

From Quiet Life to Political Activism: Memories of tenants rebellions in Mexico

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

From quiet life to political activism: Resisting evictions in Mexico City's historic centre

Rufina Galindo

Red de Desalojados de la CDMX

in conversation with

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Rufina Galindo is part of the Red de Desalojados de la Ciudad de México, a group of people affected by forced evictions. **Ana Vilenica** is a member of the Beyond Inhabitation Lab, the Radical Housing Journal editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research). **Pedro Montes de Oca Quiroz** is a postgraduate student at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). **Contact:** ana.vilenica@polito.it

Abstract

The Red de Desalojados de la Ciudad de México is a group led by people affected by forced evictions, that has been resisting evictions and revealing ways in which different real estate groups, in collaboration with the authorities, prioritize economic interests over the rights of the inhabitants. In conversation with Rufina Galindo a member of the Network of Evicted in Mexico City, we talked about the effects of the earthquake on the living conditions of people, frauds and corruption that make the complex struggles of people for life and home even harder, organizing against eviction violence, including networking and coalition building.

Keywords

Evictions, organizing, activist networks, Mexico City, city centre.

The Red de Desalojados de la Ciudad de México is a group led by people affected by forced evictions, that has been resisting evictions and revealing ways in which different real estate groups, in collaboration with the authorities, prioritize economic interests over the rights of inhabitants. The Red de Desalojados is a member of Movimiento Urbano Popular (MUP) a network of groups with a long and complicated history going back to the 1960s. We first met Rufina Galindo at one of the Urban Popular Movement meetings held at Mina 16 in Mexico City, where we went to meet with Jaime Rello, one of the leaders of the Unión

Popular Revolucionaria Emiliano Zapata (Uprez) and MUP. In Mina 16 we got to meet members and representatives of many groups involved with MUP. Rufina Galindo, member of the Red de Desalojados de la Ciudad de México shared her story with us and invited us to visit her home. We went to visit Rufina on the day of the North American Leaders Summit in Mexico City. Due to the special transport arrangements and street closures, we arrived late at the address and were met by an unpleasant group of individuals who refused to let us pass. We had to call Rufina to come down and confirm our identity before we were allowed entry. She told them that we are members of the movement, and they cleared the entrance unwillingly. In this conversation, we talked about the effects of the earthquake on people's living conditions, the fraud and corruption that make their complex struggles for life and home even harder, and organizing against eviction violence, including networking and coalition building.

Ana: We were quite scared at the door, that man didn't want to let us in and was very hostile towards us.

Rufina: That gentleman downstairs is the watchman, he is private security. If someone asks, he will say, 'Nobody lives here, there is no one with that name here.'

Pedro: Why is this building in such bad condition?

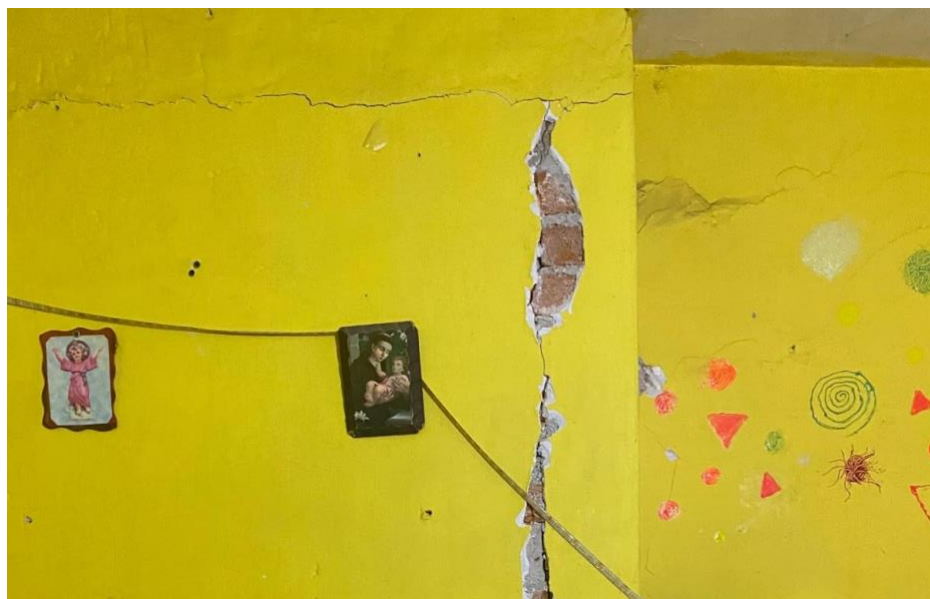
Rufina: This building was badly damaged during the earthquake and hasn't been fixed since. I'll show you these cracks, they're from that time.

