

What does homelessness look like?

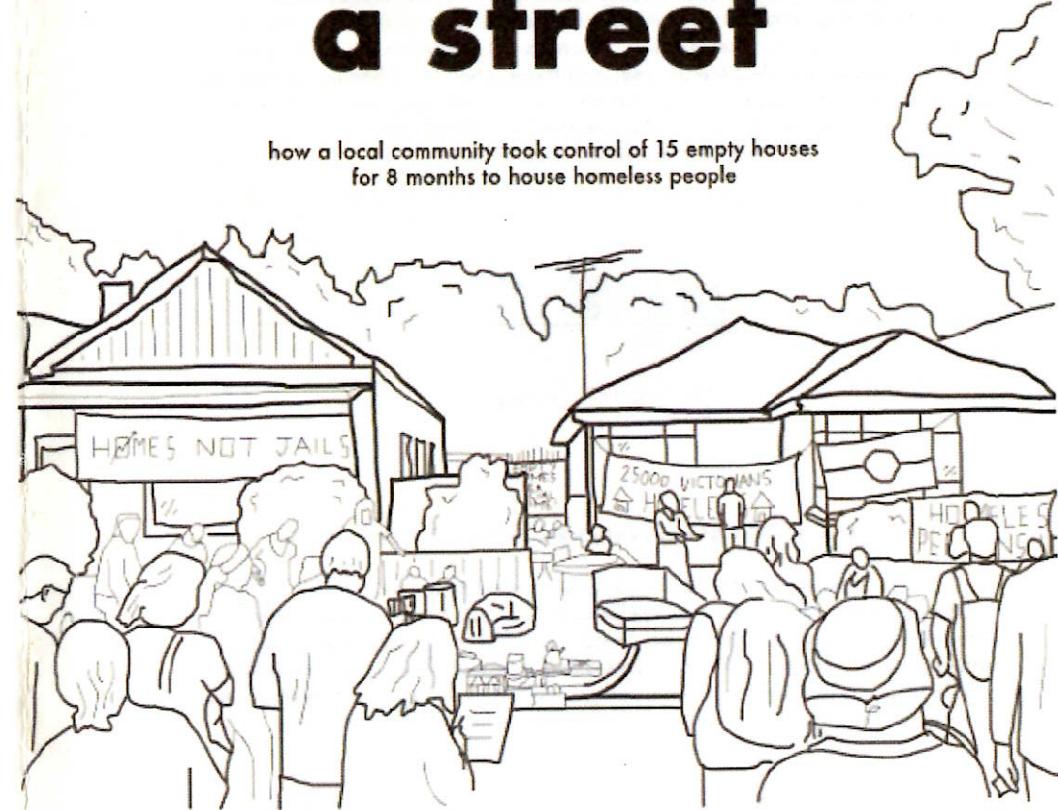
Information, studies and data on homelessness and housing insecurity is lacking in so many ways. The severity and scale of homelessness is often underrepresented. In so-called Victoria 25,000 people are homeless, 82,000 wait on public housing waiting lists, up to 90,000 private dwellings and many thousands of state-owned dwellings sit empty at any given time.

What we can be sure of is that this colonial system of private property under capitalism produces homelessness. We know that neocolonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, ableism, neurotypicism, queerphobia, transmisogyny, etc, the easier it is for you to access housing, so people marginalised by these things end up experiencing the highest rates of homelessness. Aside from collectivising private property, tools like public housing, rent caps and rent subsidies are effective ways to reduce homelessness. However, the Victorian state government is reducing the number of public housing dwellings and refuses to place caps on rent. Additionally, it aggressively criminalises, harasses and evicts homeless people on a daily basis.



collectivising a street

how a local community took control of 15 empty houses for 8 months to house homeless people

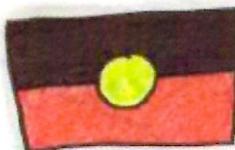


An account & timeline of the
Bendigo Street housing campaign
Narrm (Melbourne) 2016

by slumberkitty

This zine was made on the stolen and occupied lands of the Wurundjeri people, of the Kulin Nations, in the area around Narrm (so-called Melbourne) and the banks and tributaries of Birrarung (Yarra River).

This colonial occupation not only produces the conditions that lead to homelessness and housing insecurity in this urbanised area, it has also displaced so many Aboriginal people from their lands, many of whom now find themselves here. I want to acknowledge the Aboriginal diaspora living in so-called Melbourne, and those who found homes, community and strength in the Bendigo Street campaign, however temporary or fleeting, especially those who critiqued it, called it out, and kept us settlers accountable.



