Minimum Houses for Minimum Wages: Are Tiny Houses a Solution for Low-Wage Workers?

Edward Sauve
sauv1660@mylaurier.ca

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MINIMUM HOUSES FOR MINIMUM WAGES:
ARE TINY HOUSES A SOLUTION FOR LOW-WAGE WORKERS?

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SECOND READER: DR. TODD GORDON
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**Introduction**

Economic challenges to secure housing are increasing in Canada. The 2007 financial crisis was a moment that intensified the age of neoliberal austerity and saw homelessness and hunger soar in North America as many working people lost their jobs, defaulted on their mortgages and were evicted from their homes without public services to support them (McNally, 2011, pp. 14). The National Housing Survey has shown that over 3 million Canadian households (i.e. 25.2 per cent of households) use over 30 per cent of their income for shelter, which leaves little money left over to afford remaining basic needs (StatsCan, 2011). According to the Toronto Real Estate Board (TREB) (2017), the ability for Ontario families to own a home has become increasingly out of reach as the average cost to own a house in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) increased 31 per cent between 2010 and 2014. The average household income increased by only 10 per cent within the same period (Statistics Canada, 2016). Renting in large cities is not necessarily more affordable. The average rent posted online for Toronto apartments is now over $2,000 per month (Kalinowski, 2017). Looking towards the future, we can expect this issue to get much worse: TREB (2017) announced a 33 per cent increase to the average cost of GTHA housing between 2016 and 2017, while the Ontario Liberal government suggests that a twenty-cent adjustment to the minimum wage will match the rate of inflation (Ontario Ministry of Labour, March 24, 2017).

The impacts of the financial crisis and the increasingly expensive housing market have the potential to seriously harm low-wage, precarious workers’ ability to secure housing. The current Ontario full-time minimum wage of $11.40 amounts yearly to 16 per cent less than what is needed to meet one’s basic needs (Worker’s Action Centre, 2016). Furthermore, minimum
wage earners are also six times more likely to work in part-time, precarious situations suggesting that many will fall further below the poverty line than projected (Stats Can, 2010).

In desperation to secure basic needs and safety, people are looking for more affordable housing options outside of the mainstream housing market. A tiny house “movement” has emerged promising a housing model that, while unconventional, is an affordable solution to peoples’ housing needs. Advocates frame tiny housing as being compatible with a lifestyle of financial freedom and work-life flexibility (Mitchell, 2014).

The tiny house “movement” is described as “a social movement where people are choosing to downsize the space they live in” (The Tiny Life, 2017). The movement holds a wide variety of events (http://www.tinyhousecommunity.com/map/events-calendar/), and, through its sprawling online presence, provides people with more information about the benefits of tiny living, the legal policies that they believe ought to be changed and the instructions necessary for a beginner to build a tiny house themselves. Advocates believe the movement is growing as they have now received international attention from “CNN, AP, Guardian, Huffington Post, NBC, Oprah, PBS” (The Tiny Life, 2017), and other media outlets. They have also reached the attention of federal agencies. Janet Weidman of the department of housing and urban development (HUD) in the US has said that “small or tiny houses are a very important part of the equation for low income and fixed income singles and couples dealing with a shrinking economy” (Koff, 2016).

However, because tiny houses are still not recognized as legal structures in Canada and the US, they offer limited access as an affordable solution for North Americans. Advocacy groups want to see this chance, and so devote considerable time and resources to lobbying for updates to building codes. For example, on their website Tiny Home Alliance Canada (THAC)
(n.d.) declares that they are committed to “act on behalf of Canadians at the federal, provincial and municipal levels to update building codes so that tiny homes are deemed legal to live in” as they believe “every Canadian deserves the dignity of affordable housing and that citizens should determine the notion of what is an acceptable home size.”

My Major Research Paper (MRP) is critical of the tiny house movement’s assumption that tiny houses will be an affordable, accessible and desirable solution for low-income, precarious workers struggling to survive and thrive amid the housing crisis. Advocates are misrepresenting tiny houses as a tool designed to meet the needs of low-income, precarious workers without attending to factors other than market relations. Champions of tiny housing often portray themselves at the cutting-edge of a progressive housing solution. By contrast, I argue that policy changes in favour of tiny houses that are not informed by a critical political economy perspective will actually worsen the impacts of neoliberalism on precarious workers. Though the tiny house movement appears to be a niche that does not have the capacity to end the housing crisis for the masses, the strategies employed by tiny house advocates mirror the broader trends that attempt to provide solutions to social problems through individual consumer products and consumption patterns. The tiny house movement should be taken seriously because it threatens to strengthen the pervasiveness of individual consumer strategies designed for social problems, which are expressions of austerity ideology that help to justify the downloading of social responsibility onto members of the working class during intensifying neoliberal capitalism. The housing crisis, and the anxieties of workers provoked by it, can only truly be addressed through fundamental social policy transformation designed to meet people’s needs, not reproduce capitalist profitability.
In order to make my argument, this MRP is organized around three main questions: 1) Do tiny houses meet the needs of low-wage, precarious workers? 2) How might a tiny house movement suggesting workers should live with less affect other movements fighting for low-income workers? and 3) If tiny houses are not an affordable solution to the housing crisis, what is the alternative(s) that progressives should be striving for? The objective of this research is to educate tiny house advocates, policy makers, and the workers considering tiny houses by broadening a conversation about the full consequences likely to follow the legalization of “minimum-sized houses” in response to low-household incomes.

**Methodology**

*Critical Political Economy & the Housing Crisis*

My research is guided by a critical political economy perspective. A critical theory is one that evaluates the shortcomings of the existing status quo (Gingrich, 2000). Critical political economic theory then focuses its attention on the current political economy in North America, which is democratic capitalism. Capitalism is defined by *The New Dictionary of Cultural Life* as, “an economic and political system characterized by a free market for goods and services and private control of production and consumption” (2002). In the early years of the development of industrial capitalism, the founding critical political economist, Karl Marx, analyzed capitalism’s internal contradictions, which create the climate for its own collapse. Marx predicted that capitalism would endure “periodic crises of overconsumption” due to the “inherent tendency of capitalism to create more surplus value than it could realise through the sale of commodities” (Lebowitz, 1994, p. 170). The capitalist system is one that has the ability to be extremely productive; however, Marx predicts that our political economy will eventually be replaced by
revolutionary socialism as the result of the class and global inequalities that will create demand far more equality than capitalism can offer (Brock, 2012, p. 14).

Capitalism creates a struggle between two classes: “the capitalist class – those who control the productive resources of a society – and the working class – those who must sell their labour power for a wage in order to survive” (Brock, 2012, p. 15). Enclosing key productive resources (for example, land, communication and transportation networks, factories, offices, and patents), and preventing workers from freely accessing resources to meet their basic needs, largely allows the capitalist class to dominate the working class. Workers can only access the goods and services they want and need through buying them from capitalists on the market. The capitalist class then has enormous power to shape economic reality through a wage relation that favours themselves in order to maintain their power and wealth (Brock, 2012, p. 16).

Control over resources, and thus the distribution of wealth is disproportionately weighted towards the capitalist class. With full control over the means of production, and considerable control over the labour power from workers (through the wage relation), capitalists produce goods and services that can be sold for profit as commodities on the market. The capitalists receive profits from the commodities by selling them for more than the cost of production, including what they pay for labour and the cost to own the means of production (Althusser, 1968). In the Marxist tradition, then, all profits are exploitive. Profits are surplus value captured by capitalists through the normal functioning of the wage-labour economy.

By contrast, critical political economists in the Marxist tradition argue that all wealth should be controlled and shared among the workers because it was through their labour, skills, and cooperation that commodities were created. No work was provided by the capitalist in the production process; certainly nothing comparable to the vast socially- and historically-
interdependent work that goes into the actual production process (Althusser, 1968). In summary: despite what is socially just, a capitalist economy and society require that “wages paid for a certain amount of labour must be less than the value of the commodities in which that amount of labour is embodied” (Harvey, 1983, p. 305). Exploitation is central to capitalism.

Additionally, not only are workers exploited, but capitalism creates circumstances that sustain unemployment. Harriss-White argues in *Economic and Political Weekly*, that poverty can only be mitigated by social policies under capitalism but it cannot be eliminated (2006). Having unemployed workers under capitalism is a tool that disciplines workers by their existence (Harriss-White, 2006, p. 1243). Chris Maisano (2016) emphasizes that full-employment increases the bargaining power, social power of capital and living standards of the working people, which opens up possibilities for radical social transformation (p. 15). The large unemployed labour market makes workers less likely to bargain aggressively (and seriously threaten to strike, for example) for wages that would fulfill their needs, including the cost of adequate housing, because they risk being replaced by other workers who will work for a lower wage. Instead, some workers are put into a position where they must accept wage contracts with insufficient pay, benefits and precarious scheduling to secure any wage at all. This aspect of capitalism directly connects to the demand for affordable housing options, like tiny housing, that match the financial circumstances for workers who feel as though they have no choice but to accept the low-incomes that are offered. However, it can also be seen as inspiring the need for unions and social movements to fight for fair wage contracts on behalf of vulnerable workers.

Social reproduction theory (SRT) views the productive labour we do for wages as only one part of the broader reproductive labour that is required for working class survival. In addition to focusing on the paid work we do outside of the home, social reproduction “encompasses the
activities associated with the maintenance and reproduction of peoples’ lives on a daily and intergenerational basis” (Ferguson, LeBaron, Dimitrakaki & Farris, 2016, pp. 27). Capitalism depends on workers to sustain themselves with enough food, water, clothing, shelter and other basic needs to survive and attend work each day. Capitalism also depends on workers to reproduce and raise the next generation of workers after them. Social reproduction theorists argue that these relations are essential not only for daily human reproduction and survival, but capitalist reproduction (i.e. profitmaking) as well (Ferguson, LeBaron, Dimitrakaki & Farris, 2016). If people are not able to sustain themselves in the domestic sphere, the capitalist class will no longer have a supply of workers essential to the (re)production process.

Shelter is one of our most basic needs (Maslow, 1943; UN General Assembly, 1948). This situates housing, and all of the labour required to sustain people within a house, as resources and work required for social reproduction and capitalism. Because capitalism has a vested interest in the sort of workforce that is necessary to reproducing profitability over time, owners and employers are pressed to ensure that workers have something approaching the minimal standards for reproducing themselves through some combination of wages and social programs (Ferguson, LeBaron, Dimitrakaki & Farris, 2016). However, despite the capitalist class’ need for social reproduction, they do not want to pay for it; and, somewhat paradoxically, the capitalist class, which depends on the labour-power of the working class, creates “strong systemic pressure to cheapen, and thus devalue and degrade, social reproductive labour” (Ferguson, LeBaron, Dimitrakaki & Farris, 2016, pp. 30).

I view the housing crisis in the context of the same neo-liberal economic and political conditions that have forced workers to compete with each other for the lowest wages in the production process. These pressures have also created the conditions that encourage competition
and increasing unaffordability of social reproduction within the dominant private housing market in North America. As worker’s wages decrease, so too do their options for affordable housing. This leads to increased demand for what affordable stock there is. The demand for affordable homes allows the owning class to increase the cost of their assets because workers are pressured to outbid each other in order to secure their needs. As the number of affordable houses shrinks, workers begin taking on rents and mortgages that are above what they consider affordable, but are necessary to secure their needs and wants. Being pushed to meet their housing needs through homes that cost a huge proportion of income, the working class is forced to meet the remaining aspects of their social reproduction with fewer resources than is desirable or fair. Not doing so will lead to eviction or foreclosure.

Housing financing and mortgage debt are the few strategies that help families temporarily obtain their housing needs. However, the increasing need to rely on debt for our housing needs “is part of a broader attempt to individualize and (re)privatize relations of social reproduction under neoliberalism” (Roberts, 2013, p. 21). As housing costs increase, more people are being forced out of their homes and to compromise their lives because they cannot afford their needs and wants. There is a need to find solutions that allow people to affordably access their housing needs in a way that still allows low-wage workers to have a decent standard of living. Tiny houses are just one of the proposed solutions.

Method

I use textual analysis to analyze tiny houses from the critical political economy perspective. Because I am using critical theories that aim to challenge capitalism, I will be critically analyzing the literature and efforts of tiny house advocates that work within the capitalist, neoliberal agendas.
Textual analysis is a key tool for answering the questions in my project. My approach will be modelled after Greg Sharzer’s (2012) critique of community gardens. In No Local, Sharzer critiques the arguments from E.F. Schumacher’s Small is Beautiful that suggests people need to choose to support small scale businesses instead of large corporations in order to control and prevent the negative impacts of a fast-paced global economy. However, Sharzer argues that though small scale alternatives may be effective at assisting people in need, they are ineffective solutions because they do not challenge the systemic issues that force people into vulnerable circumstances.

To conduct my analysis, I have chosen a few representative texts created by tiny house advocates to analyze from a critical political economy and social reproduction perspective. The texts I have chosen to analyze are Ryan Mitchell’s book Tiny House Living: Ideas for Building & Living Well in Less than 400 Square Feet, Merete Mueller and Christopher Smith’s Netflix documentary Tiny: A Story About Living Small, and the documents provided online from the advocacy group Tiny Home Alliance Canada. I will engage in a critical conversation with these texts, drawing on social theories and quantitative data that explore how the experiences of low-income communities prevent them from participating in the tiny house movement, despite claims made by the advocates.