Ana: Who lives in this apartment, Rufina?

Rufina: This is my daughter's apartment. When I was evicted, I came here too. I thought they were going to evict both of us, but on the day of the eviction, they said, 'No, we only came to get one apartment.' On the day of my eviction, they were not all bad. They asked me, 'Rufina, do you have a place to put your things? There is another apartment where you can put them, so they don't end up on the street.' They even helped me move my

Figure 1

A wall in Rufina's home. *Credits: Ana Vilenica*



furniture. I could only rescue a few things, because it was already my second eviction, and many things were lost.

Ana: Did they allow you to move there without any pressure?

Rufina: On the day they came to evict me, I told their lawyer, that I am going to live in my daughter's apartment. 'If you give the order not to let me pass, I will go to our organization and we will come and make a mess for your boss and his business.' They do not like to be exposed.

Ana: Is there a legal case against this man?

Rufina: We filed a complaint to the government so we could legally obtain housing. I have a legal document to prove that I was evicted in an illegal way, but I didn't file a complaint. If I did, they could come after me. My daughter has filed a complaint because they emptied out her apartment. So that is how we are doing it now, more or less peacefully.

Ana: And do you pay rent for this apartment?

Rufina: No, we're not paying rent here because there is no legitimate landlord to pay. This man who claims to be the landlord is actually not the real owner of the property. He used to work for the previous owner, but when she passed away and had no living heirs, he began asserting ownership based solely on the fact that he shares the same last name with her. The owner didn't have any children, and her husband passed away before her. She had a real estate agent who managed the building, but unfortunately, he also passed away. Then this man, claiming to be her nephew, initiated lawsuits simply because he shared the same last name as the owner. We were paying the rent until the building was expropriated after the earthquake. That was a few years before the owner died.

Ana: Why was the building expropriated?

Rufina: Because the building was severely damaged by the earthquake, and the owners did not carry out any repairs.

Pedro: The government gave compensation to the owners, right?

Rufina: The owners refused the payment offered by the government, which is why the expropriation took place.

Pedro: The expropriation process was never finished. Right?

Rufina: Yes, the expropriation was carried out, but the fraudulent owner did not receive the money, he complained about the amount offered by the government. As a result, his lawyers started exploring other avenues to obtain it. Money changes hands frequently in this area, and there is a lot of corruption.

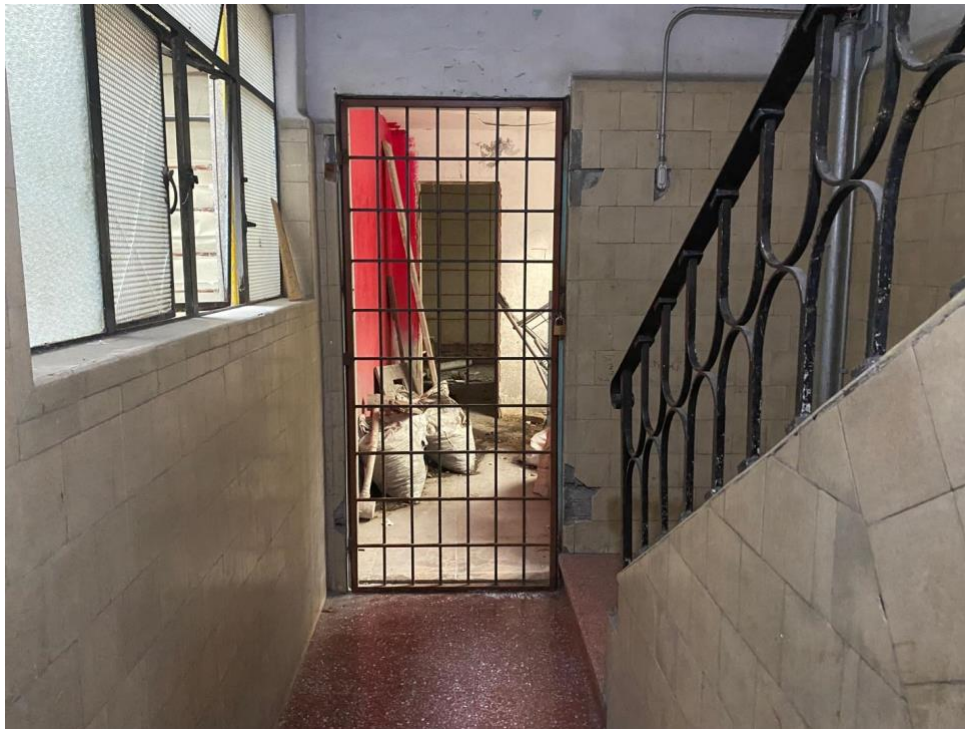
Ana: How are you organising in this situation?

