



# Abolish rent!

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### **Abstract**

'Homes for all' is, rightly, the prevailing strategic slogan in the USA tenants' movement. As a tactical slogan, however, it is time that 'abolish rent' replaces 'decommodify housing'. While 'decommodify housing' importantly points to the social problems of rental housing's status as commodity, full decommodification is a complex process requiring transformation not only of the selling and renting of housing for money but also the processes of housing production and management. This complexity makes decommodification as a tactic an obscure process and consequently an ineffective slogan for agitating tenants because of its distance from their everyday struggles. 'Abolish rent' instead points toward generalizing direct action tactics already essential in the struggles of housed and unhoused tenants, tactics like rent strikes and squatting. To generalize rent abolition necessarily includes fully decommodifying housing, but in connecting immediate tactics to long term strategy, I contend that 'abolish rent' is a more effective slogan.

### **Keywords**

decommodification, strategy, abolish, rent, tenants

## **1.**

Thanks to the work of, among others, the *Right To The City Alliance (RTTC)*, 'homes for all' is the prevailing slogan of the tenants' movement today in the USA. I'll call this slogan strategic: it names our movement's goal. Often, the strategic slogan 'homes for all,' is accompanied by a tactical statement, that 'housing should be a human right, not a commodity.' Following this tactical statement, some have proposed 'decommodify housing' as a tactical slogan, naming how we should get what we want (Baiocchi et al., 2018). I seek

to persuade comrades in the tenants' movement in the USA that we should replace the tactical slogan 'decommodify housing' with 'Abolish rent,' and to share with you why.

I've been involved in tenants' solidarity since 2011, when I began door knocking foreclosed homes, mostly rentals, with Rhode Island's *Direct Action for Rights and Equality*. Today, I write this provocation from Oakland, California, where I've volunteered as a receptionist in the Tenants' Rights Clinic of *Causa Justa :: Just Cause* since 2015. Like numerous volunteers in the clinic, I'm white, don't conform to the gender I was assigned at birth, and am an anarchist-communist. I might be the only volunteer whose parents are landlords. Our paid supervising staff are black and latinx. I've spoken with hundreds of Oakland tenants, mostly black and latinx. In the past year and a half, I've participated in organizing two eviction defenses, and gotten involved with an autonomous tenants' union, *Tenant and Neighborhood Councils (TANC)*. Since 2017, I've tested the slogan 'abolish rent' by raising it with tenants and volunteers in the clinic, chanting it in the streets and introducing it at popular assemblies, discussing it in study groups and on panels, writing about it online (Park, 2018). Responses have been consistently positive. In recent publicity, TANC has used a variation on the slogan: 'For lower rents and tenant control of housing! Toward the abolition of rents and housing for all!' (TANC, 2019).

## **2.**

Here, I mainly argue for this replacement of slogans using the terms of Marx's critique of political economy. I argue this way not because I think Marx is the only way to approach questions concerning the tenants' movement, but because the slogan I critique itself draws from Marxism (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). Readers will note I write of class, land, and capital, but not race, sexuality, nationality. I do not advocate reducing analysis of social struggles only to class struggle, though in this provocation my analysis focuses on class and property. In the USA, exclusion from homeownership has been a racist project and removal from land a colonial one, constituting the proletariat as racialized through the social division between landowners and tenants (Dreier, 1982). 'Abolish rent' is therefore an anti-racist and decolonial demand, as all communist demands must be (Park, 2018). My experience has been that many of those active in the tenants' movement are well aware of how this history does and should inform our movement. I request readers to please bear with my provisional, methodological reduction.

A brief word about class and property relations in Marx. For Marx (1894/1991), there are three major classes: proletarians, capitalists, and landlords. Those who do not own land, i.e. tenants, are not all of one class: there are proletarian and capitalist tenants (just as there are also proletarian and capitalist landlords), and they have few social needs in common (Engels 1873/1995). When I write of the tenants' movement, I write of the proletarian tenants' movement, understanding the proletariat expansively, to include all those who don't own (substantial) capital, regardless of whether they work for a formal wage. The unemployed person and the dispossessed peasant are proletarians, too.

