street occupation can, like that protest movement of a previous generation, rekindle some of the fighting spirit that Glasgow has been known for, the fighting spirit of Mary Barbour, John Maclean and the anti-Poll Tax Federation. Already the occupation has been generating a lot of cross-generational interest, both from young people in their 20's and from people in their 40's and older, something that Norman, who is himself 70 years old, is very happy to see.

It of course remains to be seen what the end result of all this will be. At time of writing the sale of Collina Street is set to begin on February 5th, and the council have not shown any further signs of listening to the Wyndford Tenants Union. Additionally, since I have spoken to Norman, a charity, "The Valley, Maryhill SCIO" has been set up to apply for a buy out or asset transfer of the Collina Street land under Community Right to Buy legislation. As [its call for volunteer trustees states](#), this would constitute "the largest urban community buyout in Scottish history." As for the occupation, it may yet be in for a long stint up on that cold and windy hill as the result of the buyout attempt is awaited. But no matter what happens, Norman is resolute that the occupation will hold its ground and see the struggle through: "By being there in this weather we're demonstrating our convictions and the local people are seeing that."

I ended by asking Norman how readers of this article can show their support for the occupation. Unfortunately, due to the need for social distancing, it isn't really feasible for members of the public to join the occupation in substantial numbers. A donated flask of soup or two is certainly always appreciated though, especially considering the winter weather. There are also ways of helping out virtually. First port of call is visiting the ["Still Game for The Valley" Facebook group](#). Here you'll be able to find information about the occupation and any updates on their progress. If you can share

news and information about the occupation with your family and friends, your trade unions and local community groups, that will help get the word out. Additionally, the issue of the occupation could be brought to meetings of your local trade union, tenants union or political party branches, anywhere where resolutions of support can be passed. Another way of helping virtually is to email your local MSPs, MPs and councillors asking them about the lack of consultation about private selloffs of land like at Collina Street, and calling on them to support the demands of the occupation.

One other more immediate way you can help is by providing storage space. Norman asked me to put a request here from the occupation for a shipping container that could be loaned to them. This would be a great help in giving the occupiers a secure and dry place to store their equipment on site. If you can help in this way, please get in touch with Norman Cunningham at normdbc@gmail.com or call 07712427315.

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