

Subvert - A podcast by Corporate Accountability

Title Episode 4: Housing justice: Southern Towers tenants stand up

Description

Southern Towers, located in Alexandria, VA, near Amazon's proposed HQ2, is more of a village than a housing development, according to tenant organizers with the #ACT4SouthernTowers campaign. The towers are home to a deeply rooted community of African immigrants and working-class folks. Tenants have long looked out for each other, but when CIM Group, a massive real estate firm, purchased the housing complex in August of 2020, tenants were faced with a new set of challenges to their home and community.

Show Notes

Guests on today's show are Amaha Kassa, Founder and Executive Director of [African Communities Together](#); Bert Bayou, Chapter Leader and Organizer with African Communities Together, and Chris Bohner, a labor and housing organizer and researcher supporting the campaign.

Visit act4southerntowers.org to support tenants; check out their social toolkit [here](#), and be sure to follow @AfricansUS and #ACT4SouthernTowers on social channels.

Transcript

Bert: This is going to be the headquarters, uh, where thousands are going to be hired, but, the community who lives here is not going to work there. And they're not going to benefit from what's happening here. As we said, like these are mostly sector, you know, service sector workers, and they are the ones who's going to be displaced by Amazon workers coming.

Lena: You're listening to Subvert, a podcast from Corporate Accountability. We're a 40-plus year old organization powered by people. We wage strategic campaigns to stop corporate abuse against human rights and our planet. I'm Lena Greenberg, I use they/them pronouns and I'm our Press Officer.

Michél: I'm Michél Legendre, and I use he/him pronouns, and I'm our Associate Campaign Director. Today, we're talking to three people advocating for the safety and stability of a deeply rooted immigrant community in Alexandria, Virginia. These folks are organizing to protect the tenants of Southern Towers, an affordable housing complex located just six miles away from Amazon's proposed HQ2.

Lena: Southern Towers is largely comprised of working-class folks, many of whom are African immigrants and service workers. Under any circumstances, these folks face barriers to thriving in a country that is not built to support them.

Michél: But this is not just any year. Not only did many tenants lose jobs at the beginning of the pandemic, but Southern Towers also got bought by a massive real estate corporation in August called

CIM group. Since then, with fading support for people at the intersection of challenges posed by the pandemic and beyond, the tenants of Southern Towers have had to organize for their right to stay in their homes and the ability to preserve a community that has thrived against so many odds.

Lena: The first voice you heard was Bert Bayou, he's a chapter director for African Communities Together based in the Washington DC area. He leads the Southern Towers organizing campaign.

Michél: We also spoke with Amaha Kassa, he/him pronouns, the founder and executive director of African Communities Together.

Amaha: I grew up, uh, partly in Northern Virginia. And, you know, I lived down the street from Southern Towers. I had cousins who lived there, was there many times growing up and, um, it's not just a high density, you know, apartment complex. It's really a, uh, a village in a way, um, that is kind of a center of the community in the area. And that's kind of, that's what's under threat right now.

Lena: The threat Amaha is referring to is of evictions. According to a report produced by the tenants, CIM group, the new owner of Southern Towers, is the largest single source of eviction filings in the city of Alexandria.

Also joining us for the conversation was Chris Bohner, he/him pronouns. Chris is a research consultant supporting the organizing effort at Southern Towers. He's been working on housing issues in the DC area for the last two decades.

Chris: It's one of the largest sources of affordable housing for service workers in this region. Uh, the median household income in Alexandria is a hundred thousand. It's about 60,000 at Southern Towers. So it's a place where people have lived a long time. The data shows that and it's because it is a place that people can afford. And although many are working more than one job, it is a vital source of the affordable housing in the region.

Michél: Bert helps set the scene for us at Southern Towers.

Bert: There are a lot of, uh, Egyptians and other Africans like Sudanese and, uh, Ghanians in this region. But Southern Towers has been home for a lot of Egyptians, you know, I would say since about the eighties, um, as new immigrants come this is, this is home for them. Like this is where, I mean everyone, a lot of people that I know, uh, whenever they came to this country have lived in this building for a longer or shorter time, it's known in the community as, you know, as our home.