This is one account of this campaign. There are many others.

This zine was written by a poor, white, genderqueer, queer, settler-coloniser living in Narrm (Melbourne). I slept some nights at Bendigo Street and Manningham Street, but I had a bed in my own home to return to. Though I have experienced homelessness in the past and live in a neverending cycle of insecure and inadequate housing, I am relatively privileged with access to community and family support, I have not had to sleep rough or flee my home from violence.

I hope this zine can inspire further actions to address housing insecurity, homelessness, neocolonialism, private property, capitalism and all forms of discrimination that make it harder for marginalised people to access housing.

I would love to update this zine with accounts from other people who were there, more accurate info, etc. Some accounts from others were not ready in time for this print run, but will be updated when ready. Please let me know if you'd like to help with this or want to send me corrections, suggestions or anything, email me at: utopicoasis@riseup.net



Homeless camps at City Square and Enterprise Park were evicted during the Bendigo Street campaign. A new camp was created outside Flinders Street Station, but it too was evicted in March 2017.



Number 4 Bendigo Street First Nations Embassy



Emboldened by anti-homeless sentiment spread by the Victorian Labor government during Bendigo Street, the then Lord Mayor of Melbourne Robert Doyle attempted to "ban" homeless people from the city by giving police more powers to harass them. In response, the community began protesting at Mr. Doyle's house in the middle of the night.



A property manager from Compton Green Real Estate attempts to break into a liberated apartment on Manningham Street. Sadly, harassment from real estate and police forced a homeless family out of these apartments.



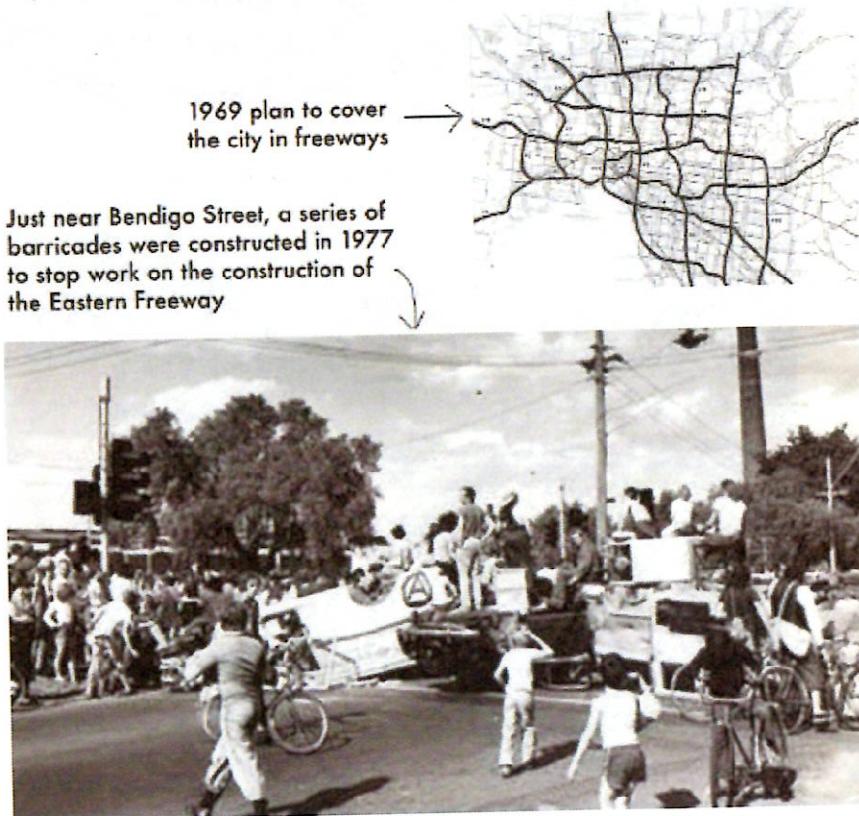
A panel discussion at Number 2



The last house to be evicted in St. Peters, Sydney, for construction of WestConnex, during the same time as Bendigo Street

