

# National

The New York Times

## Tenants Turn to Labor Tactics to Leverage Landlords

### Renters in San Francisco Unite, and Some Strike, To Force Improvements

By HEATHER KNIGHT

SAN FRANCISCO — Auto workers in Detroit. Actors and screenwriters in Hollywood. Teachers in Portland, Ore.

During a wave of labor unrest over the last year in which more than 500,000 American workers went on strike, a small group of San Franciscans has brought a similar vein of activism to a different arena: their homes.

Tenants in 65 San Francisco households have been on a rent strike, some for nearly eight months, withholding their monthly payments over a host of issues they say have made their living conditions difficult.

A handful of rent strikes have occurred before in New York City and Los Angeles. But activists, with renewed fervor, are now trying to organize tenants around the nation, saying that corporations, rather than mom-and-pop landlords, are increasingly buying up apartments and not taking care of the units.

“Most tenants these days don’t know their landlords. They’re nameless, faceless LLCs,” said Tara Raghuvver, director of the Homes Guarantee campaign, which is working to establish tenant unions like the one in San Francisco. “Naming and shaming doesn’t work. Rent strikes will become an even more necessary tactic.”

San Francisco has one of the highest concentrations of renters in the nation, about two-thirds of households, similar to the share in New York City. As a result, the liberal politicians who lead the city have long considered renters a voter base that they must woo.

In 2022, city leaders passed Union at Home, the first legislation of its kind in the country. It lays out a path for tenants to form associations and requires landlords to bargain with them, just as an employer must meet with union workers.

The law protects tenants who want to use common spaces for organizing activities or invite advocates to talk to residents about their rights.

Within a year, tenants in 55 San Francisco buildings formed their own associations that called for a range of improvements, including quicker repairs, lower charges for utilities and translation of materials for renters who do not speak English. Most of the associations have not initiated a strike.

Tenant associations exist in other cities, but do not have the city-provided leverage to demand that their landlords bargain in good faith that San Francisco tenants have.

In the Tenderloin neighborhood, where immigrant families cluster because of relatively cheap rents, tenants have begun to organize. They live in one of the city’s roughest areas, full of older, worn apartments near open-air drug markets and homeless encampments.

Luisa Rodriguez, 38, immigrated to the United States from El Salvador in 2020 with two children, now 9 and 18, and had a third child in San Francisco. The family lives in a small studio apartment on the sixth floor and are charged \$1,600 a month. Ms. Rodriguez, who works as a cook, has not paid her landlord since June. Tenants on strike are paying their rent instead to a trust fund that is being held until their demands are met.

Ms. Rodriguez and her children sleep together in two beds pushed against one wall to put as much distance as possible between them and a space where mold has continually appeared.

She showed pictures on her phone of green fuzz on the window frame that stretched down the wall. She said it had spread to clothes in a closet near the window, too, forcing her to throw out items she could not afford to replace.

She showed copies of letters from a doctor at the San Francisco Health Network that told her landlord, “The mold is endangering the health of your tenants,” and asked for immediate action.

Veritas Investments, which owns the building where the Rodriguezes live, said that workers repaired a crack in the window, used drying equipment to address water intrusion and treated, sealed and painted the window and frame to prevent the mold from returning.

Though the mold was no longer visible on a recent night, the family was not confident the problem had been solved. Her daughter Dara, 3, continues to cough at night, keeping the family awake, Ms. Rodriguez said.

The dispute highlights a big problem in San Francisco’s housing stock: old buildings that are increasingly expensive to maintain and, in a city notoriously short on housing, among the few options for low-income renters.

Veritas is one of the largest landlords in San Francisco and owns most of the buildings where tenant associations have declared a rent strike. Its holdings in the city, though, are shrinking. Like other building owners in the city roiled by the pandemic, Veritas defaulted last year on loans and is selling parts of its huge portfolio.

Ron Heckmann, a spokesman for Veritas, said that many of its buildings are more than a century old and that the company had worked hard to address the concerns of tenants, spending millions of dollars on improvements. The elevators are so outdated that replacement parts must be custom-made, he



Luisa Rodriguez, with her children Dara and David, joined tenants in her San Francisco building in a rent strike.



Franklin Borge, a maintenance technician, at a Veritas Investments-owned unit in the Pacific Heights neighborhood.



A view of Geary Street from outside one of the buildings where tenants are striking in the Tenderloin neighborhood.



Yue Lin Wu, center, a Chinese immigrant who is withholding his rent, speaking with Katelynn Cao of the Housing Rights Committee of San Francisco.

