

Low-Wage Workers and High Housing Costs

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Housing policy becomes a labor issue when housing costs consume large portions of hard-won wage increases. Working hard no longer guarantees the “American Dream” of owning a single-family home on its own plot of land. The rule of thumb that one week of the monthly wage goes to pay for housing is no longer true. In today’s economy, “it becomes clear that even if a household has multiple low wage workers or individual earners that work overtime or more than one minimum wage job to make ends meet,” adequate housing remains out of reach in most parts of the country (Pitcoff et al. 2003). Although finding and keeping decent, affordable housing has been a persistent problem for many working people, the extent and the depth of today’s housing crisis makes this issue more pressing for labor than ever before. Without the benefit of housing subsidy programs, low-income people often pay more than half their incomes on housing.

Our study examined the effect of the housing crisis on a group of low-wage care workers in Southern California, where the housing situation is one of the worst in the country. We joined with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 434B, the long term care union that represents over 100,000 homecare workers in Los Angeles and San Bernardino Counties, to conduct a study of worker’s housing. Local 434B members provide in-home services to low-income seniors and people with disabilities who otherwise would not be able to live independently in their homes.

Anyone who has cared for a disabled or elderly relative knows that homecare is physically and emotionally demanding work. Homecare workers aren’t found on sweatshop floors, behind restaurant counters or checkout stalls at supermarkets. Instead they work solitarily and invisibly in their own homes or in the homes of the people they care for -- single-family homes, row houses, apartments, duplexes, and trailer parks. The house becomes the place of

work, no matter how inadequate the building or apartment. Homecare workers may dispense medications; assist with bathing, grooming, meal preparation, and housecleaning; and/or provide transportation to medical services. They may be the only visitor a homebound senior has during the week and the only one to offer essential social contact for people for whom the only alternative is costly and even more isolating nursing home care.

Aware of the depth of the housing crisis in Southern California, we were impelled to ask where low-wage homecare workers found housing, how much they paid, and the kind of conditions they encountered. We also wanted to know how homecare workers adapted to difficult housing situations and what affect the high cost and limited supply of housing had on other dimensions of their lives. What was the human toll extracted by unaffordable, inadequate housing, we asked. Finally we wanted to examine the nature and extent of union strategies with regard to the need for decent, affordable housing for members. From a base of current and past strategies we wanted to explore future actions that Local 434B might take in housing advocacy, organizing around housing issues, and bargaining for housing benefits. Although we expected to find homecare workers living in difficult housing situations, we were not prepared for the affects of abusive landlords, the extent of overcrowding, the feelings of powerlessness, or the damage done to self-worth and dignity by overcrowded and substandard housing. The findings are presented in four parts: a contextual overview of the housing crisis in the U.S., California, and the City of Los Angeles; a description of the study's collaborative research approach; our findings with regard to affordability, conditions, and landlord relations; coping strategies; and the implications for labor.

The Dimensions of the Housing Crisis: Unmasking the Dream

Among all U.S. households, “More than 14 million spend more than half their income just keeping the roof over their head. Another 17 million spent 30 to 50 percent” (*Labor Party Press* 2003:4). Since the National Low-Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) began calculating the *housing wage*¹ in 1989, the gap between housing costs and wages has grown steadily. In 1999, the national housing wage for a two bedroom unit was \$11.08; by 2003 that amount had increased 37 percent to \$15.21 while the minimum wage remained unchanged at \$5.15 (NLIHC 2003). Even for workers making more than the minimum wage, the number of families with critical housing needs² rose 23 percent between 1997 and 1999. Of all households with critical housing needs during this period, 48 percent were working families (Lippman et al., 2001:9).

Being a low-wage worker and a renter increases the difficulty of finding decent housing in almost every jurisdiction in the U.S. According to the NLIHC (Pitcoff et al. 2003),

Renter households in forty of the nation’s states – home to almost 90 percent of all renter households in the nation – face a housing wage of more than twice the prevailing minimum wage. Looking at this in terms of the work hours per week, it is clear that in these states a household is unable to afford a two bedroom home at the FMR [fair market rent] even with two minimum wage earners working 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year.

¹ NLIHC defines the housing wage as “the amount of money a household must earn in order to afford a rental unit of a range of sizes at the area’s Fair Market Rent (FMR), based on the generally accepted affordability standard of paying no more than 30 percent of income for housing costs. The FMR is the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) best estimate of what a person seeking housing would have to pay in the local market” (*Out of Reach*, 2003).

