



# On the Autonomous Tenants Union Network La Red de Sindicatos de Inquilinos Autónomos (ATUN)

## Autonomous Tenants Union Network *La Red de Sindicatos de Inquilinos Autónomos*

**The Autonomous Tenants Union Network**/La Red de Sindicatos de Inquilinos Autónomos (ATUN) is an international network of tenants unions across North America which have joined together in recognition of the fact that as neoliberal capitalism operates on a local, regional, and international level, so too must our movement against it.

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### **Abstract**

This update focuses on the formation and current work of the Autonomous Tenants Union Network / La Red de Sindicatos de Inquilinos Autónomos (ATUN). A core function of ATUN is the providing of resources and spaces for tenants to reach common understandings of and strategies for the current moment—a moment that is characterized not only by the financialization and expansion of global real estate capital, but also by increasing mass tenant movements for a right to housing and people over profit.

### **Keywords**

Tenant unions, tenant organizing, housing movement, international movement, anticapitalist organizing

### **Introduction**

The Autonomous Tenants Union Network/La Red de Sindicatos de Inquilinos Autónomos (ATUN) is an international network of tenants unions across North America which have joined together in recognition of the fact that as neoliberal capitalism operates on a local, regional, and international level, so too must our movement against it. This update on our formation and current work was written because we believe that a core function of ATUN is to provide resources and spaces for tenants to reach common understandings of and strategies for our current moment—a moment that is characterized not only by the financialization and expansion of global real estate capital, but also by increasing mass tenant movements for a right to housing and people over profit.

ATUN's members are autonomous tenants unions who send delegates to our governing meetings on their behalf. There is no single representative who speaks on behalf of the organization, so this update consists of a combination of writings from individual ATUN delegates who volunteered to work on this piece, as well as writings from our website and founding documents, the latter of which were collaboratively written and approved by membership.

## **History and Structure of ATUN**

The Autonomous Tenants Union Network began as a conference call between members of various tenant unions on 7 April 2018. The goal was to provide a space for tenant unions to support each other through the sharing of experiences and strategies. The monthly calls that followed attracted a growing number of tenant groups interested in combining grassroots organizing, advocacy, education, and direct action. With each call facilitated by a different autonomous tenants union, ATUN hosted discussions on numerous topics that helped strengthen the work of tenants unions across the continent while also providing a connecting point for tenants to give practical support in tenant union campaigns across vast distances.

In late 2019, ATUN organizers began to plan for an in-person founding convention that would bring together tenants unions from across the North American continent. The COVID-19 pandemic forced ATUN to change our convention plans while at the same time making it even more apparent that ATUN was needed. The monthly conference calls transformed into monthly Tenant Town Halls over Zoom which were regularly attended by hundreds of tenants and organizers. Town Hall topics included eviction defense, media training, rent debt, eviction courts, and LLC landlordism.

A virtual founding convention was held in October 2020 to formalize ATUN's structure and finalize our points of unity. The convention was attended by hundreds of tenant organizers from around the world. In addition to discussions about formalizing the union, we also held organizing workshops, such as 'Building Union Capacity,' 'Intro to Housing Theory,' 'How to Start a Tenants Union,' and 'Rapid Response Eviction Defense,' all hosted by members of tenant unions.

The formal structure of ATUN was developed to connect member unions without forming a top-down or centralized organization. Decisions about ATUN's work are made by a Delegate Council, with each member union represented by one delegate (or, in the case of larger unions, a delegation which casts one vote on behalf of their union). In addition, ATUN has an Organizing Committee which is directed by the Delegate Council and carries out day-to-day tasks. Some of these tasks include updating social media pages and our website, planning monthly town halls, and connecting organizers on a regional level. Lastly, ATUN also has a group of Arbiters who are appointed to arbitrate any conflicts that might come up within or between member unions.

## **What We Believe In**

Members of the Autonomous Tenants Union Network have chosen to remain independent of nonprofits, big foundations, and government funding in order to build power that is responsive to and led by tenants. We are committed to base-building, especially among the most oppressed and exploited tenants, and to resisting the power of landlords and real estate capital to destroy our homes and our communities.

