Have more questions about tenant organizing?
Reach out for support!

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LATU Tenants Association Handbook

NYC-DSA Housing Working Group’s Tenant Organizing Manual

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Jess was fed up with her landlord. It was the end of another long December day in her freezing apartment (at 400 NoMoreLandlords Ave.) of unreturned calls sent to his voicemail.

Not only was her heat still turned off, but there were several other repairs that needed to be made. She knew that other tenants on her floor also did not have heat. Unsure of what else she could do about it on her own, Jess decided that she wanted to start a tenants association.

Tenants association (TA): a group of tenants living in the same building or development who choose to join forces in order to advocate for themselves, particularly when dealing with their landlord or management.

Members of the TA are accountable to collective decisions. TAs should be autonomous; tenants should have the power to determine their own direction.

Sample script for talking to your neighbors:
(from the DSA Tenant Organizing Handbook)

Hi, my name is__, and I live in apartment__. I’m here to talk about starting a tenant association in our building.

How long have you lived here? Has there ever been a tenant association meeting in the building before?

Do you have any problems in your apartment? How do you feel like our landlord treats you?

How have you observed how things have changed in this building while you have lived here?

Did you know that our building has a high number of code violations?

If tenants join together we will have a lot more power over our landlord to make sure that our needs are met and that we are not pushed out of our neighborhood.

Many landlords in the neighborhood have been trying to push out long term, rent stabilized tenants.

Do you feel like the landlord wants you to move? Rent stabilized tenants have rights, but we have to come together to make sure we know about them and they are enforced.

Would you be interested in coming to a tenant association meeting in the lobby?

Do you want to help us plan this first meeting?

Can I take down your name and your phone number to follow up with you for the meeting?
Ready to start organizing? Here's some practical next steps:

- Talk (and listen!) to your neighbors.
- If you are new to the building, ask if there has ever been a tenant association before.
- It's never too early to get other tenants involved. Bring a clipboard or notebook with you so that you record people's name, apartment number, and contact information.
  - Decide on a date for a first tenant association meeting.
  - Set the agenda for the first meeting: make it collaborative.
  - Do some research about your building and the owner.

Jess started knocking on the doors of the other tenants in the building. She brought a pen and paper to take down the contact information of anyone who shared her frustrations. If someone wasn't home, she noted their apartment number.

Jess went back day after day until she had spoken to almost all the tenants in the building. The more she knocked, the more she realized how much her landlord and management company were abusing their power. Tenant after tenant had urgent repairs or maintenance that needed to be done and had been ignored for months if not years.

(If you have issues getting repairs or consistently lack heat or hot water, chances are your neighbors are having the same problems. The only requirement for a TA is that you meet regularly!)
What are some of the conditions or issues in a building that could be resolved easier with a collective rather than individually?

Uneven rent increases. Some folks getting their rent raised much higher than others as a way to force them out.

Landlord harassment, illegal lockouts, displacement!

Package theft, and overall building maintenance!

REPAIRS!
REPAIRS!
REPAIRS!

Fifty 311 complaints and open violations is a much stronger incentivizer than just one.

The fight against their rich and powerful landlord was not easy. The tenants association at 400 NoMoreLandlords Ave. tried various tactics.

Like flooding the landlord with calls, protesting outside his office, and withholding rent. As other community members learned about their organizing, more and more people showed up to support their actions.
Tips for Collective Decision Making
(From LATU Handbook)

A tenant organization takes many disparate voices and unifies them in one group: Use concrete goals such as improving the conditions of a building as a starting point for building relationships and making decisions. Join in efforts to an existing or larger group that can provide guidance and greater perspective when concerns arise. Make explicit commitments to each other and discuss shared values. Have concrete answers that are talked about amongst the group for the question “why are we in a tenant organization?”

Have a plan that is agreed upon by the group for how to move forward when commitments are not met.

Collective experimentation: trying many different things at many different times gives new leaders the chance to emerge and an accountable organization can learn from both failure and success.

Skills mapping: know who your neighbors are and what roles they are willing and able to take in a collective formation.

