



# Every renter needs a tenants union

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## **Abstract**

This piece focuses on tenant organizing in California, taking the perspective of tenant organizers rooted in contexts of antiracism, abolitionism anticolonialism. Aimee Inglis notes how tenant organizing is more important now than ever in the wake of Covid-19 as a third of US renters can no longer pay rent. Yet at the same time, today's tenant organizing and work on protections for the unhoused and those most targeted by Covid-19 rests upon a long history of community building. Most recently, new city ordinances have been passed throughout California as tenant organizers build regional solidarity to fight big real estate.

## **Keywords**

tenant organizing, movement-building, capacity-building, non-profits, autonomous tenants unions

We organize for the joy of place, of community. Because we cannot afford to move. Because we refuse to move. We stand on the front lines against a history of colonialism, white supremacy, and displacement, and against the violent logic that some people are expendable in exchange for real estate profit. We are tenant organizers.

Tenant organizing during this pandemic is more important than ever before. The crisis is testing every structure of our society, and the places we fall short are in high relief. Those who have always been forgotten continue to be forgotten: our houseless neighbors, the chronically ill, undocumented people, and prisoners. Relief for homeowners and landlords



has been prioritized, while tenants, many of whom are putting their lives on the line as essential workers, are struggling to pay rent or to stay safe. About one-third of renters in the U.S. could not make their rent on 1 April 2020.<sup>1</sup> But it remains to be seen whether tenants can become an organized force able to negotiate massive rent cancellation, or whether we will instead be saddled with mounting personal debt or pushed into homelessness.

I am thankful that the tenant movement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is here and, for the past five years, has been demanding universal rent control, waging rent strikes, and occupying vacant homes. In 2015, Richmond, California passed the first new rent control law in the country in 30 years. Fast forward four years and there are similar new ordinances in Mountain View, Inglewood, and the city of Alameda. New York State passed sweeping advances to rent control. Statewide anti-rent-gouging and just cause eviction protections passed in California and Oregon. We are just getting started with what this movement may be able to accomplish. But what does it mean to organize for rent control, or more broadly, for renter power? What is our vision for housing justice? And how can we sustain our organizing for long enough to get there?

Organizing for housing justice is not like other issue campaigns. The real estate and landlord industries quietly dominate American politics, and the rent control campaigns of the last few years have awakened this sleeping giant, which is organized to block any proposals for tenant protections or housing justice that cut into their bottom line. The California Association of Realtors is consistently a top 5 donor to the California State Legislature, on both sides of the aisle.<sup>2</sup> Nearly every city relies on property taxes as a major tax base and therefore has an interest in ever-increasing property values. The power of property rights disguises itself as common sense, like water to a fish, like the air we breathe. This comes at the cost of the right to housing.

On the other hand, renters are emerging as a political force in places where they have been historically invisible, from Sacramento to Denver to Chicago to Atlanta. We, too, are waking up to how deeply the real estate industry has a stranglehold on our communities, and to our potential to challenge this status quo. For the last few decades in California, tenant advocates have been engaged in trench warfare with the landlord industry to defend what little protections we have. In 2008, we beat back an attempt by the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association to ban rent control in California. We won, but we've been on the defense ever since. Today, for the first time since the 1970s, there is a groundswell of mobilization to expand tenant protections—we're on the offense and the landlord lobby didn't see it coming.

Rent control is common sense to your average person. In my work directing Tenants Together's hotline program and counseling tenants, I've found that tenants often assume California has statewide rent control, and it has been our unhappy task to inform them

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Arnold, "Nearly A Third Of Renters Didn't Pay By 1st Week Of April," *NPR*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/08/829850505/millions-didnt-pay-rent-last-week-amid-pandemic-woes>.

<sup>2</sup> "California Association of Realtors," *Ballotpedia*, Lucy Burns Institute, [https://ballotpedia.org/California\\_Association\\_of\\_Realtors](https://ballotpedia.org/California_Association_of_Realtors).

otherwise. Moreover, rent control regularly polls with majority support. In most issue campaigns, you can run with that kind of polling and expect to win. But in this case, organizers regularly underestimate and are unprepared for the onslaught by landlords and realtors, which comes in the form of public comment sections packed with opposition; mailboxes stuffed with racist and classist lies to stoke fear of tenants; waves of rent increases and eviction notices; ‘progressive’ community leaders refusing to speak on the issue; and countermeasures like mediation programs, or half-steps like anti-gouging laws, that present false solutions to the displacement crisis. Tenant campaigns have not had the funding—or, usually, the depth of organizing—to win. In 2018 in California, Proposition 10 to repeal restrictions on local rent control failed by nearly 20 per cent despite popular support for rent control overall<sup>3</sup>. It’s clear that we are in dire need of a real focus on organizing—not just mobilizing. But what does it mean to do tenant organizing in the 21st century in the United States?

