



**Conversation series | Pursuing Tenant International:
Learning from struggles for home in Abya-Yala
Edited by Ana Vilenica**

Here to stay: Building a tenant association against displacement

Inés and Teresa

Flower Drive Tenant Association

in conversation with

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The Flower Drive Tenants Association (*La Asociación de inquilinos de Flower Drive*) is an entire block of tenants organising against displacement in South Central Los Angeles, part of the Los Angeles Tenants Union.

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Abstract

The Flower Drive Tenants Association (*La Asociación de inquilinos de Flower Drive*) is an entire block of tenants organising against displacement in South Central Los Angeles. Members of the Los Angeles Tenants Union since March 2021, Flower Drive tenants have fought to stay put in the face of a multi-billion dollar development plan to replace hundreds of rent controlled apartments with luxury housing. In the process they have transformed their block of working class Black and Latino tenants into what one comrade described as a *semillero* – a seedbed of tenant organising across South Central Los Angeles. The señoras who lead the Flower Drive TA have also turned their weekly meeting into a co-learning space for the wider community. As many as 60 tenants from across South Central LA gather each week in a parking lot behind the Flower Drive buildings to discuss their rights, share their experiences, and plan direct actions. Tenants support each other through protesting landlords, reversing lockouts, and even confronting domestic abusers. Tenants have also begun to discuss their deeper political conditions, drawing connections to popular land struggles across the world. With COVID-era tenant protections ending in Los Angeles, evictions skyrocketing, and the Olympics on the horizon, the tenants of Flower Drive know their fight is only beginning. But by holding their territory against the violence of speculative development, and refusing to follow the lead of nonprofits that would negotiate their defeat, they have turned their block into a militant space of popular education and decision making. That transformation has connected them to a global movement and brought a whole neighbourhood into their fight.

Keywords

Tenants association, tenant union, evictions, Los Angeles

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I met Inés and Teresa at one of their regular evening meetings of the Flower Drive Tenant Association. Flower Drive is one of the most active TAs in LATU and it is led by Indigenous migrant women of LA. For this conversation, we met an hour before the assembly in the parking lot behind their homes where the Flower Drive TA has been meeting for more than two years. The conversation was conducted in English and Spanish. Inés, who is bilingual, helped to translate between me and Teresa, who prefers Spanish. This conversation was co-edited with Katrina Albright, member of the LATU that I had the privilege of meeting and learning from in LA. After this conversation with Inés and Teresa, Katrina told me about 41.18, a new city ordinance targeting unhoused people, which criminalises things like sitting down in public space. Inés had removed the 41.18 sign installed on the streetlamp in front of her house a while ago. ‘They have now put it back’ - she said.

Ana: How did you learn about the [Los Angeles Tenants] Union, Inés?

Inés: Actually, I had no idea there was one there. When they started evicting people on [our neighbours’] block, a non-profit organisation got involved. They asked me if I wanted to support them. At that time, I didn’t have a young grandchild. It was just me and my husband. I had a lot of time in my hands. So, I said, I’ll go, maybe I’ll learn something. I started going to their meetings and since the negotiation was already ongoing, they began taking tenants to court. I used to go to court to accompany them.

Figure 1

Flower Drive
Tenant
Association
banner. Credits:
FlowerDriveTA



So, that's why I got involved. It was something very new for me. At first things didn't make sense to me. But little by little I started putting it together. I thought that the non-profit was helping, but my heart was not really there. Then I started telling the tenants: 'Don't sign, don't agree to relocate, because I don't think the money is enough.'

Ana: They were offering them cash-for-keys?

Inés: Yes. They all got cash-for-keys and they all accepted. I think they gave them \$50,000 minus the taxes. 30-35% or something like that. They were happy, you know. But they were never in unity. They divided people, harassed people. You know how they do it, those people. They are experts. They were telling them, well, if you don't accept now, we're not going to have enough money to offer you, so you might get less. In this way people were prepared to say, 'OK, I accept it. Because maybe later I won't get any.' But I kept telling them, in less than five years, that money is going to be absorbed. Unless you are sure that you are going to pass away within those five years. If so, then you're fine. But be aware of it. But they weren't.

Ana: Teresa, how did you get involved in the Tenants Union? How did you learn about it?

Teresa: At first, we saw what happened on the [neighbour's] block, and then after that we started the movement here. We started seeing people walking with maps on our street, observing, taking pictures, and talking among themselves.

Inés: Some of the neighbours listened to what the conversations were about. This is how we started putting pieces together.

Teresa: We heard about Katrina from somebody who knew her. And that's how we started talking about what was happening here and how the union could actually help us to get together. That's how we started meeting every week. The whole neighbourhood started meeting.

