



Staking out territory: District-based organizing in Toronto, Canada

Cole Webber
Ashley Doherty
Parkdale Organize

Cole Webber has been a legal aid worker in Parkdale for the past decade. He is a member of Parkdale Organize who is on Twitter @colefwebber

Ashleigh Doherty has been a member of Parkdale Organize since it began 7 years ago. She is a tenant in a Metcap building in Parkdale and teaches at a neighbourhood public school.

Contact:
cole.webber@gmail.com,
ashleigh.m.doherty@gmail.com

Abstract

Capital's renewed drive to profit from real estate has precipitated the multiplication of organizing initiatives around tenancy. In Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood, social dislocation results from, among other conditions, the consolidation of rental housing by firms and investors pursuing a strategy of 'repositioning.' Meanwhile, the political interventions made by members of the Parkdale Organize neighbourhood group have created the conditions for working-class self-organization against displacement, including a high-profile rent strike involving hundreds of tenants in 2017.

In this conversation, Ashleigh Doherty and Cole Webber, members of Parkdale Organize, discuss how, more than any particular organizing method, political principles have guided their interventions. Neither tenant union nor activist network, neither political party nor social agency, Parkdale Organize is a group of militant working-class people whose aim is to facilitate independent organizations of struggle within a specific territory. Members adhere to a set of principles which compel them to intervene in struggles of daily life as they affect working-class people in their area. To date these struggles have included fights against evictions and rent increases, support for labour strikes, and campaigns to defend neighbourhood services. In the future they envision broadening the scope of their activities to include struggles around the education of neighbourhood children and against border security authorities.

Webber and Doherty present their assertion that organizing on the level of the urban district holds the greatest potential to develop the independent power of working-class people. In doing so they narrate the activity of Parkdale Organize members and Parkdale tenants over the past five years. They describe tenants' winning strategies against landlords and investors and discuss theirs and other enemies' attempts to crush, co-opt, and recuperate these struggles. They emphasize the critical importance of maintaining organizational independence from politicians, non-profits, and the Left, as a prerequisite condition of our work.

Keywords

Organizing, neighbourhood, district, working-class, tenant, displacement

Introduction

Parkdale Organize is a small neighbourhood group based in the Parkdale neighbourhood of Toronto, Canada.¹ It receives no funding and has no staff. In the group's six-year history it has contributed to the struggles of working-class people against landlords, bosses, and the state, including high-profile rent strikes involving hundreds of Parkdale tenants.

The displacement of working class people from Parkdale is driven in part by the growing financialization of the rental housing market. In Canada, the proportion of national capital tied up in real estate has increased steadily since the Financial Crisis of 2008. Real estate is now Canada's most valuable industry, representing 13 percent of the national gross domestic product.² This shift in capital investment has led to the rise of financialized landlords including real estate investment trusts (REITs), private equity funds, financial asset management firms, and other investment vehicles.

As shown by Martine August and Alan Walks (2018), financialized landlords are only the latest manifestation of the economic shift toward real estate investment. In Canadian cities like Toronto and Vancouver, the financialization of housing was first established in the condominium market. Today, Toronto's condo market exemplifies the anti-social character of capital.

Condominiums are buildings or building complexes in which apartments or houses are individually owned. Since the 1980s the vast majority of new housing construction in Toronto has been condominiums. Condos are far more profitable than purpose-built rental housing. This is because condo developers can sell units to buyers before construction ever begins, whereas purpose-built rental housing which can only be rented out once construction is complete. The majority of condo units are bought by investors as financial investment vehicles, rather than for the purpose of habitation.

Most of Toronto's purpose-built rental housing was constructed in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s to accommodate the rapid urbanization and population growth of that era. These aging, mid- and high-rise apartment buildings house Toronto's working class. Tenanted units in these old stock rental units are subject to rent regulation while vacant units are not. This creates a financial incentive for landlords to evict sitting tenants paying below-market rent (Gibson, 2020).

Since 2008, financialized landlords have been buying up the old stock apartment buildings in earnest. The ongoing tenancy of working-class people who reside in the buildings is the main impediment to landlords increasing their profits. As a result, financialized landlords are at the cutting edge of the drive to displace tenants from historically working-class districts.

¹ Parkdale Organize website: <http://parkdaleorganize.ca/>.