**Literature Review**

My interpretation of the field that tiny house advocates are working within is informed by scholarship in three broad areas: access to housing, socio-economic inequality, and policy solutions to the housing crisis. Scholarship in these areas helps shine light on the interconnection of struggles for housing with many other social issues. While my primary focus is responses to the contemporary housing crisis, the range of material and emotional needs at stake is vast and
complex. Understanding the systemic causes of inequality and key historic moments that have led to the current housing crisis is essential to critically evaluating the extent to which tiny houses are capable of addressing problems from their roots. The research on solutions sheds light on gaps within existing programs for assisting people with housing, as well as provides information on how tiny houses align with and/or interfere with other existing and potential housing.

**The Need for Housing**

Housing serves our most basic needs required for survival, wellness and a flourishing life. Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1943) created the hierarchy of basic needs as a tool to help us understand what is required for full, healthy human development. Maslow (1943) placed shelter within the first stage of the hierarchy alongside other biological needs such as air, food, water and sleep. By placing shelter in the first stage, Maslow (1943) identifies shelter as a need required to fulfill others as he theorizes that reaching higher levels of the hierarchy depend on “the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need” (p. 370). This is easily understood: a house not only provides shelter from the elements, but it also creates a space to prepare and eat meals, develop relationships, and rest when we are tired, among other things. The United Nations has recognized the role that shelter plays in providing people with an adequate standard of living and has declared housing as a human right within article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly, 1948). Despite the attention to housing made by the United Nations, millions of people around the globe who live and work in capitalist systems continue to struggle to secure mainstream housing because houses are only accessible to those who can afford them under capitalism. Because houses are at the core of our well-being, there is a lot at stake for those who go without one.
Without a house, people are at greater risk of death, injury and illness. Living outdoors in Ontario poses serious risks of mortality due to exposure to both cold and hot weather conditions, as well as being more vulnerable to crime such as assault, rape and murder (Hwang, 2001). People who are homeless are also at risk of injury due to falls or being struck by motor vehicles and are very susceptible to developing skin and foot problems due to prolonged exposure to moisture and long periods of walking and standing (Hwang, 2001). Though shelter residents tend to have better health than those who live on the streets, in shelters, there is still an increased risk of contracting diseases such as tuberculosis due to crowding, transient populations and poor ventilation (Hwang, 2001). Housing is also connected to our mental health. Research suggests that the everyday negative experiences of people who live in a shelter or on the street correlate with mental illnesses and increased depressive symptoms (Fitzpatrick, Myrstol & Miller, 2015).

Living without a home also limits access to services and opportunities. Research suggests that people who are homeless have less access to health care services, despite their increased risk of health concerns (Hwang, 2001; Woollcott, 2008). Without a house in a suitable location, people lose access to “commercial facilities, public and social services, transportation networks, recreational and cultural resources, quality schools, and employment opportunities” (Mulroy & Ewalt, 1996). Living without a permanent address also complicates everyday access to communication networks if people do not have a fixed mailing address or consistent access to a phone and internet services (Wehman-Brown, 2016).

Beyond our physiological needs, housing is an important factor to secure the materials we consider necessities. Michael Lebowitz (1977) explains how needs are constantly changing within the social and historical context of a specific society and are not restricted to our physical needs for survival. Part of the reason that needs are ever-changing is because capitalists strive to
create new needs for workers to expand cycles of production and consumption: capitalists depend on workers purchasing within the market to meet needs, and the concomitant compulsion of workers to sell their labour-power to obtain the wage necessary to accessing the new need (Lebowitz, 1977, p. 437). However, it’s not simply about capitalist domination or trickery. The growth of needs can also be beneficial for workers and human development. For instance, the microwave oven (invented in 1945) made possible a whole new style of shopping and eating that shortened the time needed to prepare meals and allowed for working people to have more time in the day for other activities (Friedman & Krawitz, 2002). Although survival is not dependant on a microwave oven, it has become a household kitchen necessity used in 9 out of 10 North American homes (Friedman & Krawitz, 2002). It has become a need not only because workers have desired to have more free time outside of the kitchen, but also because capitalists have created the need by choosing to produce freezer-to-table meals designed for the microwave and stocking them in just about every North American supermarket and convenience store. We can see the similar expansion of material needs in North American homes from examples such as personal laundry machines, dishwashers, and HVAC technologies.

In addition, needs are socially constructed by what people perceive their needs as in relation to one another. Marx (1919) explains how a house is satisfactory, “as long as the surrounding houses are equally small”. However, if a palace is built beside the house, “the occupant of the relatively small house will feel more and more uncomfortable, dissatisfied and cramped within its four walls” (Marx, 1919). These socially constructed needs fuel our desire to 'keep up with the Joneses,' as the saying goes, and push our material needs beyond what is necessary for survival. This is always beneficial to the reproduction of capitalism, regardless of whether it benefits the working class or enriches human experience or the natural environment.
The cost of housing is an important variable that has the power to prevent or allow families to access all of their needs and wants. Stone (2006) explains how “housing costs generally make the first claim on disposable income, so that lower-income households have little discretion in what they can spend for non-housing items” (p. 159). Unaffordable housing is often described by mortgage lenders and real estate industries as a house that costs more than 30 percent of one’s income (Stone, 2006). This assumption “asserts that if a household pays more for housing than a certain percentage of its income, then it will not have enough left over for other necessities” (Stone, 2006, p. 162). This assumption is flawed because “affordability is not a characteristic of housing – it is a relationship between housing and people. For some people, all housing is affordable, no matter how expensive it is; for others, no housing is affordable unless it is free” (Stone, 2006, p. 153). Seventy per cent of one’s income would not consistently represent the amount that is necessary for one’s material needs. Stone (2006) provides the example of two households who have similar disposable incomes and pay the same for housing; however, one household is a single person while the other is a couple with children (p. 163). The remaining disposable income after housing may be sufficient for the household of one to secure their material needs, while the material needs of the household of many will be much different and require a different percentage of their disposable income that may exceed what they can afford.

One of the challenges facing low-income households is that housing that is deemed affordable by the household may not be available. Stone (2006) debunks the myth that assumes that households are “presumably rational utility-maximizers” who pay “just what they can afford for housing” (p. 159). Instead, Stone (2006) insists that low income households face tough circumstances that lead them to live in housing that is beyond the 30 percent rule or their own
definition of affordable because there may not be housing that is available within that price range or what is available requires living in undesirable conditions.

Living in a house that is unaffordable tends to force people into frugal lifestyles. Stone coins the term “shelter poverty” to describe how the circumstances of low-income households pit the cost of their shelter against other essentials such as food and clothing (Stone, 1993). Without the ability to afford the material necessities, social reproduction theory (SRT) suggests that many low-income households are in a position where they struggle to reproduce themselves each day, which also threatens their ability to offer their labour-power (Ferguson, LeBaron, Dimitrakaki & Farris, p. 31).

It is clear that living without a house, and living within a house that requires too much of one’s income can be dangerous. The need for an affordable solution for low-income families is pressing, especially in major metropolitan areas like the GTA, where gentrification and rising inequality are increasing the rate of evictions and foreclosures.

The Recurring History of Housing Crisis

Aalbers & Christophers (2014) help explain the full role of housing within capitalism. They reaffirm that housing is a need for social reproduction. However, under capitalism, houses play additional roles outside of meeting our needs for sustenance. Firstly, housing is a commodity that is produced by labour and sold for profit like any other. Because private home ownership must generate profit, it prohibits homeownership from being more affordable than the cost of the materials that were used to build the house in addition to the cost of the wages that were paid to the labourers. The other role houses play, is as tools that can store and increase savings. Unlike most commodities that decrease in value after being used from wear and tear, the cost of houses tends to appreciate over time. Although houses and the materials used to build
them are not necessarily finite resources, the land that houses are built upon are. There are only so many plots of accessible land to build a home within towns and cities, which makes the price of the land (and consequently the house that sits on it) susceptible to increases and decreases in value depending on the supply and demand for land in specific locations.

David Harvey (2012) helps understand the significance of the roles of housing in combination with the finite supply of land within cities. Because the amount of space within cities is limited in comparison to all of the people who use them, throughout history there have been clashes disputing who is allowed within cities, and who must live outside of the city.

In 1852, architect Baron Haussmann addressed one such conflict when he was tasked to restructure the city of Paris. A few years prior in 1848, the economy slowed, reducing profits for the capitalist class and leaving workers unemployed, leading to revolts from Parisian workers who barricaded the streets. Haussmann’s plans to restructure the city served to stabilize the conflict by requiring a huge quantity of labour that would reinvigorate the economy, while also demolishing working-class housing units in order to give way for 120 metre boulevards that would be difficult to blockade by strikes in future crisis’s (Harvey, 2012, p. 7). Not only was the working class physically displaced because of the destruction, but following construction there were fewer houses in total. That prevented people from returning to the city. The cost of housing in Paris skyrocketed because of increased demand and forced many working-class people out from the city. Furthermore, Paris became “the great centre of consumption, tourism and pleasure [with] the cafes, the department stores, the fashion industry, the grand expositions” (Harvey, 2012, p. 7), which created a culture that was unique and desirable, further increasing the amount that people were willing to pay to live in the city centre.
Though Haussmann appears to be the father of gentrification, the role that housing plays as a tool for profit and storing value continually pushes people in and out of different physical locations. Similar methods of gentrification have created new housing crisis in the more recent times. Sharon Zukin (1987) explains how in the 1970s a wave of capital reinvestments were made to houses near central business districts across North American and Western European cities. The process of gentrification had two goals for investors. The first was to generate profit for the investors, by buying properties for less than they would sell them. The second was in the name of making social reproduction more affordable by making old buildings “livable” so people could buy housing close to jobs which would eliminate costs, such as cars or bus passes.

The target houses were deteriorating older buildings in low-income neighbourhoods that were affordable to gentrifiers, yet close enough to city centres. The gentrifiers add “modest investments of time and money into a quasi-bourgeois habitus” (Zukin, 1987, p. 135) paired with overemphasis on the accessibility to city life and the history of the property, which attracts people of upper class who are willing to pay more for the location, symbolism and promise of increase in property value. This process of gentrification priced out the previous low-income dwellers, contributing to homelessness and displacement, while using the culture and history of the neighbourhoods to attract and establish new areas of urban elite (Zukin, 1987). Zukin (1987) connects the rearranging of urban centres to colonization as “the frontier thesis in US history legitimized an economic push through “uncivilized” lands, so the urban frontier thesis legitimizes the corporate reclamation of the inner city from racial ghettos and marginal business uses” (p. 141).

We can see this process of gentrification pushing out lower income people and their families from city centres today, as the cost to own and rent in big cities like Toronto is
becoming increasingly unaffordable for the average worker and monopolized by corporate professionals (TREB, 2017; Chiasson, 2017) often forcing working people to make long commutes to work in large cities from their homes in outskirt towns (Cheung, 2017).

**Economic Inequality**

The critical political economy tradition demonstrates that inequality is essential to capitalist society and economy. Capitalism is structured along a divide between, on one side, the capitalist class, which owns and controls society’s productive resources/assets, and, on the other side, the working class. Members of the working class do not own or control key productive resources or the profits generated from them. To access the goods and services that workers need and want, they must sell their capacity for labour to a capitalist in exchange for a wage.

The capitalist class requires workers to put key productive resources into motion, thus creating the commodities they sell to make profits. By enclosing those resources that provide our basic needs and the means of reproduction, the capitalist class effectively forces the working class to enter the labour market. In other words, the fundamental structures of capitalism compel workers to produce commodities in order to survive (Stanford & Biddle, 2008). Therefore, the inequality within capitalism is systemic, because it is based on continued unequal power relations that privilege the relatively small class of capitalists who own and control huge proportions of wealth and resources; astronomically more than the vast majority of the population. What Marx calls “the dull compulsion” of the capitalist economy (i.e. the way that workers are effectively forced into wage-labour if they want to survive) motivates workers to submit to the profit-making needs of capitalists.

Though it is true that capitalism is dependent on inequality, the level of inequality has varied over time, in relation to social struggles. James Cairns and Alan Sears (2012) explain how
mid-twentieth century struggles from below helped establish a new form of “welfare state” after World War II. The welfare state era increased the level of substantive equality for citizens in North America. Within this period higher wages and standards of living were offered as production was booming and unions had a strong influence. A new standard of living became available to wider layers of the population through social programmes and benefits. Greater access to better living was legislated, which allowed people to meet their basic needs (Cairns & Sears, 2012, p. 63). The political leaders within this period appear to be benevolent heroes who created a more equal society, though some argue that this was actually a strategy to pacify a growing population of labour militants, born from the struggles of the 1930-40s who posed challenges to authority, into continued consent under democratic capitalism to ensure the elites remained in power (Cairns & Sears, 2012, p. 64).

