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AUTONOMOUS
TENANTS UNION
NETWORK

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THE NATIONAL NEWSLETTER
FOR THE TENANT MOVEMENT

ABOUT ATUN



The Autonomous Tenants Union Network (ATUN-RSIA) is a collaborative of tenant unions in North America who have chosen to remain independent of non-profits, big foundations, and government funding in order to build power that is responsive to and led by tenants. We are committed to base building, especially among the most oppressed and exploited tenants, and to resisting the power of landlords and real estate capital to destroy our homes and our communities. If you have any questions or would like to get in touch, you can contact us at ATUNtenants@gmail.com

OUR NEWSLETTER

The ATUN newsletter was started after the ATUN convention in LA, June of 2022. The newsletter is a space for ATUN member organizations to share updates on our organizing, our victories and losses, and keep the network informed of our collective struggles for tenant power. The newsletter is a space for theorizing that can inform action and action that can guide theorizing, and a space where member organizations can develop a unified and strong politics. It's a space to lift up the voice of the tenant and working class in interviews and articles. It's a space for veterans of struggle to share their insight, and for the curious and those just starting a union to find encouragement and guidance. **If you would like to get involved with or have articles and tenant union updates to submit for our next issue, please e-mail: atunnewsletter@gmail.com**

BRITISH COLUMBIA	VANCOUVER	*VANCOUVER TENANTS UNION	
	VICTORIA	VICTORIA TENANT ACTION GROUP	
ARIZONA	PHEONIX	*VALLEY TENANTS UNION, FORMERLY WORRIED ABOUT RENT?	
	TUCSON	TUCSON TENANTS UNION	
CALIFORNIA	BAY AREA	*TENANT AND NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS (TANC) OAKLAND TENANTS UNION	
	GLENDALE	*GLENDALE TENANTS UNION	
	LOS ANGELES	*LOS ANGELES TENANTS UNION	
	PASADENA	*PASADENA TENANTS UNION	
	SACRAMENTO	*SACRAMENTO TENANTS UNION	
	SANTA BARBARA	*SANTA BARBARA TENANTS UNION	
CONNECTICUT		CONNECTICUT TENANTS UNION	
DC		*STOMP OUT SLUMLORDS	
ILLINOIS	CHICAGO	AUTONOMOUS TENANTS UNION (ALBANY PARK) NORTHSIDE TENANT NETWORK *TENANTS UNITED OF HYDE PARK, SOUTH SHORE, AND WOODLAWN	
		LEXINGTON	*LEXINGTON TENANTS UNION
		LOUISVILLE	LOUISVILLE TENANTS UNION
MASSACHUSETTS	BOSTON	*GREATER BOSTON TENANTS UNION	
	WORCESTER	*WORCESTER TENANTS UNION	
NEBRASKA	OMAHA	*OMAHA TENANTS UNITED	
NEW YORK	BROOKLYN	*CROWN HEIGHTS TENANT UNION *BROOKLYN EVICTION DEFENSE SUNSET PARK TENANTS UNION	
		QUEENS	RIDGEWOOD TENANTS UNION
		OKLAHOMA	*OKLAHOMA TENANTS UNION
OREGON	PORTLAND	*PORTLAND TENANTS UNITED DON'T EVICT PDX	
PENNSYLVANIA	PHILADELPHIA	*PHILADELPHIA TENANTS UNION	
RHODE ISLAND		TENANT NETWORK RI	
SOUTH DAKOTA	RAPID CITY	*WEST RIVER TENANTS UNITED	
TEXAS	HOUSTON	*HOUSTON TENANTS UNION	
	SAN ANTONIO	TENANTS UNION SAN ANTONIO	
VIRGINIA	RICHMOND	*RICHMOND TENANTS UNION	
WASHINGTON	SEATTLE/PUGET SOUND	*PUGET SOUND TENANTS UNION	
WEST VIRGINIA	HUNTINGTON	HUNTINGTON TENANTS' UNION	
WISCONSIN	MADISON	MADISON TENANT POWER	
	MILWAUKEE	*MILWAUKEE AUTONOMOUS TENANTS UNION	

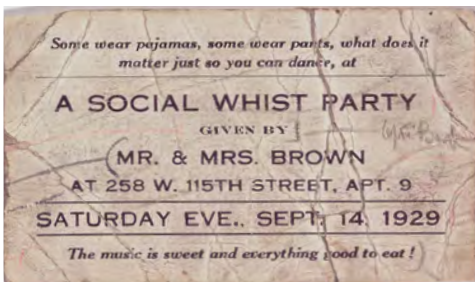
*DENOTES MEMBER OF ATUN

THE TENANT BLUES IN HARLEM

BY ALEX ZAMBITO, BROOKLYN EVICTION DEFENSE TENANT UNION

“SOME WEAR PAJAMAS, SOME WEAR PANTS, WHAT DOES IT MATTER JUST SO YOU CAN DANCE, AT A SOCIAL WHIST PARTY, GIVEN BY: MR. & MRS. BROWN. AT 258 W. 115TH STREET, APT. 9, SATURDAY EVE... THE MUSIC IS SWEET AND EVERYTHING GOOD TO EAT.”

These were the words plastered on an invitation for a Harlem “rent party” on September 14, 1929.¹ One of the most iconic symbols of the Harlem Renaissance and instrumental in the popularization of Blues music, rent parties are often romanticized and vilified as sites of debauchery and merrymaking associated with the “Roaring Twenties”. However, the rent party arose as an institution of necessity for working class and poor Harlemites to raise funds to pay their extortionate rents. These were typically held by tenants who would charge an admission fee and sell Southern-style food. But, most importantly, they usually included a live Blues performance. While many black people fled an agrarian south characterized by “black codes” and debt peonage, they did not find a particularly more hospitable environment in northern cities—exchanging tenant farming for apartment tenancy. The rent party testifies to a history of Blues music that cannot be told apart from a history of tenancy.



In his book *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, Leroi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka) explains how the Blues tradition is rooted in traditional African musical styles maintained throughout the era of formal slavery through spirituals and work songs.² Following the defeat of Reconstruction by Southern reaction and the removal of federal troops from the south in 1877, even many of the limited gains brought by the abolition of slavery and programs such as the Freedmen’s Bureau were rolled back. Of course, the formerly enslaved were not transferred any of the land they had previously worked but were exploited under similar conditions as either hired agricultural laborers or tenant farmers. Meanwhile, many antebellum landowners maintained their estates, portions of which they rented to tenants. These rents were often paid in cash, but in the most exploitative cases, tenant farmers known as sharecroppers gave a portion—frequently as high as ½ of their final crop—to the landlord. Given many tenants were impoverished, they normally lacked the tools necessary for farming their parcel of land, leading many landlords—out of the kindness of their own heart—to provide their laborers supplies on credit at exorbitant rates of interest. Like the infamous “Company Stores” of mining towns, the rural South had “Planter Stores”—usually the only store on or near a plantation—which held tenants in debt, effectively chaining them to the land they farmed. This system of debt peonage was accompanied by a

“BOURGEOIS BLUES” 
HUDDIE “LEADBELLY” LEDBETTER

TELL ALL THE COLORED FOLKS TO
LISTEN TO ME

DON’T TRY TO FIND NO HOME IN
WASHINGTON DC

‘CAUSE IT’S A BOURGEOIS TOWN
YEE, IT’S A BOURGEOIS TOWN

I GOT THE BOURGEOIS BLUES AND
I’M GONNA SPREAD THE NEWS ALL
AROUND

ME AND MARTHA, WE WERE
STANDING UPSTAIRS

I HEARD A WHITE MAN SAYIN’ “I
DON’T WANT NO NEGROES UP
THERE”

LORD, HE’S A BOURGEOIS MAN
YEE, IT’S A BOURGEOIS TOWN

I GOT THE BOURGEOIS BLUES

GONNA SPREAD THE NEWS ALL
AROUND⁴

carceral system designed to discipline recalcitrant farmhands, leading to the proliferation of convict leasing and, later, chain gangs throughout the South.³ Fleeing this rural tenancy, Black people in the South moved to urban areas, particularly cities in the North and West. However, they arrived in these new places to a familiar situation. This was reflected in Blues songs of the time like Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter’s song *Bourgeois Blues*.

One of the most popular destinations for Black people from the South was New York City, Harlem in particular. The earliest of the buildings currently standing is Alexander Hamilton’s Grange House built in 1801. At this time, Harlem was a rural area too far away from New York City to warrant significant housing investment. But this all changed in the 1880s when rail lines were extended to Harlem significantly cutting down travel time. As immigrants poured into Manhattan’s Lower East Side, established residents sought to escape the increasingly cramped conditions with many mov-



Black sharecroppers in Georgia, 1907

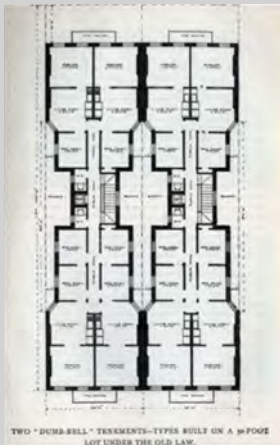
ing to the newly constructed “dumb-bell tenements”, which were long narrow buildings with air wells on each side popular among landowners. With plans to extend subway lines to Harlem, speculation in the area exploded. This launched a housing boom largely consisting of tenements but also including townhouses and luxury apartment buildings for middle- and upper-class families. However, by the early 20th century, building owners were struggling to fill rooms and the glutted market led to a collapse in prices, which

encouraged further working-class migration into Harlem—importantly including the first Black migrants from the South.⁵

White residents initially attempted to block Black entrance into Harlem, but, eventually, most fled Harlem to new residential areas in the outer boroughs made accessible by the extension of mass transportation. As a report of the Committee on Negro Housing explains, while many Black residents similarly sought to move to new neighborhoods, “...a prejudiced opposition from his prospective white neighbors confronts the Negro, which does not meet the immigrant who has shuffled off the coil of his Continental condition. Intelligence and culture do not often discount color of skin. Professions of democratic justice in the North, and deeds of individual kindness in the South, have not yet secured to Negroes the unmolested residence in blocks with white fellow-citizens.”⁶ While segregation in

Northern cities was often considered informal, it was codified and enforced in ways similar to the more notorious system of Jim Crow in the South. As teacher and writer Brian Jones points out, “Blacks who migrated to the North encountered a web of racial restrictions on their housing and school options—more often than not backed up by government agencies and the force of law.”⁷ With a constant stream of new Black migrants entering the city and segregationist housing policies funneling them into Harlem, the neighborhood’s population density climbed rapidly to 336 people per acre compared to 225 in the rest of Manhattan.⁸ Thus the demand for rooms skyrocketed, creating a perfect hunting ground for unscrupulous landlords to prey on desperate tenants.