How Comrade Equis’ neighbors formed Tenant Associations during the pandemic:

Upon the start of the pandemic, tenant self-organization experienced a spike in activity. A spike with an acute cause.

The pandemic lockdown led to millions of jobs being lost, people being unable to work, or unable to leave their homes. The moratorium on evictions — won by militant organized-tenants fighting in the streets against the real estate state — coexisted with brutal organized-neglect by the landlord class and the state.

Because landlords could not evict, landlords, as a class, organized against tenants to make their homes unlivable; a tactic to get tenants to “self-evict.” Why? So they could fill the vacancy with another anthropomorphic wallet.

It was under the auspices of all this shit that my neighbors came together.
We live in large mixed-income buildings in a predominately Black and Brown neighborhood in Brooklyn. Multiple hundreds of units, in multiple buildings, on one block: owned by the same billionaire slumlord.

Before the pandemic, my block and my building, like the buildings on the street, in our neighborhood, were fragmented. Half of my neighbors tended to keep to themselves, rarely posting on our block’s Facebook group.

Sometimes they would post about a gunshot or a package theft. More policing they said. More state-sponsored solutions. Whereas the lower-income neighbors would often post about mutual aid, side-gigs off the books, and offer free surplus goods knowing someone else might need them. There was already some collectivity.
How do we ensure this? We organize.

The more activated tenants, with a refined commitment to the project, volunteered to establish a provisional Organizing Committee. An OC is composed of people who represent the diversity in the building. An OC is composed of long standing tenants and leaders - people who are trusted and respected by other tenants. The OC plans the outreach campaigns which included routine door knocking and tabling outside of the buildings.

Through outreach and weekly meetings we found floor captains to maintain constant communication with our neighbors. We facilitated and scheduled regular general meetings that eventually branched out into subcommittees to tackle different issues: legal approaches, militant direct action, political education, outreach, and so on. Eventually, after we reached a critical mass the OC was formalized through an election.

My block organized a tenants association with over 300 units in under 5 months. Once we were united as a TA we acted in collective actions. We demonstrated in front of our landlord, mass 311 calls (opening up repair lawsuits against the landlord). Ultimately we instituted a block-wide rent strike that called for the cancelation of all pandemic arrears and the immediate repair of our essential utilities.

A side-note: during the course of our organizing, our buildings had no gas for over 6 months. The buildings were in constant disrepair and management did not answer our individualized calls for restitution. It was only once we organized as a class that things changed.

Working through everyone’s apprehensions built trust within the group, allowing them to move forward confidently as a tenants association.

Other tenants stepped up to facilitate discussions and planning, so Jess did not have to shoulder it all on her own. The TA agreed on collective values and determined the specific living conditions they wanted to fight for.
The good news? In NY, we have legal rights!

1. No landlord shall interfere with the right of a tenant to form, join or participate in the lawful activities of any group, committee or other organization formed to protect the rights of tenants; nor shall any landlord harass, punish, penalize, diminish, or withhold any right, benefit or privilege of a tenant under his tenancy for exercising such right.

2. Tenants' groups, committees or other tenants' organizations shall have the right to meet without being required to pay a fee in any location on the premises including a community or social room where use is normally subject to a fee which is devoted to the common use of all tenants in a peaceful manner, at reasonable hours and without obstructing access to the premises or facilities. No landlord shall deny such right.

When the pandemic hit, things changed. Some less community-minded working-class tenants, with a bit more cushion, lost their jobs or got furloughed. Slowly but surely they began to chip at their savings.

Eventually, when the pandemic seemed to have no end in sight, but their savings and their financial futures did, they went to the Facebook group and discovered a solution outside of their imagination: a tenants association had been formed. The tenants who had always been on the cusp of financial ruin, and had always looked dubiously at the landlords, had begun to demand control.

The task now was “selling” the way forward for our collective struggle; to build a collective vision for all the tenants regardless of their level of trust in the landlord or faith in the system. The answer was simple. We are all one class, we’d say. Almost all working-class tenants (that’s what we all are, working-class tenants) suffer income precarity during the pandemic.

