



‘The struggle gives you what the law and the boss deny you.’ Interview with Aland Castro and Cristina Cabello, from the Movimiento de Pobladores Ukamau, Santiago, Chile

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in conversation with

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Abstract

In this interview, Aland Castro, one of the founders of the Movimiento de Pobladores Ukamau in Santiago, Chile, and Cristina Cabello, one of the collective's new spokespersons, explain how Ukamau managed to mobilize more than 400 families over a decade and thus secured the construction of a social housing complex in Estación Central, a central district in the capital city of Chile. They explain how this long, contentious sequence involved a learning process, both for the Ukamau militant core and the mobilized families, which entailed collective empowerment and active participation at all stages. The result, the Barrio Maestranza, won a national award in 2021 for “best social integration project,” and demonstrated that working-class people do not have to resign themselves to displacement to the peripheries.

Keywords

Housing movement, social housing, popular sectors, protest, Santiago, Chile

Access to decent housing in central neighborhoods is a critical issue in many cities around the world, both in the Global North and the Global South. In Latin America, it has been historically associated with land occupations and informal settlements that gradually consolidated and transformed into poor, working-class neighborhoods or, as they are known in Chile, ‘poblaciones’. However, these mobilizations are partly shaped by the political and

institutional context in which they emerge and develop. Therefore, with the development of neoliberal housing policies since the 1970s—first in Chile under the Pinochet dictatorship and later, with the support of the World Bank, in many other Latin American countries—claims in favor of decent housing also changed. Based primarily on a demand-side logic that promises access to property through subsidy programs targeted at the poorest populations, these policies have contributed to individualizing and depoliticizing the housing question. In Chile, these policies contributed to the demobilization of the ‘pobladores’ movement—constituted by the residents of *poblaciones*—after the dictatorship in the 1990s.

However, these processes are not linear and their mechanisms can generate contradictory or unexpected results. Indeed, starting in the 2000s, the new housing policy of the Concertación, the center-left coalition that governed Chile from 1990 to 2010, allowed families to join together in committees of relatives (*comités de allegados*) to collectively apply for subsidies and thus access their own homes. Although this policy reproduced the neoliberal logic and implied the channeling and institutionalization of housing demands, it also reintroduced a collective dimension and opened a space for new organizations of *pobladores* to challenge the State. In this respect—and in many others—the case of the Movimiento de Pobladores Ukamau is exemplary (in Aymara, ‘ukamau’ means ‘this is who we are’).

In this interview¹ conducted at the Ukamau headquarter in Santiago de Chile on July 29, 2024, Aland Castro, one of the founders of Ukamau, and Cristina Cabello, one of the collective’s new spokespersons, explain how, between 2011 and 2020, Ukamau secured the construction of a social housing complex in Estación Central, a central district in the capital city of Chile. They explain how Ukamau managed to mobilize more than 400 families for almost a decade and contentiously challenge public authorities to first secure land and then accelerate the construction of the project. Ukamau managed not only to prevent the displacement of these families to the outskirts of the Chilean capital, but also to obtain housing that was of better quality and larger than the standard social housing financed by public funds. The families were even able to participate in its design. At every stage, people played an active role, assuming a leadership role that was not planned by housing policy and State actors. The result, the Barrio Maestranza, stands out both for the participatory process that made it possible and for the characteristics of the housing complex. In 2021, it won the Chilean Urban Contribution Award (Premio Aporte Urbano) for ‘best social integration project’ and construction has already begun on a second phase, alongside the first, which includes 200 new apartments.

The Movimiento de Pobladores Ukamau and the Barrio Maestranza show that the popular sectors need not resign themselves to passivity and displacement to the periphery. They can, to a certain extent, appropriate housing policy and orient it in ways that better serve their interests. And sometimes, as Aland Castro summarizes in the interview, “the struggle gives you what the law and the bosses deny you.”