You know, we've done a lot of surveys and, you know, before I worked for African Communities Together, I worked for a labor union called United Local 23, which is a hospitality workers union, and our members who are in also, uh, uh, especially at the airport and, uh, in the parking lots and other cafeterias are from Ethiopia.

And I've been to this building so many times, you know, to talk to workers to visit them at their houses. Or to sometimes just to even sit in the lobby, uh, to meet them as they walk in or out. So, from our

surveys, I would say the residents here are about maybe 60%, if not more of, uh, African immigrants. And it's always been like this for many, many years.

Lena: Can you talk about how African Communities Together started organizing with Southern Towers tenants?

Bert: We've been doing, uh, civic engagement work here. You know, we've done voter registration. And then last year, uh, we had a campaign to give awareness on the census, to the community in Northern Virginia community.

We built a lot of connections with the community while we're doing that. And then about March or mid-March, as we were like continuing to campaign for people to register for census, we start to get calls from the community saying, look, you know, our landlords are pushing us to pay rent.

We all are laid off from our jobs. And you know, this community here are mostly service workers and were the first ones to be laid off when the pandemic happened. And as Chris mentioned earlier, they do multiple jobs, but those multiple jobs are also service jobs. So, they are laid off from two jobs, or if they're driving Uber or Lyft as a third income that also went away.

So these, these, you know, tenants were just suddenly sitting at home with their kids, uh, with no jobs, and unemployment, which has been so difficult. Uh, you know, we were pivoting our operations from census awareness to assisting tenants with filling out unemployment forms in their own languages. In, you know, in Arabic and in, uh, in, Amharic which is the main language for Ethiopians.

And then while we're doing that, like the landlord started sending emails or putting letters under their doors saying: we know it's a pandemic, we know like you probably laid it off, but prioritize paying your rent, like prioritize having shelter. Like, shelter is important for you. So the tenants were really upset about it.

Of course, like you know, we lost all our jobs and we're trying to figure out how we get unemployment. And a lot of them were saying like, you know, we're worried about basic things like food and, other basic necessities, but now this landlord is like threatening us with evictions.

And we saw the letters, it was putting the tenants in a lot of pressure. So we said we got to start organizing the tenants. And, you know, as a union organizer before I know some union leaders who live also, who also live here. So, one of them specifically, his name is Sami Bourma. He's from Sudan and we started talking and he said, I want to start a rent cancellation campaign.

He said, like, we want this landlord to stop pushing people to pay rent, and instead they should be assisting them. So, that's how we started organizing and it quickly caught on. We did our first action on the first due date of rent after the pandemic, which was April 20.

The only thing that the landlord did back then to assist tenants was, we'll push the due date, which is the fifth of the month. Which by the way, will charge late fees and everything, which is 10% after the fifth of the month.

So we did a rally, it was in the building. It was pandemic, so we couldn't do it in person. So, we did our first car caravan actions. So we used the cars for the protest. We had signs and other props to show, you know, that we put on the cars and, uh, tenants moved around the building and started protesting. We had over 100 cars participating in this action. It was very powerful. It was the beginning of the pandemic. But that's how it started.

So, mid-March, that's when everyone started to stay home. And, immediately after that, like it was in maybe a week when rent was due on April 1st, people started receiving letters from the landlord. It was not, it's not the same landlord that we have now. It's called Bell Partners, which owned the building for many years before that.

But, that's when immediately after the pandemic started, tenants started receiving these letters from the landlord. So what happened is, it did not stop. And it was like continuing and it's continuing to, uh, stress the tenants and like sometimes heartbreaking, because at that moment on everyone's mind was the fear of the pandemic.

The fear of COVID. Like catching COVID, getting sick, or dying. And there were a lot of tenants who told me, look, I wish like, you know, with jobs out there, like I could go out and work and pay this rent. I've been put in this stress by the landlord. Uh, you know, I'm not, I'm not worried about COVID. I'm just worried about this landlord putting me out and evicting me.

