



# HOUSING JUSTICE LEAGUE NEWSLETTER

September 2022

## A CAMPAIGN TO CREATE BETTER LIVING CONDITIONS AT CHESHIRE BRIDGE HIGHRISE

by Concerned Residents of Cheshire Bridge Highrise

Cheshire Bridge is a highrise community located at 2170 Cheshire Bridge Rd NE-Atlanta, Georgia. The community is a 162-unit apartment community occupied by persons 55 and older or disabled. The building was constructed in 1978. It is owned by Atlanta Housing and currently managed by Integral Property Management.

Last summer, a group of residents formed to request that the Owners and Management improve conditions in the building. In addition to serious concerns about air quality related to mold and asbestos, one of the top resident concerns is the level of lead that appears to be in the building's water system.

Testing in the water system last fall revealed lead that exceeded the EPA action level in some of the sampled units. Management agreed to distribute bottled water

### IN THIS ISSUE:

- A Campaign to Create Better Living Conditions at Cheshire Bridge Highrise
- Georgia For All Coalition Holds Meeting for New Member Orgs
- Tenant Working Group Update
- Organizations Across the Country Demand that Millenia is Held Accountable
- The Japanese Housing Crisis and Its Mark on the JRPG Genre

*"We press on to resolve these ongoing issues, and we are thankful for all the little victories along the way. We see a future where the serious threats to resident health in the Cheshire Bridge Highrise building, as many as they are, will ultimately be a thing of the past."*

*-Concerned Residents of Cheshire Bridge Highrise*



Cheshire Bridge Highrise apartment building

until the situation was dealt with. At first, they distributed 12 water bottles to each resident each week. The group of concerned residents knew that this was insufficient to have clean water for both drinking and cooking.

In response, Concerned Residents of Cheshire Bridge Highrise wrote a series of letters to Management and Atlanta Housing. Demands included the provision of more water bottles, placement of water filters in every unit, and details on a permanent solution to the lead contamination. Integral and AHA understood that our demands were of a serious nature in part due to support from the Housing Justice League, which residents had connected with over the hotline.

After weighing the expense of it all, Management finally arranged to have a water filter installed in all 162 units. That project started on April 4, 2022.

Filters were installed over the course of eight days, an entire floor per day until the project was completed.

This is just one of our concerns but there are more that need attention. For example, the warranty on the installed cold water filters states that if hot water flows through the filter, the warranty would no longer be good on those filters. Hot water damages the filter over time, and use of the water filters are no longer effective for filtering out lead. Cheshire Bridge needs to notify residents of this, because the nature of the building's plumbing creates a situation where sometimes, when you turn on the cold water spigot, the hot water comes out first. The building needs to upgrade from this temporary filter to hot and cold water filters for the entire building. We also have issues concerning asbestos in the ceiling, and lead in the paint sealing some of the bathtubs.



*"The GFA coalition aims to end this ban on rent control and bring just-cause-eviction legislation to Georgia by gathering together progressive, community-led, democracy-based organizations from across the state."*

We press on to resolve these ongoing issues, and we are thankful for all the little victories along the way. We see a future where the serious threats to resident health in the Cheshire Bridge Highrise building, as many as they are, will ultimately be a thing of the past.

## **GEORGIA FOR ALL COALITION HOLDS MEETING FOR NEW MEMBER ORGS**

by Graham

On September 15th, the Georgia for All coalition gathered individuals and organizations who were interested in joining the fight to bring rent stabilization to Georgia. Rents have been skyrocketing everywhere across the state, including Atlanta, Albany, Savannah, and other cities, and municipal and county governments have been unable to put a stop to the trend due to a statewide ban on rent control that was passed in 1984. Additionally, tenants have almost no protections from displacement and eviction in Georgia. Landlords are allowed to increase rent at lease renewal by any amount they want, and they are not even required to allow a tenant to renew their lease. The GFA coalition aims to end this ban on rent control and bring just-cause-eviction legislation to Georgia by

gathering together progressive, community-led, democracy-based organizations from across the state.