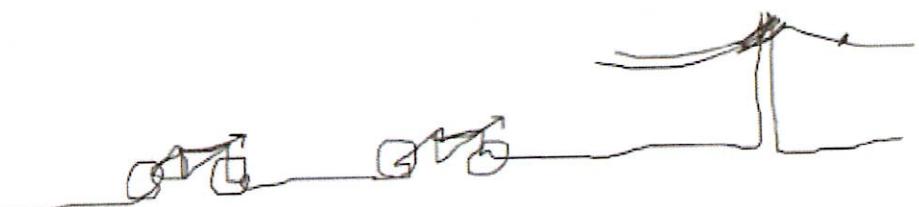
Anti-Freeway protests in Melbourne

1962 - first Freeway section constructed in Melbourne (Punt Rd - Burnley Rd)
1969-1977 - F19 Eastern Freeway/Alexandra Parade protests & barricades
1973 - Labor government commits to no new freeways, but continues building them anyway
1973-1984 - Monash Freeway "missing link" protests
1976 - road reservations for inner city freeways sold, ending several routes
1984 - Hoddle Highway widening protests
1987-1995 - Eastern Freeway extension to Springvale Road, 14 arrested 1995
1994 - Coalition Against Freeway Expansion
1990's - CityLink protests
2005-07 - North-East Link campaign
2008-14 - East-West Link early campaign, protests in Kensington
2008 - Eastern Ring Road (EastLink) protests
Sept 2013 - Nov 2014 - East-West Link tunnel picket actions
2017-present - West Gate Tunnel campaign & protests
2017-present - North East Link campaign v2



Number 13, Bendigo Street housed several Aboriginal people with complex needs and was the house targeted most by the state government. It was evicted on three separate occasions, each time it was retaken by community. During one such eviction, the state government evicted and arrested the residents early in the morning and kept them in police custody without charge while community retook the house. The state government responded by mobilising 50+ police and calling in commercial media, to spread lies and racialised stereotypes about the homeless community and Aboriginal people. The house was evicted again and when an attempt was made to confiscate the resident's personal belongings, the community stepped in and found temporary storage for their belongings.

This was one of the most fiercely fought battles with the state government, who completely failed to meet the needs of Number 13's residents, despite committing to do so after a prolonged legal battle. It demonstrated the inability of the state to meet people's housing needs, and made us question the usefulness of public housing, given a rag-tag community was doing a better job with no money and very little resources.



The Bendigo street housing campaign (also known simply as **Bendigo Street**) was a series of occupations of *empty* state government-owned properties in Melbourne's inner north. The occupations commenced on the morning of March 30, 2016 with the involvement of the Homeless Persons Union Victoria, and comprised at least fifteen properties in Collingwood, Clifton Hill and Parkville.

The campaign housed somewhere between 60 and 100 previously homeless people including several families, First Nations/Aboriginal peoples, single parents, women, trans & gender diverse people, queer people, young people and students.

It involved a campaign hub, a First Nations embassy and temporary/crisis accommodation, run by the community under structures of collective community ownership and organisation, in response to and as an alternative to the system of private property and neoliberal cuts to public housing that left 25,000 homeless (in Victoria), 80,000 houses empty (in Melbourne) and 35,000 waiting on public housing waiting lists.

In August 2016, after a legal injunction postponed evictions, the state government was forced into negotiations with residents. Some were offered public housing while others were not. The campaign continued until November/December when a court ordered the "recovery" of the state government's property and people were forced to find other housing or return to sleeping rough. The state government tokenistically announced some homeless funding initiatives, though it refused to commit to any increase in public housing and long-term housing services, and was certainly not encouraging of the collectivisation and community control of property it sought to profit from. It continues to pursue plans to develop or sell the properties for profit, while privatising public housing estates at 12 sites across Melbourne (another strong campaign is resisting this with direct action). Meanwhile, housing insecurity & homelessness continue to worsen and the marginalised in our communities are affected the most.

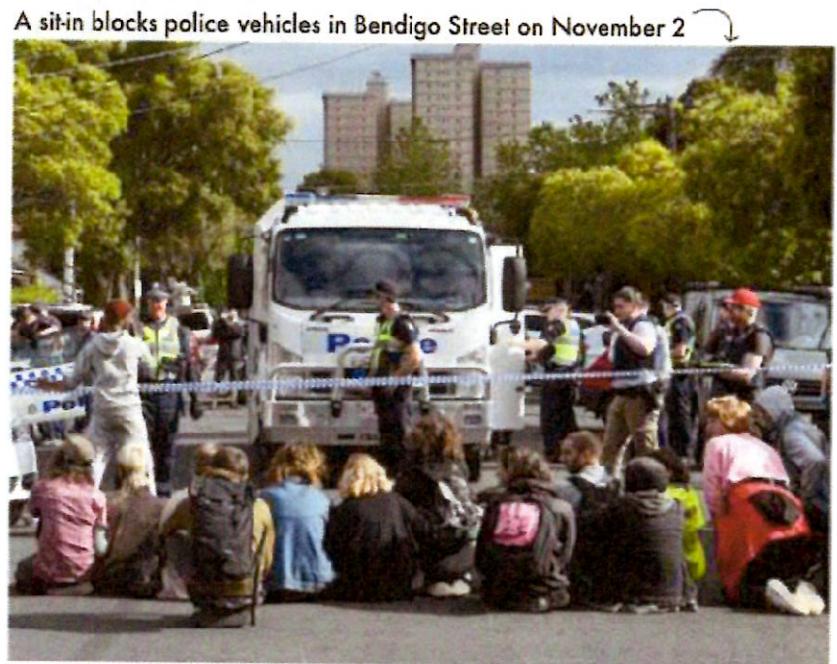
Why is this important & who is writing this?

