

When European tenants' unions meet

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Abstract

Tenants in Sweden increasingly face rising rents and displacement due to housing crises in their home countries and often face similar challenges. The series of workshops looked at how the organizations are structured, how they organize, what their tactics are and how they cope with limited resources. The scale of the challenge facing tenants' unions across Europe means many organizations are trying to build at scale, and the problems of doing this were discussed extensively. There are plans for the tenants' unions to meet again.

Keywords

tenants' unions, renters, housing crisis, international solidarity

Introduction

The decades-long housing crises afflicting countless cities across the world have produced many changes in people's lives and many reactions against them, some unconscious, some carefully considered. In May 2019 ten tenant organizations from across Europe converged on Barcelona, brought together through the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and the City.¹ The purpose of the meeting was to exchange information and ideas between organizations that fight for tenants: Dublin Tenants Association (Ireland), Living Rent (Scotland), Sindicat de Llogaters (Barcelona, Spain), London Renters Union (England), Warsaw Tenants Association (Poland), Bond Precaire Woonvormen

¹ The European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and the City can be contacted at <https://housingnotprofit.org/en> and welcomes new members.

(Netherlands), *Mietenvahnsinn* Alliance (Berlin), *Sindicato de Inquilinas e Inquilinos de Madrid* (Spain) *Habita* (Lisbon) and *Acorn* (UK).

The choice of Barcelona was no accident. Many of the cities most afflicted by housing crisis are termed, in the jargon of their cheerleaders, ‘global cities’, marketed as destinations and as places to live. Few cities have marketed themselves as successfully as Barcelona, and so it has won the dubious prize that comes with all successful international urban marketing: its property is a good investment, and so it has become one of the many self-perpetuating property bubbles around the world.

Tenants’ unions are one reaction to the flood of capital into housing that has been taking place in many cities. It’s not only that cities marketed themselves, or had marketing done for them by empire and literature. It’s that those at the top of a stunningly unequal system need enough places to invest their vast amounts of money. The choice of property, in particular housing, as a place to park this capital has created multiple housing crises across every tenure in many parts of the world. Those who rent privately have historically been the most difficult sector to organize due to the individualization of misery within the landlord-tenant relationship. But they have also been the most penalized by increasing costs and insecurity in the new normal of global property investment. Thus, they have begun to organize in many countries and cities where previously they had not.

The encounter between tenants’ unions in Barcelona is the first of such meetings: the radical organizations that met in May are mostly only a few years old. Capital comes knocking on the door with an eviction notice, and most people move. But some notice that their neighbour received an eviction notice too, or that their friend also lacks proper heating, or that prejudice and bigotry pervades unregulated rental markets, or that everyone is getting poorer except the landlords. Slowly resistance begins to build, and the private world of housing becomes a public matter.

What do tenants’ unions talk about when they meet?

What do tenants’ unions talk about when they meet? They talk about how much they are in demand as the general crises become crises for individuals. In truth, most tenants in crisis don’t find fighting tenants’ unions. They suffer in silence, at least as far as the rest of the world is concerned, and they flee cities, leaving no trace behind, often helping spread housing crises to the places they flee to. But even the small percentage who do find a union are enough to create challenges for young organizations. How can unions train people up to help each other fast enough? How does an organization avoid being a service provider, offering another consumer service to those accustomed to consumption? Are there good ways to persuade those coming for aid to engage in mutual aid, to continue in the organizations once they have been helped?

A question that radical groups don’t always have to ask themselves here hovered permanently in the air: how can the organization operate at scale? The need for scale was never in doubt among those gathered. The opponent is always capital itself, and the victims

are so numerous and widespread, that it seemed self-evident that we need big organizations. That raises questions that are unfamiliar to many who are used to doing their activism in small groups. How should expansion be structured, how can it be democratic? How are new sub-groups of organizations formed? How much money, if any, is needed to fund expansion? Where should that money come from? What type of funding should people accept, what would they aspire to? Should groups pay staff, and if so, to do what? And how can organizations with paid staff stick to an ethos of grassroots democracy and mutual aid?

Many tenants' unions are concerned too about who it is they can reach. Who comes to them for help? Are the most vulnerable members of society able to access them? The type of outreach the differing groups do revealed some differences not just in organizations but in the cultures in which they are embedded. The *Sindicat* in Barcelona do little outreach but nonetheless their assemblies cross class lines and are always busy. To achieve the same in London requires enormous work and attention, reported London Renters Union. Unlike some cities, Dublin Tenants Association is not growing fast. If put-upon renters are struggling to coalesce into organizations, why is that? To what extent is it about conditions, to what extent about organizing strategies?

The organizations talked about what their victories look like. Some were small but considered valuable for movement-building: winning back stolen deposits or getting repairs done. Others were campaign victories, or in the case of Berlin, a huge popular street movement to demand government expropriation of houses owned by big landlords. In Barcelona, the *Sindicat* is able to get extensive media coverage in a national landscape where major policy changes are slow to appear.

But what would ultimate victory look like and what would it take? All are clear that the size of the challenge is huge, for capital never goes quietly. Despite the speed of growth of the unions, the movements of private renters do not yet feel big enough. Many people impoverished by renting seem resigned rather than angry. Organizing huge numbers of people to mobilize for change can only happen with a change of perspective in the public consciousness. 'I don't like paying this much' has to become 'They have no right to charge me this much', and so build to ever greater claims. Barcelona housing organizations claim the right to stay put, yet most people do not yet truly see this as a right. The logic of the market must be dismantled in the process of building movements of renters.

But one cannot always gaze at the big picture. It is an advantage of a meeting with a narrow focus on one type of organization that attendees can get into the nitty-gritty details of organizing: what kind of meetings do groups hold and why? How does a meeting feel? What does it mean to hold inclusive meetings that aren't just 'activist' spaces? Participation in a *Sindicat de Llogaters* assembly gave attendees a feel for how things work in Barcelona. The meeting went on for four hours as it worked through the cases of everyone there. Few other representatives felt they could do the same in their organizations while retaining members, but the ambition to collectivize the actions and campaigns was impressive. The *Sindicat* as hosts also took attendees to a housing protest in the centre of the city, where opponents of the commodification of the city occupied a road and tried to hold it through the night, bedding down next to a makeshift bar. While a minor protest by Barcelona

standards it offered a taste to the visitors of what an organized housing movement can achieve.

There was no end to the details that attendees found interesting about other organizations. What working groups do people have and who attends them? What legal constitutional structures do groups use, if any? One topic of debate was the importance of membership: a couple of organizations without formal membership heard from those who do what advantages they see in it. Some themes recurred throughout the weekend: how do groups collectivize their work as they help people? What kind of cases does the union fight? And from these unfolded other questions: is it better for building a movement to win small or pick big fights and risk losing? What are the best member cases to pick? What is the personal cost to active individuals of organizing too fast? How do you grow and become big enough without burning everyone out?

Organizing in the future

As the two-day series of workshops drew to a close, unspoken questions lurked beneath the surface, perhaps to be brought out at a future meeting. How do organizations engage with politicians? What motivates those who become activists do so? How are tenants' unions engaged in wider political discourses? And what should housing look like anyway? All the groups shared a conviction that the answer to that last lies at least partly with those who organize together. And since so many of the questions raised in the workshops were unanswered or only half-answered, the question of how organizations can continue learning from each other inevitably arose. The last session closed with a commitment from the assembled organizations to meet again next year.

Figure 1

European tenants' unions join a housing rights protest in Barcelona
Source: Author



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