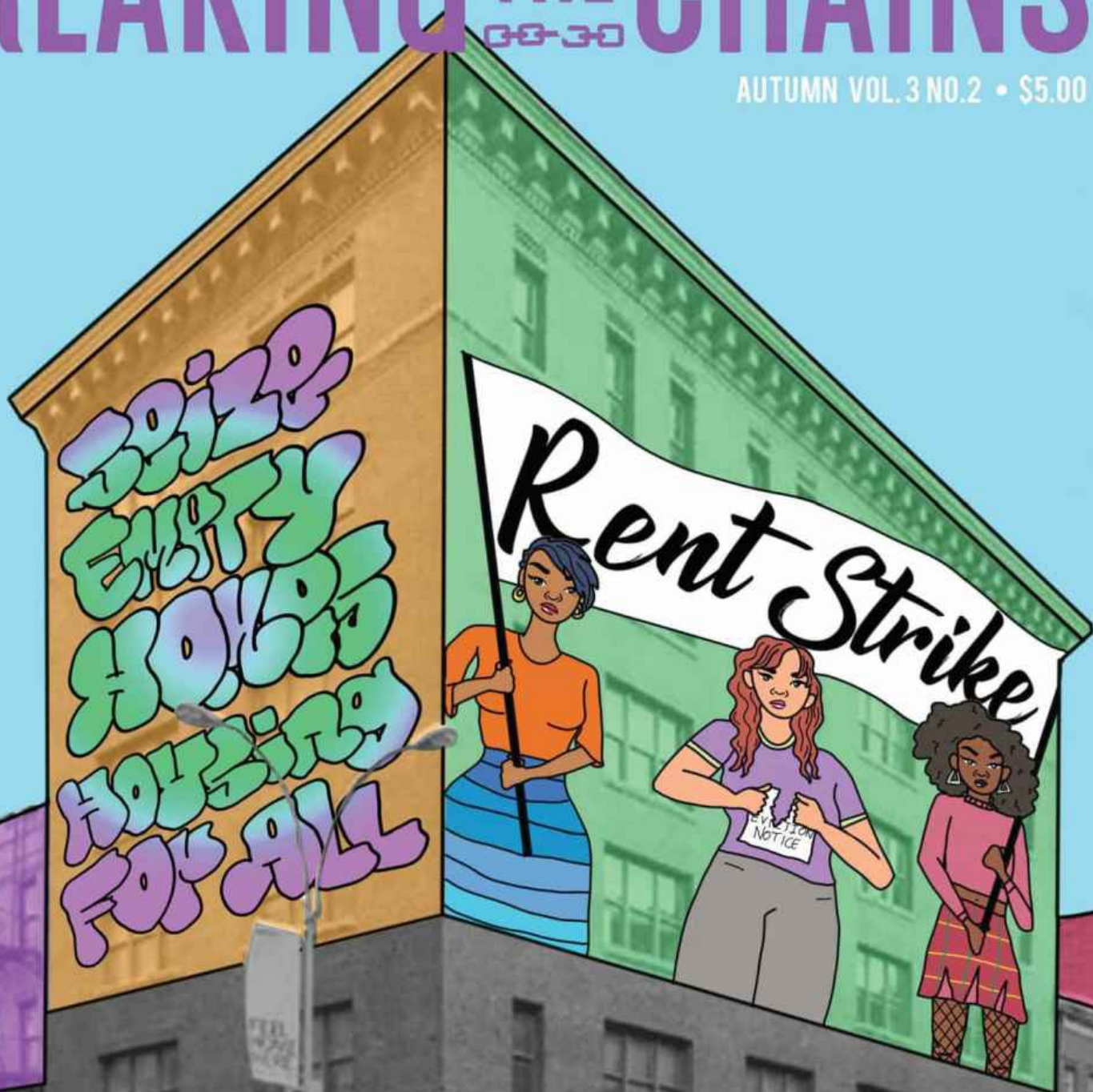


A SOCIALIST PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN'S LIBERATION

BREAKING THE CHAINS

AUTUMN VOL. 3 NO. 2 • \$5.00



THE HOUSING ISSUE

A publication of the Party for Socialism and Liberation

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Breaking the Chains (ISSN 2473-6171) is published regularly by Liberation News, 3041 Mission St. #151, San Francisco, CA 94110. Articles may be reprinted with credit to Breaking the Chains.