And, that campaign started and, you know, we have to, we have to pivot on a lot of things. Like we could not meet people in person. So we used our database to send out forms to people to fill out, like what kind of needs they have.

And most of them came back saying we need rent relief, we need rent relief. We need like, we shouldn't be bothered, we shouldn't be stressed out about rent right now. And of course groceries, and of course, like other needs that people had. So, as we continued to protest, you know, one, one campaign that we started is for the government, mostly the state, to provide assistance for rent payment.

So, one of the things that the states put was some kind of eviction moratorium and rental assistance. So, as we were pushing through that. There was some politicians who would not commit, who did commit to that, uh, like state senators and delegates and, uh, they were not in their offices.

So, one of the auctions that we have done is, um, to go to the state senators houses. And with coffee, you know, the coffee ceremony was a whole, uh, snacks and everything ready outside of the senators houses and knocking their doors and asking them to come out. So you can sit down and have coffee and talk to us about, you know what we are going through.

And, uh, we were doing that campaign, uh, or, you know, over the summer. And, um, as soon as, you know, the state opened the courts, sometime in June, there was a flood of evictions that came from, this apartment building, and the numbers were really high.

I mean, Chris would go into the numbers later on, but, the amount of evictions that were coming out of these buildings was, you know, a record, uh, and one of the highest in the city. Probably the most, uh,

the most evictions from this building than any other places. And, so this was really a big problem for tenants and they testified, they lobbied senators, uh, you know, titled their houses. And, finally the state passed a eviction moratorium, but they did not stop the eviction courts. So, the people continued to go to court.

And this is a scary thing for a lot of them because they've never been to a court, they've never been in trouble. And they can't afford lawyers, so they just go into a court without really knowing what's gonna happen. And, we had to, you know, we had to organize, uh, a lot of events and, uh, use, uh, organizers to, to assist tenants, to fill out the eviction moratorium forms and what, you know, what they can expect when they go to the court and even to show up to court.

Because a lot of people, when they see, like they don't know, like the steps, like when, when a landlord first files the brief, like. It's a threat, like pay in five days or leave. That's the letter that they receive. Right? So, for any person that's reading that letter, it's saying if I don't pay in five days, I have to leave.

So we have to, we have to talk to tenants and say, no, you know, you can, you don't have to leave in five days. You have to go to court and then, you know, you continue to live here. So, that's how we started assisting tenants from being evicted.

Of course there are some tenants who left by themselves when they get these letters because they were scared. Um, but we managed to keep most tenants in their homes for a while. And later on this organizing and campaign led to the state releasing rental assistance money in millions of dollars, which, uh, tenants can apply and pay the amount of rent that they have accrued.

The building, the company, continues to file evictions. We just found out that they're gonna to file more evictions tomorrow. So, um, that's what we're facing here.

[Pause with transition music]

Lena: Wow, Michél that was a lot. This story isn't like a lot of the stories we usually tell on Subvert, but this feels so close and so important. What's on your mind, having just learned what we did about Southern Towers?

Michél: I'm someone who immigrated to this country. I understand a little bit of the reasoning, why like someone from the Caribbean at least would want to move to the US. And I also have this perspective of like what you're looking for as an immigrant, you're trying to find a home, you're trying to minimize harm.

And as someone who has worked on climate justice issues and other housing justice issues, justice for me, is really at its root about the ability for people to find home and thrive. And I was reminded of that from a climate justice organizer in Southwest US, Lyrica Maldonado who works at Uplift Climate.

And she was mentioning this in her like reflection of what she thinks climate justice is. As someone who's immigrated from Central America, has family that's Indigenous to this part of the world and how

her indigeneity is neglected in one case to make root for someone else to claim this as their home. Um, and so, yeah, that, that has been running through my mind a lot.