The meeting was well attended, with just under fifty participants joining. Some were representatives from organizations that are already a part of GFA, including Georgia Community Coalition, Housing Justice League, SPLC Action Fund, S.A.F.E Place, Senior Citizen Council of Cobb County, Cobb County SCLC, National Faith Homebuyers, We Thrive Riverside Renters Association, and Cobb County NAACP. However, most of the attendees were reps of organizations interested in joining the coalition, including the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the Party for Socialism and Liberation, and others. The discussion focused mainly on the governance structure of the coalition and the expectations of members. The coalition will have a core team made up of representatives from all of the member organizations. There will also be working groups, which will focus on more specific work for the coalition, like communications, fundraising, organizing, and research. Attendees of the meeting had the opportunity to split off to see which working group was appealing to them and how they could best contribute to



SEPTEMBER 2022

*"Atlanta City Council agreed to pass city legislation to make Right to Counsel a reality for Atlanta residents after Housing Justice League (HJL) brought the Tenant Bill of Rights (TBOR) to them over the course of several meetings."*

the coalition. The meeting ended with discussion on what day and time the coalition will have its monthly member meeting, which will be decided soon.

## **TENANT WORKING GROUP UPDATE**

by Emma

A little update from the Tenant Working Ground (TWG)! About a month ago, members from Eviction Defense (ED) and TWG canvassed in the Royal Oaks apartment community in southwest Atlanta. The goal of this canvass was to encourage tenants to want to organize around the maintenance issues and harassment that many have been facing there and offer resources and info about upcoming meetings that the working groups will be holding. Contact information was collected during that canvass so that we are able to follow up with tenants we spoke to via phonebanking and we discussed planning a potential follow up canvass/training if tenants show interest in organizing.

TWG has been working on establishing more clear roles within the group and finding a flow to their regular meetings and work that they do as a group. TWG sat in on an ED meeting to observe and learn from them.

Many from TWG are also a part of a civic engagement fellowship that is doing ground canvassing around tenants rights as it relates to the upcoming election and electing those that will change the harmful policies that disadvantage and harm so many across the State of Georgia. The fellows recently canvassed and collected signatures for the Georgia For All Coalition (GFAC) petition that calls for rent stabilization, as well as informed them about their upcoming tenants association meeting. TWG came to support the meeting led by Deborah on 9/1 which sparked a lot on conversation amongst the residents that attended.

TWG has had a new member join the past couple Thursday meetings who is very enthusiastic about getting involved in the organization as well as organizing in their own apartment community around issues that they and their neighbors have been facing. TWG offered to help with canvassing and a potential training in the future.

Lastly but certainly not least, a recent win for tenants! Atlanta City Council agreed to pass city legislation to make Right to Counsel a reality for Atlanta residents after Housing Justice League (HJL) brought the Tenant Bill of Rights (TBOR) to



*"Over the past several months, Millennia tenants, housing organizers, lawyers, and other allies have come together to call for HUD to take action against The Millennia Companies... Millennia has demonstrated a clear and disturbing pattern of mismanagement and neglect."*



Eviction Defense and Tenant Working Group team up for canvassing

them over the course of several meetings. Alison recently met with councilperson Liliana Bakhtiari who said they'd like to have legislation passed by the end of this year. \$500,000 in seed money has already been allocated for council, but TWG will be organizing tenants around the city in order to make them aware of this change in policy and to keep the pressure on city council to ensure that funding is allocated annually and this program is sustainable for years to come. Going forward we also want to push for right to cure next so that more evictions are prevented in the first place and tenants avoid having to fight for their homes in court.

## **ORGANIZATIONS ACROSS THE COUNTRY DEMAND THAT MILLENIA IS HELD ACCOUNTABLE**

Over the past several months, Millennia tenants, housing organizers, lawyers, and other allies have come together to call for HUD to take action against The Millennia Companies. Millennia is the Ohio-based owner of Forest Cove, and it owns and manages 30,000 units across 26 states. Many Millennia complexes experience severe issues similar to those in Forest Cove. The Millennia Resistance Campaign is working to push HUD to honor eight demands that will support Millennia tenants, and lead to greater accountability for Millennia. To learn more about the campaign and how you can support, please follow @MillenniaResistance on Instagram and

*"HUD currently deals with poor housing conditions in a piecemeal, building by building manner. Millennia's actions serve as an example of why that is problematic. HUD OIG needs to conduct a national investigation to reveal the root causes of poor conditions within HUD's project-based Section 8 portfolio, with a specific focus on disparities in property conditions by race, national origin, and familial status."*

@ResistMillennia on Twitter. Below is the demand letter that the campaign sent to HUD on August 2nd:

Dear Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Marcia L. Fudge,

We write to you as a coalition of tenants, community organizers, lawyers, and other allies who are deeply concerned about the track record of Millennia Management Company LLC and Millennia Housing Mgmt. LTD., ("Millennia"), as well as other project-based Section 8 owners and managers who are not being held accountable for their failure to maintain HUD housing and keep families safe.

