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**Conversation series | Pursuing Tenant International:
Learning from struggles for home in Abya-Yala
Edited by Ana Vilenica**

Food distribution as solidarity and as a tool for building tenant power in Los Angeles

Teresa Roman

Accion Comunitaria and Los Angeles Tenant Union

in conversation with

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Abstract

In this conversation, Tresa Roman, Latina organizer and member of Accion Comunitaria and Los Angeles Tenant Union, shares her observations and analysis about the ongoing struggles in communities of Los Angeles. She discusses the use of food distribution as a means of building solidarity and tenant power, organizing against police harassment in migrant communities, and the role of women in tenant struggles.

Keywords

Food solidarity, tenant union, Latinx struggles, Los Angeles

I met Teresa Roman in Cypress Park, at the first of the two locations where they have been organizing food distributions for the local community. While volunteering, I met other compañeras and comrades from the Los Angeles Tenant's Union (LATU) that have been volunteering there regularly. This conversation took place at the second food distribution location in front of Teresa's house, only miles apart from the first. I arrived earlier in the day to help with food separation, and during one of the breaks we talked about her work and the importance of food distribution for organizing tenants in Los Angeles (LA), California. We were joined by student-activists that came to volunteer with her mum to help us with translation. The conversation transcript was collectively edited with Bryan Quintanilla, from the Los Angeles Tenants Union.

Ana: Thank you so much Teresa for saying yes to this conversation. I have heard a lot about the work that you have been doing before I came to LA from mutual comrades in LATU. I am thankful for this privilege and to spend time with you doing food solidarity work. I know that food solidarity work is strongly connected to your work in tenant organizing. How did you learn about this important organization, fighting for the right to a home? And what made you join?

Teresa: I came to the Union because I started having issue with my housing situation. A new owner bought the place, and they were offering me cash-for-keys. I didn't understand what was going on. A friend who lives in our community told me that there were meetings in a place where I could go and explain my case and that they were going to help me. That's when I came to the Union with my problem. I learned there about my rights. I confronted the owner and told him that I didn't want his money. I have always believed that lawyers are not the only ones who can help us in the courts. We are also our own lawyers. And we can also defend our rights, talk about the injustices, and say that we are tired of being harassed or told that we cannot respond to matters because we are not educated. I started going to the Union meetings to educate myself, to learn more and to be able to help others. I gained confidence there and I know now that we are a big force when we all unite.

Ana: And how did you start organizing with this group?

Teresa: Well, we started this group more than two years ago. There were only five of us at the beginning. All women. I started to do this work because I noticed that in my community, we didn't exist. We didn't exist to the politicians or the councilmembers. They didn't take us into account; I mean, we were nothing to them. We quickly realized that we didn't need the government to be able to do something in our community.

Ana: This I how you started the food distribution work?

Figure 1

Food distribution point.
Credits: Ana Vilenica



Teresa: Yes. I started to look for food, and at the beginning we only helped 50 families. The first organization that started trusting us gave us very little food. In parallel we asked for donations to buy the most indispensable things, like chili peppers, onions, tomatoes, vegetables.

Ana: How did you connect people from this community to the people from LATU?

Teresa: I told the people from the Tenant's Union that it would be necessary for them to come to our communities and talk to people. Many people in the community were facing evictions, cash-for-keys, the fact that landlords constantly raise rent, and that they don't fix your apartment. I invited them here and introduced them to the community. Later we made flyers and we talked about tenants' rights. That's how we started. They also told me how to get more food and that's how we started to grow. At that time, I was bringing food in my truck. I had to make two or three trips to bring all the food, but it was not enough. We needed a bigger truck. Then the compañero from the Union told me about GoFundMe, and we raised money to buy a van. I got a person to give us the van very cheaply.

Ana: But you still use your car.

Teresa: I still transport food in my car if the van is busy. This is an investment process. When you start something like this, you invest your time, sometimes money, you invest work to be able to invite more people to work in the community. It's an investment, but if you have the passion to help others, you can accomplish a lot, because this is about passion, it's about a big heart to do it with others. And when you focus on that, it doesn't matter that you invest money, that you invest your time, that you have to be constantly going out, leaving your family to their own devices. The great satisfaction you get later when you see those people who say thank you with a smile. That is a great satisfaction.

Ana: How many people work on this?

Teresa: Ten members of the group and we have 15 volunteers.

Ana: What is the difference between these two distinct groups?

Teresa: The difference between being a member and a volunteer is based on the time that you invest in this work. Members have to be here more often, and volunteers can come at whatever time they want, and leave at whatever time they want.

Ana: In my experience doing food solidarity for a prolonged period of time is not an easy task. What problems did you encounter in your work?

Teresa: The only obstacle that we sometimes have is the money to be able to afford gasoline, the gasoline for the van. Because we are not a registered organization, they don't give us money. We sometimes get donations, and this is the money used for the van.

Figure 2

Neighborhood.
*Credits: Ana
Vilenica*



Ana: What is the hardest part of this work for you?

Teresa: You know, Ana, the saddest thing I see here is that there are many older people coming very early to take a number because their pensions is not enough to buy food. They prefer to pay rent and save on food.

Ana: I heard you speak at the big assembly for LATU the other day and at the Autonomous Tenants Union Network (ATUN)¹ convention this summer. How did you experience participating in these big trans local and transnational gatherings?

