



Fighting Evictions in Alameda, California

New Labor Forum

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California’s affordable housing crunch has created a refugee crisis, as the tech boom and its attendant rising rents and wave of forced evictions has hit especially hard in the Bay Area. A 2015 report from California’s Legislative Analyst’s Office estimated that the state would need to build 210,000 new housing units per year just to keep pace with demand.¹ But it is not happening. Forty-three-year-old Jennifer Gima, who works as a clinical laboratory assistant at Sutter Health in Oakland, describes the visible impact she sees as she drives to work each day from her home in Alameda:

I’ve never seen so many tent cities in all my eleven years of working here. And I see them early in the morning, getting up, going to work. It’s just they can’t afford the rent. They’re not just homeless. I literally see them out there with their little water jugs and they’re brushing their teeth, and then they get in their car, and you can see them in whatever work clothes they have on. They just can’t afford to live out here.

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In the last several years, the landlords of Alameda, where Gima is one of the 56 percent of residents who rent, rather than own, their homes, have also begun evicting tenants for no cause, meaning the landlord does not have to provide a reason for the tenant to vacate. According to residents, many in the middle-class

island town of seventy thousand (which was once home to a naval air base) had perhaps hoped the cruel no-cause evictions that have long plagued predominately urban areas such as San Francisco and Oakland would pass them by. Instead, say organizers for the tenants’ rights group the Alameda Renters’ Coalition (ARC), Alamedans of all economic and racial backgrounds have found themselves targeted for evictions. Gima herself recently received an eviction notice; ARC is helping her and other Alamedans to fight back.

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The Policy Front

California’s history underscores the fact that housing is not yet a guaranteed right. Landlords lobbied for decades to prevent cities and municipalities from passing regulations that would limit their ability to charge the highest rent that the market would bear. In 1995, landlords were able to get the state legislature to pass the Costa-Hawkins Act, which limits how far cities can go in protecting tenants’ rights. It does this by prohibiting most municipalities from establishing rent control over many types of buildings, and by making it possible to raise the rent as much as a landlord wants when a unit is vacated.

Although twenty-three cities in the state do have some form of rent control, few places have

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gone beyond this regulation to force landlords to give a reason for evicting tenants from their home. In addition to this lack of regulation of landlords, the amount of available affordable housing has not gone up significantly,² leaving tenants who cannot pay something like San Francisco's average monthly one-bedroom apartment rent of \$3,000 with a grim set of options.

Mari Perez-Ruiz, president of the Alameda Renters Coalition, says that few issues pit people against profits as starkly as housing. "When people are living on fixed incomes and when you live in a place where the value is on property and people want to make quick money, the human aspect of it sometimes gets ignored." Because the right of landlords to make decisions about their property often trumps the right of tenants to live on that property, tenants in high-demand areas such as the Bay Area find themselves quietly pushed out with no legal recourse and nowhere to go. And, says Gima, the numbing frequency with which this happens can make tenants more fatalistic and less likely to speak up for themselves.

In Alameda, that is changing. ARC formed in 2014 after tenant Angela Palatto Hockabout, who was facing eviction over her inability to pay a 20 percent rent increase, took to Facebook to ask whether others in Alameda were also facing similar conditions. Around twenty people began having house meetings, and Perez-Ruiz says the group might have remained small if not for the actions of Matt Sridhar, a San Francisco-based finance executive who owned the Bay View Apartment complex in Alameda's West End. In November 2015, as the city of Alameda prepared to respond to pressure from the nascent ARC to pass a rent control ordinance, Sridhar wrote the city council a strongly worded e-mail threatening to sell his property and take his money out of the city. The city council passed a moratorium on evictions November 4, 2015 to buy itself time to respond; however, a few days later, Sridhar served sixty-day eviction notices to thirty-three families from the apartments. According to the *East Bay Express* reporting at the time, Sridhar "took advantage of a loophole in the moratorium that allowed evictions if landlords plan to do major capital improvements on the building."³

Sridhar was unapologetic, and Alamedans grew outraged. Fighting such brazen, inhumane evictions became the ARC's primary tactic as it gathered momentum around a campaign to pass a package of tenants' rights policies, including rent control and just-cause evictions. By April 2016, ARC had done the sloggish work of building tenant organizing committees to resist no-cause evictions at apartment buildings around the island, joined the statewide tenants' rights coalition Tenants Together,⁴ and gathered enough signatures to put its package of policies, called M1, on the local ballot. M1's "just cause evictions" policy would force landlords to demonstrate to the city's housing office that any eviction was for a tenant's concrete misdeed, and not simply because the landlord wanted to charge more rent.

