Dear members of the Housing Committee:

I’m writing to express my support for SB 143, An Act Concerning Evictions for Cause, as well as HB 5156, An Act Requiring Notices of Rent Increases.

I am a resident and renter in New Haven, and the union vice president and political director of the Connecticut Tenants Union. This session, the CT Tenants Union—in partnership with our broad coalition of labor unions, grassroots community organizations, and housing policy organizations—is pushing for an expansion of Just Cause Eviction Protection to include all renters, other than those in small, owner-occupied buildings. This effort did not come out of thin air; rather, it reflects the experiences, needs, and priorities of our members. Expanding Just Cause is good, smart policy, grounded in the realities renters are facing.

Tenants are asking for Just Cause in part because they are facing retaliation for speaking up about conditions issues, for organizing tenant unions with their neighbors, and for attempting to negotiate their rents. Meanwhile, opponents of Just Cause claim that landlords need to use no-fault, lapse of time evictions to evict tenants who are doing harm. Yet without requiring a stated cause for eviction, landlords will continue to hold unilateral power to define what types of behavior count as “harmful,” whether that means actual harm to others or simply requesting repairs or questioning lease terms. By requiring landlords to state the reason for the eviction, both sides have an opportunity to make their case in court—rather than giving one side an easy cover for abuses of power, which is the current status quo. In short, with expanded Just Cause, landlords intending to maintain a peaceful living environment in their buildings will continue to have the recourse of for-cause evictions, while tenants attempting to enforce their rights and advocate for themselves will be better protected against retaliatory and discriminatory no-cause evictions which are currently running rampant.

Without the protection of Just Cause, even local governments with the best intentions of protecting tenants from deplorable housing conditions will struggle to do so because tenants will continue to fear reporting their living conditions or filing fair rent complaints for fear of eviction. Retaliatory landlords will continue to use lapse of time evictions to punish outspoken tenants with impunity. The mere threat of a retaliatory eviction is often enough to produce a chilling effect on an entire community.

Tenants are also seeking Just Cause to slow down the rapid loss of affordable housing that we are currently experiencing. No-fault evictions enable a predatory business practice: investors who purchase buildings full of existing residents in order to clear them out and bring in higher-paying tenants. This is an inhumane form of gentrification that destabilizes whole communities, ripping people away from their neighbors, jobs, schools, doctors, and social networks. Such displacement is merely the “cost of doing business” to investors with no ties to the community. But to the evicted tenants, it is a severe financial, social, psychological, and often medical burden, sometimes taking a deadly toll. Meanwhile, every such displacement reduces our overall supply of existing affordable housing at a pace that new supply, even if increased from current levels, cannot keep up with.
Some will argue that tenant protections like Just Cause are either detrimental or irrelevant to the issue of increased housing supply. Yet these arguments are based on fear-mongering and threats, not data. Five states, Washington DC, and over 20 municipalities already have universal Just Cause protection in place, with no discernible impact on new development. In Connecticut, Open Communities Alliance, Desegregate CT, Partnership for Strong Communities, and other leading housing policy organizations pushing for increased affordable housing supply have all endorsed the campaign for SB 143. Their research and expertise agrees that tenant protections and increased housing supply are mutually beneficial, not mutually exclusive.

The truth is, in the midst of the deepening housing and homelessness crisis that we are witnessing every day, expanding an existing law that we’ve already had on the books for 40 years, one which simply requires a stated cause for evictions, is an incredibly moderate proposal.

On a personal level, I was raised by a landlord, investor, and CEO. Both of my parents are and were leaders in the local Republican Party. I was raised to oppose unions, oppose regulation, and to espouse laissez faire economics and individualistic responsibility as the solution to every imaginable problem. But then—I grew up. I grew up to become a worker, a renter, a debtor, and now, a tenant union organizer. I grew up to understand that genuine democracy, genuine “freedom,” require that the basic needs of the many take precedence over the private investment interests of the few.

Human cultures, and wisdom, religious, and legal traditions around the world—including the specific legal traditions that have most heavily shaped law in the United States—have always recognized that the people who live, work, suffer, celebrate, and die in a place have certain rights by virtue of that living. That relationships, history, community, and memories in a certain place actually do count for something. Beyond everything else, that’s what this question about evictions for cause gets at, in one small way.

I urge the Housing Committee to support this legislation with enthusiasm.

Sincerely,
Luke Melonakos-Harrison
New Haven, CT