² Lippman defines critical housing need as a household that “spends more than half of its total income on housing and/or lives in a severely inadequate unit” (6).

Unable to afford adequate housing, low-wage renters are forced to settle for severely inadequate or overcrowded units, or must commit more than half of their income for housing (Nelson et al. 2003).

In California, over 60 percent of all low-income renters pay more than 50 percent of their income on housing. For very low-income households, that figure rises to almost 80 percent (State of California Department of Housing and Community Development 1999). Multiple factors contribute to the problem of affordability, but central among them are the failure of wages to keep up with housing costs, the loss of existing affordable units, and the scarcity of new affordable units. For example, from 1988 to 2000, median annual earnings declined by 7 percent in real terms for the California workforce (Dardia et al. 2002:3) while the FMR of a two bedroom unit increased from \$747 to \$1,101 in just one year (from 2002 and 2003). Between 1995 and 2002, California lost more than 24,000 affordable units as landlords either failed to renew or prepay their Section 8³ contracts and is in danger of losing another 40,000 units (Riches 2004:2). With regard to the deficit problem, of the annual average need for over 200,000 new units in the 1990s, just half were actually built, and of those only 24 percent were for multifamily construction, down from 45 percent in the 1980s (State of California Department of Housing and Community Development 1999).

In Los Angeles, where the Fair Market Rent for a two bedroom unit in 2004 is \$1,021, the affordability problem is profound. In December 2000, HUD reported an affordable housing shortage for the region of roughly 401,000 units for households with “incomes below 50 percent

³ Section 8 housing subsidies provide federal funding to low-income families, elderly and disabled persons through local public housing authorities. With Section 8 vouchers recipients can rent from any property owner participating in the program at a rate consistent with HUD affordability guidelines. The program pays the difference between what a family can afford and the Fair Market Rent (FMR) for the unit. Landlords have the option of withdrawing from the program and give reasons of slow payments, meeting housing inspector demands, irresponsible tenants, and too much paperwork.

of the median who pay over half their income for rent or live in severely substandard housing” (Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty 2001:3). In addition to affordability, Los Angeles is beset with overcrowding and units with severe physical problems. In 1999, 25 percent of poor households in Los Angeles were overcrowded or severely overcrowded compared to seven percent of nonpoor households.⁴ Among 528,800 poor households in the same year, 10 percent lacked complete kitchen facilities, 18,700 units lacked some or all plumbing facilities, and 9 percent had signs of rodents in the last three months (Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty 2001:2). For homecare workers who often work less than 40 hours a week at \$7.50 an hour, trouble acquiring affordable, decent housing is almost inevitable.

A Collaborative Research Approach: Stronger Together

Our research was conducted from 2000 to 2003 as a collaborative project between members and staff of Local 434B, and students and researchers from UCLA. The study was completed in three phases. The first phase consisted of a telephone survey, developed jointly, and administered to 546 of the Local’s members by homecare workers trained to interview other homecare workers. During the second phase, researchers conducted focus groups with 51 members who were identified by union staff as active and knowledgeable. The purpose of the focus groups was to help researchers better understand and interpret contradictory findings uncovered by the survey. Finally, in-depth interviews with 19 members probed strategies used by workers to adapt to and cope with their difficult housing situations. After the data were compiled, the entire team of researchers – students, faculty, union members and staff, discussed ways the findings could be used for union organizing and lobbying efforts. It was our hope that

⁴ HUD defines overcrowded units as those with 1.01 to 1.5 persons per room and severely overcrowded as those with 1.51 or more persons per room.

the new understandings we gained from the collaboration might yield concrete results and improvements in the lives of homecare workers struggling with low wages in the new economy.

The 546 respondents in the survey were randomly selected from Local 434B membership lists and reflected the demographic profile of the workforce -- one that is predominantly female (83 percent), minority (71 percent), and poor (80 percent) (Cousineau 2000; Delp and Quan 2002). The majority of respondents were women (83 percent); 55 percent were between 45 and 65 years of age; and a quarter were immigrants. Seventy-two percent reported annual household incomes of \$15,000 or less. Racially and ethnically 62 percent of respondents were African American, 25 percent were Latino/a, three percent were white, and 3 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander. The survey questions were structured, with forced choice responses for the majority of the interview. Clusters of questions collected information on household size and composition; housing type, cost, and conditions; tenure; sources of income used to pay housing costs; and problem solving experience with regard to repairs. Descriptive analysis was conducted for each variable and cross-classification tables were constructed by gender, race/ethnicity, tenure, income, age, and immigrant status. Finally, probit and logit regressions were run for the determinants of housing satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The results confirmed our conjectures that most homecare workers are renters, that many pay more than 50 percent of their income on housing, and that they frequently live in substandard units. What we did not expect to find was that in spite of high costs and generally poor conditions, a majority of respondents reported being satisfied with costs (74 percent), and with conditions (75 percent). We used focus groups to help us understand and interpret this counter-intuitive finding.

