

Tenant And Neighborhood Councils

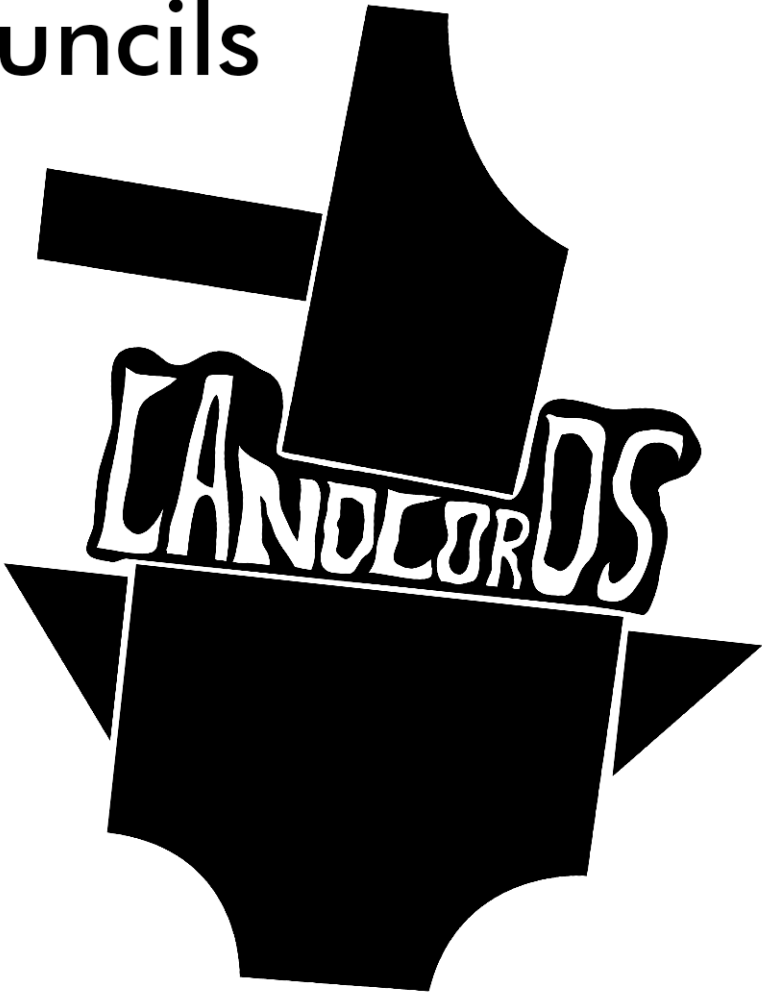


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Introduction

About TANC

Tenant and Neighborhood Councils (TANC) is a member-run housing organization built out of the East Bay Democratic Socialists of America. We encourage all tenants of private landlords, unhoused people, and public housing residents, to join us in organizing councils.

Existing avenues for combating rising rents, slumlord behavior, and evictions are channeled through non-profit organizations. These types of organizations, while a critical resource for tenants, do not necessarily challenge the larger structural dilemma that we face—the subjugation of housing under capitalism.

Effectively challenging well-heeled landlords, developers, and state managers depends on moving beyond individual relationships to landlords and towards organizing collectively as tenants against each and all landlords. Only then can we build our capacity to fight back against the forces that structure our lives.

Capitalism spurs investors and speculators to treat housing as storage containers for wealth with high rates of return rather than places to call home. From the history of the housing struggle across the country, we have seen that it is often the most precarious among us who are pushed out of our homes, made to live on the street, or forced into squalid living conditions. Throughout history, working class people—and especially working class people of color—have fought against discrimination, exploitation, and displacement. The history of these housing struggles reveal that our particular housing problems are actually collective problems that spring from the capitalist nature of housing.

We are building power towards a future where housing is constructed and allocated according to necessity—not according to profit.

What is a Council?

A council is a group of tenants who work together to wield collective power against a shared landlord in order to improve their conditions. While, in general, councils may organize for more affordable, habitable, and safer housing, the issues that a council decides to organize around

are ultimately dictated by its members. Councils are powerful because they can directly apply their collective pressure on their landlord without the permission of city hall or other third parties.

TANC will help organize councils and bring them together as a network. While councils interface directly with their landlord, they can find support from other councils who rent from different landlords. We will assist in getting the word out to tenants and researching landlords. Neighbors will get to know each other during dinners, BBQs, and other events that TANC will support. We will compile complaints that are common across councils and aid in seeking their resolution. Ultimately, the point is to reconfigure power dynamics of landlords and tenants in the Bay Area.