Submissions and letters can be directed to:

Breaking the Chains c/o Liberation News, 3181 Mission St. #13, San Francisco, CA 94110.

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Williana Burroughs

Racism, evictions and the way forward

Written by Monica Cruz

“If incarceration had come to define the lives of men from impoverished [B]lack neighborhoods, eviction was shaping the lives of women. Poor

[B]lack men were locked up.

Poor [B]lack women were locked out.”

— Matthew Desmond, author of “Evicted”

In 2016, one million households were evicted. This is the same as during the peak of the 2010 housing crisis when banks seized one million homes. In an epidemic disproportionately affecting the South and Midwest, cities like Richmond, Virginia, have issued eviction notices to one in nine renter households.

The structural legacies of the racism foundational to the U.S. economy and society is real. Racist local and federal policies designed to prevent the Black community from getting and keeping housing are still felt today. The current housing crisis is even more present in the Black community because of policies dating back to the New Deal. Capitalism’s drive for profit, the legacy of racism, as well as continued racist practices and sexism collude to economically suppress African American women.

According to Matthew Desmond, between 1991 and 2013, the percentage of renter households paying at least half of their income for housing rose from 21 to 30 percent, a trend that disproportionately affected African American and Latino households.

This trend particularly affects Black women, who in cities like Milwaukee make up 30 percent of evictions but only 9.6 percent of the population. Black women were and are prevented from attaining home ownership and housing stability by deliberate exclusion from loans and credit.

Women also have fewer employment opportunities and are paid less than working men overall. Beyond low wages, children can pose a challenge to single mothers who may need to pay more for larger rental units to accommodate their families. Additionally, women may hesitate to report domestic violence to avoid state involvement and potential eviction by a

misogynist landlord that views the women's problems as bad for their property values.

The Equal Rights Center studied whether Black families with children face discrimination using housing vouchers to rent homes. All of the participants were Black women and more than half faced barriers in attempting to use a Housing Choice Voucher. It takes years to get on the list to even attain a voucher, and one can lose these vouchers if not used within 60 days. Housing discrimination, however, extends beyond voucher discrimination, and has been embedded into the fabric of housing policies in the United States.

From the 1930s to 1960s, housing discrimination targeting Black Americans became a central feature of local, state and federal policy, especially as Black Americans migrated from the rural South to the urban North. The policies created federal housing programs that deliberately segregated African Americans.

The Federal Housing Administration was founded in 1934, as part of the New Deal, to handle the nation's housing shortage during the height of the Great Depression. The agency was explicitly created for two reasons: to increase housing and home ownership, and institutionalize housing segregation through the denying of mortgages based on race and ethnicity, known as redlining.

During the Great Depression, many white families, mostly working-class, lost their homes. The government began a program to build public housing — for white people only — in cities across the country, and they built a few segregated projects for African Americans. It is important to note that public housing began as an attempt to address a housing shortage; it was not a welfare program.

Redlining started as a New Deal policy even though it is associated with the 1950s. The FHA tasked itself with providing single-family housing for

lower- and middle-class whites. African Americans and other communities of color were shut out of new suburban communities and pushed into urban housing projects. The FHA justified outright discrimination by saying that the property values of the white families' homes being insured would decrease if African Americans bought homes in the same neighborhood. As homeownership boomed in the 1950s, African Americans were left out.

The FHA also subsidized construction companies who were mass-producing subdivisions for whites, with the stipulation that none be sold to African Americans. Private construction of white suburban developments attracted many families. Public housing projects allocated to white people remained largely vacant while projects for African Americans had long waiting lists.

