

LAND SLAVERY IN STATEN ISLAND

by Kathleen Cummings

I have lived in New York City all my life, and like many city residents I have always been under the erroneous impression that the City of New York owned the land. That is, until I discovered the theories of Henry George, the intricacies of the Manhattan land book, and Frank DeDeminico's Mariner Harbor. The Goethals Mobile Home Park in Staten Island is the only mobile home park within the five boroughs. In September of 1991, the residents of the 128-unit complex finally felt their landlord had pushed them too far.

The park is owned by a F.I.D. Construction Co., of which DeDeminico is the principal figure. The tenants "own" their mobile homes (many purchased through Mr. DeDeminico's company,) and rent the land; DeDeminico's company has administered the park for the last ten years.

The dispute started when a cable company attempted to run cables in the land itself, near the residents' homes. Mr. DeDeminico, however, wanted the cables installed in the street, "like all other Staten Island residents. I want them to respect me and put it where I want it to be put."

Unfortunately, DeDeminico's solidarity with Staten Island residents does not extend to garbage collection for his tenants. In that case, he asserts his rights as landowner, and charges for his private collection service.

A tenants' organization was formed: The Staten Island Meadowbrook Park Civic Association. The group cited a list of offenses including - in addition to the cable company's complaints - an exorbitant \$38 monthly rent hike (leases are on a monthly basis), neglect of rat infestation, delivering discolored water, and prohibiting garbage pickup by city sanitation.


The tenants began withholding their rent nearly a year and a half ago. There have been injunctions against the strike, and finally a state housing agency attempted to form a cooperative of mobile home

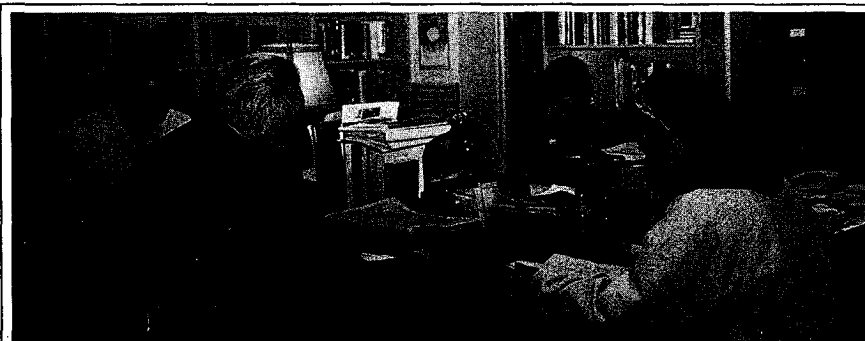
owners which would literally purchase the whole facility. However, this plan depends on the cooperation of both sides - and that has clearly not been the case here.

The situation has evolved to a stay of eviction for another twenty days. The tenants must provide \$50,000 to the owner from their escrow account, or be evicted.

Henry George's theories apply here in a glaringly obvious way. This rent strike is reminiscent of the Irish and Russian land rent strikes of the 19th century, but it also illustrates the special viciousness of 20th century life. Frank DeDeminico intends to evict his tenants because "It's the law." Henry George states in *Progress and Poverty* that a small percentage of citizens are given the right to expel nearly the whole population from the major portion of the nation. Frank DeDeminico and his F.I.D. Construction Company is a local example of this same landowning class.

Will we see more land strikes like this one in Staten Island? Not likely; this is not merely an isolated case of injustice. It is an especially egregious example of a fundamentally unjust land tenure system. Yet it clearly illustrates the harsh realities that private collection of land rent holds for ordinary people who must struggle to make a living. The residents of Goethals Mobile Home Park were stuck - unable to sell their homes, because their landlord never obtained certificates of occupancy from the city.

Editor's note: Kathleen Cummings is a student in the school's political economy classes. She reports that since this writing, the rent strike has gone on in a kind of legal limbo. Community Board #1 intervened to push for negotiations with the tenants. The tenants are attempting to purchase the whole facility, and the manager is willing to negotiate on this. Meanwhile, however, the unpaid rents accumulate, placing the tenants in a risky position, having only paid the minimum amount required to secure the court's thirty-day stay of eviction. 



HGS Library Co-ordinator Pia DeSilva has achieved her goal of user-friendliness - according to three diligent students on a Wednesday afternoon this March!