¹ Interview conducted in Spanish and edited by Marcos Ancelovici at the Casona del Ukamau, in Estación Central, Santiago de Chile, July 29, 2024.

Figure 1

Cristina Cabello and
Aland Castro,
July 29, 2024.

Source: Marcos Ancelovici



Marcos: Ukamau was founded in 1987, while the housing committee itself was founded in 2011. How did this evolution occur between 1987 and 2011? Before the creation of the housing committee, Ukamau wasn't involved in these issues? How did this struggle develop?

Aland: During the 1990s, our organization was like a space of cultural resistance to the transition. Our interpretation was that nothing had changed, that there was a certain continuity between the military regime and this new Concertación, which came to deepen and improve the neoliberal model left by the dictatorship. Now, looking back, it was actually a space of self-consumption. We hung out with people who thought like us, read the same books we did, listened to the same musicians we did, and we didn't grow much with the neighborhood. There was a lot of black clothing, punk music, hip hop, and the like, while the neighbors listened to cumbia. So we were kind of the odd ones. But in that process, a rather interesting ideological process was forged, one of ideological strength, tolerance to failure, and a very strong learning process. We understood that education had to be a tool for progress and benefit for our family, our neighborhood, our people. The idea is that those who educate themselves must be at the service of our people; they are the 'enlightened proletarians'.

Before, we had this vision of a small, over-ideologized group waging a private war against the State. We thought we were going to bring it down, I don't know how. But we didn't. We looked at the *piqueteros* in Argentina, we looked at the struggle for land and the struggle for housing in Brazil, we looked at Chávez in Venezuela, and what was being done there was building majorities to bring about change. It wasn't a small group, it wasn't the Castroist vanguard, super-prepared, going to the mountains, no, on the contrary, it was massive. And that massiveness responds to something concrete. So we had to talk more concretely and not so much about this cultural space that had existed in the 90s. So we

began to search and realized that we had many young people from Ukamau who had attended the university, who were these enlightened proletarians, professionals, and many from the social field. We had sociologists, social workers, professors, and we asked them to assess what our people would be willing to fight for. There were some *focus groups*, some surveys and everything. We came to the conclusion that housing was what was going to allow us to mobilize massively. That was what was going to attract immediate attention, because people come together out of an urgent need for housing, not because they believe in socialism or revolution, but because they want housing. In this process of building the possibility of housing, we were going to focus on winning hearts and minds for a more long-term project, one that went beyond housing. That was the initial strategy that gave life to the Movimiento de Pobladores Ukamau in February 2011, which ceased to be this cultural space and became an organization fighting primarily for housing, for the city, and for life.

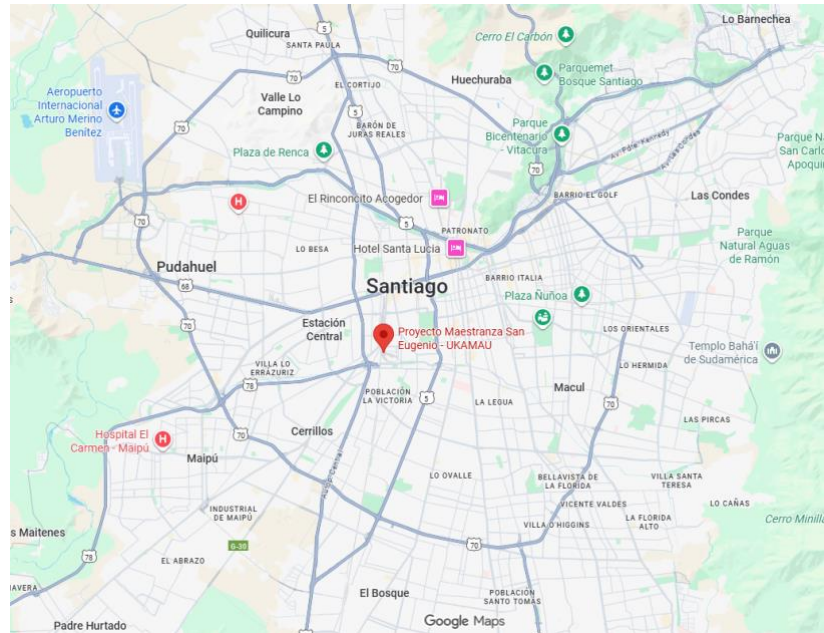
Marcos: And how did the Maestranza project itself develop?

