IUT Congress 2010:

Making the case for affordable rental housing

Participants from 25 countries teamed up on Friday 1st of October in Prague to participate in the three-day congress of IUT. Milan Taraba, chairman of the hosting Czech Union of Tenants, SON, welcomed the delegates to Prague. The congress not only elected a new President but also discussed the great differences of the rental conditions in various environments, as well as discovered similarities and common issues. Not only as regards to hardships in the different national, and sometimes even regional, rental housing policies, but also when it comes to visions, hopes and ideas.

Solidarity, Possibilities and Action are words that represented the guiding principle of the IUT’s 18th congress. All three words were prominent in the unanimous endorsement and adoption of the final statement of the congress: A new deal for affordable rental housing. This statement pinpoints the rental housing issues, urging the governments to act decisively in order to support affordable housing, which is crucial in obtaining thriving mixed communities.

In his opening speech, the leaving IUT president Sven Carlsson reminded the more than 80 delegates that:

“In spite of the hard work and the goodwill of all parties involved, some issues from the existing plan of actions had to be relayed to the future as. Many of our actions take a long time to fulfil so we must work with them for more than one congress period,” He continued: “The IUT must also find its position in a fast changing world. One devastating change, which still affects hundreds of thousands of tenants, is the big financial recession that has struck worldwide since IUT’s last congress in Berlin 2007.”

After having wished Sven Carlsson good luck in his new life as pensioner and after a round of applause, Sven Bergenstråhle – the newly elected president of the IUT – thanked the congress delegates for their confidence in him. Sven Bergenstråhle promised to do his best to live up to the expectations. As also he bears the name Sven he started by explaining the origin of this Swedish name; a young inexperienced boy.

“I am not a young boy, and in many ways inexperienced in international housing affairs,” continued Sven Bergenstråhle. “I will have to learn a lot from you to be able not only to maintain, but also to further improve, the IUT as an active tool for its member organisations. There is a big task to reverse tenancy laws in many countries to benefit also tenants and not only landlords and owners. A challenge particularly important in countries where IUT’s member organisations have limited economical and personal resources,” summarized the new IUT president in what he believes is the mission of the organisation. He continued: “For succeeding it is important that we cooperate and unite with other forces, like other housing NGOs, which have similar goals that we have.”

The IUT Plan of Action, goals and intentions was reported on by IUT Secretary General Magnus Hammar and Barbara Steenbergen from the IUT Liaison Office to the EU. They both stressed the significance of the most important international agreements on the Right to Housing: The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural rights (article 11), the revised European Social Charter (article 31) on the right to housing and finally the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (article 34) about social security and social assistance.
Charters will have to be ratified – not only signed!” emphasized Barbara Steenbergen and stressed the importance of IUT and its member organisations to push article 31 of the European Social Charter to be included into all national legislations. Other highlighted issues were the “sitting tenants” in the CEE region and the fight to give tenants more possibilities to have influence on the rapidly increasing costs for household energy.

The Global Tenant magazine, now distributed to some 1,500 subscribers worldwide and translated into French, is now also finding readers in Russia. "We need to improve tenancy laws; said Sven Bergenstråhle as new IUT President."

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"We are just about to translate the Global Tenant into Russian with voluntary help from students,” said Prof. Elena Shomina, vice president of the Russian Association of Tenants. “The information provided in this compilation is very important when informing our tenants about tenancy policy’s around the world!”

When it came to joining forces the congress showed great decisiveness behind a joint statement on the 'Dutch Case', supporting the Dutch Tenant Union, Nederlandse Woonbond, which is currently fighting against an EU ruling. The ruling is based upon a proposal from the Dutch Government that will restrict social housing to households with a fixed income below € 33,000, from before € 38,000.

“This will cause great housing problems and have serious negative effects on integration,” said the Dutch delegate René van Genugten who presented the Woonbond’s worries to the congress. “A large group of citizens will find it very difficult to acquire homes because they do not earn enough to either buy a flat, nor renting one from private landlords which requires a substantially higher income,” van Genugten explained.

The congress adopted a statement directed to the Dutch government, with a recommendation to urge the Dutch government to abolish the revenue rule or at the very least to raise the income ceiling.

“Fight real hard in Europe or you will have the same terrible situation as we have in Australia!” warned Penny Carr from the Tenants Union of Queensland. She continued: “In Australia social housing is highly welfarised, targeted to those on low incomes with additional social or medical problems, and the conditions for the tenants are tough. For example, in some states the notice provided to tenants being evicted without a reason is as little as two week! In Queensland where the same notice was recently extended to a two months notice, the real estate lobby is trying to convince the Minister for Housing to reduce it to one month and increase the notice tenants must give as well!”

In Canada, where the housing situation is similar to the Australian, much work has been done when it comes to enlightenment. Martha Lewis, executive director at TRAC, Tenant Resource & Advisory Centre in Vanvouver, spoke about the situation for most tenants in Canada.

"Of the 250,000 immigrants that arrive every year, about 1/3 are believed to buy their own housing and to make economic ends meet, they often become landlords by letting parts of their property”, said Martha.

All too often, ignoring the strong laws that do protect the tenants, these new landlords often bring with them third world apprehensions on landlord-tenant relations. To counteract this situation TRAC produces information in several languages. Today Canadian tenancy laws are available in 19 languages, among them Punjabi, traditional Chinese, Cantonese and Spanish.