² [Statistics Canada, GDP by industry.](#)

1. Parkdale: A historically working-class district

Ashleigh: What elements of Parkdale's history affect the neighbourhood today?

Cole: Parkdale is a historically working-class district in Toronto's west-end. Today the neighbourhood is defined by its high density of renters living in apartment buildings constructed in the 1950s and 60s. Parkdale is now home to around 20,000 people in an area of less than two square kilometres.

Parkdale's history is one marked by class struggles in which housing and the relationship between landlords and tenants is central. While the neighbourhood was home to working-class renters as early as the first decade of the 1900s, it was originally a village separate from the city of Toronto noted for its wealth and exclusivity. Parkdale's wealthy origins continue to form part of a narrative pushed by business and property owners justifying displacement of working-class residents as part of the process of the neighbourhood returning to its former glory.

By the 1950s, Parkdale was already considered a slum due to the conversion of many of its mansions and large houses into rental apartments. The construction of the Gardiner Expressway had required the demolition of many houses and cut the neighbourhood off from Lake Ontario. At the same time, apartment building construction began on Jameson and Tyndall Avenues saw more houses demolished and many wealthy families left the neighbourhood.

Carolyn Whitzman and Tom Slater (2006) have shown that, beginning in the 1970s, the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric institutions led to many discharged patients moving to Parkdale for its cheap rents. By 1981, between 1,000 and 1,200 psychiatric patients lived in South Parkdale. The area became known for being dangerous, for poverty, and for drugs and sex work. By 1983, the City government had closed 60 illegal rooming housing, evicting 300 people.

Owing to its concentration of rental housing and relatively inexpensive rents, Parkdale has long been home to many new arrivals to Canada. So much so that Jameson Avenue in Parkdale has often been referred to as 'the landing strip.' The 1980s and 90s brought waves of Caribbean and Tamil migrants. The early 2000s marked the beginning of a large migration of Tibetan people from India and Nepal and the late 2000s saw an influx of Roma people from Hungary and the Czech Republic. Today, Parkdale is home to the largest number of members of the Tibetan diaspora outside of India.³

Parkdale has been a site of struggles around immigration and border enforcement. The deportation of Parkdale high school student Daniel Garcia in January 2011 was a catalytic moment in the neighbourhood, which saw different sections of the class unite in a campaign to stop his deportation, including teachers and neighbourhood residents (Gillis, 2013). Tragically, efforts to oppose the mass deportation of Roma people from Parkdale in the early 2010s were largely unsuccessful.

³ City of Toronto, Neighbourhood Profile, South Parkdale.

In addition to deportations, evictions, and policing, the state began to fund social agencies to manage Parkdale's social problems. Organizations like Parkdale Community Legal Services and Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre⁴ operate to this day. As a result, Parkdale has a high concentration of social services as compared to other Toronto neighbourhoods.

Ashleigh: How have dynamics with landlords changed in the neighbourhood in this period of time?

Cole: In recent years, a few landlords have consolidated the majority of the rental units in Parkdale within their control. Between them, landlords Akelius, MetCap, and Timbercreek own more than 50 percent of rental units. Despite their differences in corporate structure these landlords share a common strategy of displacing sitting tenants. The difference between average rents and market rents in Parkdale illustrates their profit motive; average rent for a one-bedroom unit is around \$1,000 while market rent for vacant units sits around \$1,500. Between 2012 and 2017 rents for one-bedroom units saw an increase of almost 10 percent. Under COVID-19 rents in Parkdale have continued to rise (CMHC, 2021).

2. Non-Profit and Left Hegemony in Toronto

Ashleigh: Parkdale is known for a higher-than-normal density of social services (government-funded social agencies). What role do NGOs play in the city and in tenant organizing?

Cole: The decline of the Canadian welfare state has cleared the way for the establishment of a growing sector of non-profit organizations. Along with the unions and universities, the non-profit organizations form the material basis of Toronto's non-parliamentary Left. Non-profits consolidate political capital over a range of social and environmental ills that they assume the role of solving.

In Toronto there are a number of non-profit organizations which specialize in areas like 'affordable housing,' 'tenant rights,' and 'community organizing.' Their work consists mainly of lobbying the state for legislative and policy changes. Sometimes this takes the form of 'hard lobbying' where working-class people are invited out to rallies before being sent home again. Meanwhile, the real work of the organization is done by the paid experts around the boardroom table. In either case, working-class people are not seen as the primary agents within their own struggles.