Of the 51 participants in the 7 focus groups, 87 percent were women. Latinas were slightly overrepresented with 58 percent of participants. The remainder of participants was

composed of 27 percent African Americans, 11 percent whites, and 4 percent Asian/Pacific Islanders. Groups were conducted in both English and Spanish. Sessions were structured but allowed for considerable give-and-take between participants. In response to researchers' questions about the discrepancy uncovered in the telephone survey between workers' actual costs and conditions, and their reported levels of satisfaction, participants suggested five explanations. First, they felt that some workers do not think they have the right to complain because compared to average rental prices in Los Angeles, they pay very little. These workers, they say, live out the dictum, "you get what you pay for" and shouldn't expect more. Second, participants reported that many homecare workers express a sense of futility with regard to housing and feel that expressing dissatisfaction only makes a bad situation worse. They also suggested that even if a worker's housing situation was difficult, it may represent an improvement from the worker's previous circumstances. Fourth, many believed that people would rather live in poor conditions among friends and relatives than risk better conditions in an unfamiliar neighborhood. Finally, focus group participants felt that many of their colleagues do not know what standards they can expect in rental housing and are unfamiliar with their rights as tenants.

In the last phase of the study 19 in-depth interviews were conducted – 10 with men and 9 with women. Interviews were semi-structured and touched on aspects of the respondent's residential history, current housing situation, and job satisfaction. The previous two phases of the study provided only hints about workers adaptive strategies that allow them to cope in stressful residential situations. The trust established with researchers over nearly two years of work and the confidentiality of the interviews allowed participants to discuss details of their housing that might cause embarrassment in more public settings and to describe the coping mechanisms they employ. These strategies are passive (doubling up with friends and family, learning "not to see"

things that need repair) and active (upgrading skills and education in order to increase income, learning their rights and where to go if they are mistreated as tenants). Our findings from all three phases of the research fall into three categories: 1) wages and lack of affordability, 2) poor conditions and overcrowding, and 3) relations with landlords.

Wages and Lack of Affordability

In 1998, 80 percent of homecare workers in Los Angeles County who worked for the State's In-Home Supportive Services Program⁵ were poor or near poor⁶ (Cousineau et al. 1998:5). In our sample, 72 percent reported incomes at or below \$15,000 in 2002. This amount is consistent with 1999 U.S. Bureau of Labor data that show homecare aides taking home \$11,700 yearly. Those respondents in our study who reported incomes of \$15,000 must commit 82 percent of their income for a two bedroom unit at the FMR. At these rates, the 2003 gap between the housing wage in the City of Los Angeles, \$19.63 and homecare workers' wage is \$12.13. The extent of the gap is so large that some homecare workers are beset with feelings of futility and a sense of being trapped by their limited options.

The stress associated with too little money to pay for housing and other bills was evident among the people we interviewed and those who participated in focus groups. One focus group participant commented, "Homecare workers don't make enough to move anywhere else and can't move because other places are too expensive" (March 12, 2002). Anita Gonzalez portrays the situation she found herself in:

⁵ All the homecare workers of Local 434B work for this program which is part of the State's Department of Social Services.

⁶ Poor persons are defined as at or below the poverty threshold of \$16,000 for a family of 4 in 1998. Near poor persons have incomes of 101% of the poverty threshold. (Cousineau, 2000:5)

I pay so much rent and I don't earn much money and I think some times I don't have enough to pay all of my bills. So I think that I should move somewhere with less rent. But then I think that when I move I will have to pay a new deposit for the phone, and other expenses. I end up just staying there (June 29, 2002).

Workers looking for better housing are quickly discouraged. Valerie Jones who has stayed in consumers' homes in the past and at the time was doubling up with her sister-in-law told us that she hoped to find her own studio apartment or even a room of her own. But after looking she found that "renting a room from someone is like 350, 450, 500 dollars depending where you go for a room. Can you believe that? And it looks like it's going up on a weekly basis" (June 27, 2002). Esther Washington cares for her disabled daughter in a one-bedroom apartment for which she pays \$630 a month. Her teenage daughter sleeps in the living room and Ms. Washington would like to find a larger unit, but when a two bedroom apartment became available in her building the cost was prohibitive. She told us, "I have one [bedroom], unfortunately I need two. I could have had a two bedroom apartment in that building but I refused to pay eight hundred dollars, and every year, May 1st, you know, the rent is gonna go up three percent" (June 19, 2002).

