

RENT STRIKE

Make Billionaires and Corporate Landlords Pay for the Crisis!

**ORGANIZE TO WIN
RENT SUSPENSION & RENT FREEZE**

May 1st Rent Strike!



May 1st Rent Strike FAQ

Wednesday April 15, 2020

What is a rent strike?

A rent strike is when an organized group of renters (tenants) engage in a collective refusal to pay rent, partially or entirely, **as a means to winning renters' demands against corporate landlords**. Examples of demands are reducing rents, canceling rent increases (or rent freezes), or a full suspension of rent payment without consequences like back rents, debt, damage to credit rating, or eviction.

I have lost income in this COVID19 crisis and I am unable to pay my rent. In fact, so are many other renters. Doesn't that mean we are automatically on a rent strike?

Individual renters, or even multiple renters, simply not paying rent is **not** a rent strike, and will make them vulnerable to eviction and other attacks from a system that overwhelmingly puts landlords interests over those of working people. Simply not paying rent without getting organized will almost certainly result in late fees and back rent accumulation, damage to credit rating, or eviction.

A rent strike is when a group of renters gets organized **in solidarity with one another around agreed-upon demands**, and stands up together to the corporate landlord to win the demands. This kind of collective approach makes it harder or impossible for the landlord to retaliate against renters, just like when workers get organized in a workplace, it is harder for the bosses to retaliate against the workers, for example, through firings.

Why are people talking about a rent strike right now? Why organize for a May 1st Rent Strike?

The American working class is facing nothing less than a catastrophe with the COVID19 pandemic. For the vast majority of us, it is the twin crises of Coronavirus and capitalism. While the big banks and the billionaires are getting trillions of dollars in bailouts, we are experiencing the brunt of the economic devastation.

The month of March saw over 10 million layoffs, and the Federal Reserve [projects a loss of nearly 50 million jobs and a depression-type unemployment rate of over 32%](#). Up to 35 million will be losing their employer-based healthcare. Without a nationwide suspension of rent and mortgage payments, working families will be forced to choose between paying for food and healthcare versus paying their corporate landlords or big banks. Federal stimulus checks are coming, but they will be short-lived and millions will not get them.

Already the loss of paychecks has meant a third of renters did not pay their April rent. Under the pressure of our grassroots demands, the political establishment in many states have passed temporary eviction and foreclosure moratoriums. Some cities like Seattle are also mandating limited payment plan options for after the moratorium is lifted, again, as a result of pressure from our movements.

But after the moratorium is lifted, rent is still going to be due! Tens of millions of workers will still be jobless, and will not be able to pay that current month's rent, let alone pay back rent even with a payment plan of a few months.

Millions of renters and housing activists have recognized that what we really need is a **suspension - without debt, evictions, or foreclosure - of rent, mortgage, and utility payments! We also need a rent freeze (that is, no rent increases in 2020).** But to win this, we will need a fighting movement, and a May 1st Rent Strike will help to build momentum. The political establishment has deep ties to big banks and corporate real estate, and will not give this out of some kindness of heart.

How should renters get organized for the May 1st rent strike?

We need to get organized as a movement nationally. That's why Rent Strike 2020, Socialist Alternative, and I are jointly calling for a nationwide rent strike on May 1. But it is imperative for tenants to get organized city by city, neighborhood by neighborhood, and building by building.

If you want to get organized as part of the May 1st actions, start talking to your fellow tenants. Thanks to the [Philadelphia Tenants Union](#) and [tenants organizing in Alexandria with Unite Here 23](#) for their organizing guidelines.

- **Start discussing with your fellow tenants. Aim to get commitments from preferably a supermajority (i.e. >75%) of tenants on clearly formulated collective demands.**
 - Use phone contacts, immediate neighbors, or people you see or can talk to safely in public areas.

- Have **one-on-one conversations** with each person, share your own situation, and ask them how they are taking care of their needs and their family right now. Ask them to sign the demand letter.
 - Examples of demands are: suspension of full or partial rent, a rent freeze (no increases in rent), that landlord meets tenants and agrees to a suspension and freeze. Here is a [sample demand form or petition](#).
- Make sure that every person who signed gets a phone call within 24 hours to welcome them, and explain how to be involved; give them the link to share with others; brainstorm whom they can call and talk to.
- Use a group text system to drive daily content – updates, send video links, action announcements, keep sending out the demand letter link.
- Organize a weekly zoom call that everyone is invited to.
- Help train tenants to become spokespersons for the struggle.
- **Who are your fellow tenants?**
 - If you live in a large building, then just the tenants in the building are enough to begin with.
 - Do you know if your building is owned by a corporation that owns other buildings in the neighborhood or city? If yes, you can try and contact tenants in the other buildings. (You can find out from a property records search online.)
 - If you live in a small property, then you will need to reach out to the landlord's other properties.
 - If you live in a landlord's only property, then unfortunately it is extremely unlikely a rent strike will work and negotiation is the best bet, but you should still get connected with our Rent Strike movement, and contact my Council office. If you are in Seattle, join our [Seattle Rent Strike 2020 Facebook group](#)!
- **Stay in touch with us - contact my Council office! If you are in Seattle, join our Seattle Rent Strike Facebook Group!**

Aren't renters going to be vulnerable to eviction if they engage in a rent strike? Isn't it irresponsible and reckless of renters to call for a rent strike?

