

No Job, No Rent

Ten months of organizing
the tenant struggle

Stomp Out Slumlords
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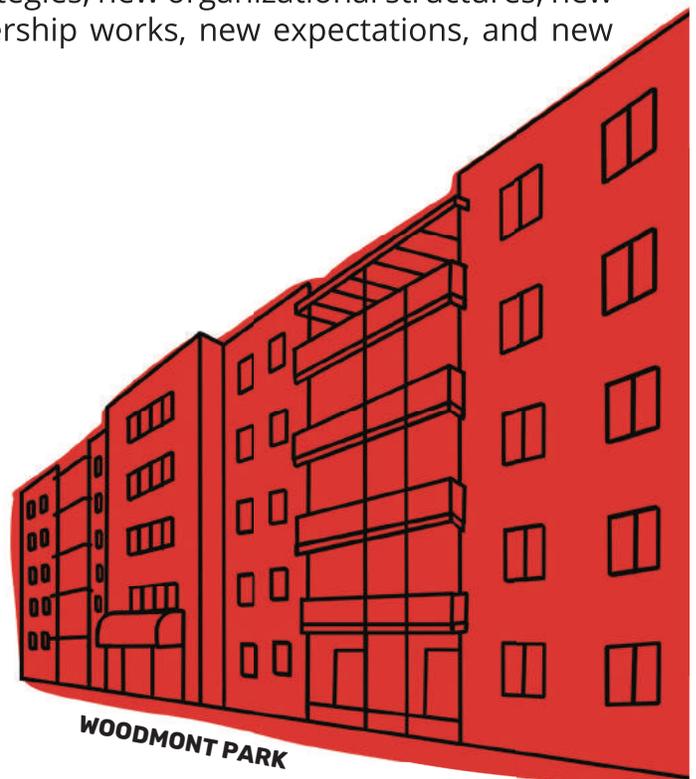
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A New Generation of Organizers

Over the last ten months, the coronavirus pandemic and accompanying social and economic crises have transformed the Stomp Out Slumlords project, along with most other aspects of our lives. Tenants have faced a new and unexpected emergency, and we had to mature quickly to be able to confront it. In late March we decided to fully commit to supporting rent strikes demanding rent cancellation and the ensuing campaign has thoroughly remade our project. We have made missteps and miscalculations, but in general, we believe we have passed the test of the moment.

The scope of our organizing has expanded dramatically, from a group of 13 organizing volunteers working in seven properties at the beginning of the year to a team of more than 40 organizers working in 20 sites and pursuing new leads all the time. Our work has also deepened. Before the pandemic, most of what we did was activism rather than organizing in a real sense: we supported individuals or small groups raising a hue and cry about slum conditions and abusive management without ever mobilizing majorities of tenants to take action. Today, we are supporting more than a dozen rent strikes, many of which include big majorities of tenants in those properties. Every building we are operating in has a committee of leaders who do the bulk of the work to move their neighbors to action. And when we activate our organizing structure, we can get hundreds of working class tenants in the streets. In part we could do all this because extraordinary circumstances inspired ordinary tenants and leftist activists alike to do hard things they would have never contemplated in normal times. But we also developed new strategies, new organizational structures, new frameworks for understanding how leadership works, new expectations, and new training programs to expand our capacity and rise to the challenge.

In general, we believe that the last ten months of struggle have vindicated our basic strategic orientation: organizing tenants to use the social power they hold as a class to cause political and economic disruption. Indeed, we have been forced to hold to our own views more faithfully than we ever had before. In the months to come, we believe that above all we must keep organizing to make sure more tenants collectively refuse to pay. We have to push the crisis onto the balance sheets of landlords of all sizes, as well as state and municipal governments, while keeping tenants protesting in the streets. We must continue to build our capacity for direct action in order to



mount a credible threat to resuming evictions. We offer this document to show how we can do it.

During the pandemic, we have been excited to see a new generation of radical tenant organizers take a leading role in the struggle, not just here in Washington, but around the country. Most of these new organizers are affiliated with either the DSA or the new Autonomous Tenants Union Network, two formations we have decided to work with. This report is mainly addressed to our friends and comrades in these circles, who are confronting similar challenges to the ones we addressed over the course of the pandemic. We have seen that if we apply the right techniques, it is possible to break from the rituals of liberal NGO politics and set up serious, fighting, working-class organizations with minimal resources. We hope this account is useful for those that aspire to do what we did, because we can't win this struggle alone. To stave off the looming eviction crisis, we need to build a much larger national tenant movement. If you're reading this, we want you to join us.

What Tenants Won

Over the course of the pandemic, we have seen some of the most consequential pieces of housing policy enacted in our lifetimes. In March, the DC government put a broad moratorium on evictions and shut down the landlord-tenant court. The moratorium on evictions has now been extended several times and will continue at least until June 2021. In September, after a patchwork of local, state, and federal eviction protections began to fall apart, the Center for Disease Control used unprecedented emergency powers to implement a national eviction moratorium. Clearly, the CDC's narrowly-targeted, means-tested, temporary protections for renters are inadequate, and we have continued agitating for rent to be canceled, without which the eviction crisis is just delayed. But we have to acknowledge that a national moratorium on evictions is a strikingly significant intervention in the housing market, especially in comparison to the past half century of federal housing policy. The moratorium, however limited it is, will save lives.

VICTORIES

- a year without evictions citywide
- a year without rent increases citywide
- rent forgiveness at individual buildings
- conditions fixes at individual buildings
- a real citywide tenant movement

A year without evictions in Washington would have been unthinkable last year and the recent history of housing policy suggests that such emergency protections were by no means inevitable. A decade ago, millions of homeowners were losing their homes to foreclosure, and both the Bush and Obama administrations had a chance to respond aggressively. Rescuing homeowners or even enacting temporary protections at the right moment probably would have stabilized the economy and could have helped both presidents' parties stave off humiliating electoral defeats. But

homeowners were not rescued. With a few heroic exceptions, America's homeowners did not fight back when they were being robbed and evicted by the widely-de-spised banks between 2007 and 2011, and they received almost no help from the state.

This time it was different. Across the country, tenants who had suddenly lost their jobs and couldn't pay the rent stood up for themselves: rent strikes broke out widely, protesters shut down housing courts, activists blockaded homes to stop illegal evictions. The militancy of the new tenant movement and its achievements are probably inseparable from the general uprising against the police that flared up in May and June. In a moment where ordinary people fought and often overtook the police for control of the streets in virtually every city in the country, any kind of protest threatened to advance from simple disruption to active rebellion. If the CDC had never issued its moratorium and police had actually begun carrying out evictions of even a fraction of the estimated 30 million people who had gotten behind on rent over the summer, riots would not have been a surprising outcome.



"We started organizing in October after we our neighbor's stuff all out on the lawn in the rain. Some people are over \$10,000 in debt. The other day I actually delivered food to a neighbor of mine who knew guy who got evicted. He said, "Well, you know, I actually saw him the other day. He's collecting cans on the street. I saw him at the bus stop. He doesn't look too good."

—Henry, LaSalle Park, Maryland

This story doesn't have an ending yet. As we finalize the report in the middle of February 2021, an impending wave of evictions seems less likely than ever. In the stimulus bill passed in December, Congress passed billions in rental assistance, and the newly installed Biden administration promises to include billions more. Of course we aren't going to count on promises, and we're continuing to mobilize to ensure that renters aren't expected to pay for the crisis. And even if the current crisis is resolved, the struggle will continue for millions of renters paying too much for substandard conditions in segregated and gentrifying cities. It's important to understand how tenants won what we have won so far so we can make a plan to keep winning.

PART 1: Organizing in a Crisis

Deciding to Fight

The core organizers in our project are Marxists: we believe that systemic crises play a decisive role in class struggle. We have learned a great deal from theorists who emphasize the importance of social and economic crisis in breaking down habits of quiescence and opening possibilities for struggle. But that didn't mean we were prepared to meet an actual systemic crisis.

