

Tenants' Unions

Building Dual Power in the Neighborhood

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Tenants' unions do not only help stop evictions, but they also carry within them the seeds of an organized counter-power to the rule of the landlords.

So we see that the crisis of modern society is not without issue. It contains the seeds of something new, which is emerging even now. But the new will not come about automatically. Its emergence will be assisted by the actions of people in society, by their permanent resistance and struggle and by their often unconscious activity. But the new will not complete itself, will not be able to establish itself as a new social system, as a new pattern of social life, unless at some stage it becomes a conscious activity, a conscious action of the mass of the people. For us, to initiate this conscious action and to help it develop, whenever it may manifest itself, is the real new meaning to be given to the words 'revolutionary politics'.

— Cornelius Castoriadis

We have gathered with a few tenants on a Sunday afternoon in south Chicago to assess our anti-eviction campaign. We remind ourselves of one of our most important achievements over the past 13 months: for the second year in a row, we have halted over three dozen evictions in the South Shore neighborhood, the city's "eviction capital," cutting the pattern of forty evictions per year down to almost zero.

We achieved this with no prior experience as tenant organizers.

The toasty apartment sheltering us from the winter cold complements the warmth of being more closely connected to our neighbors. It feels good that for the moment we are not in emergency mode, dealing with active evictions. The "next steps" conversation is peppered with easy tasks, updates of our personal lives, other tenant struggles in the city, new resources, jokes and laughter.

Our trust in one another, the love for our neighbors and our neighborhood is growing in this apartment. There is a neighborhood decoration event taking place in a few weeks, and we put it in our calendars, in addition to some important plans we are about to implement for taking the campaign to the next level before we begin to try to bring about more rent reductions. The future is uncertain and precarious, but we are moving forward with commitment.

The Struggle in the City

For centuries, workers have organized themselves in order to collectively resist the oppressive and exploitative forces of capital. From the early 1900s to the current day, the most common form of worker organizing has been the labor union. With the rise of urbanization, over half of the global population currently living in cities, and a growing understanding that the sites of capitalist production are not exclusive to the factory floor, a new type of anti-capitalist organizing is gaining ground: the tenant union.

The city itself has become a living site of capitalist production, with developers and investors vying for power through municipal arrangements, development codes, urban planning initiatives and policies. These real estate capitalists have a vested interest in pushing up the value of land

and housing so that they profit from their commodification, and the general expansion of the market. Municipal governments also have a stake in this, attracting higher-income households to the area, bringing in a stream of revenue for cities often mismanaged by a political class that puts the interest of corporate capitalists over that of residents.

The externalities of this process of capital accumulation via real estate include the displacement of working-class communities and the gentrification of neighborhoods, which tends to disproportionately impact people of color. From the point of view of capital, land and labor are mere commodities, and therefore disposable when not profitable to the capitalist class. In order to fight against this predatory system, we need to confront the corrupt nature of this exploitation through collective direct action while resisting this cyclical process of extraction.

Unions are ways of resisting, and in their optimal configuration, are a fighting force which occupy revolutionary and reformist political spaces. As such, we are organizing towards temporary and semi-permanent improvements to the exploitative and unjust hierarchical relationship between bosses and workers, landlords and tenants.

Unions can be crystallized expressions of our drive to connect and belong, to produce with and for one another, to mutually confirm our positive humanity, to love one another through care and shared experience, to declare common beliefs and spread them. They can be instruments to facilitate the natural desire for self-management and to build a society where our workplaces and communities are managed in a direct democratic fashion.

Tenants' unions are manifestations of class struggle. As such, they are configured in opposition to landlords, management companies, real estate developers and the state. Tenant unions acting in solidarity promote and nurture healthy relationships and communities.

The oppressive forces of the state and the capitalist class hold us hostage through continuous rent extraction, tenuous, unequal relationships, and laws designed to work in the owners' interests, not ours. These intersections of hierarchical power and the absence of mutually empowering relationships among tenants all work to commodify land and housing, obstructing our communal self-management.

Forming the Dual Power Tenants' Union

The origins of our campaign to stop dozens of evictions in Chicago's South Shore neighborhood can be traced back to a series of meetings back in 2017, where we formulated the idea of spearheading a tenants' union in the city's south to complement the pioneering work of the Autonomous Tenants Union (ATU) in the north. After these initial meetings, it took another year before we were able to actually start organizing the union.

We discussed that we wanted our union to be anarchist, and to fight the escalating eviction and gentrification crisis. We agreed that we wanted to build power and neighborhood-based relationships, reaching out to people we wouldn't meet any other way. We also cautiously envisioned the tenants' unions as a proto-commune, with popular assemblies all embedded in a vision of a cooperative economy.

In this vision, tenants' unions would coordinate and confederate with a new constellation of horizontally organized collectives. As such, the tenants' union would pursue a dual power strategy, in which individual unions are not restricted to merely fighting landlords and management, but are also an instrument for the oppressed to take on self-management of the local economy,

and to reclaim ownership over our life, work and communities. We knew that it was going to be difficult, “molecular” work that could take years to yield meaningful results.

After securing the resources we needed for a tenant organizer training, we established ourselves as Tenants United of Hyde Park and Woodlawn (“TU,” for short) at a local diner in October 2018. We held a small training session led by an ATU organizer, an attorney and a tenant organizer from the Chicago Metropolitan Tenants Organization. We could have definitely used the content that is now available in the monthly online trainings of the national Autonomous Tenant Union Network (ATUN). We had multiple activities in motion shortly afterward, including emergency tenant assistance, a public launch, flyering and sowing the seeds of shared unity between multiple buildings.