Shared information has also been of great importance for one of the latest members to join the IUT, the Russian Tenants Association.
"More or less everybody in this auditorium has a share in constructing our new tenant’s union – we have used many of your papers!” said Prof. Elena Shomina from Moscow.

President of CECODHAS, Mr. Vít Vaníček, stated that: “Currently the European Commission is about to review its decision on State Aid. It will be vital, for IUT and CECODHAS to join forces in order to secure that housing will be affordable to all people and that we don’t create tomorrow’s ghettos.”

UN Habitat Nairobi was represented by Dr. Christian Schlosser. UN Habitat sees great challenges from continuous migration from the rural areas to the urban areas. In 2030 an expected 60 percent of the world’s population will live in an urban environment. This relocation of the masses, which is taking place in the developing world, is causing an unprecedented growth of the slums.

"38% of the world’s urban growth is slum growth, which is the ultimate challenge of providing affordable housing in the world’s cities,” summarized Dr. Schlosser.

Daniela Grabmüllerova, director of the Ministry for Regional Development, presented interesting facts regarding the hosting country. Perhaps the most striking information was that the Czech Republic has the lowest at-risk-of-poverty rate as well as the lowest rate of inequality-of-income-distribution – of all EU 27 states.

“The Czech housing policy is comprehensive and is aimed at the overall affordability of housing,” said Ms Grabmüllerova. There are several state subsidy programmes targeted at new housing construction as well as refurbishment of the older housing stock.

Petr Sunega from the Institute of Sociology AS, Czech Rep. gave preview expectations for the future of the rental housing in the Czech Republic: “It could be expected that the share of municipal rental housing will continue decreasing and we will probably follow up the tenure structure situation of so called fast “privatizers” like in Hungary and in Estonia.”

Michael Smyth, head of Economics at the University of Ulster, shared his thoughts about finding alternative funding when building affordable social housing. Pension funds might be the solution according to him.

“Today our central government puts up with half the money and the other half comes from the housing associations. We want to build as many houses as possible and one way might be by getting sustainable loans from Islamic pension funds”, said Mr Smyth.
Interviews by Kim Weinehammar

Marta Lewis, Executive Director of TRAC British Colombia, Canada

“It’s important that people from different countries to share their knowledge. The Dutch case is an excellent example showing support for each other’s issues. The global tenant is really useful. There was an article about the right to housing in France, Scotland and South Africa. In Canada the government is looking at the right to housing and I gave the article to the politicians.”

Yelena Shomina, vice President of Russian Tenants Association, Russia

“I have followed the activity for more than 15 years. I am so satisfied with what IUT does and how they promote tenancy issues. It gives me the possibility of collaborating with other networks internationally, as well as personal contacts. I am proud of the attempt to translate Global Tenant to Russia. We will do a review that will be full of articles from IUT’s work.”

Xavi Pastor, FAVIBC Barcelona, Spain

“The most important for IUT is to create rules for housing for all countries in a general context. The rules should be of low prices for housing, and help to young people to access rental housing; – in Spain you can not do that today. The congress is a great opportunity to talk to different countries about social housing and to exchange opinions.”

Dr Sayed Iqbal Mohamed from OCR explained how sitting tenants become homeowners in South Africa.

Dr Sayed Iqbal Mohamed represented the Organisation of Civic Rights (OCR) in Durban. He summarized the housing situation of South Africa since the first free general elections in 1994:

“Although the striking contrast of rich and poor is getting worse and 40 percent live in poverty, more people than ever, 70 percent of the population now have electricity, water and sanitation.

Today we have a strong tenant and rental housing act with ‘Tribunals like in Canada, but with jurisdiction of magistrates’ courts,” continued Dr. Mohamed.

Further, according to Dr Mohamed, South African municipal houses, especially in the city of Durban, are being upgraded and then given away to the sitting tenants so that they can become owners – although they out of poverty had not paid rent for perhaps the last twenty years!

“The surprising thing is that even the poorest do allocate the minimum resources to pay,” explained Dr. Mohamed. “A number of things have been done to minimize the costs like bringing down government property interest rates on the property to zero. But of course, the prospective owners need to participate in a series of educational workshops explaining the rights and duties and what happens if they miss out in paying costs.”

Other highly valued presentations were given by Lene R. Edvardsen from the Norwegian State Housing Bank and by Juraj Kliment who spoke about ‘sitting tenants’ in Slovakia. Kazuo Takashima described the tenants’ situation in Japan and Xavi Pastor, from FAVIBC, reflected on the historical development of social housing in Catalonia, Spain.

Phil Morgan, congress Chair, summarized the outcome of the congress into three areas:

– Viewing governments spending of tax money into housing; does a government invest money into housing, and if so, how is the money spent? Is it spent on social housing or other types of housing?

– Government policies when it comes to tenants rights; what rights are granted to tenants and do they have the same rights living in a social or private housing environment or are different rules applied depending on the type of landlord?

– The tenants involvement; what are the tenants’ abilities to shape and influence the services they receive?

Text Göran Schüsseleder, freelance Congress presentations are available from:
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Photo Magnus Hammar and Vaclav Prochazka