Owning a home in Southern California where the median home price now approaches half a million dollars is out of reach for even moderately well-off people. In the City of Los Angeles, only 23 percent of residents can afford a home. Still, many of the workers we interviewed, 66 percent of whom are renters, would like to be homeowners. Linda Hunt reflected that,

For homecare workers I think the housing situation is bad. It's sad because [with] what homecare pays it's impossible to buy anything and with the price of homes

going up each day, it's just impossible. They don't make a living wage from homecare, so we cannot afford a home. In the end you have to rent, but everyone would like to be able to own a home. With kids, you want them to have their own backyard, but that's just impossible (June 25, 2002).

Combined with low wages, limited and uncompensated hours lock homecare workers into poverty.⁷ Technically workers may work up to 283 hours monthly but many find it difficult to find 40 hours a week (Delp and Quan 2002; Cousineau 2000). Statewide nearly 60 percent are allocated less than 23 hours per week and only 13 percent worked a full-time schedule (Heinritz-Canterbury 2002:19). Carl Franklin who had been caring for two people, now only takes care of his mother. He said, "If . . . you cannot reach a hundred hours you got problems about your apartment, your bills. . ." (May 19, 2003). For Gary Newman who "barely make[s] enough to rent" an apartment, more hours would mean, "I could see my way through to at least pay rent" (July 15, 2003).

In the absence of more hours, homecare providers piece together a housing package. Henry Morales, turning 80, explained the way he could afford to pay \$775 a month.

I get my paycheck from the butchers' union, and then I get my social security, and then I work over here, but then my son helps, see he lives there so, but you know, myself, I couldn't do it. . . . My son helps me, he works, he gives me a little money, he helps me out with the rent, but you know to put up \$775 every month and then your utility bills and your everything, it would be pretty hard, and then your food and I like to eat (July 28, 2003).

⁷ Allowable hours are determined by Department of Social Services social workers. Although there are guidelines, it is an individual process based on the social worker's assessment of amount of care needed by the homecare consumer.

Large as the affordability problem is for this workforce, it is not their only obstacle to decent housing. Poverty wages also lead to a high probability of living in housing that is substandard, overcrowded, or in need of substantial repair, all of which have been shown to contribute to poor health and educational outcomes, and psychological hardships.

Poor Conditions and Overcrowding

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines *substandard* as housing with problems in three or more of the following areas: plumbing, heating, electricity, upkeep, hallways, and the kitchen. When asked about their housing conditions, 12 percent of survey respondents reported not having had hot water for at least one day in the previous six months. By comparison, the 1999 American Housing Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau reported that only four percent of households nationally had the same problem in a three-month period. Similarly, 17 percent of homecare workers reported experiencing leaks on the floor from faulty plumbing, whereas for households nationally the figure was 10 percent. Nineteen percent of homecare workers reported a major problem with insects, vermin, or rodents and 12 percent of homecare worker households had no working toilet, bath, or shower for at least one day in the previous six months. All of these figures are higher for our sample than for households nationally.

While the statistics in themselves paint a clear picture of the objective inadequacy of much homecare workers' housing, as snapshots statistics cannot begin to illuminate the physical and psychological impact of serious housing problems endured over long periods of time. Anita Gonzalez has lived in her apartment for five years. She told us that during that period there was never a time when her home did not require some kind of repair. Getting needed repairs made was always a struggle until new management made some improvements. She told us of a

time when, “there was a leak and we had to keep calling the managers to change the carpet . . . there were a lot of roaches and the carpet smelled terrible.” In another instance her stove needed repair and she said she “would always send them [management] notes saying my stove doesn’t work and I need to cook my food. They have finally come to fix it, a short time ago (June 29, 2002).

In many cases when repairs were forthcoming, the tenant had to lodge numerous complaints and wait for long periods before landlords responded. Cathy Chavez said to us about her management that “sometimes they fix things up and sometimes they don’t” and then went on to relate some of her experiences trying to get repairs made.

Last year there was a problem with the plumbing and the water barely came out when you opened the faucet all the way. They would come to fix it, and it would stay the same. I can’t live like that. There are leaks sometimes and they go all night and I can ask them to fix it, but it never gets done...If I complain they say they will fix it, and then they don’t show. The hot water started coming out more than the cold and it was hard for me to shower. When I complained they said it was because they had fixed it and that was how it was going to be now.

