Fighting Gentrification: Lessons from East Harlem
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Research Aims: What can Montreal’s housing movement learn from gentrification struggles in East Harlem? Can East Harlem organisers learn something from Montreal? A network of researchers and activists in Montreal invited representatives from the Movimiento por Justicia del Barrio to present their work in a panel discussion and film showing series, in late October 2011. The Justice in the Barrio movement, launched in 2004, uses tenant organizing, demonstrations and direct action in an effort to protect the affordability of housing units in Harlem.

The conversation: Two films were shown on the Barrio movement. The first film documented the ongoing struggle to preserve affordable rental housing in El Barrio, NYC. It detailed the tactics utilized by the Barrio movement in order to mobilize residents. The Barrio movement proceeds building by building: the majority of building residents must want to resist. There are two meetings in each case to validate the decisions taken collectively. The MJB has a core of 700 tenants involved; and a particular approach to organizing (the Encuentro) which is focused in part on coalition building thus “mobilizing city-wide, national and international frames and networks as part of their neighborhood-level struggle to stay put (Maekelburgh 2012).” Further, they detailed how in a particular campaign it was a two-year political battle targeting city councillors; the campaign however also targeted a particular problematic landlord (Dawney Day Group); and were eventually successful in making this landlord sell of his holdings in the neighbourhood. A key disadvantaged group in El Barrio are undocumented immigrants who are easily exploited, due in part to fear of deportation. The second film detailed MJB’s wider political approach including their close ties with the Zapatistas’ in terms of direct democracy and political mobilization and challenged participants to think of these struggles around displacement through a wider lens. This was followed by presentations from two local groups fighting for affordable housing FRAPRU and Comité de logement Ville Marie (CLVM), highlighting a number of different approaches to protect affordable housing in neighbourhoods that are undergoing gentrification. FRAPRU distinguished two struggles: fighting for social housing (third sector) and protecting tenants’ rights (Quebec has a form of rent control in place).

Montreal has seen a 40% increase in rents in the last 10 years. The City has fiscal interests in seeing condo development and speculation on land and buildings. The main strategy for FRAPRU is maintaining a ‘rapport de force’ to assure adequate investment in social housing. The current target is 50 000 new units of social housing, while ‘core need’ is currently estimated at 200,000 households in the Montreal region. CLVM noted that some 80% of residents in Ville Marie (which covers a vast area including rich and poor neighbourhoods as well as the downtown core) are renters; some 50% pay more than 30% of their income on rent (core need) while 28% pay more than 50%. Family-sized units are occupied by singles and couples, and there is a large student population living downtown. One possible approach suggested by CLVM: increase student housing to relieve pressure on the existing housing stock; however, universities have made disastrous investments in housing (e.g. CEGEP Vieux Montreal and Ilot Voyageur). For Michaud, the core problem is the financial structure of the City: cities prefer condos because they need the property tax. This series of presentations was followed by a panel discussion. Members of MJB added details to their movement, tactics and successes, buttressing the material in the films. Furthermore, the discussion highlighted that the mobilization of MJB in El Barrio succeeded in stopping rezoning in East Harlem, but it did happen in neighbouring boroughs.

For more information on the Movement for Justice in El Barrio: