

Anti-Displacement Victory in San Francisco

BY TOM WETZEL AND JAMES TRACY

Home to one of the most expensive housing markets in the United States, San Francisco has seen more than its fair share of working-class people forced to leave the city their labor helped to create. However, thanks to tenacious community organizing and nimble legal advocacy, tenants of the Fong Building, a 21-unit apartment building in Chinatown, have saved their homes from the clutches of development. Now, with the help of the San Francisco Community Land Trust (SFCLT), the residents are attempting to ensure that their building becomes permanently affordable.

The Fong Building tenants are mainly low-income Chinese immigrants who for eight years have been locked in an anti-eviction struggle with the City College of San Francisco. The college bought their building and the nearby Columbo building in 1998 with the intention of tearing them both down for a new campus. Since then, the residents of the Fong Building have organized themselves in an attempt to prevent the destruction of their homes.

The college immediately faced difficulties—first over the historical significance of the Columbo building, and then over two zoning laws that its proposed building plans would break. This short delay gave the Fong residents time to organize, quickly mobilizing demonstrations and enlisting the aid of the Asian Law Caucus, SFCLT, and other community organizations willing to help. The tenants created a residents' association in order to guarantee democratic decision-making within the building and to coordinate with all supporting organizations. As the tenants continued to organize and gain support throughout

the community, the Asian Law Caucus filed a legal action against the college for its failure to provide a plan for the tenants' future housing.

After seven years of struggle, the tenants' first victory came in 2005, when City College announced that it had abandoned its plans for a new campus, claiming the cost of earthquake proofing would be too great. However, the college planned to sell the Fong Building to one of Chinatown's largest for-profit developers, who publicly commented on his desire to raze the building and replace it with a high-rise tower. But faced with further threats of lawsuits and under public scrutiny, the college decided the best course of action was to sell the Fong Building to SFCLT, for a price well below market rate.

SFCLT, formed in 2001 by activists searching for a long-term solution to the problem of low-income housing, is a membership organization that advocates for resident-controlled, permanently affordable housing. Today, SFCLT has an agreement with the tenants to convert the Fong Building into a resident-owned, limited-equity housing cooperative. Under the

agreement, the residents will control the building and their own homes, while the land trust retains ownership of the land underneath.

Land trust arrangements of this sort prevent "hot" real estate markets from pricing out working-class community members. The residents have a ground lease from the land trust, which enforces restrictions on resale prices for the units, thus limiting individual resale profit and protecting affordability. Land trusts exist throughout the United States, and are becoming a popular method of dealing with the growing housing crisis for the working class. (For more on land trusts and housing, see "Burlington Busts the Affordable Housing Debate," *Dollars & Sense*, Mar/Apr 2005.)

Now, with the Fong residents celebrating and planning to own their own housing, several other buildings have been brought to SFCLT as potential co-op conversions. In fact, the residents aren't the only group excited about land trusts in San Francisco—in March the San Francisco Board of Supervisors set aside \$1 million for land trusts as a result of tenant organizing and the tenaciousness of the Fong tenants. Not much, given the cost of real estate in San Francisco, but it's a start. ■

Tom Wetzel has worked as a gas-station attendant, college teacher, typesetter, and technical writer. He is completing a book on worker self-management to be published by AK Press in Spring 2008.

*James Tracy is a long-time anti-poverty organizer in the San Francisco Bay area. His latest book is *The Military Draft Handbook: A Brief History and Practical Advice for the Curious and Concerned*. He is completing a book on prefigurative community organizing.*

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