The apartment in which Valerie Allen lives has mold and mildew in the bathroom and the closet.

The resulting repairs were not only inadequate, but failed to solve the problem with mildew.

. . .when the repair person came in to do the work, he fixed the shower door so it would fit properly. This [repair] lasted about a week. The shower door was ill fitting so water would come out and this caused the tile to come up around the room, but it looked as if the water was coming from somewhere else. He came to

fix the shower door so it would fit properly, but he totally overlooked the other things (July 27, 2002).

Although the majority of respondents lived in relatively small households (73 percent live in households of 3 or less); 14 percent used a room other than a bedroom on a regular basis for sleeping. Consequently, even small households were living in overcrowded conditions. When Esther's daughter came home from the hospital after major surgery, Esther found a "spot in the living room to put a twin bed" for her. "She chose to remain in that corner" Esther told us, "and it's alright, we don't have company like we used to anyway," but admitted that she would like to be less crowded so that, "my living room would stay clean" and they would not have to "just sack out on the couch...anywhere, you know" (June 19, 2002). Janet Marino lives with her child in a house where she rents a room. When Janet moved in, three families lived in the building, now there are five. Janet told us that "because it's five now, it's a bit uncomfortable...the thing is, since there are more people, I get frustrated when I shower because when someone else is showering the water stops for me and when I'm showering, the water stops for someone else. I imagine that's because it is one house that is divided and they rent rooms. The electricity also stops. That's very uncomfortable sometimes" (June 29, 2002). Yet another homecare worker told us of her frustration sleeping on the couch of a relative, "I can't organize myself," she said, "I cannot" (Valerie Allen, June 27, 2002).

Fear of Landlords

Accompanying bad housing conditions and a mismatch between wages and affordability, homecare workers are effectively left isolated in regards to their housing problems. Fear of landlord retaliation surfaced repeatedly as a concern and stood in sharp contrast to a sense of empowerment experienced through union solidarity. One focus group participant told us:

“Landlords make people afraid to complain, they threaten. People are afraid they will be kicked out or their rent will go up” (February 5, 2002). Another explained that she refused to complain to the landlord because she was afraid that if he retaliated with eviction, she would have trouble finding housing in the future. “Eviction stays on your record regardless of the reason,” she said (March 25, 2002).

In other cases workers are caught in a quandary. They don’t feel that they have the right to complain because they pay relatively low rents and feel they are getting what they pay for or find that when they report a problem to a landlord it does little good. “Landlords always say they can’t afford to fix things, that they don’t have the money, so if they fix things, they will have to raise the rent, so people don’t complain” (February 5, 2002). One worker was told when she reported problems that, “If you don’t like it, find somewhere else to live” (March 26, 2002). Participants felt that older renters were especially vulnerable because they worry that if they lose their apartment, they could not manage finding and moving to a new place: “There is discrimination for seniors so they don’t want to get kicked out if they complain.” (February 25, 2002).

Under these conditions, acceptance of poor conditions sets in. “People don’t think they can do any better” (March 26, 2002), said a focus group participant. Another said, “If people have lived in a place for a long time, they become accustomed to the situation and think it's ok” (February 25, 2002). A staff member of Local 434B who participated in a staff-only focus group felt that many workers face problems so overwhelming they give in to hopelessness. He reflected:

The level of oppression is so high for many people that they have lost hope and just settle for what they have. The oppression is both economic and

psychological, often causing depression and denial about the reality of housing conditions (August 1, 2001).

The sense of powerlessness can result in passiveness and/or a paralyzing fear of landlords. One participant told us that: "We're taught not to complain. If you can't afford to do anything about it anyway, why complain? What good does it do?" (February 5, 2002). And another said: "You have to be content with conditions or you become unhappy" (March 26, 2002), effectively shifting the burden from the landlord to the tenant.⁸ Responses such as these are typically present in housing organizing where renters don't know their rights and or are afraid to take individual action. Drawn-out periods between the time a complaint is made and the repair executed can weaken resolve and reinforce initial reluctance to step forward. Other than in cooperatives or tenant and homeowner associations – institutional forms that encourage participation – or where aggressive and visible tenant organizing occurs, renters may be loathe to take action, censuring themselves and enduring bad conditions.