Tenants have always been in crisis. Since before the founding of the United States, property ownership has been a requirement for full political recognition. To be a tenant is to stand on the oppressed side of the class relation: we pay tribute to landlords because they own land and we don't. And they own land because landlords before them viciously expropriated the original peoples who still live here.

Today, as land is monopolized by fewer and fewer landlords and as rents continue to outpace wages dramatically, the crisis has engulfed formerly housing-secure tenants. Working-class tenants are increasingly immiserated by higher rent burdens, and people who are shut out of the housing market altogether are subjected to encampment sweeps, police harassment, and vigilante violence. Tenants live in neglected, unsafe housing, we face harassment from landlords, and we experience the trauma of housing insecurity and eviction. Black and brown communities in cities, often created by racist segregation policies, now face destruction as developers, politicians, and police create and carry out gentrification plans using mass evictions and other forms of state-backed violence.

Resolving these crises will necessitate overthrowing capitalism and establishing a cooperative political and economic system. As Engels wrote in 1872: 'As long as the capitalist mode of production continues to exist, it is folly to hope for an isolated solution to the housing question. The solution lies in the abolition of the capitalist mode of production and the appropriation of all the means of life and labor by the working class itself.'

We believe in the right to housing, the right to the city, and the right to stay put. We fight for a world without landlords and without rent. We fight to build tenant power in order to end the immiseration of the poor and working classes that housing represents under capitalism and to contribute to the struggle to end capitalism itself.

## **Our Points of Unity**

All unions affiliated with ATUN are asked to read and agree on our points of unity before joining the network so that members may all come to common understandings of the issues we face and how ATUN organizes in the struggle for a better world. The following points of unity were developed by founding members of ATUN before being collectively revised and approved by the attendees at ATUN's founding convention in October 2020:

1. We are organizations run by and for our members. We are not under the direction of paid staff, boards of directors, or state agencies, and we are funded primarily by our members rather than by grants or major donors.
2. We define a tenant as anyone who does not have control over their housing. For us, 'tenants' includes unhoused tenants, tenants who are squatting, tenants inside the carceral punishment system, tenants in nursing homes, in university housing, and in state institutions.
3. We fight for *tenants*, not for *housing*. We recognize that this is a crisis of tenancy, a crisis of our place in the overall system of social reproduction. Calling this a housing crisis benefits those who design, build, and profit from housing, not the people who live in it. Tenants are full political subjects who will not be liberated by secure housing alone.
4. We are not service organizations; we are movement organizations. As such we practice and build solidarity—not charity—across buildings, neighborhoods, borders, and language barriers.
5. We assert that the interests of landlords and tenants are fundamentally irreconcilable, and we reject any policy that attempts to paper over this conflict. While we do not rule out on principle the possibility of temporary truces and agreements between landlord and tenant, we advocate for a strategy of class struggle. Our overall political orientation consists of opposing strategies that encourage collaboration between class enemies.
6. We fight gentrification so that tenants can remain in their longtime communities and support networks. We define gentrification as 'the displacement and replacement of the poor for profit,' and we understand that it is purposeful and produced. Because Black and brown communities are specifically targeted for displacement, we view the fight against gentrification as one component of the larger struggle against systemic racism. Those who benefit from gentrification, including landlords, developers, and lenders, and those who manage it, including the police and politicians, are highly organized and need to be met with an organized, militant tenant movement.
7. We stand in solidarity with tenants in struggle around the world. We insist that tenants share interests across borders and we seek to build tenant power accordingly. We strive to adhere to an internationalist and anti-imperialist orientation in words and deeds.
8. We support demands for Land Back by Indigenous peoples. Indigenous communities are some of the most deeply affected by the tenant crisis. The system of capitalism and private land ownership in 'North America' is dependent on the ongoing theft of Indigenous lands and genocide of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous communities bring cultural knowledge necessary to our movement regarding kinship, community, and our relationship to land and place.