Accounts and stories of Bendigo Street are important as they demonstrate what is possible when even just a few dozen people get together to prioritise the needs of those most marginalised in our communities, and engage in effective tactics of decentralised and autonomous direct action to meet those needs in the present, win concessions from governments and build community capacity to survive and resist under the tyranny of colonialism, capitalism, oppression, private property and the state.

This account is from a decolonial, anarchist, transfeminist, prison abolitionist perspective. I am a settler-coloniser living on stolen Wurundjeri land. I am genderqueer, trans femme and queer. I'm living in precarious housing and do not own property or hold any assets. I have experienced homelessness in the past, however I was not homeless during the Bendigo Street housing campaign. I slept several nights in most of the houses to help keep them under community control, however I had a house to go home to. My interests in the campaign were in supporting my (specifically queer & trans) homeless friends, acting as an accomplice to First Nations peoples struggling against neocolonialism in the inner north and in realising the collectivisation of private property in balance with the more immediate demands of the Homeless Persons Union for increased public housing. I also bring the perspective of someone who was involved in direct actions to stop the East-West Link (the project that precipitated the government acquisition of these properties) in which we successfully stopped the project through constant disruption of test drilling activities. I write this for you the reader, in the hope that it will inspire you to win more public housing for your community and realise the possibilities of a world beyond colonisation, private property, capitalism and social oppression.



June 26 rally at the State Library of Victoria



A sit-in blocks police vehicles in Bendigo Street on November 2

How to collectivise a building...

It sounds like the sort of task you need a movement or a revolution to achieve, but you can "collectivise" or "squat" a building by yourself, or ideally with a small group of friends. Whatever you call it, you're putting empty and disused buildings to good social use, against private property and capitalism, no rent, no private ownership. Perhaps you or people you know need somewhere to live, or you want to start a social centre or community space, or you want to protest or draw attention to an injustice or issue. There are many ways to squat/collectivise a building, most share these 6 basic elements in common...

1. Find an empty house/building. The state and private property owners enjoy leaving houses and other buildings empty, but it can be difficult to know which ones are empty. Telltale signs include: long grass, unkempt garden, overflowing mail, curtains drawn, boarded up windows, lots of dust, lack of daily items around (shoes, broom, door mat, etc), structure in disrepair, paint peeling, no furniture inside, no cars or bikes parked outside. If you think you've found an empty one, you should make sure no one is living there or checking on the property regularly. This can include observing: is anyone coming/going? are there lights on at night time? and tricks like placing sticky tape on doors so you can see if the door has been opened. Serious squatters may be part of crews and networks that maintain maps and lists of empty properties that make it easier to open new homes and spaces when needed.

2. Get inside. This is the most criminalised part and carries the highest legal risks, so be aware of these risks, and take precautions to protect your identity and your safety. Sometimes there is an open door or window, or no door, or a hole in a wall. Other times, there will be locks, bars, fences and other obstacles preventing the building from being used as housing or socially useful space. You can overcome these obstacles in ways that don't legally implicate you or your friends. There is plenty of info online and in other zines about how to do this.

3. Secure the house/building. You & your community controls this property now, so change the locks! Fix broken doors and windows. Sometimes property owners will check on the property, sometimes neighbours will complain, call police or tell the owner (see next section), these are all bad news for the longevity of this newly liberated space. Leave a note out for the owner if they check in, explaining what you're using the space for, how much you fixed it up, how reasonable you are or how reputable your project is, and offer to communicate and negotiate. This can reduce potential conflict or give you time to move to somewhere else. If you anticipate a risk of conflict, police, thugs or want to resist an eviction, you can construct barricades. These could be simple to stop the owner getting inside, or more intense to resist of police eviction.

4. Make friends with your neighbours and community or at least don't annoy them. In some situations it may be better to pretend like no one is living there or using the space, in others it may be useful to let your neighbours know you live there or are using the space (let them assume you're a tenant if they want to). Neighbours can be the first to call police or the owner, so if you can avoid them, build rapport with them, make friends or even get their support, it's less likely that someone will call police or tell the owner.

