

# San Francisco Nativism Has Made San Francisco A SHIT HOLE

Local anti-gentrification activists have blocked new restaurants, new housing, and new businesses over racialized concerns about demographic change.



[Lee Fang](#)



*This commentary was published in partnership with [Unherd](#).*

The ugly xenophobia that has cropped up in certain corners of the GOP has an unusual cousin in an unexpected place.

The progressive Mission District in San Francisco has become ground zero for a form of Lefty nativism that scorns newcomers and most forms of economic growth. In a city renowned for its inclusive diversity and technological innovation, it is here that a bitter racialized activism has taken root.

Roberto Hernandez, self-styled “mayor of the Mission” and candidate on the ballot in local elections this year, is one of those activists. He has been waging a decade-long war to keep the neighborhood, in his words, “a [Latino barrio](#).” He has campaigned furiously against [shuttles](#) for tech workers, for a moratorium to block all [new](#) restaurants and bars, and even raged against a low-cost bike-

sharing [program](#) — all in the name of battling gentrification and those developments that might alter the demographics of the predominantly Latino area.

Plans for hundreds of new housing units at vacant lots or blighted areas were [defeated](#) by a Hernandez-led [coalition](#). Developers pitched nearly 400 below-market rate homes as part of their proposals, but Hernandez has said that he opposes anything that is not built at “100% affordable” rates. He demands [vouchers](#) for any black or Latino resident priced out of the city to first return before new residents are allowed to arrive.

“Delay, delay, delay,” said Hernandez [of](#) his strategy for stopping a proposed mixed housing development on South Van Ness Avenue by 26th Street. “Until we kill it,” another activist added.

In a barn-burning speech, Hernandez decried the influx of thousands of privileged “[white techies](#)” who he said gallivant around Dolores Park with the audacity to openly drink wine and smoke marijuana in full view of cops. Never mind the fact that anyone of any race can famously imbibe in the park without being hassled.

The hostility towards those perceived as racial outsiders is palpable. Several non-Latino small business owners have cited ethnic intimidation from neighborhood groups in the Mission. In one instance, an organization tied to Hernandez [helped block](#) a Russian immigrant-owned bakery from leasing a vacant storefront previously occupied by a Mexican panaderia over the Russian baker’s lack of Latino heritage. The pressure worked — over the last four years, the location has remained boarded up and bereft of any tenants.

Meanwhile, the Hernandez political faction has placed onerous restrictions on various forms of policing and plowed hundreds of millions of dollars into failed homeless assistance programs — the results of which are now world famous, as images of the city’s urban decay and untreated addiction-mental health crisis routinely go viral.

The Mission is now hardly gentrified. Rather than a hotbed of investment, over 56 storefronts are empty and lots once viewed as prime real estate sit abandoned, accumulating trash and graffiti. Car break-ins and burglaries abound and [drive-by shootings](#) by [gang members](#), once a relic of the distant past, have returned over the past year. The mass transit BART station is now a daily market for stolen goods, with young men hawking electronics and shampoo bottles still featuring their tags from the Best Buy and Walgreens stores.

New elections, then, represent an opportunity to shift this status quo. With the mayor’s office and several pivotal supervisor seats up for grabs, Hernandez and other far-Left candidates are vying to represent the Mission. Jackie Fielder, who has called to defund the police and restrict building projects, similarly never skips an opportunity to tout her candidacy on identitarian grounds as “a queer, Indigenous-Latina.” Fielder or Hernandez are favored to win, but unlike previous years, these types of candidates might not be a shoo-in.

Because for the first time in recent memory, moderate liberals seeking pro-growth policies, less bureaucratic obstacles, and commonsense policing have organized and are pushing back. They have been on the march over the past two years, winning elections to remove the city’s anti-law enforcement

District Attorney and several education commissioners who prioritized renaming schools over the basics of teaching children. Despite the doom loop narrative, change may be on the horizon.

The far-Left campaigns, however, offer the tempting allure of scapegoat politics. They blame nebulous landlords and tech workers and “gentrifiers” for every affliction facing the city, claiming that only they alone can finally prioritize the Mission’s true “[natives](#),” as Hernandez has argued.