POPULATION DENSITY CLIMBED RAPIDLY TO 336 PEOPLE PER ACRE COMPARED TO 225 IN THE REST OF MANHATTAN



With the exodus of their white tenants and their replacement with Black people, Harlem landlords felt free to drastically increase rents. As the New York Times reported in 1924, “Beating the rent laws has been a popular game with certain types of landlords. The latest phase of the game as practiced in Harlem has been to change the tenancy of apartment and tenement houses from white to colored, charging the colored tenants from 50 to 100 per cent higher rentals than the white tenants were

paying...”⁹ Many landlords did indeed beat the rent laws as monthly rents in Harlem increased from \$22 in 1919 to \$41.77 in 1927.¹⁰ One study found the average annual rent for the entire city of New York was \$316 while it was \$480 for Black residents.¹¹ This “black tax” was devastating given Black people often had lower paying jobs than their white counterparts. While other families in the city paid around one-sixth of their income for rent, Black families paid up to one-third.¹² This provides a prime example of how, as many have seen with the recent spike in rent prices, landlords are able to dodge the supposedly strict rent laws in New York to gouge their vulnerable tenants.

On top of this, the exorbitant rents did not necessarily guarantee decent accommodations or a responsive landlord. Throughout the 1920s, realtors invested very little money in constructing new houses and the old buildings rapidly deteriorated due to landlord neglect. Instead, landlords simply subdivided old homes originally built for middle- and upper-class residents.¹³

This problem was only exacerbated by absentee landlords. Most of the white landlords who owned buildings in Harlem had moved out of the neighborhood and viewed it solely as a source of profit. Before a meeting of the Advisory Housing Conference, the resident manager of the Paul Laurence Dunbar Garden Apartments, Roscoe Conkling Bruce, was summarized by the New York Times as reporting, “Many apartment houses in Harlem are ‘insolently unclean,’... while requests for repairs are ‘either curtly ignored or delayed nonchalantly.’ Garbage, in many instances, is ‘dumped pell mell’ down dumbwaiters.”¹⁴ It is no surprise then that a New York Urban League survey found 48% of apartments in Harlem were considered “bad,” “poor,” or “needed cleaning.”¹⁵ Despite these clear violations, Black people in Harlem still had to find a way to pay their extortionate rent. One tactic which contributed to housing congestion was for renters to take in additional lodgers to help pay the rent. Obviously, this meant that Black residents tended to have a higher

THE RENT PARTY PLAYED A CRUCIAL ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW “URBAN” STYLE OF BLUES

percentage of multiple people sharing rooms compared to other groups and these unsanitary and cramped conditions had a deleterious effect on public health.¹⁶ The New York Times reported in 1926 that Health Commissioner Louis I. Harris, “declared that housing in the negro section of the city was an alarming menace to public health, saying that the infant mortality rate in a section of Harlem was 163, compared to 56 on the lower east side.”¹⁷

Another tactic for raising rent money, which would have a profound effect on American music, was the rent party. While Black people had brought traditional Blues music from the rural South, the rent party played a crucial role in the development of a new “urban” style of Blues. Many traditional Blues singers had already produced recordings known as “race records” and begun performing at theatres, however, rent party performers produced a unique underground style blending elements of the traditional Blues with their new experiences of city life. The Urban Blues replaced the traditional acoustic with electric guitars and adopted the drums, bass, and harmonica to replace big band ensembles. The transition to city life was also reflected in the themes and tone of the new style. As Leroi Jones explained, “The blues and blues-oriented jazz of the new city dwellers was harder, crueller, and perhaps even more stoical and hopeless than the earlier forms. It took its life from the rawness and poverty of the grim adventure of ‘big city livin’.’ It was a slicker, more sophisticated music, but the people, too, could fit these descriptions.”¹⁸ The move North also allowed Black musicians to draw



on various cultural influences. For instance, rent parties also popularized a new style of blues music known as boogie-woogie which adapted traditional European techniques of piano playing to the blues style.¹⁹

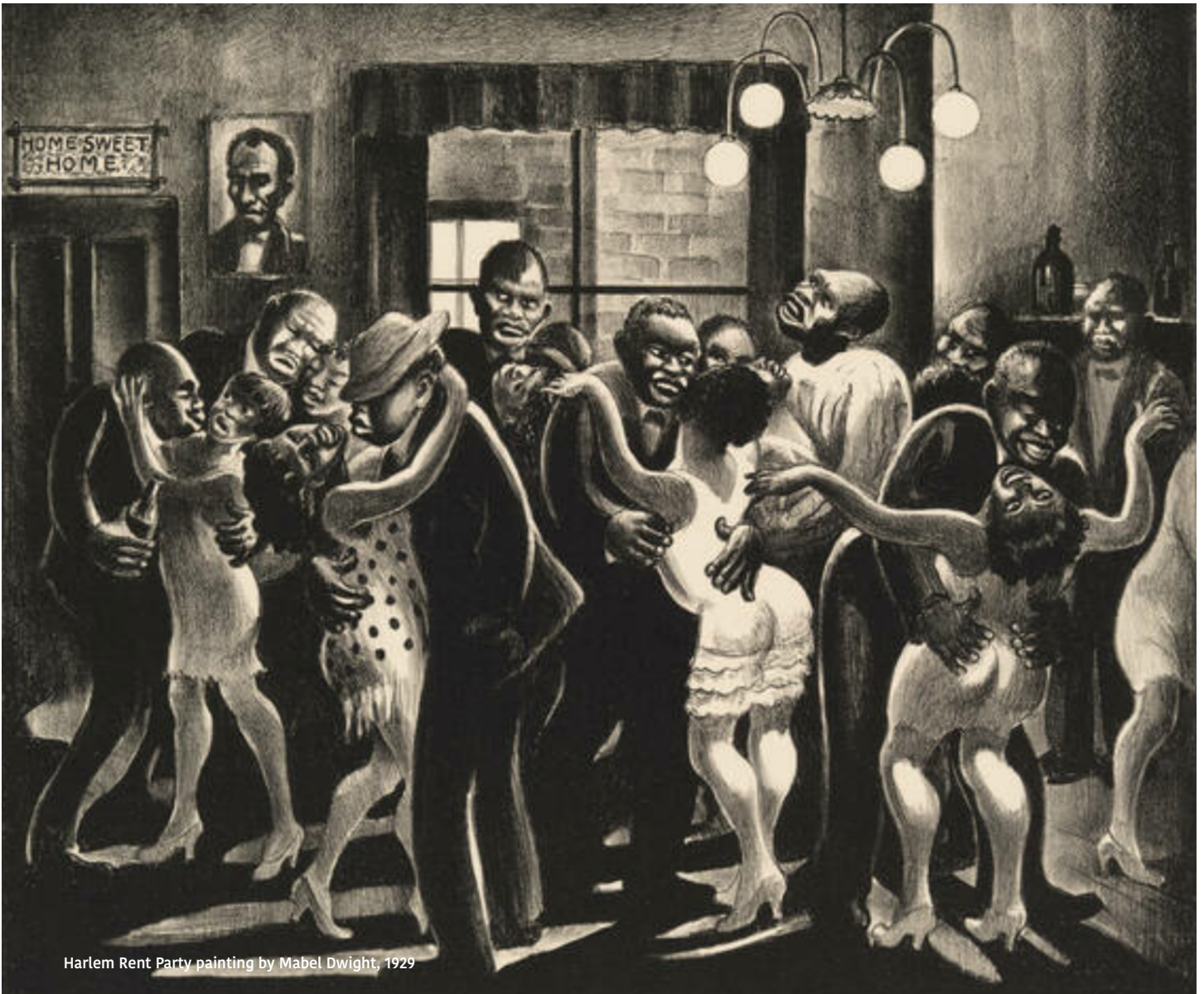
Word of rent parties soon reached white communities and produced varying reactions. Predictably, during the era of Prohibition, many responded by condemning the “immorality” and “debauchery” of rent parties. On the other hand, many white people were attracted by these “exotic” affairs of seemingly careless revelry. While less violently opposed, this fascination was not without its own racist under-

tones as many white “Jitterbugs” were drawn by a conception of “primitive” good times. In his narrative of rent parties, Frank Byrd wrote, “But the thing that makes the house-rent party (even now) so colorful and fascinating is the unequalled picture created by the dancers themselves. When the band gets hot, the dancers get hotter. They stir, throw or bounce themselves about with complete abandon; their wild, grotesque movements silhouetted in the semi-darkness like flashes from some ancient tribal ceremony.”²⁰ This white descent on Harlem to enjoy the nightlife also led to increased surveillance as white officials feared the “corrupting”

WHITE DESCENT ON HARLEM TO ENJOY THE NIGHTLIFE ALSO LED TO INCREASED SURVEILLANCE

influence on white youth.²¹ While for these white interlopers Harlem was an exotic haven for good times, the rent parties which attracted them were a sign of the deterioration and neglect of housing conditions in the neighborhood. As Gilbert Osofsky noted, “At the very time Harlem was transformed into the city’s worst slum, its image for most white Americans, and some Negroes as well, was just the reverse- a gay place inhabited by a ‘singing race’... Had these people arrived at noon and inspected a rat-infested tenement, their image of the Negro might have been changed; yet American racial consciousness refused to recognize any but the supposedly joyous side of Negro culture.”²²

As with many grassroots cultural innovations, the hand of capital quickly seized on to the “Urban Blues” and launched it into commercial success in mainstream American culture. After John Hammond organized two concerts at Carnegie Hall



Harlem Rent Party painting by Mabel Dwight, 1929

TENANCY SHAPES MUSIC

in 1938 and 1939 called “From Spirituals to Swing” which featured blues ensembles, the newly dubbed “Rhythm and Blues” was becoming more broadly accepted by white America.²³ Despite this commercial success, blues remained working class music and rent parties continued in cities from New York to Memphis for years to come.²⁴ As one former rent party attendee noted, “You could only hear the blues and real jazz in gut-bucket cabarets where the lower class went.”²⁵ Rent parties are just one example of the intimate connection between cultural movements and economic forces. In the case of Black Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries the systems of tenancy they were subject to significantly shaped the music they produced. While blues did eventually make its way to wealthier and whiter audiences, its origins were among the oppressed and stemmed from their struggle to survive.

