



RENT SUSPENSION OR RENT STRIKE!

ORGANIZING FOR HOUSING JUSTICE IN A PANDEMIC

Richmond Tenants' Union (RTU)

March 2020

Keep Calm and Organize Your Neighbors

We are in the midst of a national crisis. As COVID-19 spreads throughout our city and country, millions of working people are being laid off or otherwise unable to obtain income. Yet landlords continue to demand rent payments. The Richmond Tenants Union (RTU) stands opposed to this exploitation of our communities, and we are organizing neighbors to fight back against greedy landlords.

It's important to remember that renters were in crisis long before the pandemic began. Richmond has the second-highest eviction rate in the United States, with many working-class residents living in units that are in a state of permanent disrepair. Landlords and real estate developers have been working together to gentrify working-class communities for decades, displacing long-term residents in exchange for higher profit rates. Now more than ever, we need to stand in solidarity with our neighbors to fight for housing justice for all, and that means *getting organized*.¹

What is a Tenants Union?

A Tenants' Union is a citywide network of organizations of renters and neighbors that assemble to discuss issues in their buildings or neighborhoods, and organize to collectively improve living conditions. Through such a network, we have the power to enforce our demands against profit-hungry landlords and the city government that protects them. Anyone can join the Richmond Tenants' Union, but the first step is organizing a Tenants Council in your building, or Neighborhood Council on your block.

What is a Tenants Council?

A Tenants Council is a small group of neighbors concentrated in the same apartment building, or across multiple properties

owned by the same landlord. If you're having problems with repairs, air conditioning, heat, or hot water, it's probable that your neighbors—or tenants occupying units owned by the same landlord—are having similar problems. A Tenants Council should meet regularly, preferably on a monthly basis. If possible, pick a recurring date, time, and location for your monthly meeting so that people can integrate it into their schedules and remember it more easily. A meeting facilitator, notetaker, and timekeeper should be selected in advance, and a draft agenda should be shared ahead of time so your fellow tenants can add additional agenda items if they wish.

How to Organize a Tenants Council in Your Building

A crisis can bring people together in ways that seemed impossible before. However, effective organizers recognize the likelihood that there are residents who have been fighting for the neighborhood for years if not decades already. It is important that we identify and respect such organic leaders, working in cooperation with them to build a movement for housing justice.

COVID-19 DISCLAIMER: *Given the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the following guidelines must be carefully adapted to protect public health and safety. We recommend tenant organizers talk to their neighbors outside or stand far away from the doorway if you absolutely must go door-knocking. If you have a phone number or email address for a neighbor, use that instead. You can also post a flyer in a central location in your building or neighborhood with contact information. If security is a concern, you can provide us with a forwarding address and list the RTU email (richmondtenantsunion@riseup.net) on the flyer. We'll promptly forward all messages accordingly! If your landlord collects rent payments via apps like Venmo, it may be possible to find contact information for your fellow tenants via your landlord's profile page.*

1) This document was written by members of the Richmond Tenants Union (RTU), CounterPower, and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). It is largely based on the *Tenant Organizing Manual* produced by the New York City branch of the DSA in 2018.

Before you call your first Tenants Council meeting, you should do the following:

- **Listen to your neighbors.** Go door-to-door and have conversations with your neighbors about the conditions in your building or neighborhood, and talk about forming a Tenants Council. Discuss your rights to a safe living environment and the right to live free from harassment or the threat of displacement in your home. Ask questions about what they think the issues facing your building or neighborhood are. Ask and listen how those issues are affecting them. Dig deep on the issues.
- **If you are new to a building, ask if there has been any organizing or collective action taken by tenants in the past.** First, it is respectful to admit that you are new and that your neighbors may know much more about the building or neighborhood and its history. Second, knowing about prior organizing by tenants may help you identify veteran community leaders who can help you get your new Tenants Council started.
- **It's never too early to get other tenants involved.** If you have a good conversation, ask someone to help you go door-knocking through the rest of your building. Bring a clipboard or notebook with you so that you can record people's names, apartment number, and contact information.
- **Decide on a date for a first Tenants Council meeting.** Find a volunteer to serve as facilitator, notetaker, and timekeeper. If possible, try to include at least one long-term tenant in planning the first meeting.
- **Set the agenda for the first meeting.** Work with one or two neighbors to set an agenda for your first Tenants Council meeting.
- **Do some research about your building and the owner.** You can contact the RTU Organizing Committee directly for assistance with this step.
- **Make a turnout plan.** How will your neighbors learn about the meeting? What will encourage them to come? A few days before the meeting, make a flyer and pass it out under everybody's doors. You can also post flyers in common spaces, such as hallways, mailboxes, lobbies, and elevators. Call and/or email people whose contact information you collected from outreach and remind them about the first meeting.

