



**FIGHT THE  
GENTRIFICATION OF  
WORKING CLASS BELFAST.**

**DROP THE  
RENTS!**

## What is Gentrification?

At its most basic level, the term gentrification refers to the replacement of existing working-class communities with those from a more affluent or wealthy class.

It is a long process that begins when working-class homeowners sell low-priced properties to aspiring landlords and others with a vested interest in making vast profits in the future. These properties are then rented out to a population who, due to a lack of public housing, are forced to pay rents set well above what those on minimum wage or benefits can afford.



In its final stage, rents are raised to the point where ordinary working-class people are simply priced out and replaced by higher earners, professionals, students, or anyone else who can afford to pay what a previous working-class family simply could not

Often, this process is facilitated by local government bodies under the guise of urban development. Alternative social housing is built elsewhere to encourage working-class families to move on, while protective measures such as rent controls are quashed, inevitably pricing out entire communities.

In Belfast, the close relationship between landlords, speculators, and politicians makes this process even more obvious.

The IRSP believes that we are beginning to see this process of gentrification playing out across Belfast and beyond. We have taken the first steps in resisting what is a cynical attempt by those with political and economic power to exploit working-class communities—communities that deserve to remain in the areas they built and often defended.

West Belfast and the Falls provide a textbook example of what will occur elsewhere if this gentrification process goes unchecked. As London sociologist Ruth Glass (the first to use the term gentrification) stated:

“Once this process of ‘gentrification’ starts in a district, it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed.”



## The roots of the problem

There is a bitter irony in the fact that Margaret Thatcher remains a demonic hate figure in working-class Belfast (and rightly so), while those who have attained economic and political power in the same districts implement her ideals.

Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme of the early 1980s allowed social housing tenants to purchase their homes at a discounted price. Millions in England and Wales took up the offer, as did many here in the Six Counties when the scheme was introduced in 1983 through the Housing (NI) Order.

While home ownership is not inherently bad or contradictory to working-class republican or socialist principles, the manipulation of such a scheme by profit-seeking landlords and speculators was inevitable in the absence of social or economic controls.

The IRSP has long warned communities about the long-term dangers that would arise if individuals bought up public housing under Thatcher's scheme, in a capitalist system that had no real interest in building any more.

One female IRSP organiser went door to door in Ballymurphy, urging people to reject the scheme—even though she herself was fully eligible to buy her own home. To this day, she refuses to buy her own home as a matter of principle.

## Ceasefire speculators

The negative consequences of Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme took decades to become apparent. While the war was still ongoing, and the streets were tense, the prospect of gentrifying districts like Divis and Beechmount was zero.

Nevertheless, increasing numbers of working-class families used hard-earned savings to buy their own council or NIHE homes for as little as £10,000.



Time for Profit. Many property speculators received a financial windfall of profits following the ceasefire era of the mid-90s.

It must be stressed that these families did nothing wrong. Security of tenure, an end to overhanging rent, and a future home for their children—these are things that all parents want. In a just society, such security would be possible.

What followed however was far from just.

In the months and years after the 1994 ceasefires, property speculators of all kinds—from across Ireland and beyond—began gambling on the success of the fledgling peace process. They offered what were, by previous standards, generous sums to local families for their homes—former social housing

properties that would barely have attracted single-figure bids during the conflict.

For speculators, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to buy up still relatively cheap properties, rent them out later, and recoup their costs in a short period.

As the peace process became embedded and property prices rose, speculators inherited a windfall. This exchange of properties from working-class families to aspiring landlords soon necessitated the rise of letting agencies—middlemen who set the terms and conditions of rental contracts across the city.

## The great West / North Belfast housing swindle

Housing Benefit levels for private renters are set by Stormont politicians using a calculation tool called the Local Housing Allowance (LHA). Depending on age and family size, the government decides how much a person should be allocated to rent a home.

But what the government deems appropriate is clearly not enough for landlords.

In 2024–25, a family requiring a three-bedroom rented house in Belfast could expect to receive around £750 per month in Housing Benefit (or Universal Credit) to cover rent. However, landlords and letting agencies now rarely charge less than £930 per month for a modest three-bedroom home in Divis, Beechmount, Ardoyne, or the New Lodge.

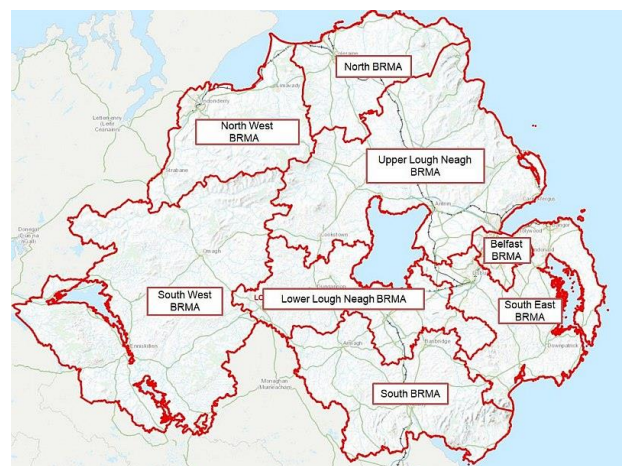
For those lucky enough to occupy social housing this is less of a problem.

Yet West Belfast tops the North's 45,000-housing waiting list, a fact that letting agencies and their landlord clients have disgracefully used to exploit those in the private sector.

Applying Tory style 'supply and demand' principles to the situation, letting agencies in Belfast now rarely charge less than £930 per month for a modest three-bedroom house in areas such as Divis, Beechmount, Ardoyne and the New Lodge<sup>1</sup>.