NOTES

- [1] Allison Meier, “Langston Hughes’s Collection of Rent Party Cards from Harlem,” *Art, Hyperallergic*, April 4, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/369172/langston-hughes-collection-of-harlem-renaissance-rent-party-cards/>
- [2] Leroi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1963).
- [3] **Convict leasing was a system of forced labor which emerged following the Civil War. It frequently involved the arbitrary arrest of Black people on charges of vagrancy or petty theft and their “leasing out” to private companies for work in mines and on rail lines. In the early 20th century, this system was replaced by the “chain gang” which put convicts to work on public projects like road construction. For more on tenant farming, convict leasing, and the chain gang see: Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans From the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Press, 2008); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and How: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (London: Verso Books, 1996); Christopher Muller, “Freedom and Convict Leasing in the Post-bellum South,” *American Journal of Sociology* 124, no. 2 (September 2018): 367-405, <https://doi.org/10.1086/698481>; Jeannie M. Whyne, *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Federal Favor in Twentieth-Century Arkansas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).**
- [4] Lead Belly, “Bourgeois Blues,” track 2 on *Bourgeois Blues: Lead Belly Legacy*, Vol. 2, Smithsonian Folkways, 1997, Spotify streaming audio.
- [5] For more on the history of housing in Harlem see: Gilbert Osofsky, “A Decade of Urban Tragedy: How Harlem Became A Slum,” *New York History*, 46, no. 4 (October 1965): 330-355, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23162615?origin=JSTOR-pdf>; Thorin Tritter, “The Growth and Decline of Harlem’s Housing,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 22, no. 1 (January 1998): 67, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/200931552?accountid=7286&parentSessionId=JSXrxf-DY7Il7AV7x%2B7kRcryJFxfvZoCb1A76St-d%2FG44%3D>, Stephen Robertson, Shane White, Stephen Garton, and Graham White, “This Harlem Life: Black Families and Everyday Life in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 1 (fall 2010): 97-122, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40802110>; Patryk Mamczur, “Rent Parties, Old Settlers and Jitterbugs: The Everyday Life of African Americans After their Exodus to Northern Cities as Preserved in Oral Histories, 1917-1945,” *Prace Historyczne* 146, no. 3 (2019): 535-547, doi: 10.4467/20844069PH.19.030.10384.
- [6] The President’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership Called by President Hoover, Report of the Committee on Negro Housing, *Negro Housing: Physical Aspects, Social and Economic Factors, Home Ownership and Financing*, by Charles S. Johnson. Edited by John M. Cries and James Ford. (Washington, D.C., 1932): 198-199.
- [7] Brian Jones, “The Struggle for Black Education,” in *Education and Capitalism: Struggles for Learning and Liberation*, ed. Jeff Bale and Sarah Knopp (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012): 55.
- [8] The President’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership Called by President Hoover, *Negro Housing*, 111.
- [9] “Landlords Exploit Colored Tenants: But Harlem Rent-Payers Get Many Reductions Through the Courts,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1924, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/landlords-exploit-golored-tenants/docview/103345165/se-2?accountid=7286>.
- [10] The President’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership Called by President Hoover, *Negro Housing*, 14.
- [11] *Ibid*, 16.
- [12] *Ibid*, 54.
- [13] Gilbert Osofsky, *New York History*, 340.
- [14] “Sees Negro Housing Crisis: Apartment Manager Finds Many Flats in Crowded Harlem Unclean,” *New York Times*, January 13, 1928, <https://www.proquest-com.brooklyn.ezproxy.cuny.edu/historical-newspapers/sees-negro-housing-crisis/docview/104370623/se-2?accountid=7286>.
- [15] The President’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, *Negro Housing*, 133.
- [16] *Ibid*, 132-133.
- [17] “Dr. Hoffman Tells of Negro Health: Insurance Company Expert Says Mental Diseases Increase- Against Race Mingling: Dr. Harris Sees Menace: Declares Housing Conditions in Harlem are Alarming and Threaten Public Welfare,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1926, <https://www.proquest-com.brooklyn.ezproxy.cuny.edu/historical-newspapers/dr-hoffman-tells-negro-health/docview/103753092/se-2?accountid=7286>.
- [18] Leroi Jones, *Blues People*, 110.
- [19] *Ibid*, 114-115.
- [20] Frank Byrd, *Harlem Rent Parties*, New York City, 1939. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh001365/>.
- [21] Stephen Robertson, Shane White, Stephen Garton, and Graham White, “Disorderly Houses: Residences, Privacy, and the Surveillance of Sexuality in 1920s Harlem,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, no. 3 (September 2012): 463-464, DOI: 10.7560/JHS21303.
- [22] Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto. Negro New York, 1890-1930* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1996): 150-151.
- [23] Stephen Robertson, “Disorderly Houses,” 545.
- [24] Robert Gordon, *Memphis Rent Party: The Blues, Rock & Soul in Music’s Hometown* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).
- [25] “The term ‘gutbucket’ came from the chitterlings bucket. Chitterlings are the guts of a hog and the practice is used to be to take a bucket to the slaughterhouse and get a bucket of guts. Therefore anything real low down was called gutbucket.” Leroi Jones, *Blues People*, 110.

CALIFORNIA

SBTU x LATU

SANTA BARBARA + LOS ANGELES TENANTS UNIONS



INTERVIEW WITH LUIS, LATU
BY MAX, SBTU

Max: My understanding is you guys are the most confrontational chapter in LA. What gives you that reputation?

Luis: We were the first to start going to the root of our problems which in the tenant struggle is the landlords. While many were focused on passing laws and extensions and protections. We were dealing with a wave of evictions. So much so we had to create a temporary eviction defense group. Ultimately that project was not sustainable and we were in the defense. We came to the conclusion that to stop these evictions being filed and for them to be lifted we would have to go to landlord homes and confront them, shame them and have them fear the power of the tenants organizing under the union. We do not hesitate to go to a landlord's home to protest and present our demands and ultimatums. Repairs, unpaid labor, bad management, re-evictions and evictions of every kind and harassment are some of the issues we fight for the most.



Max: Do you guys even consult with lawyers and write letters and stuff or do you just go straight to protesting landlords at their homes most of the time?

Luis: It varies right. Sometimes go to the landlord's home and leaving a letter or demand is sufficient and they start making repairs etc that is in part to do with the reputation of the union and many times these landlords don't want to be shamed in their rich neighborhood. Very seldom do we get the services of lawyers. For example most of us now know to file an answer to an eviction notice and stuff of that legal nature. What we definitely won't do as a local is try to push for a lawsuit against the landlord in our experience money and lawyers tend to pacify the energy and anger of the tenants. We're not in the business of getting folks money but in the one of keeping people in their homes. When we start organizing and helping new tenants we lay out to them how we go about things and what we do and won't do. Folks either are down or look elsewhere if they want to get a lawyer or go a non-profit way.

Max: What is the overall class composition of your chapter and why do you think it's made up that way?

Luis: I would say it's 100% working class at least for our local it is composed of immigrant latino women. There's a handful of young activists but we're also grew up poor and working class. Our class composition reflects the place where we live and grew up in. It's easy for us to attract other folks who look speak and struggle just like us. It helps that many of the members are long time residents of East Hollywood 20+ years it makes for very organized and strong community connections and bonds.



Max: You just got a big success of stopping some renovictions. The landlord has rescinded the unlawful detainer suits as well as the claim they need to substantially remodel. How did you guys achieve this?

Luis: It was actually another local the LATU VyBe but we we provided support and help they had been goin back n forth with the landlord etc. Not gettin nowhere the mgmt company was mistreating people and harassing them. So one day when they were scheduled to do an inspection we in a group showed and confronted the mgmt and told em to stop harassing and to lift these evictions. It was pretty confrontational and we ran the mgmt outta the building. They must've tipped the landlord of what we were willing to do and that the next step would more likely be to go protest his house so within a week it was all lifted and a new mgmt company was placed. There's a lot more to it but that's generally what happened.



Max: What tips do you have for TUs wanting to increase their militancy?

Luis: To not be afraid to push to the left even just a little bit with time and patience you'd be surprised how much distance can be covered. Meet people where they are at but tactfully push em a little more and lead by example. One thing too is that seldom is anything really illegal being done so its good to have more practice and time on the ground. People will slowly realize that yes we do have the power and it's on us to make stuff happen.