Teresa: I was grateful for the opportunity to meet other communities. Seeing how the problems are similar throughout the county was also very important for us. Our job is to work locally. To keep connecting with communities and to be able to bring more people into the struggle and educate them about migration and about the police. Many people are scared to go out because most of them are undocumented. And immigrants, tend to think that we don't have rights here. That only Americans or other races have rights, but not Latino people.

Ana: Did you have any problems with the police? Have the police harassed undocumented people in the community?

Teresa: Many times, we have seen the injustices that they have done in our communities. For example, when we call the police, when the owner does something bad, they come and ask the owner what is going on. They don't come directly to us. They usually say there is no evidence or that it is his property, and that he can do whatever he wants, that he can put cameras on the property. What right do we have? Just to pay the rent? This Monday, when we had a demonstration here in Cypress (Park), the owner called the police. Four

¹ The Autonomous Tenants Union Network/La Red de Sindicatos de Inquilinos Autónomos (ATUN) is an international network of tenants unions across North America which have joined together in recognition of the fact that as neoliberal capitalism operates on a local, regional, and international level.

police cars and about 15 officers came. There were 12 of us. We can clearly see that the police always work in favor of the owners. I have instructed my compañeras not to talk to them.

Ana: A majority of people don't understand that they don't need the police.

Teresa: In the beginning I didn't understand those things myself, I did not know what to do. I had to educate myself, because I did not understand my rights. That's why we understand when people don't know. We need to educate ourselves on a larger scale.

Ana: What does it mean to not call police in your experience?

Teresa: What have I had to do? I helped defend a compañera in the community when the owner and his family were beating her. I was attacked as well. I had to organize a public protest to talk about what happened and it was only then, that the police gave him a fine, but that's as far as it goes. I also had to defend fellow workers and Union members with my body. At times I've been able to negotiate dispute between landlords and tenants to stop the harassment. I'm not going to stop doing these things, the only one who can stop me is the one up there (God). If I'm here, I'm going to keep fighting.

Ana: Many groups reported increase in intensity in their work. How did the situation change during the pandemic in your community?

Teresa: We were able to achieve more trust with the community. We could see that they understood that we are a group from community and that we are not asking them for anything in exchange for food. There has been more trust. People feel more confident to come and ask for a number without having to register their name, phone number or ID.

Ana: One of the spots for the food distribution is in front of your home? How is your landlord taking that?

Teresa: He was sending me three days notice to remove all my things. "If you don't stop, we're going to evict you," is what he said. He told me there were vermin in the complex, mice and stuff, we haven't seen them. I told him, "If you keep harassing us, I'm going to bring my entire community and we're going to go to your offices and we're going to protest. I am going to bring TV crews, because you are a bad landlord."

Ana: What do you neighbors say? Are they sympathetic to the cause?

Teresa: There was not a single Latino person when I first came here, only Americans. When the new people arrived, I said, "Look...here, we do food distribution every Wednesday. I have many friends that are helping. Are you all okay with this?" Many responded by saying that this was fine.

Ana: What do you feel is your biggest achievement and what else would you like to do?

Teresa: I feel happy to know that other communities are seeing our work, and that they also want to do the same in their communities. My goal is to train leaders from different communities and have them do the work in their communities. I feel happy because I believe that all this has been achieved thanks to the trust and work of my compañeras. This work is a collective work. That is why our T-shirt says, "Union, Strength and Work."

My work is to show others that we can do great things together. Here we are more women than men because women are very brave. And I tell them, when Jesus came, there were many women and very few men waiting for him. When we organized the revolution in Mexico, there were many Adelitas² participating. Women are very important in our community, because men are afraid, and we are not. I think they are waiting for me over there and will need to go soon.

Ana: Teresa, thank you so much for sharing your experience. You are an example for all of us.

About this Conversation's participants

My name is **Teresa Roman**. I am a Latina Mother. I have always loved being empowered to help others. I am always involved in the community because I believe that my voice and my participation are very important. Through *Acción Comunitaria*, we currently organize a weekly distribution of food, pantry goods, and personal items for the elderly, the houseless, and vulnerable families, with the support of organizations such as Los Angeles Tenants Union, LA Mas, and friends from the neighborhood. The drive I have to do this community work is largely due to my parents, and two very important women in my life who believed in me and what I could do for others. Our food distributions could not be done without the tireless work of the other *Accion Comunitaria* mothers and grandmothers from this neighborhood who come and help every week.

Bryan Quintanilla is a writer, researcher, and translator. Los Angeles born and raised, he has been a member of the LA Tenant's Union since 2018. His interdisciplinary work touches on the intersections of race, culture, public policy, history and radical politics in Los Angeles and particularly Hollywood. An avid traveler of the city at night, who can largely be found plying the wears of the obscure, in a city that is willing to offer.

Ana Vilenica is a feminist, no border and urban activist and organiser from Serbia currently living in Italy. She is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow with the ERC project *Inhabiting Radical Housing* at the Polytechnic of Turin's Inter-university Department of Regional & Urban Studies and Planning (DIST) and a core member of Beyond Inhabitation Lab. Ana is a member of the *Radical Housing Journal* Editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research).

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² The figure of the *adelita* is a synonym for the woman who became a vital force in the revolutionary efforts through provisioning, espionage, and other activities in the battles against Mexican federal government forces during Mexican Revolution.