5. Use the space while you have control of it. Live in it if you are homeless. Give it to people who need it more than you. The community controls it now. What events could take place here? Meetings? Fundraisers? Services? Drop-in centre? Library? Child care? What does your community need space for? Are there First Nations people in your community who need housing or other spaces? You may have control of the space for a month, six months, two years, make the most of it!

6. Be prepared for an eviction. Will you try to negotiate a prolonged exit? Do you need to leave asap? Think about how your belongings or materials for the space are stored, are they easy to relocate? Who can you call on to help you if you need to move things? Where can you stay temporarily if you're evicted? Is there another empty house/building you could move to next? What will happen to groups, projects, etc, when they no longer have a space?

Why did this happen?

As of 2016, there were 22,000 people who were currently homeless in Victoria, 3,000 of whom were children. 10,000 applications for emergency shelter and 35,000 people waiting on the public housing waiting list. There were 80-90,000 empty privately-owned residential properties in Melbourne and at least 1,500 empty state government properties. Property and rent affordability, and lack of access to public housing have been increasingly severe issues in Melbourne and regional areas of Victoria for many decades. In early 2016 there was several homeless encampments in the city (notably at Enterprise Park and City Square) and increasingly large numbers of people sleeping rough in makeshift dwellings and on the street, particularly concentrated in the city.

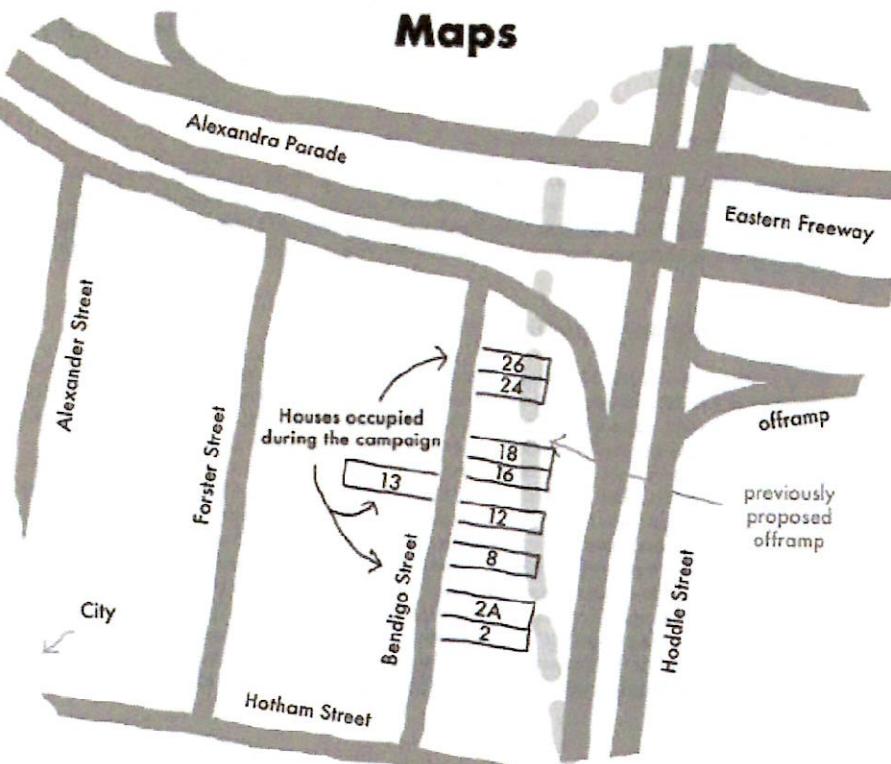
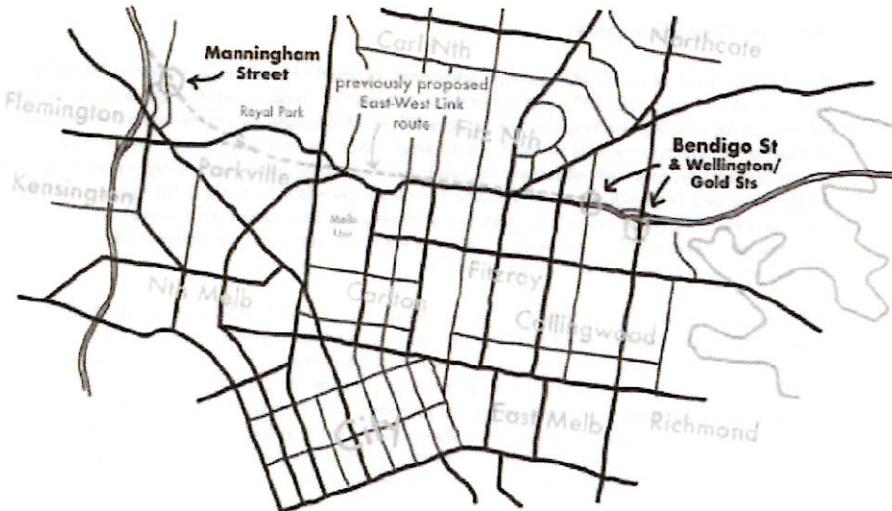
Additionally, Melbourne's inner north (particularly Fitzroy and Collingwood) is home to a significant urban population of First Nations people who are subject to neocolonial and genocidal treatment, including police violence and homelessness. It was in these same streets that 120 state government houses had been laying empty for 6-18 months. They had been compulsorily acquired or purchased by the previous Coalition state government for construction of the East-West Link tollway road. The tollway project was subsequently cancelled by the new Labor state government, who initially committed to transferring 20 of the acquired houses to the social housing sector specifically to house homeless people. However, only four or five of these were filled - many with people with personal links to the social housing organisation managing the properties (the Salvation Army) - the rest remained empty 6-18 months later while the state government waited to rent or sell them on the private housing market. For the few who were housed there, the situation was not ideal. For one single mum who had been housed in a group home on Bendigo Street, it was untenable to live there with her daughter.