Core aspects of the broad welfare state have been under attack since the 1970s. Only pieces of the welfare state are intact today. The high welfare state era came to an end when capitalist expansion reached its limits in the 1970s, as excess capital piled up without buyers. Profits for businesses began to decline (McNally, 2011, p. 30). A neoliberal offensive was put into place that set out to cut social programs, reduce wages and break unions in order to restore the level of profits for elites at the expense of the working class (McNally, 2011, p. 25). World leaders, like Ronald Reagan, as well as Chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve Paul Volcker, warned people that they were “going to have to get used to living on less” (McNally, 2011, p. 25) and ensured it would come true through strategic tactics. One tactic used by Reagan was when he broke the national air controllers strike by firing the workers and crushing their union, which sent a message to all working people that they should accept things as they are in fear for their jobs, livelihoods and the well-being of their families (McNally, 2011, p. 36).
The inequality inherent to capitalism and neoliberalism has intensified even more since the 2007-08 financial crisis. Prior to 2007, banks had been offering loans and mortgages to working people that were unsustainable – destined to be defaulted – creating a housing bubble in America (McNally, 2011, p. 22). Between 2007 and 2008, the bubble burst in the United States, shocking the world’s banks, markets and businesses (McNally, 2011, pp. 1, 4). The average price for American homes fell more than a third, erasing the wealth that people had invested in their homes (Stiglitz, 2013, p. 4). Businesses reduced their expenses by laying off workers, leaving people without savings at risk of eviction from their homes (Stiglitz, 2013, p. 4). To re-establish the status quo, governments around the world bailed out their banks, transferring the private debts of the banks onto the state (McNally, 2011, p. 4). To balance the new government debt, the world entered a new phase of neoliberalism, the age of austerity. Austerity effectively put the burden of the crisis onto the working class and the poor by slashing their “pensions, education budgets, social welfare programs, public sector wages and jobs” (McNally, 2011, 4). Corporate debt was transformed into public debt, leaving the working class to pay for the capitalist crisis.

After the bailout, the ruling classes regrouped and have tried to maintain their position of power within the system by erasing the memories of trauma they caused (McNally, 2011, p. 2). From the perspective of the elite it appeared as though business was back to normal as corporate profits and CEO bonuses recovered quickly (McNally, 2011, p. 24). However, it is clear that the trauma has not ended for working class people. Stiglitz (2013) states that “a half decade later, one out of six Americans who would like a full-time job still couldn’t find one; some eight million families had been told to leave their homes, and millions more anticipate seeing foreclosure notices in the not-too-distant future” (p. 1). By 2010, CEOs were back to making 243 times more than workers (Stiglitz, 2013, p. 4). This level of inequality is creating dangerous
results. Research suggests that countries with higher rates of inequality correlate consistently with greater risks of health concerns (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015). Within nations, statistics show that the richer you are, the longer you will live (Wilkinson, 2011).

Despite the dangers correlated with an unequal society, inequality continues to be justified in Canada and the United States. Bob Pease (2010) explains how a matrix of privileges enables groups of people to benefit from unearned advantages, notwithstanding the ways in which capitalist culture encourages the belief that we live in a meritocracy, thus those with less must have worked less hard or made poor choices. The belief that our effort and choices dictate our income is simply untrue. As discussed class inequality is essential to capitalist reproduction. There is evidence that racism and sexism heavily influence hiring processes, providing more opportunities for white males over women and racialized folks that are more qualified (Creese, 2007). Low-wage workers often work precarious positions that require them to work multiple jobs for more than forty hours total each week to survive, proving that the amount one works does not determine how much we can afford (Lewchuck, et al., 2015).

The continued belief in meritocracy can be at least partially explained using sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas of social, cultural and economic capital. These concepts help us see how hierarchies of various kinds are made to appear “natural” under capitalism. The concepts focus on how social hierarchies are organized by what we have and how we behave (Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002). Bourdieu, drawing on Marx, calls one layer of the hierarchy the petite bourgeois.

The petite bourgeois are defined by their position in between the capitalist class and the working class. The petite bourgeois are often small business owners or high income earning professions, who share similarities with the capitalist class because they both benefit from the
current capitalist order, but differ when comparing the amount of their capital assets. Members of the capitalist class hold much larger amounts of capital, allowing them to compete better than small business owners and accumulate more than high earning professions. However, unlike the capitalist class, the petite bourgeois do share some similarities with the working class. Not having the capital that large businesses do, they often cannot hire workers to do all of the labour that is necessary, and the owners themselves often must share in the work that their employees do for their business to survive. However, their experience differs from their employee’s because their labour is not for a wage, but is a strategy to reduce their expenses to increase their profits.

Their location puts the petite bourgeois in a complicated relationship with the working class. Although the petite bourgeois might better appreciate the value of the labour that their employees provide their business, they are resistant to paying higher wages than necessary because it would cut into their relatively small profits (compared to the capitalist class) needed for their own survival and desire for the taste of luxury.

Without large amounts of capital to accumulate large profits, in order for the petite bourgeois to accumulate enough profit or surplus income to afford the taste of the capitalist class they use strategic decision making to maximize their income while simultaneously minimizing their expenses. They act strategically as an entrepreneur to choose educational paths or business opportunities that will maximize their wealth. They are also selective in choosing relationships that will advance them economically. Petite bourgeois are willing to leave their working-class communities because “they are not yet ‘connections’” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 337). They are also not opposed to breaking family ties to avoid the cost of supporting family in old age, and limiting their family size to avoid the cost of raising children. Lastly, the petite bourgeois choose to stretch their income by limiting their individual consumption. The petite bourgeois suppress their
desire to consume what they can afford in the short-term with aspirations to use their savings for luxury purchases in the future. However, their luxury expenditure is still small in comparison to the capitalist class. Bourdieu (1984) explains that “it is no accident that the adjective petit (small) or one of its synonyms can be applied to everything the petit bourgeois says, thinks, does, has or is […] the petit bourgeois is indeed a bourgeois ‘writ small’” (p. 338).

Challenging the petite bourgeois perspective is difficult as they try to differentiate and distance themselves from working class communities. Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) note how “we tend to choose our friends from among our equals and have little to do with those much richer or much poorer”. Additionally, the concept of relative income explains how our self-esteem is impacted depending on if our income and consumption patterns are similar to those around us (Stiglitz, 2013, p. 131). These aspects of inequality effectively hardwire the expectations and opportunities for different classes by what they can afford and their geographic location.

People’s experience of social hierarchy invites them to understand inequality as natural and inevitable; however, certain ranks within the hierarchies live their lives without seeing the systemic barriers that prevent others from equal access to opportunities. Not only do systemic barriers prevent everyone from being able to access a decent standard of living, but low-wage, precarious employment is proven to create barriers for people to participate in their communities and fight for social change (Lewchuck, et al., 2015). Inequality weakens low-income communities by separating them from resources and higher income households with the financial ability and cognitive capacity to support the poor (Stiglitz, 2013, p. 129; Lewchuck, et al., 2015).

Tiny house advocates portray tiny houses as a solution for anyone who needs housing. In doing so, they do not recognize or address the true impacts of inequality affecting low-income
workers. Real solutions to the housing crisis, if they are to include the development of tiny housing, must ensure that tiny houses operate as a solution to inequality and not just as a solution that affords people more social capital in comparison to people with similar incomes who live in less admirable dwellings.

**Solutions**

As inequality grows, access to housing becomes increasingly insecure for members of the working class. Because housing serves such a central role in achieving the needs for capitalist social reproduction, numerous strategies supported by layers of private and state policymakers have been developed to provide housing and maintain a minimal standard of living for the working class. This section provides a cursory overview of the housing stock currently provided by the Canadian government. I also identify a few alternative models and critiques that could be implemented in the future.

**Current Solutions**

The dominant way of securing housing needs within Canada is through the private market. Within the private market, people are able to access homes by purchasing them to use as their own dwelling, or to provide housing needs for others by privately renting them to someone else on the market. As of 2004, 94 per cent of households in Canada accessed their housing needs via the private market (66 percent owner occupied, and 28 percent private rental) (Chen, Stephens & Man, 2013). This has been a trend that has been championed by neoliberal governments in places like Canada, the US and the UK, since the Thatcher era in the 1980s. In 1980, the UK Housing Act policy created by Thatcher, incentivised and encouraged home ownership, to the point that it offered public rental tenants the opportunity to buy their units for up to 33 percent less than market value (Foster, 2015). Shortly after, the US administration
mirrored the ownership trend under Regan, and continued to promote homeownership as the ideal solution to our housing needs through policy and speeches from future candidates such as Clinton and Bush who praised the “ownership society” (Béland, 2007, p. 91). Richard Harris (1999) suggests that “Canadians like to think that they live in a kinder, gentler society than that of the US”, despite being content to allow the market to rule sometimes more than their American counterparts.

Governments justify their support for homeownership “for their supposed effects upon the economy” (Harris, 1999, p. 1173) as well as the recent promotion of homeownership as a solution for poverty (Hajer, 2009). Hajer (2009) recounts how the US, and many other countries to follow, promoted homeownership in the 1990s to low-income families as a means to accumulate wealth, as low-income homeowners had significantly higher net worth than renters. Improving one’s net worth was connected not only to financial benefits but also non-financial benefits such as better health, happiness and even a higher chance of children of homeowners staying in school. The US and Canada incentivised homeownership differently, the former using “social pressure and state intervention [to force] mortgage lenders to lend to low-income communities” whereas the latter preferred “shared equity, rent to own and programs with explicit grants or subsidies” (Hajer, 2009, pp. 8, 9). In the US, extending the housing mortgages to low-income workers had catastrophic results in the 2007-08 housing crisis, and some argue “that Canada’s mortgage market is heading in the same direction as the US market” (Hajer, 2009, p. 10). Roberts (2013) though speaking about the US, criticises promoting homeownership, because “linking aspects of our social reproduction to financial markets” will “render the social reproduction of present and future generations increasingly insecure” (p. 21).
Social housing programs are another way that Canadians can access housing. Currently, thousands of Canadians find more affordable housing options through social housing. Social housing units are “subsidized by governments (often developed in collaboration with the private and public not-for-profit sector)” made available to those who would otherwise be unable to afford to live in suitable and adequate housing in the private market (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), 2011, p. 127). Today, social housing programs offer a variety of options developed for low-income households based on their income, which include public housing, non-profit housing, co-operative housing, urban native housing and rent supplement programs (CHMC, 2017). Social housing makes up about 6.5 per cent of the Canadian housing stock (approximately 650,000 units), while 37 per cent of social housing units are within Ontario (Smith, 1995). Furthermore, over 45 per cent of Ontario’s social housing is concentrated within the Greater Toronto Area (Hacksworth & Moriah, 2006, p. 517).

Social housing has a long history that began in 1938 with the National Housing Act (NHA), which provided federal funding for social housing for the first time (CMHC, 2011, p. 129). Over the past 79 years the responsibility for funding social housing programs has moved between the federal, provincial and local levels. Currently, social housing in Ontario is under attack by neoliberal policies that were created in the 1990s. In 1993, Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin announced, “that housing for the poor was no longer the responsibility of the Canadian federal government,” Ontario Premier Mike Harris removed provincial funds for social housing soon after (Hacksworth & Moriah, 2006). These elected leaders claimed to believe “that the market would solve the growing affordable housing crisis” (Hacksworth & Moriah, 2006). In reality, these changes downloaded the responsibility of social housing on to 47 local housing service managers, complicating management and placing strict financial limitations that
inaccurately reflect the cost of social housing, which threatens their effectiveness and the very existence of a non-market model (Hacksworth & Moriah, 2008).

The current circumstances for social housing and high-priced market housing impose huge barriers for those in the greatest need of affordable housing. In 2015, a record 171,360 Ontario households were waitlisted for affordable housing with an average wait time of nearly four years (Monsebraaten, 2016). The Ontario Ministry of Finance (April 20, 2017), recently released the Ontario Fair Housing Plan, which has plans to provide easier access to surplus government lands for social housing providers, though most of their recommendations support home owners. Without an increased level of support and resources for social housing providers, waitlisted Ontarians will continue to search for alternatives that they can afford to access housing and their basic needs. Should this trend continue, the very possibility of a robust social housing system will likely seem less and less viable across society.

Alternative Solutions

Stuart Hodkinson (2012) emphasizes how the 2007 financial crisis and ineffective social housing programs have influenced a revival of housing alternatives not seen since before social housing was introduced during the early twentieth century. Hodkinson (2012) suggests that there are three different types of alternative housing that work within varying anti-capitalist frameworks:

“the alternative-oppositional that consciously tries to offer a rival praxis to the ‘mainstream’ as a pole of attraction and opposition; the alternative-additional that provides a supplementary choice to the mainstream without any attempt to replace or contest it; and the alternative-substitute that provides a direct replacement to the mainstream but not necessarily in an oppositional or ontologically different way”
Tiny houses, in the way that advocates are fighting for, appear to offer an alternative-substitute housing option. If tiny houses become legal structures, dwellers will still be required to “buy a plot of land, gain planning permission and build [their] own individually-owned private home” (Hodkinson, 2012) within the limits of capitalism, without causing waves in the system that creates unequitable access to housing.

Why Alternative-Substitutes Aren’t Enough

Greg Sharzer (2012) argues in his book No Local, that alternative-substitute solutions will not solve our problems. Sharzer’s critique of community gardens suggests that solutions outside of the market may be able to help some people who are struggling some of the time, but they will not challenge the forces of global capitalism that produce the struggle in the first place (2012). This is not to say that these strategies are not beneficial. They have the potential to serve as key sites of anti-capitalist struggle. However, Sharzer states that we should be looking for solutions that “change society so people can flourish, not just survive” (Sharzer, 2012, p. 165).