Aland: Initially, some of our members came from the Revolutionary Left Movement (Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria, MIR), the Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front (Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez, FPMR), which were clandestine organizations during the dictatorship. So that was our working logic, and we had support networks to make it work, hold meetings, store stuff, so that the neighbor would open the door when the police were chasing us... So, at first, we thought about this small nucleus and building a housing project in the center of Estación Central. We thought about creating a kind of cooperative, the Christiania de Ukamau, like in Copenhagen, Denmark, a small housing project of about 40 units, where we were going to include all these neighbors, friends of the organization, who had always been accomplices.

When we called the first meeting in February 2011, very few people showed up. And we began working with these people in a way that transferred the logic of clandestine activism to this open space of struggle for housing. And without us putting up a sign or anything, many more people began to arrive who believed in this logic, who didn't believe in our ideas, but who believed in our ability and our determination. Long story short, by the end of March 2011, there were about 500 people. In other words, our initial plan of a small plot of land for 40 people no longer worked. We had to look for another piece of land. And at some point, we arrived at this piece of land, which is very interesting because it's associated with our history.

Our great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers arrived from the countryside to the city in the first half of the last century, when industrial development took place in Chile and city life was better. They arrived by train and got off at the central train station and lived in the western part of Santiago, in the large Nogales *población*, which was the mother of all this. Second, there is a very important event for us and for the history of the struggle for housing. Chile is the country with the first social housing policy in Latin America, which is the Workers' Housing Law of 1906, and later the Affordable Housing Law of 1925. With these laws, the first housing projects were built in this neighborhood, which is the

Figure 2
Location of the
Maestranza San Eugenio
project in Santiago, Chile.
Source: Screenshot from
Google Maps



working-class and railway neighborhood of San Eugenio, in the Estación Central district. So the homes in this neighborhood are very symbolic because they embody the city that was built well, in which the State, employers, and workers participated. Even the priest was involved! The workers' housing councils would bring in the firefighter, the priest, everyone, to give their opinion on how we were going to proceed, where the gardens would be, the water, everything. These *poblaciones* that were created, at first, had their own theater. It's impressive what was achieved! So, it was very interesting for us to rescue the history of this first social housing project that was built, which withstood all the earthquakes of the last century and is still there, standing and still inhabited by workers. And for us to come back to close that cycle a hundred years later was symbolic! That's why we decided that this would be the place, that we would stay in the place where our great-grandparents arrived.

Marcos: To achieve this, there was a whole process with the railway company, the municipality, the Ministry of Housing... It was quite a struggle!

Aland: The first thing we did was decide that we were going to build here, that we had a historically acquired right. We realized that the real estate business's greed was going to make this difficult. So we devised a strategy to get closer to what the State was asking for. We knew that if we went to the State Railways Company (Empresa de los Ferrocarriles del Estado, EFE) and said we were a movement of *pobladores*, we weren't going to get anything. So we created a real estate agency and sent a letter to the EFE board with an offer to buy, and they responded that they agreed, that we should meet, that they were very interested and everything. And then we sent the same letter, but this time saying that we were the Movimiento de Pobladores Ukamau, that we wanted to build social housing, and they said no. So with those two letters, we went to the assembly and told the people: when a real estate agency tells EFE it's going to buy, they say yes; when *we* tell them we're

Figure 3

Protest by Ukamau.
Source: Ukamau
(<https://ukamau.cl/>).



going to buy, they say no. This is when people decided to take over the Central Train Station. It was the first major and most disruptive action of Ukamau.

