

Tactics of the Autonomous Tenants Union

VOL. 1

Autonomous Tenants Union

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By necessity, ATU’s work often centers around talking to tenants about their “rights” as given to them by the legal system. In our organizing, these rights are referred to as **the shield**. A shield can protect you, but it cannot win a fight for you. Your rights often can only protect you if you have access to a lawyer, and can fail you on a judge’s whim. You need something more—you need **the sword**. We offer this zine in hopes that the tools within will help folks to go on the offensive and fight back against their landlords. Because even when the law and the courts ultimately work to serve the landlord class, the power of tenants united will prevail.

When we fight, we win.

We cannot stress enough that this zine is incomplete. Only you can finish the story. This is because no tactic is effective without a strategy, and a strategy is not something we can offer. You must determine it on your own, based on your own situation, your own local conditions, and your own set of demands. Some tactics within reference laws, political offices, and media specific to Chicago, and it may take research and creativity to adapt them to your own local landscape. The tactics described within are stepping stones, and it is up to you to construct your path to victory.

Strategy: Set of choices determined to achieve an objective

Tactic: Steps taken, based on the choices made, to achieve an outcome

call-in campaign

When are they useful?

- When you need to get fast results/when you need to flex some muscle.
- Objective: demonstrate how much community support you have.
- Takes 1–2 people to plan; aim to turn out 10–25.

How to organize?

Offline:

- Come up with a short, concise script stating demands. 2–4 sentences, tops. Should include something along the lines of “I demand that you negotiate with these tenants, the community is behind them.” Use respectful but firm language, and instruct your friends to do the same. Landlords love the opportunity to play victim if callers become aggressive or offensive.
- Create a flyer with the script, the phone number of the landlord, and the time period during which one should call. Pass them out to all your friends, other tenants in the building, family members, coworkers, etc.
- If you have the time, you could arrange a call party, where everyone gets together and makes an event out of it (this will also allow you to brainstorm the next steps after the call-in ends).

Online:

- Create a script (as detailed on previous page).
- Create a graphic (Google Slides is good for this) that contains the script, the day and me, and the phone number(s) to call.
- Create a Facebook event and invite all your friends (don't include the landlord's contact info until the day-of, and remove it after the call-in ends).
- Email blast your friends and family.
- If you use Twitter, post the graphic on the day of the call-in and encourage your friends to share. (Tag ATU in your post and we'll signal-boost it!)

Quick Tips

- When scheduling your call-in, remember:
- The best times to call are morning and midday. If you are calling an office, tying up the phone line will render them unable to do business — an added bonus!
- Schedule a 2–3 hour window — focused enough to be potent, long enough to be a pain in the ass.
- If this is a small landlord that works a day job, find out where their day job is and call there too.
- If the landlord refuses to answer or engage, feel free to send texts as well.
- Encourage folks to update the event page on Facebook with the results of their call — it helps to keep up momentum and encourages others to participate.

delegation

A group of people who gather for the purpose of delivering a message (spoken or unspoken) to the landlord's home or office.

When are they useful?

- At the beginning of a campaign, if you need to deliver a letter of demands.
- Takes 1–3 people to plan; aim to turn out 7–12.

How to organize?

Prep:

- When choosing roles, remember that affected tenants should be the ones presenting the letter. If there are several tenants, 1 or 2 should represent the group.
- Role play possible scenarios with the landlord.
 - They could be angry and start arguing.

- They could kick you off the property.
- They could try to divide the group by offering people different deals, or say they will only speak to tenants individually.
- They may just refuse to answer.
- These are all scenarios ATU has faced in our own campaigns. It is vital that you are prepared because if you remain unified and confident, it will make a big impact. On the flip side, it will be disastrous for morale and for your bargaining position if members start throwing their *compassion* under the bus.

At the door:

- Some mes it makes sense to have a less-rowdy delegation. If the goal is to talk, and the landlord wants to talk—talk!
- But if the landlord has been ignoring you, make your presence felt.
 - It is *technically* illegal to picket a private residence, but you can get away with marching the block. Bring your signs and banners and let everyone know what shady business their neighbor has been up to.
 - It is *technically* illegal to use amplification devices, so make sure to have your energy level up for chants and to bring some analog noisemakers (metal pots, shakers, etc.)
 - You can bring your flyers (see next section) during your delegation so that every neighbor and passerby will know exactly why you're there.

flyering

When is it useful?

- We have used this tactic for both small landlords as well as the owners of large development companies. No one likes being called out in front of their neighbors! If you don't have a lot of capacity to plan an en re ac on, you can make a flyer and 150 copies and cover the block with them in about ten minutes with a few friends.
- Can also be done in combination with canvassing, which will allow you to explain the situation to the neighbors. You could even include an ask for them to, for instance, sign a petition.
- If you want to add some extra punch, you can combine flyering with your delegation to the landlord's home or office. This way, when you start chanting and making noise, you have something to give to folks that are passing by wondering what the fuss is about.
- Takes 1–2 people to plan; aim to turn out 5–7.

How to organize?

Messaging:

- Keep all of the information factual. It isn't slander if it's true!
- Include the landlord's name and photo, as well as the address of the building the tenants are defending. Label it "COMMUNITY NOTICE" to grab attention, and ask at the end for the reader to reach out to their neighbor about the issue you've highlighted.

Leave a flyer on every building's door...
 ...and on every windshield
 of every car...
 ...but don't put them in mailboxes. It's illegal!

press conference

When is it useful?

- It's always good to have a short press conference at the beginning of any event you invite the press to, like an action or a court date.

How to organize?

