



# A union for tenants: Tenant militancy in Gothenburg as a historical example

**Hannes Rolf**

Center for Civil Society Research, Ersta Sköndal Bräcke  
University College, Stockholm

**Hannes Rolf** has a Ph.D. in social welfare and is affiliated with the Center for Civil Society Research at Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College, Stockholm and with the Institute for Housing and Urban Research at Uppsala University. His research areas are mainly political history and social movement history, and he is especially interested in the history of the labour movement and housing. Hannes's thesis was a study of the Swedish tenants' movement in the late 19th and early 20th century.

**Contact:**  
[hannes.rolf@esh.se](mailto:hannes.rolf@esh.se)

## **Abstract**

The Swedish Union of Tenants is known today as perhaps the strongest tenants' organisation in the world, with an established institutional role in the rent-setting system and a mandate to collectively bargain rents. What is relatively unknown, however, is that this system emerged out of a period of widespread rent struggle during the mid-war period. This was especially noteworthy in the city of Gothenburg. During the 19th Century, Gothenburg had become an important industrial centre and its population multiplied tenfold. Together with other groups, such as clerks and small shop owners, the workers formed a distinct popular class culture with organisational expressions and collective mobilisation that changed the social and political order of the city forever. One of these expressions was the tenants' unions, seen as a sort of trade unions for the rented home. Tenants' unions advocated protective legislation for tenants and confronted landlords, both with legal means and with militant methods such as rent strikes and blockades. This militancy reached its highest levels from 1932 to 1937. The collective mobilisation and organisation of the tenants altered the power relations between landlords and tenants, which can be seen both in the concessions made by landlords in numerous conflicts and in the fact that the landlords altered their organisations to defend themselves against the tenant offensive. By the time of the rent control act of 1942, centralised collective bargaining had been largely implemented and the collective organisations had become established and recognised interest organisations. The historical relationship between organised labour and tenants, and the effect of tenant organising on the rental market, are still under-researched subjects. This article is intended to both explore the historic rise of the tenants' movement and to show the very real historical conflict between independent grassroots organisations and political parties in housing and labour history.

## **Keywords**

Boycott, history of Gothenburg, labour history, rent strike, tenants' union

## Introduction

Close to the square *Järntorget* in Central Gothenburg, at *Olof Palmes plats*, stand several monuments depicting various prominent figures and events in the history of the Swedish Labour Movement. One of these monuments, the statue group *Genom arbete i arbete*<sup>4</sup> by Sam Westerholm (1986), has a small relief on the base depicting ‘The Olskroken Evictions of 1936.’ Even though there are plenty of labour movement monuments in Gothenburg and Sweden, this relief is the only monument known to this author depicting the history of organised tenants and the rent struggle in Sweden. This collective amnesia concerning the history of tenant organising is remarkable, especially in Gothenburg, a city where an influential and radical tenants’ movement emerged in the 1920s. The extensive claim-making of the organised tenants, often enforced through rent strikes and other labour-union inspired militant methods,<sup>5</sup> enabled them to establish a position where collective bargaining was seen as a necessity for the rental market. By the time of the rent control act of 1942, centralised collective bargaining had been largely implemented and the collective organisations had become established and recognised interest organisations.

Bo Bengtsson has pointed out that no other country’s organised tenants have come close to building a centralised tenants’ union organising as large a portion of the tenants and wielding as much influence as HRF (Bengtsson, 2013). While collective bargaining ceased during the period of rent control, HRF did benefit from the corporative system that

## List of abbreviations

Swedish Organisations

GF	<i>Fastighetsägarnas Garantiförening i Göteborg</i>	Property Owners’ Guarantee Association
HCF	<i>Hyresgästernas Centralförsamling i Göteborg</i>	Central Assembly of Gothenburg Tenants
HRF	<i>Hyresgästernas Riksförbund</i>	National Union of Tenants <sup>1</sup>
HSB	<i>Hyresgästernas Sparkasse- och Byggnadsförening</i>	Tenants’ Savings and Construction Association <sup>2</sup>
KF	<i>Kooperativa Förbundet</i>	Consumer Cooperative Federation
LO	<i>Landsorganisationen i Sverige</i>	Swedish Labour Union Federation
SAP	<i>Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetareparti</i>	Swedish Social Democratic Party
SH	<i>Stockholms Hyresgästförening</i>	Stockholm Union of Tenants
SKP	<i>Sveriges Kommunistiska Parti</i>	Communist Party of Sweden
SP	<i>Socialistiska Partiet</i>	Socialist Party <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Today the organisation is simply called *Hyresgästföreningen* (The Union of Tenants), but during the research period of this paper, the organisation was called The National Union of Tenants (HRF). It is referred to as HRF throughout this article for simplicity.

<sup>2</sup> Housing Cooperative Organisation

<sup>3</sup> Splinter organisation from the SKP and the larger of the two during the 1930s

<sup>4</sup> The name, which is poetic and somewhat nonsensical, roughly translates to ‘Through Labour in Labour’ in English.