The situation became so bad that the government began to allow African Americans to move into empty white projects. By the mid-1960s, manufacturing industries began to leave major cities. Black people living in urban areas were losing their jobs and becoming poorer. The government began to subsidize Black housing projects, leading them to become the underfunded and dilapidated slums that we associate with public housing projects today.

The Federal Housing Administration also used redlining, which prohibited the issuing of mortgages in or near predominantly Black neighborhoods. They created maps of every metropolitan area, which were color-coded by the Homeowners Loan Corp, then by the FHA, then by the Veterans Administration. Colors indicated which areas were safe for insuring mortgages, and African American communities were coded in red.

The Underwriting Manual of the FHA stated that "incompatible racial groups should not be permitted to live in the same communities," explicitly making housing discrimination and segregation a government regulation. The

manual also recommended that highways be built to separate Black and white communities. In one example, the FHA prohibited a housing developer in Detroit from building a white development until he built a six-foot concrete wall separating his development from a neighboring African American community.

The Administration justified these policies by arguing that property values fell when African Americans purchased homes in white suburbs, threatening their insurance loans. Unsurprisingly, this was a total lie, as property values actually rose when African Americans moved into white neighborhoods, since they were willing to pay more than whites because they had so few options.

For decades, African Americans were unable to purchase suburban homes, and so they could not gain any of the equity appreciation whites acquired from owning their homes. While white families could use this to send their children to college, take care of elderly parents and pass on wealth to their children, Black families were stuck paying rent every month with no ability to own their own homes.

As a follow up to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1968 Fair Housing Act, which prohibited housing discrimination on the basis of national origin, race, sex and religion. This legislation acted as a band-aid to the gaping wound caused by decades of racist housing policies inflicted on the Black community. When the FHA first began to subsidize housing in the suburbs for white families, the majority of homes cost around twice the national median annual income. This

was affordable for most working-class families of any race.

But as generations passed, those same homes were sold for seven or eight times the national median annual income, which was totally unaffordable for

most Black families.

Today, African American income is about 60 percent of the average annual income for white people. Their average wealth overall is only 5 percent of the wealth of white people. A majority of middle-class families gain their wealth from the equity they have in their homes, leaving no doubt that the lack of wealth and immense poverty the Black community experiences is a result of these racist housing policies.

As the demand for housing increases, women, particularly Black women, are left out in the cold. The feminization of poverty refers to the disproportionate rates at which women experience poverty globally.

Evictions are also feminized in the United States and trap women in poverty.

Under capitalism, housing is a commodity, not a basic human right. While all workers face difficulties in obtaining and keeping affordable and adequate housing, these white supremacist policies were used as a tool to give white people the upper hand in this inherently unequal system, effectively dividing the working class and pitting Black and white workers against one another.

As history has shown, solidarity is necessary in achieving gains for the working class as a whole. The only way working-class and poor people can win their right to affordable and adequate housing is through uniting across race and other divisions, and fighting for a system that places human lives over profit — socialism.

Award. E'mon has been published in The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop, The Down Dirty Word, and elsewhere. She has been featured in Chicago Magazine, The Chicago Tribune, and on WGN Radio. She is a member of Young Chicago Authors Teaching Artist Corps. Her first chapbook COMMANDO, was published by Haymarket Books, Fall of 2017.

Not just rich people and fancy cafes
Toward a socialist understanding of gentrification

Written by Yasmina Mrabet

Gentrification is the process of displacing poor people from a community and replacing them with more affluent people, all in the interest of profit. It has become a primary local policy of the representatives of the ruling class and is clearly carried out by the state. While it is clearly a policy, it is also an outcome of the capitalist approach to housing and development. Profit is king. People's livelihoods and well-being are not considerations.

A serious socialist program for housing must unequivocally reject the idea that gentrification is a process caused primarily by an influx of white wealthier people and fancy coffee shops. They more serve as symbols that gentrification won. By the time wealthy people and coffee shops show up, the behind-the-scenes work for gentrification has already taken place. We should begin to correctly frame gentrification as a violent function of the capitalist model. A clear political alternative that can unify working-class people of all nationalities and keep housing affordable and safe for all is the answer.