Inés: We were involved already because we were working with that non-profit and at that time our landlord gave us a new contract and we suspected it was not OK. The people from the non-profit organisation told me you don't have to sign it. When they told me that, I went to Teresa and said if it's only us that get together here to defend ourselves, that will be ok. But if there's anyone else that wants to join us, we will share this information. Once we started talking to the other neighbours, that's how everybody got an alert. And then we found out about the LATU. By that time that girl that was helping us from the non-profit had passed away and we were left on our own.

Ana: But you had already started meeting?

Inés: Well not meeting but exchanging information. And we were trying to get together. And then we met Katrina [with the LATU] and she brought us some kind of guidance, and we started working together. And that's when we became a Tenants Association. And we've been working ever since then. I think about four or five months after we started meeting, we started getting the cash for keys offers ourselves.

Ana: What is their plan over there [on the neighbouring block]?

Inés: Over there, they're going to knock buildings down. There are some historical buildings as well and they want to move them to another place. That's what the Councilman said. I really find that very ignorant because once you move a building from its original place it loses its historical value. But I think that the Councilman just wants to calm us down because we are protesting.

At first, they were going to build a hotel over there, and some commercial places, and an educational centre and stuff like that. Now they changed the plan and they're going to build only [USC] student housing. That's our battle now. But I think we lost the one [on the neighbouring block] already.

Teresa: The people that are investing think that the student housing will bring more money, you know, more revenue.

Figure 2

The Flower Drive Tenant Association protests in front of developer Scott Gale's house.

*Credits:
FlowerDriveTA*



Inés: I think that building student housing was always the original plan for the investors. All they wanted was permission to build. Because they changed the plan multiple times. I'm very suspicious.

Teresa: I agree. That's more revenue for them. Apartments are very expensive. Rents are rising.

Inés: In those green apartments right there, they got all the people out and they're bringing in new people. Rents are four times as much.

Ana: When did the two of you move to this neighbourhood? How many years have you lived here?

Inés: I've been living here for over 50 years.

Teresa: 29 years.

Ana: That's a lifetime.

Inés: Yeah. But I tell everybody it doesn't matter if you have your whole life here or you just got here, same thing. If you don't want to leave, don't leave. We need to support each other. I'm not leaving.

Ana: So, once you formed the tenants association...

Inés: So, with the union we met more people who are knowledgeable about this kind of situation. So, they worked with us and supported us, and we were learning from them.

Teresa: But now in the same way we are helping other people.

Inés: Yes. The original idea was to open this tenant association for the block only. But once we solved part of our situation, we were still meeting. But we saw there were other people around us that were looking for help. So, we opened up for other people to come. And whoever comes, we help them. Thank God until this day we haven't lost a case. We're really lucky.

Ana: That's amazing! Can you tell me a bit more about how you met, how you organise? How would you describe how the tenants' association works?

Inés: Well, it's a lot of work. It's not easy. First you need to understand that you need your neighbours, and your neighbours need you. And there are times that your neighbours don't care. They think they don't have to be there. They think they don't have to come; they don't have to show up. They either haven't realised that point yet, or they're just not willing to help other people. In our TA it is only Theresa, me, and Olga who are here all the time. And like I said, we can't let it go. Because if we let it go, we don't know what's coming. Because this is not actually our home – I mean, we don't own it. We can't think that everything is ok. We don't know when the owners will pull something else on us, so we must keep meeting and being here together, so we can be prepared.

Figure 3

Señora Esperanza and Señora Olga. The political organising of the tenant association is nurtured by a spirit of ‘convivir’ or ‘neighbourliness.’

*Credits:
FlowerDriveTA*



We’re saying we’re not going to leave. But if we ever decide to leave, it would be with something in our hands. This is a gold mine. Billions of dollars. If you give us enough to buy a house, which right now is not cheap – we *might* think about it. Right now, a small house is about a million.

Ana: What kind of problems do people who come to the tenants’ association meetings have?

Teresa: Some of them have problems with harassment. Others, because landlords don’t do the repairs. And others because they have been offered cash-for-keys, but they don’t want to leave their house, and they want to know what they can do. The majority is for harassment and eviction.

Inés: The harassment is so bad. They harass people in different ways, by raising the rent illegally, sometimes two or three times as much. People can’t pay that much.

Ana: And how do you support them when they come?

Inés: We talk about it in a circle, and we come up with solutions. For instance, we know that it’s illegal for them to increase the rent that much. So, we write a letter to the owners or to managers to remind them that what they are doing is illegal. We are responding as an association. We don’t respond as an individual. We say this person belongs to the association. Sometimes just seeing that [letter] works. If the landlord insists and takes them to court, we show up in court.

