

Michigan

Specter

For a life worth living

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We need more

By Justin Yuan

“You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.” — Angela Davis

At this point, I’m sure everyone reading this is well aware of the uprisings that took place across the country and around the world following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. I’m sure you’ve all seen your social media feeds filled with a slew of heartfelt proclamations that Black Lives Matter, personal stories of discrimination and loss, as well as ways to move forward from these tragedies, enact change, and achieve some measure of justice for those murdered by police. Chief among the many campaigns that have been circulating is 8 Can’t Wait, a project by Campaign Zero.

Since COVID-19 threw a wrench in my summer plans, I spent break commiserating with friends and comrades, watching police beat and arrest protesters, and endlessly doomscrolling through Twitter. But in the weeks and months after the grisly video of cops slowly killing George Floyd was released, I noticed more and more posts across social media from friends, family, and strangers alike all repeating the same phrase: “8 Can’t Wait.” Tentatively hopeful, I dug in.

Was an abolitionist project finally breaking through to the wider public? Was Angela Davis involved? These were my initial thoughts, but as I dug further and learned more about this social media phenomenon, my hopes shattered replaced only with the same numbness I felt freshman year when my roommate told me, without a hint of irony, that if every police officer were made to watch the Green Book — starring Mahershala Ali and Viggo Mortensen — police violence would plummet. Now I hope I shatter your hopes as well.

8 Can’t Wait was launched in

early June in response to the killing of George Floyd and quickly gained steam on social media and in the news. Fawning think pieces and op-eds everywhere from Vox to Rolling Stone to GQ to Variety accompanied glowing endorsements from high-profile political and cultural figures such as Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey, Ariana Grande, and others, lauding the project’s “succinct and clear message” and potential to save lives. At the core of the effort are eight “data-driven” reforms that Campaign Zero claims would decrease police killings by an almost unimaginable 72%. At first glance, the reforms look promising:

- Ban Chokeholds and Strangleholds
- Require De-escalation
- Require Warning before Shooting
- Exhaust all other means before Shooting
- Duty to Intervene
- Ban Shooting at Moving Vehicles
- Require Use of Force Continuum
- Require Comprehensive Reporting

Think of all the deadly encounters that could be avoided if police were required to de-escalate. Or the lives that could be saved if chokeholds and strangleholds were banned across the country. However, the assertion that widespread implementation of these eight policies would result in anything close to a 72% drop in police killings is misleading at best. Countless cities, townships, and states across the country have already enacted many of the reforms 8 Can’t Wait prescribes. Many large cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia already have at least half of them. In fact,

Campaign Zero confirmed both Tucson and San Francisco have all eight policies in place. While claiming to reduce police killings by 72% certainly grabs attention, in reality, many cities would only see a fraction of that reduction, and that’s assuming that 8 Can’t Wait’s analysis of the data is reliable. Chicago, a hotbed of police brutality, witnessed 76 police killings over the past 7 years, 56 of them black. The city also already has seven of the eight reforms listed by 8 Can’t Wait, so the people of Chicago will have to look elsewhere for jaw-dropping reductions of police killings.

Unfortunately, Campaign Zero’s supposedly “data-driven” policies aren’t exactly as clear-cut as they claim. In their own study, they allege that the average police department, out of the 91 that they analyzed, already had three of their eight recommended reforms. Right off the bat, that finding throws their fantastical 72% reduction of police killings out the window for the majority of cities, and those with only one or two policies aren’t guaranteed anything close to a three-quarter reduction in police killings. The aforementioned 2016 study that Campaign Zero conducted and based 8 Can’t Wait on contains methodological issues that seriously undermine the bold claims that it’s being used to support. It compiles data from just 91 police departments over only an 18-month period.

It’s well documented that police departments and officers get away with heinous violations of human rights and civil liberties all the damn time. As things currently stand, police, as individuals and as an institution, enjoy nearly limitless legal protections.

For example, in July 2016, police officers brutally attacked and arrested Shase Howse, who was looking for his keys in front of his home, after he replied “Yes, what the fuck?” when asked if he lived in the building. Ludicrously charged with multiple felony counts, Howse lawyered up and the charges were dropped.

If, like me, you wondered how Howse’s attackers got away with physically assaulting an innocent man then lying about what happened, it’ll probably make you as angry as I was to learn that police lying not only in their post-incident paperwork but in court and in affidavits is so common that cops themselves have a word for it — “testilying.” In fact, it’s so ridiculously bad that even the quintessential conservative (and fucking creepy-ass weirdo) himself, Alan Dershowitz, has said that “Almost all police lie about whether they violated the Constitution in order to convict guilty defendants” and that “All prosecutors, defense lawyers, and judges are aware of [that].” As bad as all that sounds, don’t worry. It gets worse.

Justifiably upset at what happened to him, Howse tried to sue the officers in federal court for excessive force. He lost. As it turned out, those officers are protected by qualified immunity, a legal doctrine affirmed by the Supreme Court that protects government officials from civil liability unless they violate a “clearly established” right. In essence, Howse, along with every other individual in the country, has no clearly established right to not be assaulted on his porch. Qualified immunity is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the astronomical number of “get out of jail free” cards that cops have. So you can rest easy knowing that cops can do basically whatever they want, especially if you’re poor and a minority, and get off either scot-free or with a slap on the wrist.