At a November meeting, a South Shore compañero stood out when he volunteered to help on a task. It was shortly afterwards that we learned that the same individual was facing eviction and wanted to fight it. Solidarity was unquestionable. We started the campaign shortly afterwards. We started by discussing first steps with ATU, organized legal support, flyeried the buildings and knocked on doors, preparing ourselves for the unfolding of a larger movement for tenant justice.

The Dual Power Toolbox

Tenant unions that pursue a dual power strategy provide immediate relief to struggling working-class families and communities while elevating the legitimacy of new grassroots systems of self-management. They fulfill their purpose through a variety of tactics, relationship-building and the creation of new, grassroots institutions. These work to weaken the commodification of housing, public space and the urban commons.

Dual power tenant unions engage in many of the tactics that regular tenants’ unions use, as such unions in general — even the not explicitly anarchist ones — tend to engage in various types of constructive actions that are conducive to building dual power. That said, the dual power toolbox has more refined tools for reaching revolutionary objectives.

The dual power toolbox includes important elements, such as:

- Organizing with tenants to foster their initiative and self-confidence, building up tendencies toward equality and independence from authority;
- Incubating autonomous associations of tenants;
- Setting up direct action campaigns that strive to be completely independent of the state’s litigious system;
- Developing community councils and assemblies to democratically decide our own future;
- Providing mutual aid for those facing eviction or untenable housing.

More practically, there are different courses of action available to tenants and local residents to undermine the authority of their landlords while increasing their autonomy. Some of the tools most readily available are sabotage, a libertarian-municipalist electoral strategy and community land trusts.

Sabotage can include actions such as switching apartment numbers to foil evictions, paralyzing management with problems, conspiring with workers in management to “lose” documents, “cheating” the landlord back for stolen deposits, and more. Sabotage is an act of reclaiming power and authority by taking matters into one’s own hands, while at the same time reducing the harm inflicted upon our communities by landlords as agents of capital.

Libertarian municipalism is a form of revolutionary organizing developed by Murray Bookchin, which, in the words of his daughter Debbie Bookchin, “is about much more than bringing a progressive agenda to city hall, important as that may be.” As she puts it:

Municipalism ... returns politics to its original definition, as a moral calling based on rationality, community, creativity, free association and freedom. It is a richly articulated vision of a decentralized, assembly-based democracy in which people act together to chart a rational future.

As Murray Bookchin elaborated elsewhere:

After having democratized themselves, municipalities would confederate into a dual power to oppose the nation-state and ultimately dispense with it and with the economic forces that underpin statism as such. Libertarian municipalism is thus both a historical goal and a concordant means to achieve the revolutionary “Commune of communes.”

As institutions of local power and autonomy, tenant unions pursuing a dual power strategy can serve as embryonic forms of directly democratic neighborhood councils or assemblies, which in turn elect delegates to run for local office and organize the grassroots campaigns that will see them elected.

Lastly, a potentially powerful institution to ward off gentrification and promote non-commodified housing is the community land trust, described by the Symbiosis Federation as a “non-profit legal entity entrusted with property management in the community’s interest — ensuring affordable housing, preserving environmental assets, and driving cooperative neighborhood development.”

Tenants can use community land trusts to make collective demands for proper housing and pool resources to purchase buildings for collective housing initiatives. By running them as housing cooperatives, these procured buildings can be used to ensure long-term housing affordability and can even serve as communal spaces for neighborhood assemblies, hubs for mutual aid initiatives and outward-facing radical educational forums.

The Challenges Ahead

Many of us who started the union had experience in other forms of organizing and had no illusions about how difficult building the union would be. The biggest fear for many of us was that people might get evicted as a result of our mistakes. We have since come to realize that the real harm comes from not getting involved. Our experience has taught us that in cases where tenants fight back, they are significantly more likely to get a better outcome, and crucially, to help avoid future evictions.

As tenant organizers, we face challenges in our time management, health, self-care and the variety of responsibilities related to political organizing. In order to build and maintain relationships with our peers and neighbors, we often need more time than many of us can realistically spare. It is difficult to know if and how labor should be diverted from other struggles.

We have not figured out the exact formula for how to make new community activists engage in tenant organizing without simply shifting people from other types of organizing work. Sometimes tenants are so far behind on rent that there is simply no legal or organizational strategy we can think of that would avoid their eviction — except for fundraising their overdue rent, which is often very difficult to do in practice.

The power of the landlords and the system backing them is still much stronger and much more developed than the resistance against it. In the short term, direct action remains our most valuable asset in circumventing the hierarchical power of the landlord without relying on the current system of bureaucratic management, cops or judges. With the legal system so clearly tilted toward landlord interests, going to eviction court results in defeat much more often than in victory.

A lot of work therefore remains to be done if we are to construct dual power tenants' unions that truly have the potential to become autonomous popular associations as part of a broader libertarian socialist movement. Yet tenants' unions may continue to grow in the coming years as many more people embrace this model in an effort to resist rampant gentrification and the commodification of housing and of all life in general.

The growth of tenants' unions is necessary both for immediate reprieve and to help lay the foundations for an organized counter-power to the rule of the landlords. The example of Tenants' United in Chicago demonstrates how successful such efforts can be, even if the organizers involved had little experience to begin with.

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