Non-profit organizations and their left-wing associates occupy the political space that working-class people need to wage their own struggles. When working-class people initiate and wage struggles under their control, the non-profits work to integrate those

⁴ [Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre website.](#)

Figure 1

Source: Parkdale Organize



struggles into their own prefabricated campaigns. Non-profits covet their relationship with the state. To protect it, they frequently intervene to have independent working class initiatives brought under their control.

3. Parkdale Organize: History and development

Cole: How did Parkdale Organize form?

Ashleigh: We began having political discussions about territorial organizing as early as 2012. Our years of experience with the Left had disillusioned us with prevalent approaches to organizing and we started looking for new strategies. We concluded that political intervention within a specific territory of the city presented the greatest potential for the construction of independent working-class organizations. We saw an opportunity to make interventions to open up and defend new spaces for the development of working-class organizations that were independent from non-profit and Left hegemony.

The founding members of Parkdale Organize were tenants or workers in the Parkdale neighbourhood. Residence and employment in the neighbourhood provided a vantage point to begin to know and understand Parkdale's social conditions. This 'on the ground' perspective coupled with a shared understanding of the failures of the historic and contemporary Left was the basis for our earliest political interventions, eventually leading to the formation of Parkdale Organize.

Cole: What early struggles helped catalyze the organization?

Ashleigh: In 2014 a Scandinavian-based firm, Akelius, bought four mid-rise apartment blocks in south Parkdale. Their business model was to displace long-term, working-class tenants and then renovate vacant units to what it called 'Akelius First Class' standards. The renovation consisted of installation of new countertops, light fixtures, and stainless-steel refrigerators and stoves. Most importantly, the newly renovated units came with a rent increase of several hundred dollars, often a raise of upwards of 50 percent.

Betty Talbot hailed from Chattam, Ontario. The former government worker and union shop steward had made her Tyndall Avenue apartment home for decades. When Akelius took over her building, fired the superintendent, and turned her building into a construction site, Betty committed to organizing her neighbours against the new landlord. She set about knocking on doors and handing out flyers at each of the buildings newly purchased by the newest predatory landlord on the block.

Cole: How did Parkdale Organize members and Akelius tenants approach the organizing?

Ashleigh: Organization at the building level was prioritized. Tenants formed building committees. Meetings were held in the building lobbies, one of the few quasi-public spaces in which more than a few neighbours were able to come together. At the lobby meetings residents shared information and updates, made decisions, and divided up tasks.⁵

An intervention by a member of Parkdale Organize at a tenant rights forum hosted by the city councilor in Parkdale pushed the struggle forward. Around twenty tenants of Akelius-owned building at 188 Jameson attended to voice their anger about the new owner. The residents were not swayed by the councilor's message of legal redress and negotiation. Instead they were drawn to the comments from their neighbour in attendance, a member of Parkdale Organize, calling for organization among tenants at the building level and direct conflict with the landlord.

Akelius tenants in Parkdale proceeded to organize a series of confrontations with the landlord. Tenants marched on the Akelius head office demanding improved conditions in the buildings. Tenants confronted Akelius property managers when they attempted to inspect the units of tenants they sought to evict. Early on in the campaign, at a meeting in the lobby of the building at 99 Tyndall, one tenant explained how Akelius was trying to remarket her neighbourhood, and in doing so, confirmed what would become the title of Parkdale Organize's neighbourhood newsletter, *This Is Parkdale*: 'On their website they're showing units in the buildings and calling it luxury living in Liberty Village West. But this ain't Liberty Village. This is Parkdale.'

Tenants saw improvement of conditions in their buildings. After the march on its head office, Akelius fired the property management company it had contracted and brought some of its functions in-house. Soon it was common to see work vans with Akelius logo decals roaming up and down Jameson and Tyndall Avenues.

The campaign's high point was the defeat by half of a large rent increase at the 188 Jameson building. The rent increase hearing at the Landlord and Tenant Board for 188 Jameson was packed with Parkdale tenants. As tenants refused settlement offer after settlement offer, an exasperated Akelius lawyer blurted out, 'I don't know what to do with these people!' Rather than have proceedings pushed to a future date, Akelius caved and dropped the increase by 50 percent.