<sup>5</sup> Defined as direct action methods used to make concessions.

governed rent setting as well as from the increasing housing standard and supply in the post-war era (Heady, 1978). The rent control was replaced bit by bit from 1968 to 1978 by a unique system where rents are set after perceived use-value, and collectively bargained on a central level. This has ensured that the interest organisations of tenants and property owners have remained strong with little need for local direct action. During the last decade, however, the established tenants' movement has been challenged, both from the right by those wanting to decrease the influence of HRF, and from the left by those wanting to once again increase the grassroots influence within the movement. A trend of separate network organising independent of, but often partially working with, HRF has been prominent in the last few years (see Gustafsson et al., 2019 and Listerborn et al., 2020). There have also been several conflicts within HRF. One of the most noticeable was when a radical Trotskyite tenant organiser with strong local support was elected as the local tenant union president of Gothenburg with surrounding areas and later expelled after claims of fraudulent misrepresentation (Risenfors 2020).

This conflict between local autonomy and centralization goes back to the very beginning of both the tenants' movement and the larger labour movement. Historically, the Swedish labour movement has been very strong both in parliamentary success and in the strength of its membership-based organisations. The organisational success is most likely part of the explanation of the parliamentary success and vice versa, but the 'two branches' of the movement have also had a somewhat problematic relationship with one another. Ingrid Millbourn has described a conflict within the Swedish labour movement that stretches back to the late 19th Century and the foundation of the social democratic party, SAP, and the national labour union and consumer cooperative federations, LO and KF. The main conflict was whether the state or the organisations were to be the main tool used for building the new socialist society and welfare institutions, and thus whether or not the organisations should subordinate themselves to a larger political project (Millbourn, 1990). Mats Lindberg (formerly Dahlkvist) has described the conflict as one between *movement socialism* and *state socialism* (Dahlkvist, 1999). As we shall see, the more movement socialist inclined tenants in Gothenburg played a central, but somewhat forgotten, role in altering power relations without which the institutionalised role of HRF probably could not have been achieved.

### **Figure 1**

Relief with the inscription  
The Olskroken Evictions  
of 1936



This article is largely based on my PhD thesis (Rolf, 2020) and examines the early history of the Gothenburg tenants' movement and its organisational shift from something resembling an urban social movement to a more institutionalised and centralised organisational entity. Despite this internationally spectacular historical strength, size and influence, especially since the second half of the 20th Century, the Swedish tenants' movement has been the subject of a surprisingly low amount of research. This is a bit puzzling considering the rich amount of source material available. The tenants' unions documented their activities extensively and saved vital documents such as correspondence with landlords, labour unions, and many other parties. The historical newspapers and tenant newspapers are available at the Stockholm Royal Library. Source material, including annual reports, minutes and correspondence, can be found in the HCF archives at the Gothenburg Regional Archives and the HRF Archive at the Swedish Labour Movements' Archive and Library in Flemingsberg. These and other archival material are extensively listed and described in my PhD thesis, for full reference see Rolf (2020).

While the Swedish tenants' movement historically is understudied, a few researchers have examined the subject of Swedish tenants and collective mobilisation. Hans Wallengren has discussed the role of organising in altering the power relations between landlord and tenant in Malmö between 1880 and 1925. Wallengren has noted that the growth of the labour movement had strengthened the tenants in Malmö even before the rise of the tenants' movement in the 1920s (Wallengren, 1994). Bo Bengtsson has noted that the militant phase of the Swedish tenants' movement in the 1930s was important for the movement as it forced the property owners into recognising the tenants' unions as a collective bargaining party. The position established by the movement could then be used to gain influence after the rent control act of 1942 had given the Swedish tenants a much stronger position (Bengtsson, 2002). This article builds on these assumptions and argues that the roots of the historically strong position of the Swedish tenants' movement can be found in the contentious period of the 1920s and 1930s, when the organised tenants by collective force established a position where either collective bargaining or rent control was deemed necessary by both the organised landlords and the state. This article is intended to both explore the historical rise

## Figure 2

Propaganda car used by Rambergsstadens Tenants' Union, announcing the improvements in housing conditions, including improved gardening, that has been the result of the tenants' unions work



of the tenants' movement and show the very real historical conflict between independent grassroots organisations and political parties in housing and labour history. Given the state of today's increasingly unequal housing market, it is the strong belief of this author that there is cause for a reminder of the role of direct action in the history of housing movements.

### **Organised tenants in history**

In Eric Hobsbawm's article *Labour in the Great City* from 1988, tenants' movements are described as fleeting phenomena, who 'flicker up and down' (Hobsbawm, 1988). From a British perspective this is in large parts correct, but tenants' organisations in other countries have shown much better organisational consistency. Even though the origin of the earliest Swedish tenants' unions in the mid-war period were similar to several other countries, with militant local organisations emerging in various (mostly industrial) urban areas of Sweden and large rental conflicts, a process of organisational centralisation under the umbrella of HRF began early. Since the 1920s, the Swedish tenants' movement has been, from an international perspective, exceptionally centralised, with central organisations including all but a few fringe tenants' unions (Rolf, 2016). This example shows that the 'flickering' character of tenants' movements are not necessarily true; organised tenants can build stable organisations. Germany is, of course, another example of a country with a historically large tenants' central organisation (Führer, 2000).