The spark...

In March 2016 a group of homeless women attempted to squat one of the empty houses in Collingwood but were quickly evicted by the state government. The women approached the Homeless Persons Union Victoria, who facilitated a meeting with homeless people, housing campaigners, squatters and others from the community, to plan a protest against homelessness.

Collectivising government property...

Early morning on March 30, several dozen people began protesting at Number 16 Bendigo Street. Number 16 was occupied and evicted, and soon after Number 18 was occupied by around 20 people, concealing their identities, who were willing to barricade themselves inside the house and be arrested if needed. After a day-long standoff with police and state government liaisons, no eviction action was taken. The community seized the opportunity to regain control of Number 16, and the next day Number 2 was occupied and began being used as a campaign hub. In the following days and weeks, all empty houses on Bendigo Street were successively occupied. A First Nations embassy was established at Number 4 and the houses provided temporary housing for homeless people. The Homeless Persons Union demanded that all the properties compulsorily acquired for the East-West Link be placed on the public housing register, while others called for free housing and for community control to continue. The campaign quickly gained support in the neighbourhood and broader community. Community control of the houses was solidified and expanded. Autonomous spaces and houses for First Nations people, queer and trans people, and families were established.



Timeline (continued)

July 18: apartments at 117 Manningham Street are occupied, a homeless family is housed

July 21: 56 Alexandra Parade, Clifton Hill is occupied, total of 13 houses occupied

July 22: police attempt and fail to evict 56 Alexandra Parade

August 1: real estate agent Compton Green and Victoria police illegally attempt to gain entry to an apartment at 177 Manningham Street that is home to a previously homeless family, though they are unable to gain entry.

August 2: Compton Green and Victoria police again illegally attempt to gain entry to the family's home, they are unable to gain entry but the family is forced to relocate as a result of the intimidation.

August 5: Homeless Persons Union hosts a forum on homelessness at the Richmond Town Hall

August 11: number 13 Bendigo Street (a home to First Nations people) is raided by 15-20 police, 3 First Nations people are arrested but are released without charge. It is not clear if police had a warrant to enter.

August 11: The state government and police deliver eviction notices to each of the 13 houses giving people 24-48 hours to vacate.

August 12: residents from all the occupied houses file for a legal injunction to stop evictions, injunction is granted and the state government cannot commence evictions.

mid August: state government offers a few of the residents public housing, the rest of the residents are not offered anything, some take the offer, handing back keys to the state government, while the overall campaign continues.

August 28: the "Bendigo Street Festival" is held in Bendigo Street, street is closed to non-local traffic, a stage is set up with live music, workshops, films, tours and food in each of the houses. 300-400 people attend.

September 19: the legal injunction ends, evictions are threatened but none occur.

October 28: Number 13 Bendigo Street is raided again, without a warrant and in conflict with the state government's own process to house First Nations residents. 3 people are arrested but are released without charges. A dozen private security are posted 24/7 to prevent the house from being retaken.

November 1: In response to the eviction of Number 13, Number 16 is retaken by the community and a First Nations/Aboriginal family moves in.

November 2: Number 13 is also retaken in the morning. The state government mobilises 40-50 police to evict Number 13, one person is arrested but released without charges. State government co-ordinates media presence for the eviction, housing minister Martin Foley talks to ABC news radio publicly attacking and defaming residents.

