



HOUSING JUSTICE LEAGUE NEWSLETTER

October 2022

ABUNDANT HOUSING ATLANTA HOSTS "DANGEROUS DWELLINGS" PANEL

by Ernest

On Wednesday, September 28th, Abundant Housing Atlanta hosted the discussion "Dangerous Dwellings: What Can Be Done". Panelists included Alison Johnson, Executive Director of Housing Justice League; Willoughby Mariano, Investigative Team Reporter for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution; and KaCey Venning, Executive Director of HEY! Helping Empower Youth. The discussion was moderated by Ernest Brown of Abundant Housing Atlanta and ended with audience Q&A. Panelists talked about the daily struggles that come from housing insecurity, how unsafe living conditions negatively impact the health and wellbeing of residents, and how the trauma of housing insecurity harms children's ability to learn in school. Conversation ranged from personal experiences to policy proposals. Abundant Housing Atlanta would like to thank the members of Housing Justice League who attended the event and especially thank Alison Johnson for joining as a panelist. We hope the discussion was an engaging, educational call to action.

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"It goes back to the fact that laws are stacked against tenants, and landlords treat tenants very poorly. They don't keep up the property, they don't listen to what the tenants are asking for, they throw tenants out for any reason they can come up with."



The panel speaks on the dangerous housing units in Atlanta

AN INTERVIEW WITH PSL COMMUNITY ORGANIZER ESTEVAN ON THE FOREST AT COLUMBIA TENANTS' ASSOCIATION

by Graham, Estevan

In June of this year, tenants at the Forest at Columbia apartment complex in Dekalb county received a stunning notice: all tenants would need to vacate in just two months so that the new management, Meridian, could renovate the property. Soon after, the Party for Socialism and Liberation got into contact with the tenants and began helping them to organize. After forming their own tenants' association, the Fighters of the Forest at Columbia, the residents fought back by putting public pressure on both the management and their Dekalb county elected officials, and they won! The evictions were stopped, and they are still in their homes. Below is an interview with Estevan, an organizer with

PSL who worked closely with the tenants and assisted them in their struggle.

How did tenant organizing at Forest at Columbia begin?

I would say that it really goes back to the situation for tenants in general in Atlanta, in Georgia, and really in this country in general. It goes back to the fact that laws are stacked against tenants, and landlords treat tenants very poorly. They don't keep up the property, they don't listen to what the tenants are asking for, they throw tenants out for any reason they can come up with. That's really how it is a lot of places. You can get a nice landlord if you're lucky, but generally the situation is that landlords think they can get away with anything. Right now, there's racist gentrification taking place across the Atlanta area whereby these properties that landlords have let go downhill because they're not interested in providing nice things for low

income, working class people are now having their tenants kicked out so that slight renovations can be made and a higher-paying group of people can move in. That's why the Old Fourth Ward looks completely different, and that's why so many people who used to live in Atlanta are getting pushed out. That's the context that I think is really crucial to start with. At this complex in particular, the landlords decided to throw out 200 people under the guise of renovations, which was just a lie, just an excuse excuse to get rid of people. They could have done renovations for those tenants, but what they wanted was just to get rid of them and replace them with a higher paying group of tenants. Once that happened, the tenants' movement got involved, and we're a part of the tenants' movement. We started talking to people and started organizing.

Who are the targets of the organizing efforts?

Meridian for sure. Meridian is the management company. They took over the property about two months before they made the decision to throw everybody out. That's they're business model. I've heard that they've done it elsewhere. They come into low-income properties, they throw everybody out, and they change it up. Meridian makes

about \$46 million per year. It's a capitalist property management corporation that's only interested in profit. They're the main target because they're the ones who are really pushing this forward. However, we've also had to target the Dekalb county commissioners. They are responsible for this area, they are elected to represent those tenants. They are not elected to represent these rental corporations. We targeted them because we wanted to demand that they do their job and stick up for the interests of renters. After targeting the board of commissioners, we realized that getting them to act on behalf of the tenants wasn't going to be straightforward. It seems that they prioritize their relationship with businesses and rental corporations over their relationship to regular people who live in the area.