ARC did gather the signatures to get M1 on the ballot—and then the California Apartment (CA) Association, a trade and lobbying group that represents landlords, developers, and real estate agents, countered with a measure of its own. ARC member Jenya Cassidy explained, "[The CA Apartment Association's measure] basically put in statute what was already in the city ordinance. So it was a fake thing." The November 2016 election brought heartbreak: ARC's M1 measure went down to defeat, and the CA Apartment Association's measure passed.⁵

ARC redoubled its efforts, this time focusing on getting the Alameda City Council to pass only the just-cause eviction policy that had been in the M1 measure. Just cause looked to be headed for defeat again in June of 2017 by a single vote in the city council; so, Perez-Ruiz said, "Within a two-day period we put [on] a lot of pressure. We followed up with our allies, our coalition partners, the unions, and we advocated." And for the second reading of the ordinance for just-cause evictions, ARC got all three votes needed for a majority. It passed.

In May, ARC launched an effort to create the California Democratic Party Renters' Caucus, the first state lawmakers' caucus dedicated to tenants' rights. In July, the not-yet-official caucus endorsed the Housing Now campaign, a statewide coalition backed by community, faith, and tenant organizing groups that wants to repeal Costa-Hawkins and replace it with enforceable tenants' rights.

These wins came as a result of the grassroots power of the eleven tenant organizing committees and roughly 2,400 activists that ARC has mobilized throughout the city. Perez-Ruiz says that every person who makes an effort is critical to the movement's success. "The seniors—when they are not able to physically move they let somebody drive their cars. And I see the youth out there on the front lines, putting [up] posters, doing the marches, bringing the water, being the cheerleaders," she said.

Perez-Ruiz adds that the group's triple focus—on fighting individual evictions, organizing tenants for grassroots power, and pushing tenants' rights in the public policy arena—also keeps Alamedans from spiraling inward. "There's a special responsibility that it is not just about taking care of our own, and becoming this isolated fight where we take care of our neighbors and ourselves and forget about the rest," she said.

Eviction Defense

Fighting the evictions is the bailiwick of Brad Hirn, who organized hotel and restaurant workers in Chicago before moving to Alameda. Hirn now organizes tenants in San Francisco for his day job, and volunteers in his home community with ARC. His term for the work is "eviction defense—the multi-pronged strategy to keep a person or a group of tenants in their homes as they are fighting eviction." He says his own neighbors next door, a group of mostly African-American tenants in an apartment building, have over the years received various rounds of sixty-day no-cause eviction notices. "And that's the main type of eviction that we are fighting over in Alameda," says Hirn. He said his neighbors have gotten the East Bay Community Law Center to provide legal help, and built a community strategy. This means "lining up local community groups, unions, faith leaders, and just residents throughout the city to stand with the tenants during public actions like rallies. We've held press conferences outside the building."

Gima is also getting support from ARC to stay in her home after her landlord served her with eviction papers which claimed that he was going to conduct an "owner move-in" eviction. Hirn explains that owner-move-in "is a type of

no-fault eviction, meaning the tenant hasn't done anything wrong, but the landlord wants to move himself in to the tenant's unit or move in a family member." In these cases, landlords frequently pay tenants a small relocation fee to get them to move out quickly. Hirn adds that this is a common and increasingly popular type of eviction in the Bay Area, and is also one that's frequently abused. So the landlord will say that he or a family member wants to move in, but never does—and once the tenant is out, the landlord doubles or triples the rent.

Meanwhile, Gima said, she has also been experiencing health challenges: She learned in June that she has a blood clot in her left leg; she is getting a hearing aid because she has lost most of the hearing in one ear; and is having what she calls "a little respiratory issue." Through it all, she has volunteered with ARC. I asked her why she kept fighting instead of simply obeying the eviction order and leaving it behind her.

"I was pretty much raised in Alameda," she said.

And I have tons of friends and families that are being displaced . . . Everybody says, "I'll just take my relocation check, and I'm just going to move out because I don't have the strength or energy." I've got a few medical issues that are kind of going crazy, but for some reason I've found the energy.

Gima said she is also fighting because of her son. "I don't want him to see me quit. To let someone think just because they have the money and they have the power and the ego, that they don't have to abide by the rules."

"We need to change state law if we're going to make real, needed change for renters."

ARC's grassroots tenant organizing strategy is taking hold across the state. In late September, over five hundred tenants and activists came to Alameda and plastered giant signs reading "Homes for All" and "Make Housing Affordable" in the Alameda High School gym. The CA Renters' Assembly⁶ held workshops and strategy

sessions on how to use their collective power to overcome the deep-pocketed landlords and realtors' groups. Participants chanted "Repeal Costa-Hawkins!" and shared stories from the field and a sense of urgency. "Many organizers and renters are impatient to push on our state leaders to take a stand now," said Cassidy. "We need to change state law if we're going to make real, needed change for renters."

Statewide, a tough battle looms over getting rid of the Costa-Hawkins law. But, that weekend in Alameda, said Cassidy, the members of ARC opened their homes and hosted the out-of-towners, sharing their couches, floors, and air mattresses in a display of mutual aid that has been a part of most successful movements for change in America. "It really brings home that this is a grassroots movement when we take turns housing each other for events," she said. When people are living in tents, an act as simple as providing hospitality can fortify everyone for the fights ahead.

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Author Biography

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