The important influence of the labour organisations affected the organisations on the rental market, and both the Swedish organised landlords and the tenants came to build their organisations after labour market organisational models and came to understand their relation as part of a class struggle narrative. The tenants' movements' strong ties to the labour movement influenced its organisational logic and its *contentious repertoire*. The concept of *contentious repertoire*, used within Contentious Politics Studies (CPS), developed mainly in the works of Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, is a useful tool to explain the methods employed by the tenants in their collective mobilisation. A repertoire in this sense can be seen as common norms for how to act during collective mobilisation such as during a workplace conflict, an election campaign or a political meeting. These ways of acting, or *contentious performances*, are in turn modified to fit the particular circumstances of the situation, making the repertoires constantly evolving (Tarrow & Tilly, 2015; Tilly, 1986; Tilly, 2008). Tilly has noted a change of repertoire that came with the rise of industrial capitalism, where protests became more disciplined and linked to certain groups and to organisations (Tilly, 1995). The Swedish tenants' movement can be seen as a product of this, with close ties particularly to the labour movement and thus picking up *its* repertoire of organising, holding mass meetings and marches and sending in petitions for change. The organised tenants also established three militant methods: *rent strikes*, the picket-like boycott actions called *property* or *rental blockades*, and the *mass termination of contracts*.

**Figure 3**

Tenants meeting  
in stairwells to discuss a  
landlord's proposition  
in a conflict, 1927



Manuel Castells, among others, has discussed the role of organised tenants. Taking the Glasgow rent strikes of 1915 as an example, he notes that, even though the movement was working-class based, it cannot be viewed as a struggle against capital in the traditional sense. Castells, basing his argument on the works of Melling, notes that the industrial capitalists were often supportive of the demands for state subsidised housing as the lack of housing for the workers affected the supply of workforce. The landlords were, just like in Gothenburg in the 1930s, often small-scale owners with large loans with high interest. However, Castells notes that:

The level of social consciousness and organisation reached by the working class through the struggle, the capacity of the labour movement to impose its own conditions on the process of consumption, and the definition of new social rights to which the state should respond were all major achievements for the working class as a class (Castells, 1983).

Thus, even though the rent strike was not aimed at industrial capital it strengthened organised labour through new means of organisation. This observation by Castells most likely holds true for Gothenburg as well, where the strong and militant tenants' movement strengthened the working class, withholding that organised struggle was relevant not only at the workplace but also at home. Bo Bengtsson has pointed out that while labour unions often have the capacity to disrupt vital flows in the economy, the militant methods of organised tenants do not possess the same disruptive qualities (Bengtsson, 2002). They can however have an effect on the radicalisation of tenants in a given area and thus affect the general class relations. Philipp Reick has noted that urban social movements are often considered a post-war phenomenon. However, Reick argues, the history of urban social movements stretches much longer back in time. The mobilisation of urban residents in the 19th and early 20th Centuries also tended to be on issues such as urban space and urban politics. Housing was one of these

issues and Reick argues that the tenants' movements in various cities were examples of such early urban social movements. The organised tenants were not only concerned with the rent levels but also with a wide variety of issues concerning the control of urban space (Reick, 2020).

Seán Damer disagrees with Manuel Castells when it comes to the issue of the Glasgow tenants and class struggle. While the Glasgow tenants were not struggling with industrial capital, Damer points out that they did confront the rentier capital that was at the time dominant in their lives as well as the local state apparatus (that was) acting in the interests of this capital. Damer argues against the interpretation of tenant organising in terms of social movements and instead views it as part of a wider class struggle (Damer, 2000; Damer, 2018). Gray (2018) agrees with Damer and argues that the housing struggle is of especial importance in contemporary anti-capitalistic organising. While I agree that the rent struggle can be seen as part of a wider class struggle, and certainly was interpreted as such by early 20th Century organised tenants, I find that social movement theory such as the aforementioned CPS is useful for interpreting the organising of tenants and the results that thereby followed. As I will show in this article, something did change when the everyday struggle between landlord and tenant took on organised forms. This was more true in Gothenburg than elsewhere.

### **Tenant Mobilisation and Strategies**

The marketisation of the social relations that came with the advent of capitalism in Sweden had changed the old, embedded economy forever and resulted in a wave of urbanisation. Gothenburg, like so many other cities, changed dramatically during the industrialisation and urbanisation of the 19th Century. At the start of the century the city had about 13,000 inhabitants. By the outbreak of WWI this number had multiplied almost 14 times, and the city counted 180,000 inhabitants (Nylander, 2015). The population would continue to grow during the mid-war period, counting almost 300,000 inhabitants by 1940 (Göteborgs stads statistiska kontor, 1969). New working-class neighbourhoods were built, often with privately owned houses in the cheap *landshövdingehus*-style.<sup>6</sup> The large influx of workers in the early 20th Century was more than the philanthropic and patriarchal systems of the previous century could manage, and a radicalised labour movement emerged in the city. Based on local union activity, the Gothenburg labour movement had a somewhat ambiguous relationship to the growing Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP) that tended to have a more hesitant stance toward working class militancy (Stråth, 1982).