The issue that liberals like those behind 8 Can’t Wait are either unable or unwilling to grasp — and that abolitionists have been calling attention to for decades — is that police brutality is a matter of power. So long as police are empowered to impose their will violently on the very people they claim to protect, injustice and suffering will continue, and no amount of pinky swears or promises will curtail that power. While projects

like 8 Can’t Wait appear well-meaning in their focus on police killings and how to reduce them, the oppression of poor and marginalized communities does not begin or end with a single statistic. 8 Can’t Wait is hampered by statistics that lack geographic, political, and historical nuance and, instead, tries to simplify the systemic issue of policing down to specific, personal, lethal encounters.

Any successful attempt at beating back the tide of police killings must reckon with the whole of the issue, which means recognizing and challenging police militarization, the prison-industrial complex, and our cruel, predatory criminal (in)justice system. In other words, abolition is the only sustainable, truly effective way forward. Applied to the realm of police killing, the abolitionist theory of change demonstrates that the only way to permanently end the violence at the hands of police is to dismantle the entire rotten system such that police officers and departments don’t have the tools or ability to deal out death and suffering. The tepid reforms Campaign Zero puts forth with 8 Can’t Wait do nothing to shift power away from police, and their failure to address the near-complete lack of accountability and oversight that police departments across the country enjoy seriously compromises the potential effectiveness of the already-limited policies that 8 Can’t Wait is pushing.

The frustrating thing about incrementalist reform projects like 8 Can’t Wait is that there’s no need to wave around in the darkness searching desperately for any way forward. The abolitionist movement has been around for decades, created and led by black scholars and activists, such as the black queer women of the Combahee River Collective. From the modern carceral state to American policing’s origins in slave patrols and explicitly discriminatory night watches, abolitionists such as Angela Davis, Mariame Kaba, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor have spent years illuminating the fundamental cruelty of police and prisons as an institution and, more importantly, blazing a path toward an alternative future where our response to crime is not to incarcerate and punish but to rehabilitate, strive for restitution, and address the underlying causes of crime, such as poverty and a lack of so-

cial welfare programs.

While there is no single, concrete path to abolition, there are clear next-steps that abolitionists have emphasized for years — ones that would actually challenge the power of police, shrink the carceral system, and put an end to state-sanctioned violence, incarceration, and suffering. In fact, as a result of the infuriatingly shallow demands of 8 Can’t Wait, abolitionists from across the country have come together to form 8 to Abolition, a campaign focused on prison and police abolition that eschews the nitpicking incrementalism of 8 Can’t Wait, calling the project “dangerous and irresponsible” for “offering a slate of reforms that have already been tried and failed, that mislead a public newly invigorated to the possibilities of police and prison abolition, and that do not reflect the needs of criminalized communities.” Their demands are:

- Defund police
- Demilitarize communities
- Remove police from schools
- Free people from jails and prisons
- Repeal laws that criminalize survival
- Invest in community self-governance
- Provide safe housing for everyone
- Invest in care, not cops

A commitment to abolition in line with the demands set forth by the activists behind 8 to Abolition is absolutely imperative. The ultimate, guiding vision of the resurgent socialist Left must be one of abolition. The moral gravity of having a system of unaccountable arbiters of death and violence, enforcing a racist legal code of class oppression, throwing people in pens to be the slave labor of the modern capitalist economy makes the cause of abolition a necessary one. The fascist Right sees the role that the police and carceral state play in the perpetuation of white supremacy and bourgeois class domination. They think it’s great. The liberal Right throws its hands up in exaggerated shock, tosses a pack of Band-Aids to the dead and dying, and calls it a day. It is up to the working-class movement of the Left to fight like hell because, until all of us are free, none of us are. 🌱

Challenging neoliberal complacency: The future of leftist organizing

By Mahnoor Imran

The lesser evil has prevailed. President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris have defeated the demagogic megalomaniac in the White House otherwise known as Donald Trump. However, in the middle of a mismanaged pandemic that has cost hundreds of thousands of lives, nationwide protests against the epidemic of police brutality, and the looming threat of climate change, Biden's insipid promise of returning to some semblance of normalcy feels uninspiring. A return to the pre-Trump status quo will not actively transform the material conditions of the working class, and a massive shift in the political paradigm is desperately needed.

Although their win has prompted celebration, there is something to be said about the failure of establishment Democrats to provide compelling narratives that take on Wall Street, insurance companies, and the fossil fuel industry. Though progressives and leftists are frequently vilified for expressing concerns about the incoming Biden-Harris administration, both Biden and Harris have problematic records that warrant criticism about their vision for the future.

