

Illegal House "Lobbies"

Outlying area residents without licenses join together to get their homes legalised
Libertad Paloma, Cadiz Andalucía Section, El País, 7 December 2008

They built without permits, paid much less for their houses than normal prices, and broke the law. But now they want more. Amongst the many illegal outlying residential areas that have sprung up in Andalucía, pressure groups have formed: neighbours have joined forces to convince authorities to overlook the offences that have been committed and to drop the cost of getting their houses regularised. Angel Núñez, tax coordinator of the environmental department, has dealt with them and warns about the power of these "lobbies" whose demands the municipal governments cannot - or do not want to - ignore.

"We aren't illegal", say homeowners protected by neighbourhood groups in Chiclana (Cádiz) who began building in this town without any planning control two decades ago. Today there are 15,000 such houses and their owners stand fiercely by the letter of planning law. "We built our homes without building permits, but the majority of the houses are over four years old. They are untouchable," argues Rafael Ortiz, one of the group's spokespersons.

One of the first meetings of José María Román (PSOE), Chiclana's recently appointed mayor, was with this neighbourhood group. He has already announced that he will reduce the municipal ordinances drawn up by the previous local government which had anticipated prices of between 20 and 36 euros per square meter for mains electricity, water and sewage hook-ups.

Pressure comes to other towns via demonstrations. Residents of El Puerto and Chipiona have joined to denounce the "social impact" created by the current policy of sanctions against illegal constructions and have called for a protest for January 16. In Chipiona, with some 300 demolition orders, Manuel García, the socialist mayor himself, in a letter to the Junta de Andalucía, admitted that demolition could provoke "social conflict".

...In Vejer, the Council of Territorial Planning and Housing of the Junta de Andalucía is going to let the houses built in El Palmar on non-urbanisable land remain, as long as the residents themselves monitor to ensure that no new buildings are constructed.

The illegal urbanization of Las Pitas has become a real headache for the local government of Córdoba whose residents have been demonstrating and pressuring the Junta de Andalucía and the town hall in search of a regularisation of their situation. Built near the archeological ruins of Medina Azahara, the land where the Last Pitas urbanization lies was declared of public interest in 2003. This has resulted in actions taken against six families who built homes after 2006...

... Residents have staged a concerted pressure campaign, including demonstrations in the streets of Córdoba, cutting off roads, congregations in front of the tribunal of the city as well as marches to the archeological ruins. Representatives of both the Junta and the town hall have met with neighbours to explain the contents of a new decree which claims the expropriation of several undeveloped plots in Medina Azahara. The homeowners in Las Pitas have also joined up with those in other urbanizations.

The British community living in the Almanzora Valley, in Almería province, have joined forces in forming AUAN and spearheading a drive urging the Administration to legalise the 5000 homes which are currently illegal in the comarca. The British association was greatly troubled by the demolition of the Priors' home in Vera, as well as by the police operation carried out in Zurgena against the mayor and councillors for alleged urban planning offences. The British community has roundly criticised the "tardy" wheels of justice in all these cases.

The aftermath of a visit of a European Parliament group in 2007 who wanted to see for their own eyes what was happening to British residents has resulted in some attempts on the part of the Junta to resolve the situation. The British even wrote to King Juan Carlos explaining the problem of the residents, the majority of

Last September, the Junta announced that houses built in eight municipalities of the Junta de Andalucía on non-urbanisable land - upon which planning disciplinary actions or penal procedures or administrative proceedings were pending - would have priority in an action plan to find a "solution" to the problem. The Housing Department delegate, Luis Caparrós, ventured to say that the first estimates indicated that only 5% of the houses in question would be "exempt from regularisation" because they were found on public or protected land.

Los Lobbies de las viviendas ilegales