From Individual Relationships to Collective Power.

Our ability to secure stable, affordable housing depends on individual relationships with landlords. As renters, we pay a monthly fee (rent) to whoever owns the buildings and land that we occupy. We have little to no control over whether they choose to maintain their properties, raise our rent, harass us in various ways, or try to evict us without reason. Since individual renters need housing more than landlords need individual renters, the default tenant-landlord relationship favors the landlord. Landlords, especially in the Bay Area, know that if they evict an individual tenant, there will be no shortage of prospective tenants lining up to fill the vacancy. As individual tenants, negotiating for habitable conditions and the right to remain is daunting. However, as historical and present day struggles teach us, the fight should not remain an individual one.

When we forge collective relationships out of individual relationships—where tenants confront and negotiate with shared landlords together—we also forge collective struggles out of individual problems. Councils transform the conversation of rent or repairs into a collective discussion. Forcing the landlord to negotiate with all or many tenants empowers us. A landlord may not care if one tenant skips rent, pays late, or requests expensive repairs—or she may retaliate. But if many of her tenants are organized together, these acts become powerful bargaining tools. Landlord retaliation becomes more difficult, because an attack on one tenant becomes an attack on all. This is what it means to form a council.

About This Reader

We're happy to provide you with the TANC Reader. Like TANC, this reader is the product of various tenants who have become frustrated with how the Bay Area's housing market has made life difficult, if not miserable.

The point of this reader is twofold. First, we want to explain what TANC does and how to get involved so anyone can join. We want TANC to act as a tool that we all can use to address problems in our everyday

lives. As more of us get involved, TANC will inevitably change its overall shape to fit our needs. This document, then, is not fixed; it will require ongoing changes as TANC grows to include new housing struggles.

Second, we want to share valuable histories and ideas about housing struggles. If our current reality seems grim, it's because we are disconnected from political struggles of the past. When we reconnect with these struggles, the inspiration drawn from daring acts and ideas by our predecessors become rekindled for us. To this end, we've added various excerpts from historical and theoretical readings on housing struggles. These can be found at the end of the reader.

Today, our relationship to housing is defined by an arrangement of powerful capitalist actors in relation to atomized individuals. When individuals act together in their shared interest, their collective power becomes an organized force for the capitalist class to fear. Understanding this framework gives us valuable insights in how to fight and win against those who profit from our subjugation.

Getting Organized Together

There are many ways to get involved in TANC. The best place to start is in your own home. As a tenant you may begin to organize with other tenants that rent from your landlord, be it people in your apartment building or your housemates. This is how to start organizing a tenant council—and all of us in TANC support one another in this effort. Additionally, people involved in TANC start and help carry out projects that aren't directly connected to tenant councils. This includes, for example: direct action, political education, and more. TANC is not a non-profit organization with professional staff and policy objectives. Like you, we are tenants and everyday working class people.

How To Get Involved

Attend Meetings. Each month, we hold one large general assembly meeting, and many smaller working meetings. All meetings are held at the Omni Commons (4799 Shattuck Ave, Oakland, CA 94609). The assembly will give you an introduction to TANC, and a space to meet other people. Times of the meetings are posted on our website and on our facebook. We also host a happy hour every month. The happy hour is a great way to get to know one another and continue discussions informally. Happy hour details will be posted on our website and on facebook as well.

Become an Organizer. Standing up to landlords and improving our collective situation won't happen automatically. It takes organizers to make real change. Luckily, everyone is a potential organizer—yourself included! TANC makes becoming an organizer an easy two-step process. First, you can attend a TANC organizer training. These trainings will prepare you to build tenants' power. Organizing is a skill that is about fostering relationships and trust. Like any other skill, practice will make you into a seasoned organizer. Organizers also need support, and for this we've started the Organizer Clusters. This is the second step. Organizer Clusters are ongoing informal gatherings where active organizers discuss how things are going, give advice, and generally offer mutual support.

Form a Council. We advocate for everyone in TANC to help form a council around their own landlord. Forming a council requires a lot of

organizing, but it's a lot easier when we work together. If no one has started organizing around your landlord, we can help. First, we can help find the locations of all your landlord's properties in the Bay Area and, if needed, can set up a first canvass. TANC can help promote events, produce and print materials, or research your landlord. Each situation is unique and you are free to choose how to organize. To get things started, simply attend a TANC meeting.

Join a Project. Projects are initiatives that add to our fight against the housing market. Projects have many facets—some support tenant councils by engaging with the press around specific problems. There are projects that provide political education, like film viewings and public talks. Other projects attack the housing market more directly, by coordinating homeless encampment defense or by helping to organize public housing. If you have a good idea for how to build and nourish tenant power, simply attend an assembly and pitch it!

