



When Progressive Mayors Aren't Enough: Homes for All and Trans-Local Social Movements

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Series: Progressive Mayors and Urban Social Movements

Progressive governments are often pulled away from their campaign promises by local growth-coalition interests or for other reasons. Social movements serve as necessary progressive counterweights. H. Jacob Carlson, Marnie Brady and Gianpaolo Baiocchi show how the growing Homes for All campaign uses trans-local organizing to connect organizers across distant places to build both local and national momentum for progressive housing demands.

The election of progressive mayors offers an important counterpoint to dire national politics of rising nativism and regressive policies. Progressives have campaigned on platforms that seek to address inequality and create inclusive cities for immigrants, people of color, and other marginalized groups. Yet we often find that progressive mayors have disappointed some of their supporters after taking office. The “dilemmas of radicals” elected at a municipal level are many: they have trouble confronting the pressures of the growth-machine coalition or other elites (Logan and Molotch 1987; Stone 1980), they may feel the fear of capital flight or the need to attract investments (Peterson 1981), and they may be caught between a more moderate electorate that expects them to govern “for the whole city” and a movement base that demands redistribution (Baiocchi 2003). Social movements can make the difference between true redistributive policies and conservative, pro-elite policies masquerading as progressive (Piven and Cloward 1977; Goldfrank and Schrank 2009; Baiocchi, Heller and Silva 2011; Leopold and McDonald 2012). Social movements have thus sought to exercise some autonomy from elected officials and to provide an important counterweight to this tendency.

Progressive governments have often failed to enact bold policy, particularly around housing issues. In Seattle, the city council known for leading the way in the “Fight for \$15” minimum-wage battles recently repealed a tax on Amazon designed to fund housing and homeless services after threats from Amazon and the local business community. In Oakland, California, Mayor Libby Schaaf, known for warning the community of impending ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raids, has fallen far short of her own affordable-housing production goals, leading renters and people without homes to set up an encampment at her front door. In Boston, when activists put together a sweeping renter-protection bill, former union leader Mayor Marty Walsh initially gave the mild response that “we could do something” to address the local housing crisis. Then, in collaboration with the city council, Walsh proceeded to water down the bill until it was merely a data-collection proposal. In New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio campaigned on addressing income inequality and providing affordable housing, but he has overseen a crisis in public housing, with over 80% of residents going for periods without heat and more than 800 children with elevated lead levels in their blood.

Pressures on housing affordability have generated a growing housing movement—one that is demanding rent control, strong protections against eviction, and the right to form tenants’ unions. This article examines one leader in that movement, Homes for All (HFA). HFA is a bottom-up, national housing-justice movement that links local communities across the country in campaigns that address both local and national targets, in hopes of getting beyond the “local trap” often encountered by left local politics (Purcell 2006). It is challenging elected officials, especially in “progressive” cities, who would prefer to narrowly focus on adding affordable-housing funding, or on new housing construction in the hope that affordability will trickle down—policies that are largely acceptable to real-estate interests that weigh heavily in city-level politics. HFA is generating national momentum around demands that explicitly confront those interests. Through this momentum and HFA’s support infrastructure, new localities are able to push their elected officials on bolder demands that resonate with a growing base of renters.

Homes for All and trans-local organizing

In 2013, the Right to the City Alliance¹ (RTC) initiated Homes for All as a way to align disparate struggles for housing justice through shared principles and strategy. RTC borrowed its name from the work of French social theorist Henri Lefebvre (1968) to invoke both a call and a demand for radical urban democracy. RTC also saw itself as an example of democratizing community organizing in the US. At the time of its formation, a growing number of grassroots activists and organizers on the US left, particularly among immigrants, women, and people of color, had critiqued the Alinskyist tradition of community organizing for narrowing demands and dissent through staff-led and top-down pragmatic campaigns (see Delgado 1998; Sen 2003; McAlevy 2015). The Homes for All campaign reflects the RTC’s distinctive strategy of transformative over pragmatic demands (Fisher *et al.* 2013), emphasis on leadership development and political education, and experiments in decentralized, trans-local organizational forms connected to broader movements.