Millennia is one of the largest owners and managers of HUD project-based Section 8 properties in the country. As outlined in the April 4, 2022 letter to you, Millennia has demonstrated a clear and disturbing pattern of mismanagement and neglect. However, Millennia is not an outlier, and HUD's response to it is not unique. On a daily basis, tenants in project-based Section 8 developments throughout this country experience terrible housing conditions. Despite being informed of these problems on several occasions, HUD has

failed to take decisive action against problem owners. As a result, families continue to suffer.

In light of these issues, we are asking for meaningful, systemic change of HUD's response to poor housing conditions in HUD's project-based Section 8 stock. We urge HUD to facilitate the following measures:

1. A national investigation into Millennia properties and other problem owners with a pattern of failing to maintain HUD housing: HUD currently deals with poor housing conditions in a piecemeal, building by building manner. Millennia's actions serve as an example of why that is problematic. HUD OIG needs to conduct a national investigation to reveal the root causes of poor conditions within HUD's project-based Section 8 portfolio, with a specific focus on disparities in property conditions by race, national origin, and familial status. HUD also needs to investigate and evaluate what policies permitted one company to take over management and/or ownership of thousands of troubled units across the country.
2. HUD must increase and improve its oversight and enforcement of its condition standards to ensure it is



*"HUD must offer tenants in housing with terrible conditions real choices that keep their housing affordable, including a tenant protection voucher or a temporary, affordable unit to live in while their current unit is rehabilitated."*

providing decent, safe, and sanitary housing to families.

It is unconscionable that tenants who live in housing created and supported with federal dollars continue to face terrible housing conditions. HUD must improve its oversight and enforcement of conditions standards and that begins by providing tenants with an active role in the inspection process. It also means that HUD must utilize existing tools to address poor housing conditions when owners fail to comply, including the issuance of civil money penalties, transfer of the Section 8 contract, suspension or debarment, receivership, and requiring the owner to secure new management. HUD should also extend to project-based Section 8 tenants the same right public housing tenants have to abate their rent or to move if their housing cannot be made habitable in a reasonable period of time. Additionally, HUD must take an immediate additional enforcement action following the expiration of the compliance period listed in the notice of default/notice of violation.

**3. Make Millennial tenants whole.** Tenants in Millennial properties have been forced to use their own limited resources to maintain their units, pay for injuries and

medical care related to injuries caused by the poor housing conditions, and expenses for hotel stays and other moving expenses when the conditions become too hazardous. Tenants shouldered these expenses because of HUD's failure to hold Millennial accountable. HUD should have to reimburse tenants for these costs or direct Millennial to cover these expenses.

**4. Provide safe, affordable housing choices to residents.** Tenants in distressed properties are often forced to move out of properties when the conditions become too hazardous to their health and well-being. Given the dearth of affordable housing, many end up homeless, doubled up with family, or living in new housing that they cannot afford. HUD must offer tenants in housing with terrible conditions real choices that keep their housing affordable, including a tenant protection voucher or a temporary, affordable unit to live in while their current unit is rehabilitated.

**5. Honor the demands of local tenants associations:** Many Millennial properties have active tenant associations, who have long been on the front lines trying to improve housing conditions and hold Millennial accountable. Some of these associations have created their own sets of

*"In addition to addressing the immediate demands tenant leaders have, tenants should also be treated as partners in the long term preservation process, and their feedback about the future of their housing should be solicited whenever possible."*



Forest Cove apartments, an apartment complex in Atlanta owned by Millennia

demands to Millennia based on the specific needs of their complexes, which have gone unheard by HUD and Millennia. HUD and Millennia should meet with these tenant leaders, listen to their concerns and demands, and honor their requests.

**6. Include tenants and tenant associations in decision-making about the future of their housing:** In addition to addressing the immediate demands tenant leaders have, tenants should also be treated as partners in the long term preservation process, and their feedback about the future of their housing should be solicited whenever possible. Especially when the owner does not correct a property's deficiencies after being warned by HUD, HUD must consult with tenants about what they would like to happen next, including the need for new ownership or management.