Such storylines not only sidestep scrutiny of the failed policies of the past decade but obscure a more vibrant history than these one-dimensional identity politics might suggest. The Mission’s past is rich with cycles of migration and economic growth.

Once home to indigenous communities, the land next saw the arrival of Spanish missionary explorers who gave the neighbourhood its name with the first Catholic church. The gold rush brought waves of Scottish, German, Italian, English and Scandinavian arrivals, migrants who built the ornately decorated Victorians that line the main boulevards. Successful merchants and traders constructed stately homes, while the business corridors of Mission were self-sufficient centers of commerce. Following the 1906 fire, the neighborhood swelled with those displaced by the disaster.

The Irish arrived in large numbers by the turn of the century, filling its eastern factories and warehouses with working-class labor. St. Peter’s Church in the Mission — now one of the largest Spanish-speaking congregations in the Bay Area — was once a bastion of the strong Irish majority.

It was not until after the Second World War that many residents of European descent began moving out to be replaced by immigrants from Latin American countries. The Latino migration has its own storied and fascinating history, one that is vital to the Mission’s identity. It is a community that has welcomed asylum seekers and those displaced by foreign conflict, and produced wonderful Mission-centric food and music inspired by far-flung cultures. The Chipotle burrito is said to have been inspired by local taquerias.

Hernandez, to his credit, has helped organize the widely attended Carnival, a daylong parade displaying the many cultures that make up Latin America, an event that has become a signature festival of the community. And he has pushed for vital job training and arts programmes for Mission youth, efforts that should be applauded.

Yet he myopically views the neighborhood as a territory claimed by one racial group, to the exclusion of all else. The post-dot-com arrival of Asian and young entrepreneurs as well as artists of every ethnic background should be welcomed equally. The stubborn rejection of new housing and business is a race to the bottom, ignoring credible [economic research](#) which shows that depressing the housing supply actually raises housing costs.

Many fear that any new influx of residents might threaten the neighborhood’s character. But such anxiety is fueled by the same concerns over any ethnic change. For an ultra-progressive sector of San Francisco, the mindset is downright reactionary.

The mix and blend of cultures and backgrounds is what makes the neighborhood unique. The grand Lutheran church on 22nd Street and the breweries on Potrero Hill were built by 19th-century German

immigrants. Now, the church is a [Buddhist temple](#) and nunnery, and the largest local brewery was recently [purchased](#) by a yogurt billionaire of Kurdish ancestry. The most popular Mission burritos now [include](#) a Filipino fusion variety. Among the most generous donors to philanthropy in the neighborhood are software developers born to Taiwanese and Indian immigrants, as well as white Americans born in New Jersey and Illinois who now call San Francisco home.

The anger at the arrival of white neighbors is misplaced. Decades ago, the inverse arguments were made to denounce “white flight.” Such double standards only serve to create a nasty racial barrier, where superficial differences take precedence over behavior.

At a forum earlier this month, taking place at the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts, the progressive candidates jostled for racial authenticity points, repeatedly reminding the audience of their Latino heritage and competing to fight the influence of outsiders, especially housing speculators and landlords. Hernandez opened his remarks with a nod to the venue, noting that he helped open this institution, a testament to his ethnic appeal.

Left unmentioned, though, were the venue’s humble roots. A century ago, it was Shaff’s Furniture Company, a small business run by German-Jewish immigrants who were known in the community for their relief efforts directed towards refugees fleeing pogroms in Eastern Europe. And here is the irony at the heart of the Mission’s politics. For a community so transfixed on identity, its representatives fail to appreciate the actual history and diversity of the neighborhood. Focusing on ethnic scapegoats and powered by racial chauvinism, it is fiddling while the Mission burns.

*First Photo: Roberto Hernandez, a Mission community organizer, poses for a portrait as he stands near the corner of 22nd and Mission in San Francisco, Calif., on Saturday, August 17, 2019; (Yalonda M. James/The San Francisco Chronicle via Getty Images)*