Lena: Yeah, for sure. I, I am not myself an immigrant, but my, my ancestors came to the US, you know, fleeing persecution, and all ended up in the same neighborhood because, you know, they all wanted to be with their people. So, I feel like that even though it's a little bit less direct for me, temporally still feels very familiar.

And I, I grew up in a big apartment building and, you know, I grew up in the middle of New York City, but it was the apartment building that was my community. And, and I think Amaha referred to Southern Towers as, as kind of its own village. That really struck me like, oh, I know that feeling.

And you know, as my neighborhood gentrified, people moved out and so did my family and now it's gone. So, the kind of threat that is posed to Southern Towers feels really close to me. And, and just to speak to the climate piece, I have long thought of the climate crisis as a crisis of home, both on a planetary scale and in terms of where people are and where it will be viable for people to be. And how many, you know, thousands, millions, probably billions of people will have to move. Um, in response to the changing climate. So very, very much resonating with the idea that finding, finding home is central to many kinds of justice.

Um, and I think it's, you know, it's really admirable what, kind of stronghold this community is and how the conditions for thriving have been created by these folks in the face of all of that. And then for this corporation to come in and threaten all of that is just horrifying to me. Like there's, corporations often present themselves as solutions to problems and often present themselves as solutions to problems they caused.

And what really struck me about this situation is that there actually wasn't a problem here to be solved by a developer, to be solved by a landlord. Like, there was just no reason for this to happen.

Chris: In August, 2020, Southern Towers was sold for \$506 million to a company called CIM group. It was one of, if not the largest, apartment transaction in the country. CIM group is a private real estate firm. They have about 28 billion assets under their control. They have received significant investments from public pension funds around the country, particularly California public pension funds. They like to focus their real estate investing in urban areas that they call qualified communities, which are communities that are, uh, rents are going up. Growth is going, is up.

And, uh, they obviously are seeking to, uh, get the highest return they can get for their, for their investment. And on behalf of their investors. They described themselves as a, uh, community focused real estate firm, and they have a lot of, um, a lot of verbiage about their commitment to corporate responsibility.

So the big question was: why? Why would a company buy for half a billion dollars an apartment building in the middle of a pandemic. And I think that's what we've been figuring out together is who this company is, what are their objectives, and what are the implications for this really unique community?

Amaha: What we're seeing happening in the whole DMV area, but, you know, particularly in Northern Virginia, um, uh, in close proximity to Amazon's HQ2, um, is really before a single, you know, kind of Amazon employee has been hired, right?

This is a gold rush. Um, that's happening around real estate in the region. Um, people are buying up property on, on, on speculation. People are, and developers are looking to cash in by building new developments that are targeted at the kind of, you know, high earners who are going to be most of the, uh, the HQ2 employees.

That is the pressure that people are experiencing now in a region that was already housing burdened, you know, where people are already spending a really high percentage of their income, on their rent, and where we have to be frank, especially in the Northern Virginia side of, of, you know, the river, weak affordable housing, uh, laws and mandates and supply.

Um, so you know, you're kind of dropping a match into, you know, into, into a tinderbox. And you know, there's a lot of people who are looking to cash in and the communities where, um, people are seen as vulnerable because they're, you know, because they're Black, they're immigrants, they don't speak English well they're not politically, you know, well-organized or, um, influential, are going to be the easiest ones to displace.

So we really see this as kind of the first big battle, uh, in the war over, you know, whether, Northern Virginia's communities of color and immigrant communities are going to be able to have a right to stay.

Chris: Amazon is certainly, you know, their experience in Seattle, it's widely known and what they did to the housing market for housing affordability. I think they've, in this case, they've announced a lot of initiatives. The question is, are they appropriate to the scale?

And I think what a lot of the housing experts that I consulted for the report are concerned about is that there's a lot of emphasis, we're going to build new housing or we're going to, this thousand units going up and 10% are going to be designated for affordable. You know, that's a good policy, but the problem is all this existing affordable housing stock, like Southern Towers. There's other, not as big, but all around the region that these things are being bought and sold as commodities.