A plethora of politically diverse housing reformists appeared in the late-19th and early 20th Centuries (Delan, 2015), driven by a wish to improve housing conditions, both in the countryside and in the cities. It was in this milieu that tenants' unions first appeared. Several attempts to organise tenants during the late-19th Century fell short of achieving lasting tenants' unions. The first known attempt at tenant organising in Sweden ever was in 1875, when a tenants' union was formed at a public meeting in Stockholm. This union soon

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<sup>6</sup> One base level built in stone and two wooden levels above. The architectural style is special for Gothenburg housing built between 1875 and 1940.

evolved into a cooperative housing company. Several similar attempts were made in Stockholm and a few other places during the following decades. The first known tenants' union in Gothenburg was formed in 1899 and followed a similar pattern, where tenants' unions were formed with much enthusiasm but then failed to develop a lasting organisational structure. What is interesting with the 19<sup>th</sup> Century tenants' organisations are that they viewed forming housing cooperatives as a sort of protest action aimed at the landlords. The militant methods used by the later, more labour movement-oriented tenants' organisations of the mid-war period was not used during these early decades (Jacobsson, 2000; Rolf, 2020).

An organisational wave swept through Sweden around 1907, and tenants' unions were formed in several cities. This wave coincided with a surge in union membership and the tenants' unions all disappeared after the defeat of the labour movement in the general strike of 1909, a period where labour union membership also plummeted (Rolf, 2020; Wallengren, 1994; Åmark, 1986). The first stable tenants' unions in Sweden were formed during World War I. The movement expanded during the six years of rent control following the 1917 rent control act. HRF was founded in 1923, the same year as the rent control law was discontinued. This national organisation was intended both to coordinate the work between the various tenants' unions in different cities and as an advocacy organisation for tenants' rights. However, the attempts to bring the different tenants' unions together in one national movement were not without their difficulties. Two fractions emerged, one more reformist with an inclination toward housing cooperatives, and the second more militant with close ties to the labour unions. The first faction was more prominent in Stockholm and the second one in Gothenburg (Hultén, 1973; Rolf, 2020).

Internationally, tenant organising has a long history and various campaigns have had different outcomes and faced different levels of state repression. Tenant collective action from is by all accounts an old phenomenon. In the Jewish ghetto in Rome in the 17th Century, a system called *tekanah*, where houses were purposefully left untenanted to keep rents down, was put in place by the community (Willis, 1950). Rent strikes also have a long history. In Bolton, Lancashire, a rent strike occurred as early as 1826 among hand-loom weavers (Englander, 1983). Organisations for urban renters seem to have existed as early as the 1860s in Germany and England (Englander, 1983; Führer, 2000). Besides urban rent strikes, rural rent strikes among tenant farmers occurred several times during the 19th Century (Clark, 1979; Heskins, 1983, Olofsson, 2008). The terms 'tenants' union' and 'tenants' association' in various versions were and are still in some cases used for organisations both of tenant farmers and of urban renters, which is important to remember when discussing these concepts in a historical setting.

Buenos Aires and New York both saw large rent strikes in 1907 (Poy, 2019). During the housing crisis of World War I, caused by an influx of munitions workers, tenant militancy surged and became especially prominent in and around Glasgow by 1915, lasting well into the 1920s. Rent protests also occurred in places such as Birmingham, London, Birkenhead, Belfast and Northampton. One result was the Rent Act of 1915, restricting rent and mortgage increases (Damer, 2000; Melling, 1983). The war also increased the tension and resulted in struggles between tenants and landlords in Berlin, resulting in new legislation

favouring the tenants in 1917 (Forsell, 2003). This legislation, like the British one, was aimed at managing the war effort. In New York, rent strikes had begun shortly before the U.S. entry into WWI and continued after the war. Local rent legislation was imposed in 1920 (Fogelson, 2013). The social unrest caused by the tenants' collective mobilisation during and at the end of the war seems to have been at least partially the cause of rent control in various countries (Willis, 1950).

Another period of widespread unrest on the rental market occurred (during) in the early 1930s, following the wage drop and increased unemployment of the global recession. Elinor Chisholm has shown connections between the unemployment movement and tenant protests in New Zealand during the depression, and similar connections seem to have existed in Sweden (Chisholm, 2016; Rolf, 2020). New York and London once again faced an increase in rent strikes (Bradley, 2014; Naison, 1986). In Barcelona, massive rent strikes started in late-1930 and continued into 1931. Over 100,000 tenants eventually went on rent strike, a massive movement with ties to the large anarcho-syndicalist movement in the city. Severe state repression broke the strike, but it had long term radicalising effects that would be seen a few years later during the attempted revolution of 1936 (Ealham, 2010). In Berlin, a session of rent strikes broke out in 1932 and continued into 1933 until the strikes were broken up and their leaders imprisoned after the NSDAP takeover (Lengemann, 2015; Rada 1991). In Scandinavia apart from Sweden, Norway was affected by tenant militancy with several rent strikes and blockades in eastern Oslo during the second half of the 1930s (Annaniassen, 1991).

As can be seen from these examples, the Swedish tenants' movement was not in any way an isolated phenomenon but instead part of an international movement during a period which saw several episodes of tenant militancy throughout the world. Gothenburg was, with its population level taken into account, the city with the largest tenants' movement in Sweden during the mid-war period. The first tenants' union in Gothenburg that lasted longer than a couple of years was formed by factory workers living in Gamlestaden in 1917. During the early 1920s other local tenants' unions were formed in the various working-class neighbourhoods across Gothenburg. A city-wide federation for the Gothenburg tenants' unions, called HCF, was formed in 1922. Compared to the other large tenants' organisations in Sweden, the Stockholm-based SH, HCF had a much more federalist structure and was much less interested in national politics (Hultén, 1973).