Rufina: We've been engaging in extensive discussions with members of the Urban Popular Movement, which includes various working groups and forums.

Figure 2

View on one of the evicted flats.

Credits: Ana Vilenica



Ana: And have you talked with anyone in the municipality?

Rufina: We have spoken with people from the municipality. The first time we raised this issue was in a meeting with Claudia Sheinbaum, Mexico City's mayor. Jaime Rello always encourages us to voice our concerns, and we did. We asked her, 'What will happen to us, the evictees?'. When the mayor read more about our problems, she was surprised. Then she suggested that we start a working group with Arturo Medina, her right hand at that time, and we did so. However, that was three years ago, and we are still here, feeling exhausted.

Ana: Do you still feel like continuing the fight?

Rufina: I used to have a peaceful and quiet life as a housewife, mother, and grandmother, but my life changed with the evictions. I became a political activist, knowing that it's important to do so. I need to be strong for my daughters, but sometimes I feel like running away and forgetting about everything. However, we continue to fight because we believe it's an injustice that must be challenged.

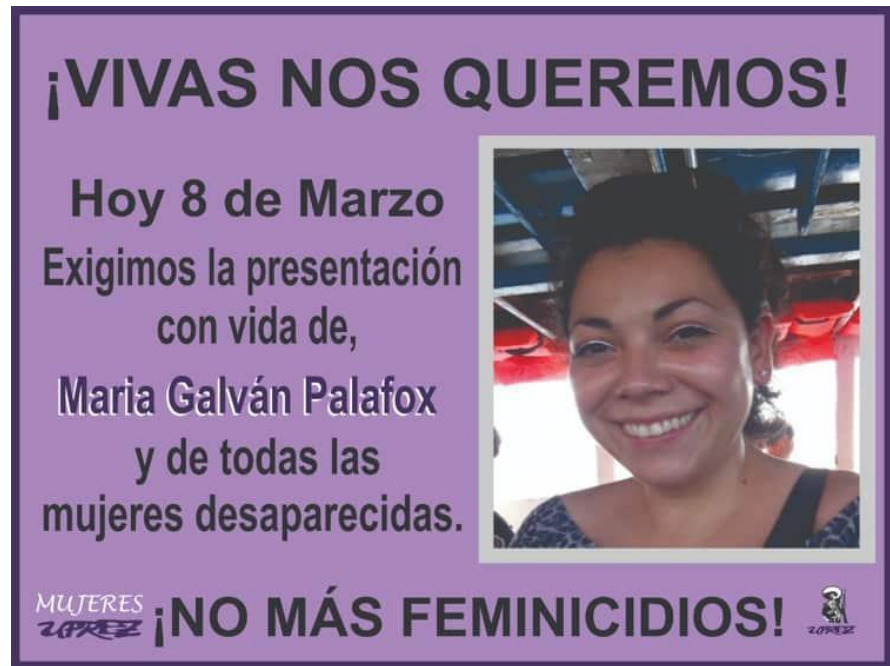
Ana: What is the organisation doing right now?

Rufina: We are currently fighting for María Galván Palafox. She left her house a year ago in January because a craftsman asked her for help with work and has been missing ever since. We went to the prosecutor's office to seek help and urge them to take action to locate her.

Ana: Was she part of the organization?

Figure 3

Announcement.
Credits: UPREZ



Rufina: Yes. She was a member of the network. We keep a list. She is Otomi, but they are from the State of Mexico. Most members are from the State of Mexico. I am from Oaxaca, near Teotitlán del Camino.

Ana: How many people are in the organisation?

Rufina: When we went to meet with Claudia, there were 17 groups. But in total there are about 40 organisations in the movement.

Ana: When did you start your group?

Rufina: In 2016, when the heaviest evictions began from the city centre, when Miguel Ángel Mancera used to be the mayor.

Ana: What is its name?

Rufina: Network of Evicted (Red del Desalojados). 17 buildings make up the Network of Evicted. But in the MUP there are more organizations, as you saw the other day. Most of us are from Cuauhtémoc municipality, in Mexico City.

Ana: How are you organized in your group?

Rufina: We use WhatsApp to communicate with each other and to coordinate our actions, such as organizing events or meetings. On Wednesdays we meet at the Movimiento Urbano Popular. For instance, on Thursday we have a meeting scheduled with the Secretary of Government, Martí Batres, when we plan to present our proposal, the General Urbanistic Plan, which will determine the future look of the city.

Ana: What is your experience in talking to people from institutions?

Rufina: Several members of the government were once a part of UPREZ (Unión Popular Revolucionaria Emiliano Zapata). This is how we have been able to establish connections

within the government. During our meetings, we started discussing the possibility of acquiring properties that had been confiscated. The government officials promised to explore whether any of these properties could be allocated for evictees.