The struggle of Parkdale tenants in the Akelius buildings demonstrated the strength of building-based organizing. It also showed the potential for building committees to form

⁵ [Parkdale Organize, This is Parkdale neighbourhood newsletters.](#)

the basis of working-class power in the neighbourhood. Improved conditions in the four buildings, and the defeat of a rent increase by half at one building, were concrete victories, evidence of the untapped strength of organized working-class people.

Ashleigh: How did tenant organizing become involved in labour strikes at the Ontario Food Terminal?

Cole: In 2016-2017, tenants of 188 Jameson continued to take a prominent role in neighbourhood struggles, now expressed on different terrain. Along with many other Parkdale tenants (mainly Tibetan men), the brother of an organizer at 188 Jameson was a warehouse worker at the Ontario Food Terminal. He would apply the lessons of his family members' struggle against Akelius at his workplace.

The Food Terminal⁶ is Canada's largest produce distribution center, located five kilometres west of Parkdale. The Terminal is infrastructure owned by the government of Ontario wherein a number of produce companies operate. A significant minority of the Food Terminal's 300 warehouse workers were organized with the Teamsters Union. Two consecutive organizing drives and strikes by Parkdale workers would see dozens more workers become union certified and win first contracts that improved wages and working conditions.

Parkdale Organize took on strike support activity during both the strikes at Fresh Taste and Ippolito companies for union recognition. The Teamsters were subject to a court injunction against picket lines blocking deliveries into the Terminal for more than three-minute intervals. The same court order proved more difficult to enforce against the dozens of Parkdale tenants who joined workers on the picket lines. Both strikes quickly won union recognition, wage increases, and improvements to scheduling.

4. The Parkdale Rent Strike

Cole: In 2017, Parkdale was the site of a highly publicized rent strike of over 300 tenants. How did this rent strike begin?

Ashleigh: In January 2017 tenants of the building at 87 Jameson Avenue reached out to Parkdale Organize. Tenants had received notice from their landlord, MetCap, of a rent increase above the guideline which would see average rents increased by more than \$150 per month over three years. Tenants held a meeting in the lobby of their building and decided to collectively withhold their rent beginning on 1 February 2017 in protest of the rent increase.

In mid-February members of the building committee at 87 Jameson met to discuss their strategy moving forward. A couple dozen tenants at the building were withholding rent and a local media outlet had done a piece about their rent strike which had received some attention. Meanwhile, tenants in other Parkdale buildings owned by Metcap had reached

⁶ [Ontario Food Terminal Board website.](#)

Figure 2

Source: Parkdale Organize



out to Parkdale Organize to report they were facing their own above-guideline rent increases. At the meeting tenants at 87 Jameson decided to temporarily call off their rent strike. Their new plan? Reach out to their neighbours in other MetCap buildings and organize a neighbourhood-wide rent strike in MetCap buildings throughout Parkdale.

Cole: How did tenants go about spreading the rent strike organizing to other MetCap buildings?

Ashleigh: In late February a mass meeting for MetCap tenants was held in the basement of the local library. Tenants from four more MetCap buildings committed to organizing their neighbours. Tenants set dates for meetings to be held in the lobby of their buildings to encourage participation of their neighbours. In addition to the committees to be established at each participating building, a rent strike planning committee of organizers from all participating buildings, open to all tenants, would meet biweekly.

The building committees met to decide on courses of action and to divide up work among neighbours. The rent strike committee served as a clearinghouse for the building committees and to coordinate joint activity. Members of Parkdale Organize participated, bringing in its experience of past struggles, and its emerging set of principles for engagement in struggles.

The tenants' first move came in March when a group briefly occupied the atrium of MetCap's downtown headquarters to deliver more than one hundred repair order forms. MetCap responded by locking the tenants out, calling the police and refusing to accept their written repair requests (Mathieu, 2017a). Tenants responded by holding a meeting in the atrium. Angered by MetCap's apparent disregard for their concerns, tenants committed then and there to going back to Parkdale and organizing toward a multi-building rent strike.

Tenants came to understand that MetCap's applications to raise rent at their buildings needed to be approved by the Landlord and Tenant Board. The rent increase hearing for 87 Jameson was scheduled for early June. Escalation of action against MetCap would be

needed before the Tribunal could approve the increase. Weighed against their need for time enough to organize themselves, tenants decided on a tentative date of 1 May to launch the multi-building rent strike. They also determined a course of escalating actions against the landlord and its investors and prepared to respond to retaliation against their organizing.

