

St. Petersburg Police Dismantle Evicted Homeowners' Protest Camp

By [Anna Dolgov](#)

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Police in St. Petersburg have dismantled a tent camp that demonstrators tried to set up outside the municipal administration in protest against their eviction from city-issued apartments.

The camp was erected by construction workers and their families who were offered housing after moving to St. Petersburg on government contracts decades ago but who now face eviction after their building was bought by a private company.

The protesters on Monday took tents and sleeping bags to St. Petersburg's central Smolny Garden, which flanks the city administration, saying they had no place else to live, the TASS news agency reported.

Police intervened before the protest could take root and escorted three of the demonstrators to a police station, but a spokesperson maintained that "they had not been detained," TASS

reported.

The three protesters held at the police station were scheduled to face court on Tuesday on charges of "violating the rules on security and the use of parks," reported Radio Svoboda, RFE/RL's Russian service.

Several other protesters said they would hold their vigil and sleep in the open air after police banned them from putting up tents, the report said. Night temperatures in St. Petersburg now drop below freezing.

The building where the families were earlier housed is located on Ulitsa Ilyushina and was put up in the dying days of the Soviet era to provide homes for construction workers who arrived to build housing in the expanding metropolis, Radio Svoboda reported.

In exchange for a key to a city-owned apartment, the workers had to give up their rooms in St. Petersburg's kommunalki — communal apartments, often located in grand older buildings in the city center — though residents were unable to obtain ownership of their new flats, Radio Svoboda reported.

A private firm bought the building in 1991 and a decade later demanded that residents vacate their homes or pay full market prices for their apartments, the report said. Following years of protests and appeals, some of the residents have received other public housing but others have been refused, Radio Svoboda reported.

At least four families have been evicted, leaving people sleeping in the building's stairwell, and the remaining nine families are awaiting eviction any day, the report added.

"We are besieged from all sides: The owners of the housing are demanding hundreds of thousands of rubles from us for rent, court bailiffs are demanding fines for our refusal to move out voluntarily," one of the protesters, Marina Kozhina, was quoted as saying. "We can't understand the authorities' reasoning."

Contact the author at newsreporter@imedia.ru

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