By choosing to organize, tenants risk their current housing and even their ability to rent in the future. Fear is pervasive, but so is the unimaginable courage exhibited by many tenant leaders. These fights must be led by those most affected because, as wonderful as allies can be, they are not likely to fight until the very end: true community ownership of land and housing. When it comes to allies, tenant leaders have on one hand overwhelmed legal aid organizations whose hands are tied by federal funding, and on the other bootstrap tenant organizations struggling to get the funding and reach they need. After all, funders are often just as invested in real estate profits as our opposition, or too easily swayed by the promise of a quick fix.

Most tenants in the United States rent in private housing. Rent control is banned in all but a few states, and even in California, the Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act and the Ellis Act undermine local rent control and just cause eviction protections. Moreover, only a handful of states have statewide renter organizations. While there has been an increase in other types of community organizations taking up renters’ rights campaigns, it is expected that most of these will move on to other issues as political priorities shift. At a basic level, then, tenant organizing in the United States lacks the independent infrastructure needed to effectively mount transformational campaigns for housing justice. In comparison, labor organizing is lightyears ahead.

Tenant organizing deserves investment, attention, and respect at a level greater or equal to that devoted to labor organizing. Renters need a union in the home just as much as they need a union in the workplace, and they need the additional support of community organizations to help mobilize allies and resources for the cause.

There is no legal definition or system of recognition for what constitutes a ‘tenants union.’ But based on my assessment of models around the country, it is possible to identify some of the key things that a tenants union does.

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<sup>3</sup> “California Proposition 10, Local Rent Control Initiative (2018),” Ballotpedia, Lucy Burns Institute, [https://ballotpedia.org/California\\_Proposition\\_10,\\_Local\\_Rent\\_Control\\_Initiative\\_\(2018\)](https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_10,_Local_Rent_Control_Initiative_(2018)).

1. Tenants unions enable tenants to make collective demands at the level of the building, neighborhood, city, state, or nation. In buildings, tenant associations have formed to demand repairs, bargain against rent increases, or fight evictions. As real estate investment becomes increasingly corporate and international, some tenants are taking to Facebook to organize against landlords that own properties across a wide geography, like Blackstone and its former subsidiary Invitation Homes.
2. Tenants unions often act as a base for peer support—providing counseling services, accompanying tenants to eviction court, connecting members to attorneys, and running programs to help with move-ins and move-outs. For that reason, an understanding of existing law and how to effectively seek help from attorneys are central to tenant organizing, and can make or break a campaign.
3. Historically, tenants unions have played an important role in enforcing and expanding protections like rent control and just cause for eviction after they are won. It is a big political hurdle to pass and keep a rent control law in the U.S., and tenants unions serve as a check on landlord power to protect these ordinances from being weakened, or even to expand them over time. This has been especially important in cities like New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. In cities that don't have tenants unions, or where they are not strong, rent control protections often wither away; in California, Palm Springs and Thousand Oaks are unfortunate examples.
4. As a hub for organizing around renters' rights, tenants unions are key to mobilizing direct action tactics, such as rent strikes, protests at landlords' homes, social media campaigns against real estate speculation, and occupations of vacant housing.

In addition to neighborhood outreach and direct action, tenant organizations employ a great variety of base-building strategies. These include providing counseling services, connecting tenants to organizing efforts, researching landlords, and bringing together tenants renting from the same landlord or management company. Working on renters' rights means providing immediate support for urgent housing issues, while moving tenants from individual action to collective action.

Through tenant organizing, there is great potential to create community in a building or neighborhood where little sense of community existed before. It is these moments of solidarity and mutual aid that make the work of organizing rewarding in the long term, even as our losses continually outnumber our victories. And through organizing, tenants are able to overcome the fear of retaliation, blacklisting, and isolation. These are tangible barriers to getting involved in the struggle, and they convince many to move out rather than fight back. In fact, there are more people today leaving California than moving here for the first time in the history of the state<sup>4</sup>. Still, many see the struggle against their landlord as a struggle for

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<sup>4</sup> Kate Cimini, "Not the Golden State anymore?: Middle- and low-income people leaving California," *CalMatters*, January 10, 2020, <https://calmatters.org/california-divide/2020/01/not-the-golden-state-anymore-middle-and-low-income-people-leaving-california>.

their community, and for many, the social bonds of community are essential for survival. We need allies to help us organize and develop tenant leadership.

