



RTU TENANT COUNCIL GUIDELINES

Richmond Tenants' Union (RTU)

March 2020

Background on the Richmond Tenants Union (RTU):

The Richmond Tenants Union grew out of the organizing work of the Richmond People's Survey, which began in the winter of 2018. Initiated by members of the Richmond DSA and CounterPower/ContraPoder (formerly Organization for a Free Society), the People's Survey was an effort towards base-building and militant co-research, in which we spent time conversing with and surveying folks from working class neighborhoods to determine their most pressing needs. The goal of this research was to ensure that our resulting organizing actions arose directly from the needs and desires articulated at the base. After speaking with folks in multiple neighborhoods, the People's Survey ultimately settled on Hillside Court as its focal point and found housing issues to be the greatest area of concern. The data that we collected over months of door-to-door canvassing provided evidence of massive injustice in Richmond public housing. However, we decided in the summer of 2019 to transition our work towards private housing. There were four major reasons for this shift:

1. A desire to ensure that our data showcasing the oppressive conditions of Hillside was not weaponized by developers and city officials to provide justification for their efforts to privatize public housing;
2. A realization that building a tenants union in Hillside would involve asking public housing residents to take risks that we as organizers who did not live in public housing were not required to take;
3. An analysis of RRHA as an institutional and therefore more abstract enemy that would be difficult to target, in comparison with individual landlords in the private housing sector; and
4. An increase in knowledge of private housing tenants unions in other cities that we could learn from and model, such as the Philadelphia Tenants Union and Los Angeles Tenants Union. We continue to communicate with and offer mutual aid to several Hillside residents we developed relationships with.

Since its formation in the summer of 2019, RTU has focused largely on consolidating the Richmond Left around housing justice work, and opening dialogue with marginalized communities facing rising rents, dilapidated units, and the threat of eviction. We worked with the Legal Aid Justice Center to develop Know Your Rights workshops and spent months going door-to-door to talk with tenants in buildings along Chamberlayne Avenue on Northside. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapidly increasing interest in rent strikes, our door-to-door canvassing has been put on pause, and we are redirecting our efforts towards the expansion of mutual aid networks and supporting rent resistance efforts city-wide.

Model and Strategy:

The goal of the Richmond Tenants Union is to create a citywide network of autonomous tenant councils. This network will form the backbone of a broad front to fight for housing justice in the face of the crises of debt, low wages, and high rent. Our model is to unionize all tenants through the formation of tenant councils in every building and neighborhood. These councils can be vehicles through which tenants can fight rising rents, lack of repairs, and threats of eviction. The landlords and their allies have a strategy: to keep our housing in a state of

disrepair combined with rising rents and costs of living to drive working people out of our neighborhoods. But tenants also have a strategy: through a network of councils, the tenants union can engage in collective bargaining with landlords to fight for safe, decent, and affordable housing for all renters. Through petitions, call-ins, protests, pickets, rent strikes, and occupations, we can win housing justice for all.

What is the difference between the Tenants Union and tenant councils?

A Tenants' Union is a citywide network of organizations of renters and neighbors that assemble to discuss issues in their buildings or neighborhoods, and organize to collectively improve living conditions. Through such a network, we have the power to enforce our demands against profit-hungry landlords and the city government that protects them. Anyone can join the Richmond Tenants Union, but the first step is organizing a tenant council in your building, or neighborhood council on your block.

tenant council is a small group of neighbors concentrated in the same apartment building, or across multiple properties owned by the same landlord. If you're having problems with repairs, air conditioning, heat, or hot water, it's probable that your neighbors—or tenants occupying units owned by the same landlord—are having similar problems.

What is the Organizing Committee and how does it relate to tenant councils?

The role of the RTU Organizing Committee is to facilitate communication between tenant councils. As of right now, it is made up of the core group of organizers who established the Tenants' Union and others who have since joined the Union as individuals. Because we are still in the early stages of the Union's development, the primary focus of the Organizing Committee has been working towards building tenant councils. Once multiple tenant councils have been established, the role of the Organizing Committee will shift towards supporting tenant council actions through mutual aid and politicizing tenant struggles. It will rally other tenant councils within the Union to support the councils that are taking action. Each tenant council should appoint 1-2 members to serve as delegates on the Organizing Committee. As tenant councils grow and multiply, it is our intention to hold a mass meeting of all Union members to elect a new or expanded Organizing Committee.

Tenant Council Organization

All Tenant Councils affiliated with the Richmond Tenants Union must commit to the following principles:

- Commit to anti-racist, feminist, queer- and trans inclusive practices.
- Commit to a democratic decision making process.
- Tenant Councils are location-based and nested structures, beginning with building councils and scaling up to housing complex and neighborhood councils.
- Appoint 1-2 delegates to the Organizing Committee to participate in broader decision making within the union
- Commit to meet regularly, for example biweekly or monthly. Councils should assemble an agenda prior to all council meetings; the agenda can be modified by the members at the start of the meeting; roles such as facilitator, notetaker, and timekeeper should be selected prior to or at the beginning of the council meeting.
- Pledge to support other tenant councils in the Union when needed.