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Activism in the homeless ranks

BYLINE: Robert Reinke, Special to the Christian Science Monitor

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HIGHLIGHT:

Lack of housing turns some living on the streets into rebels

The struggle against homelessness will take to the streets in protest across the country today in what is being called the country's first nationwide "squat."

Homeless people in at least 60 United States cities have targeted more than 100 federally owned, repossessed houses for squatting. These activists, with help from community members, will tear down the boards from these abandoned buildings and move in indefinitely.

Politically active homeless people have raised the housing issue in a variety of protests this year:

*In Atlanta, as many as 10,000 people marched last February demanding more government help in housing the homeless.

*About 30 homeless people and activists occupied a vacant building at the University of California, Berkeley, and spray-painted "Rent is robbery" and "Housing is a human right" on the walls in March.

*Demonstrators last month built a wooden shack on the south side of the Pentagon to protest cuts in housing programs.

*The homeless have camped out at Boston's City Hall since April, drawing as many as 100 homeless each night.

Some homeless activists are taking different, less radical roads.

The homeless group camped out in front of Boston's City Hall has incorporated, and by saving work wages and donations in a bank account, the group hopes to buy a house from the city government. Lisa O'Callaghan, secretary of the group, says that breaking into buildings only angers government officials, and that negotiating with the city, with a little protest pressure, is the better route.

"If the government sees that this is a different kind of protest, maybe they will help us," she says.

"These kinds of actions help hold up the reality, which is that all kinds of Americans are finding themselves unable to meet their basic housing needs," said Jim Stewart, who runs a homeless shelter in Cambridge, Mass. "Until we recognize housing as a right, we will continue to have this problem."

Today's protest comes at a time when Congress is considering a new housing proposal - the Affordable Housing Act. The act calls for \$15 billion a year for the next five years toward "building, acquiring, and rehabilitating" new housing. But the bill is not likely to go through while Ronald Reagan is President, says Rep. Barney Frank (D) of Massachusetts, who sponsored the bill.

Since September the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has allocated \$170

million toward transitional housing for the homeless and permanent housing for the chronically mentally ill.

To show Michael Dukakis their support for the Affordable Housing Act, and their concern for the housing shortage, protesters will stop at his campaign headquarters before seizing a building.

"We think that the Democrats are more sensitive to these kinds of issues," says Chris Sprowal, president of the National Union of the Homeless (NUH).

As governor, Mr. Dukakis made 35,000 housing units available for low- and moderate-income Bay State residents from 1983 to 1987.

But between 75,000 and 100,000 units are still needed, according to Thomas D. Herman, deputy issues director for the Dukakis campaign. Dukakis promised in June that, as president, he would commit \$3 billion to the building of new housing.

NUH and the Community for Creative Non-Violence have timed the housing takeover for the same day French peasants stormed the Bastille 199 years ago.

The purpose of today's event, according to organizers, is to raise public awareness of the national housing shortage. Their message will reach the Dukakis campaign on the eve of the Democratic National Convention.

"I don't think that Dukakis or anyone has done enough to end this kind of national shame," Mr. Sprowal says.

On June 28 at the Massachusetts Housing Partnership Conference, Dukakis said, "I'm running for president to end the shame of homelessness in America."

HUD spokesman Robert Nipp says that 50 percent of their repossessed houses have problems such as unsafe wiring, local code violations, and lead paint. If houses are broken into, he says, local authorities may decide to move against the squatters.

"We're saying that people have to struggle," Sprowal says. "There has never been change in this country without struggle, without sacrifice." He points to the movements against the Vietnam war. "The policies and the laws didn't change because people decided to passively work work within the system. Change came about because people decided to say, 'No more!'"

"Why do we have abandoned buildings boarded up while there are people on the streets?" asks Savina Martin, president of the Greater Boston Union of the Homeless and a former homeless person. The majority of the shelters are full, she says.