Displacement of working-class people takes place throughout all stages of

gentrification, and by various methods and tactics. In Washington, D.C., these have included intensive, racist and anti-poor policing; increased parking regulations, rental property neglect and an uptick in slum conditions; the neglect and privatization of public housing; the elimination of family-sized units; the breaking up of multigenerational families living in one unit into smaller units; and the elimination of affordable units accessible to low-income families.

In Congress Heights in southeast Washington, D.C., developers seeking to build luxury apartments neglected a property until it became a slum, forcing tenants to endure toxic mold, flooding, infestations, trash pile-ups, sewage backups, and heat and air conditioning outages. Despite these conditions, the tenants had to continue paying rent or face eviction.

Slum-like conditions are maintained to force tenants to leave when they are no longer able to tolerate the horrible conditions. Additionally, because of the rising costs of rent in the private market, there are very few places that will accept vouchers or that offer quality affordable housing. As a result, many tenants end up living in dangerous conditions with no remedies.

The government, at all levels, is complicit in setting the stage for gentrification and often facilitating it. Developers who take over a depressed neighborhood and build high-cost housing units for the rich are rarely or never held accountable. They often receive exemptions from providing low-income or affordable housing and from restrictions that protect public interests. Local governments enact policies that facilitate gentrification. In large urban areas, politicians in nearby areas are pressured to eliminate rent control and make way for luxury housing. Local politicians are also pressured to push forward development plans for the rich, not poor and working people.

The government acted as a slumlord itself when it purposely let public housing deteriorate and then sold it to developers for little to nothing. A BBC

article on U.S. public housing noted: “In 1992, housing officials began receiving government grants to tear down and replace the worst public housing complexes. Housing agencies had demolished or otherwise got rid of 285,000 homes by 2012 and replaced only about a sixth, according to a report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a Washington-based research institute.”

For super-oppressed workers, like women, the lack of adequate housing deepens oppression, creating even more vulnerability to the brutalities of the capitalist system. Women often tend to be the leaseholders and are first in line to be subjected to mass evictions. Women with families have difficulty securing safe, habitable, affordable housing due to the elimination of family-sized units.

At Brookland Manor in northeast Washington, D.C., private developer Mid-City Financial plans to demolish the existing 535 units of affordable housing on a property where working-class Black families have lived for generations. On the same 22 acres of land where 535 spacious and family-friendly units currently exist, Mid-City seeks to triple density by building over 1,750 luxury apartments. The plan calls for the elimination of all four- and five-bedroom units, thereby reducing the overall number of affordable units from the existing 535 down to 373, and restricting 200 out of the 373 affordable units to seniors only, 62 and older. This leaves 173 units left for hundreds of families that currently live on the property, many of them already living in units that are too small for the number of people in their household.

Displacement at Brookland Manor is additionally facilitated by armed, private security. Developer Mid-City hired armed private police that patrol the property and police the community ahead of the planned redevelopment. Private police forces play a major role throughout the city in furthering displacement through intimidation and the enforcement of rules, such as no

standing on the grass, no leaning on the fence, no sitting outside and more, in order to run up infractions and give eviction notices. These rules either did not exist or were not enforced on the property prior to the beginning of the planned redevelopment. Once the rules are enforced, tenants are found to be in “violation” of their lease agreement and subsequently evicted.

In their attempt to clear out properties ahead of redevelopment, landlords take every opportunity to force evictions. One of the most tragic cases at Brookland Manor is that of Karen Reel, whose son Coby Reel tragically committed suicide at their home at the Brookland Manor property. After her son’s funeral, she received an eviction lawsuit. The “notice to quit and vacate for violation of lease” stated: “You and/or your household members have engaged in criminal activity that threatens the health, safety, or peaceful enjoyment of the premises by other residents. ... MPD responded to a self-inflicted shooting and an unregistered weapon was found.”