Last year, Biden assured his wealthy donors that “nothing would fundamentally change” if he were elected, once more reminding us that elite centrists will always prioritize the interests of the ruling class. Despite having an atrocious record of racist tough-on-crime policies, Biden operated his campaign under the assumption that people of color were obligated to vote for him simply because he was not Trump. In addition

to these things, many resistance liberals have conveniently forgotten about him leading support for the Iraq War, the Obama-Biden administration carrying out mass deportations that ripped families apart, his inappropriate displays of unwanted affection toward women, and credible sexual assault allegations against him. As Attorney General of California, Harris fought hard to keep the wrongfully convicted in prison, withheld evidence that would have freed incarcerated people, criminalized and imprisoned parents because their children were truant, and received criticism from the transgender community for denying gender-affirming healthcare and banning forums that sex workers use to protect themselves.

In the next four years, the Biden-Harris administration will continue to champion neoliberal governance and imperialist interests. Their transition team is filled with wealthy corporate executives and lobbyists from companies like Uber and Amazon who are entirely disconnected from the struggles of the working class. The team also comprises Obama administration alumni like Cecilia Muñoz, President Obama's top immigration advisor who continually justified harsh immigration enforcement policies and rationalized the separation of parents from their children.

Though centrism may have won at the top of the ticket, it proved to be electorally shaky. In fact, many moderates lost their seats or came dangerously close to losing their seats. Although Democrats tried to blame the Left for their own shortcomings, progressive or-

ganizers, many of whom were people of color, were the ones who helped secure Biden's win in swing states. Black communities, indigenous communities, and Hispanic communities did the heavy lifting for a democracy that never worked in their favor. Representative Rashida Tlaib, who represents one of the most impoverished districts in the country, recently told Politico that “If [voters] can walk past blighted homes and school closures and pollution to vote for Biden-Harris, when they feel like they don't have anything else, they deserve to be heard.” Instead of paying lip service to social issues and defaulting to vague bromides about unity, the incoming Biden administration owes these communities more than just a nod of thanks. They deserve a bold vision for the future of America.

The reality is that our nation's current modality of political and economic operation is committed to half-hearted incrementalism and assumes that anything other than that is impossible. This concession to pragmatism inhibits real progress. The pursuance of middle-ground politics paves the way for excessive globalization at the expense of developing countries, corporate tax breaks paid for through austerity, and rhetoric about civility at the expense of communities of color.

Neoliberalism is degenerative. It allows for oligarchs to dictate our political agenda and influence our political process. It launches wars based on lies and makes billions in profits by selling arms to repressive regimes. It tries to convince us that the levers of the capitalist mar-

ket are capable of producing equity and sustainability. It fuels a for-profit healthcare system that burdens people with thousands of dollars in medical debt. It maintains an egregious carceral system that disproportionately harms and kills black, indigenous, Hispanic, immigrant, mentally ill, and disabled communities. It deceives us into believing that individual hard work is the key to amassing wealth and achieving the American Dream. It generates cult-like infatuations with billionaires who would be nothing without government subsidies and the workers whom they underpay and exploit.

When governments abandon their obligation to transform socioeconomic outcomes for the better, political efficacy diminishes. This points to the inextricable link between neoliberalism and the triumph of Trumpism. In four years, we may have hard-right candidates try to take the presidency again. In that terrifying prospect, the pullback might be stronger than the push forward. The only way to prevent this is for the Democratic Party to muster the moral and political courage to get behind popular movements and policies like the Green New Deal, Medicare for All, and defund-

ing the police.

Unfortunately, both Biden and Harris have spent a considerable amount of energy contemptuously distancing themselves from progressivism and denouncing socialism. Although the word “socialist” is used pejoratively by Republicans to lambaste any Democrat with a pulse, the more that Democrats try to distance themselves from progressivism and socialism as if they were inherently bad, the more it legitimizes GOP framing.

Instead of waiting out an interregnum in our political history, we must continue to fight for progressive policies that are actually popular among rural, urban, and suburban voters. The future for leftist organizing and movement building is far from bleak. In fact, 67% of Americans support increasing the minimum wage to \$15, 69% support Medicare for All, and 63% support free public college.

Furthermore, 26 out of 30 of the Democratic Socialists of America's nationally endorsed candidates won their races. All four members of “The Squad” — Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Ayanna Presley, and Ilhan Omar — have won their

reelections and will be joined by progressive insurgents Jamaal Bowman and Cori Bush. Every single swing-seat House Democrat who endorsed Medicare for All won their race and 99% of Green New Deal co-sponsors won their races in this cycle.

Although Biden's win has undoubtedly exacerbated neoliberal complacency, this is a critical moment to push for an unapologetic agenda that promotes justice, challenges structural racism, combats climate change, increases political accountability, dismantles institutions of oppression, and radically redistributes wealth. We can continue to organize by supporting indigenous sovereignty, fighting for police and prison abolition, developing ecosocialist frameworks for promoting environmental justice, and creating mutual aid networks. When we build community power and cultivate solidarity, we can rise above the forces of oppression, marginalization, and vituperation that threaten to destroy us. The horizon of a liberated future is within our line of sight. We just have to keep moving forward and pushing left. 🌱



Photo: Katie Schuering via NYC-DSA

The False Narratives Around Rent Control

By Ashvin Pai

The landlord-tenant dynamic is one of the most complex and interesting social frameworks of modern capitalism. It is arguably the most divisive and inflammatory economic relationship present today. One can virtually guarantee that every renter has had a landlord they hated and conversely, every landlord, a tenant they despised.

