

Speech from 23 Häuser sagen Nein

Dear all, fighting for a more social city,
and dear house community of Hermannstr. 48,

I am Lorena from „23 Häuser sagen NEIN“ – 23 houses say NO.

We said NO to Deutsche Wohnen. Deutsche Wohnen is a listed real estate company and major player in the German and mainly in the Berlin real estate market. In May 2020, Deutsche Wohnen became part of the DAX and, a few days later, bought our 23 houses from a private real estate investor. This affected 400 apartments with around 1000 tenants and 40 small businesses.

We said NO for many reasons:

Deutsche Wohnen is known in Berlin for bad leasing practices and for being a ‚price driver‘ due to its large market share in the Berlin real estate market. To us it was clear that Deutsche Wohnen had a particular interest in retaining this position and securing its market shares, especially since it had been admitted to the DAX.

We said NO: first in our individual flats, then in our houses and finally as an entire initiative with loud protest and a clear political agenda!

Now the same is happening to you – and you organised, you got everyone together, looked for common solutions and even approached the original owner. We have shown it and you are showing it now: We do not simply accept what is happening in this city. We fight back. We make ourselves heard and we become louder than ever. We are the rebellious city!

Together we say NO to Deutsche Wohnen, Akelius, Vonovia, Pears Global, Padovic, Heimstaden and whoever bought Hermannstr. 48. We also say NO to real estate speculation in general. We will keep fighting for housing that is communal and self-governing, until political change occurs. We keep fighting for housing as a fundamental right and a common good. Housing is the most important basis of our social life. Unfortunately it is still not protected: there are mass shelters without protection amidst a pandemic, homeless people are at their most vulnerable in the middle of winter, and the highly praised home office is ultimately the privilege of people with a secure living situation.

Housing is lacking redistribution efforts. Questions about ownership and distribution of land and real estate have only recently come into focus as part of the expropriation debate in Berlin.

The classic labor struggle of the workers' movement has always posed the question of who actually owns the means of production and how we sell our productive power. However, we have taken it for granted for too long, that every piece of real estate, every apartment, and most fundamentally every piece of land belongs to someone.

We constantly ask ourselves: Who owns the city? But we also have to address the question: Who owns the soil?

Why is this question so important? Because it highlights how property is distributed today and what kind of effect this has on all our lives.

Parking your car in front of a supermarket without shopping there may lead to your car being towed, because the parking lot belongs to someone. Train stations and shopping malls, parks and forests all have rules of etiquette and prohibitions determined by whoever owns them. We can't sit on the riverbanks of the Spree because these are covered with office buildings and we can't walk along the beach of a lake belonging to a hotel or villa because that piece of beach is owned by a private person.

The dogma of private ownership of land dominates our everyday life unnoticed.

When looking at the history of land ownership, today's realities become even more absurd.

As people settled down they looked for a piece of land where they could build a house, grow their own food and live in a self-sufficient manner.

But then there were those who felt compelled to do something higher than farming. Eventually they became the oppressors, took away fields and profits from the original owners. Slowly but surely power relations and hierarchies emerged, made possible by land ownership! The history of the division of land is a history of the oppressors and the oppressed – ultimately leading to the invention of property rights.

And so history continues and – because it has always been that way – we take it for granted that every inch of land belongs to someone. We take it for granted that this someone can freely dispose of it.

Today, the history of property is still the history of the oppressors and the oppressed. Today they are called: landlords (or landladies) and tenants.

The question of power is still relevant. Whoever owns the land can determine the lives of those who walk, live and work on it. The main task of an owner is to own – and to earn by doing that. In a capitalist society they can market the land. Fallow land is fallow land – and it will remain a wasteland for another 10 years if the owner decides that it should not be used. If this wasteland was located in Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg and if the owner had bought it in 2010, he could have effortlessly resold that same land in 2019 with a value increase of 1587 percent. Ownership leads to more ownership.

To this day, the fetish of private property has manifested itself everywhere in our capitalist society. Property can be monetised. Property enables profiting from the lives of others who depend on the property. The hierarchies of the rich and the dependent remain – and they will remain if we don't finally rethink! Low-income tenants sometimes pay more than 40 percent of their net income to cover their rent. The rent burden is immensely high. Politicians keep repeating, that rent should never be higher than 30 percent of the household income. But even 30 percent is absurdly high – we should spend a third of our income for a roof over our heads, to do reproductive work there, and then go back to work the next day so we make enough money for rent? Housing is so incredibly fundamental for our society and our economy, yet housing still holds a high poverty risk, especially for older people and those at risk of poverty.

That is why housing should be the target for extensive redistribution efforts. New concepts and their support are needed when it comes to individual and company-based private ownership. Ownership should instead be communal, cooperative and self-managed. There should be a way in which housing does not revolve around the wallets of investors and real estate companies but is directed towards communal living first.

In our joint political struggle there is another aspect as well: naming those responsible. Mistakes have been made by state and federal politicians. If these mistakes can be named, they can also be rectified. That is what the tenants are demanding. Protect the interests of your city's population and not those of the investors. Don't protect those who see the neighbourhoods, social and political spaces, project spaces, small businesses and life in this city as objects of investment.

The main mistakes started being made 30 years ago. Masses of state-owned housing companies in Berlin were privatised. It was the starting signal for the financialization of the housing market. Real estate and land were cheaply sold off when money was needed – the starting point of our misery today. Housing and land were handed over to the free market and today we can see the consequences. Rents are rising and eviction and gentrification are common. The public and welfare sector of the housing market is shrinking while the private sector is growing. In Berlin, the pri-

vate sector incorporates 70 percent of all existing housing. 12 percent are held by cooperatives and 18 percent are state-owned housing association.

Meaning: most of today's housing is in private hands. Objects can be sold at will. If private investors consider Berlin to no longer be profitable or get scared of the rent cap, they can simply sell and move on to Leipzig or Frankfurt. If they do, who then buys from them? The one with the best offer and who can get the highest return from it – usually draining every last bit of profit from the real estate, as if it were a resource that could be mined without any problems.

From conservatives, neoliberals or the landlord bubble on Twitter you always hear: Don't complain, because the rents are still cheap and because Berlin is neither London nor Paris! Berlin is on its way to be just like that, if we don't do something about it now.

Berlin is a popular place for investors. They can buy real-estate, wait for a short time, and effortlessly re-sell it with profit – made possible by a lack of political control.

Every now and then, properties are communalised per right of first refusal ((Vorkaufsrecht) and do not end up in the hands of investors. But these are mere exceptions. To make a real difference, properties have to be communalised as a norm, not as an exception. We need more state-owned housing so that sovereignty of the districts and the state can be regained – especially when it comes to urban development and the control over rent and real estate prices.

We all unite here: in front of and for H48 – and all the other houses fighting similar battles. The smaller the free housing market becomes, the fewer problems with rents we will face.

For now: anyone can buy houses and pursue their profit driven interests – but if we continue to be as rebellious as we have been in the past – and are today – that might no longer be so.

Dear investors: don't mess with Berlin!

Oust the displacers!

Good luck for H48!

Solidarity!