Adaptive Strategies

Faced with the critical shortage of affordable housing, the lack of housing subsidies, and the very real possibility of landlord reprisals, homecare workers nevertheless employ a number of strategies that allow them to adapt to very difficult housing situations and to overcome their frustrations. Cook et al. (2000) describe some of the behaviors households adopt when faced with multiple problems:

Household reconfiguration, adopting new standards, and social action may result when other, more active means of housing adjustment are restricted. Families that double up, launch adult children, ignore peeling paint, or withhold rent to protest

⁸ This frustration and resignation afflicts homeowners who cannot afford regular home maintenance as well as renters. "There's just no money for repairs," said one worker who owns a small home (March 26, 2002).

increases are engaging in creative adaptation processes (Cook et al. 2000 [Priemus 1986]:188).

The homecare workers we talked to employed all of these strategies and more. For some, a sense of resignation allowed them to live in very difficult circumstances. Cathy Chavez told us, “Everything is okay. I’ve told you my life. I live poorly. I don’t live in luxury. Even if you’re not okay, you have to say you are okay. Things are bad all around” (July 2, 2002). Others hope to improve their situation by moving to a better neighborhood or to the suburbs. Still others dream of moving “back home” whether that is to Louisiana or Guatemala, but all face significant obstacles in pursuing these dreams. Esther Washington would like to move back to North Carolina where she has a family home, but her daughter’s asthma and chronic bronchitis keep her in Los Angeles (June 19, 2002). Loraine Smith would like to move to the suburbs but says she can’t afford to because her “husband is just a few years from retirement, and we weren’t able to save for retirement. His job does provide a pension, but it’s nothing so we can’t afford to move” (June 27, 2002). Janet Marino would like to move to a safer neighborhood but feels it would be difficult to find people to care for her young child. “Where I live,” she said, “I know people that can pick up my daughter or who I can leave her with or do whatever favor. Maybe when she’s older...” (June 29, 2002).

One of the most common adaptive strategies reported was doubling up with friends or relatives. Anita Gonzalez told us, “You know one can barely live with the wages we get. It’s hard to pay for an apartment all by yourself. And so I moved in with some people from work” (June 29, 2002). While living with friends or relatives insures a place to sleep, it almost always adds stress to worker’s lives. Cathy Chavez said that when she first came to Los Angeles she lived with her brother and his family, but soon found him to be “very angry and bossy all the

time. I had to make sure to pay the rent on time and have dinner ready when he came home. So I decided to live alone. I paid about \$15 a day at a hotel” (July 2, 2002).

A few interview respondents employed affirmative strategies that gave them more control over their situation and reduced feelings of powerlessness. When Esther Jones moved into her current apartment, she contacted the Los Angeles Housing Department (LAHD) for tenant’s rights literature. “When I first came back in ’95” she said, “I called housing and they sent me a book. Other tenants act like they’re afraid to complain to the landlady, but I say, ‘No, you’re not going to get away with that with me, I know my rights.’ I shake my book at her” (June 19, 2002). Esther, however, is atypical in asserting her rights. Workers who are undocumented or who live with several families in an apartment, are reluctant to jeopardize their housing even if they know they are being exploited by landlords imposing illegal rent increases or refusing to make repairs. There is fear particularly in the many gentrifying areas in Los Angeles City where people hear about landlords evicting tenants in order to raise rents to market rates.

A second and more common, affirmative strategy is supplementing existing education in order to obtain work that pays better than homecare. For example, Esther Jones had completed a computer course and with two more classes would qualify as an assistant in adult education classes. Valerie Allen works in a conflict resolution program on weekends and is taking psychology classes in order to become a full-time counselor. And Cathy Chavez was learning English so she could take training as a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN).

For active members, union participation has provided a more structural understanding of the housing crisis and for them, collective action rather than individual adaptation offers the best solution. Anita Gonzalez thought that perhaps “because they [policymakers] don’t pay attention to us, they don’t realize that we are looking for clean and inexpensive places to live...I think that

maybe we should be more united to ask for things. Maybe then they will pay attention. If we are united and can keep struggling to make a better future maybe we can do it” (June 29, 2002).

Valerie Allen worried that homelessness among working people was increasing. She commented, “We’re not providing decent affordable housing for people because” when budget cuts are made “they take place in poorer neighborhoods. Our answer or solution is to tax the two percent wealthy rather than always taking it off the backs of the poor.” Valerie believes that the low wages paid for homecare stem from social devaluation of the work. “We’re talking about lives here,” she says, “how possibly can you justify the person that is taking care of someone not to be able to take care of themselves. I think that in order for things to change, more people like me, who were kind of in the dark, need to get involved with the union. And I think the public needs to be more aware, they need to know about these things that are going on” (June 27, 2002).