In late March we published some comments outlining our perspective on responding to the eviction crisis that had only recently appeared on the horizon. It is somewhat strange to review that document now. At the time, we dismissed the prospect of organizing rent strikes and recommended a two-pronged approach of helping tenants take advantage of the legal protections that did exist and campaigning for more legislation to create better protections. Our outlook was largely defensive, focused on staving off evictions without much thought to what would come next. We said nothing about fighting to cancel rent. We abandoned this position almost immediately, and within weeks we had laid the groundwork for strikes in a number of important properties. But we think it's worth examining why we were so pessimistic at the beginning of the pandemic. In retrospect, we know that there was an opening for a mass movement, but we couldn't see it. Why?

In March, it was easy to give in to despair and defeatism. We were all afraid of a virus no one understood, of the sudden economic insecurity many of us were suddenly facing, of social isolation, and of our uncertainty about what the future looked like. Fear paralyzes us and shuts down rational thinking; nothing is more toxic to organizing. Overwhelmed by the scale of the catastrophe, many of us wanted to retreat from politics at a moment when it was most important to look for possibilities to organize. While we struggled with inner challenges, the logistical obstacles to launching any new organizing were daunting. Our work to that point had depended heavily on door-to-door canvassing and in-person meetings. Organizing over the phone and Zoom seemed impossible. Meanwhile, we didn't understand how tenants who couldn't pay because they had no income could have any leverage to make demands. Rather than thinking through these complicated issues, it was easy to dismiss the concept of a

rent strike as socially weightless internet chatter. We felt like we knew what we were doing: we had actually organized rent strikes, unlike most people sharing #Rent-Strike2020 memes. In the end, this knowledge was a tremendous resource, but at first we



were tripped up by our own experience. The newness and strangeness of the situation challenged any sense that we were experts or knew what to do. Because the model we had been using was obviously not going to work, we were reflexively suspicious that we could do anything. In our experience, activists frequently get caught in this trap, especially in moments of crisis when creativity is most important. In our case, outside forces intervened to help.

In early March, we muddled forward. The board of the DC Tenants Union (DCTU), which included some of our cadre, decided to focus on getting landlord-tenant court closed and we mobilized our networks to pressure the DC council with calls and emails. This was accomplished without much of a fight. The leaders of the union decided to circulate a petition focusing on a new demand: canceling rent. This petition, which went out to a list of a few hundred people, quickly netted more than 4,000 signatures. We started to suspect that there might actually be a groundswell of support for more aggressive tenant protections. The authorities seemed to share this suspicion, and within a couple weeks the Mayor enacted a moratorium on evictions that would hold through July.

Ultimately, the inspiration for our strategic shift towards the rent strike came from the struggle at a property called Southern Towers, a sprawling complex of five buildings in Alexandria, Virginia. Southern Towers is home to more than 2,300 households, most of whom are immigrants from Africa and Asia working in the service sector, especially the nearby National Airport and the industries connected to it. When the pandemic hit and those sectors of the economy shut down, thousands of cooks, servers, janitors, housekeepers, Uber drivers, baggage handlers, and others living at the property suddenly couldn't pay rent as they struggled to deal with Virginia's miserly and backlogged unemployment system. A handful of them decided to push back and started meeting over Zoom to discuss a plan to demand that the owner of the property, a massive real estate investment trust called Bell Partners, cancel the rent. The leaders of this group were active members of Unite Here Local 23, a progressive and militant union of food service workers, almost all of whom were also unemployed. The staff and leadership of the local, recognizing the need to be flexible in order to become an effective union of unemployed workers, committed to supporting the struggle at Southern Towers, and the push towards a rent strike began.

This small group of activist tenants began reaching out to neighbors they already knew over the phone, asking them to sign on to a petition. As they signed more

- 1. Cancellation of rent and mortgage payments for the duration of the state of emergency, plus one month.** No one knows how long this pandemic will last. It is no good to impose a moratorium on evictions alone, only to force tenants out when the eviction moratorium expires. With so many Washingtonians already out of work, we need to cancel rent and mortgage payments for the duration of the state of emergency, and allow a one-month cushion.
- 2. A two-year rent freeze on increases while the city recovers.** We cannot allow the crisis to become the death knell of working-class life in Washington, D.C. Landlords should not make back their losses on the backs of struggling renters, and should not raise rents while tenants struggle to get back on their feet.
- 3. The right to counsel in eviction cases.** The crisis is likely to cause a wave of evictions throughout the city; we must help tenants defend themselves in court by fully funding legal services and making an attorney available to any tenant who wants one.
- 4. Tripled funding and vastly expanded eligibility for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program and the elimination of annual limits on frequency and amount.** ERAP's small budget, high barriers to entry, and annual limit severely limit its ability to help a broad cross-section of DC residents. Expanding the program will help make it a pillar of D.C.'s response to the crisis. Residents who have claimed ERAP earlier within the last year should remain eligible for ERAP prospectively in light of the current crisis.
- 5. The enactment into law of the Reclaim Rent Control platform in its entirety.** The previous demands are all temporary, emergency fixes to a city that is already wracked by a housing crisis. One of the keys to a long-term solution to Washington, D.C.'s housing crisis is a broad-based rent control law.

"The owners of these buildings, they've received thousands of dollars which they don't deserve. They have raised my rent two times during this pandemic. In my building people have died from coronavirus. And the owners of the building haven't even come to clean the building for us."

—Estela, Meridian Heights, D.C.



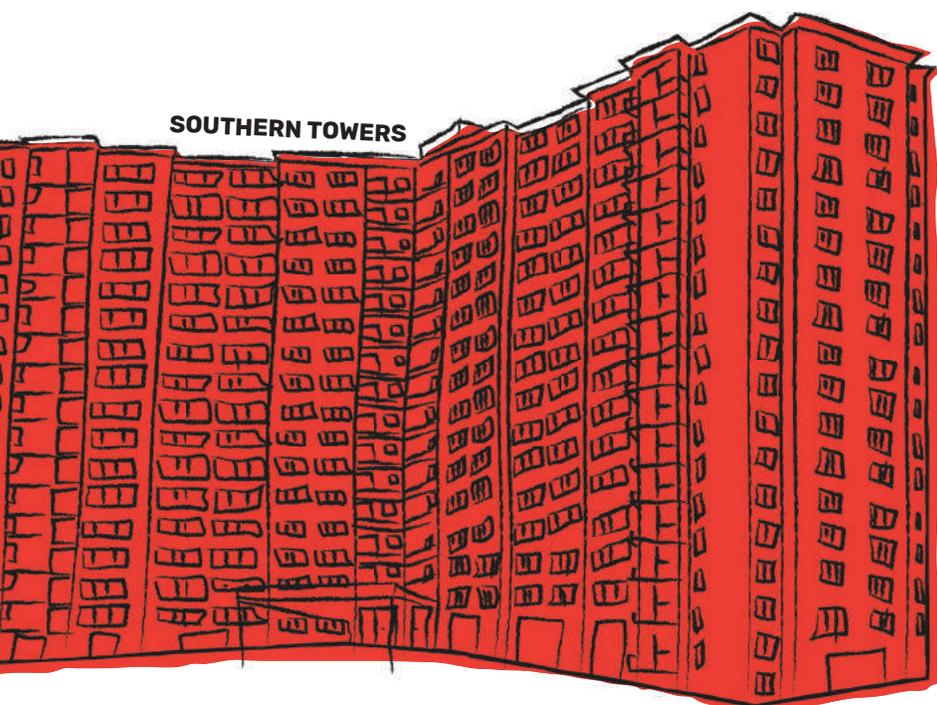
people up, they organized the same kind of structure Unite Here would set up in a campaign to organize a workplace: an organizing committee. Everyone who signed the petition was asked to sign up more people, mainly through their social networks. Tenants who demonstrated an ability to recruit large numbers of petition signers were in turn recruited onto the committee and assigned a list of other petition signers to stay in contact with. The committee only met over Zoom and avoided in-person canvassing at first, but despite these challenges, the structure worked and within a couple of weeks, more than 300 people had signed the petition and the committee pushed people to refuse to pay and prepared for public action. A few of our organizers had worked with Local 23 as staff or volunteer organizers, so we were talking to the leaders at Southern Towers from the beginning. It was no longer possible to dismiss talk of a rent strike as idle online chatter. We had seen friends with no prior experience in housing struggles rapidly become some of the most effective tenant organizers in the region. We decided we should try what they were doing, and everything that came after depended on our choice to try.