Planning:

- Three to five speakers is ideal, with each person addressing a major issue/message in your campaign. No one should speak for more than five minutes.
- Try to turn out as many supporters as possible. You want the media to see that the campaign has community support, and it looks great in photos and video to have them standing behind the speakers with banners and signs.

Prep:

- The main prep task for a press event is writing the press release. Keep it short and include planning info the press needs—things like dates, times, and locations of actions—in a large, bold font.
- For your press conference, speakers should have their speech memorized or read it in a way that keeps their faces looking at the cameras. Practice using your talking points to answer questions reporters might ask so you're comfortable in front of the microphone.

Messaging:

- Think of up to three main reasons explaining why you are acting. For instance, if your action is targeting a developer/property manager, your main messages could be about gentrification, illegal eviction, and organizing victories. Whenever you answer questions from the press, make sure one of those talking points is the basis of your answer.

Working with the media

- Sending an email to the press with basic information about your event is still the best way to get media to turn out. You can find a Chicago press list at <http://bit.ly/rachaelpr2018>.
- Make sure to send your press release or press conference email at least 48 hours before your event. If you want, you can follow up with a tweet about your event to reporters on Twitter.

postcards

When is it useful?

- In ATU's experience, this tends to work better with smaller landlords because they (usually) have not completely lost their conscience.

How to organize?

Prep & Execution:

- The image on the postcard should be compelling. In the past, we have taken pictures of bad building conditions and then sent the postcards to the landlord saying "[Tenant] has to look at this every day, we want you to experience a small sliver of what they have to experience."
- Works great as an ask to make of community supporters. Anyone who wants to support the tenants can sign a card and write a note echoing the tenants demands.
- Don't send them all at once! Staggered mailing will ensure the landlord gets several per day and has to wonder when it will stop.

Limitations:

- There is a cost component, as opposed to other actions, which can be a barrier for some.
- It requires a larger number of participants to be really effective.

banner drop

When is it useful?

- Very useful when doing some kind of demonstration/press conference so that witnesses understand your overall message.
- Also a powerful way to illustrate tenants' claim to a building.
- Takes 1-2 people to plan; 2-3 people to execute.

How to organize?

Prep & Execution:

- Workshop a clear and concise message and/or demand, and select an image that complements the text.
 - i.e., ALBANY PARK IS A NO DISPLACEMENT ZONE
- Determine how big you want the banner to be, keeping in mind: Size of available canvas, who is carrying it, how you will be hanging it, how heavy you want it to be, and if it could possibly be confiscated.
- Use software like Photoshop/Illustrator/Google Slides to workshop the visual design. Determine where elements will be positioned.
- After placing text, think of colors that compliment each other and be aware of the size of the letters. It is easy to look at a computer screen and lose a sense of what it will look like once you draw it on your canvas.
- Use a projector to trace your digital design onto the canvas, and invite friends to help paint.
- Consider the materials you will need for the drop itself: grommets and rope for the top, and something to weigh down the bottom (think bean bags, or a sack across the bottom) to keep it from flapping in the wind.

alderpeople

When is it useful?

- The most useful thing an alderperson can do for your campaign is to expedite a city inspector. When campaigning around a building with bad conditions, have the tenants call 311 to report the issues and be sure to record the case number. Then you can contact the alderperson and ask them to fast-track the case so that a building inspector gets out ASAP.

How to organize?

- If you have a good relationship with the alderperson, you could ask them to contact the developer/landlord on the tenants' behalf. Often it's best if the tenant(s) contact them directly as constituent(s), rather than the organizers.
- If they avoid or refuse a meeting, show up to their open office night. Depending on how confrontational you think you need to be, you can go with just the tenants and an organizer or two; or, treat it more like a delegation action and show up with a big group.
- Regardless, aim high—ask them to contact the landlord/developer and apply pressure to stop the eviction/fix the building/whatever the tenant is trying to get done. You can request that the alderperson facilitate a meeting between the tenant and landlord, if that's what the tenant wants. If the alderperson claims they are unable to do any of this, ask them to publicly denounce the target. If they won't do that, then you can target the alderperson for future actions in the same way you'd target the landlord. If they won't come to your side, treat them as a target.

Pressuring elected officials

Research:

- Check for their donors at illinoissunshine.org. Be sure to look for developer corpora on names and names of the individuals who run those companies. Also check for those individuals' spouses & family members.
- Sometimes the easiest way to pressure an alderperson is through other organizations they are allied with, such as chambers of commerce, neighborhood associations, development non-profits, etc. Find a reason that these groups would also be upset with a developer/landlord you are fighting (i.e. maybe they make a big mess during construction, which bothers the neighborhood association) and pressure them to speak with the alderperson.

Be persistent!:

- There is a trend in Chicago of alderpeople trying to appear "progressive," especially on housing issues, while still being as deep in the pocket of developers as any openly pro-corporate politician. Take advantage of this by attending public events like zoning meetings & public safety forums and calling them out publicly in front of voters regarding their connections to developers and landlords.
- Always remember that the main goal of almost any alderperson is to stay in office another term. Even when they are helping you, they will try to co-opt the tenants' struggle for their own benefit if given the chance. Be sure to remain in control of the campaign and the public narrative – the alderpeople should be there to serve the tenants, not the other way around.

Autonomous Tenants Union

Autonomous Tenants Union is an all-volunteer collective committed to organizing for housing justice from below and to the left. As an independent collective based in Chicago, we strategize together to defend and enforce our right to dignified housing. We believe housing is a human right, not a commodity! We fight for an end to all evictions, and for community control of housing through the building of popular power. If you would like to get involved or have any questions or feedback, feel free to reach out to us.

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