November 4: a man in his 50's is found to have passed away inside number 4, Bendigo Street, possibly due to substance use issues. Housing Minister Martin Foley uses the person's death to attack residents and the campaign in the media, drug-shaming the homeless community and suggesting the death is further justification for evictions.

November 10: Supreme court issues orders for the "recovery" of 4, 16, 18, 24 and 26 Bendigo Street, evictions expected.

November 12: state government announces a \$109m "homelessness funding package" but makes no commitments regarding the Bendigo Street houses or long term housing provision such as public housing.

November & December: many residents are forced to leave remaining houses under threat of eviction, attempt to find other housing or return to sleeping rough. Most houses remain empty. Further evictions of homeless camps in the city.

Mid 2017: properties occupied in Parkville are demolished for new private developments.

Mid 2018: no new public housing has been constructed at the time of writing this zine, evictions of squatted houses and homeless camps continue under a so-called "lefty" Labor state government.

Timeline

March 11: women evicted from squatted empty East-West Link house on Bendigo Street
March 30: two houses occupied (Number 16 & 18), eviction occurs at Number 18
March 31: a third house occupied (Number 2), campaign hub set up
March 31: community meeting held attended by over 100 local residents and supporters
April 3: a fourth house is occupied, a First Nations embassy is established "Sovereign House"
April 4: a public event discussing homelessness is held
April 5: the City of Yarra (local government) passes motion to facilitate meeting with the housing minister.
April 6: an event is hosted at the First Nations embassy discussing Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples and issues of treaty, land rights and decolonisation.
April 7: a second community meeting is attended by over 100 residents and supporters
April 9: state government creates a new Family Violence Housing Assistance Implementation task force in response to the campaign, saying the Bendigo St houses "could" be used to house homeless survivors of family violence, though they make no commitments regarding the empty properties and refuse to place any on the public housing register.
April 12: an event is held on the issue of queer and transgender homelessness
April 13: a legal briefing is held sharing information about legal rights and police accountability
April 22: the Andrews state government evicts homeless people from an empty EW Link property on Gold Street, Clifton Hill.
April 24: a large street party is attended by over 200 people
April 26: several Bendigo Street houses sign land lease with First Nations peoples
April 26: a film night is held at number 12 with members of Melbourne's West Papuan community
April 29: real estate agent Noble Knight, acting on behalf of the Andrews state government, threaten and intimidate homeless people from another empty house on Gold Street
May 3: residents of Bendigo Street begin to protest at Martin Foley's office (housing minister)
May 4: film screening at number 12
May 6: police liaison & observing training at Bendigo Street
May 10: number 18 begins running solidarity & support for other social justice campaigns
May 16: the campaign hosts another Treaty discussion with First Nations peoples
May 19: picket of Noble Knight offices in Lilydale
May 22: police harass homeless protest at City Square
June 1: a property on Manningham Street in Parkville is brought under community control
June 1: First Nations film night at number 12
June 2: estate agent Compton Green illegally cuts water to Parkville property
June 3: Number 8 Bendigo Street brought under community control
June 3: community dinner at nearby public housing estate
June 5: queer squatting film night at Manningham Street, Parkville
June 9: Food Not Bombs fundraiser at number 16
June 9: police evict a Wellington Street property in Clifton Hill, arresting two homeless people
June 12: gardening working bee at Bendigo Street
June 13: Sovereignty event with First Nations peoples at number 2
June 13: trans & gender diverse women's space opened by community on Bendigo Street
June 16: state government attempts & fails to evict trans & gender diverse house (Number 24)
June 16: Spanish language lessons at number 18
June 17: CPR & First Aid training at number 18
June 19: Squatting skillshare at number 18
June 23: St.Vincent's "CEO sleepout" event gatecrashed by homeless people & housing activists
June 25: a rally is held at City Square attended by 50 people
June 26: a rally is held at the State Library attended by 150 people
June 27: properties continuously occupied for 100 days
June 29: State government & City of Melbourne evict homeless people from Enterprise Park in the city, the encampment had been the largest and most stable homeless community in the city



The houses...

Bendigo Street, Collingwood...

Number 2 - campaign hub, later occupied by a single parent. this was the third house to be occupied, commencing March 31. it had a large open plan kitchen, dining & living space well suited to large meetings and indoor events like film screenings. most meetings took place here.

Number 4 - First Nations embassy

Number 8 - Homeless Persons Union Victoria

Number 12 - occupied by a homeless family

Number 13 - First Nations residents

Number 16 - occupied by a few different residents including a single mother escaping family violence, queer and trans youth and First Nations people. this was the house originally squatted by homeless women and evicted on March 11, the first to be retaken on March 30.