RICHMOND TENANTS UNION



STEADILY BUILDING BOTH TENANT POWER AND CAPACITY THROUGH CONSISTENT AND PRINCIPLED OUTREACH AND SUPPORT

The past year has been one of significant progress for the Richmond Tenants Union (RTU) after several years of deliberate effort laying the groundwork for a solid foundation. Through the course of 2023 we have been steadily building both tenant power and capacity through consistent and principled outreach and support. We have expanded significantly the number of autonomous tenant councils and organizing projects we are supporting, as well as growing our real capacity and membership in a sustainable and engaged way through consistency, outreach, and collaboration with housing justice projects and organizers in the city. We are excited about our trajectory and our ability to build power and hold landlords accountable in the coming year.

As an example, our first and most well-established affiliate is the Chamberlayne Tenant Council (CTC). Though this project took a couple of years to find our footing, real progress is starting to be apparent. Through

consistent effort over the last couple of years, RTU was able to identify and support several tenant leaders in different buildings owned by Red Oak. Through a principled approach of centering tenant leadership and decision making, we have seen the relationships between tenants grow as well as their confidence to escalate their unmet demands with the landlord and property management company.

Fear of retaliation has been and remains a significant obstacle, as well as lack of trust between tenants. We have taken steps to build solidarity and community between tenants with campaigns such as mutual aid distributions, a COVID vaccine clinic, a summer box fan delivery, and a Labor Day rally outside the property management office. We have seen traction in some of the CTC's eight demands, but the landlord remains recalcitrant on many others. So the struggle continues. Following the rally, the CTC has garnered more attention from news

organizations and city officials, and discussions continue on how best to use this energy moving forward.

We also are in the midst of a membership restructuring aimed at transitioning more members into active organizing roles in the life of the union. We had many members who had signed up and were paying dues, but for various reasons were not attending meetings or participating in any active organizing projects. We decided to undertake a process of reaching out to set expectations and provide mentorship as needed to all inactive members. We had one-on-one conversations around the expectations for membership and what we could do to support each member in that. We have seen an increase in attendance and engagement as we've been implementing this process, and have high hopes that being clear with expectations, asking for commitments, and providing mentorship will help us all achieve our shared goal of building tenant power together.

TENANT POLI ED

As a part of our membership restructuring, we have also recommitted ourselves to engaging in more public-facing political education on issues surrounding housing and tenant justice. In this pursuit, we have been working with other organizations and housing activists in the city to provide know-your-rights seminars and organizing workshops. We have seen ancillary benefits to this not only in the building and strengthening of relationships with our collaborators, but also in expanding our ability to reach more tenants and build more connections with people across the city. We are excited to continue these efforts in the new year.



STARTING TO COME TOGETHER

RTU was founded in the late summer of 2019, and its first few years were marked by significant highs and lows. However, in the past year or so, our consistent effort is truly starting to come together and we are seeing progress in the amount of tenants we are working with, the relationships and power the tenants are building, as well as our capacity to sustain and continue the work. For myself, I continue to be honored to be working for tenant power alongside such dedicated, principled, and capable comrades, including the broader ATUN network, and am excited to see what we can build together in the future. Solidarity forever.

-Wren

MUTUAL AID DISTRIBUTION
COVID VACCINE CLINIC & BOX FANS

OUTREACH AND COLLABORATION
ON HOUSING JUSTICE PROJECTS

TENANT RALLIES
AT PROPERTY MANAGEMENT OFFICES

POLI ED
ON HOUSING AND TENANT JUSTICE

MASSACHUSETTS

GBTU DC MARCH

GREATER BOSTON TENANTS UNION



Why did you decide to go to the March on DC for Palestine?

Aarohi: I felt a moral obligation to go to this march as a hopefully only once-in-a-lifetime action. Logistically speaking, I was able to go so there was no reason for me not to. I've only been politically active for a couple of years now but even I could tell that this march was a massive shift in the politics of the American masses, which made me want to see what would happen. I simply had to march.

Adam: During this intense period of escalated colonial violence in Palestine I haven't really known what to do. As everyone now knows, we have entered a new phase in the ongoing Nakba and resistance to it, and like so many other people I have been overwhelmed by grief during this genocide. Attending what we hoped would be the biggest pro-Palestine demonstration in the history of the U.S. was most obviously a way to oppose the U.S.-Israeli violence by disrupting everyday life in D.C., and also a chance to collectively process that grief. We were also trying to figure out how our tenants union could intervene in support of Palestinians, and we figured that at the very least, we could organize a contingent of tenant unionists to join the protest and march with the GBTU banner.

THIS IS A GUIDED REFLECTION BY SOME GBTU MEMBERS WHO ATTENDED THE MARCH ON DC FOR PALESTINE ON NOV 4, 2023

How did the march make you feel? What did the march make you look forward to?

Corinna: When we arrived and were climbing through the Metro station up to the street, we suddenly realized that everyone around us was wearing keffiyehs, wrapped in Palestine flags, and carrying signs for Palestinian liberation. Being part of that kind of mass solidarity with Palestinian struggle felt different than other solidarity or BDS actions I've been to in the past, where you are in public space to affirm the existence of Palestine to an often indifferent flow of commuters. In the space of the march, full of families and kids, organizers and students, and seemingly every leftist org in the country, we briefly saw what the complete normalization of Palestinian liberation struggle in US public space looks like. That experience can and will be repeated. The political awakenings people here are having about Palestine in this moment, and the connections they're drawing about our complicity as Americans, aren't going to be undone, and that is very hopeful to me.

How do you think fighting for Palestinian liberation connects to the tenant struggle in the US?

Corinna: As communists, we know that struggles for liberation around the world are all connected, but in the case of Palestine and the US these connections are especially direct. GBTU recently released a statement that describes some of these, which include the amount of money and military support flowing from Boston to Israel. Some of the most impressive solidarity actions for Palestine around the world have been possible where organizing infrastructure already exists, such as the Belgian transport unions refusing to ship arms to Israel. Building up tenant union infrastructure here not only creates channels to learn in community about the history and imperative to support Palestine, but positions us to be able to imagine and more effectively participate in disrupting the flow of resources from our neighborhoods to Israel.

THE MAPPING PROJECT



Why did you choose to march with GBTU in DC instead of by yourself?

Aarohi: I chose to march with GBTU in DC because we are comrades. I originally went to DC with my school's SJP chapter but to be frank, I just don't have the same rapport with them as I do with my comrades in GBTU. In addition, several of us wanted to use this opportunity to strengthen our cadre and start building a base within GBTU to continue this solidarity work as tenant unionists. We also all have sick matching shirts.

GBTU UPDATE



Almost a year ago as of writing this article, the Greater Boston Tenants Union (GBTU) attended the Southern New England Tenants Union Summit with several member unions of the Autonomous Tenants Union Network. With those in attendance detailing their unions' formation, structure, and hopes for the future, it was an energizing and heartening space. Taking what we learned about structure and basebuilding to heart, GBTU looked inward.

How can GBTU organize against landlords who support Zionism/imperialism? What about other ways to organize against the landlord class?

Adam: This is obviously the key question that we're thinking about now. We are hoping to build on work done by local anti-imperialist organizers who painstakingly detailed the links between U.S. funding to Israel, and more broadly, 'local institutional support for the colonization of Palestine and harms that we see as linked, such as policing, US imperialism, and displacement/ethnic cleansing' as part of The Mapping Project. It has been exciting to see a surge in this type of analysis that maps out the intricate connections that enable capital, particularly the land-owning class, to support its global and imperial hegemony; in this regard we've been particularly inspired by the work of Charmaine Chua and Bay Area TANC's organizing against Zionist landlords in Berkeley. Basically, before October, we had begun working on organizing against landlords that use capital extracted from rents to support the colonization of Palestine, but now it feels like this is the critical thing tenant unionists need to focus on going forward.

How can we talk about Palestinian liberation and anti-imperialism within GBTU, our building associations, and our neighbors?

Evan: Building a collective political consciousness outside of the immediate needs and demands of a tenants union is a difficult but exciting prospect. As members come together and build community around their pressing needs as tenants, they are forming an institution that can build a collective politics, and can eventually act on those politics at a local level or (eventually) beyond. Forming this feels particularly necessary in moments of crisis, such as the ongoing genocide in Gaza. In GBTU, one of our unions used their Whatsapp group to talk about the protests happening in the wake of the George Floyd uprising and even tried (unsuccessfully) to have a small meetup at one of the protests. Drawing out the interconnectedness of struggle is an important way to start such conversations. In this case, talking about the role of real estate capital in funding the dispossession and ethnic cleansing of Palestine, and the close links between imperial violence and domestic police violence. Beginning these conversations will feel difficult, but it is an important step in building durable and powerful working class institutions.

Over the past year, our work in GBTU has largely focused on internally organizing to set the foundation for the future of a growing, well-structured organization. We started the year off by setting 3 month, 6 month, and 12 month goals. Many of our goals were achieved such as holding consistent monthly eviction defense canvasses combined with semi-regular tabling, making new Know Your Rights flyers for tenants, the creation of a Graphic Design Working Group, and increasing general organizing activity.

In the spirit of increasing general organizing, GBTU has been working on forming neighborhood "local unions" and successfully formed GBTU North (encompassing Medford, Cambridge, and Somerville) and GBTU Allston/Brighton. These locals were often built on top of organized groups or networks of tenants from pre-existing Tenant Associations such as the Fineberg Tenants Union and they look to organize new TAs in their neighborhoods. We are also working towards forming a Jamaica Plain/Roxbury local. In all of these local settings, we have focused on organizing TAs in larger apartment buildings, and working to bring politicized tenants to local meetings. At these meetings, tenants can share experiences and strategize with other

tenants leading organizing fights in other buildings in their neighborhood, and connect to the city-wide union.

We also wrote, discussed at length, and passed our bylaws! These are now available to read on our site (gbtu.xyz). In writing them, we took some inspiration from Bay Area TANC and used the process to articulate the informal administrative and leadership structure that had naturally grown in our tenants union. This led to establishing our Administrative Coordinators as well as our neighborhood locals.

