

The time tenants from eight buildings came together to take on one owner



Organizers in Queens, NY built a coalition between tenants living in buildings owned by a single owner.



Jagpreet describes an ongoing campaign against Zara Realty, “Zara had been on the bad landlord list for 4 years, but they didn’t care. We had a meeting with the city council member where management yelled at us and the tenants. We’ve had OpEds and articles written about them. At the end of the day they don’t care about political or public pressure. We had to involve the legal process for this reason. We got an order from the Court but it didn’t stop them. So we had to bring in heavier guns. The Attorney General’s office. The State Commission. The Governor’s Office. Every year we’ve had a

campaign against them... It's taken a lot longer, more pressure, more organizing, to put pressure on such a difficult target."

Early on, enthusiasm from some tenant leaders was waning. But, Jagpreet says, after organizing cross-building meetings with tenant leaders from all of Zara's properties, "It started getting easier. People saw it wasn't just their building. It brought the community aspect along. We celebrate the small victories we have. There was a building who had gas out for a whole winter. We got a court order to turn the gas back on. We held an action in front of a building with tenants from all of the Zara's buildings to support them. Another building who attended that saw that actions are powerful and the tenants wanted to hold their own action. Linking with each other... helps to prevent burnout."

Ongoing organizing and constant pressure on the City to take action has finally paid off. When the new Attorney General was sworn in, Zara coalition was already prepared to ask them. More than 50 tenants showed up in full force at the coalition meeting to demand the state take further action. As a result Zara is [being sued](#) by the Attorney Generals' office and State Tenant Protection Unit.

Other Wins & Lessons Learned

Leadership Development Pays off In the Long Term

"A mistake we made in some of the earlier building organizing was we didn't spend enough time building the leadership of the tenants," says Jagpreet Singh, Lead Organizer for Chhaya CDC, "We thought we could go into 1 or 2 buildings and use the legal system to hold the landlords accountable." But Jagpreet recalls a time when, even though they won the legal case, "The harassment didn't stop. It didn't stop their tactics in other buildings and the tenant association fell apart. Now building up the leadership of tenants [across buildings] is our main focus. It ensures the fight is sustainable."

The Importance of Culturally-Aware Organizing

Jagpreet says, "As a non-Bangladeshi, non-Bengali speaker, it's harder to connect with Bangladeshi residents. When we go out to door knock, a lot of times the people at home are married women. Culturally in the South Asian community, they'll be worried about opening up the door to a South Asian male. Learning from that mistake, we've

hired Rima, a Bangladeshi woman. She's able to relate across that cultural barrier which has been a longer lesson learned by us.

"Our work is also different from some of the other Asian organizations, where the buildings in Queens aren't all South Asian. Buildings in Queens are predominantly Latinx residents and minority Bangladeshi. That dynamic has a big impact and it's harder to work through cultural dynamics across buildings.

"We had a situation where the landlord is Indo- Caribbean which led to some fragmentation across communities. It led to tensions between the South Asian and Latinx residents. Through 1 on 1 conversations we were able to break down some of the misconceptions that Latinx residents had, so they could trust the South Asian tenants. It also helps that as an organizer who is working with them, I'm South Asian.

"We host meetings in 2-3 languages to make sure everything is being communicated. Since a lot of the South Asian tenants are English speakers or understand some English, it's easier to hold meetings in 2 languages (English/ Spanish) than going between 3 languages."

Tenant Organizing against Islamophobia

Jagpreet says, "We have two majority Bangladeshi buildings, which have been really targeted by management. Homeland security and police were called by the landlord and they posted these signs to target the mostly Muslim residents saying 'If you see something, say something.' It forced the tenants to really organize and reach out and build leadership with each other. If a tenants association is already organized, these tactics unite tenants together rather than pushing them apart.

"We're able to point out that it's illegal. In NYC, luckily human rights laws are on our side. Within buildings we've been able to organize early enough, so when these threats come we're able to say, 'This isn't just a bad landlord. These are bad people.' If a buildings isn't organized it causes people to shy away from organizing. Then you really need to come in and explain rights."



“Chhaya CDC was founded in 2000 to advocate for the housing needs of New York City’s South Asian community. Our mission is to work with New Yorkers of South Asian origin to advocate for and build economically stable, sustainable, and thriving communities.”

URL: <http://chhayacdc.org/>