Creating a huge monthly shortfall of hundreds of pounds and forcing already struggling families to find the money elsewhere or face the threat of eviction. All this in districts already blighted by huge child poverty levels.

Over recent years, it has become evident that letting agencies and their landlord clients have acquired so many properties in West Belfast that they can now exploit the housing shortage, engaging in rental extortion that scams hard-pressed families and the government itself out of millions.



The Six County Local Housing Allowance rental map. Figures provided sit well below what is normally charged by private landlords.



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/housing-help/local-housing-allowance/average-weekly-market-rent-data>

The IRSP makes no apology for blaming this practice for the Dickensian levels of poverty seen across Belfast. It is no coincidence that food banks are booming while struggling families go without food or heat just to pay extortionate rents.

### **The Gentrification begins**

Worse still, landlords and their agents now find themselves in such a position of power –given their proven close relationship with politicians and the subsequent absence of government rent controls –that they can pursue the gentrification of districts by outpricing the traditional local working-class population, replacing it with a higher earning and more socially mobile demographic.



This 4 Bedroom property on the Springfield Rd was advertised at a rent of £1800 per month.

When we consider the changing urban landscape of west Belfast, including the close proximity of the new Grand Central travel hub, the new glider routes, the close proximity of the RVH, along with various student residential hubs; one can see how vulture property speculators would see an opportunity for harvesting even more profits via the rental sector in west Belfast.

The only obstacle being the already existing working-class communities that live there.

This reality can be demonstrated when we view the increasing numbers of properties in West Belfast, with rents that go far beyond even the extortionate levels previously mentioned and which place homes in working class areas well beyond the means of working-class families.

### **IRSP 'Drop the Rents' and Anti Eviction campaigns.**

The IRSP began to publicly challenge these emerging rental practices in 2020, with activists entering several letting agencies in West Belfast and politely demanding that they reduce rents to LHA (Housing Benefit) levels, informing them of our intention to take peaceful protest action should they fail to do so.

Two years prior to this the party had also made public their intentions to peacefully prevent evictions of any tenants in West Belfast by any renting body and for whatever reason. The IRSP viewed their 'Drop the Rents' campaign as an extension of this promise.

As expected, the IRSP were initially ignored by all letting agencies and on all these points.

Soon the protest action followed however with advertised properties being visited and having large adhesive stickers placed on their windows and doors declaring 'Property under dispute' – 'Drop the Rents'. The premises of said letting agencies were also visited by IRSP pickets forcing some to down shutters and close business for the day.

On numerous occasions these actions forced letting agencies to drop their rents to a more respectable level, lest letting agencies simply fail to find tenants who would agree to take on a contract.

These actions occurred on dozens of properties across West and North Belfast and indeed further afield in Newry and Derry, in actions that found unanimous approval from all commentators' bar the local media and the landlord community themselves. The premises of said letting agencies were also visited by IRSP pickets forcing some to down shutters and close business for the day.



IRSP lead the way in exposing and opposing the landlord system in West and North Belfast.

In 2018, the IRSP had been contacted by a young mother from Divis who had found herself facing the threat of eviction by the Housing Executive, due to an overpayment of Housing Benefit which occurred because she had returned to full time study. Another gift from the Thatcher era designed to prevent working class people on benefits from becoming mature students and so getting 'above their station'.

The IRSP made it very clear to this woman that they would stand firm and prevent any attempt to evict her from her home. The Housing Executive were likewise informed with assurances given that we would make sure the policing costs would come to an amount much higher than any overpayment.

IRSP Members from across Belfast were put on notice that they were to be ready at the drop of a hat and to make their way to Divis for the purpose of preventing any eviction of this mother from her home. All agreed to drop what they were doing and make themselves available day or night. Offers of support also flooded in from the public and from other republican organisations.

Such was the level of feeling on this issue that in another semi humorous incident, Housing Executive officials visiting another Divis resident on a totally unrelated matter were mistaken for an eviction party, and by the time IRSP members began pouring into the area the poor NIHE officials were running up Albert Street as fast as is possible in a business suit.

No harm was done, the word got back, the benefits overpayment was waived, and the eviction prevented. We are led to believe that the NIHE sought and received counsel on the matter from other political parties in the area and were advised to let the matter rest.





Not long after this however the party did have to act and physically prevent the incursion of an actual eviction party, along with police and court officials who attempted to enter Divis and evict a low paid working man who had fallen into arrears thanks to the newly installed Universal Credit

system. Since that time and due to the positive publicity, that was raised, the IRSP are now the first port of call for people facing eviction in West Belfast, and we are rarely if ever not now 'on anti-eviction notice' of one type or other.



The letting agencies soon began to notice our 'Drop the Rent' actions also, with prospective renters and viewers calling to enquire as to why the property they were viewing was 'under dispute'. The campaign was beginning to have the desired effect, and the new property class were becoming uncomfortable.

Hundreds gather to protest an eviction in North Belfast following a mobilisation call from the IRSP.

### **The fight against future gentrification**

Until this point our campaigns have been reasonably successful in both raising awareness of the issues, lowering some rents and preventing some evictions.

The future fight against gentrification will be a much tougher fight, calling together every possible aspect of class struggle and forcing those who claim to want to fight to put their money where their mouths are.

We are up for that fight and encourage all of a like mind to join us in it.

**FIGHT FOR OUR COMMUNITIES, FIGHT FOR OUR CLASS, FIGHT GENTRIFICATION.**

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