GBTU has been active in and around the Boston community, holding Know Your Rights workshops, organizer trainings, tabling at events such as the annual Dyke March and Boston Anarchist Bookfair, and lending organizing advice to TUs outside of our current reach such as on Cape Cod and in the Upper Valley. Most recently, of course, GBTU has been active in organizing member contingents to join protests for Palestinian liberation and we formed a Palestine solidarity chat to explore the material ways in which tenant organizing can support Palestine. Several of us attended the March on DC for Palestine as a GBTU contingent and marched with Brooklyn Eviction Defense, a tenant union based in New York!

MADISON TENANT POWER

WISCONSIN

BY AMADI, PAUL, AND OTHERS

Madison has the fastest rising rents of any major city in the U.S. This year has been about expanding Madison Tenant Power's reach by talking to new people, wheat-pasting flyers, tabling at housing fairs for Black tenants, and developing our communications to keep a broader base of tenants updated on our activities. We are forming working committees to focus our expanded membership. More than anything, we have been having regular, biweekly conversations about our strategy and tactics that are open to all tenants. We are updating the Madison Tenant Power Strategy and Constitution to better reflect our shifting approaches, matching what we are doing with what we want to be.



OPEN HOUSE RENTERS ASSEMBLY

In July 2023, we organized our first Open House Renters' Assembly, an all-day forum with interactive modules on questions related to: our needs and values as renters, our history and future as tenants, what a tenant union should and should not do, and how to take personal ownership of the tenant movement (see example program modules here).

The Open House Renters' Assembly attracted a couple dozen fresh faces (of all ages, of all walks of life). We discussed how to focus our priorities and build a strong community of mutual support, care, and trust in order to create a sustainable environment for tenants here in Madison. The conversation was an opportunity to bring fellow renters into movement work to share feedback and organize their own "shops."

CURRENT UNION PROJECTS

Last year, we designed Find My Landlord (<https://findmylandlord.madisontenantpower.org/>), a tool that gives tenants information about other properties owned by their landlord. Now, we are working to clarify our processes for joining union membership. We designed checklists to support ongoing administrative tasks and developed a “Door-Knocking Toolkit” to support union members canvassing their buildings. We want to revisit our union structure to empower more community members to attend Madison Tenant Power meetings and events, especially those who contact us for support but are initially reluctant to organize, often out of fear of retaliation or lack of resources.

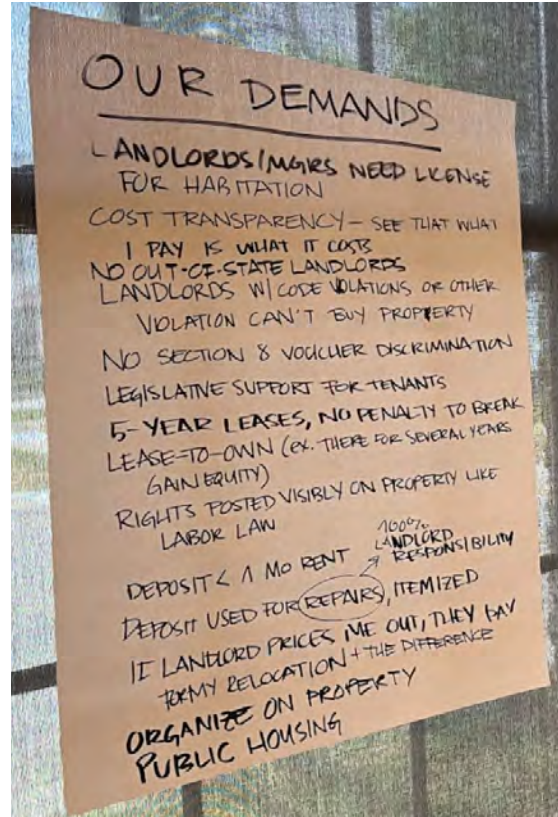
We want to feel like we are winning and not reacting. In November 2023, alongside the Madison WI Homeless Union, we crashed a charity event for Porchlight, Inc., the nonprofit that runs Porchlight Men’s Shelter and Porchlight Properties, in order to warn potential donors about dangerous living conditions.

TENANT BILL OF RIGHTS

We’ve begun drafting a “Tenant Bill of Rights,” imagining provisions like: multi-year leases, security deposit maximums, indoor heat maximums, prohibition on out-of-state landlords, protections and relocation support for tenants priced out of their homes, blocking landlords with a history of abuse or building code violations from buying more property, and strict reporting requirements when landlords choose not to re-extend a lease.

In 2011, on his way out of office, former Governor Scott Walker and current assembly-speaker + landlord Robin Vos installed anti-tenant preemption laws that limited individual municipalities’ ability to push forward pro-tenant and pro-union legislation, reversing many of the hard-won tenant protections enacted by the original Madison Tenant Union in the 1960s through 1980s. With our gerrymandered state legislature, we imagine the Tenant Bill of Rights as both a pragmatic strategy and an agitational tool. The Tenant Bill of Rights showcases not only what we could have as tenants, but also what we should have, if state lawmakers would get out of our way.

As one tenant said during the Open House Assembly: “we sell hope to each other.” We want to use the Tenant Bill of Rights project to engage real policy changes (which has attracted more elders to our movement work) and challenge state preemption laws, without distracting ourselves away from the practicalities of doing for ourselves as tenants what legislators and landlords will never do for us. The impossible is only impossible until it becomes possible.



THE ENERGY IS THERE

We are excited about the organizational growth we have witnessed over the last few months, which makes these years-long projects seem more approachable. One renter joined the union after Madison Property Management, the largest landlord in Madison, gave his entire building a week’s notice to agree to a 30% rent increase. The neighbor got half of the tenants in his 40-unit building to sign a letter demanding management negotiate -- after initially refusing, MPM negotiated the increase down by a third. The tenant has since recruited others to the union.

As a union, we are learning while doing. This is both exhilarating and frustrating. We want to build a system that sustains itself. We want to build a structure that gives people enough confidence to join the system. We have momentum, but we don’t have the capacity to bring enough new people in to share the work. Still, we know the energy is there. The mass mobilizations in solidarity with Palestine have been some of the largest and most activated demonstrations we have witnessed locally since the 2020 George Floyd uprisings.

KC TENANTS

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

“WHAT CAN WE DO NOW IN ORDER TO BE ABLE TO DO TOMORROW WHAT WE ARE UNABLE TO DO TODAY?”



www.facebook.com/kctenants/

TENANT UNION PROFILE

BY ROSE, LATU

**KC Tenants is not a member
of ATUN**



Since we started building the Autonomous Tenants Union Network in 2018, we’ve seen many unions come and go. There are many small groups of radicals around the country who want to build militant, powerful organizations of poor and working-class people. But, as anyone who has tried it knows, it’s very difficult to get a group of like-minded people together who are willing and able to do the kind and amount of work that’s required to build an organizing project from scratch, and then to sustain it past conflicts and failures towards something that has enough momentum and infrastructure to persist, grow, and develop. Since ATUN was founded, many initially promising groups have folded, and many other unions have lasted in some form for several years but have not been able to grow or become much stronger.

DRAMATIC GROWTH SINCE ITS 2019 FOUNDING

Many of us first heard of KC Tenants in 2020, after they held several big, disruptive actions at eviction courthouses. In July and then again in October of that year they blocked access to the courthouse and disrupted proceedings in person and online in protest of the end of the COVID eviction moratorium.

In January 2021, they organized a “Zero-Eviction January”; that month they prevented 919 eviction hearings (90% of those scheduled), protested outside a judge’s house, pressured another judge to completely stop hearing cases, and held several actions outside the courthouse. (Here is coverage of that project.)

They have also written and passed some policy: in 2019 they passed a Tenants’ Bill of Rights and in 2022 they passed a resolution that they wrote creating a \$50 million bond to be used for affordable housing at 30% AMI (\$550-750 for apartments).

They are currently trying to make source of income discrimination illegal (i.e. to make it illegal for landlords not to accept Section 8 vouchers).

In 2023 they formed an offshoot that could do electoral work. They endorsed a slate of six candidates for city council, and four of them won; one had been a leader in KC Tenants for several years.

They have organized tenants in individual buildings, large complexes, and mobile home parks against major rent increases, mass evictions, and poor conditions. They have several tenant associations (tenants organized at the level of their building) and tenant councils (tenants organized across buildings who share a landlord), and several neighborhood-based groups.



919 EVICTIONS PREVENTED
DURING ZERO-EVICTION JANUARY
with protests, pressure, courthouse actions

\$50 MILLION BOND
FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING
at 30% AMI (\$550-750 for apartments)

10,000 MEMBERS
SIGNED UP AS SUPPORTERS
get emails but don't participate beyond that

500 LEADERS
INVOLVED IN REGULAR WORK
active in meeting spaces or working teams

BRINGING TENANTS ACROSS THE CITY INTO A SHARED COLLECTIVE BODY



How has KC Tenants been able to do so much and grow so much in so little time?

Part of the explanation for that is that it has funding and staff. Their annual budget, which comes from grants and small donations, is around \$450,000. That pays for around seven full-time staff members and an office. But funding and staff is only part of the explanation, since many organizations with funding and staff have done much less organizing and built much less infrastructure. According to the criteria ATUN uses, grants & staff make a union fail to qualify as “autonomous”; we’ve never collectively articulated what we’ve meant by that word, but we’ve said that it involves “independence from nonprofits, big foundations, and



government funding.” But I think that given KC Tenants’ success at building citywide infrastructure for tenants– their progress in bringing tenants across the city into a shared collective body—we have a lot to learn from them. They often quote the Paulo Freire line: “What can we do now in order to be able to do tomorrow what we are unable to do today?” In other words, how can we become more powerful? If a group of tenants is collectively talking about how to answer that question, and taking action together in response to that question, then I think we should be taking the work of that group very seriously and using it as a foil

against which to think about how to make our own work stronger.