Social Media

We like to do most of our organizing face-to-face, building real relationships between people. Despite this we're still online. Please bookmark the website and follow TANC's social media:

1. Website—www.bayTANC.com
2. Email—tenantorganizingeastbay@gmail.com
3. Facebook Page— www.fb.com/baytanc
4. Twitter—[@TANCBay](https://twitter.com/TANCBay)

Additional Readings

The nuts and bolts of TANC can't be separated from the history of housing struggles that have shaped our organizing. We recognize that not everybody has had access to these histories and ideas. This section of the reader is an initial attempt at remedying this problem and contextualizing our project. Below are selections from readings that many of us have found helpful and inspirational. We hope to have these, and a few other readings, available on our website soon.

Excerpt 1: Ongoing, Massive Rent Strike in SF: Midtown

This excerpt is from a 48 Hills article, and it refers to an ongoing housing struggle that is still unfolding in San Francisco. The following portion is about the action that tenants have been taking against their landlords. The strike is one of the biggest ever in San Francisco, and it is still happening today.

For the full text:

<https://48hills.org/2016/09/15879/>



“The battle for Midtown: A community housing struggle”

By Natalia Kresich, published in 48 Hills

The controversy at Midtown has roots in the city’s failed Redevelopment policies of the 1960s and 1970s, when much of the Western Addition was bulldozed for “slum clearance” and thousands of Black families and businesses were displaced, never to return.

For many of the tenants, who remember the Redevelopment era or have parents who do, history is inescapable: It’s as if the tenants, 50 years later, are still fighting the political legacy of an agency that no longer exists but that once, under the direction of City Hall, left deep scars in the Western Addition.

The current ongoing rent strike and heated protests are also the result of many years of what at best can be called bad communications by city officials and a series of private property managers who told the tenants they would someday have the opportunity to own their units and that in the meantime, their rents were subject to the city’s rent control laws.

Two years ago, the tenants were abruptly informed that neither outcome is possible— that they will never have ownership opportunities and that rent control doesn’t apply to them. The fact that the rent-control law may, in fact, not apply to Midtown and that ownership models for the complex at this point in time are complicated and expensive doesn’t change the reality on the ground: For years, the tenants were told a different story. For decades, Midtown was managed by a tenant-elected board that set its own rules and, former members agree, allowed rents to stay so low that revenue didn’t match expenses and maintenance problems piled up.

When Mercy Housing took over, the management group shifted Midtown from the model it had followed since shortly after it was built— essentially, the model of a tenant-managed rent-controlled building – to a standard nonprofit housing model, in which rents are tied to annual mandatory income certifications. Mercy Housing also introduced an affordable housing lease, which contains provisions very different from what the tenants, who wrote their own rules and bylaws, had been living under since the 1960s. Failure to sign the lease can qualify a tenant for eviction. Mercy Housing President Doug Shoemaker says he now agrees that his operation should have been “more sensitive to the building’s history.” He told us he wants to avoid evictions, and so far, nobody has been thrown out for not signing the lease.

Western Addition Supervisor London Breed told us that “the tenants have been lied to for years. The city really messed this up,” but nonetheless does not support the tenants’ rent strike, nor their aspiration for

equity ownership. Dean Preston, the director of a state-wide organization for tenant's rights who is running for supervisor in the district, told us that the city is still doing the wrong thing: "They could have just recognized that this was a historically rent-controlled property and tried to keep that model," he said.

So now tenants, mostly African American, many with families who have grown up at Midtown, some who have been there since the Redevelopment era, are mounting vocal protests, taking on the administration of Mayor Ed Lee and a giant nonprofit housing manager that has tight connections to City Hall.

The city – which owns the property – now considers Midtown to be part of the affordable-housing infrastructure, most of which is managed by nonprofits like Mercy Housing that use federal money earmarked for low-income tenants. It's illegal for that money to go to a project where some tenants make more money than federal guidelines allow. And with the city desperately in need of new sources of permanently affordable housing, Midtown is immensely valuable.

Midtown tenant leaders don't see it that way at all. While many are on fixed incomes or are working-class, others are not – and see no reason why they should have to pay higher rent—mainly because many original residents were already displaced once by the city and because they were promised ownership. "We are not an affordable housing project," tenant leader Phyllis Bowie told us.

Pat Smith, who has lived at Midtown since 1970 and has raised eight disabled foster children there, notes: "We are not public housing, we are not HUD and we are not Section 8. We have never been. And that's what they're trying to make it look like now."