While the contemporary case for tiny houses is unique, debates over how to more fully meet human needs go back to the origins of organized anti-capitalism. For example, in his pamphlet The Housing Question, published in 1872, the socialist Friedrich Engels criticized the anarchist housing strategies proposed by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1872/housing-question/). Proudhon suggested that the process of renting shelter was exploitive and needed to be abolished and replaced with a rent-to-own process by which tenants gradually pay monthly payments as part owners, until they reach the full value of the property and become full owners (Engels, 1935, p. 33). Engels (1935) criticises the practicality of this system of partial ownership in the case of a worker who moves
often and owns “seven three-hundred and sixtieths” of multiple residences, and the dangers that could result if tenants became chained to their workplaces because they fear losing the progress made towards owning their home (p. 33). From a normative perspective, Engels emphasizes that this new process of securing housing would not protect workers from being exploited. Drawing on Marx he explains how the wage required to pay for housing is still not the full value of workers’ labour-power under capitalism. Whether the wage is used towards rent or ownership is irrelevant with respect to the question of capitalist exploitation (Engels, 1935, p. 39).

Alternatively, analysts such as Engels, Jeff Noonan, and Sarah Jaffe suggest that the most effective approach to the housing crisis is to change our political economy entirely. Engels (1935) insists that the ruling class has always had vested interest in there being “a number of small property owners in order to build an army for themselves against the proletariat” (Engels, 1935, p. 35), which would turn parts of the working class against each other, weakening resistance to power. Echoes of this argument are heard in Bourdieu’s work on the petite bourgeois, discussed above. Engels envisions that housing needs will be met if workers revolt and redistribute housing to everyone, as he believes “there are already in existence sufficient buildings for dwellings in the big towns to remedy immediately any real “housing shortage,” given rational utilisation of them” (Engels, 1935, pp. 36).

Jeff Noonan adds to this argument by suggesting that our current liberal democracy needs to be replaced by a needs-based radical democracy that allocates resources based on need satisfaction rather than profitability (Noonan, 2004). Noonan ultimately suggests, like Engels, that the needy themselves should have control over resources in order to satisfy their own needs, and that this process can begin by converting empty buildings, lots and factories into social housing, community gardens and worker owned factories (Noonan, 2004, pp. 323). Noonan
proves that small victories towards needs-based allocation are possible by showcasing how the Parkdale Area Recreation Centre (PARC) reduced the strain of the housing crisis in Toronto by converting unused space within their headquarters into below market priced rental property for those in need (Noonan, 2004, p. 321).

*Necessary Trouble* documents Sarah Jaffe’s experiences tracing social movements across North America since 2011, and suggests that radical responses to the 2008 financial crisis “has always been a question of when, not if” (Jaffe, 2016, pp. 4). One of the groups pushing towards societal changes to fix the housing crisis is The Fight for $15 in the US, and its Canadian counterpart: The Fight for $15 & Fairness. These groups are calling on governments to increase the minimum wage and eliminate precarious tactics in an attempt to raise the floor income to a level that allows working people to afford their basic needs and housing in mainstream housing, rather than searching for cheaper solutions (Abdelbaki et. al., 2016).

Finally, Toronto tenants living in Parkdale apartments have waged rent strikes to resist landlords who continue to increase rents as a means to drive out lower income people (Chiasson, 2017). Although examples like these may seem like small steps to a radically different future, at the very least they are valuable movements that contribute to “class-consciousness, a necessity for challenging the capitalist system” (Gilderbloom, 2009, p. 40). They help remind us that another world is possible.

**The Call for Tiny Houses**

Over the past five years, tiny houses have gone from an internet sensation to potential housing policy. In the tiny house documentary *Small is Beautiful*, Benn Kovco, an Australian tiny house dweller, says that “there is a hook in [the idea of tiny living] that really attracts people, whether they want to live in a tiny house or not” (Campbell & Beasley, 2015). Images of
tiny houses have gone viral as people who admire their unique minimalist designs share their thoughts about a lifestyle in a smaller space with less stuff.

Romanticizing life in a small space is not a totally new fad. Already in the early decades of industrial capitalism, Henry David Thoreau extolled the benefits of living simply in his memoir *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1908), which describes in painstaking detail how he lived happily in the tiny cabin he built in 1845. Jay Shafer was one of the first to reintroduce the appeal of living simply in contemporary times, by capturing people’s attention with the unique designs of his tiny house (Smith & Mueller, 2014). Although he built his first tiny house in the late 1990s, only in recent years have tiny house websites seen traffic steadily increase (Mitchell, p. 48). Tiny house movement leaders attribute some of their newfound popularity to the 2007-08 financial crisis, and the consequent desperation of people seeking safe, secure places to live.

Tiny housing frames itself as an alternative to the mainstream housing market. Regardless of what draws people, Kent Griswold, editor of TinyHouseBlog.com, sees between “10,000 – 15,000 unique visitors a day” (Smith & Mueller, 2014).

The internet popularity of tiny houses suggests to tiny house advocates and builders that there is a desire for alternatives to traditional homes. Their popularity has inspired more people to seriously consider building a tiny home; however, government policies and building codes prevent Canadians from living in them legally. These barriers have spurred a “tiny house movement” that aims to spread awareness of their existence and benefits, and work towards changes that will make tiny houses more available in North America.

**What is a tiny house?**

Tiny houses are loosely defined by Tiny Home Alliance Canada (THAC) (n.d.) as “residential building[s] between 101 – 500 square feet”. The size of tiny houses falls below what
is permissible within zoning laws or building codes in most municipalities, which has led people to improvise by placing their tiny house on a trailer creating so-called “tiny houses on wheels” (THOW). THOWs are legal only as temporary structures. Tiny house advocates make a clear distinction that these structures are different than other small dwellings such as recreation vehicles (RV) and park model trailers, though sometimes they connect them to laneway alternatives (Tiny Home Alliance Canada, n.d.; BC Tiny House Collective, 2016).

Tiny houses on wheels appear to be the most popular style of tiny home, and are often built by the people who will reside in the home rather than a home builder. Tiny houses on wheels are the focus in the advocacy sources I’ve examined. It is fair to assume that most advocates are referring to THOWs when they use the broader term “tiny house”.

**Why live in a tiny house?**

Tiny house advocates argue that tiny houses are more than just unique and beautifully designed, but are worth serious consideration because they offer desirable financial advantages and a simple lifestyle with the potential to improve one’s standard of living.

The most obvious benefit that most people understand about tiny houses is the ability to offer homeownership at a more affordable cost in comparison to traditional homes. Tiny homes require much less building materials and labour due to their size, which significantly reduces their cost. The tiny house that Christopher Smith builds in *Tiny* is rather high end, and only cost him approximately $26,000. However, on average a tiny house cost between $100 - $350 per square foot (THAC, 2014). Tiny houses cut costs not only because they use less materials, but because many people choose to build their own, eliminating the costs they would pay for labour. Like Smith, many people build their tiny homes with help from instructional videos online. In contrast, the average Canadian home, around 1,900 square feet, costs between $475,000 -
$508,000 for materials and labour, before the accrued costs of mortgage interest, insurance and property tax (THAC, n.d.).

Tiny house advocates also believe that tiny houses dramatically reduce risks because banks are hesitant to support tiny houses. Mitchell (2014) explains that:

A mortgage has a certain amount of risk associated with it because, if at some point you fall behind in payments, you can lose your home and all the equity you’ve put into it in a foreclosure. Because a tiny house costs less, you can own one outright very quickly, removing the risks of foreclosure and eviction. What’s more, tiny houses are seen as non-traditional housing and therefore aren’t viewed as assets by banks and courts, meaning they aren’t likely to place liens on your tiny house or repossess your home. (p. 21)

Many people who were evicted from their homes during the financial crisis may be attracted to tiny houses because it eliminates the possibility of being displaced by a bank in a future financial crisis. However, because banks cannot repossess tiny houses they are often unwilling to provide loans or insurance for them, complicating the process of purchasing a tiny house for those who do not have enough money to pay upfront.

Advocates also believe that the size of tiny houses also makes it more realistic to operate the home using materials and sustainable technology that are healthy for the environment and create a bill free home. Tiny houses have such low power requirements that some tiny houses are able to “power themselves on a single solar panel and a basic system that costs no more than a few hundred dollars” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 36). Being able to use sustainable technology allows some tiny house dwellers to be “off-grid” and avoid paying any monthly fee for utilities, saving the residents much more money in the long term than the cost of installing and maintaining the technology.
Additionally, the size of tiny houses allows their dwellers to choose materials that are most sustainable rather than what would be most profitable for a construction company.

Traditional homes on a mass scale are damaging to the environment. The construction process often displaces wildlife at the sites of new developments, while simultaneously threatening the ecosystems abroad by importing lumber and other resources from other countries (Mitchell, 2014, p. 36). Tiny house advocates believe that:

“when you are only using two hundred 2x4s to build your house, you can spend the extra money for responsibly sourced materials such as sustainably framed lumber or alternative materials like SIPs (structural insulate panels) that would be prohibitively expensive on the scale of a traditional house, but in a tiny house might only be the difference of a few hundred dollars” (p. 36).

Despite the temptation to use high quality materials, many tiny homeowners find more affordable ways to use environmentally friendly materials. Some tiny homeowners, like documentary film maker Christopher Smith, use “reclaimed materials to capture valuable resources from waste streams, reducing their impact on the environment and saving money” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 36).

The savings that tiny houses afford their dwellers proves financially advantageous in the statistics that show “over 60% of tiny home owners are debt free and mortgage free (US 2014-2015 data)” (THAC, n.d.). Advocates believe that this is a huge draw for people who have tried to reduce their debt without success by making small scale financial changes that have become popular suggested strategies, such as restricting themselves from purchasing coffee each morning or the occasional dinner out. Instead, tiny houses offer a more effective solution that reduces or even eliminates our largest expenditure, allowing people whose “rent or mortgage takes a third to
a half of their incomes, [to] reclaim that portion of their income [and] make strides toward living the life they wish to live” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 21). A change like this allows people to “no longer need to be a slave to that monthly payment to the bank or landlord” and allows people to “take the money [they] are saving and compound it over time, leading to huge returns beyond anything [they] would normally be able to achieve” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 21).

Beyond the affordability of the tiny house itself, a tiny house encourages its dwellers to live a lifestyle that requires less income. Tiny houses are a physical constraint that help people live a minimalist, or at the very least, a less consumptive lifestyle in a society that is saturated with messages instructing people to: *consume more*. Mitchell believes that “understanding and recognizing [consumption and marketing] is sometimes half the battle, because you may not even be aware of the influence they have on your behaviour” (2014, p. 63). Tiny houses seek to counter consumerism by forcing us to constantly recognize when consumer culture is influencing us. In a home with less than 400 square feet, dwellers do not have the space to keep items that they blindly consume, but instead must be intentional about their space and things they will fit in it.

The real benefit of living the tiny house lifestyle, according to advocates, is that it allows us to resist the impulse to ‘keep up with the Joneses’. Mitchell (2014) suggests that over-consumption creates dangerous ideas that convince us that we “are better than someone else because of the items you possess – or that you need to own more items to keep up with your peers” (p. 70). However, advocates suggest that we later learn that the thrill of buying the thing we need to ‘keep up’ wears off once we receive the credit card bill. Minimalists and tiny house advocates suggest that even if you choose not to live in a tiny house that there are benefits within the process of reducing our possessions:
Reduce. By reducing the number of our possessions for an extended period of time, we prove to ourselves that consumerism does not define us.

Refuse. By refusing to go along with the misleading lifestyle of consumerism, we form new priorities in line with personal virtue and what is best for the world around us.

Rejigger. By rejiggering our lives through simplicity, we nurture better relationships with family, community, and nature (Mitchell, 2014, p. 70).

Clearly, advocates want us to believe that tiny houses will make us wealthier by reducing the amount we spend on our housing and consumption habits. However, tiny houses enthusiasts believe that living small will not only “put more money in your pocket” because you will no longer be “spending your money on things that you don’t need” (THAC, 2017), but they also offer a number of additional benefits.

The concept of ‘freedom’ is presented as the most cherished benefit by tiny house dwellers and advocates. Mitchell (2014) explains the anti-thesis of freedom as something to be endured and survived, where we are chained to reoccurring “workweeks to get through, more bills to pay and so on” (p. 34). He and other advocates insist that true freedom “is the ability to choose your own fate and determine how you spend your life” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 34). Freedom has multiple meanings for tiny house enthusiasts, using the term to describe their relationship with their finances, time and mental well-being.

In addition to more financial flexibility, tiny house advocates believe that people will have more control over their time. Mitchell explains that “because a tiny house greatly reduces your annual living expenses – the amount of time you must spend earning an income is greatly reduced. A tiny house lets you spend less time at work because you don’t need the extra income” (2014, p. 33). This must sound attractive to people who are committed to “sixty-hour work
weeks to maintain large houses full of stuff” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 7). Furthermore, the smaller space in a tiny house also requires less time to maintain and organize. Tiny house advocates often brag about how easily they can clean up their few possessions and how quickly they can vacuum or sweep their entire floor space.

