

2020

TENANTS ASSOCIATION

Handbook

PRODUCED BY



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LOS ANGELES TENANTS UNION

Tenants Association Handbook

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PREFACE

One of the strongest tools that we have as tenants to protect our housing is to build community. An open channel of communication between neighbors makes it possible to share experiences and information. Even in apartment buildings where there are no problems with the landlord, creating community transforms everyday life. Community entails providing support for our elderly neighbors and establishing care systems for children and neighbors who fall ill. Community between tenants can help us learn what it means to live with people who are different from us in language, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and beliefs.

This handbook was created by rank-and-file members of the L.A. Tenants Union to help other tenants in the process of creating and defending community. The idea of tenants supporting and standing with other tenants is a fundamental principle of the L.A. Tenants Union. We have created this handbook both to encourage tenants everywhere to organize themselves and for them to then help others organize. In the words of the freedom struggle: each one teach one.

We want to thank all the L.A. Tenants Union members who shared their stories with us. We welcome feedback for future editions of the handbook so that it can become a living resource for building the kind of city that welcomes all of us and that sees housing as a human right for everyone.

L.A. Tenants Union Outreach Committee



CREATING AND DEFENDING COMMUNITY



A TENANTS ASSOCIATION is 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.

Much of a landlord's power comes from isolating the tenants in a building, making us feel helpless, vulnerable, and alone. This was certainly Fran Glenn's experience in a building where she used to live in Burbank. When her landlord gave Fran a sudden, unwarranted \$125 rent increase, she didn't think it was possible to fight back, and though she knew that many of her neighbors had received similar rent increases, she wasn't sure how to connect her personal struggle with theirs. They were all facing the same problem, but instead of facing it together, they were each facing it on their own. As a result, Fran and most of her neighbors were forced to move out of the building, despite wanting to stay in a place where they had friends, family members, jobs—in short, a community.

Fran compares this experience to her current living situation in Eagle Rock, where she and

many of the other tenants in her 100-unit building—most of whom are elderly and living on fixed incomes—have formed a tenants association to fight back against things like unjust rent increases. More than anything, Fran says, being a part of this tenants association has given her a sense of support. "It's nice to know that there are other people who are willing to stand up and say, No, we don't want you jacking our rent up," Fran says. "It's nice to know I'm not alone in that."

"People think they have to surrender because they have no power. But we do have power,"

Fran continues. Fran and her neighbors proved this point recently when 19 units in their building received rent increases ranging from 40% to 60%. Their tenants association collectively fought back against these rent hikes—and won. With the help and support of the Northeast Local of the L.A. Tenants Union, Fran and her neighbors organized protests, wrote petitions, initiated lawsuits, and spoke out

at City and Neighborhood Council meetings. The result? The rent increases were lowered first to 6% and then to 3%. Fran and her neighbors are still fighting to lower the rent further, given that even a 3% increase presents a serious burden to many of the building's elderly, fixed-income tenants. Fran's unit wasn't one of the 19 units that received a rent hike, she says. But she supported her neighbors in their struggle. She knew that the other members of her tenants association would do the same thing for her.

As Fran's story demonstrates, tenants associations are a powerful way to address immediate, practical concerns. Tenants associations can provide a unified resistance to a landlord who has unfairly raised the rent, who is failing to provide adequate repairs, or who is harassing tenants and pressuring them to move. On a deeper level, Fran's story also shows how tenants associations can help us defend our neighborhoods and communities. **Working together, tenants can stand up to landlords, development companies, and others who would sacrifice our homes and our human connections simply to make a profit.** Without a tenants association and the support it could have provided, Fran's previous community in Burbank was torn apart. In Eagle Rock, by contrast, Fran's tenants association helped her and her neighbors fight to hold their community and their neighborhood together.



Fran's story also demonstrates something else: **just as a tenants association is stronger than an individual tenant, a Local chapter of the L.A. Tenants Union is stronger than an individual tenants association.** Without the support of the Northeast Local, which both helped Fran and her neighbors establish their tenants association and then gave them ongoing encouragement and assistance in their struggle, Fran's building would not have had the wider strength of the L.A. Tenants Union behind it. Thus, by connecting their tenants association to a Local of the Tenants Union, Fran and her neighbors benefited from the collective power that the Union had already built. Conversely, by joining the Union, the tenants in Fran's building have also contributed to the growing power of the Tenants Union as a whole.