Ana: What are these properties?

Rufina: These properties were confiscated because they were involved in criminal activities. Claudia Sheinbaum stated that since they already have them, there is no need to spend any money. Now, we are supposed to assess their condition and start the process. I once asked Arturo Medina, who was the Secretary at the time, ‘How will you know that I am an evictee?’ If you are in the middle of a trial, how can you prove that you were evicted? He told me that I can show all the paperwork made during the trials as proof. After listening to this I felt calm.

Ana: Without a document people will not be eligible to get a home?

Rufina: During the eviction, in 2016, there were 800 police officers, including 800 members of the riot police—known in Spanish as *granaderos* because they can throw grenades—and two helicopters. This caused fear among the people and many of them became discouraged, no longer wanting to continue the fight or ask for anything.

Pedro: There were that many police officers?

Rufina: They had machine guns with lights, and they descended down here on ropes. I was stunned; I had never seen anything like that before. It was organized as a part of the operation searching for drugs and weapons.

Ana: That sounds really tough.

Rufina: I have had many good memories in my life, but also many bad ones. I arrived with my family 60 years ago from Oaxaca by train. We travelled with a 2nd class ticket. In 2018, criminals came to live here and since then, everything changed. Before that, everything was calm. After the eviction, my daughter, myself, and only one other person remained in the building. We were alone. Neighbors asked me, ‘Aren’t you afraid to be there?’ but I know this building so well that I can move inside with my eyes closed. I am not afraid.

Ana: How do you manage to organize your every-day life and be a part of an organised struggle at the same time?

Rufina: I just got back from the action we organized before you arrived, and I haven’t had a chance to prepare any food yet. I’ll manage somehow. I’m a seamstress, and I make clothes whenever I have a chance. I brought my sewing machines to my daughter’s house when I was evicted. Whenever I have some free time, I go there to work. But I don’t like being dependent on my daughters.

Ana: In the Network of Evicted, most of you are women, correct?

Rufina: Yes, most of us are women who are at home taking care of our families. The men usually go to work and may not be as aware of the problems we face at home, such as taking care of sick children, cooking, and getting them to school. However, I don’t want

Figure 4

Historic Centre of
Mexico City.

*Credits: Ana
Vilenica*



to speak negatively about men. Nowadays, they are taking on more responsibilities at home as well.

Ana: Do you think that what you are experiencing is part of a gentrification process?

Rufina: Well, in my particular case, I don't think it's gentrification. It's more about someone's ambition, and it's a by-product of gentrification. For example, in República de Argentina, they are experiencing gentrification. The day before they evicted us here, they went to Argentina and were throwing things out of the windows. They almost threw a boy out of the window because he was resisting. At that time, I was organizing with another group and didn't know anyone from the Urban Social Movement.

Ana: How did you meet people from the Urban Social Movement?

Rufina: In one of the many meetings, I was introduced to a journalist who was in Mina 16. That's where I met Jaime Rello, and I decided to leave the other group.

Ana: Was there something wrong with the other group?

Rufina: Jaime has always treated us well. He is our *compañero*. He paints the reality as it is. And the other leader was not like that.

Ana: That means that you can count on your *compañeras* to mobilise if they try to evict you?

Rufina: Jaime doesn't approve of violence, and I think that's the reason the government has listened to us. That's why we have to organize ourselves and strategize. Last time we thought that just putting up iron bars on the doors would be enough, but they descended from a helicopter. We need to take all these things in to consideration.

Rufina: Are you going to see Jaime now in Chapultepec?

Ana: Yes, I am going to the meeting.

Rufina: I won't go this time. How are you going to go when the traffic is closed?

Pedro: In subway, I think. Isn't it already working?

Rufina: Yes, but this station is closed. Right now, there is traffic in this one. You can take that way.

Pedro: We will do our best. Thank you.

Ana: Rufina, thank you so much for this conversation. I wish you the best of luck in your struggle, and I truly hope that you and your family can find a beautiful home soon.

Rufina: I'll save your phone number so that I can keep you on my list of people who have come here to support us. When I finally get my apartment, I will let you know. Even if you're already back in your country, I'll make sure to keep you informed.

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About this Conversation's participants

The Red de Desalojados de la Ciudad de México is a group of people affected by forced evictions. They have been resisting evictions and revealing ways in which different real estate groups in collaboration with the authorities, prioritize economic interests over the rights of inhabitants. Their struggle is a struggle of thousands of citizens of Mexico City facing loss of homes as gentrification unveils in Mexico City. The Red de Desalojados is a member of the Movimiento Urbano Popular a network of groups with long and complicated history going back to 1960s.

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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