Midtown isn't public housing, and it's been operating under a unique model, but it's still public property – and nobody can seriously suggest that it will be anything in the future other than some sort of affordable housing. Of course, the city's ownership is part of the problem: For decades, the city was an absentee landlord, either willfully or negligently ignoring maintenance issues and paying little attention to how its property was being run — and then acted precipitously when things reached a crisis point.

RENT STRIKE

Of the 130 households at Midtown, 65 families have been on rent strike for nine months. Striking tenants have refused to pay the increased rent that came with the new lease since August 1, 2015. Some tenants, whose rent is actually decreasing under the terms of the new lease, are striking out of solidarity with their neighbors. Striking tenants argue that those who did sign the new lease and have already paid the increased rent have only done so out of duress. Some tenants who were interviewed but who declined to be named gave explanations for

signing the new lease and rental agreement.

“They told me my rent would be raised to market rate if I didn’t sign,” said one tenant. Another responded, “I didn’t know what to do. I thought I would be evicted.” So far, nobody has been evicted from Midtown.

This is the largest rent strike in San Francisco since the Ping Yuen North Rent Strike in Chinatown, in which 200 units – out of 434 – stopped paying rent from September 27, 1978 to November 18, 1978. The Ping Yuen residents had been fighting for months to improve the dangerous conditions created by a lack of security around the complex. It wasn’t until the murder of 17-year-old garment worker and Ping Yuen North resident Julia Wong on August 23, 1978 that the tenants’ furor coalesced into an organized rent strike.

Unlike the Chinatown rent strike, striking Midtown residents are only paying the old rent they paid under rent control—the rent that they believe to be fair—making it a partial rent strike. It is unique, however, in that it is entirely self-organized. Of the 139 households, all but 33 of them have had their rent raised. Some of the households who experienced rent decreases are striking out of solidarity with their neighbors by refusing to sign the new lease, as are those tenants whose rent is basically staying the same.

“It’s the principle of it,” says Bowie. “It doesn’t affect me that much,” says Donald Griggs, whose rent increase was negligible. “But what about my neighbor? That’s my friend we’re talking about.”

Excerpt 2: The Limits to State Assistance

The following excerpt is a chapter taken from *The Housing Monster*, a book that describes how certain miseries in our lives flow from the capitalist domination over housing. The chapter is entitled “Rent Control and State Housing.” This chapter shows how state intervention, like rent control and public housing, are not inherently liberatory in themselves.



For the full text:

<http://www.prole.info/thm.html>

The Housing Monster

RENT CONTROL AND STATE HOUSING

The free market in housing is supported and regulated by the state. Various levels of government impose all sorts of health and safety regulations, building codes, subsidies, taxes, tax subsidies, loan guarantees, and zoning laws that affect housing. The state does not intervene on behalf of the poor or interfere in the business of the rich. It tries to stabilize and unify a society that tends towards separation, fragmentation and crisis. It balances the demands of developers, financiers, contractors, landlords and “the public”—of capital invested in the land and the rest of capitalist society.

Normally the only interest the state has in controlling rents is in keeping high rents from putting too much pressure on employers to raise wages. Politicians will often use rent control that only applies to a tiny part of the housing stock, or that only puts very weak limits on rent increases to show they’re doing something for the workin’ man. Without a threat from below, the situation tends to be either low wages and low rents, or decent wages and high rents.

When such a threat exists, it’s a different story. The agitation, strikes, mutinies, insurrections and revolutions that happened during and

immediately after the First World War were responded to with all kinds of reforms. This was the beginning of serious rent control.

In New York city, for example, landlords had taken advantage of wartime shortages to jack up the rents on apartments all over the city. In 1918 and 1919, thousands of tenants went on rent strike, supported rent strikes and joined the growing tenants leagues in the city. The actions succeeded in stopping some rent increases and evictions. By 1920, there were fears that so many renters would refuse to pay rent that the police and the national guard simply couldn't evict them all, and New York passed tenant protections including limits on rent increases.

In 1915, in Glasgow, working class tenants responded to rent increases by only paying the old rent or not paying any rent at all. Massive demonstrations kept the police from evicting people for not paying rent. The UK government, afraid that the rent strikes would lead to strikes in the Glasgow munitions factories, instituted national rent control.

Tenant protections are passed to protect against tenants movements. Rent control is passed to control working class renters.