It is important to note the diversity of organizing styles, forms, and political perspectives within the tenant movement. My own perspective is rooted in the history of the all-volunteer tenants unions that emerged in the 1970s during the last wave of tenant organizing in California, which include many of Tenants Together's founding member organizations. At the same time, my direct experience as staff here is as part of a statewide nonprofit coalition structure. Our tenant counseling hotline is perhaps the best manifestation of this hybrid approach; drawing on the model of the San Francisco Tenants Union, we chose to structure it as a peer-counseling program in which most volunteers are tenants themselves, instead of staffing it with attorneys or other professionals. Our hybrid model is also the reason we were able to build on the current wave of tenants self-organizing by quickly shifting our focus to supporting the formation of independent tenant unions. While our staff of seven has a background in organizing, we decided in 2017 to shift from direct small-scale organizing and policy campaigns to supporting existing and new organizers in order to meet the increasing demand for a stronger statewide network.

One reason for our shift in strategy was a growth in the formation of new tenant organizations, both volunteer-led and through nonprofits. Though tenant organizing had been happening in some form in California for decades, around 2014 we noticed an increase of self-organized tenants unions, as well as established nonprofits taking up the issue of renters' rights. Previously, Tenants Together saw our role as planting this seed through local organizing, as well as showing up in the state capitol to make renters' voices heard. We are now in the unique position of training, supporting, and connecting local tenant organizing groups across the state of California. Our goal is to build tenant power that centers the leadership of low-income communities of color and aligns with other movements to end structural oppression, including racial, gender, economic, environmental, and disability justice; trans and queer liberation; and indigenous sovereignty.

While there are many challenges in the work of supplying tools for tenant organizers, showing up for them locally to support as needed, and tending to an ever-growing network, a few in particular stand out from our organizational vantage point. The first is supporting the long-term viability of volunteer-led tenants unions. Next is the status of tenant issues within groups that, while organizationally strong, may or may not approach renters' rights with the same longevity as they do the other issues they support. And finally, of particular concern to us, is how best to connect local groups so that they can leverage their power statewide.

We have been excited to see and support the growth of self-organizing among tenants against rent increases, evictions, and subpar housing conditions. Notable moments of inspiration have been the rent strikes in Concord and Los Angeles, the passage of rent control in 2016 in Mountain View (on a shoestring budget where no previous tenant and housing organizing had happened), and the increasingly apparent need for organizing at scale when big landlords like Reliant threaten tenants with displacement.

Tenants are forming organizations on their own in order to take collective action, as there is currently no process to formally recognize tenants associations or unions in California. I use the term ‘self-organizing’ to distinguish these grassroots efforts from those coming out of existing organizations (nonprofit or not). Self-organized tenants may or may not be a part of greater networks, and their efforts may or may not be structured horizontally. But in all cases, tenants are both the organizers and the organized, with little to no distinction between the ‘base’ and the ‘leadership.’

These new self-organized tenant unions are often formed out of necessity. Members are volunteers. There are no dues, or if there are, fundraising at the scale needed to hire staff is likely not a priority. If the organization continues to exist for even one month, members quickly find that their efforts are limited by their all-volunteer capacity. Unanswered phone calls pile up. The number of meetings required to make collective decisions becomes taxing. The same one or two people volunteer for most of the work, which is both unsustainable and bestows undue power on those who have the time to spare (a relative privilege that often falls on race and class lines). Tenant members move out or away from the area, and the turnover in leadership makes it difficult to maintain the organization. All these challenges and more contribute to the current and historical fact that all-volunteer tenant organizations come and go as needed and rarely achieve longevity.

Tenants Together, and our member organizations who face this reality, would like to see more tenant organizations exist beyond one campaign to the next and instead create lasting political power. Several ideas have emerged to address this need. One is the creation of a robust fiscal sponsor for tenant groups that would dedicate staff positions solely to manage finances, and possibly obtain grants, for the work. This would offload many administrative tasks that take time and effort from organizing. Currently, most fiscal sponsor organizations—if they are not already at capacity—have minimum budget thresholds that are much higher than most tenant organizations have (or ever want to have).

Another historically successful model for longevity is housing a tenant organization within a broader organization. The Community Tenants Association, part of San Francisco’s Chinatown Community Development Corporation, is one of the longest-running, and arguably one of the most politically impactful, tenants unions in the state for decades.