Organizing the Organizers

Once we committed, we realized that demand for help with organizing was overwhelming—partly out of the desperation of the situation, but also because people recognized that the crisis wasn't their fault. In the last week of March, one of our organizers appeared on local Spanish-language TV news and mentioned our hotline; in the next 24 hours more than 100 tenants called us asking what they could do to get the rent canceled. We assembled a team of volunteers to answer the phone and try to respond to everyone who left us a message. We connected people who called from the same properties, we identified clusters of tenants at bigger buildings who had signed the DCTU petition against rent and reached out to them, and we called up old contacts from our anti-eviction canvassing to see how they were doing. We started calling contacts that had gone cold in buildings we had been trying to orga-

nize to see how people's circumstances had changed. Once we put out calls for volunteers, we realized huge numbers of people in the DSA and other activist networks were stuck at home and desperate to do something to make a difference in the midst of this massive crisis, so we recruited as many volunteers as we could to make calls.

When we talked to tenants, we told them to start talking to their neighbors and make a list of people who agreed that they shouldn't have to pay rent (usually by signing them up to a cancel rent petition). We explained that they needed to confront their landlord and they needed numbers to do it. As the first tenants to call us spread the word, more and more calls came in, frequently from the sprawling outer-ring suburbs of Virginia and Maryland where we had little experience. But even as our operation grew, we struggled: some of our organizers worked 16-hour days but we still couldn't keep up with everyone. Some people struggled to connect with their neighbors and gave up, some people approached their landlord quickly without any meaningful



organization and signed inadvisable informal deals, some decided to just move, and many just stopped calling us or responding to our calls. Of the 100 people who called us after our TV appearance, we stayed in touch with less than 10. We realized we needed to refine our approach to keep people organized for the long fight ahead.

To organize at the scale the moment demanded, we needed to develop our methods. We were lucky to have close relationships with experienced organizers at Unite Here Local 23, who had jumped into the struggle at

Southern Towers, and they helped us rethink our work. Before the pandemic, we had already been looking at labor unions as a model—adapting their techniques for organizing a tenant union and rent strikes—but during the pandemic summer we took this further. Reflecting on the union organizing techniques deepened our understanding of what leadership means, the committee as an organizational form, and our ability to move people to action through one-on-one conversations. We created a much more rigorous training program for our organizers to share these lessons and adopted a new organizational structure to hold a growing group of volunteers in a complicated, often chaotic struggle.

We recognized that the campaign at Southern Towers was succeeding because it was based on organic leadership. The tenants on the committee were taking responsi-

bility for building, maintaining, and activating their own groups of followers. We understood that we needed to find people with that capacity for leadership and build similar structures in buildings where people reached out to us.

Reflecting on previous moves in this direction, we knew we had a lot to learn. In the early days of SOS organizing, we had aspired to build committees, but we struggled to recruit actual tenant leaders who could move significant numbers of their neighbors to take action. We had tended to work with the loudest, most agitated people we met, not the people who could actually persuade

and motivate others. Generally, the people we worked with were activists, not leaders: they were happy to confront the landlord or make demands of a politician or tell their story in the media, but they rarely had followers who would join them in the struggle. At best, we recruited tenants who would canvass their neighbors, usually to pass out know-your-rights information or circulate surveys and petitions about conditions, but we usually neglected to really train them to do effective outreach or recruit a group of people to help them, so these activists frequently felt burnt out or hopeless.

In practice, it was our organizing volunteers and not the supposed leaders in the buildings who persuaded tenants to attend meetings, sign petitions, join us for protests, or withhold their rent. Unsurprisingly, the groups we managed to get together were small: for instance, the first rent strike we launched included less than 20% of

"At least half of my neighbors in the Woodner work in hospitality. We are asking at the local and the federal level for rent cancellation. As the Woodner Tenants Union, we are showing up for our neighbors. We are distributing food and necessary products to the people who need it. We need this assistance to continue not only at the level of our neighborhood but at the federal level."

—Karla, The Woodner, D.C.



The protest at the Woodner on May 28. (Katherine Frey/The Washington Post)

the tenants in the building. When we did win concessions it was usually because we managed to get attention in the press and shame some political or regulatory agency into stepping in and helping the tenants. This is what most community organizers do most of the time, but it would not work in the face of the crisis we found ourselves in at the beginning of the pandemic. We had recognized these issues with our model before the pandemic and we had been looking to the tools of union organizers to overcome them, but old habits proved hard to overcome.

Witnessing the struggle at Southern Towers and observing Unite Here's organizing model from the inside clarified what we needed to do. We committed to building the committee as the foundation of our strategy. We learned we could aspire to actually move majorities of people, but doing so required a higher level of leadership than we had ever achieved. We learned that we needed to be able to identify potential leaders who had existing social networks or the will and skill to go out and build a network. As we traced out the social networks of our first contacts and branched out by distributing flyers and knocking doors, we tried to assess which of the people we talked to might be leaders, and then we tested them. We learned to give people assignments and see if they could move their neighbors. If they could, we focused on recruiting them; if they struggled but showed a will to keep trying, we worked on training them. We learned we had to recruit multiple leaders who could complement one another by covering distinct groups, ideally people they had some kind of relationship with already. We focused on recruiting church group leaders, pickup soccer team captains, grill-masters, organizers of service industry group chats, gossips who know everyone's business, and people who won their neighbors over with charisma, confidence, empathy, and calm under pressure. We got the people who could go get more people.

Learning to work with real leaders was a crucial step that made our work sustainable and scalable: it allowed our organizing volunteers to stop trying to talk to everyone and concentrate on moving the people who would move others. We learned that real leaders are frequently skeptical of risky collective action at first but that we needed to put in the work to persuade them, rather than just moving forward with a coalition of the willing. And in the course of putting in that work, we learned what it really takes to push people into action.

Going Deeper

An important principle we learned from working with the union was that to successfully change minds and move people to action, we had to go much deeper than we were used to. We had talked about building trust with people, but we didn't really know how to do it. When we talked to tenants, we talked about the situation at hand: what was wrong with the place they lived, why the landlord was bad, what we could do to remedy the situation. We believed that we could move people to action through reasoned argument—by convincing them that they were being treated unfairly, that they had rights that ought to be respected, and that we had a good plan to make a difference. But we never reckoned with the emotional obstacles that get in the way of organizing: resignation, hopelessness, self-doubt, shame, and fear. As such, in the past, we struggled to keep our contacts motivated over the long run and to keep people committed to the struggle when things got hard or our plans didn't work out.

During the past year, despite all of the obstacles the pandemic entails, we have managed to hold organizations together through the ups and downs. We did it by learning to work with people's feelings, something we could only do by understanding them much better, learning about their ambitions and hopes, their fears and regrets, their

jobs and families, their past and beliefs. We also had to learn to get a lot more vulnerable than we were used to, to tell our own stories and talk about our own feelings in order to build genuine relationships. And we had to develop the strength of will to refuse to let people give up and to keep pushing them when things got hard.

None of this came naturally to our organizers or tenant leaders, in large part because all the hegemonic institutions of our society promote an individualistic and competitive mindset to keep us disorganized. We needed to teach would-be volunteer organizers the tools to identify potential leaders and move them to action, and then we needed to make sure that volunteers were actually implementing those lessons. In June, we worked with an organizer at Local 23 to set up and lead a new training program based on material Unite Here uses for its own staff and members. We instituted a weekly two-hour training and pushed all our volunteers to commit to attending. We made people practice telling personal stories and asking open-ended questions and role-play conversations they needed to have with leaders. We assigned homework and expected people to immediately implement the lessons we were teaching and to report back on their progress. We covered some fundamental skills: social mapping and identifying leaders, agitation, recruitment, storytelling, inoculation, and pushing; and had people start practicing with one another in roleplays.