But capital's movements are not a simple matter of government legislation. Limits on a landlord's right to evict tenants or on abuses like key money and security deposits are real gains, but they do not necessarily hurt capital invested in renting out houses. Especially when the market is stable, the landlord doesn't need to constantly evict tenants, and there are usually ways to get around the laws (like moving a family member into the apartment for a few months). Effective rent control is different. By definition, effective rent control has to limit landlords' profits. Since being a landlord, like any other line of business, is about making a profit, effective rent control makes renting houses a less competitive business. At first this may just mean that landlords try to make up the difference by spending less on repairs and maintenance. The longer the rent control lasts, the more incentive there is for landlords to put their money into some other business. Serious rent control that lasts for any amount of time necessarily leads to disinvestment in housing.

Rent control is a legal maximum price on a commodity. It pushes the flows of value, as different lines of business compete for investment. Usually an industry whose product is in high demand can raise its prices and attract more capital. Where there is serious rent control, real demand for houses will move above supply, but prices can't rise. Either the rent control will be repealed, or a black market will tend to develop, where housing is rented out at above legal levels--which undermines the effectiveness of the rent control. If the black market is cracked down on, and house rents are strictly kept at the rent controlled level, it won't just be the landlord business that will become uncompetitive. As capital moves out of the business of renting housing, the market

for houses shrinks. Developers and construction companies see their profits squeezed, which leads to disinvestment in house production generally. In time, this causes housing shortages. The state is then faced with a choice: peel back the rent control, face a housing crisis, or go into the landlord business itself.

A certain kind of state housing is a normal complement to the free market in housing. This is housing that is recognized as only for the very poor. Often it is falling apart, and usually has restrictive or humiliating rules. Rent collection may be combined with apartment inspections. There may be curfews or restrictions on visitors. It may be limited only to proper families--married couples with children. Tenants' privacy is rarely respected. This kind of state housing works as a constant reminder to the rest of the working class that we could be worse off. It stops working this way, the moment it becomes a desirable place to live for anyone other than the extremely poor--the moment it starts to compete with private landlords.

Usually the place where the state is most willing to compete with private landlords is where it is also the employer. In this case, it has a direct interest in keeping rents from putting upward pressure on wages. The first kind of housing that states built was often for their soldiers and for workers in key nationalized industries. Where it goes further than that, where the government starts building for the working class in general, where government housing actually competes with private landlords, it only does so in response to a serious crisis and strong working class movements that need to be co-opted.

The state will act as landlord, but it still buys the land from private owners (pays capitalized rents), hires private contractors to do the building, and borrows the money from banks or in the form of bonds (and so has to pay interest). Where the government owns enough land, or has strict enough land use laws, land speculation can be severely limited. Assuming that state housing does not operate for a profit, the price of housing can be lowered. In this case, the landlord has been sacrificed for the good of capitalist society in general.

On top of this, the state may provide subsidies, further lowering the price of housing. These subsidies, if permanent and regular, are essentially a collectivized form of wage increase. Instead of money paid directly to employees for working, the money is paid to the state (through higher taxes), who then distributes it in socialized benefits. This is a real, material gain, just like subsidies to lower public transit costs, or free government healthcare. Just like a wage increase, it can improve the quality of housing we can afford. Since socialized housing is given to people equally (skilled workers don't usually get better state housing than unskilled), it tends to lessen the differences between rich and poor neighborhoods and to slow the creation of slums and ghettos.

Still, having the state pay part of our rent is expensive. The authori-

ties may give in to this when they feel threatened. As a movement is repressed and institutionalized, the threat fades. Subsidies tend to be taken away. Private landlords may reappear. State housing may deteriorate and start to be seen as only for the very poor once again.

On the other hand, state housing can become a regular part of the functioning of capitalist society. Tenants unions can get state funding and become a respectable part of managing the housing stock, negotiating rents with the government. Where the state acts as a nonprofit landlord, part of the gain in lowered rents can go to employers in the form of lower wages. In certain times and places businesses have supported state housing, as a way to keep wages low—especially businesses that produce for export. In the same way, a business may support government healthcare so that it can be in a better position when competing with businesses in countries where healthcare benefits are paid for by employers. One part of capital profits off another part's problems.

Also, just because the state is not making a profit, does not mean that landed capital has been eliminated. As development happens and housing prices go up, the benefit to working class tenants shrinks. Where the state pays private companies their costs plus a “fair profit,” there's an incentive for them to just jack up their prices and make more profit. While the state may simply be increasing rents to cover its costs, the increased rent are going to construction contractors or the manufacturers of building materials, or the banks and investors (in the form of increased interest on loans).