Through violent means, working-class Black families and communities are displaced in and from the nation’s capital, as part of the process of gentrification.

Gentrification is a housing policy of the capitalist class, managed by the bourgeois political infrastructure. It is a process led and controlled by developers with politicians managing community relations. The politicians insist to the public that development is necessary to increase the supply of housing to meet the demand. However, in Washington, D.C., for example, there are 40,000 people on the public housing waiting list. In other words, in the “free market economy,” because housing is a commodity, its supply is only available to those with greater purchasing power, and to all others, decent dignified housing is denied because affordable housing is not sufficiently profitable. In short, under capitalism, housing is a privilege, not a right.

In Washington, D.C., the main homeless shelter is D.C. General, an abandoned hospital situated between a jail and an STD clinic. Many young people and families live there for months or years waiting to get housing. Because the shelter system is insufficient to address the crisis of homelessness in the nation's capital, the city contracts with hotels on New York Avenue, each of which cost over \$27 million per year.

Meanwhile, the District government continues to sell and privatize public land and housing to developers for as little as \$1, as they did in the case of the Wharf in southwest Washington, D.C., which was sold to known slumlord Geoff Griffis. The affordable housing crisis continues to grow while the city continues to sanction, facilitate and pay for the building of luxury developments at the expense of working people.

City police play a major role in the process of gentrification similar to the role of private police forces. In 2007, when the city was still predominantly Black and working-class, an all-hands-on-deck approach was implemented by the Metropolitan Police Department. Both uniformed and plain-clothes police were given license to "jump out" and harass anyone in the community, especially in communities deemed "Red Zones," or high-crime areas.

Basically every neighborhood where working-class and poor people lived was considered a red zone, and the policy stripped the rights of everyone who happened to be caught in those areas even if they lived there. During this period, many arrests were made for possession of marijuana, which played a major role and was a go-to reason for unwarranted searches. Marijuana became legal in the district after the mass criminalization of Blacks had filled up the courtroom just a few years prior.

Such brutal actions against the working class in the name of profit essentially amount to a human-trafficking-like process, where working-class people are exploited, imprisoned and moved in accordance with the agenda

of the wealthy owning class.

It is critically important to debunk the myth that the private market can solve the affordable housing crisis that afflicts every city in America. People need to hit the streets and fight to defend and extend quality public housing. Our demands must include an end to the privatization of public housing and the organization of existing resources to immediately eradicate homelessness.

A socialist program for housing must provide a clear alternative: a public option. As socialists, we fight for the protection and expansion of state-of-the-art public housing. The cost of housing should be based on a reasonable percentage of one's income, for which they could opt in to public housing as an alternative to the outrageous costs of private market housing. Under socialism, gentrification would become obsolete because housing policy would be determined by the needs of people, not the profit margins of developers. Housing is a human right and necessary for survival.



‘Tax The Rich’ mural by Megan Wilson on Clarion Alley
San Francisco, California, Photo: Victor Grigas

About Lynn Lewis

Lynn Lewis, a community member with roots in both organizing and ending the criminalization of homeless people, was one of the early founders of Picture the Homeless. Along with Anthony Williams, Lewis helped build PTH as an organization led by homeless people.



Lynn Lewis with Picture the Homeless organizers

Photo: Picture the Homeless

Socialism offers an alternative

Housing: A tale of two social systems

Written by Joyce Chediac

The United States is the richest country in the world. The stock market is rising, the Gross Domestic Product is growing, but so are evictions and homelessness.

Cuba is a small Caribbean nation where resources are limited due to five decades of U.S. blockade. But there is no homelessness, and 85 percent of the population owns their own home.

How can this be?

New York City, the home of Wall Street, could be called the capital of capitalism. It is also the U.S. capital of homelessness. It has the highest number of people living in the street and in shelters in the country. Over the last year, this number soared by close to 40 percent. Three-quarters of the city's homeless are families with children, and most of these are single-parent families headed by women.