We got in there and didn't let anyone in or out. About 15 minutes later, the EFE real estate manager called me and told me it had been a regrettable mistake, that a secretary had made a mistake. That's when we got a working meeting with EFE, which told us that part of Maestranza was going to be ours. After that, we went to the City Hall of Estación Central to tell them; we wanted the mayor at the time, from the Independent Democratic Union (Unión Demócrata Independiente, UDI)², to know about it. Since he never had time to meet with us, one day in June 2011, the 400-something families went to the City Hall and took over the building. In less than 5 minutes, we had a meeting with the mayor!

This step triggered two processes. One, the concrete process of moving toward the construction of the project, because without land there is nothing. The other was reinforcing among people the idea that the struggle pays off, that the struggle gives you what the law and the boss deny you, as the slogan says.

Marcos: Did you continue doing many actions afterwards?

Aland: Yes, then we had to get Housing and Urbanization Services (Servicios de Vivienda y Urbanización, SERVIU), which is part of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development) to sit down at the table so that all of this could be finalized and made a priority. We knew that if we called the press because we had something important to report, they would not show up. But there's something we learned from the Argentine *piqueteros*: when they block the road to prevent trucks carrying merchandise from passing,

² The UDI is a political party founded in 1983 and closely associated with the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). One of its founders, Jaime Guzmán, participated in drafting the 1980 Constitution, which institutionalized neoliberalism in Chile

Figure 4

Protest by Ukamau.

Source: Ukamau (<https://ukamau.cl/>).

they get the government to negotiate with them. So we said: “We live near the most important avenue in Chile, the Alameda, and the most important commodity capitalism has—human labor, which is the only one that produces value—passes through that avenue. So we’re going to block the Alameda during rush hour, at 7 a.m., before we go to work, we’re going to block traffic.” And it worked! We arrived, blocked traffic, and had all the press and all the television channels in this country lined up, with our spokesperson at the time, Doris González, speaking to all of Chile.

We also inaugurated a new form of struggle. Up until that point, the fight had taken place on university campuses, between youths and the police. So when we put nearly 500 working-class women in the streets blocking traffic, the police came, but when they got off the buses and looked at them, they didn’t know what to do, because their mother, their aunt, their cousin, were there. They looked at those women and said, “How do I repress them?”

Marcos: Why were they mostly women?

Aland: We never delegated leadership roles, even though we had many offers. Specifically, university students from the 2010 struggles came here with that intention, saying, ‘We’ll build a barricade...’ We said, ‘no, we’re going to be the protagonists, these women are the ones who will fight, we’re not going to delegate the leadership to anyone. Even if it takes us a little longer, even if it costs us a little more to speak, we’ll do it. We appreciate the support, but let it be support, not leadership’. And to this day, this remains the logic of

our educational work, popular leadership. And so we began blocking traffic every two weeks.

Marcos: And you did it many times?

Aland: Many times, yes, afterward we would march, block the Alameda, march toward the center, until they repressed us. We would get to where they took us out of the Alameda, but since there were so many of us, we could block four corners of the Alameda at a time, that is, 100 women on each corner. Then the police would arrive and take a corner and we would run, and that was like an hour.

Marcos: Were there many people arrested?

Aland: At first, it was a bit difficult for the police to understand the logic. For example, I remember on July 11, 2011, when precisely 11 of us were arrested. Of the 11 of us who were arrested, nine weren't from the housing project. And we were almost all men, because the police started looking for the men so they could arrest them. Later, they learned; they arrested the women, used a lot of tear gas, a lot of water, at 7:00 a.m. in the winter... Afterwards, people were beaten and everything. In other words, they repressed us anyways. But there was the conviction that we were winning. This made the Ukamau struggle very attractive to all these leftist sectors who were more or less disappointed by the hegemony that the Concertación had maintained. It was the popular, working-class world fighting again! This opened up another space for us.