Since its founding, the HFA campaign has grown to 78 grassroots housing-justice organizations in 44 cities and 27 states, including both pre-existing organizations and new Homes for All chapters. They work in some of the most progressive cities in the country—where gentrification and displacement pressures are strongest—as well as in many small and medium-sized cities. HFA member organizations work to build a united front with other housing and progressive forces outside of its direct membership around the country.

¹ The Right to the City Alliance is a national formation of organizations working for racial justice, environmental justice, urban justice, human rights, and democracy.

Figure 1. HFA members place their recent housing-justice victories on a map



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The trans-local approach is central to the HFA model. Trans-local organizing unites locally focused campaigns under a broad framework, without exercising high levels of control. On the one hand, this strategy tries to avoid the typical problems of national campaigns, which tend to be top-down and resource intensive. National campaigns also take on national targets that are—especially at this moment—largely immovable. On the other hand, exclusively local campaigns may win important victories, but they do not lead to change beyond the locality. Trans-local organizing seeks to address these problems: while there are national-level infrastructures that work with members to set the broad framework and provide mutual coordination and support systems, the national HFA body does not dictate or control local campaigns. This leaves local campaigns nimble enough to respond to local conditions as they see fit. As local victories accrue, they provide momentum to other local campaigns, as well as share lessons through the network, while still maintaining local autonomy.

There are two primary structures to facilitate trans-local organizing: trans-local committees and trans-local assemblies. Both committees and assemblies serve as entry points for new affiliates, as well as structures to cross-pollinate tactics, inspirational victories, and strategic warnings. Trans-local committees consist primarily of monthly calls to support day-to-day local organizing as well as to advance national-level coordinated efforts. Assemblies are groups of renters and organizers that periodically come together in-person and online to democratically make collective decisions about national, regional, statewide, and local strategy. Organizers from one group may also coordinate visits to another locality through these trans-local committees. By putting the motto of “each one teach one” into practice, it is largely through these committees and assemblies that local organizers learn of campaigns and tactics that have worked—or haven’t—in other places, as well as draw from the national support infrastructure to help them get their own campaign off the ground.

For example, through HFA’s “Renters’ Rights” trans-local committee, members focus on advancing renter protections through eviction protection, code enforcement, and expanding tenants’

unions, as well as through new policies like ban-the-box² on housing applications, rent control, and just-cause eviction. Some efforts have remained primarily in one city, while others have spread through the committee to other localities—particularly just-cause eviction and rent control. Just-cause eviction laws prevent evictions when the tenant has done no wrong, such as when a landlord wants to evict a low-rent tenant in favor of a higher-rent tenant. The fight for just-cause policy grew in Oakland, particularly spearheaded by HFA affiliate Causa Justa::Just Cause. It was then taken up by local HFA organizations in Boston, where it was part of a proposed bill of new and bold renter protections. Now there are just-cause campaigns that have either been won or are in progress through the leadership of HFA affiliates in Providence in Rhode Island,³ Portland in Oregon,⁴ and Chicago,⁵ and has since reached beyond HFA’s membership in Philadelphia.⁶

Similarly, the demand for rent control has spread to numerous states. In 2016, after two years of campaigns, activists including HFA affiliate Tenants Together,⁷ in California, succeeded in passing the first new rent-control measures in the US in the last four decades, in Richmond and Mountain View in the San Francisco Bay Area. Building on this momentum, activists successfully placed on the ballot a state repeal of California’s Costa–Hawkins Rental Housing Act, which has inhibited cities from expanding their rent-controlled housing stock. In the wake of these wins and aided by an adapted version of Tenants Together’s “rent-control toolkit,” HFA partners have strategized with emergent campaigns in Oregon,⁸ Washington,⁹ Minnesota,¹⁰ Providence in Rhode Island,¹¹ Newark in New Jersey,¹² Illinois,¹³ and Colorado.¹⁴ In New York,¹⁵ smaller cities are passing new rent-restriction laws, and candidates for governor and other offices have run on platforms that included universal rent control. Shared demands also means shared enemies. HFA has repeatedly fought locally and nationally against corporate landlords like Blackstone, which has poured millions of dollars into defeating the new rent-control proposition in California in order to prevent it from becoming an example for other states. As Lisa Owens of HFA affiliate City Life/Vida Urbana said, “We’re both watching and learning from how they are building this broad-based movement [in California].”¹⁶

² See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ban_the_Box.