A Sample Rap for Preparing Your First Tenants Council Meeting:

"Hi, my name is _____, and I live in apartment _____. I'm here to talk about starting a Tenants Council in our building.

How long have you lived here? Has there ever been a tenants' organization or collective action taken by tenants 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?

Our building has a lot of changes that need to be made. 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 tenants. Do you feel like the landlord wants you to move? Tenants have rights, but we have to come together to make sure all our neighbors know about them, and that we can take action to enforce these rights.

Would you be interested in coming to a Tenants Council meeting at _____? Do you want to help us plan this first meeting?

Can I take down your name and phone number to follow-up with you for the meeting?"

How to Run a Tenants Council in Your Building or Neighborhood

Meetings should be productive, enjoyable, and short. People lose focus when meetings drag on and get less productive. You can get a lot done in one hour if everyone sticks to the agenda. No tenant wants to waste time at meetings that drag on and on, and no tenant wants to go to meetings that result in lots of talk but no action. Here are some tips to keep your meeting focused and on-task:

- Have a written agenda, and stick to it. Give people room to speak, but don't allow the discussion to wander all over the place. Keep the conversation focused on identifying common problems and developing collective solutions.
- Make sure that all decisions are group decisions, and not simply one or two people deciding. Only if people are clear about what is being done and why it's being done will they fully support the action.

- Leave with next steps and make sure action is clear. Who will do what? When will it be done?
- Encourage people to talk, but also encourage people to listen.
- Bring butcher paper. Write the agenda on the butcher paper, and keep notes on it as well. It helps people feel heard to see their contributions recorded on butcher paper.
- Give your neighbors roles: a facilitator, notetaker, and timekeeper.
- Establish a way to communicate, such as a Signal group.

Where should we meet?

In someone's apartment or a nearby location you won't be disturbed. Considerations for elder neighbors and neighbors with disabilities must be accounted for. People are more likely to attend a meeting if they don't have to leave the building or neighborhood to get there. As we are in the midst of a pandemic, the safest option is to use the free and secure video and phone conferencing app, Jitsi. You can create a conference here: <https://meet.mayfirst.org> However, this assumes tenants have computer and internet access (though it can be accessed via phone as well).

What should we bring to the meeting?

A sign-in sheet, butcher paper, tape, markers, and chairs.

What if the police are called and try to shut down the meeting?

Landlords understand the power of tenant organizing. If tenants are agitating, educating, and organizing their neighbors in defense of housing justice as a collective, it will be harder for the landlord to repress them. If the police, landlord, or a representative of the landlord come and try to shut down the meeting, you should have a printed copy of “§ 55.1-1258: Retaliatory Conduct Prohibited” of the Virginia Residential Landlord and Tenant Act (2019), and state that you are simply exercising your legal right to organize. Before you present § 55.1-1258, designate a member of the meeting to film the exchange and contact RTU. All instances of police and landlord repression should be immediately reported to the RTU Organizing Committee and, if possible, an emergency flying picket line (which is composed of tenants with different landlords or realty companies than the members of the Tenants Council) will be immediately assembled and dispatched in defense of the Tenants Council. If the police, landlord, or representative of the landlord refuse to leave, or if your fellow tenants do not feel comfortable continuing with

the meeting, you may need to disband (however, this can result in disillusionment, effectively giving the landlords and police what they want). Regardless, follow-up with tenants after and decide how you want to respond, but don't stop meeting all together.

What if no one or only a few people come to your meeting?

A low turnout is to be expected at the beginning. Furthermore, you do not need 100% participation in your building to win improvements on behalf of tenants. Every organizing project starts with a few people and, when your fellow tenants start to see the improvements won by their building or neighborhood Tenants Council, they'll be more open to joining RTU.