Cole: How did MetCap respond to the announcement of the rent strike?

Ashleigh: In April a number of rent strike organizers hung banners in their windows and from the balconies which read, ‘May 1 Rent Strike.’ Metcap responded by sending lawyers letters and eviction notices to the tenants. In one case, a MetCap property manager put his foot in the door of a tenants’ unit and threatened to send his employees into her unit to remove the banner from her balcony. Later MetCap informed the tenant that it would send its employees to remove the banner at noon the following day, Good Friday. Her neighbours responded by filling the building lobby in numbers and blocking MetCap’s employees from entering. This action, covered by *CityNews*, proved to be a defining moment for the organizing moving forward.⁷

Cole: What actions were taken to build support throughout the neighbourhood?

Ashleigh: On 30 April, the day before the rent strike began, tenants and supporters marched through Parkdale to build support in the neighbourhood. On 1 May, 200 tenants began to withhold their rent. On 4 May, rent strikers rallied in the financial district at the offices of Metcap’s primary investor, the Alberta Investment Management Corporation. On 15 May, rent strikers shut down the annual general meeting of the Ontario landlord association and briefly occupied MetCap’s Operations Offices in Scarborough. Meanwhile, rent strike organizers were beginning to carry out their ‘Adopt a Building’ program, designed to recruit even more tenants in MetCap buildings to join the strike. ‘Adopt a Building’ meant Parkdale organizers would work with tenants at another MetCap which had not yet joined the rent strike to assist them in organizing their neighbours like they had at their own building.

In May 2017 the Parkdale rent strike was being taken up by 200 tenants in five apartment buildings facing above guideline rent increases. On 1 June another 100 tenants joined the rent strike, bringing the total number of rent strikers up to 300. This was a direct result of the rent strikers Adopt a Building program. Adopt a Building saw the committees in the ‘struck’ buildings work with tenants in other nearby MetCap buildings to form their own committee and join the strike.

Cole: Were there any particular moments that shifted momentum in tenants’ favour?

Ashleigh: On 30 May tenants at one of the striking buildings on Tyndall Avenue called an action against the local MetCap property manager to demand renovations at the apartment of their elderly neighbours. Tenants confronted the property manager in his office at the building. Refusing to address the tenants’ demands, he fled to his car in the parking lot. Tenants blocked his escape. Instead he sought protection from a construction

⁷ <https://toronto.citynews.ca/video/2017/04/15/video-parkdale-tenants-feeling-targeted-over-rent-strike/>.

crew working at another MetCap building nearby. From the construction site he made a phone call and soon a pick-up truck arrived. MetCap CEO Brent Merrill was behind the wheel. Tenants moved toward the truck calling for Merrill to address them. Rather than hear his tenants out, as soon as the embattled property manager got in the truck, he hit the gas. An organizer was struck by the truck. The next day the incident, and the rent strike, was the front page of the *Toronto Star* newspaper (Mathieu, 2017b).

On 7 June the tenants of 87 Jameson had their rent increase hearing. That morning more than 100 rent strikers and supporters occupied the hearing room at the Landlord and Tenant Board, delaying the hearing. As a result, the Board was forced to reschedule the hearing to a later date and MetCap was unable to have its rent increase approved.

The tenants' campaign of escalating actions, coupled with another 100 tenants joining the strike on 1 June, brought MetCap and its investors to offer to enter into negotiations with the rent strikers. Tenant committees in each building elected one or two representatives to the rent strike negotiating committee. Over the course of two meetings a settlement agreement was reached which significantly reduced the rent increases and provided further rent relief to tenants on fixed incomes.

5. Post-Rent Strike

Ashleigh: How did the rent strike change organizing in Parkdale?

Cole: Since the Parkdale rent strike, the response from landlords, in particular MetCap, to tenant organizing in Parkdale has shifted from dismissal to acceptance in an attempt at political recuperation. MetCap's CEO has agreed to frequent meetings with tenants to address concerns around conditions and to discuss future building renovations and repairs. MetCap employees advertise for their own lobby meetings to inform tenants about issues related to the building and hear their concerns. At a lobby meeting at 200 Jameson, a MetCap representative said that, 'MetCap always negotiates their AGIs [above-guideline rent increases] with their tenants.'