Over the years of organizing with and empowering tenants, L.A. Tenants Union members have heard many stories like Fran's. We have heard stories from tenants of diverse backgrounds and neighborhoods. We have heard stories about the concerns that tenants have in forming an association. Thinking about your own situation in your building, it's possible that you may feel uncertain about forming a tenants association. Perhaps, as you speak with your neighbors, you may hear that they are afraid of retaliation from the landlord. Perhaps they fear the involvement of law enforcement or ICE. These are understandable fears, particularly for tenants who lack documentation. When it comes to documentation, the most important thing to remember is that our rights as tenants aren't dependent on citizenship. It's against the law for a landlord to use our lack of documentation against us. Regardless of our legal status, we are stronger when we work together. By joining together in associations and connecting these associations to the L.A. Tenants Union, we can successfully put pressure on landlords and city officials and defend our communities.

Another possible challenge when starting a tenants association is that, especially if you or your neighbors have lived in your building for a long time, there may be past differences and disagreements between some of you. Laura Straus, one of the tenants in Fran's building who received a 60% rent increase, says that this was a very real problem for their tenants association. At the

INTRODUCTION

beginning, she recalls, "there were so many different approaches and opinions." People's personalities clashed; historical animosities resurfaced. As Laura puts it: "It wasn't as simple as, 'Suddenly we were all friends, we made a circle and sang Kumbaya.'"

Despite these issues, however, Laura is clear on one point: "I would never have gotten my rent down by just fighting on my own." She, Fran, and the other members of the tenants association worked through their personal differences and, in Laura's words, "We somehow did it together."

In fact, Laura goes on, she and her neighbors did more than just put their differences aside. Through the process of organizing together, old disagreements were forgotten and new friendships were formed. Laura remembers one day in particular when the members of her tenants association all attended a City meeting together. "I drove some people," Laura recalls. "And one of the women I drove was known for not being friends with anyone. But she made friends that day, and we all went out to dinner afterward. Now, when I go to her door and shout, 'Hi Lily, it's Laura!' she comes out. She answers!"

Laura and Fran's experience shows *just how powerful a tenants association can be. Not only is it an effective tool for solving immediate, practical problems with your landlord., it's also a way to create new connections with your neighbors and your community, and to deepen the connections that already exist.*

In the following pages, you'll learn that there is no single model for a tenants association. Fran and Laura's tenants association looks one way, given the particularities of their building. Your tenants association will likely look different. You'll also learn that you don't need a lawyer to form a tenants association. Nor do you need every tenant in your building to join (though the more the merrier!). The most important thing is that you work together with your neighbors to improve the conditions in your building and that you join your efforts to the efforts of the L.A. Tenants Union as a whole.

Let's defend our housing and our communities by using the very thing that makes our city so rich in the first place: our connections to our neighbors!



PRINCIPLES AND COMMITMENTS

TENANTS HAVE POWER. We often just don't know it because we haven't put that power into practice. It may feel like the landlord holds all the power. A lesson we learn over and over in the L.A. Tenants Union is that individual tenants are stronger when they come together and form a tenants association. A tenants association is stronger when it gets involved in the local chapter of L.A. Tenants Union, building tenant power in the neighborhood. Each local chapter of the union is stronger when it remains active and connected to the citywide tenants union movement.

At each of these levels, tenants have the opportunity to reflect on their experience together, critically analyze our situation as tenants, and take collective action in defense of our communities, especially the poorest among us. Tenants associations are the most direct and intimate organizing space where our principles and commitments come home.

Forming a tenants association gives neighbors the chance to talk about and put into practice our values as a community. What is important to us in working together and strengthening our community? A similar question was put to a group of two dozen solidarity organizers and base leaders in L.A. Tenants Union in September 2019. Here are their answers to the question, what are the values of L.A. Tenants Union and our movement for tenant power. Your group can begin the association process by asking that question for yourselves or reflecting on the statements below.

// 01

L.A. Tenants Union organizes tenant power in apartment buildings, neighborhoods, citywide, and internationally. Building power involves education, advocacy, and direct action. Direct action gets the goods! Everywhere we organize we are guided by shared principles and commitments.