A Sample Meeting Agenda

- Introductions: Name, gender pronouns, how long you have lived in the building or neighborhood, and what brought you here tonight.
- What is going on in the building or neighborhood? What do we need to fight for?
- Living Conditions
- Rising Rents
- Displacement
- Make a plan:
- Who has power? The landlord. If we organize, we can shift power:
- Educate our fellow tenants.
- Disseminate our message through the media.
- Win improvements in our building or neighborhood.
- Change unjust laws.
- Know our history: In order to fight back, we'll need to know as much about our building, landlord, and neighborhood as possible.
- Fill out an apartment or neighborhood conditions survey.
- Take a vote to organize!
- Next steps:
- Reach out to more tenants.
- Letter to the landlord? Rent strike?
- Set next meeting date; select next facilitator, notetaker, and timekeeper.
- Collect apartment or neighborhood conditions survey.

Tactics for Tenants

- **Group call-ins against the landlord.**
- **Picketing the landlord's offices.**
- **Rent strikes.**
- **Social media.**
- **Pressuring elected officials to take action.**
- **Press conferences at the building.**

Tips for Successful Actions

- Pick a date, time, and place for the action that works for as many tenants in your building as possible to ensure the largest turnout. The best time to get press to come is in the morning during the week, but that might not be the best time for tenants.
- Make a turnout plan. Make sure you have sufficient time to door-knock, flyer, and make phone calls in your building or neighborhood about the action. If you don't want the landlord to be alerted to your presence or to an action, be cautious about utilizing flyers and stickers, as well as public social media posts. Notify the RTU Organizing Committee so that broader community support can be rallied and coordinated in advance.
- Make a plan for the action. Who is going to MC the rally? Who is going to speak? What are they going to say? Are they prepared? Identify strong tenant leaders who can speak about their personal stories with the press.
- Make fun and engaging visuals (such as banners and signs) that display the tenants' message. These can be hung from the windows or roof of the building in advance.
- Write fun and militant chants. Identify a chant leader who will keep energy high during the action.
- Draft a press release and send it the afternoon before the action.

Sample Press Release:

Contact: NAME | EMAIL | PHONE NUMBER

DAY OF THE WEEK:

Tenants to march against slumlord, demanding heat and a rent freeze. As winter approaches, tenants at [INSERT ADDRESS] are putting pressure on their landlord to settle with their demands for heat, affordable housing, and an end to harassment and intimidation.

What & Who:

The residents of [INSERT ADDRESS], members of the Richmond Tenants Union, and other neighbors, friends, and housing advocates will march on [INSERT LANDLORD]'s offices. Speakers will include long-time tenants, new tenants, Richmond Tenants Union members, and housing advocates.

Where & When:

[INSERT DATE, TIME, ADDRESS]

Why:

Across the city of Richmond, tenants are suffering from rent hikes, harassment, and unsafe living conditions due to weak housing laws and policies that benefit landlords and developers at the expense of residents. Tenants of [INSERT ADDRESS] have formed a tenants council and launched a campaign to end landlord abuse, harassment, and rent hikes in their building.

How to Organize a Rent Strike

Once you've gotten together with your fellow tenants **and begun the process of forming a Tenants Council in your building, it's time for action.**

If intolerable conditions have compelled you and your fellow tenants to withhold rent payments, you should be aware that such actions are usually not legal. However, you will be joining a long line of historic freedom fighters: we must remember that not so long ago, racial segregation and child labor were legal, and people of color and women were denied the right to vote. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." You are joining a righteous struggle for freedom, justice, and equality by standing up against the landlords and the government that protects them.

Rent Strike Guidelines:

- **Clear Demands:** With your Tenants Council, draft specific demands in clear writing, with a clear deadline. For example, "Due to the mass layoffs and economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the 3126 Chamberlayne Ave. Tenants Council demands an immediate suspension of rent collections by Bloom Realty until May 12, 2020. If Bloom Realty refuses to comply, the Tenants Council has unanimously decided that tenants will collectively withhold payment of rent, and will not pay back rent."
- **Get Tenants to Sign-On:** Once your Tenants Council has drafted the demand letter, go door-to-door to obtain signatures.

- **Prepare an Online Petition and Call-In Campaign:** In order to rally massive community support, create an online petition and call-in campaign to pressure your landlord to concede to your demands.
- **Public Letter Delivery:** Once your demands are drafted, tenants have signed on, and you have an online petition and call-in campaign prepared, it's time to deliver the letter to your landlord. Prior to the letter delivery, you should have a press release sent out to local media the afternoon before, and a public presence to put pressure on the landlord.
- **Prepare for Battle:** Your landlord will throw everything they have at you. Therefore, it's important to be courageous, to stand your ground, and to lean on your comrades in struggle. The RTU Organizing Committee will do everything in its power to rally the city of Richmond—and the broader housing justice movement throughout the United States—in defense of your struggle for justice.