**3.**

As a slogan, ‘decommodify housing’ obscures the tenant struggles out of which ‘homes for all’ must be won. To decommodify, housing would need not only to cease being rented to tenants as a commodity but also cease being sold to social landlords as a commodity and thus no longer produced and maintained by a capitalist production process (Prole.info, 2012). All this would be a desirable achievement but nonetheless exceeds the immediate horizon of most tenant struggles—against eviction and rent increases, for repairs—and thus makes the path to ‘homes for all’ unnecessarily mysterious. At best, ‘decommodify housing’ is a demand issued from professional tenants’ advocates to fellow advocates and professional policymakers. Meanwhile, the refusal to pay rent in various forms, whether by rent strike or squatting, is the most characteristic tactic in tenant struggles past and present, whether the struggles of renters or of unhoused tenants (Corr, 1999). Rent abolition would generalize these already familiar refusals; ‘abolish rent’ is the general demand immanent to the tactics specific to tenants’ struggle.

**4.**

The demand to decommodify housing is made because, it’s argued, the crisis for proletarian tenants is caused by rental housing being a source of profit, often through speculation. If only, so this argument continues, housing didn’t circulate as a commodity, then it couldn’t be a source of profit and couldn’t be speculated upon, so its price couldn’t be competitively inflated; then tenants could be housed affordably. Therefore, it’s concluded, we must shield housing from markets: we should limit excessive profits with rent control and excessive speculation with taxes; we should remove housing from markets: we should establish social housing of various forms, through social landlordism by the state, by cooperatives, by land trusts (Madden and Marcuse, 2016).

Under capitalism—including its socialist variants—there can be no completely decommodified housing (Prole.info, 2012). Some advocates almost admit this (Baiocchi et al., 2018). At most, housing could be partially de-subsumed, i.e. partially shielded from the profit-demands of capitalism. As I’ve said, housing isn’t only commodified through tenants’ rental payments whether or not these payments generate net income for the landlord; it is also commodified by being produced and maintained by a capitalist production process, which includes the costs of labor-power and machinery and raw materials. Alternately, and extremely commonly, capital expenditures are neglected and the cost is borne by proletarian tenants who have no choice but to rent more affordable but less habitable housing. Even social housing is exposed to the external pressures of profit and cost (Nelson, 2018); unfortunately, the fires at London’s Grenfell Tower (Temple et al., 2017), caused by, among other things, cutting costs in materials, are at least as representative of the fate of social housing under capitalism as any of the beautiful buildings in Vienna touted as exemplary by social housing advocates (Day, 2018). To understand how comprehensive social transformation must be to achieve complete decommodification, it’s useful to disaggregate the aspects which together constitute housing as a use-value and imagine them

decommodified: 1) land must be owned in common; 2) architects must be able to survive working for free; 3) contractors must be made obsolete by worker self-management; 4) construction workers, electricians, plumbers must be able to survive working for free; 5) materials must be acquired for free; 6) those who need housing must be given it for free.

Typically, the focus of this tactical slogan, ‘decommodify housing,’ is on the ownership of land (‘public land for public good’; aspect 1, above) and the guaranteed availability of housing (‘housing is a human right’; aspect 6), to the exclusion of its production as a commodity (aspects 2-5). It seems that many of the specific demands associated with this slogan are referred to this way because the slogan makes them seem anti-capitalist; but there’s nothing inherently anti-capitalist about, e.g., social landlordism. Living in the Bay Area, there is no shortage of stories of tenants exploited by and evicted from cooperative housing. Social landlordism merely decommodifies one aspect of the housing commodity while preserving the commodification of other parts, thus allowing capitalist firms which lose profits from one sector to seek profits in another. Thus, the behavior of social landlords is in one way or another, sooner or later, subordinated to capitalist social control—by debt and by expropriation when other factors already described fail. The USA’s tragic experience with social housing in the 20th century outlines this very story (Right To The City Alliance, 2010). Most remaining social housing is so-called affordable housing, owned by non-profit organizations, that few can afford and even fewer get hold of; this, alongside government vouchers that fewer and fewer private landlords will accept.

