



Haight-Ashbury district in San-Francisco, famous for its role as a centre of the 1960s' hippie movement.

SAN FRANCISCO TENANTS UNION



Protest traditions colour the housing battle

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Sunny California has a special ring to it, not to mention San Francisco with its remarkable Victorian row houses lining hilly streets in a unique cultural setting. But there is also another side to this glamorous front, which is not so visible for the visitor; Old unrenovated flats with poor heating, broken windows and poor isolation. Not much to protect from cold salty cool breezes from the Pacific ocean on misty winter nights.

For the last 25 years or so, San Francisco has been in a state of continual housing crises marked by soaring rents, ever increasing evictions and a scarcity of available rental units.

Much is to blame on the housing market which is as big as New York's. It also has the highest rents in all of the US. From relatively reasonable levels in

the 70ties, every decade has seen a sharp increase in rents.

The booming high-tech economy in Silicon Valley in the 1990's bringing thousands of well-paid workers to San Francisco, made the situation even worse. Highly paid IT-specialists were ready to pay just about anything for a flat in city.

The new city dwellers also began

converting apartments into condominiums. The entire fabric of the city rapidly changed during these years. Neighbourhoods that once were affordable for a wide segment of society became extremely expensive enclaves.

Soaring rents cause poor tenants

This lead to steep increases of housing

costs, of 30 to 40 percent a year. A situation that has continued ever since the 1990's, although prices eased a bit following the burst of the "dotcom bubble".

As of now, 87 percent of the city's available rentals are too expensive for households with incomes under 19,800 dollars a year. This is a city where, despite much wealth, 30 percent of the households earn less than 12,000 dollars a year.

"A two bedroom flat for 450 dollar a month in 1978 would cost 3,000 dollars today. This is more than most tenants can afford", says Ted Gullicksen, Office manager at the San Francisco Tenants Union, SFTU.

Thirty percent of tenants pay over half of their income to landlords. In total, 70 percent of tenants are classified as "shelter poor", meaning they pay more than 1/3 of their gross income for their rent.

Legal loophole spurs evictions

The city of San Francisco has tried to control the rising rents by placing a cap on rents for occupied flats, also providing some protection against arbitrary evictions by landlords. But the current law has a major weak point; it provides no restriction on increased rents on empty flats. This has created an economic motivation for landlords to try to evict long-term tenants. And 98 percent of all San Francisco flats are owned by private landlords.

"By evicting a family who has lived in a rent-controlled apartment for a number of years, the landlord will be able to double or triple the rent. Not surprisingly rents in vacant units have risen dramatically and so have evictions", adds Ted Gullicksen.

Formed in 1970, SFTU has 5 000 paying members, half of them households, paying 55 dollars a year. Poor households pay less.

"This money is the backbone in our economy. Its not much for all the work needed, but this way we can have it our own way, not depending on any external financial supporters", explains Ted Gullicksen.

When flower was power

This proud sense of self reliance reflects the fighting spirit of SFTU. Here is a union that won't give up in the first place – a spirit fostered in the protest traditions of the city that goes back to the early hip-

pie days of the 1960's. And listening to Ted Gullicksen and his colleagues in the premises in Capp Street in downtown San Francisco, gives you a feeling that the spirit is still very much alive. The office is full of campaign posters depicting landlords as "villains", heaps of flyers on the desks among empty tea cups and demonstration banners leaning against the walls.

Empowering the tenants

Ted Gullicksen, has the perspective, joining SFTU already in 1988.

"In those days everything happened in the streets. People would gather at bus stations to get attention to the soaring rents, collecting names on petition lists, crying out their demands".

The same approach remains today, but the work is carried through other means, helping tenants to file the complaints that can stop a planned evictions.

"It's all about empowering the tenants, giving them the tools they need to challenge any unjust action by the landlords", says Ted. To make this happen, the union has some 30 volunteers, taking turns to help their fellow tenants

with good advice. Each of them work five hours a week. Another 50 helping hands, mostly students are on stand-by.

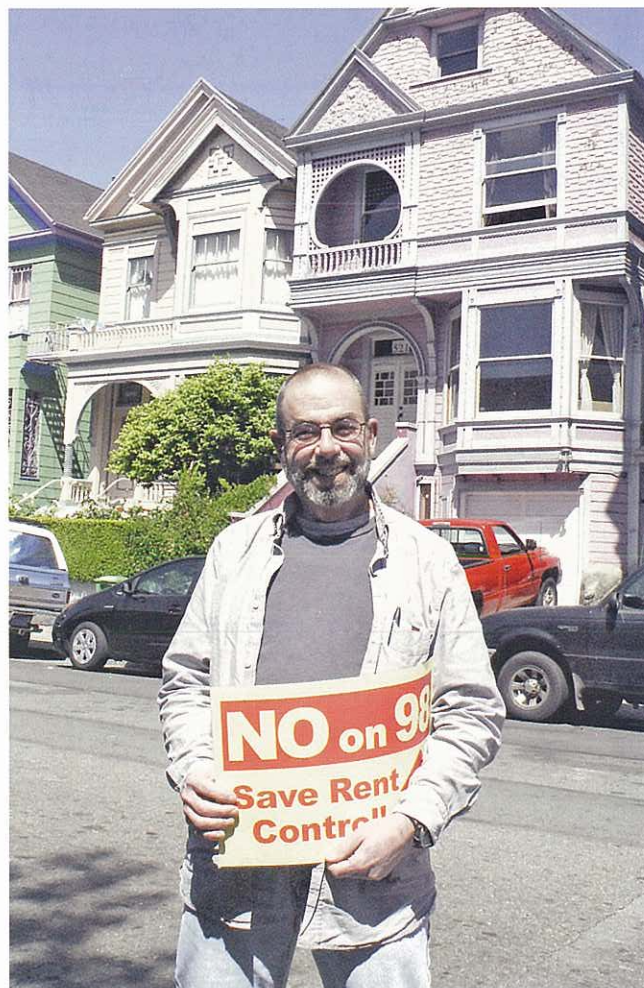
From streets to counselling rooms

Tenants seeking counselling, get all instructions they need to challenge and to take action against unlawful evictions or unacceptable rent increases. For professional legal help, special "tenants attorneys" are engaged. Members also receive a Tenants Rights Handbook with all their rights explained. There is also a lot of information on the Unions web site www.sftu.org

Besides helping tenants with their individual problems, the Tenants Union also strongly advocates for legislation to preserve and expand the rights and rent control. In the past 15 years nearly every local law expanding tenant's rights has come from the SFTU.

SFTU has been a member of the IUT since 1992.

"Being part of this family of tenant unions around the world has given me an interesting perspective on the work. And it has made me feel less isolated", ends Ted Gullicksen.



Ted Gullicksen, manager at SFTU, and Victorian row houses in San Francisco.