Ideologically, the organised tenants mainly relied on moral arguments, where 'fair' rents were advocated. The rhetoric was not revolutionary in itself, but instead aimed at condemning the so-called *husjobbare* who used the housing shortage to extort unreasonable rents from the tenants, neglected repairs and evicted families when profiting from it. However, the ideological position was not fixed and at times the property owners were denounced as 'property capital.' The class struggle rhetoric used in the tenant bi-weekly newspaper *Hyresgästen* increased during the 1930s as the organised property owners instead of individual landlords became the main opponents, intensifying the analogous experience of class struggle (Rolf, 2020). As Sten O. Karlsson has noted, while most political parties

**Figure 4**

The Tenants'  
Youth Organisation  
in Gamlestaden



tended to appear in the working-class neighbourhoods during election times, the tenants' movement regularly showed up and agitated working-class unity against the oppressors (Karlsson 1993). Though the SAP dominated politically and held most significant positions within the main trade union organisation LO, union activists belonging to one of the two communist parties (SKP and SP) had a strong influence in local unions belonging to LO (Kennerström 1974). The syndicalist movement, standing outside LO, also had a strong presence among some groups of workers and continually challenged LO from the left. HCF housed members of all these fractions and tried to maintain party-political neutrality and working-class unity (Rolf 2020).

Tenants' union activists advocated protective legislation for tenants and confronted landlords, with both legal means and militant methods such as rent strikes and blockades. Even though the organised tenants had obvious ties to the Gothenburg labour movement, and mainly consisted of working-class union activists, theirs was a movement with a class base consisting not only of workers but also of petty bourgeoisie such as shop owners and clerks. The movement also connected various groups of workers, such as stevedores and factory workers on the common ground of consumption rather than in the field of production. As several landlords involved in the conflicts themselves were members of the trade unions and SAP, the rent struggle cut a rift through the Gothenburg labour movement that was accentuated by the growing tensions in the 1930s between the more and less conflict-oriented camps of the labour movement (Hultén, 1973; Rolf 2020).

The tenants' unions were thus considered a part of the greater labour movement, but their members were not exclusively working-class. Even though the rented home was the typical dwelling of the average working-class household, it also housed petty bourgeoisie such as clerks and small shop-owners, a melting pot that sociologist Mats Franzén has called the *popular classes* (Franzén, 1992). The tenants were united by their common interest concerning consumption, not production. Ownership of properties was often small-scale

and cut through traditional class boundaries. Viewing it as a good investment and a security for old age, several members of these broadly defined *popular classes* ended up as landlords (Perlinge, 2012). The landlords wanted returns on their investments and given the low supply compared to the demand the rent level was prone to steep increases which, together with the threat of unemployment, made the economic position of the household uncertain. This also meant that tenants on occasion would be unable (or unwilling) to pay due rents. Relations between tenant and landlord were prone to conflicts, every now and then resulting in physical confrontation. The tenants' unions can be seen as the organisational expression of the tension between tenant and landlord in the economic uncertainty of pre-welfare capitalist society.

This organisational expression was made possible by the local class struggle. The tenants' movement was created by activists schooled in the labour and temperance movement, but organisationally it cut through boundaries such as class, alignment with the various parties and unions of the labour movement and even, to some extent, gender. Internationally, the role of women in tenant activism has been noted by several scholars (for example, Gold, 2014 and Currie, 2018). Even though the leadership of the local Gothenburg tenants' unions was predominantly male, female activists played important roles in the day-to-day activities of promoting the movement in the local neighbourhood, collecting membership fees and selling *Hyresgästen*. Fee-collecting was also seen as an opportunity to talk to the local tenants and find out the situation in each block. A separatist tenant women organisation within the movement existed, focusing on social activities. The system of household organisation meant that only one spouse was considered a full member with the right to vote at meetings. In the patriarchal culture of the time, this was generally the husband of the family. In the late 1930s there was a debate in the tenants' movement about allowing women separate votes instead of the one vote per household system which usually meant that only the husband voted. This was implemented in the Malmö Tenants' Union in 1938 but not in SH or HCF (Johansson, 1982; Rolf, 2020).

### **The militant repertoire**

Geographically, two parts of Gothenburg saw especially militant tenant unions. The first was the industrial belt on the eastern fringe of the city, stretching from Gamlestaden in the north down to Gårda in the south. A second part was the traditionally 'red' harbour districts in the western part of the city, stretching from Masthugget to Majorna and Kungsladugård. Majorna stands out as a district particularly affected by rent struggles (Rolf, 2020). Both the dock workers and the sailors had militant trade unionist traditions, which might explain at least partly the militant tenants' unions in these parts of the city. Factory workers and construction workers were other radical worker groups where the tenants' unions drew members and activists. The stairwells of the *landshövdingebus*, the traditional place for neighbour interaction, were transformed into temporary meeting places where tenants with different backgrounds met to discuss organisational and strategic matters, and to plan social activities. Tenants unions' arranged dances, theatre plays and a variety of activities for children and teenagers, among these a seaside holiday camp for children. While there typically

seems to have been some sort of agitational undertone during these activities, they seem mainly to have been aimed for the recreation and enjoyment of the participants. These social events strengthened the tenants' unions not only through the goodwill they provided, but also by recruiting a new, young cadre for the organisations of the labour movement (Johansson, 1982; Rolf, 2020).