RELATIONSHIPS

If you're only showing up as an activist, talking about the landlord and abstractions, you're not building up a real relationship.

We need people to trust us because we're going to ask them to do hard things. We also need to demystify ourselves because we're not mythic organizers—we're ordinary people who made a decision to fight.

TRAINING

- **identifying leaders**
- **the committee**
- **one-on-ones**
- **agitation**
- **storytelling**
- **the push**
- **the steps of recruitment**
- **real commitment**

Organizers found that these trainings expanded their capacity almost immediately. The written materials and conceptual tools from the union were helpful, but what was crucial for us was having an experienced organizer willing to help us think through the problems and design a training program that made sense under the circumstances—and, like everything else, organizing our organizers into attending. As we expanded, we refined our organizational structure, too, making sure that every organizer feels like part of a community. Every volunteer is part of an organizing team of two to four people, ideally with mixed levels of experience, focused on a particular property or group of properties. Every team reports to a more senior lead organizer for a regular check-in. All the organizing teams are part of three larger “squads,” each of which have a few

of those senior leader organizers responsible for checking in with all our organizers, keeping them on track, and mobilizing them for big actions, with squad leaders meeting regularly to coordinate the project and the training program.

The methods and strategies we learned from the union helped us focus on what we really cared about. This was crucial for the situation we found ourselves in the spring, when there were far more people asking for help than we could reasonably support. We needed to make hard choices and prioritize. We decided our main objective was developing leadership and building structures that could mobilize masses. Inevitably, that meant we oriented away from any kind of casework and we got used to referring people to the local mutual aid networks or legal service organizations when they had problems that didn't lend themselves to organizing. Our strategies seemed to work best and certainly to scale up fastest in larger apartment complexes, so that was where we focused. We talked about trying to support tenants in single-family homes and small apartment buildings, but in practice it didn't make sense, and didn't pay off beyond getting a handful of people out of bad situations. Organizing larger buildings allowed us to reach large numbers more efficiently, and also promised more potential political significance because it brought us into conflict with larger, well-connected and economically significant landlords and developers. It was tough to foreclose some possibilities at the time, but in retrospect we would not have been able to do what we did if we hadn't also decided what we weren't going to do.



"When I was a little girl, my sister and I found a quick way to clean our room by pushing all our things under the bed and into the closet. My mom was wise enough to come in and check under the bed, check in the closet, find out that we didn't do it properly. And then she would make us do it the right way. I share that story with everyone because I want the government to know that they have to stop pushing all the things under the bed and in the closet. "

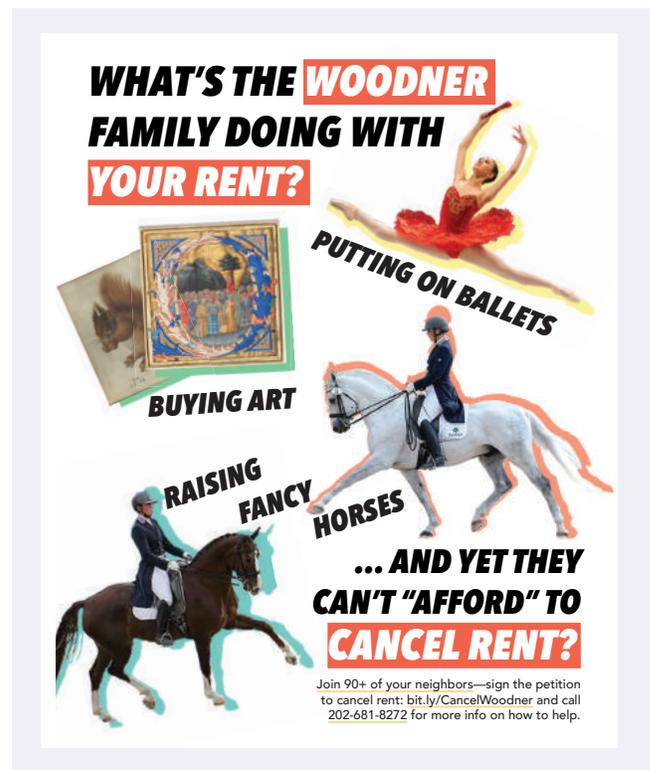
—Jewel, Park 7, D.C.

PART 2: The Course of the Struggle

“Food Not Rent”

Our friends at Unite Here helped us with the tools to build and hold together an organization, but we still faced major strategic questions. April 1 came, rent was due, and we still didn't understand what it meant to rent strike when people simply couldn't pay. As we noted in our March document, tenants' leverage in the rent strikes we witnessed came from their ability to pay: collective refusal to pay came with an implicit offer to do so if the landlord gave in to what tenants wanted. Without that leverage, how were tenants supposed to win anything? And if people simply couldn't pay because they had no income, what would it mean to organize? Wouldn't it make more sense to prepare for mass eviction defense and to lobby the government for relief in the meantime? All of these were good questions, and we didn't arrive at any compelling answers before we committed to join the struggle. As we started to talk to people, we came to learn a lot about how people were experiencing the crisis, and we worked out a strategy as we went.

At first, being willing to have deep conversations about the reality people were facing was more important than having a fully fleshed out strategy. As we connected with more and more tenants, we talked about the fact that people simply could not pay for reasons that were completely out of their control and that it was unreasonable and unfair for landlords to be demanding payment. Most people agreed with us so far, so we encouraged them to connect with neighbors and to then collectively inform their landlords that they couldn't pay and demand rent cancellation. When people were enthusiastic about making a demand, we helped them formulate a petition and make a plan to take it to neighbors. We didn't really expect to win any meaningful concessions this way, but fostering conversations about the injustice of the situation and the necessity of doing something was a necessary first step to building a real organizing structure. It also helped us evaluate which of our initial contacts had leadership potential. More often than not, the people who proved the most effective at moving their neighbors to action were not the people



who originally called us looking for help. We learned to recruit more intentionally, and we gradually began building committees in a handful of properties. We still didn't know exactly what these committees would do, but they were the basic building blocks that made later collective action possible.

As we talked with more people, we developed a better sense of the agency tenants had, however constrained it was. The slogan "food not rent," which we first heard from the LA Tenants Union, was clarifying because it reminded us that tenants still had a choice to make. People were thinking about how they were going to spend their last dollar, and we argued that they should spend it taking care of themselves and their families rather than paying it to their landlord. This message turned out to be more important than we anticipated. It wasn't quite true that it was impossible for people to pay; they could, if they made agonizing sacrifices, and frequently they did so. We met people who depleted their savings, skipped meals, took out risky loans, sold their furniture, put rent on the credit card, and stopped supporting sick and elderly family members so that they could pay their rent. Many people had lost some but not all of their income and scrimped and saved so they could go on paying at least part of what they owed. Landlords were also scrambling to lock tenants into exploitative payment plans that forgave none of the rent but bound tenants into paying full rent, plus the backlog—and threatened eviction the instant they couldn't.

The more we understood about the situation and the powerful pressures people were feeling to pay up, the more the idea of a rent strike made sense. We believed that if tenants refused to pay they could hold out for a better deal that would actually reduce what they owed, not just defer payment. Redistributing economic pain onto landlords could create pressure for them to forgive at least some rent and drive them to demand more economic relief from the state. We started working with committees to organize people to reject payment plans and demand better terms by persuading people to withhold their rent—and even to do so in solidarity if they were still fully employed. Landlords quickly let us know our efforts were working.

The Movement Accelerates

Wherever we started organizing, landlords started responding. They circulated insipid flyers about how we're all in this together, announcing that they would generously accept partial or late payments. They sent information about unemployment insurance and other assistance programs, while one offered to help people apply for jobs at grocery stores. They said they were trying to get more help from the government. Within the first few months of the pandemic, companies tried to get tenants to sign on to payment plans where they would agree to quickly catch up on their back rent, even when they still didn't have a reliable income. Meanwhile, landlords kept trying to intimidate tenants even though they had lost the threat of eviction, their most effective tool for keeping people in line. Managers went door to door to accost people who owed money; security guards tried to keep people from passing out flyers or talking to neighbors. All of this told us that landlords were

desperate for every dollar they could get their hands on. We were turning up the pressure on them effectively.

