

**MEDIA RELEASE FOR Wednesday, November 20, 2019**

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## **HUNDREDS PACK DTLA STREETS TO DENOUNCE LA'S RED CARPET TREATMENT FOR LUXURY DEVELOPERS AND TO DEMAND MORE AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR WORKING FAMILIES**

*Marchers' Demands Echo Against Luxury Towers Packed with Empty Condos in City Boasting 3 Vacant Units for Every Unhoused Person; Advocates Call for Vacancy Tax After City and State Pass Historic Tenant Protections*

LOS ANGELES—As storm clouds loomed overhead, hundreds of marchers descended on downtown Los Angeles streets to decry the glut of luxury condo units dominating the skyline while tens of thousands of unhoused Angelenos prepared to sleep on the streets or in their cars. The late afternoon march took place in the heart of Pershing Square following the unveiling of a groundbreaking report yesterday, [“Who’s Buying Los Angeles? How Speculative Finance Keeps Houses Vacant and People Unhoused.”](#)

The report details how, in 2017, three vacant housing units existed for every one homeless person in Los Angeles, as more than 103,000 housing units in the city remained unoccupied – oftentimes held by the wealthy as an investment, not as a primary residence. At that time, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) tabulated that 33,138 unhoused residents lived in Los Angeles.

“Knowing that our city is failing so dramatically to house people, it’s shocking to find tens of thousands of units are sitting empty, many just to fill the pockets of investors,” said report author Alex Ferrer with Strategic Action for a Just Economy, or SAJE. “People deserve to know who owns their city and who benefits from this injustice.”

Marchers included members of the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), Housing Is a Human Right—Los Angeles, Los Angeles Center for Community Law and Action (LACCLA), Los Angeles Community Action Network (LACAN), Los Angeles Tenants Union (LATU), SEIU Local 721, SEIU-UHWW, SAJE, UNITE HERE Local 11 and UTLA.

But it also included homeless families and people on the verge of eviction as well as low-income residents and workers – including members of the Mobile Workers Alliance. The MWA represents rideshare drivers, organizing alongside SEIU Local 721, who are primarily employed by Uber and Lyft and who are fighting for proper job classification, worker protections and union rights.

“The report shows clearly that we need to build more affordable housing now but the challenge before us is not just about housing supply,” said MWA member Rick Heintz, who drives with Lyft and recently found himself unhoused after enduring a perfect storm of unfortunate events – accelerated in large part Lyft’s predatory lease practices. “We need an economy that creates high-quality jobs – good union jobs with fair wages, decent benefits and basic protections for workers. There is a direct connection between an economy that creates poverty jobs and the housing affordability crisis we now see all around us.”

“I currently live in a 2-bedroom apartment and the dreams of some-day owning a house where I can raise my family seem more out of reach every day,” said Edith Merlin a Housekeeper at the Freehand Hotel. “I can’t think about owning a home now because I don’t make enough at the Freehand Hotel, and because homes are way too expensive for me to afford.”

A coalition among labor and housing activists formed to further help tackle the housing crisis in Los Angeles. [The number of homeless people in Los Angeles has increased since 2017, with LAHSA now declaring that between 50,000 to 60,000 people may be found homeless on any given night in Los Angeles County, with more than 44,000 of them living on the streets.](#)

"Our union UNITE HERE Local 11 is proud of all of the work we have done to improve wages and raise the living standards for tens of thousands of hotel, airport and food service workers all across SoCal and AZ, but that is not enough," said Kurt Petersen, UNITE Here Local 11 Co-President. "We must advocate for all working families and fight for their future."

"It is absolutely unacceptable for anyone to work a full time job and still find themselves without a home," said Bob Schoonover, President of SEIU 721 and SEIU California. "The union movement is growing because workers have had it with the race to the bottom. They have had it with an economy whose bounty is enjoyed only by the richest of the rich while the rest of us fight over scraps. And they have had it with being told that this is just the best we can do. We know we can do better – and we will."

As the homeless crisis continues to grow and [rents continue to increase](#), buildings are being bought and sold every day by private equity firms, often with investment from California public pension funds like the California Public Employees' Retirement System and California State Teachers' Retirement System. In many cases, these entities are looking to flip the buildings for a quick buck while hundreds of families in Los Angeles are displaced due to the lack of affordable housing.

"You have opulent wealth sitting side-by-side with a growing crisis of homelessness on our streets. Meanwhile, over half of all renters in Los Angeles can barely afford their rent. This is unsustainable," said René Christian Moya, Campaign Director for Housing Is a Human Right. "Our elected officials at City Hall and in Sacramento must act urgently to house the unhoused, to build the housing that our most vulnerable communities need, and to expand rent control to keep families in their homes."

Private Equity firms also invest and own hotels like the hipster boutique hot-spot Freehand Los Angeles—now owned by Queensgate Investments—where workers have not been granted a fair process to decide on unionization. The hotel's original developers received public subsidies in the form of federal tax credits. The Freehand will be one of the stops on Wednesday's march.

The Housing March will bring awareness to the actions of Real Estate Developers and Investors in fueling and benefiting from the severe housing crisis in Los Angeles and urge a luxury vacancy tax be imposed on luxury vacant units in Los Angeles. In the midst of a ballooning housing crisis in Los Angeles luxury developers pay no tax on vacant units.

"A staggering number of properties in Los Angeles are used as investments or second homes for the rich, and sit mostly unoccupied — enough to provide shelter for every unhoused person in the city," said the members of The Housing and Homelessness Committee of DSA-LA. "We can implement a vacancy tax, also called an empty homes tax, to disincentivize leaving units vacant and to fund public or subsidized housing. What we need more than anything is housing that is truly affordable, accessible to the places we frequent, and controlled democratically — and not hostage to real estate interests. But we also consider the current number of vacant, habitable units in the face of our housing affordability crisis to be a political failure and we call for urgent change to the incentive structures that have created it."

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