In purely monetary terms, the rental housing market is one of the largest in the United States, netting in well over \$100 billion in 2020, with most of this value managed by giant real estate companies (Ann Arbor's own McKinley manages a \$4.6 billion portfolio with over 34,000 apartments). It is in this backdrop, with these stakes, that the policy of rent control is being judged for its worthiness. It should come as no surprise, then, with so much capital threatened by affordable housing policies, that rent control has been the target of a relentless smear campaign.

Rent control, a robust package of policies aimed at increasing housing stability for the poor — including things such as restrictions on condo conversions and caps on rent increases — has historically enjoyed massive support among urban renters. However, for almost 75 years, status-quo economists have enthusiastically maintained the stance that rent control is a failed policy. These views have proliferated so widely into the public opinion that current conversations around rent control, liberal and conservative alike, treat it as an issue on which economics has reached a universal consensus. However, to put it mildly, the premise of this discourse — that economics has “proven rent control wrong” — is wildly inaccurate. Indeed, rent control, as a policy to promote housing stability for the poor, is an effective and efficient one

that must be adopted.

A cursory search of rent control in the news reveals the critical nature of current conversations around the policy. Many mainstream news outlets have published pieces actively arguing against the policy when it gains popular support in communities. For example, in 2019, when London mayor Sadiq Khan called for progressive housing policies, the BBC released a fact-check article claiming “standard economic theory is that rent control does not work” and cited a Stanford study in a claim that “[rent] controls helped accelerate gentrification.”

In the United States, when several rent control laws seemed poised to pass in New York and California, The Washington Post published an op-ed in which author Megan McArdle argued that “every economist agrees that rent controls are bad.” In a similar vein, the recent ‘No on 21’ campaign, in opposition to California’s Prop 21 housing amendment, garnered the endorsement of 28 local newspapers including the Pasadena Star-News, Orange County Register, and Los Angeles Daily News, whose editorial boards all published the same opinion that rent control reduces homebuilding and land values, and forces properties off of the rental market.

The San Francisco Chronicle went even further, saying that rent control was “overwhelmingly rejected by experts and refuted by research.” The ‘No on 21’ campaign itself, which ultimately received a cease and desist letter for misleading voters, was funded by real estate giants Blackstone, Essex, and Equity Residential among others. Unsurprisingly, Prop 21 was rejected by California voters in the 2020 election.

Understanding that there is a large corporate and political interest in

blocking rent control policies is easy enough. Using a technical analysis to point at specific points where these arguments go wrong is a little more difficult. The fact of the matter is that opposition to rent control has a long-standing economic tradition, with many famous economists from Milton Friedman to Assar Lindbeck coming out against it. It is upon this perceived economic consensus which rent control opposition stands. Reading the articles mentioned above, it becomes clear that while they offer some specific arguments against rent control, the real message they are pushing is essentially the same: economists have found the answer for rent control — it doesn’t work.

This begs the question, Where can one find this economic consensus? There is certainly some truth to this claim as economic papers, studies, and essays against rent control policies date back almost 75 years. Many people cite Friedman and George Stigler’s 1946 *Roofs or Ceilings?* as the original work that kicked off rent control opposition. Through the lens of free market analysis, Friedman and Stigler make a theoretical argument against rent ceilings, concluding that rent ceilings allocate space haphazardly, use that space inefficiently, retard new construction, and cause future depression in residential building. The next big study, Edgar Olsen’s 1972 ‘An Econometric Analysis of Rent Control’ continues in a similar vein, developing a more complex mathematical model to derive several inefficiencies surrounding rent control. Most notably, Olsen asserts that rent-controlled housing deteriorates sub-optimally; that is, rent-controlled housing deteriorates faster than in the absence of controls and that only a free housing market can attain the optimal path of de-

terioration.

Several empirical rebuttals of rent control exist as well. The majority of these center around the effects of rent deregulation in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the 1990s. The most widely cited may be David Autor’s 2014 study, which empirically found that the removal of rent control caused a property appreciation of \$2.0 billion between 1994 and 2004 in the Cambridge housing market. Henry Pollakowski’s 2003 study of Cambridge’s deregulation found to a similar effect that a significant amount of post-deregulation investment 16 to 24%, in fact would not have occurred without deregulation. Pollakowski even claims that rent deregulation helps the poor as housing investment is not relegated to high-income neighborhoods, but instead equally spread across all socioeconomic boundaries.

For some time, studies of deregulation in Cambridge were the only empirical analyses of rent control and oppositional economists found that they were relying too heavily on theoretical arguments. This call for more empirical research led to Rebecca Diamond’s 2019 analysis of rent control in San Francisco, arguably the study most widely cited in the modern rent control discourse (referenced in both the BBC and ‘No On 21’ campaign articles mentioned above). One of the biggest conclusions of the study was that “rent control contributed to the gentrification of San Francisco” by incentivizing landlords to convert existing rental properties into condominiums. Many saw this as the final nail in the coffin for rent control, whose advocates often tout it as a policy to keep gentrification at bay.

