

Dispatches from the housing war

written by Greg Butterfield

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The Red House eviction blockade in Portland, Ore.

Jan. 1 — Millions of renters and homeowners received a last-minute reprieve when President Donald Trump finally signed the (pitiful, inadequate) congressional stimulus bill on Dec. 27 after several days' delay. The measure extended the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) eviction ban for another month, through Jan. 31, 2021 — just in time to put off a spate of New Year's evictions amidst the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Census Bureau survey released just before the holidays found that an incredible 35.3% of adults in the U.S. are “living in households not current on rent or mortgage where eviction or foreclosure in the next two months is either very likely or somewhat likely.”

“The survey found that residents of Washington, D.C., are the most likely to face eviction or foreclosure, with 67.3% of adults living in households where the prospect is at least somewhat likely,” [Newsweek reported](#). “States with a majority of adults also likely to lose their homes include South Dakota, South Carolina, Georgia and Oregon.”

Desperate workers and families, faced with being thrown into winter streets, could finally take a breath when the stimulus bill was signed — but only just. The CDC eviction ban was extended for just another month, during which time high unemployment and the ravages of disease are unlikely to improve.

And the measure still requires that all back rent and mortgage payments be paid to the landlords and banks — meaning the massive debt crisis facing workers is only getting worse.

“The Federal stimulus bill extends the flimsy CDC ban on evictions (the one that requires you to swear to pay your landlord everything you can) to the end of January,” noted the [Crown Heights Tenants Union](#). “All this moratorium does is require tenants to beg judges not to evict them.



Clianda Florence-Yarde speaks at a rally after her family's eviction in Rochester, N.Y.

"It did not, for example, stop the 'legal' eviction of public school teacher Clianda Florence-Yarde and her three children in Rochester, N.Y., on Friday night."

Florence-Yarde, a Black woman, was jailed, [as were 15 housing activists](#) who attempted to block the family's forcible eviction on Dec. 18. Florence-Yarde had withheld payments because of awful conditions and numerous code violations, which her landlord refused to correct.

Diane Yentel, president of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, told National Public Radio, "One of the flaws is that [the CDC ban is] not automatic, and so renters need to know that the protection exists and they need to know what actions to take

in order to receive that protection.”

“The order is also being treated differently by judges around the U.S.,” notes NPR, “so outcomes vary wildly depending on where people live or what court they end up in,” citing the case of [Tiffany Robinson, a Texas mother of three](#), who was evicted despite doing her best to fulfill the CDC requirements.

A quick survey of local news media across the U.S. is enough to show that this is a deep, widespread, countrywide crisis, not limited to the most expensive coastal cities. From [Tampa, Fla.](#), to [Youngstown, Ohio](#), the story is the same: working-class families with few resources facing eviction, landlords hungrily preparing for mass evictions as soon as restrictions are lifted, and already overburdened tenants’ advocates unable to meet the massive need for legal and material support.

Not a new crisis

As the [Lower Hudson news site reported Dec. 21](#), “Before the pandemic, 48% of rental households in the nation were already ‘rent burdened,’ or paying more than 30% of their income towards rent, according to the 2018 American Community Survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

“The majority of renter households below the poverty line spent at least half of their income toward rent in 2018, with one in four spending over 70% of their income toward housing costs, according to 2018 U.S. Census Bureau data.”

No wonder that the fight for housing rights has been among the most widespread working-class struggles in recent years, along with the movement to defend Black lives from police violence. Because of widespread housing discrimination, racist redlining by banks and [attacks on public housing residents](#) by white supremacist politicians, these struggles also overlap to a great extent.

Even before the current economic crisis, Black women were twice as likely to be

evicted as white people in at least 17 states, according to Sandra Park, senior attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union Women's Rights Project.

"Unfortunately, the fallout will be borne most by women of color, who have also had to bear so much of the fallout of the pandemic and economic crisis overall," Park told [The 19th News](#).

Here are a few current hotspots in the housing struggle.

Portland: Red House defense

In early December, police in Portland, Ore., attempted to raid a house in the gentrified North Portland neighborhood and evict the Kinney family. Their home, known as the Red House, is one of the few remaining Black and Indigenous-owned homes in what was once a predominantly Black neighborhood.