// 02

L.A. Tenants Union members are accountable to collective decisions. L.A. Tenants Union is autonomous; tenants have the power to determine their own direction. And L.A. Tenants Union is horizontal; we are a leader-filled movement.

// 03

L.A. Tenants Union is a movement for building tenant power and not just a service organization. At the same time, we see leadership as service to the movement--especially service to the most vulnerable people in our communities. We see building community as the basis of tenant power.

// 04

L.A. Tenants Union is an anti-gentrification movement. We oppose the displacement of tenants and we oppose the institutions and policies behind social cleansing, which is rooted in structural racism, colonialism, xenophobia, and class violence.

// 05

L.A. Tenants Union is a tenant-centered movement. We organize tenants in the fullness of their lives. At the same time, we understand that housing is not an economic relation but a human need, a means of making community. Housing is a human necessity. We struggle for the dignity of housed and of unhoused tenants.

REASONS L.A. TENANTS UNION ORGANIZES TENANT ASSOCIATIONS

The L.A. Tenants Union was formed in 2015 by a diverse group of tenants from across the city. Many of us were facing evictions, landlord harassment, and the threat of social cleansing, or gentrification. We knew that the only way to defend our homes and our communities was to collectivize our struggles and form a union. But in a city as diverse and geographically dispersed as Los Angeles, we quickly learned that our union needed to be in every neighborhood and in every apartment building.

When tenants come together to start the process of forming an association, one of the first questions they ask themselves as a group is why do they need a tenants association in our apartment building. In September 2019, two dozen solidarity organizers and base leaders in the union came together and asked a similar question. Why does L.A. Tenants Union organize associations of tenants? Here are their responses.

// 01

L.A. Tenants Union is committed to organizing tenant associations in neighborhoods across the city--#TAinEveryBldg. There are reasons for forming a tenant association from a legal perspective (see below). And there are reasons L.A. Tenants Union organizes tenant associations from the perspective of building tenant power.

// 02

A tenant association brings the movement home and connects the home to the larger movement. A tenant association helps to bring crucial information into the home and channels on-the-ground struggles and leadership into the L.A. Tenants Union local, citywide union, and beyond.

// 03

A tenant association builds unity within community. It makes community something we make together through mutual accountability, mutual dependence, and shared learning. Tenant associations proliferate spaces for the development of leadership and collective experimentation across the city.

// 04

A tenant association is a learning space and an active space. It is how we build power and raise consciousness. It is how we turn learning into action, and knowing our rights into practicing our rights for the defense of our community—in particular, the most vulnerable among us.

// 05

A tenant association meets people where they're at and expands the movement beyond crisis-response to the fullness of our lives as tenants. The tenant association redefines the home as a space of social struggle to create and defend a good life for everyone and not just for the rich. A tenant association thrives and endures as long as it responds to all of the concerns that our community faces, ensuring that we face the problems for the long-term and together.



TEN LEGAL REASONS FOR FORMING A TENANTS ASSOCIATION IN YOUR APARTMENT BUILDING

In the L.A. Tenants Union, we have seen a wide range of reasons why tenants benefit from forming a tenants association with their neighbors. We also know that forming a tenants association is something that tenants can do on their own without having to consult with a lawyer. However, we asked some lawyers to share with us reasons why they believe it is important for tenants to start their own association.

This flyer was prepared with assistance from Los Angeles Center for Community Law and Action (www.laccla.org) for use by the L.A. Tenants Union. The content is not intended to constitute attorney solicitation or create a duty of care between the reader and authors.



1. STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

A landlord's power over tenants comes from tenants feeling alone and afraid. It is difficult to demand your rights when you feel alone. The first reason for forming an association is that doing so will help to counter the fear that comes from feeling like the landlord has all the power. When you are in an association, you are surrounded by other people in the same position who can provide you with support. It is easier to feel empowered when you are fighting alongside others.

2. MEET YOUR NEIGHBORS

Forming a tenants association helps to strengthen the community in your apartment

building. A tenants association is a way to meet people united by the same cause. The connections that you make could lead to new and empowering friendships and relationships. Even in buildings where there is a history of conflict between neighbors, defending yourselves against an abusive landlord or protecting your housing against displacement can be a powerful way to heal and come together.