What were some of the tactics that the owners and the county government used to try to stop the organizing?

First they ignored us. They didn't answer the phone, didn't respond to our emails. We started rallying, and they tried to ignore that as well. They began to use their security team to intimidate tenants physically and to stop them from organizing. Organizers and tenants were being harassed and our

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"We stayed on top of management and demanded that they honor tenants' right to security and to access their mail in a secured mailbox."



Source: Chauncey Alcorn, Capital B News

meetings were interrupted. They kicked us off the property. All of this was a violation of our right to organize. They even tried to get the police to kick us off the property. It's a shocking waste of taxpayer money to have police called in on behalf of a greedy landlord to throw organizing tenants off the property.

Now that there's been a promise from management to stop the evictions, what is the tenants' union fighting for now?

The struggle continues. The landlord said they were going to raise the rent, in some cases by 45%. But they haven't even made the renovations to the property, which are sorely needed. It's ridiculous, so we're fighting these rent increases and fighting for the tenants' association's right to exist and not be kicked off the property. We're fighting to improve the property not for profit or

gentrification or whatever the property management wants, but for what tenants want. They want the property to be nicer.



VICTORY AT CITYVIEWS APARTMENT COMPLEX

by Deborah

Here at Cityviews we are finally able to go to our mailboxes without fear. Our mailboxes have been vandalized for months. Bills, notices, and other pieces of mail have been absent from delivery. Receiving any mail is important, especially bills concerning your apartments. Many reports were made to management, the Post Office (who deferred responsibility to



Stanton Oaks Tenant Association meeting

management), and police officers (who deferred responsibility to management). We stayed on top of management and demanded that they honor tenants' right to security and to access their mail in a secured mailbox. Finally, within this week we are able to go to our mailboxes without being scared of our mail being taken, opened, or found on the ground.

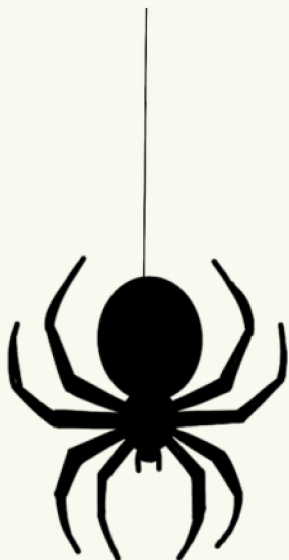
This saga is a reminder that if you stay encouraged and you stay on top of management, you will have victory!



STANTON OAKS TENANTS' ASSOCIATION MAKES THEIR VOICE HEARD

by Deborah

Kudos to Stanton Oaks tenants Association for their hard work of holding their owners accountable. Stanton Oaks Tenants Association has quarterly meetings with Owners executives to discuss the property. This executive flies every three months to care for the concerns and oversee management operations, and responsibilities to its tenants. The meeting consisted of one one with the owners of Woody properties. The tenants spoke up and showed they care about their quality of living environment. Their concerns and voices were heard. Encouragement:



"The tenants spoke up and showed they care about their quality of living environment.

Their concerns and voices were heard."



The Eviction
Defense
Working Group
meets every
Tuesday at 5:00
PM on Zoom.
To get involved,
email
evictiondefense
@housingjustice
league.org

Rise UP tenants, it's your voice that counts!

One December 3th 2022 will be our day of end of the year meeting and celebration. You are cordially invited.

EVICTIION DEFENSE WORKING GROUP UPDATE

by Anh-Ton

At Eviction Defense, we've been reflecting on our organizing practices and our hotline. We are currently cleaning our hotline data and conducting an initial analysis. We plan to share this data with the community to get feedback on questions and concerns that need to be answered. Another way we are taking stock of our organizing practices is by inviting other groups fighting for housing justice to our meetings. Recently, we met with Estevan of the Party for Socialism and Liberation to learn about their work with tenants in the Forest at Columbia apartments. We learned many useful tactics from them. We also invited Jessica from Action NC to speak with us about their tenant hotline. She provided many insights, and also pointed us towards their participation in a national campaign against corporate landlords called *Renters Rising*. Landlord accountability is horrifically low in the state of

Georgia due to weak tenant protections, allowing slumlords to prey on tenants. Seeing examples of organizing work against unjust landlords and how other groups continue to refine their strategies has given us inspiration on how to continue our work. We invite any and all to join us! We meet every Tuesday at 5 PM on Zoom. Email evictiondefense@housingjusticeleague.org to get involved!

