

The Struggle for Somerford Grove

By

Somerford Grove Renters

In Hackney, a group of tenants have been threatened with eviction if they fail to pay extortionate rent to their billionaire landlord – but their fightback shows the power tenants can have if they decide to organise.

In a block of 170 flats in Somerford Grove in Hackney – the area that has seen the last decade's fastest rent rises in the UK – a group of us as tenants have been putting up a fight against landlordism.

At the start of the pandemic, we grouped together to ask our landlord, John Christodoulou, for help. Christodoulou lives in the tax haven of Monaco, and is worth an estimated £1.8 billion, coming in at number 82 on the *Sunday Times* Rich List. Landlords like him charge extortionate rents that drive up the cost of living for everyone in the neighbourhood, meaning that working-class people and Black and Brown people are pushed out of our borough at an ever-growing rate.

One man, whose name was Musa, died on the street in summer 2019 after spending months living in the bus stop in front of our block. Musa had attended the Halkevi Kurdish and Turkish Community Centre which used to be based in the building Christodoulou now owns; the community centre was turfed out, and a chain retail store opened in its place.

In the early days of the virus, we requested a 20% discount on rent and a guarantee that nobody would be evicted for inability to pay. Christodoulou's letting agents said in no uncertain terms that our request would not be granted. We were told that we had 'cancelled holidays' we could use to pay our rent – which goes up by 5% each year – in full, and that while we were self-isolating, our landlord was having to bear the cost of wear and tear increasing in the flats.

In other words: we were treated with contempt. But the public, local government and media took an interest in our case, and in response to their dismissiveness we joined the London Renters Union, formally naming ourselves the Somerford Grove Renters.

There were attempts to scare us off. Residents received anonymous phone calls, and security guards photographed organisers in the building. A law firm was hired to send legal threats alleging 'procuring breach of contract', claiming we would be responsible for unpaid rent in the entire block and warning about

exorbitant legal fees. Our tenants WhatsApp was infiltrated, and a fake one created to spread lies and misinformation.

In July, our household received a Section 21 eviction notice dated for September 21st – the day the eviction ban lifted. We were told it was a ‘business decision,’ but it was clear there were other factors at play. The two of us have been targeted for organising publicly and demanding a better deal for tenants.

Several households who accrued rent arrears subsequently received threatening letters, which said that if they didn’t pay the debt in full at the end of the week, they would receive eviction notices. Some of these notices have now been delivered, but we’re not leaving. We will fight until we see these eviction threats reversed and rent debt forgiven.

With the aid of an often compliant Parliamentary Labour Party, the Tories have transferred financial risk from wealthy landlords onto vulnerable tenants for decades, and coronavirus is throwing the dire consequences of that political decision into sharp relief. Our local MP, Diane Abbott has recognised the problem, and wrote to block residents to commend us for our ‘courage and persistence.’ ‘To win vital concessions,’ she said, ‘you must work together.’

But Keir Starmer’s Labour is barely putting up a fight for tenants. Shadow Housing Secretary Thangam Debonnaire made the outrageous assertion that rent forgiveness is ‘regressive’ and ‘un-Labour’, and when we challenged her in a Generation Rent call, she doubled down, arguing the pathetic neoliberal position which says that universal welfare policies benefit the wealthy. Wealthy people seem unlikely to be struggling with rent arrears.

Private landlords exploit our need for shelter to generate obscene profits, increasing rents year after year while our dignity is stripped in return. We’re not even allowed to hang pictures on the walls. Most of the tenants in our block are freelancers reliant on precarious income; they’re part of the generation of workers accustomed to atomised life in their workplaces and neighbourhoods, and until we started organising, we had only met a few of the hundreds of tenants with whom we now have solid relationships.

The intensity of our landlord’s campaign against us was too much for a few members of our tenant group; others moved because they could no longer afford the rent. But with the help of our union we stayed strong, and our numbers continue to grow.

On September 21st we were supposed to be evicted. It didn’t happen. Instead, with the London Renters Union (LRU) and Momentum, we organised a demonstration in front of Christodoulou’s hotel, the Canary Riverside Plaza: if he refused to talk to us, we’d bring over seventy residents and supporters to talk to him.

The public pressure we’ve generated has forced our local council to act. We suspected our landlord had violated legal safety and licensing requirements, and we convinced them to conduct investigations which have proven us correct. As a result, the eviction notices he’s served are invalid, and we’re organising to win

substantial compensation.

At the demonstration, Labour MP Apsana Begum said that she ‘would like to see this replicated across the country, because many tenants are going to be in the situation [we’re] now in.’ Landlords across the board are caving in under pressure, and we need to keep it up – every tenant should think about what they can do to help organise the fightback. We cannot accept a single eviction, and we cannot accept the housing situation as it is. We cannot stop fighting until we win.

About the Author

Jordan Osseman and Marc Sutton write on behalf of Somerford Grove Renters. The group organises at www.somerfordgroverenters.com.