³ See: <https://turnto10.com/archive/just-cause-eviction-legislation-becomes-law-in-rhode-island>.

⁴ See: www.kptv.com/news/portland-commissioners-to-vote-on-permanent-no-cause-eviction-ordinance/article_b5a0208d-5254-5c50-bc84-773049c09ba6.html.

⁵ See: <http://chicagoeviction.com/2018/05/eviction-ordinance-proposed>.

⁶ See: <http://www2.philly.com/philly/news/eviction-just-cause-bill-housing-curtis-jones-20180214.html>.

⁷ Website: www.tenants-together.org.

⁸ See: www.statesmanjournal.com/story/news/politics/2017/04/04/oregon-house-oks-rent-control-bans-no-cause-evictions/100030610.

⁹ See: <https://homesforall.salsalabs.org/washingtonstaterenterassembly/index.html>.

¹⁰ See: www.citypages.com/news/the-newest-battle-coming-to-minneapolis-rent-control/446596693.

¹¹ See: www.browndailyherald.com/2018/03/08/local-advocacy-group-pushes-rent-control.

¹² See: www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2017/09/residents_win_rent_control.html.

¹³ See: www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2017/10/02/the-movement-for-rent-control-in-chicago-is-gaining-momentum.

¹⁴ See: <http://unecolorado.org/our-work/our-campaigns>.

¹⁵ See: <https://ny.curbed.com/2018/8/23/17771320/new-york-rent-control-tenant-rights-andrew-cuomo>.

¹⁶ Source: Dougherty, C. 2018. “California Tenants Take Rent Control Fight to the Ballot Box”, *New York Times*, 12 October. Available online at this URL: www.nytimes.com/2018/10/12/business/economy/california-rent-control-tenants.html.

Figure 2. HFA members from the Mountain West region hold a trans-local strategy session at the 2018 national HFA assembly in Atlanta, Georgia



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Assemblies take place at national, regional, statewide, and local levels to help build strategic consensus, as well as to connect organizers across geographies. In fall of 2017, HFA members across the South held a southern assembly. In July 2018, more than 300 participants from 100 HFA member organizations across the country assembled in Atlanta, Georgia. In fall of 2018, HFA affiliates hosted statewide renters’ assemblies in Washington, Oregon, and New York, and a local assembly in Boston. These assemblies brought together a broad base of social-justice organizations, including those beyond HFA’s own membership. It is through these assemblies that members decide on trans-local strategy, such as the priorities of universal rent control, new renter protections, and community control over land and housing.

These policy fights are built on the leadership of renters who have first built their power through collective and direct action against landlords. Inquilinxs Unidxs por Justicia¹⁷ in Minneapolis wages multi-building rent strikes. City Life/Vida Urbana in Boston engages in collective bargaining directly with landlords. Take Back the Land Rochester has formed a citywide tenants' union, and occupies homes to stop foreclosures and evictions. A priority for HFA is to support the creation of new tenants' unions exerting their power in fights across the country and aligning with broader social-justice demands and movement building. In 2019, HFA will launch its "Green Book," inspired by the Spanish housing movement La PAH (La Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca,¹⁸ or "Platform for People Affected by Mortgages"). The Green Book details the nuts and bolts of organizing a tenants' union, as well as principles and values that require unity for a group to affiliate with HFA. These include the importance of the leadership of those most affected, grassroots democracy, intersectionality, solidarity and mentorship for others in the movement, as well as the human right to housing.

Progressive city governments in the US have been quick to prioritize affordable-housing policy that focuses on incentives for developers, hoping that housing affordability will trickle down to those most in need. Yet few have embraced the stronger demands from communities that directly confront real-estate interests, such as rent control and just-cause eviction protections. As a result, new emerging housing movements like HFA are finding that in order to grow and exert political leverage, they must forge new ties across geographies, and build mobilized bases of tenants by pushing for galvanizing demands.

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¹⁷ Website: www.inquilinxsunidxs.org/en/home.

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