This will always be our common ground. Even without a pandemic, our class will always suffer income precarity, housing insecurity, and so on.

The money that we work for lines the landlord’s pockets — our money keeps the lights on. The landlord does not work.

His capital passively (in a fiscal sense) and violently (in a material sense) accumulates profit. He provides nothing in a parasitic relationship while we provide it all. Because of this, we must fight for our human rights. We must organize for our own protection.

We must expropriate from the landlord class certainty and control of our living conditions.
The structured isolation of tenants from one another gives the landlord class their power. This feeling of alienation and aloneness makes us vulnerable to the violence of a powerful and wealthy class enemy. But as you will see, once you begin to organize the power imbalance shifts. The landlord class exists and subsists on our wages which they extract in the form of rent. That is where the working class power is. Once we have collectively organized we can withhold our surplus value. We can demand direct control of where and how we live. We can steal back our power from the ruling class.

A health crisis and a housing crisis — phenomena that the ruling class is unable to resolve because it is designed to exploit us, not keep us safe — brought together neighbors who’d never met. Neighbors initiated conversations around collective wellness, collective responsibility, collective action because the landlord left us in the dark to fend for ourselves. The ultimatum made us recognize our power and our capability as an organized class. We realized that we can exist and thrive without these materially and ideologically imposed structures of exploitation-domination.

These crises are not the first of their kind nor the last. Capitalism is predicated on crisis. It guarantees it.

This is not to say you need a crisis to organize: all you need is collective demands: repairs, no rent hikes, clean and safe living conditions. This is something we all need all the time. Because if landlords exist only to extract profits, then we can always expect the hum-drum crisis of overcharge, lack of repairs, threats of eviction, and intimidation. We can always expect the landlords’ relentless pursuit to maximize profit.

The crisis is capitalism. The solution is working-class control — socialism. We must organize to get there!

What are some risks or challenges about organizing a tenant’s association?

Building is too small! Note: Find other buildings your LL owns. Start a Union!

Past differences and disagreements between tenants. Or possibly some more friendly with management that may act against the TA’s interests.

Landlord retaliation like rent hikes, harassment, non-renewal of lease.

Citizenship status and not being on a lease. Note: Non-citizens have the same tenant rights as citizens. If you lived there for longer than 30 days you have rights too!

That your neighbors won’t stand with you

Alienating myself to management and them not doing my repairs or answering my calls. Call 311 + withhold rent
Why is it important to be honest about these apprehensions as a collective?

Airing out fears, and giving those apprehensions space, allows multiple tenants to try and come up with tactics to fight worst-case scenarios.

Decision-making bodies should be accountable to all members thus creating democratic institutions of people power.

At their first meeting, the tenants in Jess’s building realized they were not alone, and how horribly (and illegally) their landlord was treating them.

As more and more tenants spoke up about the various issues in their apartments, their unanswered requests for maintenance, and experiences with landlord harassment, the energy in the room grew. Many of the tenants felt motivated to get started organizing for the higher quality of living they deserved.

Being realistic about what fighting back against landlord power allows people to make informed decisions about choosing a role in the struggle. This also means that tenants will never be caught too off-guard when the worst starts to happen.
What makes a Tenant Association so Powerful?

It takes many disparate voices and unifies them in one group.

It makes struggles occurring in the home the responsibility of many affected tenants and not an individual.

The power in numbers! 20 people withholding rent is much more impactful to the landlords pockets than 1 person! Our demands are stronger because of our numbers.

Knowing who your neighbors are and what they are going through builds trust and confidence in a shared future determined collectively.

As the tenants continued to meet to discuss forming an association and taking action, they hit some bumps in the road. For example, Joe in 3B was the ex-husband of Miles in 5H and those two were committed to disagreeing on... everything. A few members began to express their apprehensions about organizing.

A tenant that did not have citizenship and was not on the lease did not want to risk being questioned by the authorities. Jake’s parenting responsibilities and recent unemployment made him especially concerned about landlord retaliation and losing his housing.

As they quickly realized everyone had fears, they decided that they should talk through them openly as a group before moving forward.