Bert: So, just a little bit more on Amazon, cause this is going to be the headquarters where thousands are going to be hired, but, the community who lives here is not going to work there. They're not going to benefit from what's happening here. As we said, like, these are mostly sector, you know, service sector workers, and they are the ones who's going to be displaced by Amazon workers coming.

I mean, Amazon headquarters workers coming here. So, the other problem is also, you know, DMV area, the Washington DC area is like a big region, but, um, most of the work that these tenants work like airports, um, and you know, other, uh, other service jobs are near Washington DC. So, you know, commuting is also important.

A lot of union members that we have who work at the airport, they start working at 4:00 AM in the morning, right? Like that's when they report to work. And, you know, I can tell you that, a lot of them

don't drive. Can rely on just showing up downstairs from Southern Towers and getting a ride to work with their coworkers, right?

Like, it's close enough. That's where people live. So if these workers, if these tenants are evicted from here, there is no other city or, you know, nearby location where they could, they could relocate. Like, there are places which are, you know, affordable, but like one hour away, um, from the DMV area, like where the jobs are.

So, you know, uh, Chris has put it in his report. And also you can also look at it at Southern Towers. They're marketing it, uh, for people who work for, who's going to work for Amazon. But if you really come and look at the playgrounds and, um, you know, the residents here, they don't look anything like what you see in the Southern Towers websites.

Right, like they're trying to change the demography of this area and this building and, if you ask me where this community would go, I really don't know.

Amaha: Yeah, and just to connect, uh, uh, the dots on a couple of things, um, this company CIM, which is one of the biggest, um, for-profit landlords in the country has shown that they are not interested in helping Southern Towers tenants stay in place.

And they've shown that by, um, continuing to, to drag people into court during the eviction moratorium, they've shown that by, continuing to charge late fees during a pandemic, and to pile on the late fees on top of back rent that, uh, you know, for people who, who were displaced, were put out of work and, um, have few if any resources.

And they've shown that also by being, um, disinterested, if not outright resistant to take advantage of the city and state funds that are available, that landlords can apply to, for tenant relief. Right? They've sort of told the tenants, well, yeah, you're on your own. As opposed to partnering with the tenants to try to get, you know, try to, uh, secure that relief. Um, and we think that the reason for that is pretty clear.

Um, this is down the street from Amazon HQ2, right? This company CIM has secured hundreds of millions more than they needed to purchase Southern Towers. You know, we think it's pretty clear that what they intend to do is upgrade these facilities, and rent them to new, more affluent, um, Amazon HQ2, uh, employees.

And they're not interested in keeping these, low-income Black and Brown uh, you know, African immigrants, allowing them to hold on to this community, uh, where some have been for decades.

Chris: One of the kind of startling things of following the money on this transaction is that Freddie Mac, which is uh, basically a government owned financial institution that facilitates single family purchases, but also finances transactions like this. Freddie Mac, which is owned by taxpayers, because they were bailed out in 2008, is financing this transaction. And CIM called it in one of their presentations: extremely favorable financing. It's taxpayer subsidized financing for this transaction.

But, Freddie Mac has imposed virtually no conditions on the eviction practices and certainly not on the longer term affordable housing. So you've got to ask, what is the role here? You know, government is stepping in and helping firms like CIM, but you don't see the same sort of level of commitment to the residents and the community.

So, the tenants have gone to Freddie Mac to sort of say you can't finance this kind of thing without putting conditions on it, because that's their role, that's their mission is to promote affordable housing, but the opposite is happening.

And, at the same time also CIM group is a company that, they got a Paycheck Protection Program loan. They're a \$28 billion institution, it's supposed to be for small businesses. And meanwhile, these, and meanwhile they're dragging people into court while claiming to their pension fund investors that they're focused on the community and they're investing. What we've all tried to do is lay bare what's really going on here.

Amaha: Bert, do you want to talk about some of the ways that they're pushing people out. And why, and how that led, you know, folks to withhold rent and how we were, how we were sort of organizing around that?