In 1917 a rent control law had been enacted, but unlike in other European countries it was abandoned early in 1923. The Gothenburg tenants' unions immediately started looking for other methods to combat the soaring rents that followed the deregulation. Rent strikes had occurred in Sweden during World War I, for example in Nynäshamn in 1916 and in Stockholm in 1917. The rent strike was however not to become the preferred method of the Gothenburg tenants' movement. Instead, a method was developed that was called *hyresblockad* (rental blockade). When a conflict with a property owner was not easily solved, the local tenants' union would proclaim a blockade against the property in question, urging others not to move there or do any business with the property owner. This was often extended to the landlords' other properties, and since many landlords were also small business owners, their shops would also be subject to the blockade. A Swedish version of the picket line, the blockade was, in effect, a boycott action. A proclaimed rental blockade prompted everyone, and especially organised workers, to refrain from moving into the affected building. No one was supposed to do repairs in, or move furniture into, a blockaded building without the consent of the tenants' union. Since the term 'blockade' was frequently used by the labour unions, it was widely recognised and accepted in working class neighbourhoods. Being a blockade breaker or *brytare* was equivalent to being a strikebreaker and it was a sure way to become ostracised in the working-class neighbourhoods of Gothenburg (Karlsson, 1993; Rolf, 2020).

Rental blockades were a means not only to inflict economic damage but also to enforce solidarity with the struggle in the community. Rent strikes were occasionally used as a complementary method to the blockade, but HCF was reluctant to use the term and instead called it 'rent deposits' as the rents were collected during strikes by the tenants' unions and withheld until the conflict had been settled. While rent strikes could quickly result in criminal charges and eviction, the blockade method was legal and (came with) held/meant few risks. Blockades were announced in *Hyresgästen* and, sometimes, in other local labour movement newspapers. Notes were handed out by blockade guards and occasionally put in windows or glued to the property, in a few cases resulting in fines for tenant leaders (Rolf, 2020). The early labour movement struggles were often about the right to organise and bargain collectively wage levels and the work process (Lundh, 2002). The early tenants' movement had similar claims. Blockades were proclaimed in order to be acknowledged as a collective representative for tenants and against rent increases and for improved maintenance of buildings. Another common issue was landlords who did not want to give their tenants precedence to vacant (better) apartments in their properties. This was seen as a tenant's moral right in Gothenburg and several conflicts originated from such claims. Several conflicts were also caused by claims of mistreatment from superintendents, who were often working class themselves and seen as class traitors. In 1925 a family in Gårda, eastern Gothenburg, were

not allowed to get their contract renewed, supposedly because the superintendent, who had quarrels with the family, had heard the children singing an obscene song. A blockade was proclaimed with demands that the superintendent be fired. His co-workers at a tapestry factory were informed of his new status as a class traitor (Rolf, 2020).

The boundary between labour and tenant conflict was often blurry. In 1926 the Gothenburg tenants' movement faced its first larger conflict. Previous conflicts had been relatively small-scale but this time the local tenants' union in *Gårda* had decided to take on the property owner and industrialist Fritz Kronker in a fight concerning rent increases in his properties. HCF proclaimed a blockade and also extended this to a factory owned by Kronker. This caused the local labour union to react and to question the tenants' mandate to proclaim a blockade that threatened the livelihood of the workers. HCF was forced to accept rent increases, but as the tenants' movement grew and the city saw more rent strikes and blockades, the labour unions, who shared members and activists with the tenants' union, were forced to accept the reality of tenants' organisations. A deal on how the labour and tenants' unions were to act in solidarity with one another was struck in 1929 (Rolf, 2020). A larger conflict in Majorna, southwestern Gothenburg, was a combined tenants' and labour union conflict against the construction firm Branding & Persson and their properties. The conflict, where antagonists from both sides were convicted of assault, lasted from 1927 to 1932. Hilmer Branding made a name for himself as someone who could help moving into blockaded properties that were boycotted by organised transport workers. Branding & Persson were also accused of filling their blockaded properties with strikebreakers, which resulted in a large communist-organised protest that was broken up by riot police outside one of the buildings. A deal was finally struck in 1932 that forced Branding & Persson to accept a collective agreement and to evict their tenants accused of strikebreaking (Johansson, 1982; Rolf, 2020).

### **The Gothenburg Rent Wars 1932-1937**

A third method, often combined with the aforementioned methods of rent strikes and property blockades, was the mass termination of contracts in what was called *rent-reducing actions*. These were first used in Stockholm and then imported to and used in Gothenburg from 1931 to 1938. The actions were aimed at either driving rents down, countering announced rent increases or enforcing renovation demands. In the typical case, the tenant union activists or ombudsmen would collect warrants from the tenants and the contracts would then be collectively terminated from 1 October, the traditional date for moving in urban Sweden. This was often followed by the threat of blockade. Landlords, in many cases small-scale property owners, were faced with the prospect of drastically reduced income and many yielded to the tenants' demands. The rent-reducing actions demanded a response from the organised landlords whose organisation changed into a more conflict-oriented one. Routines for collective bargaining were set up, signalling the beginning of collective rent bargaining on a wider level. In Gothenburg the rent-reducing actions signalled an offensive in a larger ongoing conflict with the organised landlords. This offensive was to be the spark

that ignited the most militant years (Hildebrand, 1940; Ivarsson & Tengling, 1988; Rolf, 2020).