These numbers are likely to increase.

Yet, no one walking the streets of New York City can miss the construction boom. The construction, however, is not housing for the working class, but luxury units.

Many of the luxury apartments are empty or rarely occupied. They are investments, or wealth storage units for what Credit Suisse describes as the "ultra-high net worth" class, those with \$40 million or more. These are part of a worldwide infrastructure meant to hide wealth and ownership to avoid taxation and oversight.

Projects like these destroy affordable working-class housing. They drive up land, rent and housing costs in entire neighborhoods.

Grassroots organizers in neighborhood after neighborhood have testified at countless city hearings, petitioned and protested the destruction of their communities by this luxury housing. However, the housing crisis continues to grow almost unabated.

The same process is taking place in all major U.S. cities, and housing costs and homelessness are growing in all areas of the country.

Social values, not market values

Again, in marked contrast, there is no homelessness in Cuba, and 85 percent of the people own their own homes. How did this small Caribbean nation accomplish this?

The 1959 Cuban socialist revolution replaced the capitalist mode of production based upon profit with a planned socialist economy designed to meet human needs.

Housing was a huge challenge. Cities like Havana were ringed with shantytowns. The poverty and underdevelopment in the countryside were extreme. The new government declared housing to be a right, said it would provide every family with a decent home, and that it would distribute housing based upon social values, not market values.

The homes of the rich who fled the revolution were confiscated, and the poor moved in. The 1960 Urban Reform Law made it illegal to own more than one primary residence and a vacation home. Most multiple owners were compensated, but slumlords received nothing.

The socialist government halted evictions and rolled back rents by up to 50 percent. Half of urban tenants became homeowners. Many tenants were given long-term rent-free leases.

Eliminating housing disparities

Following the revolution, housing production heavily focused on eliminating the disparity between the city and the countryside. In the early 1960s, more than 26,000 units of housing were built in 150 new villages.

All units built or distributed by the government after 1961 were assigned leases at no more than 10 percent of household income, with full ownership of the unit after five to 20 years. Many were granted rent-free leases. Starting

in the 1970s, very low-income households did not have to pay any rent. In addition, the price of vacant lots was set at a low price of \$4 per square meter.

But there was still much to be done. Cuban development was hampered first by the blockade imposed by the United States in 1962, and then, in 1991, by the collapse of its main trading partner, the USSR. There were shortages of everything, including building materials.

In 1971, the Cuban government started the microbrigades, teams of workers that built housing while their coworkers agreed to maintain production at current levels. Sixty percent of the units constructed went to the microbrigade's workplace labor force; 40 percent went to households living in buildings slated for demolition. From 1971 to 1975, construction nearly tripled.

‘Socialism and the will of a great people’

This reporter visited a microbrigade in 1990 in La Guinera, on the outskirts of Havana. Our group was greeted by Fifi, a 52-year old Black woman, who was the head of the brigade. She explained that the area before us was a swamp before the revolution, and that the population had just been dumped there.

There were 258 women in the brigade, 190 of whom considered themselves “housewives” before becoming construction workers because there were no jobs in that area. Now they were gaining a skill. The income increase was especially important to single mothers. The first thing they built, she said, was a daycare center.

The microbrigade workers showed us some of the services included in the five-story residential building they constructed: a shoe repair shop, a beauty parlor, a barber shop, a massage area, steam baths and an area to coordinate social services.

The pride of the construction workers was palpable. “We used to live in

shantytowns,” Fifi said. “We never thought we could build five-story buildings.” She said it was “the result of socialism, and of the will of this great people.”

There is still a great housing need. At present, Cuba uses volunteer and self-built housing and formally planned construction to meet its housing needs. To ensure equitability, units are distributed in open community and trade union meetings. In recent years, private investment has been allowed, and joint ventures for large projects, like tourist hotels, which bring in important revenue. These private investments are not permitted to dominate.

Which social system?

The United States is capitalist. The system is chaotic. The “right to profit” from housing is enshrined and protected at all levels by the capitalist state. The right to a roof over one’s head is not.

