# Tenants in San Francisco’s Tenderloin fight corporate landlords through rent strikes



Johana Ramírez has called her modest studio apartment in San Francisco's Tenderloin district home for 17 years, despite enduring a host of maintenance issues. The 370-square-foot unit at 434 Leavenworth, known as the Rainbow Flag Apartments, is marked by cracked walls, broken tiles, cockroach infestations, and poorly maintained fixtures — conditions that have prompted Ramírez and her neighbours to take collective action.

For the past two years, Ramírez and other tenants have staged a rent strike to demand necessary repairs, pest control, and compensation for what they describe as unlivable living conditions. Rather than addressing these concerns, the landlord, Ballast Investments — San Francisco’s largest residential property owner — issued eviction notices to the tenants. The dispute has now escalated to the city’s Rent Board, which arbitrates disagreements involving rent control and eviction cases.

Ramírez expressed her motivations, telling El Tecolote, “I fight for myself, yes. But we have to set a precedent to protect others like me. This landlord has hundreds of apartments.” Despite the grime and disrepair evident in her unit, she remains determined to maintain her home.

Nearby, another group of tenants at 781 O’Farrell has initiated a rent strike against their landlord, Veritas Investments, and are scheduled for an eviction court hearing later in April. Both Ballast and Veritas are backed by private equity and hold extensive portfolios of rent-controlled units, particularly within the Tenderloin, a neighbourhood home to many non-English-speaking, working-class immigrants who have lived there for many years.

Tenant advocates have highlighted that this demographic is especially vulnerable to displacement as corporate landlords seek to replace long-term residents with higher-paying tenants. They also allege that language barriers are being used strategically by landlords to complicate tenants’ ability to exercise their rights. At both properties engaged in rent strikes, Veritas reportedly removed bilingual onsite managers, posted key notices solely in English, and directed staff to communicate exclusively in English. Lizzy Kramer, spokesperson for the Housing Rights Committee, a San Francisco nonprofit, told El Tecolote, “Tenants have been hit with fees after being left in the dark about rent changes.”

San Francisco law mandates that all rental units, regardless of public or private ownership, must be free from vermin such as cockroaches and rats, and have functioning plumbing and gas with hot and cold running water. Tenants are legally entitled to report violations, withhold rent, or pursue “repair and deduct” remedies. Furthermore, evictions or rent increases occurring within six months of a tenant complaint may be considered retaliatory and are subject to judicial review.

However, while the city’s Language Access Ordinance requires public landlords to provide translation and interpretation services, private landlords are not bound by this rule. This gap has been acknowledged by employees within the private investment firms; a Veritas staff member commented anonymously, “Do you know how many languages we’d have to translate?”

Alongside these legal challenges, a growing tenant movement is taking shape, energised in part by the 2022 Union-at-Home Ordinance passed in San Francisco. This law requires landlords to engage in negotiations with tenant associations representing a majority of residents in a building, thereby formalising collective bargaining efforts. Fred Sherburn-Zimmer, lead tenant organiser at the Housing Rights Committee, remarked, “Some landlords, just at the sight of a tenant association, start obeying the law. But others, like Veritas, are hard to get to the table.”

In mid-April, Ramírez participated in a coordinated citywide call-in campaign to pressure landlords Ballast, Veritas, and their management company, Brick + Timber, signalling tenants’ resolve. This effort included daily calls to different landlords with a unified message that “business is not as usual.” Additionally, tenants from 11 Veritas properties rallied at San Francisco’s Rent Board in solidarity with those striking at 781 O’Farrell.

Tenants have employed a range of tactics, from petitions and office occupations to rent strikes, to secure negotiations and improvements. Notably, at 320 14th Street, a 16-unit building previously owned by Veritas, Latinx tenants had long endured difficult conditions including mould and pest infestations. Following a 2022 rent strike and Veritas’ loan default on properties including this site and 434 Leavenworth, Prado Investments acquired 320 14th Street. After negotiating with the tenant association, Prado forgave rent debts, addressed critical repairs, and eventually sold the building to the non-profit San Francisco Community Land Trust. This transition allowed rents to be recalculated on an income basis, resulting in substantial rent reductions for residents like bakery worker Luis Zenón and McDonald’s employee Sandra Martinez.

Nevertheless, the battle faced by tenants remains steep. At Ramírez’s building, the original group of 30 rent strikers has dwindled to just six, all monolingual immigrants. Ramírez herself has spoken candidly about the toll the struggle has taken on her mental health, saying, “My depression has worsened throughout the ordeal, but I cannot leave San Francisco because I depend on the city’s LGBTQ health services.” She described the ongoing fight as “very difficult” but asserted that “the situation is just not fair.”

The Rent Board is set to deliberate on the case involving Ballast and the tenants of 434 Leavenworth at a meeting scheduled for 30 April 2025. Meanwhile, the tenant association at 781 O’Farrell prepares to face eviction proceedings in court on 28 April. Fred Sherburn-Zimmer emphasised the importance of these cases, stating, “The stakes for Tenderloin residents are huge. These tenants are fighting for the heart of the city right now, at a point when people need San Francisco like they’ve never needed it before.”

Johana Ramírez’s persistent advocacy highlights the challenges faced by rent-controlled tenants battling corporate landlords in one of America’s most expensive cities. Her story embodies a wider tenant movement seeking to confront long-standing housing issues in San Francisco.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.324larkin.com> - Provides context on rent-controlled units in San Francisco (324 Larkin) and historical tenant protections, relevant to legal frameworks mentioned for 434 Leavenworth.
2. <https://www.apartments.com/324-larkin-san-francisco-ca/m24f08l/> - Confirms San Francisco Rent Ordinance protections against unjust evictions, applicable to the tenants' legal disputes at 434 Leavenworth and 781 O’Farrell.
3. <https://sfstandard.com/2024/03/23/why-san-francisco-apartments-lower-haight-empty/> - Describes tenant lawsuits over building neglect and displacement risks in San Francisco, paralleling the conditions at 434 Leavenworth and 781 O’Farrell.
4. <https://www.ebar.com/story.php?ch=news&id=327620> - Highlights tenant-landlord disputes over building-related issues in San Francisco, consistent with the challenges described at both rent-strike properties.
5. <https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/lgbtq-rainbow-flag-ban-17825385.php> - Discusses symbolic importance of Rainbow Flag designations for LGBTQ+ safe housing, relevant to the named 'Rainbow Flag Apartments' at 434 Leavenworth.
6. <https://sfstandard.com/2024/03/23/why-san-francisco-apartments-lower-haight-empty/> - Details insurance disputes and owner negligence in maintaining buildings, mirroring allegations against Ballast and Veritas in the article.
7. <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMia0FVX3lxTE5jRUZOQ0xLRWpERDdNR1pHYjF5RElocV9WRV92R0d4RDgyZ1kxdkZ5Q1ZYNnpZTm1SSFpNcHBJNkxCU0R5dFJmZFdMNWRSUzNNcXZhcXFEVlVnZEtKcXVyd1JSYm96VG1EdzY0?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data