

Chicago unions, tenants fight for housing

People's Weekly World Newspaper, 07/10/04 00:00

Author: Emile Schepers

CHICAGO – In an important new development, organized labor is now stepping forward to make its voice heard on the side of renters in the growing housing crisis here.

The causes of the crisis go beyond the general economic downturn. The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) is well into a plan to demolish 13,000 units of public housing in “projects” all around the city. Almost nothing has been done to make sure there is new alternative housing available for these thousands of families. The CHA blithely tells displaced public housing residents that they can get a Section 8 subsidized housing voucher. But at both the national and local level, Section 8 vouchers are drying up. There are 56,000 families on the CHA’s waiting list even as the CHA buildings are being torn down. As for the famous Section 8 vouchers, there is a waiting list of 23,000, according to a study by the Heartland Institute.

Chicago’s increased population, a result of large-scale immigration, is contributing to the housing crunch. Since 1990, Chicago has added as many as 100,000 people. Many of these new Chicagoans are not citizens and therefore are not eligible for either CHA housing or Section 8 vouchers. Gentrification has hit a large number of formerly affordable neighborhoods, driving working-class residents out. Finally, a tax structure that places the burden of paying for public schools on the backs of small-scale property owners has caused many small-time landlords to raise rents to the point that lower-income working people can no longer afford them.

The result is that, according to the Chicago Rehab Network and the Community Media Workshop here, Chicago is short 49,000 private market residential rental units. Almost 200,000 Chicago households are paying more than 35 percent of their income for housing, and 116,000 are paying more than half.

Major unions, including UNITE, HERE, AFSCME, SEIU and the Carpenters Union, as well as Chicago Jobs with Justice, have joined community groups to support the “Balanced Development Campaign,” whose purpose is to preserve existing affordable housing and put the brakes on housing loss due to gentrification. At a June 24 press conference, UNITE representative Sonia Silva, who is a former Illinois state representative, pointed out that UNITE’s members and those of other unions represented at the activity are the selfsame lower-income working people who are hit hardest by the housing crunch. Because of the cost of housing, UNITE members are being driven out of Chicago and into the suburbs, Silva added. Thus it is perfectly appropriate that unions enter the fight for affordable housing, just as they are entering the fight for health care, for example.

The “set aside” ordinance this coalition of community and labor groups wants passed would require that developers of 10 or more housing units be required to set aside 15 percent of units as “affordable” housing. Even though the 15 percent demand is a step back from an original demand for a 30 percent set-aside, the ordinance has been strongly opposed by real estate interests. These interests are closely interconnected through political campaign contributions and direct business relationships with some of the most powerful politicians in Chicago, including Mayor Richard M. Daley. The move by labor to strongly back the community’s efforts may help break the logjam that has kept the ordinance bottled up in a City Council committee.

The housing problem will be greatly worsened by the Bush administration’s new proposals on Section 8. The Bush policy reduces the total funding for Section 8 vouchers, cutting the funding out from under some vouchers that are already promised to struggling families. Even worse, it proposes to turn former direct federal support for Section 8 into “block grants” administered by the states. Across the country states are facing budget crises caused by cutoffs of federal aid. In this context, “block grant” funding mechanisms inevitably end up eroding federally funded benefits even more.

Tenants organizations coordinated by the Rogers Park Community Action Network and the Section 8 Tenants’ Council announced that on June 22 they delivered a large number of post cards to Illinois’ two senators, demanding that they support federal legislation (S 2467) which will stop the HUD cuts in Section 8 vouchers. Senator Dick Durbin, a Democrat, is already on board this legislation, but Senator Peter Fitzgerald, a Republican, has not joined him. Without S 2467, housing activists predict that Section 8 vouchers will be reduced nationally by \$1.6 billion next year and \$4.6 billion by 2009.

The author can be reached at pww@pww.org.