**7. Protect HUD tenants' Right to Organize.** Millennia tenants who attempt to organize report a pattern of harassment and violation of tenants' Right to Organize under 24 CFR Part 245. Again, this is not an outlier - tenant harassment and retaliation by owners and managers is all too common. Unfortunately, it is also all too common for HUD not to investigate and take actions against these owners and managers. Using 24 CFR part 245 power, HUD should investigate and respond to these tenant complaints and assess civil monetary penalties for right to organize violations by Millennia management and others. HUD should address this pattern at Millennia by securing a written commitment that Millennia will recognize legitimate tenant associations and respect tenants rights throughout its project-based Section 8 portfolio.



*"HUD should focus the allocation of Sec. 514 funding to develop local tenant organizations and local organizations with a demonstrated history of supporting tenants' preservation efforts."*

8. HUD should meaningfully fund resident organizing activities. HUD should annually include a request for \$10 M in Section 514 funding to support tenant organizing activities, tenant capacity building activities, and tenant-led preservation activities. HUD should focus the allocation of Sec. 514 funding to develop local tenant organizations and local organizations with a demonstrated history of supporting tenants' preservation efforts.

We are pleased that members of your staff have agreed to meet with representatives from our coalition on Wednesday, August 17th. We look forward to discussing these points further, and we hope that this meeting will be the start of a longer effort to bring justice and relief to Millennial tenants, and all tenants living in substandard HUD housing.

Sincerely,

22nd Avenue Apartments  
Cordoba Tenants Association  
American Friends Service  
Committee — Atlanta  
Economic Justice Program  
Gabriel Towers Tenants Union  
Housing Justice League  
Kansas City Tenants Union  
Mass Alliance of HUD tenants  
Memphis Tenants Union  
Metropolitan Tenants  
Organization

National Alliance of HUD  
Tenants  
National Housing Law Project  
Tenant Association of City View

## **THE JAPANESE HOUSING CRISIS AND ITS MARK ON THE JRPG GENRE**

by Amram

The JRPG (Japanese role playing game) is a staple of the gaming community. Series like Final Fantasy and Persona have brought this genre to the mainstream and are enticing more players every day. Whether it's four heroes in a line taking turns to fight, monster catching madness, or a frantic action brawling, JRPGs have used many different concepts to deliver exciting gameplay, portray interesting characters, and tell compelling stories. Another thing that seems to show up in multiple JRPGs is conflict involving housing. Whether it's Ys Seven, Dragon Quest 8, or Xenoblade Chronicles, housing as a conflict is a JRPG staple almost as common as limit breaks.

What is it about JRPGs that encourages them to use serious issues such as housing or economic inequality for story material? Art imitates life, so the evils of the real world can make interesting material for the fake one, but housing



*"The government of Japan constantly subsidized its best performing businesses... These were the main ingredients of the eventual bubble that Japan would enjoy in the 80s."*

seems like a specific issue I've encountered in more than a few of the JRPGs I've played recently.

JRPGs are games primarily developed by Japanese creators. This means they are games developed by Japanese culture, Japanese history, and a Japanese point of view. The experiences of the creators of these games will eventually be put into their work. My guess is that the Japanese housing crisis had a profound effect on the stories of JRPGs. A major economic event like that more than likely had effects on various facets of Japanese fiction.

#### **The Economic Collapse and the Lost Decade**

The housing crisis in Japan was part of a larger economic bubble happening inside and outside the country. Japan was an economic powerhouse in the late 80s. This was mostly due to exported automobiles and electronics. While Nissans and Nintendos make a good buck, Japan's meteoric economic rise in the 80s was due to multiple factors happening in concert with each other.

One of the main parts was the Plaza Accord. The Plaza Accord was an agreement between five countries to reduce the strength of the dollar against the German and Japanese currencies through money markets.

The main reason for the Plaza Accord was to make America more competitive in global markets. A dollar that was TOO strong made it cheaper for international consumers to buy products from other countries. In addition to the Plaza Accord, Japan had business entities known as keiretsu. Keiretsu are large related companies across various industries operating under a similar banner or brand name. Many of them are organized around a supporting bank. An example would be Mitsubishi. They have the Bank, Heavy Industries, Corporation and Motors subsidiaries.

An additional benefit to the keiretsu of the time was the neoliberal assistance from the Japanese government. The government of Japan constantly subsidized its best performing businesses, and many American business owners found this practice unfair. These were the main ingredients of the eventual bubble that Japan would enjoy in the 80s. A strong yen made international investments cheap and commonplace for Japanese corporations. The economic strength enjoyed by Japan caused an optimistic environment for money to come and go very rapidly and for a speculative asset economy (that included skyrocketing real estate prices).

