

## CITY LIFE/VIDA URBANA

### 2010 YEAR IN REVIEW

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*This brief summary is excerpted from a longer document assessing CL/VU's organizing work, "EVALUATION – Tenant Organizing Team 2010 Workplan," 23 pp. Shorter versions of the report may be obtained by emailing: [dmturner@clvu.org](mailto:dmturner@clvu.org).*

#### ***A General Assessment of 2010***

The momentum that City Life built in 2009 made this year one of its busiest and most successful. Movement-building on the ground grew even further, bolstered by national media attention from the New York Times and PBS News Hour. A major legal victory spearheaded by CL/VU landed the first tenant protection legislation since 1994, securing just cause eviction protection for tenants in foreclosed buildings. City Life's model was replicated in cities across the region, a project supported by OSI, with the potential to go national. Other highlights include:

- City Life again proved an extremely effective organizing team, managing to coordinate large numbers of volunteers, collectivize case work, and carry out regular mass actions of all kinds, all while refining and expanding upon our model.
- CL/VU continued to innovate, adding to its strategy tactics like vigils and foreclosure auction protests, visual arts and street theatre, as well as creative actions targeting investors buying foreclosed properties. These strategies created a culture of resistance in Boston that was probably foremost in the country.
- Our partnership with Boston Community Capital (BCC) proved instrumental in advancing the buyback method as a legitimate process. BCC bought nearly 60 buildings for resale, most to CL/VU members during 2010. This helped make our strategy of principal reduction centrally important, as it forces banks to admit their lack of an alternative.
- CL/VU gave 87 talks this year, including at several national forums, such as the Housing Justice Network (HJN) conference, and two National Consumer Law Center (NCLC) conferences. We led another Radical Organizing Conference Summer Institute, and continued to be recognized for our leadership in movement-building and radical organizing.
- This year also saw a limited reemergence of some more traditional areas of City Life tenant organizing, including tenant association formation and Sec. 8 work.

#### **Challenges to Our Work**

Although CL/VU's partnership with BCC has been successful, it also presents a challenge to organizers, since there is a risk of each tenant or former owner being treated as a distinct, individual case, without a connection to the larger picture of the crisis and the organizing needed to resolve it.

Due to limited staff/volunteer hours CL/VU was unable to achieve the goal of phoning each household at least once weekly, and had to settle for a biweekly schedule. This challenge presented itself despite the concerted effort of 74 individuals, both staff and volunteers. Much work remains to be done at the level of intake.

## **Bank Organizing in Detail**

### Outreach and Mass Canvassing

Our movement continues to canvass almost all the buildings in Boston and Revere that are listed for a foreclosure sale in Banker and Tradesman, twice monthly during 2010. Bank tenants collaborate with Harvard Law students, who mobilize for canvassing and prepare the property maps, and who organized the follow-up NCLC conference. Their partnership enabled 68 canvassers to work with City Life this year. The No One Leaves campaign, originally organized out of Harvard Law School to support City Life canvassing, has gone through several iterations of leadership. New leaders have assumed key burdens: technical tasks like mapping, organizing tasks like reaching out to student groups in other schools, replication tasks to spread the method.

City Life's sophisticated story telling contributes to a media strategy that has achieved a high level of coverage, local (neighborhood and town papers), regional (metropolitan papers, TV, radio) and national (New York Times, Dateline NBC, PBS News Hour). Many of our members tell of finding us from these stories. New tactics were adopted, especially with regard to City Life's use of art, including:

- 1) John Hulsey's *72 Hours* involved a a play of silhouettes about the foreclosure process of 8 CLVU members. The work was shown at Harvard and City Life's Block Rebellion. The New York Times came to cover the art and did a big story on our movement.
- 2) Kelly Creedon's *We Shall Not Be Moved* exhibited moving and dramatic photos of our struggle at various locations. As a professional photographer, she pioneered in doing stories on our members, ultimately producing a website at [weshallnotbemoved.net](http://weshallnotbemoved.net).
- 3) Jorge Diaz developed *The Doors* with City Life members, a street theater piece that dramatizes eviction, and organized resistance, which ultimately succeeds in the play, helping the characters to keep their home. Our members have performed it several times and we regularly use pieces of it in our Tuesday meeting educational section.