Marcos: Was there a turning point where you felt you were finally achieving your goal? Or was it a gradual process?

Aland: I think we felt that we were finally achieving our goal when we were able to reach far beyond ourselves. At first, we were a housing committee, then we became the Ukamau. In other words, the press talked about us, referred to our national spokesperson; we had

Figure 5

Protest by Ukamau.
Source: Ukamau
(<https://ukamau.cl/>).



coverage and were feared. Then we realized that we had this strength; we had the commitment of the base; we had an architect involved in the housing project.

Marcos: How did you find an architect?

Aland: It was the very product of these struggles! Many students came to us, and a social worker came to watch our assembly. She came with her boyfriend, who was an architecture student. And at the end of the assembly, this architect came up and said, ‘You know what? I’m working on my thesis and I’d like to do it with you, to design the housing project for you’. There were a lot of students, and internship students are sometimes a pain because you have to take care of them. So we said, ‘Yes, maybe.’ But he told us that his supervisor was Don Fernando Castillo Velasco, the National Architecture Award (Premio Nacional de Arquitectura). I think he’s the man who contributed the most to social housing in this country in the last century; he’s an eminence. So when he said that, he became our favorite person! They took charge of the housing project.

Marcos: And in terms of financing, how did the residential project work? Did you receive the subsidy before you had the land?

Aland: We had the subsidies around September, and with that same money, we bought the land. That’s how the model works.

Marcos: Was the land still owned by the State Railways Company (Empresa de los Ferrocarriles del Estado, EFE)?

Aland: Yes. So, EFE sells it to Housing and Urbanization Services (Servicios de Vivienda y Urbanización, SERVIU), and SERVIU pays for it with the people’s subsidy money. The subsidy is used to buy the land, develop it, and build the building. At that time, each family contributed a minimum of 10 UF (units of development)³ in savings. Today families contribute 40 UF because Maestranza 2⁴ has underground parking, an elevator, and more facilities than Maestranza 1.

Marcos: So the project is largely funded through State subsidies...

Aland: The subsidy model is typical of the policy initiated by the dictatorship in 1978, which liberalized land as a consumer good in the market and established that housing was a commodity that families had to acquire and that the State would help them acquire it through a subsidy. In the 1990s, the Concertación came up with the brilliant idea of banking social housing. So, working-class families would go to the bank and take out long-term loans, which could last 20, 25, or 30 years, to purchase their unit. The State subsidized part of the loan and acted as guarantor (because at the bank, we don’t have access to credit...). But that model failed because the currency used to make these loans is the Unidad de Fomento (UF), which fluctuates daily. So people started paying 50,000

³ The “unit of development” (Unidad de Fomento, UF) is a non-circulating currency; it is a unit of account controlled by the Central Bank of Chile and used for savings, loans, and investments. The UF is periodically adjusted for inflation to maintain its purchasing power.

⁴ Maestranza 2 is the second phase of the Maestranza project, on an adjacent lot in the same Estación Central neighborhood.

Chilean pesos, which was affordable, but it turned out that after 10 years of payments, those 50,000 had already become 250,000 or 300,000. The initial value of the housing unit had already been paid, but it kept increasing. People defaulted and couldn't continue paying. And what did the banks do? They did what banks do. They started foreclosures, throwing people out onto the street. In other words, the Concertación gave homes to the popular sectors that 10 years later the banks were taking away from them. And that led to a large movement of housing debtors, the National Association of Housing Debtors (Asociación Nacional de Deudores Habitacionales, ANDHA Chile), which achieved debt forgiveness, and in some cases, halted foreclosures and evictions. Based on that experience, the model was reconsidered. Since then, the State provides almost all the funding and the subsidy is almost total.

Marcos: How was the design of the Maestranza 1 complex elaborated? What was the collaboration with the architect like? What input did the families have? For example, the apartments in Maestranza 1 are slightly larger than standard social housing apartments in Chile. Did the families play a role in this process?