Fortunately, despite these studies, political support for rent control is still alive and well. Perhaps even more importantly, that this political support remains is justified. This is because, upon closer inspection, there exist several issues with the conclusions that the studies mentioned above have reached. That the conclusions of these studies have glaring issues is no light matter; these are some of the most widely cited pieces in the modern policy discourse surrounding rent control, and are authored by highly respected economists.

They say that the beginning is the most important part of the work. Thus, it only seems natural that a criticism starts there as well. Enter Friedman’s *Roofs or Ceilings?* While Friedman’s theoretical rebuttal of rent control may prove convincing to some, the truth of the matter remains there is little empirical evidence to back up his conclusions. Consider, for example, Friedman’s claim that rent control policies cause a slump in housing construction.

Much evidence suggests that this is simply not the case. In a report on the effects of rent control from 1978 to 1994, Berkeley, California’s planning and development department found “no evidence that rent control had any effect on construction of new housing.” More broadly, data indicates that, between 2007 and 2014, the cities in California’s Bay Area with rent control “produced more housing units per capita than cities without rent control.”

These results carry over to the East Coast as well. John Gilderbloom’s 30-year survey of over 70 New Jersey cities with rent control found that, in the period between 1990 and 2000, moderate rent controls had no significant impact on new constructions in the rental market. Conveniently, Gilderbloom also refutes Olsen’s analysis that rent control results in faster-than-optimal housing deterioration. In the same New Jersey study, it was found that there was no significant relationship between rent controls and the percentage of housing with working plumbing — widely accepted as a reasonable indicator for rental housing quality.

In *Roofs or Ceilings?* Friedman claims that his arguments against rent control are hedged in the interest of alleviating the housing crisis. In his view, the removal of rent controls would help the housing market perform more efficiently, in turn, helping the individual find the housing they desired. Thus, one could reasonably assume that if rent deregulation did not help the poor find affordable housing, Friedman would be against it.

So what actually happens when rent controls are removed? One only has to return to the example of Cambridge, Massachusetts to see the stark effects of ending rent controls on housing stability for the poor. Immediately following

rent decontrol, tenants of previously controlled units saw a sharp increase in rents. This was accompanied by a significant increase in residential turnover, the number of transactions on the housing market, as people were no longer able to afford to live in their homes.

It wouldn’t be unreasonable to say that these transactions were happening primarily between poor individuals and large real estate speculators as housing investment in decontrolled units more than doubled on an annual basis — a far greater injection of capital than individual purchases could possibly contribute. So in Cambridge, at least, rent deregulation did not result in a more equitable housing market that helped the common person — the outcome Friedman was supposedly advocating for.

However, for some odd reason, proponents of rent deregulation ignore this and continue to dogmatically equate increased housing investment with economic success. Referring back to Autor and Pollakowski’s praise for deregulation, one finds that they are built on this exact premise, treating housing investment as the foremost metric to be concerned with rather than equitable housing or long-term housing security — the actual problems that common people in the housing market face. That such a blatant false equivocation is so unscrupulously made (most notably when Pollakowski cites equally distributed housing investment as evidence that deregulation helps the poor) is incredibly concerning and raises questions about the supposed good-faith standing of these studies, especially when their ultimate denunciations of rent control are made with no hesitation.

Similar inaccuracies extend into the aforementioned Diamond study of rent control in San Francisco. That this study in particular contains said inaccuracies is especially important as it has become one of the most widely cited in recent years by advocates of rent deregulation. One of the biggest claims Diamond makes is that rent control fueled gentrification in San Francisco by incentivizing landlords to “[convert] existing rental properties to higher-end, owner-occupied condominium housing.”

However, this critique ignores the fact that, historically, constructing

new low-income housing without government subsidies is a largely unprofitable venture. In other words, with or without rent controls, landlords have no incentives to provide affordable housing when they could be making much higher profits catering to wealthier demographics. Thus, claiming that rent controls are somehow an incentive for condo conversions makes absolutely no sense as, in a deregulated market, these landlords would skip straight to condos anyway. The deeper insinuation that rent control contributes to gentrification is demonstrably false as well. Indeed, it seems the opposite may be the case; when Boston neighborhoods repealed their rent control laws in the mid-1990s, they saw a multitude of socioeconomic changes that signified gentrification, including a significant increase of rents and home prices.

Notwithstanding, even if rent controls act as an incentive for landlords to convert to condominiums, this observation is still not a valid critique of rent control laws. This is because rent control advocates have always proposed restrictions on condominium conversions as a feature of their policies. Thus, Diamond's findings only suggest that there exists a political climate around rent control which allows for landlords to game the system through loopholes such as condo conversion — a political climate that studies such as hers feed into. Indeed, the hard data of the study itself shows that “beneficiaries of rent control are between 10 and 20% more likely to remain at their [home address],” and that rent controls helped protect populations from personal shocks that required them to change

residence. In other words, even this incredibly popular study, which presents itself as a critique of rent control, conclusively found the policy accomplished its main task of increasing housing stability for poor renters.