*"The overconfidence eventually led to a crash that devastated the Japanese economy and caused a long period of depreciation for the yen. This period in Japanese economic history is known as the Lost Decade. The Lost Decade was a transformative time not only for the economy, but also for the people and culture of Japan."*

As with all bubbles, this one burst as well. The overconfidence eventually led to a crash that devastated the Japanese economy and caused a long period of depreciation for the yen. This period in Japanese economic history is known as the Lost Decade. The Lost Decade was a transformative time not only for the economy, but also for the people and culture of Japan. Some who lived through the asset bubble described it as a financially wealthy, but morally hollow time; it's during this period that we can recognize and desire for agency and a shift in what's valued as important through the culture.

#### The Role of Culture during the Lost Decade

Some experts of Japanese culture suggest that otaku culture (anime, manga, and video games) might have the potential to hold messages of resistance against the status quo of the Lost Decade that was overwhelmed by right-wing politics. In a society where the voice of the left is weak or nonexistent, art can be an outlet to express those messages where we otherwise wouldn't get them. We have to be aware that these products are still made for profit, and more-or-less have to be green lit by the powers that be. In my opinion, executives that control the trademarks and

pull strings may not always be aware enough to recognize the subsurface messages of resistance. We should also note that otaku culture has an equal capacity for right-wing and nationalist messages as well. Another interesting note about otaku culture in Japan is that the divide between high and low culture isn't as wide as in the states. While video games, manga and anime are a subculture, it's not viewed as much as a juvenile media as it would be in America.

I think a shining example of resistance in otaku culture can be found in Final Fantasy VII. The original Final Fantasy VII was released in 1997 and contains a message of environmentalism. The game starts out with your character helping an eco-terrorist organization fighting against a major corporation (quite possibly a keiretsu) sucking energy from the planet for profit. With the current events of 2020 and the remake, renewed focus on the leftist messages of Final Fantasy VII have reached the forefront of popular consciousness again.

You can tell a lot about a culture by who their villains are. The evils of fiction offer a window into who we think the real life monsters are. In the case of Final Fantasy VII, that monster is unregulated corporate interests. At least for

*"You can tell a lot about a culture by who their villains are. The evils of fiction offer a window into who we think the real life monsters are."*

about half of the original release of the game, the Shinra corporation is a major antagonist. Most of the problems Cloud and his party face in the world can be traced back to Shinra and their unending hunger for more profits. It's hard to say that recent economic events had no effect on Shinra's plot in the story. In a similar case, a major anime antagonist was inspired by Japanese real estate moguls. While most of the examples in this article have been allegories up to this point, let's look at a game that approaches the housing bubble directly.

The *Yakuza* series revolves around a Japanese yakuza family known as the Tojo Clan and (for about 7 games at least) its star member Kazuma Kiryu. The plots are long, intriguing, and filled with memorable characters. *Yakuza* games are JRPGs set in modern Tokyo. The heroes of these games deal less with dragons and wizards and more with corrupt politicians and money launderers.

In 2015, Sega released *Yakuza 0* for Japanese audiences. As the sixth main game in the series, this story takes a look at how Kiryu and Majima (another major *Yakuza* character) got their start in the business in the year 1988. This means the game takes place during the height of the bubble, and

almost all aspects of the game reflect this. The in-game economy has not only shifted to reflect the influence of the bubble, but also the plot, combat, and skill progression are all built around money. Much like the bubble of the real-world Japan, money is the end-all-be-all in the world of *Yakuza 0*. *Yakuza* producer Toshihiro Nagoshi made a comment on the spirit of 1980s Japan they tried to capture in this game.

"Nobody had a problem spending money and they had more spirit in them. But if you were to ask if they were richer in heart than they are today, that's not exactly the case ..."

The game also addresses housing as an issue in Japanese society at the time. Not only does the plot center around a small piece of land, but you'll have the opportunity to make money as a real estate speculator yourself. Through vitriol and violence, the developers of *Yakuza 0* immerses players within 1988 Japan and its destructive housing bubble. In addition to the rampant homelessness and closing businesses, murders and backroom deals are going on in fictional Tokyo for real estate deals worth billions of yen.

If you would like to read more by Amram, including the full version of this piece, visit their blog:

[medium.com/@TrashboatDaGoat](https://medium.com/@TrashboatDaGoat)