Ana: Could you tell us what kind of work goes into organising? What I see is that every time you meet you need to reassemble tables, chairs, food.

Inés: Yes, it’s like that for over two years. You have to keep your spirits high.

Ana: How do you keep your spirits high?

Figure 4

Señora Inés protests at developer Scott Gale's house.

*Credits:
FlowerDriveTA*



Inés: Like I told you, without these ladies there would be no association.

Teresa: And the other members who come from outside the block, they support us, they sometimes bring food, etc.

Inés: We provide the coffee, food. But we have been providing it from the beginning and sometimes we get tired. Sometimes we buy pizza but that's kind of expensive. It's every week. It can be a little bit too much. We were providing it all at one point and then we said we can't do this all the time. We are providing the space. And that's complicated too. We ask people not to park in the driveway because that's for the people who live here who might not be in the meetings. And we meet here in the parking lot. Restrooms are also a big issue. Unfortunately, some people get upset because we don't have a restroom. I have my daughters, my sister, my husband, my grandchildren in the house. They have to take showers in the evening while we are meeting. It's busy. We are working on having a porta potty – raising the funds. So, we provide a lot, but we have to ask those that come for support too.

Ana: What are the other issues? I saw people resolving conflicts in the circle.

Inés: We have several. Somebody who doesn't even live here told a gentleman that he wasn't welcome because of his sexual preference. And I was so mad. It made me upset because one, we don't care. And if you do care, well this may not be the place for you. Everybody is welcome to come.

Ana: How do you make sure that everyone has space to speak?

Inés: Today we will have a fast introduction by everyone and then we will break into groups. If you've been evicted right now, you can go to this particular group and then whoever has a harassment problem in the other one, and the Flower Drive people can meet

Figure 5

Señoras serve food at a Christmas Posada. The Flower Drive TA blocked off the street for the celebration. Behind them is a 41:18 sign, banning sitting, standing, or eating on the sidewalk or street. *Credits: FlowerDriveTA*



separately to talk about an event we're planning. At the end of the groups part, we will discuss everything together and come up with solutions.

Ana: How do you find solutions to problems? From your own experiences?

Inés: Yes exactly. For example, right now we're having a situation of an ex-husband trying to evict the wife. He claims he is selling the property. We think that he's lying and harassing her. We have already been chatting about that on the WhatsApp group. But we will talk about it a little bit more here and we'll come up with a solution.

Ana: Can you talk a bit more about the relation of your Tenant Association to the South Central Local chapter?

Inés: We don't really meet with the local as a whole. I personally don't go to those other local meetings because I don't have time and because of the lack of transportation. The people from the South Central local come to our meetings sometimes; we also have meetings of three different associations. Every month we have an *escuelita* where all the locals go.

Teresa: Every year there is also a convention where people from other places like yourself come and people from our associations go and report on what we do here.

Ana: How was your experience with the *escuelita*?

Teresa: The first time I went to the *escuelita* I got a lot of information. We also learned tactics to defend ourselves. We learned about our rights, and that you don't have to leave, that the decision is yours, to stay or go. To me the *escuelitas* are very productive because you start to see that there are a lot more people in the same situation as you. I like it very much.

Figure 6

Flower Drive tenants turn a parking lot into a space to learn and discuss problems in the neighborhood.

Credits:
FlowerDriveTA



Ana: So, you talked about the problems you face in the *escuelita* and how to solve them?

Teresa: We talked about them, and then we acted them out. We acted out scenes between the tenant and the landlord, the harasser. By looking at it you lose your fear. You see the owner come and knock on your door and when he really gets there you're not scared anymore. What can he do?

Ana: What was your favourite scene you enacted?

Teresa: In my group we acted out the time that the owner of Flower Drive came here, and we were all here to confront him. And we all learned that we don't need to be afraid. Yes, he's going to offer you cash for keys, but you decide. That's what I liked. I felt more prepared.

Inés: I always tell my neighbours. ok. They're harassing us. They're trying to evict us. They are offering us cash for keys. What is the worst thing that can happen if we fight? They are already evicting us. So, let's do whatever we have to do. That's how we gain our power.

Ana: I was at the General Assembly of LATU the other day and it was so powerful to hear you speak in front of everyone! I thought that the analysis that you delivered there was very powerful.