Figure 3

Source: Parkdale Organize



This representation of MetCap's willingness to negotiate with tenants is questionable. They have applied for above guideline rent increases without consulting tenants and have never negotiated rent increases with tenants outside of the rent strike. It is reflective instead of MetCap's desire to be viewed as a landlord willing to negotiate with tenants. The reality of this claim is unimportant as rapidly increasing rents and low vacancy rates mean that tenants will overlook a landlord's bad reputation in order to secure housing. This public relations manoeuvre is directed instead at investors. They must show that their properties are stable investments.

Ashleigh: What struggles are tenants still facing in Parkdale? How are tenants fighting back now?

Cole: Tenants still suffer from disrepair and fear displacement from their homes through rent increases and eviction. Maintaining a functional level of organization within buildings to continue to push forward on building conditions between coordinated campaigns has been a challenge. The sheer volume of tenant issues throughout Parkdale means there has never been a shortage of organizing opportunities. In February 2018, tenants at 1251 King Street West went on a successful two-month rent strike against an above-guideline rent increase. Tenants at several other buildings have delivered collective demands to their landlords and applied pressure by visiting their landlord at their home, getting their story in the news and organizing towards greater collective actions (Gupta, 2018).

News of organizing successes have spread from building to building through word of mouth, Parkdale Organize's website and our newsletter that is hand-delivered door-to-door. Working class people in Parkdale have become more comfortable with Parkdale Organize's political intervention: the assertion that the legal process is a dead-end for working class people and that collective strength can be built by organizing with our neighbours and directly confronting landlords and bosses. The challenge that remains for Parkdale Organize is to break with preconceived notions of what an organization should be as we work to build an organization that represents working class interests and expands working class authority in all areas of life in Parkdale.⁸

6. Territorial Organizing

Cole: We describe our work as territorial organizing. Can you explain what that means?

Ashleigh: Defining territorial organizing is not difficult. It is simply organizing which deliberately confines itself to a defined area. This definition lacks precision regarding a critical component of what we mean and engage in as territorial organizing, namely scale. A nation state, province, topographically similar region and electoral district are all territories. Our territorial organizing is at the scale of the neighbourhood. This is a purposeful decision. Within a neighbourhood exists the full scope of working class life in more evident and immediate forms. It provides an identity which is hard to incorporate

⁸ Parkdale Organize, This is Parkdale neighbourhood newsletters.

Figure 4

Source: Parkdale Organize



into bourgeois legal structures and within which it is easy to provide a framing for struggles that focuses on proletarian interests.

Unlike most other borders, the borders of a neighbourhood are an abstraction without direct engagement from the state. There is no external political validity to the contours of the neighbourhood. There is no authority or level of government that is elected to represent it. The validity of the neighbourhood evolves from the interactions of daily life. By territory we do not envision the land which is to be seized and administered differently. Territory for us sets the parameters within which working class people are engaged with and integrated into organizing in their class interest. The territory is not about the land itself but the people within it.

Cole: How do you think this affects the organizing itself?

Ashleigh: There are practical implications to territorial organizing being on the scale of a neighbourhood. The neighbourhood is equal parts mass and personal in nature. The social reality of a neighbourhood is close at hand and available to be engaged with both personally and collectively, be that social engagement one of collaboration or conflict. A neighbour is not a fellow citizen, and a working class neighbour is not merely a 'fellow worker.' The scale of the neighbourhood may be modest but the scope of life within a neighbourhood is both immense and within grasp. Neighbours can incorporate organizing and organization into daily life when it is at the scale of the neighbourhood. While some may criticize this approach as possibly leading to parochialism, it has been our experience that it is when we have genuinely concentrated on the conditions within our neighbourhood that the vast implications and realities of working class life reveal themselves to us.

In the course of carrying out this work the conceptual framework of what territorial organizing is and why it is effective became clearer. Likewise carrying out this work for the last six years has provided us the ability and experience to draw conclusions about the

finer points of how to carry out this work and which directions we can go in the near to medium term.

Cole: What does it mean to intervene in the struggles of daily life within a territory?

Ashleigh: Tenant unions, labour unions, migrant rights, and homeless and anti-poverty organizing purport to represent specific sectors of the working class or broader society. A tenant union organizes around ‘tenant issues’ such as rents and evictions. Its political outlook is to improve conditions for tenants.

Parkdale Organize intervenes on the struggles of working-class people in Parkdale. We don’t aim to organize within any particular sector of the economy. Instead, we aim to intervene within the myriad of struggles facing working class people within a particular territory. We aim to build the power of working class people, as a class, within that territory.