State housing also has problems that private housing does not. Getting into state housing may mean proving our incomes are below a certain level, and usually means waiting on a list until a place opens up. Once we get a place, we're probably not going to be evicted unless we stop paying the rent, but if we leave, we'll probably have to wait a long time before finding a new place. People tend to stay in social housing as long as they can. Even if we're allowed to swap houses with other tenants in social housing or to get some sort of government certificate of urgency that allows tenants in a bad situation to jump the line for new apartments, it doesn't change the fact that government housing tends to reduce tenant mobility. And reduced mobility goes hand in hand with reduced wages, as we're not able to move to new places for new job opportunities. Where state housing goes along with wage compression (shrinking the difference between the lower and higher paid workers) this reduced mobility can help keep skilled workers from moving somewhere else for higher wages—and therefore help lower employers' labor costs.

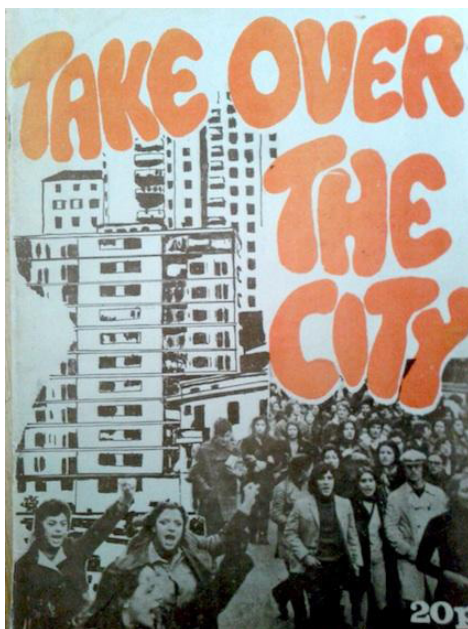
The state is less likely to be a personally vindictive landlord or to demand huge rent increases, but it does not give us housing for free. Whether we pay rent to the local government or a private landlord, housing is still a commodity. The house is bought with money, and the need to come up with rent money is a major factor pushing us to go to work every day.

Excerpt 3: Housing Organizing in 1970s Italy

The following excerpt are two short sections from a pamphlet entitled *Take Over The City*. The pamphlet was made by participants of Italy's housing struggles in the late 60's and early 70's. The text is deeply inspirational: it gives us perspective on what has been possible in past housing struggles.

The first section, "Rent Strike," is the first part of the pamphlet. It focuses on housing struggles in Milan, which were some of the most militant in Italy. This section is especially charming, with anecdotal interviews of people who engaged in mass, collective rent strikes.

The second section, "Rome," is taken from the end of the pamphlet. This part of the text includes a brief summary of the housing actions that happened in Italy's historic capital. It describes how different parts of the working class—construction workers and unhoused immigrants—acted in unison against the capitalist housing market.



For the full text:

<http://libcom.org/library/take-over-city-italy-1972-lotta-continua>

Take Over The City

RENT STRIKE

On May Day 1970 about 2,000 people demonstrated in the streets of Quarto Oggiaro. This was a positive break with the tradition of "public processions" organized by the political parties and the trade unions. People were coming onto the streets of their own community. The march was an occasion for people to realize their growing strength and unity and to further develop their struggle. It culminated in a mass

meeting held in a square in the center of the district, where a large number of people spoke about their experiences:

An elderly woman from the area: “We tenants began our struggle in January 1968. I was one of the first women to stop paying rent. Despite the many difficulties, our struggle has developed. The young people of the area have had a lot of trouble, day and night. But our minds are made up. If anyone goes on rent strike, nobody’s going to be able to evict them. Every time the police come we’ll be there, all together, in front of the door, to stop them from getting in.

“Not long ago 500 police were sent down from the Viale Romagna - 500 police to throw the family of one poor worker out onto the street. How come, when hundreds of evictions used to be carried out with only one officer there, it now takes a whole army?

“It’s because here in Quarto Oggiaro people have got together to fight. Because here in Quarto Oggiaro there’s the Tenants’ Union. We’re using a new type of weapon to fight against the rising cost of living, against the bosses’ exploitation of us in our homes. It’s something really effective - a rent strike.

“I’m not speaking now to the young people, to those youths in the area who have been in the forefront of our struggle. I want to say something to the women who live here. Many of them still aren’t involved and haven’t realized the importance of this strike.

“In the two years and five months that I’ve been on strike, I’ve saved a lot of money. I feel healthier. I’ve had more money to give to the children, to the ones who really need it. I’ve had some money to give to a few old-age pensioners. I’m not saying all this to give you big ideas about myself. But just think for a minute. Rather than give your money to the bosses, keep it for yourself. Give it to the children. Give it to the workers who are struggling in the factories and who are exploited year in and year out.

