

# Taking our Human Right to housing into our own hands: Chicago forms an Anti-Eviction Campaign

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It is a cold November morning in Chicago. People crowd around the front door and inside the living room of Lenise Forrest's apartment in the row-houses of Chicago's Cabrini Green public housing development. Banners taped to the wall outside read, "We are all Lenise Forrest – No more evictions!" "Housing is a human right, we won't go without a fight!" and "The rich got bailed out, we will not be put out!" News cameras set up, waiting to see what will happen if the sheriff arrives. A week ago, the sheriff kicked in the door to announce an eviction but then decided to give Lenise a week to pack up before evicting her for back rent. Lenise tells the story to the news media, standing amidst the human blockade in front of her apartment.



"I was upstairs when they came, I heard a lot of banging, at least four or five times. After that I heard the breaking of the door and them screaming 'Don't move, don't move, this is an eviction!' and a lady came upstairs saying, 'put some pants on cause this is an eviction!'"

"I don't have any money saved," she adds.

"So you're literally gonna be out here out the street?" asks a reporter.

"That's what they say."

"Not if we can help it," interjects Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign co-founder Willie J.R. Flemming. "This is a real community. One thing about Cabrini, we are one Cabrini, we are one community. We're not gonna let our residents go homeless over here. We'll do whatever it takes, *whatever* it takes."



Lenise Forrest is a mother and grandmother of two and a 19-year resident of the Cabrini Green public housing complex. Her local Alderman describes her as a "model citizen." She is being threatened with eviction because she lost her job due to the bad economy and has fallen behind on rent. The new management company refuses to recognize the payment plan she was on under the previous management. Though she is appealing the eviction order, her time has run out. When the sheriffs came a week ago, they decided to leave and give her exactly seven days to pack up and get out. Lenise, not willing to be homeless before the holidays, decided to use that week to get ready to fight back.

The same day the sheriff was kicking in Lenise's door, Ashraf Cassiem of South Africa's Western Cape Anti-

Eviction Campaign landed in Chicago to kick off a speaking tour and series of discussions with U.S.-based social movements. One of these discussions was at Cabrini Green, one of Chicago's oldest and largest public housing complexes. When representatives of the Independent Human Rights Council, the Coalition to Protect Public Public Housing and Southside Together Organizing for Power (STOP) took Ashraf on a tour of Cabrini Green, he was shocked. "I feel like I'm back at home in the townships of Cape Town. Except here the rich are just a couple blocks away." Cabrini residents, who are renowned for fighting back against displacement and other human rights abuses, listened attentively as Ashraf explained the way that township dwellers around South Africa resist evictions and take the human right to housing into their own hands.



Cabrini Green stands just blocks from Chicago's Gold Coast, which is home to some of the richest people in the world. One resident, while telling Ashraf about the demolition of much of Cabrini Green and the long struggle of the remaining residents to resist being put out of their community, says "for us, gentrification is just a fancy word for land grab."

Despite Mayor Daley's defeat in trying to bring the 2016 Summer Olympics to Chicago and despite the crash of the housing market, business and political leaders continue their project of transforming Chicago into a "global city," which means converting entire communities into homes for

rich global investors, their institutions and their workers. Some people expected gentrification to slow down when the economy crashed and the construction of luxury condominiums temporarily stopped. Thousands of units of unsold housing sit vacant and thousands more people have lost their homes to foreclosure. Meanwhile, homelessness and unemployment have continued to rise, particularly in the communities of African and Latin American descendants. Despite this, the developers who helped cause the crisis in the first place continue to drive city policies and in fact are buying up properties at a faster pace than ever, since they are in the best position to take advantage of the depressed price of housing and land.

Racist hiring and housing practices, lack of investment in education, poor wages and a system that puts profit over people have kept most residents of Cabrini and many other Chicago communities in a perpetual state of economic crisis. Some residents have been able to improve their lot as individuals, but many people have done everything "right" and still continue to struggle for survival.

Lenice, for example, worked for years earning low wages at a home for the mentally ill. Often her pay check did not cover all the expenses of raising a family and she began to fall behind on rent. She went on to work for the company that is re-developing much of Cabrini Green, Holsten Development, counseling residents and helping them move into newly-created mixed-income communities. When the economic crisis hit, however, Lenice found herself without a job and began to fall even farther behind on rent. She had a payment plan with the former management company, but they were removed for negligence when a gate fell and killed a 3-year-old child. The new management company claims not to have a record of her payment plan.



“I’ve been fighting this case for a year and I’ve been trying to make meetings with the management office in order for them to help me obtain a payment arrangement but I had a difficult time being able to talk to them because they didn’t want to even hear my story,” explains Lenise.



“I know there's a lot of people out here in my neighborhood going through the same things and I just don't want to move, and I just need some understanding from someone so I can go on with my life so my kids can have a good upbringing and so I can have a good Thanksgiving.”

The sheriff decided not to come the day the blockade started, thereby avoiding a confrontation with an angry crowd in front of the news cameras. Chicago Housing Authority Asset Manager Mr. Garret told us that the management company, H.J. Russell, would work out a payment plan after all. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Midwest Director Beverly Bishop told us that she understood that CHA had asked management to work out a payment plan as well. But Ms. Hinton, the property manager, continues to refuse to meet with Lenise and now CHA is denying that they even have the authority to make the management work out a payment plan, despite the fact that they hired them. So Lenise and the rest of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign remain on alert, ready to set the blockade back up at a moments notice and turning up the pressure in the meantime.

“I’m glad that everyone came out and supported me because a lot of people are going through the same thing here in Cabrini Green... The holidays are next week, everybody needs to have some kind of peace of mind, a place to stay,” says Lenise.

The Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign will continue struggling to stop all economically-motivated evictions Chicago. We are no longer willing to wait for any authority to institute our human right to housing. Lenise is just one of thousands of people in similar situations. The banks were bailed out. The auto industry was bailed out. The time for a bail-out of the people at the bottom is long past-due. We are calling for a national moratorium on economically-motivated evictions. In the mean time, we are instituting a people's moratorium on evictions by putting our bodies in front of sheriffs and putting our people back in their homes.