Cuba is socialist. It has a centrally planned and managed economy. Despite scarcities, it has employed creativity, flexibility and the motivation of its population to build and distribute housing equitably based upon need. It has one of the highest rates of home ownership in the world — 85 percent — and no homelessness.

Capitalism or socialism — which social system can lead the way forward?

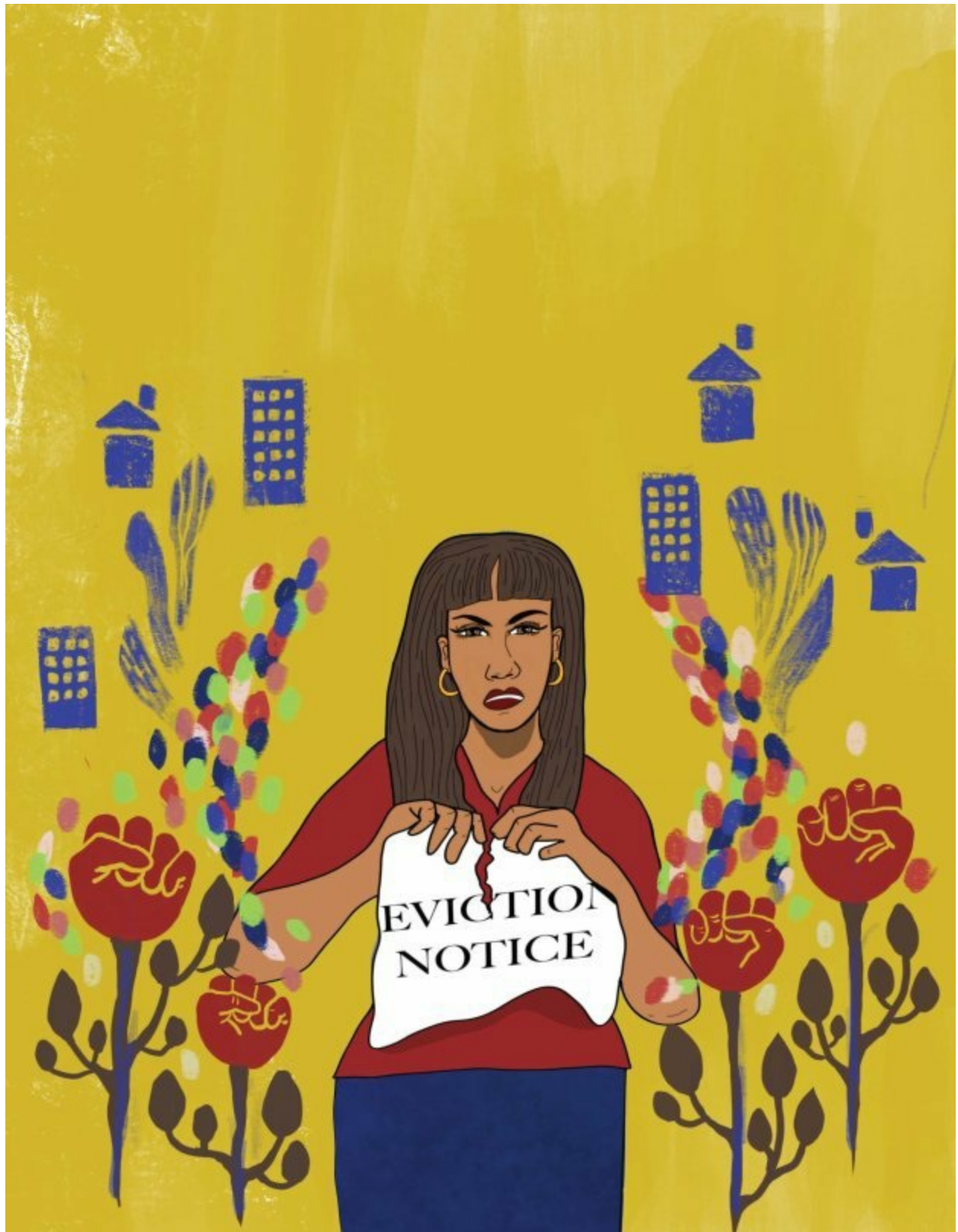


Fifi speaking about the impact of the Cuban Revolution to improve housing conditions