Another theme present among critics of rent control, academics and news outlets alike, is that they misunderstand what the purpose of rent control is and what specific policies it entails. Historically, rent control has not been proposed as a simple price ceiling on rents, as Friedman critiqued it. A 1988 article in the Harvard Law Review defined rent control as “a regulatory scheme combining rent [regulation], a warranty of habitability, eviction restrictions, a moratorium on condominium conversion, and residential zoning restrictions,” emphasizing that “the full scheme [was] neces-



Credit: Caelie Frampton via Flickr

sary to ensure rent control's efficacy in a gentrifying market.” Even today, many rent control advocates don't even focus on absolute rents, rather placing more emphasis on controlling rent increases. Thus, an analysis of rent control as a simple price ceiling is a pointless exercise. (Somewhat ironically, rent control is often used as the default price ceiling example in introductory economics classes.)

Furthermore, even with all these policies, rent control's main aim is not to create affordable housing or improve housing quality for the poor, the grounds upon which Olsen, Autor, and Pollakowski took the most issue. Rather, rent control advocates envision it as a policy to ensure housing stability and protect people from being forced out of their homes by price increases. In his testimonial to the Jersey City Council, J.W. Mason, assistant economic professor at the City University of New York, said exactly this, advocating for rent controls on the grounds that renters “have a reasonable expectation of remaining in their homes in terms similar to the ones they experienced in the past.”

By no means does this mean that rent control ignores housing creation or housing quality. It may well be that with increased housing stability, renters will gain more political power against landlords and real estate companies. This increased political oomph could very well be the catalyst for higher ambitions of more affordable and quality housing. However, because these aren't the main goals of rent control, critiques of the policy along these lines are fundamentally flawed.

When judged on its own terms, it becomes clear that the data on rent control is overwhelmingly in its favor. In terms of benefiting its intended constituency, rent control is generally successful. A study of rent control in Santa Monica found that lower-income tenants experienced a significant reduction in shelter costs, gaining proportionately more from the rent control law than their higher-income counterparts. Additionally, there was no significant evidence supporting an argument that rent control had unintended effects of providing disproportionate

benefits to middle- and upper-class renters.

Rent control also effectively protects against forced mobility. A literature review done by Manuel Pastor, Vanessa Carter, and Maya Abood found that home mobility driven by factors of force can be countered through rent stabilization measures. Of course, some economists, such as Friedman, have seen low levels of mobility among renters as an inefficient allocation of housing. This view ignores the numerous external benefits of housing stability. Housing stability has wide ranging beneficial effects on communities; much research has been done linking evictions with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and trouble making social ties.

What's worse is that already marginalized communities experience these types of evictions at higher rates; in Milwaukee, black women account for only 9.6% of the population but make up 30% of evictions. The curbing of forced evictions through rent control policies clearly has the potential of greatly improving mental health and alleviating financial stresses for already struggling communities. Additionally, housing stability has many effects on the academic success of children, with findings suggesting a significant negative relationship between residential moves and high school completion. Conversely, housing stability has a significant positive correlation to increased school attendance for children. With these facts in mind, it quickly becomes apparent that the effects of housing stability lie beyond solely the monetary realm, creating cascading effects which results in healthier and more vibrant communities.

These effects don't take much time to manifest themselves either. Because rent control targets the private housing market, it can take effect on a large amount of housing with very little cost in very little time. Furthermore, it is extremely cost-efficient for governments to implement; both Berkeley and Santa Monica's rent boards do not rely on general city funds and as little as 26 full-time staff are able to oversee over 25,000 units.

This low-cost implementation

means that rent control is significantly cheaper than other affordable housing policies. For example, Berkeley's rent control program was able to stabilize 19,000 units for just \$4 million dollars. In comparison, it would have taken \$20 million to provide housing vouchers for a little over 2,000 units, and \$220 million to build or rehabilitate 2,000 units. This type of data makes it unrealistic that a lack of government funds is a reason to not implement rent controls. The implications of this argument are quite stark; in the eyes of policymakers, allowing the housing crisis to go on is seen as justifiable and even desirable because it results in less government spending.

As the housing crisis grows worse, the need for policies such as rent control becomes more immediate. However, with this urgency, one can expect a greater oppositional narrative and an increased effort to execute the smear campaign against affordable housing. The current perception of economic consensus around rent control as ineffective is flawed at best and intellectually dishonest at worst. Much of the traditional literature all the way from Friedman to Diamond misunderstands the aims of rent control, makes false equivocations which result in flawed conclusions, and isn't backed by empirical data.

Despite this, the message that rent control is a failed policy is being continually pushed out to the public in the language of these studies and essays. Economists such as Mason, Levine, and Gilderbloom, among others, are thrown by the wayside in the desperate appeal to authority that decontrol advocates invariably resort to. It is dangerous to pretend that there are no political motivations to these decontrol studies when they have such clear flaws.