Local government tried to intervene in various ways. Some sympathetic city councilmembers talked to tenants and then asked landlords to negotiate without much success. At one point the DC mayor's Latino liaison came out to some of our buildings to try to talk tenants into paying what they could and got laughed off. The District used funding from the CARES Act to create a local rent relief program, and landlords started pushing people to apply for funds as soon as they were available. This put us in an uncomfortable dilemma. These assistance programs could clearly disorganize people by making them compete for help and turn away from collective solutions while putting money in the landlord's pocket, but we also didn't want to discourage people from seeking help. Ultimately, the assistance programs were so inadequate our attitude toward them didn't really matter. The process of applying was difficult and intrusive, requirements were stringent, and the vast majority of people we knew who applied were rejected or never heard back. Landlords complained that the application process was too onerous and demanded that the city start providing relief to them directly rather than making tenants apply, which it eventually did. We saw this as a positive development, since it wouldn't interfere with our ability to organize.

"Mayor Bowser, don't let landlords treat immigrants differently. Just because we don't have documents. Just because they think we don't belong here. Don't let our children live in the street. How are we going to quarantine if we don't have a place to live? They are asking us to wear masks. How are we gonna get masks if we don't have a job? Cancel the rent!"

—Ale, Buena Vista Apartments, D.C.



Another thing that became clear over the course of the spring was how many people were desperate for food. We linked up with local food banks, churches, and mutual aid networks to supply tenants with weekly grocery distributions at some of our buildings. We used mutual aid as a way for the tenant committees there to build trust and relationships with their neighbors, in addition to building a list and publicizing the rent strike. We pushed tenant leaders to take responsibility for the logistics of identifying who needed help and distributing donations so they could gain practical experience managing projects. Like the breadlines that snaked down DC's main thoroughfares, these grocery deliveries also radicalized people who might not be personally affected by the pandemic to throw down in the rent strike with their neighbors. Confrontations

with management and police also politicized tenant leaders who didn't anticipate that cops would try to stop them from feeding their neighbors, and built up committee members' skills and commitment—while also keeping neighbors' bellies full.

In the first few months, more than a thousand people signed on to the petitions that our committees were moving in more than a dozen buildings. All kinds of people were getting activated, although undocumented immigrants, who are totally excluded from unemployment benefits and many other public relief measures, played an outsized role. We were active all over the city, but particularly focused on Columbia Heights and Mt. Pleasant, gentrifying areas in Northwest Washington distinguished by a concentration of large apartment complexes and Central American immigrants. Wherever we went, whether tenants were desperately poor or comfortably working from home, we found people had plenty of grievances besides not being able to pay, from broken elevators and rat infestations to abusive managers, unfair fees, and rampant violence, which we integrated into our demands. The harm of these issues was magnified since people were spending vastly more time stuck in their apartments. And frequently, landlords would make concessions on these issues, which were cheap in comparison to demands for rent cancellation. We prepared committees to inoculate their neighbors against these quick fixes—which usually didn't last beyond a few weeks—while using them to bring even more people on strike. All the rent strikes we started in this period are continuing today and most of them have grown consistently.



Taking It to the Streets

In May, we started to think about how we could go more public with the struggle. We had reached majorities in a number of properties signed on to petitions and delivered those petitions to landlords, and we wanted to take the next step. We wanted to demonstrate the scale of the movement, both to local authorities and to the tenants themselves. It felt important to publicize the fight, especially as we started to think about the potential expiration of the eviction moratorium in July. But we were still nervous about in-person gatherings and protests. We started hanging up banners on the side of buildings, a tactic which infuriated landlords, excited tenants, and got a lot of media attention. We participated in a few car caravans at Southern Towers, the Capitol, and in support of a DSA-backed council candidate, but these were legis-

tically challenging, and excluded most people we were trying to organize. As emergency restrictions on businesses and public gatherings were lifted and outdoor social activities became more normalized, we decided the time had come to organize a few small, socially-distant protests outside big buildings on major thoroughfares. We planned these actions for the final week in May. And then the largest protest movement in American history erupted.

The uprising that followed the murder of George Floyd had a profound impact on our work. Many tenant leaders and all of our core organizers took part in the protests, and experiencing the violence of the state's repression and the outpouring of solidarity that repression provoked helped radicalize all of us. What happened at the end of May and beginning of June was a shocking departure from the orderly, routine protests DC witnesses just about every day. Watching and confronting the murderous racism of the state forced everyone to reflect more on the meaning of what we were doing. Tenants intuitively connected the institutional racism of the police to the racism manifest in housing segregation, slums, and evictions. We were encouraged to hear widespread support for the protests and comments about how we should go down to the White House among immigrant groups where sympathy for Black Americans is by no means the norm. The explosion reset our expectations about what was politically possible. We had been reminded that the state was perfectly willing to kill its citizens outright, in addition to letting them die in a pandemic, which affirmed that we were in a life-and-death struggle. The size and militancy of the protests of May and June inspired us and the people around us. Once the tear gas had cleared and the troops were off the streets, everyone could agree that we needed to escalate. The protests showed us that we could organize big, outdoor gatherings given enough precautions about masks, social distancing, mic safety, and hand-sanitizer.



In June, we started to mobilize. Our cadres on the board of the DC Tenants Union advanced a proposal for a mass rally demanding that DC cancel rent at the end of July, just before the state of emergency that included an eviction ban was set to expire. Once the union announced the protest, various left-wing and community groups flocked to endorse it. Having been to many small dispiriting protests where college-educated sympathizers vastly outnumber the people with any skin in the game, we wanted to make sure that working class tenants were the foundation at this action. This was not a matter of our aesthetic preferences. We wanted leaders from different buildings to meet one another and to actually see the movement they were a part of, to understand that it was made up of people like them, and to develop more of a sense of their collective power.

We pressed our structure into action: all building-level organizing teams worked with their committees to set turnout goals and identify exactly who they planned to recruit. In the weeks leading up to the rally, organizers and tenant leaders had hundreds of one-on-one recruitment conversations with everyone we thought we could bring. Then they came back for a follow-up conversation as well to make sure people came through. We organized our organizers to make sure everyone stuck to their plan and talked to enough people to meet their goals. The mayor announced the extension of the eviction moratorium a few days before the rally, but that didn't dampen anyone's enthusiasm. The structure passed its biggest test yet with flying colors. We were able to turn out more than 150 people from our buildings and another 50 or so people

out of our immediate social networks, and we estimated the total turnout to be a bit more than 300 people. We took over the heart of Columbia Heights for a few hours and marched up to the Woodner, the largest apartment building in the District. The numbers we could call out are small relative to the spontaneous anti-police protests of the summer, but they compare pretty favorably to what any local community organization can do, including groups with significant funding. But the rally didn't just measure what we could already do—it increased our capacity. Everyone in our project learned what it takes to move people to action and got to experience the rewards of putting in the work. Tenant leaders were inspired and raised their expectations. We decided we wanted to keep mobilizing and take the fight to the landlords more aggressively.

The summer stayed hot. The day after the rally, tenants in a house in a working-class Maryland suburb called us because their landlord was trying to kick them out in spite of the eviction moratorium and had threatened to send some of "his guys" to remove their belongings. With only a

PROTEST AT CALVIN CAFRITZ'S HOUSE



WHEN: Sunday 8/30, 5pm
meet in the grassy triangle where
Ogden and Otis meet, we'll go to:
WHERE: 1642 29th St NW
WHY: cancel rent at Tivoli Gardens
WEAR: formal black, for a funeral



- \$194 million grants given in the last 10 years
- \$80,000 grants to artists during the pandemic ... to pay rent
- \$0 rent forgiven
- \$0 mortgage

The Cafritz Foundation has no mortgage on Tivoli Gardens, and has refused to come to the table to cancel rent for struggling tenants who've lived there for decades. Calvin Cafritz, chairman of the board, owns more than three houses—including this \$7.7 million mansion in Georgetown. Why should he enjoy a quiet Sunday dinner when tenants are worried about thousands of dollars in backrent?