“People talk about the Hot Autumn factory contracts. What did the workers gain? Nothing - absolutely nothing! I know what my family’s finances are like. If you do the shopping, you see prices rising every day. I’d say we’ve lost out badly. They can laugh -the clever ones, the reformists, all those male politicians. But we’re getting near election time, and we’ll give our vote to those who deserve it - and that’s none of them!

“Eat sirloin steaks ... don’t go handing your hard-earned money over to the thieves in the Viale Romagna!

“After those 500 police came to Quarto Oggiaro our struggle expanded a hundred times. Even the very next day. Anybody who’s still paying rent just remember this: You won’t get a penny of it back from the authorities. Follow the example of the young people - even if you don’t give them responsibilities a lot of the time, seeing as they’re so young. They’re much tougher and braver than we are, because after 50 years

of struggle we can't get the same results we used to.

"Personally. I can say this. Since the time I first went on rent strike things have gone better for me. Long live the working class! And long live the struggle of the tenants!"

A woman worker from Fiat: "After four months of strikes in the factories I was in trouble trying to live on a wage that just wasn't enough. I have three children, all of them very young and dear to me. And I just couldn't afford the rent I was paying to this private landlord. So they had me evicted. I didn't get help from anyone.

"Then I heard there was a flat empty in Quarto Oggiaro, and I decided to squat in it. Now the authorities have told me I'll have to get out in ten days' time. Well, the authorities had better learn this: I love my kids and I'm going to make sure that they've got somewhere to live. And I can show them a thing or two.

"A home is a right, and in the name of that right I've taken one!"

ROME

Rome is one of the first stops on the route which takes people forced off the land in the South on to the industrial cities of the North. Between 1951 and 1969 the population of the city grew by an average of 60,000 a year. There are few regular jobs for these migrants, since apart from service industries and construction most of the work there is clerical and is handed out as a "favor" on the say-so of local politicians. There are 40,000 people unemployed, many of them young people.

Since it is ruling-class policy to make workers move to the industrial jobs in the North, hardly any low-rent municipal housing is built in Rome. There are 100,000 families living in the outlying slums. Construction workers, newly-arrived immigrants, unemployed workers, pensioners; they live either in shanty towns or in apartments shared by several families. Another 62,000 families live in private accommodations, paying rents of between 40,000 and 80,000 lira (\$650 to \$1300 a month).

The struggle for cheaper housing began in 1969 when people started to occupy luxury apartments in the city center left empty by speculators (Tufello: 125 families; Celio: 225 families; Via Pigafetta: 155 families; Via Prati: 290 families). The struggle soon spread to families living in tenements, who went on rent strikes and developed collective ways of fighting evictions.

Since the people from the shanty towns have nothing to lose, their struggles have often been direct and violent. Before leaving their huts they have often burned them to the ground, determined never to return. In recent struggles construction workers have played an important role. At Via Alboccione construction workers joined 205 families to occupy the houses they had just built.

Excerpt 4: Parkdale Rent Strike Wins Big

The following is an interview with an organizer from the successful Parkdale rent strike. In the summer of 2017, tenants organized building by building against illegal rent increases. The increases were made by a large management company who bought up dozens of buildings in Parkdale, a working class neighborhood in Toronto. The strike was preceded by tenant-ran meetings in lobbies, grocery stores, and living rooms. Organizing their buildings and their neighborhood became an everyday activity. One tenant tells us this: “We won this strike because we refused to play by the rules.”

For the full text: <http://novaramedia.com/2017/06/27/no-to-gentrification-yes-to-rent-strikes-an-interview-with-torontos-parkdale-organize/>



Parkdale in Struggle

Recent events have made it tragically clear how dangerous it can be when tenants' concerns about their homes are ignored. In this context, it's inspiring to take a look at Parkdale, an area in Toronto, Canada where tenants have been organizing to demand repairs and fight rent increases. As part of this struggle, several hundred tenants have been on rent strike since the start of May. William Neumeister talked to a member of Parkdale Organize to learn more about their progress for Novara Media.

WN: Could you give a quick introduction to the group? How did you form, and what were your main activities before the rent strike?

Parkdale Organize is a group of working class renters in the Parkdale neighborhood of Toronto. In 2013 a large real estate firm called Akelius bought up four mid-rise apartment buildings in the neighborhood. Parkdale Organize formed out of the successful struggles waged by committees of tenants at those buildings against rent hikes, harassment, and disrepair.