BELTLINE FOR ALL WORKING GROUP UPDATE

by Phill

The BeltLine for All Working Group is excited to be planning a documentary screening and panel for mid-November, and are working with Director Caletta Harris of No Address and Councilmember Liliana Bakhtiari's office to host it at the Georgia Beer Garden. Keep your eye out for an invite and in case details change, but in the meantime save Thursday, November 17th at 6pm as the tentative date and time!

Time for a policy refresher! Years ago, volunteers and staff, primarily from the BeltLine for All Working Group, assembled the Housing Justice League's Affordable Housing Policy Package to present to policymakers at the city and



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state level. This year, volunteers and staff, primarily from the Tenant Working Group and Eviction Defense put together a Tenant Bill of Rights that was recently presented to city councilmembers. Below I've summarized what ideas the documents advocate for separately, and underneath that I've listed some of the ideas that the documents have in common.

Housing Justice League Policy Package

1. Redefine Affordability: define the city's affordability standards to be for people who make 0-30% of AMI (Area Median Income).
2. Extend Affordability: require affordability for at least 50 years for units where requirements/subsidies are given to developers for affordable units.
3. Public Land for Housing: move city-owned, vacant property into development of affordable housing.
4. Homeowner Property Tax Breaks: for low-income homeowners facing rapidly rising property values and taxes.
5. Landlord Tax Incentive: giving property tax breaks to landlords to maintain affordability of units.

Housing Justice League Tenant Bill of Rights

1. Right to Counsel, guaranteeing renters' access to legal counsel in eviction proceedings.
2. Establish an Office of the Tenant Advocate, whose first step should be to set up a lease registry that tracks rental properties' rent prices and lease terms, and who generally will focus on enforcing existing tenant protections to reduce uninhabitable conditions, illegal evictions, discrimination, and harassment of renters. They should also lead the city to redefine the city's affordability of AMI to 30% from 50%, including the cost of utilities (an idea also found in our Policy Package).
3. Inform Tenants of their Rights, landlords must provide new tenants with information on their rights when they move in.
4. Ban the Box, to ensure discrimination on the basis of previous evictions be prevented in Atlanta.
5. Right to Cure, giving renters written notice for a chance to back pay rent before an eviction proceeding can be started, avoiding associated court costs, fees, and an eviction filing on the tenant's rental history.

The Beltline
for All Working
Group meets
one the second
and fourth
Tuesdays of
each month. To
get involved,
please email
policy
@housingjustice
league.org



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Policies found on both the Policy Package and Tenant Bill of Rights

1. Rent Control/Stabilization, to ensure long term affordability of housing
2. Right to Renew/Right of First Refusal (TOPA, Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act), to allow tenants to be given the chance to buy their property if their landlord is selling it, with access to low-interest financing to maintain its affordability.

What do you think about these policy ideas? What do you think is missing from this list of priorities? For example, we've heard from Legal Aid about the need for the City of Atlanta to turn housing inspection reports to the corresponding renter immediately (as opposed to waiting for months and sometimes only turning them over in legal proceedings). We've also heard from our legal volunteers about the need for a court-ordered escrow account where renters can pay monthly rent to the court instead of paying their landlord who is out of compliance with livability

standards. Another idea is receivership, where a property that is not being maintained up to legal livability standards for a period of time is turned over to the court to ensure it is brought up to standard and residents can avoid being displaced due to the company's bankruptcy or lack of property upkeep. If you have feedback on these ideas or want to offer a new one, want to help share these policy ideas with your councilmember and other policymakers, or want to join us for our 2nd & 4th Tuesday of the Month meetings, you can reach out to our BeltLine for All Working Group at: policy@housingjusticeleague.org