Looking at blockade lists and articles in *Hyresgästen* and summaries from the annual reports of HCF, as well as reports of rent-reducing actions, we can get a good idea of the scale of the tenant militancy in Gothenburg from the mid-war to the post-war period. We then see a particular period of tenant unrest between 1932 and 1937, where 1,104 addresses were targeted by blockades. From 1932 to 1936, according to HCF, no less than 18,413 households received rent reduction due to tenant action. In a city with about 250,000 inhabitants, this meant that quite a large portion of the population was affected (Rolf, 2020). Blockades were used by tenants' unions in other cities in Sweden, but nowhere near such an extent as in Gothenburg. In Stockholm, the city with the second highest number of blockades, roughly 200 blockades were announced between 1928 and 1942, according to annual reports and blockade lists in the tenant bi-weekly newspapers *Vår Bostad* and *Hus och Härd*. In contrast, about 2,000 addresses were the targets of blockades in Gothenburg during the same period. All in all, close to 2,200 addresses in Gothenburg were blockaded between 1923 and 1955 (Rolf, 2020).

By the early 1930s, tenant militancy had radicalised not only the tenants, but also the property owners, who formed a militant organisation, GF, in 1932. The organisation collected large funds from their members and forbade them, with the penalty of heavy fines, to make individual deals with the organised tenants (Rolf, 2020). The strategy was that of attrition, where the property owners hoped to be able to use their financial advantage to prolong the conflicts and win by exhausting the resources of the tenants. It was a sort of reversed lockout tactic, since unlike on the labour market, the landlords were the sellers of the commodity whose price was the source of the conflict. The new landlord organisation immediately challenged the organised tenants. During the first years of rent-reducing actions the landlords had often yielded to the demands but in August 1933 eviction notes were handed out to about 1,500 tenants who had cancelled their contracts. GF demanded that all blockades should be ended before they started negotiating. The Comintern-connected communists in SKP, in their turn, called for a massive rent strike. The local authorities intervened, and a deal was made, where both parties were to abide by a collective agreement, restricting the use of militant methods. This agreement, however, was voted against in the local tenants' unions, which caused both the social democratic leadership, the reformist union leaders of the national labour union federation LO and the national tenants' federation to intervene (Ivarsson & Tengling, 1988; Rolf, 2020).

The tenant militancy in Gothenburg had now received nationwide attention, and the reformist leaders of the national labour union federation LO saw it as both a direct threat to the jobs of store clerks and an indirect threat that could result in anti-union legislation. The issue of blockade and strike breaking was widely discussed in Sweden during the 1920s and 1930s, and there was an imminent threat of legislation that would, in effect, ban blockades. Yet another concern was that several landlords themselves were social democrats of working-class origin with union membership. During the HRF congress of 1933, HCF was forced to accept the collective agreement, but a rift had opened up in the tenants' movement

that would prove hard to close. The Stockholm representatives saw the Gothenburg activists as reckless radicals and were in return seen as weak reformists, favouring housing cooperatives over direct action. A deal in the Gothenburg conflict was finally struck, ending most blockades in return for significant rent reductions (Hultén, 1973; Rolf, 2020).

To understand the conflict within HRF, it is important to note that the conflict between SH and HCF was one of strategy and organisational ideas. While HCF favoured local autonomy, direct action and movement socialism, SH, that dominated HRF, favoured more centralised organisations and was more inclined to see the state as the primary agent of change. The main goals for the tenants' movement was, according to the Stockholmers, a new rent law and state-loan funded housing cooperatives. The old housing cooperative ideas from the 19th Century had resurfaced and had been given a new form in the housing cooperative organisation HSB, which came to be viewed as a second branch of the tenants' movement (Rolf, 2020). The organisation, however, soon became an independent and centralised organisation with large financial assets and its own national organisation, independent of HRF, already in place in 1924. HSB was to become more influential in Stockholm than in Gothenburg, with large parts of the SH membership being passive, collectively organised HSB members (Gustafsson, 1974; Rolf, 2020). There were militant tenants' unions in the suburbs and surrounding municipalities of Stockholm, and SH did have a militant phase from 1928 to 1937, but the centralised negotiations between landlord and tenant ombudsmen seem to have been prioritised by both parties and no large scale conflicts like the ones in Gothenburg took place in Stockholm (Rolf, 2020).

The tensions remained throughout the decade and several rent conflicts required state mediation. In Gothenburg, the conflict of 1933 ended with an uneasy truce that was broken in 1935, when the rent-reducing actions once again caused threats of mass evictions in *Källtorp*, eastern Gothenburg. Once again, there were threats of mass evictions, but these were never carried out (Rolf, 2020). The collective agreement from 1933 was now declared dead, and both parties headed for a mass conflict that was to take place in *Olskroken*, eastern Gothenburg. The so-called *Olskroken conflict* of 1936-1937 was by far the most known and dramatic event of the period, and this time mass evictions were actually carried out. However, the evictions proved to be not as effective as the property owners had hoped. The Transport Workers Union refused to carry out the evictions. An early attempt to use 'breakers' as movers in evictions resulted in a riot and instead the evictions had to be carried out by civil servants at a low pace. As the availability of rental housing had increased during the 1930s, HCF could relatively easily find new accommodation for evicted tenants as well as for those who had left *Olskroken* voluntarily after the mass termination of contracts. Large parts of *Olskroken* were emptied of tenants and the shopkeepers now intervened with pleas to end the conflict. By now, the old conflicts with the labour union and the national tenant leadership had mostly been resolved and a nationwide solidarity campaign helped the tenants financially. Eventually GF had to concede and agree to modernise the buildings, among other things installing water closets. The tenants agreed to a small rent increase and a collective agreement that resulted in a much less conflict-ridden rental market (Hultén, 1973; Ivarsson & Tengling, 1988; Rolf, 2020; Schönbeck, 1994).