DC
TENANTS
UNION

QUESTIONS?
CALL 202-656-3607

few days' notice, we turned out more than 100 people to confront the landlord and his goon squad and ran him off. A week later, we did it again at a nearby property and stopped another illegal eviction. We could have done a better job connecting these direct actions to long-term organizing, but the tenants who had contacted us just wanted to buy time so they could move out on their own terms. Most people at these actions came from



the activist scene and we would have liked to bring more of the leaders from the buildings to the actions, but the people who did come walked away with a renewed sense of purpose and a belief that we could fight back even if the landlord moved to evict. The actions also helped us connect with tenant activists in Maryland to finally start some serious base-building work in Prince George's County, the poorest part of the DC suburbs and the destination for many Black Washingtonians priced out of gentrifying areas.

In the ensuing weeks we shifted from defensive to offensive actions. In August and September we organized a series of big delegations that marched on management offices and the homes of big local real estate developers and property managers, bringing the fight directly to their doors. We mobilized groups of 20, 30, or 40 tenants from individual properties for these actions by trusting our structure and our organizing model. Committee leaders had serious one-on-one recruitment conversations with everyone who attended. We pushed, we asked for real commitments, and we followed up aggressively. Leaders honed their ability to move their neighbors to actions and rank-and-file rent strikers got more connected to the organization. Marching through rich neighborhoods like Georgetown, we could all feel that we were becoming a power to be reckoned with.

Fissures in the Tenant Union

In the report we published a year ago, we discussed our participation in the DC Tenants Union at length. We hoped that the new formation would become the main vehicle for tenant struggle in the District, and we tried to subsume ourselves into it as much as we could. As we launched our campaign to cancel rent, we hoped to build the tenant union, and we were optimistic about its future. Unfortunately, it was not to be. Instead, our efforts to launch a rent strike movement led to serious conflicts with the nonprofit organizations that had played a leading role in organizing the

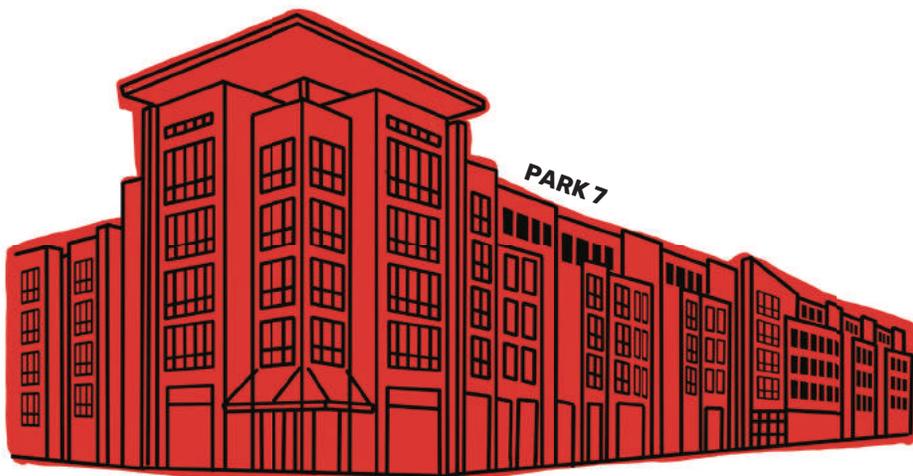
tenant union. In the end, these conflicts could not be resolved amicably and in September we left to continue organizing independently.

There had always been significant ideological, strategic, and cultural differences between us and the nonprofits. Generally, they are oriented to helping tenants work within bureaucratic systems like DC's tenant purchase process, the courts, the housing department's funding allocation cycle, and the DC Council. They act in partnership with government agencies, developers, lawyers, and financial institutions. They train tenant leaders to represent their neighbors in negotiations with landlords and council hearings and the like, not to mobilize their neighbors for disruptive collective action. They tend to be risk-averse and always counsel people to stay within the law. For the first few months of the tenant union's existence, we coexisted peacefully, but in the pandemic, our strategic disagreements became increasingly pressing. When millions of people lost their jobs and found themselves at risk of eviction, we did not believe there was any low-risk way for them to defend their interests within the system.

In the mad scramble to respond to the pandemic in March, the tenant union board had endorsed the concept of organizing tenants to demand rent relief from their landlords and shortly thereafter we started organizing rent strikes. Although they did not say so openly, the nonprofits had substantial reservations about encouraging mass non-payment of rent. They got contracts from the city government to help disburse rental assistance funds, which made them particularly reluctant to tell people not to pay. With the nonprofits declining to actively support the rent strike movement, most board members weren't organized into participating, and we became the only force in the union committed to the campaign. Unfortunately, instead of having a frank discussion about our differences, we let them fester. The nonprofits used the pretext of interpersonal conflicts to organize a purge of our members from the board, which ironically also resulted in even more members resigning.

In addition to the political divide between us and the nonprofits, there was a major institutional divide in the tenant movement. As we organized a new cadre of tenant leaders, there was no way to bring them into the life of the tenant union. Before the pandemic, anyone could show up at a chapter meeting, meet some of the leaders,

and get plugged into the wider organization. But during the pandemic, regular meetings shut down and never moved onto online platforms. We convened some calls about the cancel rent campaign, but because the nonprofits stayed out, most of the union leadership wasn't there to connect with the people who were getting



activated. Rent strike leaders were eager to link up with other tenants in the fight and expand the struggle into more buildings, but the tenant union wasn't providing a platform to do that. A preoccupation with more bureaucratic work—like passing bylaws, assigning various official positions, and relating to other nonprofits —distracted from connecting with the movement that was breaking out.

We decided to cut ties with the DC Tenant Union in September, and since our departure, we have been holding meetings for a new regional organizing committee with representatives from most of the properties we're working in. We have explained the situation with the DC Tenant Union to most of the tenant leaders, and none of them have cared very much. What matters to the tenants we organize is their relationships with the specific people who show up to help out with their struggles, not the proper nouns we use to describe our work. Now we're optimistic that we can build a new organization of tenants that's truly autonomous from the state and foundation funding.

At one point, many of us believed that if we wanted to work with working class tenants, we needed to work with established organizations that already had relationships with the relevant communities. We were eager to partner with the NGOs because we believed they were a necessary channel to connect with the people we hoped to organize. But we misunderstood the role the nonprofits play: they're meant to stabilize the system, which puts them at odds with our attempts to encourage unrest. We thought institutions would offer us credibility, but it turns out credibility actually comes from relationships and building trust with people. In the end, we didn't need anyone's permission to build a base, we just needed to make the decision to go talk to tenants, ask good questions, and demonstrate that we were sincerely committed to supporting their struggles.



"What happens to people who went into debt to pay their rent? Who are informally employed? Who are undocumented? No one should ever lose their home. If eviction is a public health crisis, during a pandemic then eviction should be illegal, period."

—Roger, Tivoli Gardens, D.C.

Collective Bargaining

Over the course of all this organizing, we had been making efforts to collectively bargain with landlords with decidedly mixed results. We'd had some preliminary talks with a couple management companies already, but they had refused to actually bargain with tenants—they preferred to lecture us about how they were good people, really. No one was willing to waive back rent for the first few months. In July, one company finally told us they were willing to discuss a payment plan that would cancel some of the rent tenants owed if they agreed to pay something. Tenants were willing to have a serious discussion on this point, but the landlord insisted that they immediately start paying full monthly rent plus payments toward their debts, all while tenants still had less income than they had in March and enhanced unemployment was about to run out. Tenants couldn't agree to pay money they didn't have, and the negotiation collapsed. At another cluster of buildings, the hated property managers were removed and the company planning to take over as new management has tried to strike a deal with us, but have not impressed tenants with their offers.