3. STRENGTHEN YOUR COMMUNITY

Forming a tenants association demonstrates that a community is stronger when it is united through an empowered idea of itself. Having an association in your building will help you to protect the identity and spirit of a community that is threatened by gentrification. The more people in the neighborhood that are united in associations and members of the L.A. Tenants Union, the more people can lean on each other in the fight for tenants' rights.

4. COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

As an association member, you may find it easier to bargain with a landlord. "Collective bargaining" is when a group of people joins together in order to increase their negotiating power. One hundred tenants advocating for lower rent, necessary repairs, or against harassment will have far more power than one tenant advocating for the same thing. Demands coming from a tenants association are much more likely to be granted than people acting by themselves. So, the easiest way to get your landlord to do what you want would be to form a tenants association.

5. PUBLIC PRESSURE

An association has a greater ability to put public pressure on officials and landlords. One person conducting a rent strike to protest unfair treatment by the landlord probably will not attract the attention of public officials. And one tenant protesting may

TEN LEGAL REASONS

make that person vulnerable to retaliation from the landlord. However, ten or even two hundred households conducting a protest rent strike will get the attention of the local government and the press. Local officials keep public pressure in mind when making decisions for the community.

6. EASIER TO RETAIN LEGAL COUNSEL

When you are connected with a tenants association, you have greater access to legal resources. Lawyers who specialize in tenant cases are easier to contact through an association representative. Lawyers are more likely to take a case when they know that they are also forming a valuable relationship with a tenants association, as opposed to with an individual. Often lawyers are more willing to take on a case if they know they have the support of a group of tenants united.

7. EASIER AND QUICKER TO PLAN AN EFFECTIVE LEGAL STRATEGY

From a lawyer's perspective, working with a tenants association makes planning a case much easier. Witnesses, documents, and other evidence might apply to more than one case in the same building. Your lawyer can often prepare the cases for all the association members together, which makes planning more efficient. Other people from the association who are members of the L.A. Tenants Union can also provide support, and it is easy for your legal counsel to contact them when planning a case.

8. ATTORNEY CLIENT PRIVILEGE AND WORK PRODUCT PROTECTIONS

California Evidence Code § 954 and Federal Rule of Evidence 502 protect specific legal communications between you, your lawyer, and your agents. When preparing your case, communications between you, your lawyer, and other agents (such as L.A. Tenants Union representatives) may be protected under these laws. This means that you may be able to communicate more freely with other association members, L.A. Tenants Union representatives, and your attorney when developing your legal strategy if you engage in a joint representation agreement with other association members and organizers.

9. PROTECTION FROM RETALIATION

According to California Civil Code § 1942.5, it is illegal for a landlord to retaliate or threaten to retaliate against you for joining or participating in a tenants association. When you join a tenants association, you have greater protections under California law when you exercise your rights and stand up for yourself. If a landlord does retaliate against members of a tenants association by issuing a 3-day notice to quit or by some form of harassment, the tenants can choose to raise the issue in court later as defense against an Unlawful Detainer. Or the tenants can sue for retaliation under Civil Code § 1942.5. The subsection of the retaliation statute (Civil Code § 1942.5(c)) prohibiting retaliation for a tenant's participation in a tenants' association does not require the landlord's retaliatory act to occur within a specific time period following notice to the landlord of the formation of the association for a retaliation claim to be valid.

10. FREEDOM OF SPEECH, ASSEMBLY, AND THE RIGHT TO MAKE PUBLIC DEMANDS COLLECTIVELY

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution protects everyone engaging in the freedom of speech or assembly. Over the years, the courts have interpreted the First Amendment to protect a wide variety of union and association activities, including public protest. When you join a tenants association, the United States Constitution protects your right to free speech and your right to association (with limits). Article 1 of the California Constitution is generally interpreted as providing even more free speech protections than the federal Constitution. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights also guarantees rights to people who express their opinions through a tenant's association, although generally courts in the United States do not enforce this part of international law. In California, landlords may be subject to a special type of legal proceeding, called Anti-SLAPP (Code of Civil Procedure § 425.16), if they take actions against a tenants association because of an association protest.