While making survival possible, many of these adaptive strategies tend to be short-term and provide no bridge to more permanent solutions. In a recent survey of members conducted by the Local, housing was named as the third most pressing concern after wages and benefits. In recognition of this priority, the Local has taken steps to begin to address workers’ housing needs. Their long-range goal is to have every homecare worker in a decent and affordable house.

Local 434B’s Housing Activities

In order to achieve this goal, Local 434B has adopted a three-pronged approach to worker housing. The Local, 1) is participating in housing advocacy programs and supports city-wide housing coalitions, 2) is experimenting with new home construction and ownership programs, and 3) is including housing education in its members’ services program.

Los Angeles’ fight for affordable housing has been long and, with a few exceptions, unsuccessful. Most recently a broad coalition of labor unions, community organizations, and

housing groups formed *Housing LA* to pressure the city for a larger commitment to affordable housing. The importance of labor in this coalition was demonstrated in part by the co-chair position held by the head of the LA County Federation of Labor and by organizers' belief that it was crucial to have labor at the table. One *Housing LA* organizer remarked, "We had to engage the unions, especially those that represent the working poor, who bear the brunt of the housing crisis, as well as the building trades, whose members would build some of the [new] housing." (Drier and Candele 2002). In addition to putting pressure on the city with regard to housing the coalition served to cement a broad labor-community alliance that has been developing in the city over the last several years.

With support from Local 434B, *Housing LA* made affordable housing a key issue in the 2001 municipal elections. The coalition raised the

issue among rank-and-file members and made affordable housing a key part of candidate endorsement interviews. Housing LA distributed 10,000 copies of a pamphlet summarizing candidates' views on housing...and invited every candidate to a series of housing tours that made tangible the city's grim housing realities, contrasting slums with well-designed affordable buildings sponsored by nonprofit developers. 'The tours were a major eye-opener for many of the candidates,' explained a coalition member, 'They saw families, including children, living in sub-human conditions – in garages and tiny apartments with rats, peeling lead paint and no hot water – some with rents as high as \$1,000 a month. (Dreier and Candaele 2002).

Following the elections, Housing LA continued their campaign, which resulted in the creation of the largest housing trust fund in the country -- \$100 million to expand the city's affordable

housing supply. In addition to support for city-wide housing coalitions, Local 434B provides ongoing testimony and data regarding worker's housing conditions to state and county officials and legislators

The second prong of the Local's housing strategy is an experimental program to build new housing for members. The program provides for both construction of affordable housing and financing assistance for member-buyers. In outline, the program acquires abandoned, tax-delinquent parcels from local municipalities at very low cost. Then, working with a combination of sweat-equity and an affordable housing developer, constructs homes that are sold to members at a cost much below current market rates. In addition, recognizing that homecare workers have difficulty accumulating the money for a down payment and with mortgage financing, the Local qualifies the buyer and helps cover the down payment through a revolving loan fund administered by the union. According to a high-placed staff member, "The Local is still at the incubation stage and [is working] to identify partners who are willing to work on housing that is below-market and with people who are considered high risk" (January 21, 2004). Despite the very small number of houses being built –four houses—the program serves two important functions in the Local's overall housing strategy in addition to increasing the stock of low-income housing. First, the program demonstrates to other locals the need and possibility of addressing the housing needs of members. Second, it provides a visible sign of hope for workers who may be overwhelmed and/or feeling disempowered by their living conditions. In doing so it reinforces the local's program for empowering members to engage in the struggle for policy changes at the county and state level.

The third part of the Local's housing plan is only in the planning stage but will include classes for new homeowners and services for renters. The Local's objective for renters—two-

thirds of the members—is to hire a full time staff person to develop a rental housing program that will become part of member services.⁹ This person will develop tenants' rights classes, help members deal with landlords, make legal referrals, etc. as well as work on the home ownership program.

In addition to these existing programs the local could expand its support for renters in several ways. For example, 80,000 evictions are occurring annually in the City of Los Angeles. Studies have shown that legal representation makes a difference in tenants receiving favorable action (Popp 2004). The Local could help provide such representation. It could also conduct a legal clinic that would help tenants with code enforcement issues, cases of landlord retaliation, and illegal rent increases. In some areas where homecare workers live, strong community organizations are building low-income housing and acting as advocates for low-income renters. The local could strengthen coalition-building at the local level while engaging members' in grassroots organizing around housing issues by connecting member to these resources.