Sometimes bargaining functions as a trap. At another large complex, management hinted that they were ready to negotiate in September, and the tenant committee slowed a lot of its organizing activities because they believed the landlord was ready to listen. After a month of waiting, the landlord announced that they would not in fact negotiate, and the tenants were left demobilized, discouraged, and disoriented. That committee learned a valuable lesson: our ability to change things doesn't come from having a seat at the table, it comes from making trouble. Now they're recommitted to expanding the rent strike and staging direct actions. Sometimes we got significant concessions without negotiation. In August we marched on the home of Chris Donatelli, the developer behind Park 7, a building where we've been organizing for three years. A few weeks later, tenants were informed that if they had a balance, any rent they paid would count double and that if they paid monthly rent for October, November, and December, any other rent they owed would be forgiven—and they didn't even have to sign anything! The rent strike continues there nonetheless.

It seems unlikely we'll be able to resolve the rent strikes through private negotiations with landlords. Theoretically, we can imagine a deal about partial payment that would satisfy large numbers of rent strikers, but in practice, landlords have not been

DON'T PAY RENT DON'T NEGOTIATE SOLO TOGETHER WE ARE STRONGER

Residents of Park 7 are organized to support all tenants in our community and ensure we can stay in our homes. We are fighting to take Park 7 and Chris Donatelli to court for bad conditions, racial discrimination, and bad management. We started working together in April and now over 100 residents have joined our group. We are part of a regional movement of 15+ buildings in the DMV. We're growing stronger every day!

We are in an unprecedented economic crisis, and no one should have to choose between rent and food. We are fighting to CANCEL RENT and to make sure all our neighbors can stay in their homes. Park 7 has received support from the government in the form of forgivable Paycheck Protection Program loans and CAN help their tenants.

Chris Donatelli only offered a partial rent forgiveness plan because we went on RENT STRIKE, PROTESTED AT HIS MANSION, and SHAMED HIM IN THE MEDIA. While this is a major victory, we know this plan is ONLY for tenants who had a balance (owed money) and can now afford to pay at least partial rent. It's also over now. Start withholding your rent and join us in taking Donatelli to court to repairs the fastest way we know how. The original rent strike, after all, is what's gotten us these protections:

YOU CANNOT BE EVICTED during the pandemic. The landlord can't even start the process of starting a case until May 31, 2021. No matter what, only legal way for a landlord to evict a tenant in DC is to file an eviction case and then win that case. Before filing a case, they must send you a "notice to quit," which is banned during the pandemic. There have been zero legal evictions in D.C. during the pandemic.

THERE ARE NO LATE FEES AND NO RENT INCREASES through March 31, 2021.

YOUR CREDIT SCORE WON'T BE AFFECTED because your landlord first has to prove they can evict you in court, and typically sues and other public records themselves do not determine credit score. If you were sued for nonpayment, and you won your case, then reporting that debt would be unlawful.

MANAGEMENT IS REQUIRED TO WEAR MASKS (PPE) in common areas and in your unit. They must always give you appropriate notice to enter your unit.



willing to offer enough forgiveness to settle things. Ultimately, the issue will have to be resolved politically, and the fate of the movement depends on whether policymakers decide to sanction mass eviction, bail out landlords, or force them to forgive rent (or in what proportion they do all three). Landlords proved much more willing to make concessions when eviction moratoriums were extended and it became clear they would not be able to threaten tenants into paying. So far tenant protections against eviction have remained strong in DC, in part thanks to the strength of our organizing, and to a lesser extent its immediate surroundings, but governments have only kicked the can down the road and refused to offer any long-term solutions. We don't think landlords will make deep enough concessions as long as they believe they will regain the threat of eviction.

So the political struggle continues. At the end of October, we led 200 tenants on a march to the DC mayor's house demanding she act to cancel rent. Within the following month, the eviction moratorium was extended into the summer of 2021 and the District rolled out a new \$10 million rent relief program. This program had an important feature: it covered 80 percent of back rent that tenants owed, but it required landlords to forgive the remaining 20 percent. If this approach is widely replicated it could be a model that cities and states use to make scarce rental assistance funds go further and limit the extent to which they subsidize profitable landlords.

We are conscious that local governments are under extreme fiscal pressure right now, and what they do depends in large part on what kind of stimulus measures the federal government passes. In the most recent relief bill passed at the end of December, Congress allocated \$25 billion for rental assistance out of an estimated \$70 billion owed by renters as a result of the pandemic. Those funds now have to be parceled out by local authorities, and the particulars of how they do so will probably be a new front we have to fight over. The huge increase in funds will probably alter our approach to rent relief programs, but it is too soon to say precisely how. United Democratic control of the federal government makes it thinkable that a future stimulus package could include even more rental assistance, perhaps even enough to head off an eviction crisis. Of course, we won't count on that, and we've already

mobilized to ensure that the White House and Congressional leaders are feeling the pressure from tenants. We don't expect to get anything from the government without fighting for it.

We are still thinking about the particulars of our political strategy, but we're not about to shift to lobbying for some legislation. We believe political power comes from organizing the unorganized and that tenants will win whatever they can win by rent striking, fighting evictions, and disrupting the housing market. When we need to lobby, we'll lobby from the street.



"I work at a financial institution, and I see how it is easy for small businesses to receive money—including our landlord. But yet we are out here struggling, making ends meet. Many of my neighbors do not qualify for rent relief. Many of them are ineligible and did not receive any kind of governmental help. We come to you because you are empowered to make these changes for your people."

—Yajaira, New Hampshire & First Apartments, D.C.

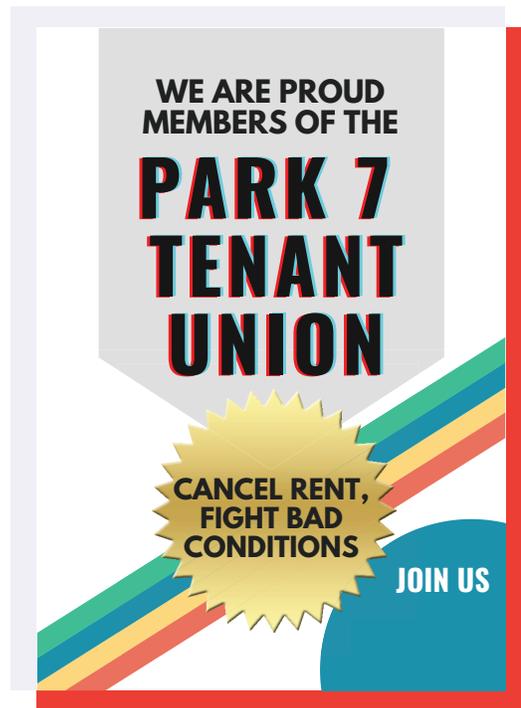


PART 3: Learning to Lead

Structure and Spontaneity

We've always believed that all important social reforms in the United States have been won by the rebellions of poor people in the midst of major social and economic crises, not patient advocacy within the legislative arena. As we faced down an unprecedented economic crisis, it was important to recall how the American working class won a welfare state in the depths of the Great Depression: after years of government inaction in the face of rampant unemployment, thousands of people stormed their local welfare offices, demanding relief with disruptive, riotous protest. Resolved to make economic elites feel their pain, they marched on factories demanding work and fought the police to stop evictions. These legions of the unemployed refused to back down when those local governments said they didn't have the money, and after months of prolonged protest, municipalities caved by doling out relief. Those local officials then turned around and begged state and federal governments for more, ultimately leading to the massive spending of the New Deal. Similarly disruptive protests formed the backbone of the labor battles of the 1930s, the long civil rights movement in 1960s, the fight against AIDS in the 1980s-90s, and the uprisings against the police of our own era.

None of these protests happened through the proper (legal) channels, and most of them were denounced by the respectable leadership that purported to represent people in the streets. These weren't initiated by unions, political parties, or community groups, but by ordinary people who defied the rules of everyday life and rose up against their oppressors. Before the pandemic, we would've held that these struggles were largely spontaneous, the result of enormous structural changes at work for years that erupt unpredictably. To a certain extent we still think that's true, but after the last ten months we've figured out that this kind of defiance doesn't happen automatically. Historical circumstances beyond our control certainly play a role, but having lived and organized through a major upsurge of protest, we are convinced that the will to fight needs to be organized.