Our territorial orientation leads us to political conclusions that organizing on a sectoral basis would not. For example, the rent strike in MetCap buildings. A sectoral orientation might have led us to attempt a city-wide initiative to organize tenants in MetCap buildings. Such an initiative, had it been taken up, would have siphoned away energy from the organizing at Parkdale buildings. The level of engagement and participation required for the rent strike to win would potentially have been scuttled. While maintaining the Metcap rent strike as a Parkdale affair has allowed for the increased breadth and depth of the understanding of class interest among working class people in Parkdale.

Ashleigh: You have mentioned the importance of the independence of working class organizations. Can you elaborate on that?

Cole: Sectoral organizing, including organizing by tenant unions and labour unions, lends itself to integration with the state. In organizing to advance the interests of a particular sector there is immense pressure to make increasing that sector’s influence within the state a priority. As a result, lobbying campaigns for legislative and policy reform are the bread and butter work of sectoral organizations and representatives.

Independent organizing constructs working-class organizations which exert their power directly against class enemies, outside the political and legal channels. For example, a tenant union might campaign for stronger protections from tenants against eviction while the strategy of independent organizing in a particular territory would seek to raise the financial, social, and political costs to landlords for evicting tenants by confronting them directly.

Ashleigh: Political principles are an important part of building effective working-class organizations. What is the basis of unity upon which members join Parkdale Organize?

Cole: Tenant unions recruit members on the basis of their social and economic association as renters. Membership is based on shared conditions, not shared political principles. Because of this, tenant unions may take a wide variety of political positions on all manner of questions. Parkdale Organize is a membership-based organization with shared political principles. Parkdale Organize aids in the development of working class organizations,

including committees of tenants based in apartment buildings. Members of Parkdale Organize are active in their building committees but they do not represent their building committee within Parkdale Organize.

The membership criteria of Parkdale Organize is not a list of demands on behalf of tenants. It instead outlines what is required of its members:

Parkdale Organize is a membership-based group of working class people who organize to build neighbourhood power in Parkdale. Where landlords, bosses, or the state exploit or abuse us, we organize to defend, inform, educate and empower our neighbours to collectively improve our conditions. We want to build working class organizations independent of politicians and social service providers.

We join with our neighbours to fight displacement, rent increases, and disrepair. We work with parents and caregivers to provide a better environment for our families and youth. We support the struggles of workers in our neighbourhood against abusive and exploitative bosses. When working class people in Parkdale struggle, we have their backs.

Parkdale Organize is against the complacency and inaction of working class people when faced with common struggles. We organize across all false divisions between our neighbours whether based on race, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, ability, language and literacy, level of education or level of poverty. We oppose all those who want to further divide us.⁹

This provides a starting point for what is required of working class people to create the organization that working class people need.

7. Beyond Tenant Struggle

Cole: With territorial organizing comes the understanding that the context provided by the neighbourhood will determine the content of the organizing. In one neighbourhood the shared and catalytic condition may be an imbalance of power between landlords and tenants while in another neighbourhood struggles faced by working class people may be most pronounced relating to immigration status, criminalization or environmental contamination. What does this mean for organizing in different neighbourhoods?

Ashleigh: It follows that the organizing in each neighbourhood should appear different but maintain coherence through political independence and a political basis of unity while rejecting the political parochialism of a sectoral focus. A neighbourhood-based organization must then evolve as the struggles in the neighbourhood do. Its success is represented in its ability to expand its focus as it grows and take on more of the struggles faced by working-class people in that territory.

⁹ Parkdale Organize [Statement of Principles](#).

Figure 5

Source: Parkdale Organize



The future success of Parkdale Organize will be measured in its ability to extend its reach beyond struggles against rent increases and disrepair. Though landlords and the threat of displacement have been the most widespread and pressing issues faced by working class people in Parkdale, we also experience the economic pressures of exploitation at work, the threat of deportation and insufficient and worsening social services. A strong working class requires organizations it can wield in collective struggles on all of these issues.

Cole: How else have these connections been made between struggles in the neighbourhood?