Conclusions

The housing crisis described here highlights the need for labor to press for improvements in workers' conditions that go beyond wages and the workplace. Even with a massive effort and political good-will, it is not likely that labor will be able to close the \$12.13 housing wage gap faced by homecare and other low-wage workers in Los Angeles. It is therefore necessary to employ additional direct and indirect strategies to ensure that low-income workers have safe and decent places to live.

Direct engagement with housing issues is not new to labor. Organized labor supported federal involvement in housing for working class families during and after World War I. In the

⁹ See Cantorna et al. Given the clustering of homecare providers in geographic areas, and especially with tenants, services could be extended to non-union members. That could lead to organizing around common issues of neighborhood development.

1920s, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACW) broke ground for the “coops” in New York City. By 1932, the American Federation of Labor had shifted its position to support individual homeownership. Others in the labor movement remained eager to move forward. Influenced by European ideas about social housing, the director of research for the Philadelphia local of the Hosiery Workers Union was crucial to the assembly of land and building a 300-unit project in 1934-35 that became a model for early public housing. The Labor Housing Conference (LHC), formed in 1934, lobbied unions and built coalitions that were the bedrock of the 1937 U.S. Housing Act that created public housing. More recently Boston’s Hotel Employees and Restaurant employees’ Local 26 tied rising housing costs to their contract and, as a result of the dispute that followed, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) was amended to allow unions and employers “to provide housing assistance to workers under collective bargaining agreements.” Few unions, however, have used this provision to bargain for housing benefits – such as employer-sponsored mortgage assistance or rent subsidies” (Dreier 2000:368). Ferlauto (2000:3) makes the point that the “the inclusion of housing benefits in collective bargaining contracts, or the direct provision of subsidized housing programs to members could become an important part of the ‘union as service provider’ strategy now being promoted by the AFL-CIO.”

Labor can draw from these experiences in designing new housing strategies that target low-wage workers. Such a strategy might also be crafted after Local 434B’s model for organizing 74,000 homecare workers in 1999. This approach connected grassroots organizing, coalition-building, and policy change in such a way that each component of the overall strategy reinforced the others (Delp and Quan 2000).

Political mobilization around the difficult day-to-day housing problems faced by low-wage workers would focus grassroots organizing and bring together union members with community groups and advocacy organizations. Chapter and division meetings would raise members' awareness by linking their daily experience with the broader housing crisis and providing a forum for workers concerns. Coalitions and mobilization at the local level can provide strength for city-wide actions, put additional pressure on local officials, and offer support for labor's efforts at the national level to lobby for changed housing policy.

In addition to engaging in coalitions at the local level, this strategy would encourage long-term coalitions between labor, affordable housing advocates, nonprofit developers, and the building trades at municipal and state levels.¹⁰ Cases such as *Housing LA* demonstrate the potential for such coalitions to make substantive gains in affordable housing. Strong municipal coalitions can also press for legislation requiring inclusionary zoning,¹¹ code enforcement, and rent stabilization. State and municipal coalitions provide both leverage for policy change and resources for experimentation with new affordable housing programs. Labor would also become more visible among housing coalitions and labor issues would, in turn, gain wider audiences.

There is no shortage of proposed policy changes that could make decent housing available to all Americans. They range from legislation that would make housing a right guaranteed to all citizens to providing tax incentives to affordable housing builders. What is lacking is the organized political will to make affordable housing a community priority and a practical possibility for builders. Catherine Bauer ended her classic book *Modern Housing* by

¹⁰ For example, the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education has been collaborating with the Southern California Association of NonProfit Housing Developers (SCANPH) and the building trades around research issues concerning affordable housing.

¹¹ Inclusionary zoning ordinances typically require developers to contribute to the community's affordable housing stock either by contributing to a trust fund or building affordable units, in exchange for development rights or zoning variances.

arguing that “a realistic housing movement” would only occur when the “workers and the consumers – and the unemployed –themselves take a hand in the solution” (Radford 1996:81).

We believe this is as much a rallying cry today as it was seventy years ago.

Labor has a critical role to play in building the resolve needed for the long struggle this requires. Labor can accelerate the awareness of the fact that the housing crisis affects workers at all income levels; that inadequate and unaffordable housing places high rent/mortgage burdens on working people that in turn hurt the economy, contribute to poor health and education outcomes, and deepen the gap between rich and poor. For this to happen housing can no longer be seen as an “extra” on labors’ agenda but must become central to an overall program of social and economic justice.

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