Los Angeles tenants increasingly engaging in rent strikes amid housing crisis

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LOS ANGELES — A few dozen tenants from a working-class neighborhood here hopped into their vehicles, creating a caravan that would head to affluent Orange County.

After the hour-long drive in late May, the group converged on the sidewalk in front of a two-story house with Spanish-tile roofing belonging to Gina Kim — their landlord's daughter. Chung Suk Kim had purchased the seven-building apartment complex in Los Angeles for $8.5 million in September. Eviction notices for all 80 residents — almost all of them black or Latino — went up a few weeks later, indicating that the owner wanted to convert the units, located near the University of Southern California, into student housing.

"Vulture landlord, get a real job! Vulture landlord, get a real job!" the tenants shouted. A pair of police cars soon arrived.

But chanting is not the only way the tenants are making their feelings known. Since the eviction notices were posted some eight months ago, they have refused to pay rent.

"I'm not against student housing, don't get me wrong," said Robert Evans, a 32-year-old African American security guard who makes $14.50 an hour and shares a $1,700 three-bedroom unit with six people in one of Kim's buildings. "But if you want to come in and invest in property, you can't just put people out on the streets."

In Los Angeles — one of the most expensive rental markets in the country — the housing crisis is getting so severe that tenants are increasingly engaging in rent strikes, a practice from the early 1900s.

Led by the fledgling L.A. Tenants Union, inhabitants of multiunit buildings are joining forces and refusing to pay rent until their landlords negotiate what they view as fairer rent hikes. Some, such as the tenants in Kim's buildings, also are striking to prevent mass evictions.

In the mostly Hispanic neighborhood of Boyle Heights, some tenants were hit with rent increases of up to 80 percent last year. The building's 25-plus residents, including about a dozen mariachi musicians, went on rent strike for nine months before settling with the landlord early this year. The agreement: The landlord would get an immediate 14 percent rent increase but would increase rents no more than 5 percent each year subsequently.

"As real estate speculators and Wall Street gamblers flood the market, rents are skyrocketing and tenants are displaced and they can't keep up," said Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal, an organizer with the L.A. Tenants Union. "I think that's probably why we are seeing the return of the rent strikes."

Other cities, including Cleveland and San Francisco, also have experienced recent rent strikes, but not as many as in Los Angeles, where there have been approximately a half-dozen strikes since 2016. Organizers in Los Angeles say they plan to continue the strikes and protests while also pushing for legislative fixes and protection for renters.

The latter effort hit a snag Thursday, when the California Assembly defeated two bills that would have offered protections to renters in disputes with landlords; the Assembly passed a more modest bill that requires landlords to wait longer before starting the eviction process. In November, Californians are expected to vote on a ballot initiative to enable cities to expand rent-control laws. Los Angeles for example, has a rent-control law on the books, but it applies only to buildings constructed before October 1978.

It is not surprising that Los Angeles is the center of renter activism. The city is home to the largest share of renters of any major U.S. city, with 54 percent of its homes inhabited by renters,

according to U.S. Census data. A 2017 study by Harvard University found the Los Angeles rental market to be the nation's second-most-burdened by costs, defined by the percentage of renters who pay at least 30 percent of their income on housing.

In Los Angeles, 57 percent of renters fall into this category, second only to Miami (61.5 percent). Blacks and Latinos in Los Angeles are particularly hard-hit: A recent report by Zillow found that these renters are spending, on average, 63 percent of their incomes on housing.

And Los Angeles rents keep rising. The median price for a two-bedroom apartment is $1,740 a month, according to ApartmentList.com, an apartment-search website. Rents rose about 3 percent over the past year — a full percentage point higher than the nationwide average — after having spiked by 6 percent in 2015. Los Angeles County's homeless population, meanwhile, has jumped to 53,195, a nearly 40 percent increase since 2010.

"We don't know how people become homeless, but we can look at the data and look at the explosion in homelessness and draw some pretty firm conclusions," said Michael Lens, an associate professor of urban planning and public policy at UCLA.

In organizing rent strikes, the L.A. Tenants Union is employing a tool that dates back to the late 1800s and early 1900s, but has fallen out of favor in modern times. Housing activists say their reemergence is a sign of just how extreme the housing crisis has become in Los Angeles.

"We are reaching levels of inequality that we have not seen since the Gilded Age, and so maybe it's time to return to tactics like the rent strikes that were invented in those years," Rosenthal said.

Paul Lanctot, an organizer with the L.A. Tenants Union, said rent strikes and protests are sometimes necessary to prevent unfair rent hikes or evictions, and to prod landlords to properly maintain their buildings. Kim's buildings, Lanctot says, are laden with mold and crawling with cockroaches. An elevator has been broken for six months, he adds, even though a disabled tenant lives on the third floor. Lanctot also charges that the Kims want to convert the dwellings into student housing because they "just want to rent to a different class of people and a different race of people."

The Kims dispute that their buildings are in bad shape and say they are only trying to make smart business decisions involving private property they lawfully own. Gina Kim wrote in an email that the tenants rejected her father's offer to let them stay in their below-market units until March 2019.

"If in the end it is students who come to rent at the building (and in that area it does make commercial sense), they will be of all races and colors and nationalities," Chung Suk Kim said in an email.

While protesters banged on pots and yelled into a bullhorn during the May 23 protest at Gina Kim's home, some neighbors expressed irritation.

"All they care about is their situation. What about our situation?" said Tae Kim, a 50-year-old restaurant owner who said the protest was impeding his son's efforts to study for the SAT. (Tae Kim is not related to Gina and Chung Suk Kim.) "Daytime, I don't care, but it's past 8 o'clock."

Gina Kim says she feels aggrieved and not just because of the noise. She said in an email that she respects tenants' right to free speech, but she takes exception to how they have mentioned her children during the protests. She said demonstrators have shouted through a bullhorn that while the noisy demonstration may make it difficult for her kids to sleep, she should think about the young children her father is evicting.

"It's stressful for me because they are targeting my small children and me, and I am not the final decision-maker for the landlord," she wrote.

Dennis Robinson, a 46-year-old African American physical trainer and a tenant-protester, said he doesn't blame Kim or her neighbors for being annoyed. He would be annoyed, too.

"If I had a home, I would think the same way," he said. "But we don't have a home."