Advocates suggest that being able to spend less time doing labour at work and home leaves more leisure time to do things we would enjoy doing more, including hobbies, fulfilling dreams, spending time with family and friends, or simply relaxing more often. Some tiny house dwellers, like Jay Austin, save so much money via the tiny house lifestyle that he is no longer as dependent on his job and can enter a state of “‘part-time retirement’, where he works a limited time out of the year and then spends several months travelling” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 121). Austin explains how he saves $1,500 each month that he used to pay for his previous rental house, which allows him to afford the trips he enjoys all while still saving for retirement, paying taxes, and other necessities (Mitchell, 2014, p. 121).

Additionally, the tiny house movement says, because tiny houses require less income, owning one allows people to take a job that they truly love. Many tiny house dwellers found themselves in corporate offices that paid great salaries before they built their tiny homes, but decide that they would rather work for less money at a job that they are more passionate for once they are no longer dependent on a high paying job to afford their home. One such person is Tammy Strobel, who worked in the investment management industry, where she was unhappy commuting two-hours a day and sitting for ten-hours in a cubicle (Smith & Mueller, 2014). She believes that the “conscious decisions [she] made about how [she] lives and the structures that [she] chooses to live in” have enabled her to leave her old job for a job she enjoys more as a freelance writer (Smith & Mueller, 2014).
Tiny houses also improve our mental health. THAC advocates believe that removing the physical clutter from our lives will also provide us with more emotional space and mental clarity (Bruce, 2017). The freedom that tiny houses provide seems to allow people to hack into the perfect work-life balance, free of stress produced by income, time, and work.

Who Lives in a Tiny House?

Who wouldn’t be drawn to a lifestyle that offers us more financial flexibility, as well as more control over our time, work, mental health and impact on the environment? Tiny house advocates lean heavily on anecdotal evidence and their internet traffic to calculate the growth of their movement because it is difficult to determine the exact number of tiny houses that are being built. Mitchell (2014) suggests that it is difficult to get an accurate count because living tiny is not legal in all parts of North America, which forces people to keep their tiny houses tucked away and secret, while “various classifications, definitions, and legal paradigms” further obscure any data that is collected (p. 48). However, advocates have identified over two-hundred tiny house blogs, which makes Mitchell believe, “that there are five to ten times that number of people who are actually picking up a hammer” (2014, p. 48).

Despite a lack of statistics, tiny house advocates believe there are certain demographics that are more drawn to the tiny house lifestyle. Mitchell’s book suggests that tiny houses have the potential to address specific issues affecting broad groups of people.

Tiny house advocates believe that tiny houses are an option for people of all walks of life looking for a better life. Some people believe that a tiny house is the only way that they will be able to afford homeownership and be able to leave a life as “lifelong renters” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 35). This was the case for Catherine Allen, who proclaims in Tiny that she “couldn’t live in one more rental” (Smith & Mueller, 2014). For others, tiny houses have a “strong potential for social
justice” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 35), especially in the interest of tackling issues like poverty and homelessness. Mitchell acknowledges that there are many reasons one might not be able to generate enough income for a traditional house, including lack of job opportunities, injury and medical issues, generational poverty or simply because the middle class is shrinking, yet he and others believes that tiny houses offer potential to succeed despite our diverse circumstances (Mitchell, 2014, p. 35).

One way that advocates believe tiny houses support social justice is through their ability to travel. Tiny houses on wheels offer mobility that is not possible with traditional homes, which allows people to “move [their] home to where [they] can get work, further helping people escape the grips of poverty and homelessness” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 35). The financial benefits of tiny houses also allow people to use their savings to advance themselves. Mitchell (2014) suggests that someone struggling financially could use the money they save with a tiny house on a new suit for a job interview that will secure a higher income or pursuing higher education to acquire the skills they need for a promotion. At the very least, the boost in finances that tiny houses provide should allow them to “simply put food on the table” and save money “so they can weather bumps in the road of life” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 35).

THAC reinforces the social justice potential of tiny houses by stating that many municipalities see the responsible and ethical gains that can be made as affordable housing has become a “luxury among the poor and middle-class” leaving more than 4.5 million Canadians without a reasonable home for rent or purchase (Leonardo, 2017). Even Janet Weidman, from the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) office in the United States, has stated that “small or tiny houses are a very important part of the equation for low income and fixed income singles and couples dealing with a shrinking economy” (Koff, 2016).
Baby boomers are one demographic that advocates say they are working to legalize tiny houses on behalf of. Advocates believe that this demographic is drawn to tiny houses because they have been impacted and turned away from traditional housing after the market crash in 2007-08. Advocates believe that many boomers preparing to retire saw their savings disappear in the crash after thirty-plus years of work and left them wondering if they would ever be able to retire as they not only worried about affording their homes, but the other rising costs that come with old age, such as health care. Advocates pose tiny houses as a good fit for baby boomers because they provide housing at a price that allows them to afford the retirement they worked for, while also providing a backup health care strategy that allows them to “park their tiny house in the backyard of their children’s homes” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 35), when the time comes that they need extra care.

Young people appear to be the most driven to own a tiny home. Most people advocating for tiny houses in documentaries, blogs and books are millennials in their 20s to early 30s. Advocates believe that millennials are drawn to tiny houses because they have seen what has happened to the baby boomer generation and hope to avoid similar experiences:

“Younger people have seen their parents and their friends’ parents slave away at cubicle jobs only to be laid off; they have seen their homes foreclosed on; and they have watched them struggle to make ends meet even though they worked hard and were well educated. It is with these life experiences that they seek tiny houses as a way to escape the rat race and the pitfalls of a large mortgage. This generation is markedly known for its focus on relationships and wanting to derive meaning from life and the work they pursue. It is no wonder that they are drawn to tiny living: this lifestyle helps them achieve all these things in one fell swoop and they are
able to lead the lives they wish to live while still meeting the realities of adult life.”


However, not only have millennials watched older generations struggle, but they are struggling themselves. The same austerity measures that are forcing boomers to find other ways to afford retirement are forcing millennials into positions of low-wage and precarious work that make it difficult for them to afford traditional housing and expenses. In addition, many millennials are weighed down by student loans, and are looking for strategies to shake off their debt. Statistics shows this is a big draw as tiny house dwellers are “twice as likely to hold a master’s degree as the rest of the United States, [yet] are 90 percent more likely to have no debt” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 106). The circumstances of millennials and baby boomers also place them in the third eager demographic: those seeking a better life.

**Why do we need a tiny house movement?**

Clearly advocates believe that tiny houses offer many benefits and are attractive to diverse groups of people; but some people still wonder why there needs to be a tiny house movement at all. The simple answer is that there are still a lot of barriers for people who want to build and live in a tiny house, which advocates view as unfair. Tiny house advocates are inviting people to join their movement with hope that enough support will persuade governments of all levels to change the laws and processes that inhibit the expansion of tiny house building.

One barrier is the difficulty that tiny house dreamers encounter if they require a loan. While some advocates believe, this is an advantage because it encourages people to avoid debt and pay with cash, others see that this is not always possible and desire a fairer loans system. Advocates like Mitchell believe there needs to be a non-profit bank that allows loans for tiny houses at a modest fixed rate of interest that is both profitable for the bank and affordable for the
owner (2014, p. 52). “The good thing about loans for tiny houses”, Mitchell (2014) suggests, “is that people will be able to pay them off very quickly because they are small amounts” (p. 52). With the savings that a tiny house awards a person, paying off even an expensive tiny house loan around $25,000 might only take years to pay off instead of decades or a lifetime like traditional houses (Mitchell, 2014, p. 53).

The most challenging obstacle for tiny house advocates are the laws that prevent tiny houses. THAC explains how:

“in many municipalities, the minimum size you can have for a dwelling is dictated. How/if you can be off-grid is also determined. What services you must be connected to and pay for or where you can reside is dependent on home design and region.”

(Leonardo, 2017).

In municipalities where the laws and zoning codes do not allow tiny houses, people who choose to live in them are forced to live in remote locations and in secrecy. However, advocates believe that a legal middle ground can be found because both, “tiny house people want to be able to live in their homes legally, and municipalities have a vested interest in being able to regulate and tax tiny houses” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 49). Some tiny house advocates believe that the laws and building codes will inevitably change to allow tiny houses in the future; however, they continue to worry that they might not have any say in what changes are made. There is potential that new codes might be “designed to maximize taxation and help the construction industry”, so tiny house advocates are working proactively to establish and present their own codes that serve their needs.

Another barrier to tiny house owners is the cost of land. Advocates believe that because “populations are growing, we are beginning to see land prices rise drastically and lot sizes shrink
in size” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 50), which compromises the affordability of tiny houses. The high cost of land forces some tiny house dwellers to instead illegally place their tiny house on someone else’s property, or to squat their tiny house on vacant land. Some tiny house advocates recognize they cannot afford land as a single buyer and instead purchase large parcels of land in groups so they can share the cost and “pool resources, for things like common use outdoor space, community-owned solar arrays, shared vehicles, and a community common house in which people can connect and congregate” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 50). Tiny house communities also offer a legal advantage as municipalities are more likely to work with well-organized groups who show promise of developing unused land into taxable assets, especially if the plans promise to be something that they can show off as a place of civic-minded, affordable and green innovation. (Mitchell, 2014, p. 51).

Lastly, prevailing attitudes about housing are preventing the normalization of tiny houses. As tiny house advocate groups (like THAC) form and demand change from governments, resistance to the tiny houses emerges. Friedman & Krawitz (2002) explain how “many homeowners oppose the introduction of affordable housing into their neighbourhoods […] under the mistaken impression that “affordable housing” is just a diversionary term for ‘poor people’s housing’” (p. 183), that will affect the value of their own homes and increase traffic. Though advocates do not predict what will happen to neighbouring property values, it is clear that the tiny house movement is hoping to influence the attitudes of those who are not considering tiny house living just as much as those who have already fallen for the individual benefits that tiny houses offer.

The Critique of Tiny Houses

Do tiny houses meet the needs of the low-income workers?
Advocates present tiny houses as a solution for housing insecurity and income stress, but do not recognize their limits. They fail to consider whether this alternative is accessible to everyone, especially those struggling most with accessing adequate housing. Tiny house advocates pitch tiny houses as a solution for anyone who wants to improve their lives; however, they do not recognize that advocates often fit within a specific social location that allows them to participate in the movement. The website for Continuing Studies at University of Victoria (http://web2.uvcs.uvic.ca/courses/csafty/mod2/glossary.htm, n.d.) describes social location as:

“the groups that people belong to because of their place or position in history and society. All people have a social location that is defined by their gender, race, social class, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, and geographic location. Each group membership confers a certain set of social roles and rules, power, and privilege (or lack of), which heavily influence our own identity and how we see the world”.

Advocates are presenting the solutions that they have used to get ahead, but fail to tell us where they started. This is a problem as their social location inherently affects how they understand the world, the challenges that they are encountering and what they believe are possible solutions. The tiny house advocates are clearly situated in a different social location than the working poor, however, they present tiny houses as a solution for low-income individuals without providing their voices within the material. By excluding the voices of low-income households, they speak on their behalf without having any understanding of the systemic barriers, challenges and frustrations of securing housing needs with limited resources. Though the gender, race, age and religion of tiny house advocates may vary slightly, advocates are often economically located within what Bourdieu, drawing on Marx, calls the petite bourgeoisie.
The petite bourgeois are located between the capitalist and working class, who fear that they will fall from their position back into the challenging experiences of working class life. This fear pushes them to constantly strive to individually ascend into and enjoy the lavish lifestyle of the capitalist class. The petite bourgeois are small business owners who depend on relatively small profits or working professionals who earn middle-class incomes. Without capital to realize large profits that allow the capitalist class to afford luxury goods, the petite bourgeois must use strategies to maximize their income, while minimizing their expenses to compete for the ability to afford the lifestyle of a capitalist.

Tiny house advocates and enthusiasts are driven by petite bourgeois values to act as the ideal neoliberal subject in order to achieve the lifestyle they desire individually (McGuigan, 2014). Jim McGuigan (2014) describes the neoliberal self as a combination of “classical and neoclassical economics – featuring entrepreneurship and consumer sovereignty – with the contemporary discourse of ‘the taxpayer’, who is skeptical of redistributive justice, and a ‘cool’ posture that derives symbolically – and ironically – from cultures of disaffection and, indeed, opposition” (p. 223). The ideal neoliberal subject is viewed as a “successful entrepreneur” who is also a “hard-working tax payer”, suggesting that hard work and paying your dues protects oneself from any criticism of their economic position (McGuigan, 2014). Furthermore, “choice is vital in the sphere of consumption” for the neoliberal subject who acts as a “sovereign consumer” with self-control (McGuigan, 2014). By making strategic decisions with their income, the neoliberal self feels justified in having more or less than others because it was their choice to use their money responsibly or not.

The ideal neoliberal subject can be seen as an extension of the transition to lean production processes within the workplace during the neoliberal era since the 1970s. Lean
production is an attempt to “eliminate the waste in work processes” (Sears, 2003), or in other words, to find ways to reduce the expenses of the employer to an absolute minimum to increase profits. Since the 1970s, capitalism responded to a profitability squeeze by attacking what employers were required to pay for their workers (Sears, 2003). Employers were able to reduce some of their expenses themselves, by imposing lean techniques on their workers such as “increasing flexibility, reducing the core workforce to an absolute minimum by driving up productivity, and contracting-out significant chunks of work” (Sears, 2003, p. 2). However, some expenses that employers pay are not within their personal control. The strong welfare state that existed within the 1970s ensured that working people enjoyed a social minimum standard of living provided by the state, including “a specified level of income, housing, health, and education” (Sears, 2003, p. 10). This was possible by using taxes to create social programs. Employers set out to reclaim the profits they lost to taxes by advocating for few social programmes and that all of the goods and services that people need to survive should not be provided but be available for purchase within the market (Sears, 2003).