A lot of the work KC Tenants has done is very different from what we do in the union I belong to, the L.A. Tenants Union. In LATU, we generally avoid working to get particular policies passed, with some exceptions, and we’ve never endorsed candidates as a union or done other kinds of electoral work. We also do a lot of support work for tenants in crisis at meetings; KC Tenants does all of that only through a hotline and uses in-person meetings for organizing tenants associations in buildings or developing broader city-wide struggles.

But a lot of our work is similar: we organize in buildings, we bring tenants together and facilitate their building the trust necessary to take collective action, we issue demands and escalate, we use particular fights as the seeds of yet more fights, we develop new leadership in the course of those fights, and we try to create the structures that will help us grow and collectively develop politically. We try to become more powerful.

THIS PAST FALL I TRAVELED TO KANSAS CITY WITH MY FRIEND TRACY TO VISIT KC TENANTS. WE SPENT TWO DAYS THERE, MOSTLY WITH TWO CO-FOUNDERS, TARA RAGHUVVEER WHO HOSTED US AND DIANE CHARITY WHO GAVE US A TOUR OF THE CITY. I HOPE TO WRITE MORE ABOUT KC TENANTS IN THE FUTURE BUT FOR NOW WHAT I WANT TO SHARE IS THE QUESTIONS I CAME UP WITH IN TRYING TO THINK ABOUT WHAT MAKES A TENANTS’ UNION STRONG. I INVITE ORGANIZERS FROM OTHER UNIONS TO PROPOSE OTHER QUESTIONS, SO THAT WE CAN DEVELOP A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF WHERE OUR WORK STANDS AND WHAT WE’RE AIMING FOR.

HOW STRONG IS THIS UNION?

How many tenants' associations (or, in neighborhoods with mostly single-family homes or small apartment buildings, block committees) has the organization built?

How strong is each of those associations—what has happened in its fight? What kinds of risks has the association taken? How many people participate actively—what percentage of the building? Has the association won its demands? Has it built relationships and started activity that will persist after a particular crisis is over, or after there has been some short-term resolution? How does it make decisions about what to do next? Has the association built new leadership via its organizing—people who can spread their knowledge and inspire others to organize too? How much control does the association exercise over its territory and what kind of presence does it have in the neighborhood? Do people in the neighborhood know that the tenants are in struggle, and are they welcomed to learn and join? Are the tenants associations seeds for more organizing—do they proliferate other tenants' associations?

What structures does the organization have for new tenant leaders to learn from each other as they struggle?

By what structures or in what settings are leaders from different tenant associations brought together? How easy or hard is it for a new tenant who wants to organize to get the support they need to build a strong tenants' association? What support if any does the organization offer to tenants who aren't in organizing situations, and how does the organization understand the value of that work in relation to its larger goals?

Does the organization have the power to get policy passed? Does it aspire to?

If it wins new tenant protections, are those enforced? How significant are the material changes to tenants' lives? If the organization fights for policy changes, do the fights build new leadership and help the organization grow? If the organization fights for policy changes, how do those fights relate to struggles within buildings and neighborhoods against particular landlords?



How widely-known is the organization as the voice of tenants in the city?

Have most people in the city heard of the organization? What is its reputation? How would people who aren't involved describe it based on what they've heard? How many people can the organization turn out for particular large actions? Is the organization able to get the kind of press coverage it wants? Has the organization been able to shape discourse around a particular topic?

What kinds of risks does the organization make possible?

Does the organization have the infrastructure to support tenants taking high-risk actions like rent strikes or direct landlord confrontation? Can the organization respond with strength when it is attacked by landlords via the courts, if eviction cases or criminal charges are filed against organizers, or if organizers are attacked in other ways?

Who produces the ideology and politics of the organization?

Is the organization carrying out the vision of a leader or a small group of leaders, or is there a wide culture of strategic conversation and debate that issues in action? How many people, and which people, are actively deliberating about what the organization should do? How many people, and which people, take the initiative to make new projects in the organization happen?

SOCIALISM 2023

KATY SLININGER PUTNAM
FOUNDING MEMBER
CARGILL TENANTS UNION CTU

Katy Slininger



SOCIALIST STRATEGY AND THE HOUSING CRISIS

CHICAGO

This past January we established a tenant union in our apartment complex—a mixed-use converted textile mill in a post-industrial New England town, with 82 residential units. It was right after Christmas, after only three years of the mill being open to residents, when the health department alerted tenants to the news of a two-year-old's lead poisoning. Lead dust wipes in the child's apartment had tested at 4,800 times the EPA limit for lead dust within a square foot of flooring. That two year old was severely injured and will have cognitive health issues for the rest of his life. I have raised my four year old son Noah in this building, which also has chronic mold that kept him in and out of the hospital with respiratory illnesses all last fall and winter.

Our mill was a brownfield site only five years ago, but the redevelopment was supposed to remediate all hazardous materials. In fact millions in public funds were poured into this private project with the promise of the provision of "affordable housing." Our landlord, management company, the private developer that renovated it, the

construction company, and the town itself were all involved in covering up the conditions of this building from prospective tenants out of a sense of urgency around town revitalization (which we usually interpret as gentrification).

There was nowhere else to go. But as these things go, the housing crisis created its own enemy. The parents in our complex felt like caged animals, trying to protect their children physically but also from the mental stress we were carrying about poison in the walls around us. We had nowhere to go, so we decided to fight. It took us three weeks to form a union and get a supermajority of signatures. Within four weeks we had eight families on rent strike.



JC: When discussing housing organizing in DSA, we generally talk about two different things. On the one hand, there are policy interventions at the state and municipal levels for reforms. On the other hand, there are building-level fights in which tenants work together against landlords, sometimes scaling up beyond the building to the neighborhood, town, city, or even state. How are these two forms of struggle for housing justice related to each other? How might they be irreconcilable? And how might they reinforce one another?

KS: I'm fairly new to tenant organizing, so Dan [Denvir] and Cea [Weaver] know more of the specifics about the progress of housing policy and legislation. But from my perspective, it seems like the relationship between policy, or legislation, and radical groundwork, or unionization, varies depending on the details of each case or region. That's not a pass, it just shows the importance of being rooted in history and cadre organizations that incorporate inquiry, as well as the importance of mentorship and collective analysis. Housing policy tails radical organizing, and some of it reacts to it. At the ATUN panel yesterday, Tra-

WE WANT THE WORKING CLASS TO SELF-GOVERN AND SELF-ORGANIZE

cy Rosenthal from LATU described how “good cause” eviction policies were used as a bludgeon to crush the eviction moratorium tenant organizers had won. Obviously the initial eviction moratorium *was* a successful policy, and it seems like the fight for it strengthened the unions behind it.

The policy has to be worth the organization energy put into it, which means determining: 1) whether it is an attempt to suppress ground-level organizing through compromise; 2) whether it centers the rights of the humans involved (the tenants) as opposed to protecting the existence of “housing” as a market commodity or financial asset; 3) threatens the market value of property and the profit of developers and landlords. Certainly if the policy fight is in any way at the expense of base-building, you risk losing those protections and power over time as forces of capital degrade those rights.

When making these decisions about what policies to fight for, or if you should, or how you should, it's important to consider the nature of

the capitalist state and think very carefully about how you direct proletarian agitation into the legal system or legislative system. We want the working class to self-govern and self-organize, not intentionally put them in positions of subservience, in petitioning the state for our human rights. Every potential policy should have organizers asking themselves: is it possible to accomplish whatever power (rent control, affordable housing plans) we're talking about through organized force rather than begging the state? Will this policy even be enforceable or even implemented without an organized base? Can it be easily overturned or suppressed without an organized base?

And, will we be protected by the same state when the private interests react with further repression and disenfranchisement? The state that legally and illegally launders money, refuses to enforce existing codes and regulations? That hires the cops to police and brutalize you? A cop will still show up to your door and shoot you in the head over eviction whether it was good or no cause.



JC: Often, when folks on the broad left (not necessarily always the socialist left) talk about the affordability crisis, the framing concerns supply, specifically market rate. But we also hear a great deal of talk about social housing. I'm wondering how you each define that term and what it looks like to build it with the horizon being a socialist one.

KS: Obviously in America public housing is means-tested, heavily-surveilled, heavily-policed, segregated, and really, really shitty. If anything it's anti-social. But my comrade Nick Pokorzynski in Connecticut recently wrote about the communist horizon of social housing: "Social housing is not a concession from the state or a means to "curtail the excesses" of capitalism, but an integral part of the "real movement which abolishes the present state of things." Social housing must be: truly universal, environmentally-sustainable, a site of socialist reproduction (which means providing the community and organization required for the revolution), and democratically-controlled. Social housing has to be a process of expropriation

SOCIAL HOUSING CAN'T BE PASSIVE

and redistribution of land. Social housing can't be passive, like adding "affordable" or "available" housing, although it has to be that. And in terms of environmental sustainability, truly sustainable housing would require financial divestment from imperial resource extraction.

