

Inequality, Gentrification, & the Right to the City

Gilda Haas is the Executive Director of Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE; www.saje.net) is an economic justice, community development, and popular education center that has been in Los Angeles since 1996. The following excerpt is from her remarks at *ColorLines* Magazine's racial justice organizing conference, *Facing Race 2008*, held in Oakland, CA in November 2008.

For the past ten years SAJE has been working to build urban land reform. We work in a part of Los Angeles that is large by organizer standards, but tiny with respect to the global nature of its problems. Our turf is South Central Los Angeles, or more specifically, the neighborhoods that are south of downtown and surround the Staples Center and the University of Southern California (USC).

The area known as South Central has recently been colonized by capital (or those hoping to attract capital), and in the spirit of all good colonizers, they have renamed it as (depending on whom you ask) the Figueroa Corridor, University Park, South Park, or "South Los Angeles" — as though removing the word "Central" could erase the pain and conflict of the Wats Riots, the 1992 rebellions, and the current struggles over contested terrain.

Two hundred thousand people live in the ten- or eleven-square mile area we now call the Figueroa Corridor. Once entirely occupied by working class people of color, this area has gradually and uncomfortably begun to accommodate both economic poles of one of the most unequal cities in the nation, pushing out the low end to make room for the high. For the present time, both extremes coexist.

A New Common Sense

Change has been rapid — property values have quadrupled in the last five years. And to my enormous frustration, the



Los Angeles, CA, 2005. A graduate of Economic Survival Class, a 10-week, bilingual curriculum that offers students self-advocacy skills, an understanding of how everyday systems work, contact information to resource organizations, and financial literacy. PHOTO: STRATEGIC ACTIONS FOR A JUST ECONOMY (WWW.SAJE.NET)

change has produced a new common sense. Ten years ago, poor folks here were surrounded by people who looked like themselves. Their homes looked like their neighbors' homes. Those people and buildings are still here, but now that they are adjacent to a 7,000-seat live theater, a stadium, and loft dwellings, the pervasive common sense by the new person on the street is that it's those poor people and their homes that have got to go. *They don't belong. They don't fit in.*

Part of common sense is produced by what you can see with your eyes and part of common sense is the consciousness with which you see it. If you cannot see or know the injuries that moved that building from norm to anomaly, you cannot imagine a need for reconciliation and reparations.

In order to determine what is fair and what is right in the economy, you need to witness and know and believe that human decisions were made in the face of — or in the service of — injustice. This is important

because once you know this, once you know that it wasn't "the market," that it wasn't a "natural cycle," that it wasn't inevitable, then you can believe in change. You can witness and know and believe that other human decisions can make it right, take it back, and produce justice.

Homegrown Organizing

Cecilia Nuñez was born in the Figueroa Corridor. When she was a child she lived across the street from where SAJE is located now, in a sweet little duplex which no longer exists. When she walked to school, she watched the houses in her neighborhood, nice houses she thought, get torn down and replaced by brick and concrete warehouses and factories that housed low-wage jobs. Finally, adding insult to injury, the school district threatened to take her neighborhood by eminent domain to build a new school.

Cecilia couldn't see the racial expulsive zoning that replaced residential land uses with industrial ones, a practice common in

working class communities of color around the country in the sixties and seventies. But she knew it was wrong. With quiet determination she stayed in her neighborhood.

She became a legal secretary, managed to transcend redlining and gender discrimination, and bought a house — although she did have to pay interest rates of 16% or 17%.

She was there when a redevelopment agency, to accommodate USC's expansion, took nearby stores and homes by eminent domain, tore them down, and left the rubble in place for four years.

She was there when USC held community meetings about a commercial development which it promised would bring 2,000 jobs to the community, and she was there to see the proposed site used instead as a university parking lot for the next 13 years and finally used as the location for

the USC Galen Sports Arena.

The whole time she watched, she talked to neighbors, determined to take her neighborhood back.

Cecilia organized her neighbors into Neighbors for an Improved Community. They joined the Figueroa Corridor Coalition for Economic Justice. We are placing 1200 people in jobs this year through an agreement negotiated by that coalition with developers to target employment opportunities to area residents. Cecilia is on the Board of the Figueroa Corridor Community Land Trust, which got a school built not on land occupied by residents and businesses, but on the site of an abandoned dairy. Cecilia Nuñez is only one of many grassroots urban planners who are taking back the land, the plans, the ideas of who and what the city is for. She is at the edge of history, and so are we.

A Right to the City

We are building a movement for urban land reform. We are demanding a right to the city, along with our brothers and sisters across the country, as part of a coalition of base-building organizations together with allies (www.righttothecity.org).

Specifically, we are working to criminalize slumlords; to expand tenants' rights; and to make sure that development improves the lives of the people who live in the neighborhood.

And finally, we are working to give the people more control over land. In our area, we are taking that to the streets in our mobile planning lab — our decked out pop-up trailer, so we can have instant democratic planning in any neighborhood in the Figueroa Corridor. Watch out for us — one of these days we are going to roll on up to your street. ☪



Los Angeles, CA, 2005. In the winter of 2004/2005, the owners of the Morrison Hotel turned off the heat and left the tenants without hot water. Community members brought the city attorney's office and the media down to the building to get the heat turned back on. PHOTO:

STRATEGIES FOR A JUST ECONOMY (WWW.SAJE.NET)

SECURITY WITHOUT EMPIRE: A NATIONAL ORGANIZING CONFERENCE ON FOREIGN MILITARY BASES

February 27-March 2, 2009
American University, Washington DC

From Okinawa and Guam to Honduras, Germany, and Iraq, people who have suffered from the abuses inherent to foreign military bases have been calling for their withdrawal. People in the US have joined this call, outraged by the damage done by US bases abroad and by their expense, which diverts \$138 billion a year from addressing human needs and revitalizing our economy. Representatives of 13 organizations have come together to organize a national conference on the closing and withdrawal of military bases.

This interactive conference will feature workshops, presentations by international and local activists, planning for action, lobby skills session, a Pentagon vigil, and Congressional advocacy.

Speakers include: Walden Bello (Philippines), Jana Glivicka (Czech Republic), Raed Jarrar (Iraq), Ko Yu Kyoung (Korea), Wafula Okumi (South Africa), Suzuyo Takazato (Okinawa), Cynthia Enloe (US — Clark University), Bruce Gagnon (US — Global Network Against Weapons in Space), John Lindsay-Poland (US — Fellowship of Reconciliation), Zia Mian (US — Princeton University), & Ann Wright (US — diplomat & retired US Army colonel)

Organized by: The National Project on US Military Bases (www.projectonmilitarybases.org)

To register and learn more: www.projectonmilitarybases.org; ggold@afsc.org; 617/661-6130