Ashleigh: During both the MetCap rent strike and the rent strike at 1251 King Street West, members of Parkdale Organize collaborated with teachers at the local elementary schools to organize support rallies for the rent strikers. This support helped to increase the profile of both rent strikes and played a role in their successes. More importantly, this marked a breached border between groups often held apart. Teachers deepened their understanding of the lives of their students and their families. They also had a living example of people stepping out of the bounds of liberal convention and directly struggling in their class interest. The rent strikers witnessed the interconnectedness of the broader class interest of the people around them. Perhaps most importantly, working class people in Parkdale that were neither rent strikers nor teachers had an example of solidaristic multi-faceted class politics on display in their own neighbourhood carried out by their neighbours.

Throughout 2019, a long list of cuts to social services were announced in the province of Ontario. Parkdale's legal aid clinic had nearly 50 percent of its budget slashed. Local schools would lose teachers and see decreased operating budgets. Refugees would no longer have access to legal aid nor financial support for their children. The Ontario Food Terminal was being assessed and considered for closure. Evictions were made faster and easier for landlords to legally enact. People in Parkdale are deeply affected by all of these cuts. With the involvement of tenants, refugees, Food Terminal workers and teachers, all past organizing work of Parkdale Organize was implicated.

Parkdale Organize held a public talk to directly discuss the interconnectedness of these issues. It was decided that a public rally on Parkdale's largest thoroughfare would be

organized. Lobby meetings, previously held exclusively to discuss issues of rent increases, evictions or disrepair were held at a dozen buildings to discuss the cuts to education, social services and possible job losses. Similar meetings were held with teachers and parents at both local elementary schools. Building committees that had been almost exclusively focused on fights between tenants and landlords were now meeting to discuss the recent cuts, to strategize how to respond and who to support.

At the 5 June rally, hundreds of teachers, families, social service workers and Parkdale tenants rallied together. They did so at 7:45 a.m. on a Wednesday morning, a horrible strategy if your intention is to get the attention of local news or provincial politicians. This was not the target audience. The rally was a message to working class people in the neighbourhood that these cutbacks, rent increases and service cutbacks are attacks on all of us. Further, that those attacks will be successful if we fail to fight those that are attacking us. Importantly this fight should be on our terms and under our control as working class people. These cuts and how working class people will respond is ongoing and uncertain.

8. Conclusion

The history of the working class in North America is a story of defeat. Much of the left's role in this history is marked by failure, betrayal and self-cannibalization as it has attempted to engage in working class struggle by proxy, without the meaningful engagement of working class people. Now, as we are faced with shocking threats to our quality of life and Earth's ecology, working class people need to have an understanding of what we are confronted by and what is required of us to adequately respond. This cannot be done by proxy.

The battles that working class people must engage in can seem constant and pressing, where we gradually lose ground as we attempt to defend against worsening conditions in perpetuity. By building working class organizations that are able to assert and expand local authority while habituating analysis, reflection, solidarity, and struggle in those organizations members and the working class generally, we see a vision for the future in which these battles can be won.

References

- August, M. & Walks, A. (2018) Gentrification, suburban decline, and the financialization of multi-family rental housing: the case of Toronto, *Geoforum* 89, pp. 124-136.
- August, M. & Webber, C. (2020) *Demanding the Right to the City and the Right to Housing: The role of non-profits in supporting community organizing* report, Parkdale Community Legal Services.
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (2021) *Rental Market Survey Data Tables*. Accessed from: <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/professionals/housing-markets-data-and-research/housing-data/data-tables/rental-market/rental-market-report-data-tables>.
- Common Cause (2013) Run this town: Building class power in the city, *Mortar Journal* Volume 1.

- Gibson, V. (2020) Landlords can raise rents as much as they like when a tenant moves out. If that rule were scrapped, would it make for more affordable housing?, *The Toronto Star*, November 12.
- Gillis, W. (2013) Deported teen still lives in fear, *The Toronto Star*, September 12.
- Gupta, R. (2018) Parkdale tenants celebrate rent strike victory, *Toronto.com*, March 27.
- Mathieu, E. (2017a) Parkdale tenants rally in the face of rent increases, *The Toronto Star*, March 18.
- Mathieu, E. (2017b) Parkdale property CEO nearly hits tenant advocate with truck. *The Toronto Star*, May 30.
- Whitzman, C., & Slater, T. (2006) Village ghetto land: Myth, social conditions, and housing policy in Parkdale, Toronto, 1879–2000, *Urban Affairs Review*, 41(5), pp. 673-696.