Bert: Yeah so, as I said earlier, as they were pushing tenants to pay whatever money they have into rent. Um, at the same time they were not even maintaining the buildings, right? Like, each floor has like a trash shoot and they on some, on some of these levels, they closed the trash shoots and like people were like leaving their trash outside. So the whole way was like, you know, really smelling bad.

This is a pandemic where all the kids are staying home, all the parents are, everyone is home. And, people have to go out and buy groceries and go about their daily lives. And, the building was not cleaning the common areas. There was no rule, like how many people that they, you know, they go into the elevators, elevators were not working. And then they started shutting down the water.

Like, this is like a typical, uh, landlord trying to push tenants out. There were like, you know, two days or three days sometimes where people just do not have water, running water, in their apartment buildings.

Lena: We actually have done some work around this. Our water campaign, alongside allies from across the country, has been pushing for a moratorium on water and utility shut offs during the pandemic. Because, how can it be okay to shut people's water off when we're telling everyone to wash their hands?

Bert: The tenants were really upset about this whole thing. And, you know, this is how it started saying, nope, you know what? I'm not, even if I have savings, my savings is for food. And I'm not gonna go and borrow money from my friends or family to pay rent. That's not what I want to do right now in the middle of a pandemic.

And what really upset them is also the way management treated tenants. In this relationship, especially CIM, the relationship between the office management and the tenant is not like your typical uh, you know, apartment building and the customer relationship. It is filled with so much disrespect and neglect

and basically acting like, uh, like every time a tenant walks into the office, they were made to feel like they're bothering them or like, um, I can't talk to you now, like go away, send me an email.

Like most of these tenants don't speak English, or even if they speak English, it's so hard for them to find a computer, to send email and like explain what, what they want to do. They will always feel like they're pushed away and disrespected. That's the other thing also that really pissed off these tenants because, as we said earlier, almost all these tenants have been living here for many years and they pay their rent on time.

Uh, even if they have to do two or three jobs, like, you know, they spend, uh, their money to pay rent. And like, they felt like when this thing happened, like they thought the landlord was going to be, considerate, look at their payment history, look at their, you know, uh, looking at like how good residents they were.

They'll be getting some kind of relief or some kind of assistance or some compassion. Right? But instead what they faced is complete threat and, uh, you know, evictions and, um, being dragged to court and like, but the most important thing that really angered a lot of tenants is also that the company is not willing to talk to them.

So, those are the things which push tenants to, to organize and, they found each other, they look for each other, they were talking in the parking lots in the parks, and saying, I'm in this situation, you're in the same situation, come join us. So that's how this grew and became a movement really.

Because, when we have a lot of legislature meetings and hearings, Southern Towers tenants were always the ones who were always sought out to speak, to testify about what's happening. And when we want eviction moratoriums, and similar as other measures by the state, these tenants were the voice of the tenants in the city to speak up and say what, what they're going through, what they're facing, and what they need.

Amaha: Yeah, and to get to speak to you know, what can people who are not Southern Towers tenants, uh, do to support the Southern Towers tenants' fight. Unfortunately, this company isn't necessarily gonna listen to public input, right? Um, their tenants have power as an organized group.

But, really what we need to do is to put pressure on, particularly the government agencies that are enabling this corporate landlord. So we need to put pressure on the city of Alexandria to say: listen, if you're going to let these folks continue to build or do massive development projects in the city, you should be asking hard questions about what kind of neighbor and what kind of landlord they are.

You know, do your job to protect the supply of affordable housing that we already have in Alexandria. Um, you know, we need to be asking hard questions of Freddie Mac and why they are investing in and underwriting, uh, real estate development that claims to be in communities, uh, you know, in diverse communities and say, well, what are you doing in those diverse communities? Are you helping people stay? Or are you pushing them out?