## **5.**

I think it’s a mistake for socialists, communists, and anarchists in the tenants’ movement to focus on the commodity-form in our propaganda, even though analysis of the housing commodity is useful for understanding how comprehensive social transformation must be and how many inter-movement alliances must be formed to win ‘homes for all.’ Instead, and starting from what I take as a widely-shared assumption—that we can only win ‘Homes for all’ through a mass social movement of tenants’ direct action—I believe the tactical slogan ‘abolish rent’ has substantial advantage. The most significant advantage is that it links the breath of tenants’ movement tactics to our strategic objective, which is why ‘abolish rent’ is preferable also to alternate tactical slogans like ‘social housing’ which are increasingly popular among self-described socialists in the USA.

Rent and rental contracts, including contracts with social landlords, are the immediate form through which landlords dominate and exploit tenants; for most proletarian tenants, whose wages are flat if not declining, the immediate question is the reduction of rent (Lotta Continua, 1973; Samara, 2014; TANC, 2019). Hence the popularity of campaigns for rent control, the growing prevalence of rent strikes, and the growing militancy and organization of unhoused tenants’ informal settlements (squats and encampments reduce rent to \$0) (Park, 2019). Consider the momentum of rent struggles in California alone: last year tenants statewide waged an ambitious, if unsuccessful, campaign to allow massive expansions of rent control coverage (Tenants Together, 2018). National and business news agencies increasingly

report on the growing rent strike wave (Lang, 2018), with a concentration in Los Angeles (Kuznia, 2018). The wave is linked to a proliferation of tenants' unions around the country and is now inspiring a new state-legislative fight for the tenants' right to unionize (Tenants Together, 2019). In Oakland and Berkeley militant unhoused tenants' organizations like *The Village* and *First They Came for the Homeless* have engaged in political and service-providing encampments, rallying allies to confront mass-evictions and demand permanent housing (Gordon et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the participation of proletarian tenants in efforts to decommodify can be effectively be promoted by the 'abolish rent' slogan—on the basis that decommodification involves a reduction and, eventually, elimination of rent payments. To abolish rent is to decommodify housing from below, by the proletarian tenant not the landlord. In the case of individual landlords, for example, rent strikes are often leveraged to force maintenance which landlords have deferred to super-exploit tenants by jeopardizing their safety; for many slumlords, deferring maintenance is often necessary to make low-rent housing an income-generating property (Smith, 1979); rent strikes call this income into question. In the case of state landlordism, informal settlements on state-owned land refuse the principle that state-owned land should generate income through taxation, rental, or sale to private developers. In one case of social landlordism, the rent is abolished and the housing decommodified by making common the labor, material costs, and management of the housing in an indefinitely socially reproducible manner.

RTTC's *Homes For All* Campaign identifies four models of decommodification (Baiocchi et al., 2018): limited equity cooperatives, community land trusts, tenement syndicates, and mutual aid housing cooperatives. *Cooperation Jackson* in Jackson, Mississippi is one of the few socialist organizations in the USA approaching rent abolition through mutual aid housing cooperatives, with their 'Sustainable Communities Initiative' to build self-governing eco-villages. This initiative would put title to the land into a community trust, form housing cooperatives to sustain the housing, hire construction cooperatives to build and a waste management/recycling cooperative to ecologically process the materials consumed by the housing residents. *Homefulness*, in Oakland, self-described as a 'sweat equity, permanent co-housing, education, arts, micro-business and social change project for landless/houseless and formerly houseless families and individuals,' also operates in this vein (Onion, 2010, n.p.). Each of these rent abolitionist projects respectively elaborate, in rhetoric and practice, on traditions of black liberation and decolonization.

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