We can continue to pour public funds into the financial portfolios of the parasites of our world, and mimic their market logic with the promise of affordability, but I'm living the logical conclusion of that approach. It completely ignores the power dynamics at play in this crisis, the root of which is an exploitative and oppressive social relation between landlords and tenants that's codified by law and on steroids from finan-

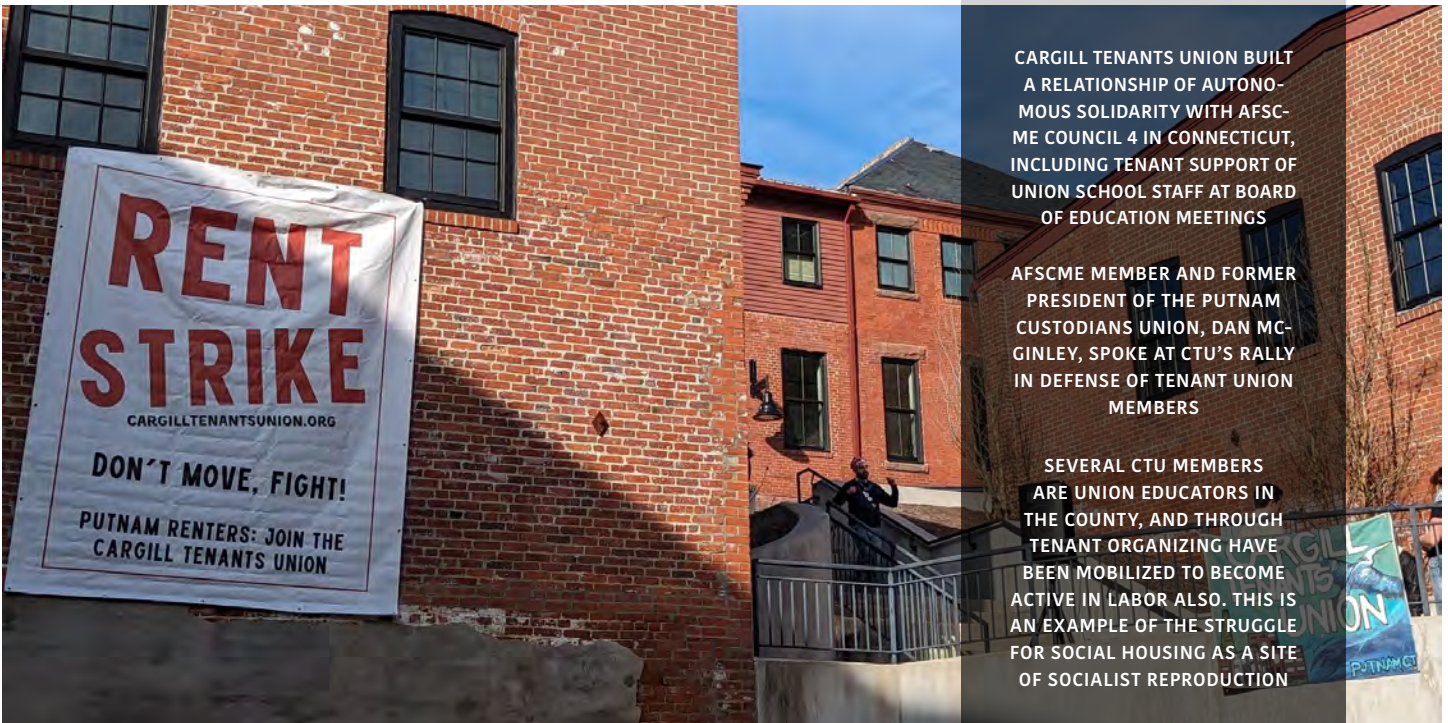
cialization of housing.

I don't have organized YIMBYs and NIMBYs in my little town (thank god) but both groups are pathetic and cynical. They apply the most elementary market logic of supply and demand to this power struggle. Landlords, developers, forces of capital shape the economy for their own interests, they aren't subservient to it. Tenants in the movement need to shift their mindset towards exerting brute force through their organizations. There aren't many shortcuts to developing that degree of power. We must do a lot of building to even use the tools needed for systemic change, like wildcat rent strikes and expropriation. But the good news is there's plenty to win along the way.

IN JANUARY 2024, MEMBERS OF THE CARGILL TENANTS UNION MADE THE DECISION TO SEPARATE FROM THE CONNECTICUT TENANTS UNION. THE BUREAUCRATIC AND POLITICAL LIMITATIONS IMPOSED BY OUR STATUS AS A CHAPTER AND FORMAL AFFILIATE OF SEIU1199 BECAME INCREASINGLY INCOMPATIBLE WITH THE EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH WE ADOPTED IN OUR ORGANIZING EFFORTS. GIVEN THE DECLINE IN COUNTY AND MUNICIPAL ENFORCEMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE, WE RECOGNIZED THE NEED FOR AUTONOMOUS DIRECT ACTION TO EFFECTIVELY ESCALATE OUR EFFORTS.

TENANT COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL LABOR TO REBUILD THE WORKING CLASS

OVERLAP IN MOVEMENTS



CARGILL TENANTS UNION BUILT A RELATIONSHIP OF AUTONOMOUS SOLIDARITY WITH AFSCME COUNCIL 4 IN CONNECTICUT, INCLUDING TENANT SUPPORT OF UNION SCHOOL STAFF AT BOARD OF EDUCATION MEETINGS

AFSCME MEMBER AND FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE PUTNAM CUSTODIANS UNION, DAN MCGINLEY, SPOKE AT CTU'S RALLY IN DEFENSE OF TENANT UNION MEMBERS

SEVERAL CTU MEMBERS ARE UNION EDUCATORS IN THE COUNTY, AND THROUGH TENANT ORGANIZING HAVE BEEN MOBILIZED TO BECOME ACTIVE IN LABOR ALSO. THIS IS AN EXAMPLE OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SOCIAL HOUSING AS A SITE OF SOCIALIST REPRODUCTION

JC: One of the things I find the most interesting and fruitful about housing as a terrain of struggle is that it tends to bleed into or mingle with other terrains pretty easily. I'm specifically thinking about labor and abolition. How have these areas overlapped in your organizing experience? How do you see them relating to each other?

KS: We've seen a pretty heavy overlap with the labor movement in Connecticut. In fact the statewide TU is directly supported by SEIU 1199, financially and otherwise. [SEIU] 1199 members bore a huge burden during the pandemic, and lost a lot of lives. And now, without adequate wage increases and rising housing costs, there's rising poverty in the rank-and-file membership. More union members needing second or third jobs, and even rising homelessness.

So 1199 leaders saw the organic radical energy coming from the tenants union and recognized the potential power there to improve living conditions for their members. Obviously, the major caveat here is we need labor militancy to increase for immediate material reasons and long-term political reasons, and totally shifting organizing energy from one to the other is not a good idea. But there's certainly a lot of potential for collective turnout and pressure with an overlap between the movements, as well as a major increase in proletarian power if militancy is matched.

In terms of abolition, tenants are inherently an exploited class and, due to their position in society, also often experience other forms of social violence: displacement, domestic violence, police brutality, degradation of public services. Terrains overlap in terms of prison and police abolition, and family abolition.

As the American working class and poor, we're in a stage of disorganization and depoliticization. This includes susceptibility to propaganda, increased distrust of each other, and increased reliance on police intervention. We both need social housing and a tenant movement to organize and politicize the working class towards abolition of prison and the capitalist nuclear family, and need abolition to reach the communist horizon of social housing. Which sounds like a catch-22 but as an organizer, the good news is there are ways to practice abolition along the road. We can build organizations around collective safety and organize unions to the point that they can self-govern and formalize care networks. As communists, what differentiates these projects from mutual aid is the politicization of our work.

HOW WE WON RENT CONTROL IN PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

BY RYAN BELL

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NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF—AND NEED FOR—A GROUND GAME.

THE LAST YEAR AND A HALF HAS SEEN SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS FOR RENTERS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA. THOUGH THERE IS STILL A LONG WAY TO GO BEFORE OUR LAWS REFLECT THE FACT THAT HOUSING IS A HUMAN RIGHT, CITIES THAT HAVE NEVER HAD EVEN THE MOST RUDIMENTARY PROTECTIONS ARE SEEING RENT CONTROL AND RELATED TENANT PROTECTIONS PASSED, THANKS TO THE POWER OF ORGANIZING.

The city of Santa Ana passed rent control and just cause eviction ordinances in October 2021—the first city in Orange County history to have these protections. It subsequently passed an ordinance establishing a rental housing board.

The city of Pomona in Los Angeles County passed rent control and just cause ordinances last summer after more than five years of community organizing and pressure campaigns.

Bell Gardens, a city of about 40,000 residents in east Los Angeles County, passed rent control and just cause protections in September 2022. Despite the city's population being 79 percent renter households, the women of Union de Vecinas de Bell Gardens had to fight for nearly two years before getting three of the five city council members to approve these measures.

Building on this series of wins, the most recent victory for tenants happened in November 2022 in Pasadena, where 53.8 percent of the city's nearly 90,000 voters passed Measure H—a comprehensive tenant protection charter amendment placed on the ballot by the Pasadena Tenants Union and a strong coalition of supportive organizations and individuals.

WHAT IT DOES AND WHY IT WAS NEEDED

Pasadena is city of renters, of which I am one. According to recent census data, at least 58 percent of households rent their homes and rates of rent burden are similar to other large metropolitan areas in the United States—high. In 2018, 54 percent of Pasadena's renter households were paying more than 30 percent of their income toward rent and 31 percent were paying over 50 percent. That rent burden is much more likely to fall on Black and brown families. Seventy percent of African American households and 68 percent of Hispanic/Latinx households in Pasadena rent their homes.



Under the new rent control and just cause law—now Article XVIII of the Pasadena City Charter—tenants are entitled to an impressive array of new protections as of December 2022.

Rents for most tenants may now only be raised once per year and by no more than 75 percent of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for qualifying units. (California’s Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act exempts single family homes, condos, and units built in 1995 or after from local rent control regulations.) Landlords need a just cause to evict a tenant from their unit, such as failure to pay rent or another violation of the lease. While there are still several no-fault just causes (for example, the owner or their family is moving into the unit), substantial renovation is no longer a just cause in Pasadena. Landlords must pay to relocate tenants during the renovation and offer the unit back to the original tenant at the rent they had been paying.

If landlords harass tenants for organizing a tenant association, the tenants have legal recourse to fight back. Landlords can be prosecuted for failure to abide by Article XVIII of the city charter.

The charter amendment also establishes a rental registry and an independent rental housing board which must have a tenant majority.

EARLY ATTEMPTS AT RENT CONTROL AND JUST CAUSE EVICTION

As with most grassroots campaigns, the path to victory was not straight. Several residents recall that the first efforts for rent control began over 20 years ago.

