

# Jury rules landlord can't evict former Portland Mayor Strimling

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Former Portland Mayor Ethan Strimling hugs his partner, Stephanie Clifford, after a jury ruled in his favor Thursday. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

A Cumberland County Superior Court jury ruled in favor of former Portland Mayor Ethan Strimling on Thursday, finding that his landlord illegally tried to evict him for his involvement in creating a tenants union.

The verdict came after 90 minutes of deliberations by nine jurors, who shuffled into the Portland courtroom and handed a piece of paper to the clerk. It was the first time in four days of trial that the room was silent.

The case against landlord Geoffrey Rice, who owns the downtown Trelawny Building, was the first in Maine history to raise participation in a tenants union as a defense against an eviction.

“This is a huge victory not only for Mr. Strimling personally but for any tenants who are looking to form a tenants union,” said Scott Dolan, the former mayor’s attorney. “Tenants unions have real power in Maine and this verdict shows it.”

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Rice and his lawyer, David Chamberlain, left the courtroom quickly and without commenting Thursday afternoon. Rice maintains that he evicted Strimling for personal reasons and not because of his involvement in the tenants union, which has filed several complaints against Rice with the city.

Rice has been trying to evict Strimling since 2021.

The jury was charged with determining if Rice evicted Strimling as retaliation for his involvement in the Trelawny Tenants Union, which would be illegal, or if the eviction was simply due to personal differences between the two men. Ultimately, they sided with Strimling.

Unlike in a criminal case, the civil case did not require consensus from the jury, but a majority of at least six of the nine jurors. The verdict was 8-1.

Strimling said he felt relieved.

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“I feel like I’ve been carrying a lot of stress about this, both for myself because I’d be losing my apartment, but also for all the other tenants in the building,” he said.

Strimling also emphasized the implications of this case for tenants in Maine.

“Hopefully it tells tenants that they can be a little less scared of joining a union, and that actually being a part of a union can help protect you. Landlords have a lot of power and the law still favors landlords, so it’s a very important precedent for tenants in Maine history,” he said.

Rice can serve Strimling with another eviction notice in 90 days or he can appeal the Superior Court decision to the Maine Supreme Judicial Court, which hears appeals as the Law Court.

“My plan is to sleep well tonight in my bed for the first time in 37 months,” Strimling said. “It was 37 months ago Thursday that he tried to kick me out and tonight will be the first night I can sleep in my bed and not worry about losing my home.”

The trial lasted four days and was often marked by emotional testimony and conflict between the opposing attorneys.

This is the third court decision in this case, but the first that has been handed down by a jury rather than a judge.

## **ON THE STAND**

Strimling spent Thursday morning on the stand, during which time he emphasized his good record as a tenant.

“I never had any warnings, any lease violations, I paid my rent every month right on time, so I was a little bit taken aback to all of a sudden have someone say I’d be evicted,” he said.

He told the jury that he was asked to move out after opening a window on a warm spring day. He was sent a written violation for the infraction and said he wanted to meet with Rice to explain why his windows had been open. His repeated requests for a meeting went unanswered, he said, until a letter from the Trelawny Tenants Union was sent to Rice laying out unrelated concerns the group had about lease renewals. At that point, Rice agreed to a meeting with Strimling and requested it be held in his attorney’s office.

Strimling said when he arrived at the meeting he saw a printed copy of the letter sent by the union on the table. At that point, he said, he worried the meeting was about something bigger than the open window violation.



Former Portland Mayor Ethan Strimling listens to his attorney Scott Dolan after his eviction trial on Thursday. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

“I was like, ‘OK I guess we’re talking about the letter that we sent and maybe this will be productive,’” Strimling said.

Ultimately, Strimling said that Rice told him during the meeting that he planned to evict 10 families in order to hike rents closer to market rate. Strimling said that after explaining this, Rice handed him a notice of non-renewal.

“Do you believe you’re being retaliated against?” his lawyer asked him.

“I do,” Strimling said. “The fact that we’re still here three years later, I pay my rent every month and that I’ve never violated anything. I feel that more strongly than when we started.”

In his cross-examination, Chamberlain called Strimling a “polarizing figure” and questioned how much time he really spends in the Trelawny Building, insinuating that he spends time with his partner at her home in Cape Elizabeth. Strimling insisted the Trelawny Building is his primary residence.

## **CREDIBILITY**

Closing arguments unfolded with the same drama that characterized the extended trial. Both lawyers questioned the credibility of the other’s client.

“What we have here is an attention-hungry former mayor who wanted to stay in the limelight ... supported by the Democratic Socialists,” Chamberlain said of Strimling.

For his part, Dolan accused Rice of acting frail and confused on the stand to garner sympathy.

“He ... pretended he couldn’t hear me. He pretended to get emotional when he was questioned by attorney Chamberlain,” Dolan said.

At one point, Chamberlain compared Strimling’s secret recording of his 2021 meeting with Rice to the Watergate tapes.

Dolan drew attention to Rice’s powerful position as a landlord in the city.

“He brings in millions and he does it by being exacting,” he said of Rice. “He figured by bringing down the group’s highest-profile figure, the other tenants would back down.”

But Chamberlain argued that Rice’s motivations were personal.

“He nickels and dimes him, he’s negotiated the rent down three times ... who wants to do business with that?” he said.

“The business of America is doing business,” Chamberlain finished. “Let Geoffrey Rice do business with who he wants to. Preserve the American dream and protect the American way. Thank you.”

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