Number 18 - youth and transient house with women's space. this was the second house to be occupied on March 30, and the first to successfully force police and state government to back down. it was a two-storey terrace house with many rooms.

Number 24 - trans and gender diverse house. single-storey terrace house, large portion of the rear of the house was falling down.

Number 26 - First Nations residents

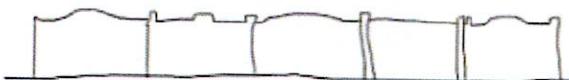


Manningham Street, Parkville...

Number 81 - queer, trans, poc youth house, a large single-storey detached house built in the 1930's, several film nights and meetings were held here. demolished mid 2017 :('

Number 117 - a large apartment building built in the 1960's, several apartments were occupied, one housed a homeless family for a short time before they were forced to leave due to real estate and police harassment.

Other Manningham Street properties were almost occupied on several occasions, notably a property a few doors north of Number 81 that was practically being lived in by two 24/7 private security guards. One would sit alone in the empty house while waiting for the other to bring food.



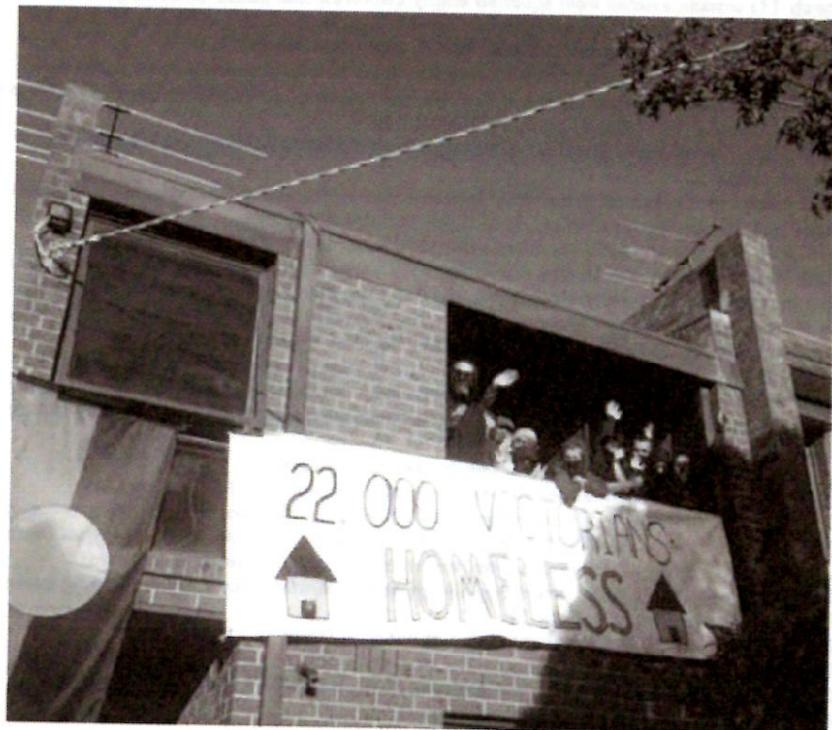
Clifton Hill...

Gold Street - two houses on this street were occupied by homeless people several times, though they were an early target for late night security and police evictions in late April as they were several streets away from Bendigo Street.

Wellington Street - a house here was occupied by squatters and homeless people, it was evicted and retaken several times.

Alexandra Parade - a house (Number 56) was occupied for a time and at least one eviction was resisted on July 22. a property on the corner of Alexandra and Wellington may have also been briefly occupied.

There were many more empty properties north of Alexandra Parade around Wellington & Gold streets, several were almost occupied on several occasions.



People occupy Number 18 Bendigo Street, forcing the state government to decide whether or not it would evict over a dozen people - some of whom homeless - in a very public and shameful way. The state government did not evict Number 18 and within 24 hours several other houses were also brought under community control.

Inside the house preparations were made to barricade entrances, plans devised to determine the longest and most difficult arrest processes possible (climbing out onto the roof? or locking ourselves in the hottub?), banners were hung and meetings held to check in on how everyone was feeling and was everyone well informed about the actions they were taking. At the crucial moment when police threatened eviction with authorisation from the property owner, the group inside was staunchly united. Almost all of us had experienced homelessness, some of us were currently homeless, and our communities were living in precarious and inadequate housing. We were all ready to get arrested to finally bring some action and attention to housing and homelessness. We would not back down.

Alliances built between homeless people, squatters, activists and people who had never participated in direct action, was a wonderful thing to see.