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention the possibility of formalizing tenants unions into a 501(c)3 or 501(c)4 nonprofit structure and hiring staff—a tack many (but not all) of the tenant groups that formed in California in the 1970s have since taken. Becoming a nonprofit does not have to mean giving up their preferred organizational form (e.g. horizontal) and decision-making process (e.g. consensus).

In terms of organizational capacity, there are many benefits when existing multi-issue groups devote resources to renter’s rights issues. But there are also drawbacks in terms of the larger goal of building tenant power. Many multi-issue organizations understand the basics of organizing but lack the familiarity with tenant issues necessary to help responsibly—to avoid, for instance, inadvertently getting a whole building evicted. These organizations also risk falling into a traditional policy advocacy role that relies on mobilizing an existing



base, rather than taking the time to involve tenants themselves in leadership roles. As well, nonprofits' interest in tenant organizing may be tied to grant cycles as much as need, and it is uncertain whether and how long the current interest in housing among major funders will last. Still, there is just as much history of multi-issue organizations sticking with renters' rights long-term as there is of all-volunteer tenants unions lasting long-term. There are a number of organizations across the state and country that simultaneously focus on renters' rights, environmental justice, immigrant rights, and economic justice, whose intersectional approach has proven powerful.

It would be hard to say that either approach to tenant organizing—self-organizing or nonprofitization—is superior to the other. The present challenge is to build understanding across these different vantage points, and to structure our work to respond to the very different needs of each of them. Tenants Together exists for the purpose of creating a strong peer-to-peer exchange network, an organizer training hub, and a cohesive political voice for tenants statewide. California is a big state; there are very few tenant and housing groups inland, and in the very north, many have just formed in the past year. It's clear from the lack of depth and breadth of tenant organizing in this state that we have a lot to do before we are considered a force to be reckoned with. As we build out a new organizing infrastructure, it is a difficult moment to achieve political cohesion, but also an opportune one.

## **Conclusion**

Many others have written about how deep our housing crisis runs. There are helpful actions that can be taken today (rent control, for example, is logistically simple and can be implemented immediately), but there is no long-term quick fix to this system that started out flawed and remains flawed. The creation of the United States relied on stolen land and slave labor. Consistently, housing policies have promoted the erasure of the indigenous population and the relegation of Asian, African American, and other communities of color to a permanent renter class, thus allowing the majority of White people to do a little better as homeowners. The opportunities made available to some were possible because of extractive, unsustainable systems. Americans continue to be convinced that the only path to housing stability is homeownership, yet the current system depends on ever-increasing home values that make ownership unattainable for many.

Community control over land and housing means the complete overhaul of this system, and the rise of another that understands the purpose of housing as serving people, not profits. It does not mean inclusionary zoning, funding for affordable housing, or even universal rent control. All these proposed solutions treat the existing private housing market as the core driver of housing creation and maintenance. But that market will take every opportunity to increase profits, and must oppose measures that reduce its bottom line.

Public housing gets us closer to the goal of community control; where public housing exists at a big enough scale, it serves to pull the market down to a more reasonable floor. This means that as long as public housing exists beside a private market, it poses a threat to

that market. It's therefore no accident that most new housing being built today is luxury housing, and that on the flip side of the coin, we are no longer building public housing.<sup>5</sup>

We are presented with a challenge today that is different than the one we faced decades ago. Real estate speculators make up a larger portion of the landlord class than before, sending the financialization of housing into overdrive. For a great number of these speculator landlords, the income from monthly rent is small potatoes compared to the tax breaks and sales revenue from flipping properties. The rent strike may be a powerful threat to a mom-and-pop landlord—and it is the tactic that won rent control in Berkeley in the 1970s—but today's conditions call for organization and coordination on a mass scale in order to threaten the corporate landlords and real estate speculators with properties around the globe.

For this reason, we need tenants unions at every level: building, city, state, national, and international. We need community organizations to be allies and provide support. We need organizers who are conscious of race, class, and other oppressive power dynamics to develop organizations that transform us from the inside out. We cannot win by replicating the problems of the current system. Organizing tenants unions will help us win important policies like rent control and deeply affordable housing, and perhaps even reinvestment in public housing. But even more importantly, it will help us transform our broken system into one where everyone has a safe, affordable home with dignity and security. There are no shortcuts to housing justice, and we are just getting started.

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<sup>5</sup> Nadia Balint, "8 Out of 10 New Apartment Buildings Were High-End in 2017, Trend Continues in 2018," *RENTCafé Blog*, September 21, 2018, <https://www.rentcafe.com/blog/apartmentliving/luxury-apartments/8-out-of-10-new-apartment-buildings-were-high-end-in-2017-trend-carries-on-into-2018>.