It is dangerous to pretend that the free-market economics criticizing rent control aren't ultimately biased toward what is best for giant real estate corporations. With the large successes that rent control has had in creating housing stability, it is important that the false narratives around the policy be challenged whenever they are brought up. The data is clear: rent control works. 🌱

Gig Companies Buy Immunity From Labor Protections

By Bri Jackson

While the whole country was wrapped up in a contentious presidential election, gig companies in California were biding their time. Corporations like Uber, Lyft, DoorDash, Instacart, and Postmates spent \$200 million advertising in favor of the highly damaging California ballot measure known as Proposition 22, which would categorize gig workers as independent contractors. The classification exempts these corporate behemoths from giving their workers the benefits entitled to company employees such as a minimum wage, health insurance, and sick pay.

The proposition spits in the face of hard-won labor protections that have existed in the United States for decades. In fact, the California Supreme Court had previously upheld Assembly Bill 5 (AB 5), enacted on January 1st of this year, which sought to protect gig workers and classify them as full employees. Despite the overwhelming harm to California workers if the legislation were reversed, voters passed Proposition 22 with a strong majority of 58%. With the passage of Prop 22, corporate greed has bought out the opinions, and votes, of Californians and stripped rights from workers who desperately need them.

If you're asking "Why??" and slapping your forehead, you are not alone. Let's quickly examine the history of gig legislation this year in California to understand. AB 5 protected workers by instituting a three-point framework to classify any worker as an independent contractor: the worker must have control

over how they work, they must be free to seek work elsewhere, and their labor cannot be central to the company's business. A major win for workers and labor unions, the bill helped to categorize gig workers as employees entitled to the same benefits as other workers.

As expected, AB 5 was promptly vilified by gig companies who immediately began searching for a way to overturn the legislation that was hurting their bottom line. Uber and Lyft argued that one of the main benefits of working for them was drivers' flexibility to make their own schedule, but that AB 5 would force the companies to schedule drivers and reduce their total workforce to remain profitable. The ride-sharing companies also claimed that workers have significant control over how they work because of the scheduling flexibility. But, as is the case with so many of their claims, it is a farce. In fact, Uber sets drivers' base fares, assigns drivers specific routes, and fires drivers by "deactivating" their accounts for inactivity or for receiving low passenger ratings. In reality, it seems drivers have little control over what they charge as well as when and where they work.

In response to AB 5, Uber and Lyft immediately took to advertising for a counter-legislation through ballot proposal. And, thus, Prop 22 was born. In spite of the obvious consequences of not providing basic labor protections to workers, voters went to the polls and cast their ballots to counter the basic rights of their fellow Californians anyway.

The passage of Proposition 22

was the result of a ceaseless campaign by gig companies to manipulate voters and convince workers that the measure would benefit them. During the campaign, Uber and Lyft maintained that, under the proposal, they would be providing their workers with a minimum wage and a healthcare stipend to offset the cost of having to buy their own health insurance. Yet again, the gig companies have intentionally misrepresented the realities of enacting the proposal. Prop 22 avoids guaranteeing independent contractors a minimum wage by modifying the activities that count as "worked" time, lowering actual wages from \$12 an hour to an estimated \$5.64. In addition, the healthcare stipend is estimated to be a paltry \$30 per pay-period — hardly a drop in the bucket.

All of these negative effects on workers are made worse in the current moment during the full throes of the COVID-19 pandemic. As ride demand goes down due to safety restrictions, gig workers are offered no protections to help them navigate the hardships caused by loss of income. In addition to this, people of color, who are already the most socially vulnerable group during this pandemic, constitute a majority of drivers. The result of Prop 22 in such an unprecedented moment is to make vulnerable workers significantly more vulnerable in a time of desperate need. Despite the companies' claims of wanting to help workers, their actions speak louder than their words. 🍌

INTERVIEW WITH BYP100

Black Lives Matter is the largest protest movement in American history. Indeed, the fight for racial justice has united countless groups and mobilized them behind a single noble cause. One of those groups is Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100).

BYP100 was founded in 2013 following the murder of Trayvon Martin. They are a member-based collective of young black activists fighting for freedom and liberation. Starting in Chicago, BYP100 has since expanded considerably with chapters from California's Bay Area to Washington DC.

Last month, Elias Khoury and Taylor-Ray Council got a chance to speak with BYP100's national Comms Associate Kwynn Riley. What follows is a transcript of that conversation, edited for clarity and length.

EK | Give us a brief summary of BYP100. Who are you (as an organization), what do you do, and why do you do it?

KR | BYP100 is a member-based organization of young black activists ages 18 to 35. We are a nationwide organization. We currently have 10 chapters and a large digital following. We are also in the process of building up a new chapter in South Florida.

Our mission is freedom for black people — all black people. We understand the world through a black-queer-feminist lens. This means that we focus on black trans and gender nonconforming folks. Because, when they are free, we all will be.

EK | At a national level, Y/DSA endorses a social democratic policy set that includes things like the Green New Deal, tuition-free public college, and universal healthcare. What policies or ideological currents run through the whole of BYP100, and to what extent do you consider your organization "big-tent"?

KR | Right now, we have a few campaigns that we are prioritizing. We readily embrace any policies compatible with the aforementioned black-queer-feminist lens. For example, we are working alongside The People's Coalition to fight back against the harmful effects of the 1994 crime bill.