### Weekly mass meetings.

City Life hosted mass meetings every week in Jamaica Plain, regularly drawing over 100 attendees. These meetings enable check-ins and support for the group, legal strategy consulting opportunities, and enable faster reactions to developments on the ground. Additionally, the organizing staff has maintained the second Tuesday of the month as a movement building meeting, designed to include reports on tenant organizing activity and emphasize broader political concerns.

The increased participation is not just a boost in the level of turnout, but also of engagement, and this has changed the character of CLVU organizing. Sixty to 75% of the attendees to CLVU meetings are former homeowners, and increased participation by residents living outside of Boston contribute to this majority. Much of our counseling of owners now involves comparing the loan modification process and the BCC buyback process.

Weekly Bank tenant meetings include the following, usually taken in this order:

- **Solidarity:** Perhaps most important, people experience the meetings as places of love, community and solidarity. We consciously try to create that, allowing space for testimony and stories. This begins with initial introductions, where new attendees are encouraged to introduce themselves and tell the group the status of their struggle. This encourages people to leave their shame at the door.
- **Movement strategy:** Every meeting has a component on how people can volunteer, including canvassing, calling, leadership committees, etc. There are planning discussions around our frequent public actions and evaluations after they happen, often including slides of the event (prepared by KC Bailey).
- **Presentation of basic method:** As Melonie says at many meetings, "We are not normal here." We present why City Life's approach is different and why it is effective.

- Leadership development: During 2010 we increasingly used members to present key elements of City Life strategy in Tuesday meetings. We developed the use of skits and improvised theater, including props.
- Legal education: Whenever there are legal changes or new legal defense possibilities, we review these shield elements at our meetings. The break-out small meeting orientation for new members (led by Jim Brooks) uses our shield quiz tool to educate in legal evictions rights.
- Casework: Lawyers meet with members who have urgent legal questions. City Life staff update cases in regard to public letters and BCC applications.
- Political discussion: Usually during the second half of the meeting, we have more in depth discussion of the week's news and current events. Outside speakers are invited for a regular feature known as Making Connections. Speakers are drawn from labor and many other movements.

Maintaining our primarily Spanish East Boston branch is an important accomplishment, and it is worth noting the significant developments that came out of Vida Urbana's weekly Wednesday meetings. The East Boston schedule extended to add a monthly Saturday meeting and a monthly neighborhood canvassing, and the usual meetings began to offer legal advice resources. Revere was added to the regular canvassing beat, which induced a name change to the Northside Bank Tenant Association. Chelsea bank tenants joined Vida Urbana meetings as our relationship with Chelsea Collaborative strengthened, as did our relationships with other East Boston groups.

#### Mass case management.

Staff members are constantly refining a mass casework or collectivized casework model in order to manage this load. At the end of December, 2010, our case list had expanded to be over 900 households, almost doubling from the end of 2009. Much of the work is managed at our Tuesday meetings, where staff work intensively with long lines of patient owners and tenants. In East Boston, the work required a separate casework meeting every other Tuesday when there was not a members meeting. Mutual support from lawyers contributing to CL/VU's shield strategy, and BCC staff is critical to our high level of success.

CL/VU's public letter strategy continued in 2010 and was a key method for collectivizing casework. Our members write a letter to the foreclosing bank, or better yet the bank's lawyer. This letter describes in their own words who they are, why they care about their home and their community, how they are involved in the community, what the bank did to them, and what they want. Copies go to all political leaders. The letters help CL/VU to make the connection between individual cases. We maintain a list of cases likely to need further action, like a vigil or blockade, and this attention helps us to introduce the sword aspect of our strategy into each case.

The collectivized approach, in combination with other methods, helps to keep members from falling through the cracks.

#### Mass public actions of all kinds.

Bank pickets, court actions, auction protests, targeting investor assets, public hearings, vigils, occupations, block rebellions, press conferences, and eviction blockades were all enacted by City Life during 2010. Fewer pickets took place, but banks were aware that blockades still comprise an important part of CL/VU strategy. Generally, our public actions fit to these five categories:

- A) Protests to defend individual households or tenant associations.
- B) Protests to pro-actively target banks.
- C) Protests around other issues or connected with larger coalitions that City Life mobilizes for strongly
- D) City-wide hearings/rallies around legislation, such as those connected to MAAPL.
- E) Presentations at forums or other meetings, especially on our bank organizing. Tenant rights and organizing workshops. We hoped to do 10 events in categories D or E outside of trainings done in tenant association meetings.