We can see the similarities between the cost saving strategies used in the leaning of production and social programs and the cost saving designs used in tiny houses, leading us to believe that tiny houses are a way for the ideal neoliberal self to not only accept the conditions of lean production at the workplace, but also in their personal lives. Tiny houses are pitched to working people as a way to eliminate the wasted expenses in their homes by designing their space only with what they need or less. However, eliminating expenses by owning a tiny house does not increase profits for the owner, but rather allows the dwellers to stretch their income further to make other purchases.
Therefore, a tiny house does not necessarily make their owner a member of the petite bourgeoisie, but advocating that they are a strategy to advance oneself is an invitation to adopt the taste of the petite bourgeoisie and their understanding of neoliberal strategies as necessary sacrifices in their personal lives to obtain those tastes. The tiny house advocates are suggesting that workers must act like a small business owners who tries to find strategies to increase their profits. However, in the case of low-income workers, advocates are not prescribing petite bourgeois strategies to increase profits, but to stretch insufficient incomes far enough to sustain people outside of the mainstream market. A tiny house is not a solution to the housing crisis, but a prescribed solution for the working class to make sacrifices in order to protect the ability for businesses to continue to pay the wages that allow them to make the most profit which create the problems that low-income workers face as consequences.

The popularity and demand for tiny houses has proven that working class people are willing to make these sacrifices to stretch their income. However, it is difficult to understand why tiny house enthusiasts are so eager to find solutions that allow them to accept the conditions that have been forced on them by employers who are actively working to reduce working class standards of living.

Harvey (2005), suggests that major institutions in our society (i.e. corporations, the media, universities, churches, professional associations, art, etc.) have asserted the neoliberal self within the average person by presenting neoliberal policies as common sense. Alan Sears (2013) exposes the Ontario education system as one example of where neoliberal ideologies are being promoted in our society. Sears (2003) believes that the education system has emphasized that students should adopt an entrepreneurial and consumerist orientation to succeed in life. Sears explains how since the Mike Harris conservative government in 1995, the way citizenship is
taught in schools has changed from encouraging social citizenship to a new version of neo-liberal citizenship that “reorients schooling so that the individual develops a self in relation to the market rather than the state” (Sears, 2003, p. 11). This new focus has helped to change what people accept as common sense. Education has changed from a society that encourages students to value social minima for all within the welfare state, towards the development of individuals who should value “individual property rights, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade” (Harvey, 2005, p. 64) within the neoliberal state.

Creating common sense ideologies within society can be “profoundly misleading, obfuscating or disguising real problems under cultural prejudices” (Harvey, 2005, p. 39). Harvey (2005) suggests that common sense ideologies play a role in distracting the population from connecting their problems to neoliberalism, capitalism and corporate power. Unable to see the causes of their struggle, social groups have and continue to be persuaded “to vote against their material, economic, and class interests for cultural, nationalist and religious reasons” (Harvey, 2005, p. 50).

In addition to being encouraged by society to adopt the neoliberal self, the rolling back of public services and expansion of the market since the 1970s has forced people to adopt the neoliberal self through the dull compulsion of economic relations (Peck, 2014, p. 398). Though some undoubtedly see past neoliberalism as common sense, the material and economic realities of how our society is structured offers few alternatives for people to meet their needs outside of the market. Without policies in place for low-income people to meet their needs with social assistance, people risk not being able to afford their livelihoods if they do not find ways to live without state support. Unfortunately, the increasing neoliberal perspectives held by most of the population, as well as the large amount of capital required for non-state groups to offer
alternative supports, has limited the existence and access to alternatives offered outside of the market and leave people with few options to meet their needs aside from the individual solutions and sacrifices associated with the neoliberal self.

However, expecting workers to act responsibly to be the solution for people to individually acquire all of their needs without social programs ignores the facts that the opportunity for one to become the neoliberal self is not equally accessible to everyone as “psychosocial resources required to engage in aspirations are considerable and easier for some classes to obtain and deploy than others” (Carraher & Rueter, 2017, p.489). Tiny house advocates do not recognize that they hold certain economic privileges that have allowed them to advance and participate in society as a conscious consumer. The “minimalist” lifestyle that tiny houses guide, has been successful at increasing the savings of middle-income families by prescribing the taste of necessity on certain aspects of their lives. Because this solution has worked for some middle-class families, they assume that the same will be true for anyone, including the working-poor, though there are no advocates or dwellers featured in their work who speak from that position. The petite bourgeois individualistic worldview that is cast externally assumes that the circumstances of low-income families are due to poor consumer choices. However, this perspective ignores the systemic barriers that force low-income families to rely on and struggle to access the taste of necessity. Low-income families are already forced to experience the taste of necessity, not because they choose to do so to advance themselves, but because the lack the ability “to ‘spend more’, or differently” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 375).

It is clear that the size of tiny houses represents the cost savings strategy used by tiny house advocates. However, living within small spaces is a strategy already used by low-income families. Although tiny house advocates resist most connection between them, tiny houses are
very similar to park model trailers in size. Regardless if they admit any connections, advocates have modeled tiny houses after trailers intentionally in order to reap the savings of living in a small space that is most affordable. Park model trailers are designed as seasonal recreational vehicles, but are used as a resource by “more than 10% of the population in a country like the US” (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014, p. 387). However, tiny houses differ from park model trailers because they are designed and furnished with the tastes of the bourgeoisie. Tiny house builders are willing to live in small spaces that are usually associated with the poor because it allows them to fulfill their upper class dream of being a homeowner, while still being able to differentiate themselves from the working class by building them with materials and filling it with things that express the taste of luxury.

The materials that tiny house advocates choose to use represent quality that is not affordable for those limited to the taste of necessity. In contrast to park model trailers that use materials that are cheapest, tiny house builders use materials that express their petite bourgeois culture or bring more economic advantages. Advocates boast that they can afford to decorate with the furniture of their dreams because they can afford 250 square feet of expensive materials that were out of their price range if they wanted to use them to furnish a larger home. In other cases, builders are happy to take on the higher upfront cost of well insulated materials not because it is more beautiful, but because it symbolizes intellectual sophistication and long-term savings through efficiency that are unaffordable to low-income families.

Tiny house advocates boast that tiny house dwellers are very likely to be educated, leading some advocates to wonder if “it takes an educated person to live within their means” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 106). This thought highlights how the petite bourgeois worldview assumes that those who are struggling have only themselves to blame for making the wrong decisions.
Assuming that only educated people are wise enough to consume what they can afford ignores the fact that education is one of the privileges that allow tiny house people to earn more money than the average person (Mitchell, 2014, p. 106). In this sense education did not make tiny house owners wise enough to live within their means, but it helped them to secure an income that allowed them to extend what they could afford.

Advocates still might suggest that education is the first step needed to secure a job that provides a decent wage, but this ignores the fact that education, in the current social order in many Western states, is a privilege that not all can afford. Education is another strategy used by the neoliberal self to advance economic circumstances; and, of course, education is more accessible to children of privileged families. Mitnik, Cumberworth & Grusky (2016) highlight how privileged parents are more likely to set up their children for academic success by being able to “afford privileged residential neighborhoods, with accordingly improved access to high-quality public schools, neighborhood amenities that assist human-capital formation (e.g. libraries), and peers that can provide all manner of career advantages” (p. 145). Furthermore, the same study proves the assumption that most post-secondary graduates are the children of middle-class families who provide the support necessary to be able to afford their education.

Research has also proven that education is not guaranteed to provide a middle-class income. Contrary to the beliefs of the petite bourgeois, social mobility from one social stratum to another is not simply an economic science based on merit. Carr and Weimers (2016) have found that social mobility has “declined for both men and women and among workers of all levels of education, with the largest declines among college-educated workers. In the presence of increasing inequality, “falling mobility implies that as the rungs of the ladder have moved farther apart, moving between them has become more difficult”’. Furthermore, Morissette & Zhang
(2005) conducted research to trace the upward mobility of low-income workers between 1983-2000, and determined that low-paid work is not a guaranteed step towards higher paying jobs. Depending on the year, between one-third and half of men, and between 15 and 35 per cent of women would move above the low-earnings threshold. Though these statistics appear optimistic, each year about 25 per cent of men and women who had previously advanced from low-income work fell back in again.

Another aspect of privilege that is ignored by tiny house advocates in their literature is their family size. Most tiny house dwellers are single or a couple. Very few of the tiny house dwellers featured in advocacy work have children. Tiny house advocates boast about the cost savings of their homes, but they completely disregard the fact that they are also saving money because they have limited the number of mouths they have to feed and support.

Although tiny house advocates must assume that their family sizes are a personal choice, it is also a privilege. Tiny house advocates may view having a small family as a sacrifice, but their social location also puts them in a position where they have more control over choosing their family size. Low-income families face barriers that prevent them from accessing their preferred forms of birth control, such as the cost of contraceptives and the time needed away from work required to request contraceptives at doctors’ appointments (Dennis & Grossman, 2012). Barriers like this prevent low-income families from choosing to have children, making poor and minority women more likely to have unintended pregnancy (Tonlaar & Ayoola, 2014). The size of low-income families appears to some as a moral issue, justifying the position of low-income people for having untamed sexual desires. However, the idea that low-income families with children are immoral is not only ignoring the systemic circumstances that make them more
likely to have unplanned children, but also ignores the fact that it is not immoral to want or have large families.

Capitalist society has created social pressure around family size that can be traced back to the cost of social reproduction, implementing the ideal family type that minimizes the cost of social reproduction that they must pay. Ford Motor Company was especially concerned with the roles that households played within capitalism. This was evident when Ford’s personnel manager, J. R. Lee said, “if we keep pounding away at the root and the heart of the family in the home, that we are going to make better men for future generations, than if we simply pounded away at the fellows at their work here in the factory” (Lewchuck, 1993, p. 844). Small families are not desirable because they are what we should desire; rather, they are expected because the capitalist class does not want to pay for large families.

In conclusion, it is clear that tiny houses are partially a way to extend the petite bourgeois culture of individual sacrifice used to lean the labour process and embed it deeper it onto the personal consumption of the working class. However, tiny houses cannot be considered accessible to low-income workers, or all workers seeking a better life, because the ability to act as the neoliberal self like the petite bourgeois is not possible for the most disadvantaged workers under capitalism. Beyond financial limitations, tiny houses are clearly designed for petite bourgeois families, with limited family ties including children. Tiny houses are limited from being a solution to the housing crisis because they are not accessible as an affordable solution for all of the working class. The blame placed on workers struggling to access housing for not making the right decisions is misplaced, and should instead be focused on the systemic barriers created by capitalism that make even the most affordable options, like tiny houses, unaffordable to low-income workers.
The impacts of a successful tiny house movement on the working class

Despite the stated intentions of tiny house advocates, legalizing tiny houses has the potential to work more in the interests of the capitalist class than the working class. Within a moment where neoliberal politics have forced people to live with less, tiny house advocates and minimalists can appear to provide proof that more austerity is endurable. If tiny houses are built into Canadian laws and building codes, there could be serious repercussions in the form of decreased wages, as well as weakened working-class solidarity and, consequently, the sort of working class power needed to fight for better standards of living and socialist alternatives. Not only could these changes potentially force low-income people to live with even less than they do now, but it could eliminate the economic advantages of tiny houses altogether. Despite being framed as a progressive strategy for negotiating the housing crisis, the tiny house movement may actually further embed the dominant political and economic logics that have created the crisis in the first place.

The threat to increased wages

Decreased wages could be an unforeseen outcome of a successful tiny house movement. Engels offered words of caution to strategies that helped workers to lower their cost of living by surviving outside of the market. As Sharzer explains, this is because “reforms like cheaper rent, transit and even community gardens can make it cheaper for workers to live, but they also allow capitalists to lower wages” (Sharzer, 2014, p. 80). The wage contract between capitalists and workers does not represent the amount of value that the worker adds in the process of production, but instead represents the level of success workers have had in their struggle against capitalists in order to receive wages that are enough to purchase aspects of their social reproduction (Ferguson, et. al., 2016). Wages that are beyond the means of sustenance are
opposed by capitalists because they are understood to be giving away money that could be used for the capitalist goal: profit accumulation. When workers seek out ways to reduce the cost of their own sustenance, they effectively reduce the cost that the employer must pay for the same results. Paradoxically, then, in the absence of mass working-class struggle for social gains, the individual savings that workers intend to accrue from reducing the cost of their social reproduction is instead transferred to the capitalist who receives the workers’ savings in the form of reduced wages and increased profits.