## High Schools Will Provide Job Training For Hospitals

By JENNA RUSSELL

Public school students in Boston will have a direct route to guaranteed jobs with the city’s largest employer, the Mass General Brigham health system, via a new initiative that will pair high schools eager to expand career training with hospitals desperate for workers.

A \$38 million investment by Bloomberg Philanthropies — the largest gift in the history of the city’s public schools — will transform a small high school into an 800-student feeder for the sprawling Mass General system, which is currently plagued by some 2,000 job vacancies.

Boston is one of 10 cities or regions where Bloomberg has pledged to spend a total of \$250 million over five years pairing hospitals with high schools. Students will earn college credits as they train for careers in nursing, emergency medicine, lab science, medical imaging and surgery.

But in a nod to evolving views on higher education, and to surging demand for vocational training, the program will prepare thousands of students to start full-time jobs upon graduation instead of college, if they choose.

“There’s a growing sense that the value of college has diminished, relative to cost,” Howard Wolfson, education program lead at Bloomberg Philanthropies, said in an interview on Tuesday. “This should not be construed as anti-college — every kid who wants to go should have the opportunity. But at the same time, we have to acknowledge the reality that, for a lot of kids, college is not an option, or they want to get on with their careers.”

The foundation started by Michael R. Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York who grew up in a Boston suburb,

### An initiative by Bloomberg aims to build a work force to fill critical vacancies.

will establish similar partnerships between schools and hospitals in New York, Philadelphia, Nashville, Houston, Dallas, Charlotte and Durham, as well as in rural Tennessee and Alabama.

In Boston, the money will allow the Edward M. Kennedy Academy for Health Careers to gradually double its enrollment to 800 students from 400 and offer five health care career tracks instead of the current two.

Students will choose a specialty by the end of 10th grade, then spend time as juniors and seniors training in hospital labs, emergency departments and other such settings, the school said.

Founded in 1995, the Kennedy Academy has a waiting list of 400 students, its leaders said. That mirrors interest in vocational training seen around the state and country. A 2019 state report on vocational education in Massachusetts found that student demand had increased by 33 percent in five years, with vocational school enrollments falling far short of projected job needs in health care and other fields.

Supporters of vocational schools have pushed the state to fund more of them, and to adopt a lottery admissions system for existing programs, arguing that students of color have been unfairly excluded.

Mayor Michelle Wu of Boston said the project would be a “game changer,” helping to build a stronger, more stable middle class in a city that ranks among the most expensive in the country.

“For our community members to be able to step into well-paying jobs where they’re desperately needed,” she said, “that builds on-ramps to higher-paying careers that allow you to stay in the city and serve your community.”

Median starting salaries for some of the jobs that students will train for range from \$56,000 for surgical technologists to \$71,000 for respiratory therapists, according to Bloomberg.

More than 90 percent of students at the Kennedy Academy are Black or Hispanic; 85 percent are classified as “high needs,” meaning that they are from low-income households, are multilingual English learners, or have disabilities. To ensure that students succeed, the gift from Bloomberg includes money for supports such as school social workers and mental health clinicians.

Dr. Anne Klibanski, president and chief executive of Mass General Brigham, said the partnership would diversify the system’s work force, helping it more closely mirror the increasingly diverse city it serves. Filling vacant jobs will also help cut wait times for patients and ease burnout among overextended employees, she said.

Mr. Wolfson said he envisioned cities across the country setting up similar pipelines to fill 2 million job openings in health care, a number projected to double by 2031. In Boston, Mary Skipper, the schools superintendent, said she can imagine feeder schools to help address the critical national shortage of teachers in addition to health care workers.

“It’s a very powerful model,” she said. “It sets a blueprint.”

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMY OSBORNE, THE NEW YORK TIMES

said. The plumbing, wiring and heating systems are aging and complex.

Mr. Heckmann added that just a fraction of the tenants in the company’s thousands of units around the city have joined the strike. He dismissed the strikes as ideological grandstanding driven by Brad Hirn, a tenant advocate with the nonprofit Housing Rights Committee of San Francisco, who has organized the tenant associations and led the fights.

Mr. Hirn, though, said that the buildings have real problems that include cockroaches, vermin, mold, and broken mailboxes and elevators. Mr. Heckmann said that whenever problems like these are raised by tenants, the company works hard to quickly address them. Mr. Hirn said tenants will call off the strikes when the company gives rent reductions for code violations, improves health and safety protocols and translates materials into other languages.

“With enough support, they can win things they never thought were possible,” he said.