Aland: Well, Don Fernando Castillo Velasco died in 2013. This is his posthumous work, and it's being continued by his son, Cristián Castillo,⁵ along with Pamela González and Emilio Becerra. First, there's the logic of community. What it seeks is to generate community and create meeting spaces for those who live there. So, first, there are the large courtyards. By grouping all the buildings together and creating a continuous façade, rather than dividing them into blocks like social housing had been designed, you generate interior space. That's why there are three large courtyards. Then, there are no individual balconies here, which is what the typical building offers. Here, everything is thought of as a collective experience. What we created was a 2-meter-wide hallway that allows for coexistence. It's not just a transit hallway, but rather a meeting hall, where people pass by with a small table, can share whatever, have tea, a beer, smoke, it's a meeting space. The stair landings are also wide, also to facilitate this type of interactions. Upstairs, on the upper floors, we eliminated some apartments. On the fifth floor, for example, there's an apartment that's missing to create an elevated square. The idea is that people on the fifth floor don't necessarily have to go down to the courtyard; they have their own space there, and those on the fourth floor have a space there as well. So, the idea was always for us to live together, for all of us to be together. But it was work.

The collective dimension of the residential complex also reinforces security, which is an important element. Within the complex, women are safe, the children who play there are safe. Because it's a kind of positive panopticon, where you can see from any part of the complex, and moreover we all know each other.

But there was also some participation in some construction details. For example, what happened with the bathrooms was spectacular! Cristián Castillo, the architect, arrived and proposed his typology. And Pedro Pablo, who's a big old man who worked selling sand, said, 'You know what? The bathroom is too small, and I'm going to have to do some

⁵ On June 10, 2024, Cristián Castillo Echeverría received Chile's National Architecture Award, like his father.

**Figures 6-9**

Barrio Maestranza 1, in Estación Central, Santiago de Chile, July 29, 2024.

Source: Marcos Ancelovici.

maneuvering...? So Cristián left, and when he came back the next time, the bathroom was larger. That speaks highly of the professional! So, if you go into the apartments and you go into the bathroom, you'll see that it's larger thanks to Pedro Pablo, because he told Cristián. But for him to be able to say so, there had to be a prior process that generated trust and allowed him to raise his hand... Because generally, the architect is right. And since what they end up installing for people is perceived as a gift, people don't complain. But it's not a gift, it's a right.

Marcos: Didn't the problem arise that as the project developed and took shape, more people wanted to join?

Aland: That's why the second phase of the complex, Maestranza 2, was created. For us, the original core of Ukamau, the plan was to do this to show that it's possible. We were going to do a housing project and that was it. But so many people started arriving that we decided to do a second project. And this second project has to have the same features as this one, which has 62 m² per apartment, it has underground wiring, no overhead electric cables, it has piped gas that reaches each apartment, it has to have that and more. That's why the second project has underground parking, to free up space, it has an elevator...

And now we have a third phase. Yes, and we have other housing projects led by Cristina, in other districts, we've grown nationally.

Marcos: But once the first phase of the project is over, is it still managed collectively or does everyone go their own way?

Aland: That's one of our weaknesses. We're very good at political agitation and leadership. Our comrades know how to do all of that, but we don't truly prepare people to manage a housing complex, which are different skills. Leading a march isn't the same as managing a housing complex. We're talking about 424 families... We had the idea or dream that this was going to be like the *petite* socialist republic... And no, it's not like that. I mean, many people were involved, they knew they would make it with us, but they didn't really subscribe to our project. They did everything that needed to be done, but they weren't necessarily going to continue being activists. We thought they would all be activists and that they would have hung up banners of Che Guevara. That didn't happen. Many of those families, I'm sure that for New Year's they take out the Ukamau flag and all that. Or they see me inside and greet me. But they don't come to meetings; the level of participation is low. However, the level of participation is maintained for other things. For example, the scout group is still functioning, now there's a group of grandmothers... The germ of organizing remained, not as we wanted, but it remained. There are still management committees, which are people who are connected to us, who campaign with us, but the massive turnout we expected, where there would still be assemblies of 300 people, isn't happening.