In the current context of advancing austerity and the low state of worker struggles, I argue that tiny houses are best understood as a reform that reduces the cost of living for workers. Throughout tiny house literature it is made clear that not only does the size of the structures reduce the cost of ownership for the dweller, but also the cost of maintenance for the home and energy needed to heat the space and run appliances, which are all necessary aspects of social reproduction needed for sustenance in Canada. Statistics Canada (2017) shows that the average Canadian spent approximately $82,697 in 2015. Breaking down the expenditures, the average amount used for shelter was $17,500, and an additional $4,490 for household operations. A tiny house dweller who has eliminated the cost for shelter and household operations after they have paid off the cost of construction and by living off the grid with sustainable technology would cut the cost of their social reproduction by approximately 26 per cent each year. However, the cost of social reproduction could be less still. The minimalist lifestyle that many tiny house owners live could further reduce their cost of social reproduction by spending less than the average Canadians uses for household furnishings and equipment ($2,166), clothing and accessories ($3,374) and miscellaneous expenditures ($1,703) (Stats Can, 2017).
Because tiny houses reduce such a large portion of the cost of social reproduction for workers, capitalists have good reason to stand behind tiny house advocates. If the capitalist class was able to help tiny living become part of the prevailing common-sense, so that tiny houses became seen as a realistic and desirable option to meet our housing needs, owners and employers would certainly seize on the opportunity to reduce our wages by over 26 percent, rather than allow workers to receive the benefits through an increase to their buying power.

What might be more realistic is that instead of seeing wages decline, we will simply see wages stagnant. It is clear that the cost of housing continues to increase at a much faster pace than working class wages. This has put workers in a position where they cannot afford the means to sustain themselves without debt or alternative models, which should force us to question what the quantity of our wages represents. If tiny houses were to become legal, defenders of the owning class would undoubtedly assert that the minimum wage is justified at sub-poverty rates because of newfound ways to access minimal housing on the market.

Historical examples demonstrate the likelihood of this outcome. Bhattacharya (2015) summarizes how in the eighteenth century, working class wages were justified through “regular dietary class war”:

“landowners, farmers, parsons, manufacturers, and the Government itself sought to drive labourers from a wheaten to a [cheaper] potato diet. The ruling class, as a class, then forced the increase potato acreage over wheat and prompting the historian Redcliffe Salaman to rightly claim that ‘the use of the potato…did, in fact, enable the workers to survive on the lowest possible wage.’”

As working class people, we must ask ourselves whether it is in our interests for tiny houses to become the new basic standard of living. If we are not prepared to answer yes to that
question, it is up to the working class to fight for better wages, better housing, and access to essential resources on the basis of human need.

The threat to working class solidarity

Tiny house advocates understand that housing is a human need for social reproduction, and realize that it is problematic that traditional home-ownership is not affordable to all of the working class. They are alive to, and concerned about the housing crisis. However, the petite bourgeois perspective expressed within tiny house literature, confines the imaginations of advocates to only look within the market for solutions to the housing crisis. The petite bourgeois perspective aligns with the dominant social assumption of the ideal neoliberal self and the emphasis placed on consumer consciousness has left tiny house advocates to believe that they can only realize the change they want in the world by purchasing products that align with their beliefs and avoiding commodities that do not. Advocates believe that new tiny house policies are an innovation that extends the market to meet the needs of a new level of the population whose income was not able to afford home-ownership previously. Not only are tiny houses more affordable but they appeal to the conscious consumer with their financial and environmental promises. However, despite the intentions and assumptions of advocates, tiny houses are still unaffordable to the most vulnerable sections of the population.

The ideal neoliberal consumer that tiny house advocates model not only encourages an individual approach to systemic issues, but deters people from seeing the value of collective action. People who have internalized the neoliberal self believe that people “should be able to provide for themselves and their families rather than being looked after by a paternalistic state” (McGuigan, 2014, p. 225). The neoliberal self is disciplined to live a life of work and sacrifice by images of celebrities who model the achieving our needs is possible within capitalism, as well
as by the experience of being forced to make do with less (McGuigan, 2014). Despite the rarity for one to reach celebrity status, the neoliberal self believes that failure to achieve the material wants and needs in our lives as our celebrity models do, is a result of too little work and sacrifice. Any redistributive solutions are then perceived by the neoliberal self as “frittering away … people’s hard-won earnings” to those who are undeserving, undisciplined workers.

Engels (1935) explains how the ruling class has always had a vested interest in having a small portion of the working class become home-owners. This is because it creates a small army of working class people who feel they relate closer with the capitalist class and work to uphold their interests by acting as the ideal neoliberal self. By modestly increasing the amount of working class homeowners, it fragments the most privileged sections of the working class from experiencing the struggles of the whole working class as a shared struggle, and prevents workers from taking unified action towards solutions that will support the most vulnerable through public assistance.

It is problematic “to encourage the community housing and the private rental sector to meet the future demand for low cost housing” (Jacobs & Flanagan, 2013), because the private sector is not committed to providing housing that meet the needs and affordability of the entire population, but rather houses that are profitable for their owners. Engels (1935) argues that the profit-driven model is another way that cheats the worker out of their wages in addition to the exploitation they experience in the production process. With the current state of inequality in Ontario it is impossible for everyone to meet their needs by for-profit housing. Stone (2006) explains how affordability is not a fixed rate, but rather a relationship between people and housing. For some people all housing is affordable, others require housing that is less than what is available on the market, while for others housing is only affordable if it is free (Stone, 2006).
The dangers that come with extending the market is that those who will access tiny houses, if they are relieved of their struggle to access housing, may no longer share in the frustration that they previously felt when they were excluded from the for-profit housing market. By removing themselves from the struggle, tiny home owners also remove themselves from the experiences that convince them that the housing market is inevitably inaccessible to a large portion of the working class. As more layers of the population become home-owners, fewer people feel a sense of responsibility to provide supports for those in the community who are excluded from the market, posing further challenges to implement alternative strategies to address the housing crisis that require collective consciousness and action.

An evident division among the working class exists between those who access housing from the private market and those who access social housing from the public sphere. Social housing is affordable housing that is subsidized by the state through taxes. Social housing often uses a “rent-gearied-to-income” strategies that allow its tenants to pay a specific portion of their income each month, rather than a specified quantity to ensure that residents will always have enough money to afford their housing needs (Smith, 1995). Although housing is not always affordable for people based on a percentage of one’s income (Stone, 2006) it does provide housing for low-income communities at a cost that is below market value. However, the limited social housing stock in Ontario prevents people of all income levels from participating in social housing. Instead, social housing candidates must meet certain requirements of need, which restricts the diversity of tenants (Jacobs & Flanagan, 2013). The restrictions often limit social housing access to those severely systematically disadvantaged, which “reinforce the reputation of public housing within the wider community as a tenure of last resort that is inferior to both homeownership and private renting” (Jacobs & Flanagan, 2013, p. 324). The lack of diversity
within social housing communities creates stereotypes associated with their tenants, and misunderstood assumptions that “explain problems such as place-based disadvantage, crime and anti-social behaviour by attributing them to individual agency, in particular the life styles and choices of the individuals who reside in public housing” rather than attributing the problems to structural factors such as income inequality and spatial disadvantage (Jacobs & Flanagan, 2013, p. 324). Using this pathological frame to understand social housing leads to stigmas that suggest social housing supports or even foster immoral behaviours, and develop undeserving dependence on the state.

The push for homeownership throughout the UK, USA and Canada since the Thatcher era (Harris, 1999; Béland, 2007) has further stigmatized social housing and used it as a strategy to assert that the public sphere is not a desirable solution to our housing needs. The push for ownership must be seen as a push away from socialized housing which allows the ruling class to further lean out what remains of the welfare state, and shift more of the cost of social reproduction onto the wage of the individual worker. Socialized housing and other public services can then be seen as a way to have the capitalist class support our social reproduction beyond what they already pay in the form of wages. In today’s state, we can see that the push for homeownership has coincided with the decline in number of social housing units, as well as less financial support for the upkeep of the units that do exist (Hackworth & Moriah, 2006). This has pushed more people towards the market not only because there are not enough units to house those who need them, but also because others who would benefit from social housing are turned away by the stigma and condition of the units.

By extending the private market to solve the housing crisis, tiny houses prevent some of the frustrated population who are excluded from both traditional housing and social housing
from focusing on changes that will allow them to access their housing needs without compromising their standard of living. Extending the market implies that it is impossible to challenge the market forces of supply and demand that make private housing increasingly unaffordable, and further strengthens the argument that families who struggle to access housing should work harder, rather than expect that social wealth should be shared more evenly.

Socialist Alternatives

Although a successful tiny house movement in its current guise will tend to help the state and employers impose deeper austerity, and will create further challenges for the working class to build solidarity, it is still worth noting that the call for tiny houses has been successful at naming the common struggles that working class people are currently facing. The tiny house advocates have acknowledged that the cost of housing is preventing the working class from living financially stable lives. The popularity of the movement has proven that people are willing to take creative measures to have affordable housing, more savings, more control over their time at home and at work, and to protect the environment. It is worth stating that these wants are not excessive entitlements for one to expect. However, tiny house advocates do not see possibility in creating the future they want with others, and instead use individual market strategies to purchase the freedom they desire for themselves by consuming in ways that will increase their savings. If tiny house advocates truly have an interest in improving housing security for everyone, there are socialist alternatives to tiny houses that have the potential to help more people, without damaging the wages and collective power of the working class.

A socialist future would involve providing people with resources based on need, rather than what one can afford (Noonan, 2004). Engels (1935) emphasizes how “there are already in existence sufficient buildings in the big towns to remedy immediately any real “housing
shortage”. With enough shelter for all those in need, it is clear that the capitalist system which only satisfies the housing needs of those who can afford market value is preventing society from finding solutions to housing insecurity and homelessness that place those in need into shelter that is unused and underused. The most progressive solution to the housing crisis would be to undo the capitalist system that puts profits before housing needs and replace it with a socialist alternative that guarantees housing as basic minima.

Rosa Luxembourg (2008) outlines in Reform or Revolution that social reforms are necessary steps to build the class consciousness and working class strength needed to overthrow capitalism and replace it with socialism. This section does not attempt to provide detailed socialist solutions to the housing crisis. As Luxemburg (2008) suggests, those will emerge through mass struggles for greater democracy and equality. I want to conclude, however, by outlining in broad strokes some of the socialist reforms that could achieve the same benefits as tiny houses with collective and public strategies rather than individual, market based ones.

In order to realize each of the following socialist reforms, the working class must take collective action to impact “official democracy” while also demanding recognition as democratic bodies “from below” that deserve active, self-governing authority over how we structure our society (Cairns & Sears, 2012).

Official democracy refers to the “particular form of administration in which “the people” elect representatives who have specific decision making powers (such as presidents, congresswomen, members of parliament, senators, and so on)” (Cairns & Sears, 2012, p. 7). Socialist alternatives can be collectively fought for within the sphere of official democracy by organizing the working class to vote for parties that promise in their campaigns to use their
decision-making powers to create changes that will advance working class needs before capitalist interests for profits.

In addition, the working class must play a role as members of democracy from below, “in which the people exercise effective power themselves rather than simply participating in the choice of who will govern over them” (Cairns & Sears, 2012, p. 12). From this perspective, collective effort must also be put towards social movements that conduct “strikes, demonstrations, riots, boycotts, and other tactics by huge numbers of ‘ordinary people’” (Cairns & Sears, 2012, p. 14), to create real change through self-determination or through civil disobedience aimed at pressuring the capitalist class and governing officials to act in the interest of the masses. Political parties can be influenced by such collective action because the embodied effort of social movements is a physical representation of the number of people they risk losing votes from if they do not act in their interests. The owning class can be influenced similarly, risking their credibility to consumers, in addition to the costs they will lose in periods where production is stalled and stopped.

**Demanding better access to affordable housing**

Instead of inventing new housing models, like tiny houses, that are more affordable, collective action could force governments to regulate traditional housing so that it is affordable for the working class. Rather than extending the market to find new housing models that are more affordable, there is a more urgent need for working class solidarity that fights to increase public access to housing and to decrease the cost of private ownership and rent to ensure that the needs of working class people are put before the profit accumulating wants of the capitalist class. The dominant role that the private market currently plays has proven to force people to compromise other needs in their lives in order to pay what is often more than 30 percent of their
income towards their housing. By enduring the conditions that private market homes place on our lives without struggle, we accept that the role of housing serves the profit-driven interest of the capitalist class more than they serve the use-values that workers seek from houses. The profit that is accumulated from housing comes at the expense of exhausting incomes and preventing people from being able to afford the needs and joys of working class life.

Working together to demand more social housing is one way that could weaken the dependence on the private market to meet our needs and reduce the cost of housing. Currently, the limited social housing stock in Ontario prevents people of all income levels from participating in social housing. Aalbers & Christophers (2014) suggests that in countries where 30 or more percent of the housing stock is social housing, that the perception of social housing changes to “a sector for “the masses”, i.e. including people from all walks of life” rather than “a residual sector for the poorest of the poor”.

Ontario needs to end social housing stigma to allow people who currently pay more than 30 percent of their income for their housing needs to have a more affordable option through the public sphere. Social rent geared to income programs allow its tenants to pay a specific portion of their income each month, rather than a specified quantity (Smith, 1995). These programs are made possible because they are driven to meet people’s housing needs, rather than to generate profits, and are willing to subsidize the remaining costs of the building with taxes. Social rent geared to income provides housing at a more affordable rate for many. However, as Stone (2006) suggests that 30 percent of one’s income does not always guarantee that housing is affordable, social housing programs would be more effective if they received increased funding to provide subsidies to people beyond what they are capable of now.
Increasing the stock of social housing from its current 6 percent (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014) to a level near Scandinavian countries (the Netherlands provided 35 percent of its housing stock in 1998) (Scanlon & Whitehead, 2004), would allow a large number of people struggling to meet their needs within the private sector to have their needs more affordably met below market value. A change this large would dramatically reduce the number of people being forced to compete for affordable housing in the private market, decreasing the demand, and thus lowering the price of private rent and ownership.