Well-targeted public actions in East Boston resulted in preventing investor-initiated evictions, and public hearings on legislation – some of which involved city government officials – brought just cause eviction protection legislation to a vote, and unanimous passage. We borrowed the idea of doing regular auction protests from Lynn United for Change, and staged multiple events in 2010, coordinated by a committee of bank tenants. Vigils became a popular event this year, especially for members living outside of Boston, as the threshold for coordinating the event is lower, and can be done on our own time. Nationally, CL/VU participated in the the One Nation march in Washington DC.

#### Mass trainings and political discussion

In addition to the continued, biweekly Bank Tenant Leadership Committee meetings, City Life included political discussions as part of most Tuesday meetings. In the last few months, for instance, we had multi-meeting discussions on the election referendum questions, how democratic participation is limited by money and other structures, the case of Chuck Turner, the importance and details of new legislation, green justice issues, and union organizing campaigns.

City Life took 10 people to the US Social Forum in Detroit. For those who went it was an intense and engaging experience. City Life made several presentations that included our members. There was rich discussion both in the workshops and among our delegates outside the workshops. The USSF experience generated many political discussions at Leadership Team meetings, in the Summer Institute, and on Tuesday nights.

During the summer of 2010, City Life was the main organizer for the third Summer Institute, a series of organizing training workshops. We scaled back a bit in 2010 on the number of workshops, but the list was still quite varied. We set aside two Tuesdays during the summer for mass meetings at SEIU 1199. City Life provided the main turnout for each meeting, but many other movements participated. July 13 included a report back from the Social Forum. Aug. 10 included a process known as the World Café, designed to enhance the learning experience across different movements.

#### Coalitions

City Life furthered work in six primary coalitions, and seven secondary coalitions. The six primary coalitions are recognized for their strategic importance to our on-the-ground organizing, and receive more attention from CL/VU as a result. These coalitions are the following: Massachusetts Alliance Against Predatory lending (MAAPL), Committee on Occupied Housing in Foreclosure (COHIF), Action for Regional Equity, (Action!), Community Labor United (CLU), Boston Tenant Coalition (BTC), Right to the City (RTTC). Our work with MAAPL helped to pass the tenant protection bill, but has splintered and since taken a back seat to other initiatives. Emerging from that group, our alliance with COHIF has yielded promising discussions about mass purchases of occupied foreclosed properties. COHIF remains a very important, if unheralded and unrecognized, decision making arena. Likewise, BTC is a vital organization in which CL/VU plays an active leadership role, and which helped pass the legislation. RTTC was a forum in which CL/VU participated in ongoing regional discussions of Right to the City groups.

The secondary coalitions are less directly linked to CL/VU's agenda, but received organizational attention during 2010. These groups are: Fairmount Line Coalition, Whose Boston, Jobs with Justice, E. Boston Network, immigrant rights and anti-war struggles, and Sec. 8 organizing planning.

#### **Expansion**

As a result of our presence at the Housing Justice Network Conference, City Life sought Open Society Institute (OSI) funding to expand our model of organizing to 4 expansion sites. One is our own Northside Bank Tenant Association, staffed by Dominic Desiata. OSI funding would make him full time. The other 3 sites are Lynn (Lynn United for Change – LUC), Worcester (Worcester Anti-Foreclosure Team – WAFT), and Providence (Direct Action for Rights and Equality – DARE). Both Lynn and Providence have functioning Bank Tenant Association projects that could expand enormously with organizer funding. DARE is a Right to the City organization with long ties to City Life. LUC is a new organization coming out of the Obama campaign. WAFT has a long history in Worcester that has used some City Life methods.

The expansion project will have a significant impact on City Life's movement, and will require changes to how City Life operates day-to-day.

- Staff time and resources will need to shift in order to support the expansion project
- Weekly meetings of lead organizers from different cities will be scheduled by CL/VU
- Monthly meetings of bank tenant organizers will be made more intensive
- The sword/shield methodology popularized by City Life's collaboration with lawyers and BCC will now be an eastern New England movement
- OSI will provide for a strategy to promote this eastern NE movement nationally.

The expansion is both a huge step for City Life and fraught with dilemmas, all solvable. It should be noted that City Life's willingness to devote significant resources to building other organizations is a rare act of movement-building consciousness for a non-profit.