**Figure 5**

Mass protest  
during the Olskroken  
Conflict evictions 1936

**The end of a contentious era?**

Tenant militancy and the rent struggles of the 1930s had forced the organised landlords into accepting the tenants' organisations as collective bargaining partners, laying the foundation for the unique Swedish system of collectively bargained rents that was to emerge a couple of decades later. A new law in 1939 enabled municipal rental boards to mediate in conflicts, but as the new board was not able to arrange a settlement, once again a government commission had to interfere. However, this law did not include tenant demands like security of tenure, (Rolf, 2020). The outbreak of World War II halted construction and raised the costs of heating dramatically. The issue of the financial distribution of this new burden was the source of a new period of conflicts, resulting in a very large number of blockades and threats of eviction in Gothenburg in 1941. This time it was the tenants who were on the defensive side and the conflicts never became as serious as the ones in the 1930s. In 1942 rent control was enacted, giving security of tenure and freezing rents as well as giving the rental boards increased authority with a mandate to mediate in conflicts as a result (Baheru, 2020; Rolf, 2020).

This time around the rent control would be in effect for decades to come. It was to be continually turned into the very special Swedish model of collective bargaining on the rental market, a transition that was completed in the decade following 1968 (Bengtsson, 2013). The model is still around, showing the effect that consumer organisations and collective mobilisation can have on institutions, both direct and through advocacy. Following the 1942 rent control, in most places the tenants' unions changed their repertoire, focusing more on their representative role on the boards than on direct action. What is interesting, however, is that the Gothenburg tenants carried on with their blockades for almost two decades. The last reported blockade in Gothenburg was in 1960 and threats of blockade were issued as

late as 1965. The late 1970s saw a small surge of tenant militancy in Gothenburg and in other places, with rent strikes being carried out both in working class areas and in student homes. These carried on for a decade, but since the 1990s rent strikes are virtually unheard of in Sweden (Rolf, 2019).

The housing issue, which had at first been of little interest to most political actors, had become a major political issue during the 1930s, which had increasingly changed the opportunity structures and allowed HRF to become a political actor, pushing for increased municipally owned housing. However, this required a more centralised organisation with internal discipline. By the start of the 1940s the merging into a larger, more centralised national organisation was well underway and the radicals within the movement were losing their position. This process closely followed what was happening on the labour market, where the Saltsjöbaden Treaty of 1938 had meant increased demands of internal discipline within the central labour union organisations. The 1942 rent act, with security of tenure and rent regulations, empowered the tenants' unions, as they would hereafter be considered the legal representatives of the tenants. The focus in the tenants' unions shifted from the local neighbourhood struggle to the rent boards and political advocacy. At the same time, the alliance with the Social Democratic movement and the housing programs gradually strengthened the increasingly centralised tenants' movement into a more homogenous but also, in certain ways, stronger organisation (Ivarsson & Tengling, 1988; Rolf, 2016; Rolf, 2020). The turn to a state socialist program was evident within the movement as a whole, even though movement socialist ideals would linger to this day.

### **Concluding remarks**

The tenants' movement played an obvious role in the politicising and radicalising of the Gothenburg working class, especially in the 1930s. Tenants' unions, together with other types of organisations such as labour unions, functioned as schools for working class activists, giving them both an ideological framework and practical training in organisational skills such as holding a meeting, writing articles and pamphlets, bookkeeping and much more. They also shaped the repertoire of actors engaging in political protest and organising. This plethora of organisations, engaged in questions regarding different aspects of life, showed that almost all aspects of daily life could be politicised and held the promise that collective mobilisation and political struggle could improve the conditions of the ordinary people and make them masters of their own destiny. If wages and exploitation was a political matter, then why not rent, or the price of bread? As we have seen in the examples above, the Gothenburg tenants functioned as both an independent and an extension of the labour movement, adding new members and creating new fronts, some of which cut through the old organisations. Divisions within the movements, both political and organisational, played a major role in altering the movement. These divisions have lingered into the present day.

On the rental market the tenant militancy forced the property owners to make large concessions and accept the organised tenants as legitimate collectively bargaining representatives of the tenants. At the same time, the success of the tenants' unions in their

direct actions also strengthened them enough to give them a role within the rental system that would in itself change the movement. This is in itself a valuable lesson. Whether one prefers centralised or decentralised organisations, both obviously have their own merits but also their drawbacks. There is power in being able to collectively bargain for thousands of tenants, but there is also power in leading your neighbours in a rent strike. The actions of past organisers can serve as examples of what can be done and what maybe should be avoided in our present situation, where in the last hundred years so much, yet so little, has changed.

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