In order to increase social housing funding, pressure needs to be placed on governments to allocate taxes in this area. In order to find the money needed for the cost of social housing, resources would either have to be reallocated from other public services, or by increasing taxes (Connolly & Mason, 2016). Increasing taxes is in the best interest for the working class who cannot afford to lose other social services such as education and health care, but this will be strongly opposed by the capitalist class. In order for social housing to be improved without deteriorating other social services, the working class must collectively work against capitalist interests by putting pressure on political parties and casting their vote in ways that serve their own interest.

Another strategy that could be taken is to demand for regulation over rent and ownership by the state. Allowing the government to have control over the maximum amount that should be paid to purchase and rent a home would effectively limit the amount that home owners are able to profit from their buyers or tenants. Regulation would ensure that the cost of housing better represents what allows working class families need to affordably meet their social reproduction, and restricts owners from taking advantage of the competition between workers within periods of strong demand for housing.
It needs to be acknowledged that regulation of the private market will be strongly opposed by the current owners within the private market because it will reduce the amount that they can profit from selling their ownership. Opponents will focus on the supposed benefits of an unmoderated market; however, social movements need to refute with solidarity based on the shared experiences of the cost of market housing compromising their standard of living. The need for workers to afford housing at an appropriate cost that allows them to afford all the elements of their social reproduction such as food, sustenance and the right to enough leisure time to not only reproduce their mental state to return to work, but also to enjoy life to a certain minimum must be made a priority over the needs of the capitalist class to accumulate more than is necessary and experience a life of luxury.

**Demanding incomes that meet our needs**

Financial freedom is one of the strongest benefits that draw people to the tiny house movement. For people to live financially stable lives, not only does the cost of housing need to be reduced, but wages need to be increased. Although increasing the number of affordable housing units will allow families to save a higher percentage of their income, there is still a need to work against the capitalist class who will try to claim the benefits from the reduced cost of living for themselves by decreasing wages (Sharzer, 2012; Engels, 1935). Three different strategies that can be used to combat the interests of the capitalist class and secure more financial stability for working class families are improving union strength and numbers, increasing the minimum wage standards, and establishing a universal basic income.

Unions are representatives of groups of the working class, who negotiate with employers on behalf of workers for better wages, benefits and working conditions. Unions reduce the risks that an individual would face, such as being fired or harassed, if they confronted their employer
about an issue at work, while also strengthening the bargaining power of the working class with the solidarity of all the workers in a given workplace or industry. Unions have a history of fighting for fairness at the workplace. The Canadian Labour Congress (2015) explains on their website that “the labour movement was created by people standing up together for fair wages, safe workplaces and decent work hours.” Unions introduced many of the reforms we take for granted today, such as weekends, workplace safety laws, health care, the 8-hour workday and the 40-hour work week (Public and Private Workers of Canada, 2012). However, as unions decline, neo-liberal austerity threatens the advances previously made by unions and prevent them from negotiating the changes we need today. A study by Jaumotte and Buitron (2015) of the International Monetary Fund concluded that “the decline in unionization is related to the rise of top income shares and less redistribution, while the erosion of minimum wages is correlated with considerable increases in overall inequality.” (p. 4)

The Fight for $15 & Fairness campaign in Ontario has recognized the role of unions in the effort to reduce income inequality, but have watched them struggle to defend and advance their gains in the past decades under neo-liberal capitalism. Their strategy is “to build a broad working class movement by uniting union and non-unionized workers” (Abdelbaki, et. al, 2016) who will wield enough solidarity to demand changes. The Fight for $15 & Fairness are demanding easier access to join and form unions to help rebuild the strength of the labour movement, while also making demands that would raise minimum standards for all workers in Ontario, such as the increasing the minimum wage and number of paid leave days. The Fight for $15 & Fairness proved that working class solidarity can be effective when the Ontario Liberal government promised to incorporate some of their demands that were included in the changing workplaces act, including a $15 minimum wage by the year 2019 (Office of the Premier, 2017).
Another option to combat the interests of the capitalist class is the idea of universal basic income (UBI). Though there are many different suggestions about what a UBI policy should look like (De Wispelaere & Stirton, 2004), a basic description of UBI is “a minimum allowance without means-testing that would give everyone the means to live with a basic level with dignity” (Fabre, et. al., 2014). UBI is a strategy that will use taxes to transfer money to individuals who fall below a certain income level in an attempt to ensure that everyone has enough for basic social reproduction. The danger of UBI is that the funds needed for the program could reallocated taxes currently used for other social services, instead of increasing and using the taxes from the corporations who have created inequality by refusing to pay the cost of social reproduction to the working class through wages. In order to ensure that a Universal Basic Income is an addition to the public services that Ontarians have, rather than a replacement of, there is a need for “a very strong social movement to demand higher taxes … one that ensure the rich pay their fair share” (Abdelbaki, et. al., 2016).

**Demanding control over time & work**

The financial safety net that tiny houses provide their dwellers allow them to have more control at their workplaces because they no longer need full-time hours or a high-income job to meet their needs. Advocates have used examples of tiny house owners who have the confidence to convince their bosses to allow them to work less or from home, where others simply quit their jobs to do find something they enjoy more, even if it pays less. Improving affordable housing, and successful gains made to financial stability should allow the working class to have more confidence to do the same, however there are other ways that the working class could collectively achieve more control over their time and work by fighting for new standards that
focus on achieving full-employment, a shorter work-week, more paid leave, and improved employment insurance.

Chris Maisano (2016) believes that full-employment and more leisure time are connected. Full-employment refers to “an economy in which everyone who is willing and able to work has access to a job” (Maisano, 2016, p. 15). Full-employment not only allows more people to have access to a wage that they need for sustenance, but it also dramatically reduces the amount of power that employers have because they can no longer discipline workers who want better treatment “by pointing to the unemployed masses outside the factory gate or the office door” (Maisano, 2016, p. 16) who will gladly replace them for what is being offered. With full-employment, workers gain more confidence to stand up against their employers, because even if they are fired they are likely to find other work quickly that will meet their needs.

Shortening the number of hours that North Americans work in a week is a necessary step towards full-employment. Maisano (2016) explains how mainstream economists use the Non-Accelerating Inflation Rate of Unemployment (NAIRU) to project the number of unemployed people needed to keep wages and prices down. In the US, unemployment is just over 8 percent, which is high enough to strike the fear of being replaced in workers, but too low to cause mass outrage about the lack of opportunities to meet our needs (Maisano, 2016). These numbers are reached by increasing the number of hours that one needs to work to earn enough for sustenance, therefore reducing the amount of people required to do that job. Samuel Gompers explains it simply when he says that “so long as there is one man who seeks employment and cannot obtain it, the hours of labour are too long” (Maisano, 2016, p. 18). To achieve full-employment, workers must demand less hours for the same pay. This will not only be beneficial to workers because they will receive more leisure time without compromising the wages they need to survive, but
because it will force employers to hire more workers to keep the same pace of production – thus limiting unemployment and increasing working class leverage. Scandinavian countries have proven this is possible by decreasing the standard work week and increasing the amount of paid leave, which has allowed more people to participate in the market, while simultaneously allowing more leisure time (Maisano, 2016).

Another way to reduce the fear of replacement that prevents workers from standing up for better conditions is to improve Ontario’s employment insurance (EI) program. The purpose of EI is to provide a safety net for workers in between jobs. By paying a percentage of each paycheck into employment insurance, workers can continue to collect an income to provide their basic needs in a situation where they lose their job. In theory, EI should serve the same purpose that the savings of tiny house dwellers serve: the comfort of knowing that you will still meet your needs while in between employment. However, over time employment insurance has been cut back, reducing the quantity, as well as the duration that workers can collect (Porter, 2015). The current support that the EI program offers forces people to take any job they can find as quickly as possible, “particularly “frequent users” to accept a wider variety of work at considerably lower rates of pay” (Porter, 2015, p. 23), rather than focusing on finding good employment that meets their needs and they enjoy, which might take time to find. Improving the EI program, while simultaneously working towards shorter work weeks and full-employment will provide unemployed workers more desirable opportunities to choose from, with the comfort of knowing that their needs will be met in the process of searching.

**Demanding environmental justice**

Lastly, the environmental stance of tiny houses is misplaced. Though tiny houses are presumably less harmful than a traditional single-family middle-class home, the positive impacts
that they will have on reversing climate change are minimal. The belief that living in a tiny house is a feasible way to reverse climate change is due to the petite bourgeois perspective that the only way to make change is through our individual consumption. This is supported by the ideals of conscious consumerism, where “every purchase you make is a “moral act” – an opportunity to “vote with your dollar” for the world you want to see” (Wicker, 2017). However, “despite increasing awareness towards environmental problems, and social norms more and more obliging individuals for environmental actions, there is too little difference made on the ecological impact levels” (Csutora, 2012, p. 1), by people who refuse to consume unethical products. In reality, climate change is moving at a rapid pace because corporations are choosing to use cost-effective practices that pollute our planet at a massive scale not because consumers are choosing products without an environmental conscious. More effective solutions are collective strategies that will regulate damaging corporate practices, or at the very least make them responsible for their externalities.

Naomi Klein (2014) believes that the “extractive” relationship that the western world has with nature prevents capitalism from being held accountable to repair any damage that they have caused. The lack of environmental conscience justifies the capitalist class’ use of practices that maximize profits regardless of their impact on our shared planet. Fighting for climate change must involve setting limits to what damaging practices the capitalist class can use while simultaneously encouraging states rather than individuals to embrace sustainable technologies that have fewer destructive effects and offer a more promising long term future. These environmental regulations fundamentally contradict the capitalist assumption that the markets should remain untampered, and corporations will oppose necessary changes on the basis that they will prevent the capitalist class from maximizing profits. Because the capitalist class will
not voluntarily change their ways, it is up to the working class to demand changes that will prevent environmental devastation.

Inspiring collective action for real solutions to climate change are increasingly challenging as potential advocates experience “a host of cognitive dissonances that almost invariably add up to inaction” (Turner, 2012). The gradual effects of climate change prevent people from acting because they are not currently affected by the problems and any action they take now “won’t be felt until much later and may only be felt far away” (Turner, 2012, p. 91). Because of these distractions, creating real collective action for environmental justice will require a global collective consciousness that calls on all working-class people, even in areas that will not be affected by certain aspects of climate change, to demand that governments regulate corporate externalities for those who will be impacted first.

**Conclusion**

The tiny house movement has emphasized that the housing needs of the working class are being threatened by increasing unaffordability of private market housing. The neoliberal attack on public access to meeting human needs is felt far and wide, even if not always defined as such.

The petite bourgeois attitude that is evident within tiny house advocacy reinforces the dominant social pressure to act as the ideal neoliberal subject who meets needs based on what they can afford through the market. Tiny house advocates accept the neoliberal ideal however realize that the market does not currently offer housing that allows them to afford their needs and luxury desires. Tiny house advocates have cloaked their demand for a housing model designed for the ideal neoliberal subject as a solution for low-income workers and the housing crisis.
However, in reality, tiny houses are an individual solution, only accessible to those who can afford the privilege and meet their needs within this new level of home-ownership.

By acting on this belief, tiny house advocates may see some improvements to their own standard of living, but it will come at the expense of isolating themselves from the struggle for public assistance and regulation that will help increase access to affordable housing for all, and indeed, undercut the possibility of further improving their own lives. Tiny houses are a dangerous strategy that risks breaking the solidarity between members of the working class from struggling collectively towards regulating a balanced housing stock of subsidized public housing and affordable private market units, as well as demanding wages, benefits and working conditions that allow people to access a decent standard of living and a sustainable planet.

Extending the market to solve the housing crisis is a direct threat to struggles demanding affordable access to housing for all. Though tiny houses may be a more affordable market solution, they are still not accessible to low-income families who cannot meet their needs within them and cannot afford to build one because they must use their wages for what is necessary. Moreover, even for those who could afford tiny houses, it seems clear that doing so involves further restricting the possibility of human flourishing at the same time as capitalist profits skyrocket. By suggesting market extension strategies, we succeed in reducing the cost of social reproduction for the working class, which is more beneficial to the capitalist class who will see those benefits through decreasing wages. Advocating for market extension strategies to assist the working class accepts the neoliberal conditions that are desirable from the perspective of the capitalist class. For working people to truly improve their standard of living, the working class needs to demand more, in the form of more regulation, more social housing and more power within the workplace, instead of living with less.
Future research in this area would benefit from learning the first-person experiences and opinions of low-income and precarious workers. The tiny house literature makes it seem as though low-income people have been invited into the burgeoning community. However, as I’ve argued, despite tiny house advocates speaking from the position of “they” or even “we”, in fact, low-income voices tend to be excluded from tiny house campaigns (see Brown & Strega, 2005). Learning from diverse intersectional experiences within low-income communities about what aspects of tiny houses do or do not meet their needs and circumstances will be valuable work that will help to uncover the bias neoliberal assumptions within the tiny house movement in a new way.
References