Photo: Joyce Chediac



Cuban housing micro-brigade in La Guinera, Photo: Joyce Chediac





**Lili
Guerrero**

I grew up with a single mother as the head of household of two children. I recall constant anxiety over our financial situation, since she could barely make ends meet with income from multiple minimum-wage jobs and hairdressing, the long hours of strain causing carpal tunnel syndrome. She put herself through training to get her real estate license to avoid irreparable bodily damage. She completed this just in time for the real estate market to crash in 2008. Alongside my mother's livelihood, we lost our modest home, which had been purchased on a variable interest loan given to us by greedy lenders all enabled by the capitalist system.

I was in college during the great recession, a product of our economic system. I could not find employment. There were times I didn't have enough money for food. I even talked to an Air Force recruiter to figure out a way to pay for school. I finally found work and no longer had to potentially join the military, risk my life and be an accomplice to a murderous empire in order to afford school. The circumstances of my youth planted a seed within me to recognize injustice in its many forms, but I didn't yet have the framework to understand how common and symptomatic this all was. I met the Party for Socialism and Liber-

-ation during the 2016 elections when I refused to pick between the abhorrent Donald Trump and the "lesser of two evils," Hillary Clinton. The PSL explained in plain terms how Clinton, despite being a woman, was an enemy of the working class for so many reasons. I had more political epiphanies being exposed to the PSL within the first few months than I had in the previous years on my own. The politics of the PSL gave me the socialist framework to understand how capitalist partisans could never represent the interests of the working class, and it gave me an avenue to channel my passion to end the unjust symptoms of capitalism.

This organization rejects the status quo of people being forced into poverty and disenfranchisement by the capitalist system. I joined the PSL because I wanted to live in a world where people aren't morphed into work machines and robbed of their physical and mental health. The PSL gave me the ability to both imagine and work toward a socialist future where human needs are put first, where people have rights to housing, education, employment and health care. Together we are fighting for a system that works for and by the workers—a system for dignity for all!

**A WOMAN'S
PLACE
IS IN THE
STRUGGLE**

JOIN US!

In college, I decided to study biophysics because I was interested in understanding reality through the natural sciences. My desire to understand reality led me to Marxism, as it utilizes a scientific approach to understanding history and oppression. With this learning, I came to understand that not only had capitalism disgustingly forsaken people and the environment in favor of profit and power, but class oppression had been ingrained in my identity. In fact, my family name is marred by this. When my great grandfather, Choo Kang, was taken from China to Guyana as an indentured worker, he was given a more Western first name—William—and was from then on known as William Choo-Kang.

As the child of Guyanese immigrants whose families were taken from their homelands and forced into servitude, As the sister of a single mom, who has witnessed her fight for a meager sum of child support and an inadequate amount of alimony from her husband for



**Candice
Choo-Kang**

the decade of unpaid labor during which she raised their two children.

As the victim of a near-fatal car accident when I was a teenager, whose family went bankrupt overnight from crippling medical bills that exceeded my family's health care plan, As a graduate student, who must work full-time to pay for exorbitant tuition fees, thus taking away from my ability to study, As a woman who has had an abortion—in part due to the fact that birth control was not covered by my insurance—and had to struggle with both the emotional and financial costs of an abortion, I came to the conclusion that I had no choice but to fight capitalism as the underlying cause of all of these personal issues and much other suffering around the world. I joined the Party for Socialism and Liberation. Studying, organizing, and marching with my comrades, along with their revolutionary optimism, electrifies me and gives me the confidence to say that there is an achievable solution.



**COMMUNIST ORGANIZER
WITH THE HARLEM TENANTS UNION**