Undoubtedly, we have to be sober about the challenges our movement faces. Corporate landlords have huge cash reserves and ruthless attorneys. They have the political establishment and the courts on their side. Organizing renters movements against such powerful adversaries will not be easy, and will need collective strategy, and it will need solidarity among renters.

Renters need to take organizing seriously in order to be successful in pushing back against corporate landlords, just as workers in a workplace have to get organized against bosses and executives to win their demands.

Our rent strike actions on May 1 and beyond will be tied to our demands for a **statewide suspension - without debt, evictions, or foreclosure - of rent, mortgage, and utility payments, and for a rent freeze (no rent increases in 2020).**

But as a matter of fact, renters are increasingly recognizing that not fighting back is not an option, because if we don't, the corporate landlords and the big banks are going to inflict a massive wave of evictions and foreclosures on millions of us, as they did in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession.

A fightback by renters is also related to the fundamental nature of capitalism, not just the current pandemic. For many poor and working-class families across the country, eviction has been a real and ongoing threat. For example, sociologist Matthew Desmond estimates that [2.3 million evictions were filed in the US in 2016 — a rate of four every minute](#). **We not only need to fight to win demands in the context of the pandemic, we need broader and militant mass movements to win social housing, funded by taxing big business, as an alternative to the for-profit real estate market. Our movements also need to call for taking the big banks and real estate corporations into democratic public ownership.**

Why push for a rent and mortgage suspension, when you know corporate real estate will call it unconstitutional, and take any such policy, even if it is passed, to court?

If our movement succeeded in winning a suspension of rent and mortgage payments, at the state or national levels, I have no doubt that the vicious corporate real estate lobby will go to the courts with the unconstitutionality claim.

Opponents to a rent and mortgage suspension argue that the US constitution prohibits the government from taking private property without compensation. But the laws under capitalism weren't written for working people and we have to fight for our rights. Throughout the history of this system, most real gains by working people have been won by building powerful movements that overcame legal and political obstacles, rather than bowing down to them. It is no coincidence that the majority conservative supreme court passed Roe v. Wade during the height of the women's movement of the 1970s. Racist laws were long part of the backbone of US society until they were defeated by unrelenting civil rights struggles.

Large retail businesses have already started their own rent strike of sorts. Subway – with 20,000 stores – has told landlords not to expect full rents on April 1 and it can't say for May 1. Cheesecake Factory – with 300 restaurants – is publicly withholding its rent payments to its landlords. The Chambers of Commerce will no doubt sit down governors and mayors and insist on rent relief for these "renters." Working people should absolutely fight for their own rights as renters.

The Rent Strike 2020 movement is demanding elected officials suspend rents and mortgages for working people, and if we succeed and are challenged in the courts, we will fight to defend our rights there too.

Why not instead push for rental assistance or rent relief, or some other policy that is constitutional?

My Council office is certainly fighting for all kinds of tenant protections, as we have shown through the victories we've won in the last six years. Limited rental assistance or rent relief is far from enough in the context of the massive collapse of tens of millions of working people's ability to pay rent, as we saw with one third of renters being unable to pay April rent. And it is

certainly not a viable proposal by itself in the absence of any taxes on big business to generate the revenues to be used for the scale of rental assistance needed, at a time when other social budgets are starting to be slashed.

Equally importantly, rental assistance at this moment on the basis of public funds would effectively be a bailout for the corporate landlords, one of the most rapacious sections of the capitalist class. We need to fight for a full suspension, without consequences, of rent payments for renters and mortgage payments for small landlords and homeowners. **The banks, corporate landlords, and Wall Street need to pay for this crisis, not ordinary people.**

What comes after May 1st?

We will need to keep organizing. The Republican party and the Democratic establishment are both beholden to corporate real estate and big banks, so we should expect them to fight us tooth and nail.

But we know we can win. When we organize and fight, we win!

Who is calling for a rent suspension and/or rent strike throughout the nation?

We are in good company! Rent Strike 2020 and countless housing justice and tenant rights organizations have called for a suspension of rent, mortgage, and utility payments, and for a rent freeze. In addition to socialists and housing justice activists, even groups like [ParentsTogether, a national parent-led group, are calling on the US Congress](#) to suspend rent, mortgage, and utility payments for the duration of the pandemic.

Many groups are calling for a May 1st Rent Strike to build momentum for those demands. Among them are Kent Tenants Union - Kent, Ohio; Autonomous Tenants Union - Chicago, Illinois; Tenants United - Chicago, Illinois; Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE) - Los Angeles, California; Rent Strike ATX - Austin, Texas; Woodside on the Move - Queens, New York; 1234 Pacific Street Tenant Association - Brooklyn, New York; Unite Here

Local 23 union and African Communities Together - Alexandria, Virginia; Richmond Tenants Union. - Richmond, Virginia; Tenants of Saturn Property Management, Linking Up with the LA Tenant's Union - Los Angeles California.

Rent Strike 2020's petition has gathered 3 million signatures nationally, while our statewide [petition](#) has nearly 9,000 signatures. In addition to socialists and housing justice activists, even groups like [ParentsTogether, a national parent-led group, are calling on the US Congress](#) to suspend rent, mortgage, and utility payments for the duration of the pandemic.