Marcos: And you, Cristina, how did you get into Ukamau?

Cristina: Thanks to my mother-in-law I learned about all this, about the housing committee and everything. And within the organization I learned that it was much more than just having a home for me and my daughters, but something much bigger. Trying to change the world, change the country, change people's mind. Because many people only care about 'me, myself, and I'. I also want to care about what's happening next door, about the person next to me, or for those next to me to care about what's happening to me. So that's like living in a community.

Marcos: And in Maestranza 2, how many families are there?

Cristina: 200 families.

Aland: Because that's a mistake we saw here, in Maestranza 1. Very large housing complexes are very difficult to manage.

Marcos: How do people find out about the new project? Do you do any advertising or recruiting?

Cristina: What happened is that when Maestranza 1 was built, people started arriving alone because of their cousin, their niece, their grandmother, their sister, and so the rumor spread, because people realized that by fighting they could get a home, they could live the dream of a home of their own for themselves and their children.

Marcos: And you're the spokesperson for this second project. How did you get to this role?

Cristina: It's been a learning process, a lot of learning since I've been at Ukamau. I mean, I learn something new every day, but it happened little by little. I joined the housing committee around 2021 to get housing and I started participating in meetings. We were going to marches, we were going to block streets, many times... During this process, I became pregnant with my youngest daughter, and my oldest daughter and my partner were the ones who went to meetings or marches when I couldn't go. So it was a joint effort. And after I had my baby, I started participating again. I came with my newborn baby, and that's when I started to get a little more involved in the organization. And that's when Aland told me, 'Look, you know what? I need you to work here, to help me', and here we are, learning every day.

Marcos: And what have you learned? How to speak in public?

Cristina: Yes, it was really hard for me! To this day, I still get those butterflies in my stomach or get nervous, but I've been loosening up more. At first, I would stutter or lose my composure and break into a cold sweat, but then I started to loosen up little by little, and now I'm a little more comfortable giving speeches or speaking in public and everything.

Marcos: And for families awaiting this second phase, what is the project's future prospects?

Aland: The construction will take 21 months. At the organizational level, it's longer than here, to improve the process. Here, in Maestranza 1, there used to be large assemblies; in Maestranza 2, it was decided to hold 10 assemblies. There are 200 families, and each assembly consists of 20 people. A 20-person assembly allows everyone to sit here, at the Ukamau headquarters and see each other face to face, creating greater levels of trust and depth in the discussions that take place. In contrast, in an assembly with a hundred people, those in the back will always get a little distracted, talking about something else, checking WhatsApp. That's much more intense for the leadership, but it ensures that when we're in the housing complex, there will be greater control. For example, regarding common expenses, rules, noise disturbances, all of that, it's going to be easier to approach someone with whom I've met many times and know their name and everything. It's easier for me to learn the names of my 20 neighbors than for me to learn the names of a hundred neighbors.

Of those 20 people in the assembly, two are Ukamau activists and are on the management committee, responsible for running things. We're betting it will give us a better level of organization, a better organizational framework than what we had here at Maestranza 1. At Maestranza 1, they mobilized much more, built barricades, fought, were arrested, and were beaten up. At Maestranza 2, not as much, but they have a much greater level of intensity in deepening the organization.

Marcos: And do the assemblies meet very often?

Aland: There are two types of assemblies. One is this small assembly, which is intended to meet every two months, and the other is the general assembly, which is comprised of 200 families and also held every two months, so that the two alternate. Therefore, ideally, we

should have an assembly once a month. That's in addition to all the organizational work. And beyond that, Ukamau women began to join together and created the National Encounter of Working-Class Women (Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres Populares, ENAMUP), which has a different logic.