Activists supporting the Kinneys, who have camped out near the house since September, managed to fight off the cops. An ["eviction blockade" has been established](#) around the house, including barricades and spikes on the street, with 24-hour people's patrols to keep cops out. The defense of the Red House is being carried out in the militant spirit of the Black Lives uprising that has kept up a nightly presence in Portland since late May.

Bankers and developers have been attempting to steal the Kinney's house — owned by the family since 1955 — using Oregon's policy of "nonjudicial evictions" that allows for automatic foreclosures without the protections that would be present in a court case. The Kinneys and their supporters explain that this is just a modern version of Portland's long history of segregation and theft of Indigenous lands.

"Known white supremacists continue to illegally brandish arms without consequences," the Kinney family said in a statement. "We refuse to be characterized as a violent movement when our leadership is rooted in an Afro-

Indigenous ethic of land reclamation.”

For more information, visit RedHouseOnMississippi.com.

New Yorkers win stronger eviction ban

New York City is notorious for its exorbitant rents. Workers and families are forced to double, triple or quadruple up in cramped apartments, often owned by slumlords who refuse the most basic repairs for health and safety. According to the [Coalition for the Homeless](#), nearly 60,000 New Yorkers were homeless on any given night in October 2020 — many of them children. That’s twice as many as 10 years ago.

Politicians in City Hall and the New York state Capitol in Albany, including Mayor Bill de Blasio and Gov. Andrew Cuomo, are beholden to the interests of big landlords and real estate developers.

So it was an important victory for fighters for housing justice and all New York state residents when the state Legislature and Cuomo were forced to enact a strengthened ban on evictions during a special session Dec. 28.

Under the measure, most evictions will be halted until May 1, 2021, as long as tenants and homeowners [sign a declaration](#) stating that “they have lost income or dealt with increased costs, or if moving would put them or a member of their household at higher risk of COVID-19 due to an underlying medical condition.”

“An eviction moratorium is only a temporary solution,” said Cea Weaver of the [Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance](#). “Between now and May 1, we have to come together as a movement, stronger than ever before, to ensure that all back rent accrued during the crisis is cleared. New York’s leaders need to fund social and supportive housing, and make a real plan to end homelessness.”

“Now we have to ORGANIZE, continue to build the [#RentStrike](#), to [#CancelRent](#) by

May Day so that no one owes any rent and all cases are permanently dismissed on May Day. We won this victory on the eviction ban by persistent struggle in our buildings and the streets. We can and WILL cancel rent by May Day," [vowed the Crown Heights Tenant Union.](#)

Los Angeles: Families seize empty houses

A pitched battle between houseless families and the vicious California Highway Patrol (CHP) on Nov. 25 made national headlines. The families and supporters were attempting to [occupy 19 empty homes](#) in the El Sereno neighborhood of Los Angeles.

The homes are owned by the California Department of Transportation, which acquired them decades ago as part of a since abandoned plan to extend the 710 Freeway. In March 2020, the Reclaiming Our Homes movement, led by homeless Black and Latinx women, seized 13 of these long-vacant homes, inspired by the 2019 Moms 4 Housing takeover in Oakland, Calif.

"During a press conference in March 2020, Reclaimer Ruby Gordillo stood on the porch of the modest bungalow she occupied with a banner that read 'shelter from the storm.' She told a crowd of news media that reclaimers were calling on officials to open the homes for Angelenos experiencing houselessness, reported [Bitch Magazine.](#)

"With this health crisis and this housing crisis, we need every vacant house to be a home for those who don't have a safe and stable place to sleep in," Gordillo said.

Taken off guard by the bold action, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and the Los Angeles Housing Authority allowed them to stay. But there are 200 vacant houses in all. Now CHP stormtroopers patrol the area to prevent further attempts to house people in need, like the one in November.

A homeless census released in June 2020 counted [more than 66,000 unhoused people](#) in Los Angeles County, a 12.7% increase over 2019. But that's only part of the story. Downtown Los Angeles has one of the country's largest concentrations of homeless people, while families in the suburbs cram into garages rented out as "apartments." In July 2019, the L.A. City Council cruelly [reinstated a ban](#) on sleeping overnight in cars, criminalizing thousands for using their only shelter.