Inés: People in the City Council are crooks. They receive money from the investors for their campaigns. They work together with the non-profits. These organisations are supposed to be helping us. But those nonprofits don't help tenants, they only help negotiate the cash-for-keys. They help convince the tenants you can get more cash, or whatever. But they don't work for us. We have to work for ourselves. We have to form groups like tenants' associations, working with each other and for each other. This is what will make

the difference. Everything else is just part of this capitalist system. If you want to do something to make a better life for you and your family, someone up there will be ready to put their foot on your throat. That's how I feel.

We can look back to the times when we had all this land that belonged to the natives and some other people from different countries came here and took it away by force. And now they capitalise on it. And they're forcing us to pay in order to live. We pay to drink water, to see light, to stay warm and to stay cool in the summer. Not only food, but we also pay for everything, we pay for the air that we breathe. What else do we need to pay for? We need to start taking that back as people. To be able to do that, we need to organise in order to be powerful. I'm not saying this is going to happen overnight. But it could happen. If we all take the conscious decision and say enough is enough. We are the people. If you don't do the work, we will take you out of office. And I think that's what needs to happen.

Ana: Yeah! And do you see this happening across the state borders? You attended the ATUN convention in June that was attended by people from all over the country. What did you take from that? How was that for you?

Inés: It was very nice. Participating made me realise that it's not only happening here in this area, not only in this block, not only in Los Angeles, not only in the United States, but it's happening everywhere. In every country. Because capitalism is everywhere, and it is managing the whole world. Unfortunately, we allow that to happen because we don't fight against it.

Their dollars do not clean up after them. People clean up after them. And they're not paying us enough to do that work. They want to pay us a little bit. We deserve a life too. They're not willing to raise the salaries and have better places for people to live. When we go to work, we have nothing but sadness in us. And we bring that sadness to our family. And our children don't want to stay in the house, they go out on the streets and that's how the crime starts. They are making criminals. The system, the capitalist system, makes criminals out of people. They have been capitalising on this land with buildings. That we are building for them!

Teresa: And then they put us in jail.

Inés: Yeah, they put us in jail and treat us like disposable people. I think that all of us disposable people better start getting together and start thinking. We are the ones that produce more people. Because let me tell you, those people – they don't have time for kids. And here we are having more children in the community of workers, and they need these people. But they don't want to treat them as people. I think that we need to get together. All of us. It's time for us to wake up.

Ana: While they are constantly trying to divide us across many lines, including racial identity.

Inés: Well capitalism is just like racism. It's the same thing. Because you have this much, then this is how much you are worth. You don't have nothing, then you're not worth anything. There's a lot of racism in capitalism and the other way around.

Figure 8

Flower Drive
tenants meeting.
Credits:
FlowerDriveTA



Ana: And how do you deal with that in your tenants association?

Inés: We must give it up. We must. We decided to open the doors for all people. We must treat them as people. We must treat them as equal. And that's why I was so upset the other day when someone said to a person that they couldn't come. We are not going to close our doors to anyone. Anybody that needs help, we're going to help. We don't judge people. We do have some rules, yes. One is that you must treat people with respect.

Ana: Language justice that is practised in your meetings is quite impressive for me. In this way people can speak in their own language and feel comfortable.

Inés: I think that's very important. If we don't want to have capitalism, and we don't want to have racism in our group, then language justice is one of the things we need to have. Because you feel more comfortable communicating in your own language.

Ana: Also, I found it super nice that there are these things for children, like colouring stuff and that they are present, and not excluded, from the assembly. They can kind of just hang around.

Inés: That's why we're an association. We have to all be involved. Those are the rules actually. We don't need children running around, falling on the concrete, and getting hurt during the meetings.

Teresa: Because we are part of a family. Whatever happens, we need to take care of each other, and we need to be involved.

OK, we need to go - the meeting is about to start!

Ana: Thank you so much for this amazing conversation!

About this Conversation's participants

The Flower Drive Tenants Association (La Asociación de inquilinos de Flower Drive) is an entire block of tenants organising against displacement in South Central Los Angeles. Members of the Los Angeles Tenants Union since March 2021, Flower Drive tenants have fought to stay put in the face of a multi-billion dollar development plan to replace hundreds of rent controlled apartments with luxury housing. In the process they have transformed their block of working class Black and Latino tenants into what one comrade described as a *semillero* – a seedbed of tenant organising across South Central Los Angeles.

Katrina Albright is a member of the Los Angeles Tenants Union.

Ana Vilenica is a feminist, no border and urban activist and organiser from Serbia currently living in Italy. She is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow with the ERC project 'Inhabiting Radical Housing' at the Polytechnic of Turin's Inter-university Department of Regional & Urban Studies and Planning (DIST) and a core member of Beyond Inhabitation Lab. Ana is a member of the Radical Housing Journal Editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research).

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