Veterans of the fights against Akelius soon joined with neighbors in other buildings to win a number of battles against their landlords, a major local employer, and to provide a learning space for school kids and their parents. The past three years of concerted neighborhood organizing, coupled with a housing market in which rents have soared, have culminated in the ongoing rent strike in the MetCap buildings in Parkdale.

WN: What's happened in the rent strike so far? How did it start? What are the main issues, and how did tenants organize for it?

In February, residents of a MetCap building in Parkdale organized a rent strike leading up to the Tribunal hearing that would have approved a large rent increase. By turning out at the Tribunal in numbers they were able to have the hearing postponed. They then linked up with Parkdale Organize to reach out to neighbors living in the other MetCap buildings.

March saw the formation of committees of residents at five more MetCap buildings in Parkdale. The committees held meetings in their building lobbies and reached out to their neighbors door to door. Neighborhood meetings between buildings were held in the basement of the local library. An occupation of the atrium at MetCap's head office ended in a spontaneous mass meeting where the decision to go out on a neighborhood-wide rent strike was taken.

In April residents hung banners from their windows and balconies declaring "May 1 Rent Strike", then successfully resisted the landlord's reprisals. On April 30 rent strikers marched through the streets of Parkdale to announce their strike. On May 1 two hundred tenants in six buildings began a rent strike to demand the immediate withdrawal of MetCap's applications for rent increases above the Ontario rent guideline (totaling nearly 15% over three years) and completion of all necessary repairs.

Since May 1 rent strikers have won improvements in building conditions. They have protested MetCap's corporate investors, crashed the Ontario landlord association's annual meeting, occupied the MetCap operations offices, protested at the personal estate of a MetCap co-owner, and occupied and shut down proceedings at the Ontario Landlord and Tenant Board to stop the approval of a rent increase. On June 1 more than 100 more tenants joined the rent strike, expanding the strike to six more MetCap buildings in Parkdale.

WN: Can you tell us a bit about Parkdale? Do you think there's anything specific to the area, or to MetCap buildings, that made the rent strike possible, or do you think the most important conditions are ones that are common to tenants everywhere?

Parkdale is one of the last remaining working class neighborhoods near downtown Toronto. The neighborhood is characterized by its high density of rental housing; a full 90% of residents are renters, the majority in privately-owned mid-rise apartment buildings. Parkdale is the Toronto neighborhood where residents spend the highest proportion of their incomes on housing, at nearly 50% on average. It is a heavily racialized neighborhood and home to many new immigrants including the largest population of Tibetan refugees outside of India and Nepal.

Gentrification and displacement of working class residents is not new to Parkdale. Hundreds of people and families have already been pushed out of their homes by predatory landlords hiking rents, neglecting repairs, and harassing and abusing residents. Parkdale is under massive pressure from the housing market and state and legal systems which facilitate the process of displacement. In Ontario there is no rent control on vacant units. This creates a financial incentive for landlords to push out long term tenants in order to hike rents. The Tribunal rubber stamps landlords' applications for rent increases above the guideline.

The ongoing rent strike is the organized response of hundreds of neighborhood residents in defense of their homes and neighborhood. The high density of rental housing makes the apartment buildings the appropriate bases of a neighborhood-wide working class organization. Neighborhood organizing by tenants over the past three years has convinced dozens of Parkdale residents for the need to build such an organization and a victory for the rent strikers will activate hundreds more.

WN: Is there any advice you would give to other tenants elsewhere about how to start getting organized?

Neighborhood or territorial-based organizing must be based in local conditions. In Parkdale landlords are pushing residents out of their buildings in a densely populated neighborhood where the majority of rental housing is privately owned and in the increasingly concentrated control of a few large companies. MetCap is the largest single landlord in Parkdale with 19 buildings and more than 1200 rental units. In this context the basis for organizing is at the building level. Residents form organizations at their buildings which carry out the strategies they decide. From there residents link up between buildings to increase their numbers and co-ordinate their actions. In a multi-national, multi-racial, and multi-lingual urban district such as Parkdale residents must deliberately organize across these lines and come to common strategies based on shared interests.



By way of concluding, then, our only real advice to you is to continue, keep going and do not stop. Occupy more, find each other, build larger and larger networks and keep discovering new ways to experiment with social life, consensus and democracy. Discover new ways to use these spaces, discover new ways to hold on to them and never give them up again. Resist fiercely when you are under attack, but otherwise take pleasure in what you are doing, let it be easy, fun even. We are all watching one another now, and from Cairo we want to say that we are in solidarity with you, and we love you all for what you are doing.

**Solidarity Statement to Occupy from
Comrades in Cairo, Egypt, 2011.**