This is obviously in tension with the prevailing winds of nonprofit organizing and community organizing, which hold that people "organize themselves" and intuitively know how to win better conditions. If that were true, we wouldn't be forking over \$2000 every month in rent. We obviously believe that working class people know

what they need but, after decades of defeats and disorganization, very few people know how to get it. Even natural leaders need practice and training but very few people living today have any real experience with self-organization. Capitalist society actively disorganizes people in almost every facet of their lives and most people need a push to break the norm.

So who can organize a rebellion? The institutions that integrate the exploited classes into civil society have never been willing to push the masses to disruptive action and we don't see that changing any time soon—just look at the calls for "peaceful protest" this summer from nonprofits and community groups. But being skeptical of institutions and mass-membership organizations doesn't mean that leadership isn't real—it just means that the leadership required to fuel protests and build movements is different from the kind of leadership produced by bureaucratic organizations. And in order to push people to act on the scale required to force the change we need, we've had to build up an organization based on organic leadership. Organic leadership isn't based on holding an official position within an institution and it's not built for representing people to the city council or the government or a grant provider: it's about moving people to take action.

"You're giving the money to all the wrong people. The money needs to come to us. \$600 stimulus check, some get it, some don't. But if we all don't pay rent, we all get evicted. Then what you gonna do then? We gonna live in tents? We gonna be homeless with our babies? Put yourself in our place, how would you feel?"

—Barbara, Marbury Plaza, D.C.



In the chaos of March and April, people still had to be convinced to join the rent strike. The crisis might have upended tenant's daily lives and made them more open to our ideas, but it didn't do our job for us. We still had to propose a plan, answer the obvious questions people had about our strategy ("Won't we all get evicted?" for instance), and push them to follow through. But from the outset, we understood we weren't going to be the most effective persuaders. When facing a tough decision, people tend to look for help from the people they know and trust and respect. We all tend to follow the people we have relationships with, and we can use this insight to guide our organizing strategy. The committees we established work because each of

those leaders has a network of tenants in the building. The structure of our organization is made out of real human relationships, not money, rules, and bureaucratic offices.

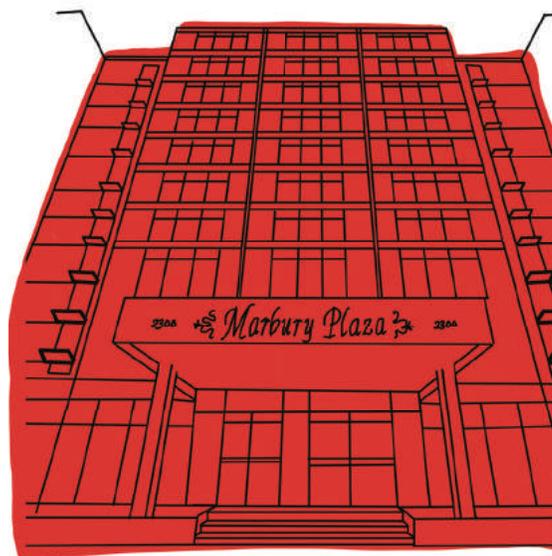
Our role as organizers is to persuade organic leaders that radical action is both necessary and possible, get them to self-identify as leaders so that they can move their networks to action, too, and then to link up with other emergent leaders. In the process, we accomplish nothing by abdicating our own roles as leaders and the responsibilities that entails—namely, to bring more people into the struggle and build up more leaders by teaching them what we've learned. That's meant moving away from the kind of vulgar horizontalism that tends to prevail in activist spaces and towards a structure that can actually sustain mass participation. Democracy depends on leadership: collective action doesn't happen if no one takes the initiative to bring people together, propose options, and build consensus. Leadership isn't zero-sum, and one person's leadership doesn't have to come at someone else's expense since good leaders should create more leaders.

Recognizing that has meant reflecting on our own role as leaders both within our organization and within the broader tenant movement. Once we accepted that we had to lead, we got serious about learning how to lead effectively. All of us come to this work with different skills, and figuring out which ones to develop and which ones we can pass on to others has completely altered the scale of our organizing. As our base of volunteers expanded, we came to understand better than we ever had that organizers must also be organized. Organizers have feelings too, and we

all need help overcoming moments of fear, self-doubt, and despair that knock us off course. Like anyone else, organizers need to be checked in on and motivated and reminded to show up if they're going to stick to a plan. Fundamentally, we are executing the same program with everyone, tenant leaders and organizing volunteers alike: we are organizing them using the same methods and training them on the same skills. This lesson has helped us relate to the people we're trying to organize and overcome the unhelpful binary of the organizer and the organized. Working within a mass upsurge has helped us clarify our role: we want to build an organization of organizers embedded in the daily life of the working class that can disseminate the lessons we've learned and help people get into motion and win what they can when opportunities present themselves.



We've been deeply moved by what tenant committee leaders have had to say in our regional meetings about self-identifying as "leaders" for the first time, and we're having a moment like that ourselves. The isolation of the pandemic has made building those relationships even more important to us. As a committee member said on one of our self-reflective calls on leadership and building the committee, sometimes being a leader means going first. We've really taken that to heart this pandemic, and come to understand our own role in the struggle much better.



At the same time, we're not oblivious to the divides, especially along race and class lines, that have continued to separate rank-and-file tenants from organizing volunteers. In part these are a product of the DSA and activist networks from which SOS emerged; in part they have been perpetuated by the organizing structures we've put in place, for justifiable reasons, where volunteers come together in squads while tenants operate in building-level committees. We recognize the problem: our long-term goal is to gradually erode and eventually overcome this distinction by plugging more and more tenants into the SOS training and organizing machine. Yet we also understand this problem to be a fundamental one on the American left, one that in the long term can only be solved by creating new forms of organization that don't merely replicate the whiteness and professional class makeup of existing left-wing groups. The ideas for addressing these issues most popular on the left today—for instance, corporate-style trainings or reliance on language drawn from academic scholarship on race—seem plainly insufficient and, in our organizing, essentially irrelevant. One thing gives cause for hope: as our organizing has expanded, so has the role of tenants in setting the agenda, making decisions, and shaping day-to-day work. We're committed to continuing that process, because without it the tenant movement can't expand.

Your Role in the Struggle

There has never been a riper time for organizing in our lifetimes. Masses of working-class people proved they were willing to disrupt the status quo this summer by rioting in the face of police murders, in the face of evictions, in the face of a pandemic. We believe we're at a crossroads the likes of which we haven't seen since the 1960s. This summer millions of people marched and looted and rioted and showed up day after day to protest police brutality. The CDC waded into housing for the first time and was moved to issue an unprecedented, nationwide eviction moratorium because of the immediate threat of escalating civil unrest. Washington, DC, which usually sees thousands of evictions a year, hasn't had a single legal eviction since March. More buildings are on rent strike in our city than we've seen since the 1970s.

Inspired as we are, we understand we have only won a reprieve. Millions are still at risk of eviction this year and will remain at risk unless the back rent they owe is forgiven. We have no confidence that the Biden administration or the congressional leaders will have the appetite to do what needs to be done, and we have no interest in being obedient junior partners. We've seen just how comfortable political elites are with a death toll creeping towards half a million, so long as the stock market rebounds. We are entering a decisive moment that will determine who pays for the crisis, and we aren't going to get a chance to vote on it. What we do have is the threat of disruption, which is the only thing that has ever won us the social change we've needed in this country. Rarely do social confluences like this come around for us to influence—so we should seize the moment and try to win as many victories as we can in this moment. The alternative is death, disease, and destitution.

In the past, we've shied away both from recognizing our own leadership in the tenants' movement and in telling people what to do. But the present crisis begs us to be candid: you should do as we have been doing, both for your sake and ours. The future of democracy and the future of the planet depends on our willingness to rise up and raise hell, not on registering people to vote or reforming the Democratic Party. Right now, right outside your door, masses of people are willing to fight back. Are you going to push them to do it?