Um, and so, you know, we need to be asking that question of Freddie Mac, our members of Congress. The oversight committees in Congress need to be asking those questions of Freddie Mac about how they're spending the taxpayer funds, um, that they're investing in, in, in, uh, real estate development.

And we need to be advocating for stronger renter protections. I think the appropriate amount of a rent late fee, but we should be charging in a massive pandemic, you know, where a huge percentage of the workforce has been laid off through no fault of their own. I think the appropriate level of late fee in that situation should be zero.

And that's how much they should be collecting from tenants, is zero. You know, we need to also keep pushing for, you know, big visionary demands, like, you know, broad rent cancellation, you know, and broad tenant relief and putting tenants, on the same playing field as homeowners where we've had, where we have seen, you know, Congress move on, on mortgage relief.

So, we need to say, look, we need you to do your jobs, um, and to help us stay in our homes and stay in our communities.

Chris: I would just add one addition as well is the funds that are financing this are public pension funds. They're state workers, they're healthcare workers. So, part of what we're asking is that those pension funds take a look. Um, because I think they're being told one thing by CIM, that they're community focused and there's, you know, that this is all a win-win for everybody, but they have to understand that there's a cost to this as well.

And I think a lot of the members of these pension funds, if they understood and we name them in our report, at least who are invested with CIM, we don't know if they're in this specific project, but I think if a lot of these public employees saw what was going on, they would not be happy. They wouldn't think this is an appropriate use. They don't want to make their retirement by displacing people who lived in, in, in, in Southern Towers for generations.

Amaha: And it's true, Southern Towers tenants have already experienced displacement. Um, a lot of times from their country of birth. And whether it's like, you know, sort of my family that came here, you know, way back in, in the seventies, um, you know, as asylum seekers or the people who came through the eighties and nineties through the Diversity Visa Program. Um, you know, were able to immigrate because they had a family member, uh, who came before them.

We've had generations of people building a community and building a sense of place, in this place in Southern Towers. And that's what's under threat right now, um, is that people who've been displaced at least once, you know, sometimes several times in their lives are going to be displaced again. And so, you know, we're putting pressure on the city, the state, the federal government, you know, we think it's, you know, shocking the degree to which policy makers have favored homeowners versus renters in doing, um, relief.

But we're also saying, you know, CIM, you have a part to play here too. You're one of the, um, the wealthiest, most deep pocketed landlords in the country. And the fact that you are doing so much with

our taxpayer funds, our taxpayer investments to facilitate the displacement of this community while mouthing these platitudes about your commitment to diversity and equity is really a shame and a disgrace.

Bert: There's a big crisis waiting to happen here, and that's what we want to get ahead and start expose and like, so that politicians and, uh, corporations like CIM, um, can do the right thing by these tenants by this community.

Michél: This was a heavy, heavy episode, but there's so much, I think there's so much power too right here. Like I love the unity. I love the example of, of people coming together and preserving what they've built. And it's, if it's not a lesson for like every single movement like that exists. Like, I don't know what would be a better example. So, um, yeah, it's, it's really incredible.

Lena: Yeah, and it, and it makes me think of the idea of permanently organized communities. That these folks are in what seems from, from what we heard to be somewhat of a permanently organized community. Like these, African Communities Together was already doing outreach in these buildings for the census.

And then in response to a new threat, a new challenge, that organizing pivoted which suggests to me that this is a community that's organized to organize in the face of whatever comes up, instead of just, you know, kind of single issue, like let's do this one thing and, and move on. These people are, are looking out for each other in a way that's really phenomenal to see.

Thanks for listening to Subvert. For information on how to support the Southern Towers tenants, you can go to their website, act4southerntowers.org. There's also a link to their website and the social media toolkit on our website, corporateaccountability.org/subvert.

Michél: This episode was co-hosted by me and Lena Greenberg. Lena also wrote the show.

Lena: Eric Johnson and I co-produced and edited the show. Eric mixed the show and also wrote our music.

And thanks so much to our guests. Amaha Kassa, Bert Bayou, and Chris Bohner. We really appreciate you all chatting with us.