Cristina: ENAMUP goes beyond housing; it's a space where women can talk, share their insecurities, and support each other. A space especially dedicated to women.

Marcos: And is it national?

Cristina: Yes, nationwide. We're currently organizing it in various municipalities in the Metropolitan Region,⁶ but we also established it in the Valparaíso region. And we plan to expand to other regions so that it's nationwide. But for now, it's only been in Valparaíso and the Metropolitan Region.

Marcos: And do other groups come to see you, to see how you organize, how you function, not necessarily to do the same thing, but to get some inspiration from this process to do it elsewhere?

Aland: Yes, in fact, at the national level, Ukamau is a reference for many groups, and also in Latin America we have relationships with organizations in Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia. We're part of a Latin American network of organizations: the Darío Santillán Popular Front (Frente Popular Darío Santillán) of Argentina, the Homeless Workers' Movement (Movimiento de los Trabajadores sin Techo) of Brazil, and the People's Congress (Congreso de los Pueblos) of Colombia.

Marcos: And what kind of relationship do you have with political parties?

Aland: For a long time, we tried to maintain our independence and pursue our own path, but we realize it's very difficult because we lack resources. The popular sector is well-regarded for publicity by some sectors of the left, but they don't really like our participation. The election of our former spokesperson, Doris Gonzáles, to the National Central Committee of the Frente Amplio⁷ has been a very important victory for us. Not everyone in Ukamau is a Frente Amplio member, but a large part of its leadership is in the Frente Amplio. Actually, as a matter of fact, Cristina is the political coordinator of the Frente Amplio for the Estación Central district.

Marcos: Does this strategy change anything concretely? Does it facilitate access to any type of resources? Does it allow projects to move forward?

Aland: Now we have a challenge in the October 2024 municipal elections. Our goal is to secure two council seats: one here in Estación Central, for Victoria Herrera, who is one of our spokespersons, and another in the Tabo district, which is on the central coast of the Valparaíso region, for Gabriela Alvear, who is our spokesperson there. We believe

⁶ The Metropolitan Region includes 52 municipalities, including the city of Santiago.

⁷ The Frente Amplio, which means "Broad Front," emerged as a coalition of left-wing parties in 2017 and later turned into a unified party in 2024. It is the party of the current President of the Chile, Gabriel Boric.

that being part of the Frente Amplio will make it easier for these women to be elected. That's what we hope for.⁸

Marcos: And what do the Maestranza families think about this political activism?

Aland: Everyone knows, our candidate is the candidate of all the families. We've always been transparent about that and explained things: 'Look, we made this choice for this, this, and that. You're not obliged, but you're invited'. From the beginning, our work has sought to politicize the grassroots, the working-class world. Because depoliticization, disaffection with politics, is Pinochet's choice, it's the choice that keeps the same people in power.

Cristina: The thing is, everyone who comes to Ukamau knows our political orientation. So it's each person's personal decision to stay or leave. But most people support us in every decision we make and are in favor of everything we do to move forward with all the projects we have.

Further readings

- Abufhele, V., González, D., and Paulsen, A. (ed.) (2021). *UKAMAU: Conquistando la Vida Buena* (Santiago, Chile: Fundación Feman - Ukamau - Fundación Rosa Luxemburgo).
- Angelcos, N. and Pérez, M. (ed.) (2023). *Vivir con dignidad: Transformaciones sociales y políticas de los sectores populares en Chile* (Santiago, Chile, Fondo de Cultura Económica).
- Koppelman, C.M. (2018). 'For Now, We Are in Waiting': Negotiating Time in Chile's Social Housing System. *City & Community*, 17 (2), pp. 504–524.
- Pérez, M. (2022). *The Right to Dignity: Housing Struggles, City Making, and Citizenship in Urban Chile* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).

⁸ Since this interview was conducted, Victoria Herrera has been elected in the Estación Central district, where she now seats on the municipal council. However, Gabriela Alvear was unsuccessful in being elected in the Tabo district.