9. We support demands for reparations for descendants of enslaved Black people. We recognize that slavery and ensuing racist practices across centuries shape the conditions that tenants experience in the present.
10. We support fighting for anti-discrimination in housing practices for those who identify as LGBTQIA2S+.
11. We are committed to language justice and aspire to create fully language-accessible spaces. We believe everyone has the right to understand and be understood in the language in which they are most comfortable and that language justice is everyone's responsibility.
12. We organize democratically and we are committed to fighting oppressive behavior and systems in and outside our ranks. We seek a membership and leadership that reflects the people most impacted by the crisis. We are engaged in an active struggle against the forces of systemic oppression within our communities which restrict access to resources, education, healthcare, and housing for marginalized groups of people. Within our unions we commit to learning how to deconstruct oppression and oppressive ways of working. We are bringing tenants together across lines of race, class, gender, gender identity, orientation, ability, age, etc.

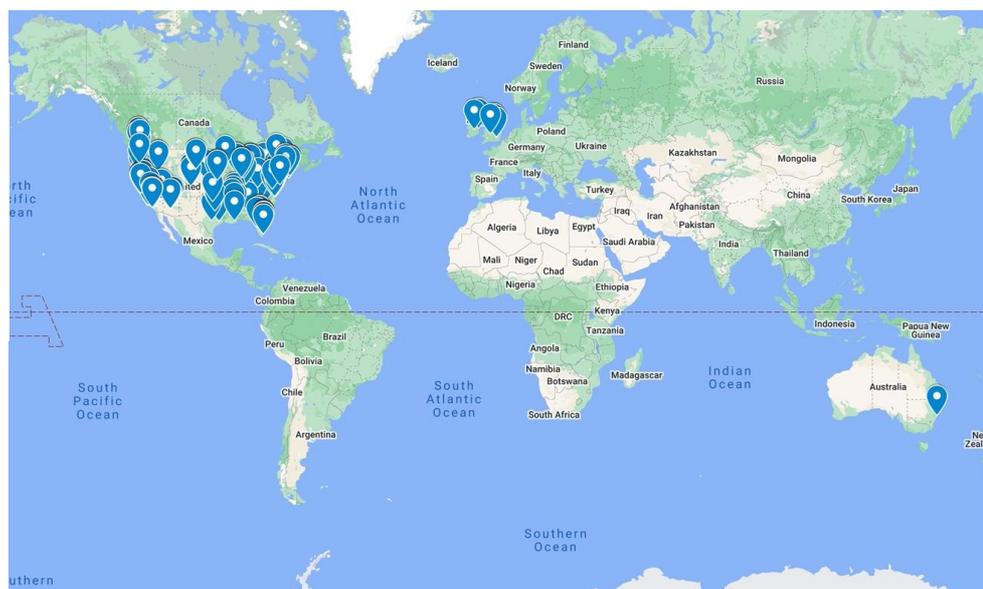
### **Current Work and Questions for the Movement**

Currently, the Autonomous Tenants Union Network is continuing the work that began before and during the pandemic. In addition to monthly town halls, we have also hosted book clubs and other workshops or training sessions. We have connected organizers in different cities through regular office hours and regional meetings, held international days of action, and supported the campaigns of member unions through social media.

In addition to this work, we have also been learning and reflecting about how we can build this organization, and more broadly, the international tenant movement. In just the

**Figure 1**

Map of locations of people who registered to attend our founding convention, by ATUN.



past year, the tenant union movement has grown exponentially, and although this movement is strong, we do not have all the answers. These are some of the questions we continue to explore:

- How can tenants organize on a global level to challenge the globalized capitalist housing system? What kind of structures do we need to make this happen?
- How are the struggles of tenants similar in different places? How are they different?
- How can we share knowledge and skills with new tenant unions and organizers?
- What tactics and strategies have been successful for tenant unions locally? How can we scale this work up regionally, nationally, and internationally?
- How can ATUN build capacity as an organization? What are the most strategic and effective ways for us to use this capacity?

The biggest accomplishment of ATUN so far has been connecting tenant organizers from around the world who are all facing common struggles. This alone has been hugely beneficial, as organizers in Lansing, Michigan and Burlington, Vermont learn from organizers in Houston, Texas and Omaha, Nebraska, who in turn learned from organizers in Los Angeles, Vancouver, and New York City. The next steps for ATUN are to continue to turn those connections into a network of tenant unions that are organized and capable of demanding housing as a human right. Today our homes, tomorrow the world!