We also are a part of the Movement 4 Black Lives, which created the BREATHE Act: a comprehensive document that mainly focuses on federal divestment from policing, and allocating those

resources toward education and mental health services for black and brown folks.

And then, of course, we have our "She Safe, We Safe" campaign that helps with combating gender-based violence. We started the campaign in recognition of the fact that black trans and gender nonconforming folks really need our support, and in hopes of redefining what safety looks like within that community.

EK | How is BYP100 set up from an organizational perspective? Is decision-making typically done on a democratic basis? What does that look like?

KR | So, we are a 501(c)3 and a 501(c)4. We are a member-based organization. So we do have a lot of all-membership meetings where members can give their input and recommendations. This is how we stay responsive to membership.

A majority of national staff — myself included — are members of BYP100. I'm from the Chicago chapter; our national director is from Durham. That speaks for itself. We have organizers getting paid to organize.

Decision-making in BYP100 is community-based. Of course, with all big organizations, you are going to have some hierarchy. But, at the same time, everyone who wants a say will have one.

EK | During the Democratic primary, members of BYP100 and the Sunrise Movement joined forces to protest a Joe Biden rally

in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Is this sort of collaboration common? If so, who else have you worked with in the past and on what issues?

KR | This sort of collaboration is very common. I mentioned previously the Movement 4 Black Lives and The People's Coalition. You brought up Sunrise. We also work with Black Lives Matter, and other similar grassroots organizations.

We love joining in these coalitions because we know that, when we collaborate, we actually get more work done. Groups often reach out to BYP100 asking us to participate in their actions. And we are happy to give them more bodies to put on the front-lines.

EK | How do you foresee your activism changing under a Biden administration compared to the last four years under Trump, if at all?

KR | I foresee our activism becoming stronger. Because of the pandemic, we have a lot more folks charged-up and wanting to make a change. As you know, with organizing, we do get burnt-out; we do get discouraged; and we do get tired. So it is nice that we can give members a chance to rest and pass the torch to younger, newer members who are more energized to hold Biden accountable and challenge Kamala on issues of policing. We have a lot of people eager to help set black people free.

TRC | Being that racial injustice and economic injustice go hand-in-hand, what is BYP100 doing to help more people understand that capitalism has a negative effect on the black community?

KR | That is a really good question. I specifically think of the Chicago chapter. Whenever we have events, we make sure that everything is free. BYP100 tries to decommodify our organization as much as possible. For example, we give groceries away. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have also been giving away hygiene products, condoms, and other things that society chooses to hold on to — almost as a bargaining tool.

We also fight hard against prison labor. In general, BYP100 just tries to be sensitive to members' socioeconomic status. We do what we can to provide members as much as possible free of charge.

TRC | Under your "She Safe, We Safe" campaign, you mention "Reallocating funding from the police to community-determined programs that address gender-based violence in Black communities." What particular services do you have in mind, and why do you think the police are insufficient to reduce gender-based violence?

KR | We are referring to schools, which help break cycles of violence because education dissipates fear. We also want to divert police funds toward transformative justice initiatives, and make

sure schoolchildren are learning about transformative justice. Counseling services are too often underfunded, so we want to make sure money goes to that as well. Police funds could also be put toward making necessities like housing and healthcare more affordable.

We know that police are insufficient to solve the problem of gender-based violence. Just look at Chicago. With how policed it is, and how big the police budget is, you would think that we are the safest city in the world. But we are not.

TRC | The #SayHerName movement has typically been about black women and girls. But not for BYP100. You have taken special care to also raise awareness about the harm faced by femmes and the gender nonconforming. Why is this sort of inclusivity so important?

KR | It is important because these are the people who have been kept out. They have been marginalized and oppressed. We are in the year 2020, and it is still happening.

Freedom starts from ground-up — not from the top-down. And we know that when black trans, femmes, and gender nonconforming people are free, all of us are truly free. It is inclusivity, but it is also fighting against discrimination which should have been dealt with a long time ago. BYP100 wants to highlight and illuminate the struggles of heteronormativity's biggest victims. We have to admit the harm that has been done.

TRC | In a video on your website, BYP100 refers to itself as the "black-queer-feminist organization of this time." How fond are you of the term "intersectionality," and in what ways does it inform your activism?

KR | The black-queer-feminist lens and praxis inspires everything that we do. It is something of a mandate on our activism. BYP100 is fond of the term "intersectionality" because we recognize the different layers of oppression. We also recognize that now, more than ever, is the time to uplift the voices of diverse and disparate communities.

As far as integrating intersectionality into our activism, BYP100 tries to stay up-to-date with legislation and policies that affect marginalized peoples. We also make sure that we have black trans and gender nonconforming folks in our leadership. BYP100 also tries to partner with different black trans-led organizations. The Transgender Day of Remembrance is coming up, and we are working with them to plan how we will honor the victims of transphobia.

BYP100 does not use intersectionality to belabor our differences. Rather, we use it to show the overwhelming power that we have when we truly come together. All marginalized people, fighting as one, are unstoppable. We built all of this, and we can tear it down too. 🌟