“WITH THE HOUSING CRISIS BEING SO EXTREME TODAY, IT’S EASY TO FORGET THAT WE WERE IN A HOUSING CRISIS BACK THEN,” RECALLS BERT NEWTON, A HOUSING JUSTICE ACTIVIST IN PASADENA FOR OVER 25 YEARS. “PEOPLE ON OUR STEERING COMMITTEE WERE LOSING THEIR HOMES.”

These early efforts involved lobbying the city’s seven council members, presenting the rent burden faced by the city’s residents, and asking for rent control and eviction protections. These pleas were universally ignored. There was not a single supportive councilmember in those early days, according to those who took part in those struggles.

FOR YEARS THERE WAS NO ANSWER TO THE RECALCITRANCE OF CITY LEADERS.

In late 2016, two tenants, inspired by the newly formed Los Angeles Tenants Union, set about forming the Pasadena Tenants Union (PTU). At that time tenants could be evicted with 60 days’ notice for any reason. I was one such tenant. With no warning, in the summer of 2017, my landlord gave me a 60-day notice to vacate my apartment. Having lived in a rent controlled apartment in Los Angeles from 2005 to 2013, I assumed this was illegal. That’s when I discovered that there were no tenant protections in Pasadena. If a landlord wanted to displace any tenant, the only requirement was 60 days’ notice. My research led me to PTU. So many of the initial PTU members were displaced in those early days that it was nearly impossible to build a consistent base for our new union. In that context, members decided that the first major campaign should be for rent control and just cause.

Still without a single elected official on our side, we opted to run a ballot initiative campaign. With help from Public Council attorneys, we wrote our own ordinance and began collecting signatures with the hope of qualifying for the 2018 ballot. When it was clear that we were going to fall several thousand signatures short, the tenants union was forced to regroup.

IN 2019, PTU ESTABLISHED THE PASADENA TENANT JUSTICE COALITION (PTJC) TO DRAW TOGETHER A BROAD GROUP OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS TO SUPPORT THE NEXT EFFORT.

Answering the call were the ACLU of Southern California, the League of Women Voters Pasadena Area, the Democratic Socialists of America–Los Angeles, and Socialists of Caltech, all of whom joined with the Pasadena Tenants Union to form the new coalition and share the work.

The coalition decided to pursue a charter amendment rather than an ordinance and the policy committee set about reworking the language of the measure. This decision made the next effort more difficult. To qualify a charter amendment for the ballot in Pasadena requires 15 percent of the registered voters to sign a petition as opposed to the 10 percent needed for an ordinance. The coalition made this decision, in spite of the difficulty, because that very difficulty would also make an amendment hard to reverse once secured, placing these protections farther out of reach of the mayor and city council members, who we felt would immediately seek to weaken or even repeal them.



CHANGING CONDITIONS

In March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the coalition’s ability to safely collect signatures as the entire nation came under stay-at-home orders. We eventually set our sights on the November 2022 General Election, still aiming for a charter amendment. Signature gathering began in October 2021. Over 300 volunteers exercised extreme caution during repeated waves of COVID variants throughout the fall and into the winter of 2022, wearing KN-95 masks as they stood in front of grocery stores and other public places in extreme heat, and then rain and cold, every weekend for six months.

The pandemic also pulled back the curtain on widespread housing insecurity, dangerous living conditions, and endemic landlord harassment and abuse.

Individuals and families who had never understood themselves to be housing insecure suddenly saw their income disappear and with it, the ability to pay their rent. A rapidly changing regulatory landscape also

created confusion and anxiety. While most tenants had strong defenses against eviction, landlords continued to issue invalid demands to pay and eviction notices. Hundreds of tenants self-evicted, others froze in fear. “The tenants union was inundated with calls and emails,” recalls coalition member organizer Jane Panangaden. “No one knew what was going on as the laws kept changing at the local, state, county, and federal levels all at once.”

During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pasadena also gained a champion for tenant protections on the City Council. In March of 2020, Councilmember Victor Gordo was elected mayor of Pasadena, leaving a vacancy in District 5. In accordance with city charter rules regarding vacancies, Jess Rivas was appointed to the District 5 seat. She ran and officially won her seat in June 2022, and shortly afterward she endorsed and actively campaigned for Measure H, as the rent control charter amendment came to be known.

THE WINNING CAMPAIGN

After another slow start to signature gathering, PTJC teamed up with the campaign consultants at Red Bridge Strategies, Jen Snyder and Avery Yu, in September 2021. Snyder and Yu had successfully managed several ballot initiative campaigns in San Francisco, as well as Dean Preston's successful campaign for San Francisco supervisor. Their involvement in the Pasadena Measure H campaign brought technical skill and experience as well as the focus and discipline needed to win.

The campaign ultimately gathered just over 20,000 signatures in the process of qualifying for the ballot. Our internal validation process determined that we had 15,352 valid signatures which we submitted to the Pasadena City Clerk at the end of March 2022. After the Los Angeles County Clerk's office conducted their validation process, the campaign had 15,101 valid signatures, 13 percent more than the required 13,366 signatures. As soon as the charter amendment qualified for the ballot the team went into campaign mode, starting with having signs printed and posting them in the windows of supportive local businesses.

For six months, hundreds of volunteers fanned out throughout the city, most often on weekends, knocking on doors, informing voters about Measure H, answering questions, and securing commitments to vote yes on Measure H.

The campaign knocked on over 42,000 doors, made calls to more than 29,000 people, and placed over 150 yard signs around the city. Community members and campaign leaders wrote at least a dozen op-eds in local papers explaining Measure H and countering misinformation and distortions from current and former elected officials, Realtors, landlords, and the Chamber of Commerce. The campaign also raised \$357,642 from over 350 individual donors, as well as several foundations and one labor union, SEIU Local 2015.

With support from our consultants, the campaign was able to send eight pieces of mail, nearly matching the number of mail pieces sent by the landlord and Realtor opposition, and advancing a positive message of community solidarity and support for low- and middle-income tenants.

CAMPAIGN STATS

20,000+

SIGNATURES

42,000

DOORS KNOCKED ON

29,000

PHONE CALLS

\$500,000

FUNDS RAISED

OVERCOMING THE OPPOSITION

The “No on Measure H” campaign was led by the California Apartment Association (CAA), with strong support from the National Association of Realtors and the California Association of Realtors. Their local proxies included the Pasadena Foothills Association of Realtors, the Pasadena Chamber of Commerce, and a variety of current and former elected officials, including Mayor Victor Gordo, who wrote an op-ed in Pasadena Now condemning rent control as a failed policy. The previous mayor of Pasadena, Terry Tornek, also came out strongly against Measure H, penning an op-ed and signing the opposition argument in the ballot handbook.

The No on Measure H campaign leaders also marshaled their supporters to spread misinformation on Facebook and the Nextdoor app, but they had no visible field campaign. They also had yard signs, but since they lacked strong support in the community, few homeowners were interested in putting a No on H sign in their yard. Instead, they resorted to placing them in illegal locations like roadway medians and parkways, from which they were frequently removed.

The No on Measure H messaging will be familiar to anyone who has worked on rent control campaigns anywhere in the country. It claimed simplistically that “rent control doesn’t work” without addressing for who or for what. It said rent control kills new development, which it doesn’t. Especially under Costa-Hawkins there isn’t even a potential disincentive. Not to mention, local homeowners—often the same

people who oppose rent control—are already blocking new development of apartments through their political advocacy.

Opponents said that rent control would make rents go up for tenants, and also that it would cripple landlords’ ability to make essential repairs. Missing from that argument, of course, is the fact that landlords weren’t making essential repairs before rent control and that their arguments are mutually exclusive—does rent control make rent go up or reduce landlord revenue? It can’t be both.

They also argued that if rent control passed, landlords would simply sell their buildings to large corporations who would be even worse actors or take their units off the market altogether. “Every argument against rent control is nothing more than a threat to make tenant’s lives even worse,” said one tenant who volunteered to pass Measure H. Voters correctly discerned that the real estate industry’s arguments

were projecting their own behaviors and choices onto a policy that simply limits the amount of abuse landlords are allowed to heap on their tenants. It is not rent control that causes apartment units to deteriorate from disrepair and neglect. It is landlords who make those choices, chasing maximum profits. No one is forcing landlords to neglect their investment properties or raise the rent beyond what is needed for a fair return in the long-term. The logic of profit guides them to this neglect and abuse.

In the absence of a convincing message or base of support, the opposition threw in \$436,515—including \$100,000 from the National Association of Realtors alone—to send mail designed to scare people into voting no. In the past, the CAA could count on voters to be fearful enough to vote no after being subjected to scare tactics. That’s what happened in Sacramento and Burbank in 2020.

This time it wasn’t enough.

MEASURE H PASSED WITH 53.8 PERCENT OF THE VOTERS APPROVING. DETAILED ELECTION RETURNS REVEALED THAT MEASURE H ALSO PASSED IN 6 OF 7 COUNCIL DISTRICTS, A FEAT FEW PEOPLE THOUGHT WAS POSSIBLE. IN RENTER-DENSE DISTRICTS, TYPICALLY PLAGUED BY LOW VOTER PARTICIPATION, MEASURE H PASSED BY AS MUCH AS 69 PERCENT AND APPEARS TO HAVE MOBILIZED NEW AND INFREQUENT VOTERS, IN SPITE OF THE FACT THAT IT WAS A MIDTERM ELECTION.

After decades of being ignored by our elected officials, tenants took the fight directly to the voters and won! Pasadena is the first city in California south of the Bay Area to pass rent control by ballot initiative. But this is a victory for more than just Pasadena. We are changing the horizon of the possible well beyond our city. Tenant unions from Santa Barbara to San Bernardino are dreaming big and demanding that their elected officials pass rent control and permanent eviction protections. Together we are proving the old organizing adage: when we fight, we win!