FORMING YOUR TENANT ASSOCIATION



The process of formalizing your tenants association can take different forms. For some tenants, forming an association means going through a formal bylaws process. In other buildings, forming an association means writing a letter to your landlord announcing your group and listing your grievances. You do not need to wait to be in crisis to form an association. In fact, it would be extremely useful to come together before crisis hits. Having an association already organized will help you and your neighbors prepare to act together and win. Formalizing your tenant association is also a way to deal with smaller issues related to repairs, for instance, issues that the owner could be ignoring because they only come as complaints from individual tenants.

In this chapter we will cover go over steps that you and your neighbors can take to make your tenants association an actual entity. Your group will need to adapt the suggestions in this handbook to the specific situation in your building. It is important to remember that forming an association is part of building community. Formalizing your group will require many voices and many hands.

Here are five tips to keep in mind when beginning the process of forming a tenants association.

// 01

It is important to keep in mind that the steps for forming an association are intended to facilitate the tenants through a collective process. Forming the association shapes the tenants into a unified group. Rushing through the steps or asking one person to execute the letter of agreement on the tenants' behalf undermines the process by which the tenants will begin to develop trust and unity. As stated above, building community is one of the primary purposes of forming an association. To that end, the following five steps are intended to be flexible given the size of your apartment building, complex, or neighborhood. The steps are also intended to be flexible to different conditions and levels of crisis.

// 02

This is YOUR tenant association. You can change your by-laws at any time to reflect the needs of the tenants and the changing conditions in your building, changes in ownership, and changes in the neighborhood.

// 03

In forming the association, follow basic community agreements. Be inclusive. Provide communications in the languages spoken in your building. Don't make assumptions about people's backgrounds and lifestyles. Try to resolve disputes in the building without calling the police, especially when there are conflicts with unhoused neighbors. The tenant association is better suited to find nonviolent and respectful solutions than the police.

// 04

Every tenant association will have cycles of activity and inactivity. An effective way to ensure that your association remains active is to balance meetings with social events like barbeques, movie nights, holiday parties, and just hanging out. Weave the life of the association into the social life of your building, complex, or block.

// 05

Experience has proven over and over again, a tenant association is only as strong as its involvement in L.A. Tenants Union and the larger tenant power movement. Just as an individual tenant is stronger when combined with the tenants in the whole building, so too is the building stronger when active in the L.A. Tenants Union.

We Are Chesapeake



WE ARE Tenants Elders Families Working People

The Concerned Community Members for Chesapeake Apartments,
Tenant Association is committed to:

- Ensuring Healthy and Habitable Homes
- Tenant/Landlord Rights Education
- Fighting to Keep Tenants in Their Apartments
- Protecting OUR Community from Outside Interests
- Building Neighborly of Support for One Another

Step One

THE FIRST MEETING

1. Begin by bringing together the tenants in your building (except tenant management). One tool for bringing folks together is to hold an information meeting; e.g. tenants rights workshop, updates on issues in the building, new ownership, updates on a development, updates on changes in the neighborhood.
2. Determine who can help with interpretation if the tenants in your building speak multiple languages, including by reaching out to your nearest LATU local chapter and/or the Language Justice team if you need ideas or support.
3. During the meeting, go over the reasons for forming a tenants association. Emphasize the importance of being a part of L.A. Tenants Union, a citywide tenants movement that is building tenant power.
4. Invite the tenants to a second meeting to begin forming the association.
5. Before ending the meeting, set the date and time for the next meeting and make sure you have everyone's contact information.

Step Two

WHY DO WE NEED A TENANT ASSOCIATION?

1. Begin with introductions and review what the tenants discussed at the last meeting.
2. Review the reasons for forming a tenant association and the importance of being part of L.A. Tenants union, the citywide movement for building tenant power.

3. Brainstorm as a group why you want a tenant association in your building. List the ideas on paper. The list can include: community, mutual assistance (e.g. in the event of an earthquake), share information, pressure the landlord to make repairs, stop landlord harassment, participate in the larger struggle against gentrification in the area, or solidarity with unhoused neighbors.
4. Delegate someone to turn the list into the "mission statement" for your tenant association.
5. Set the next meeting.

Step Three

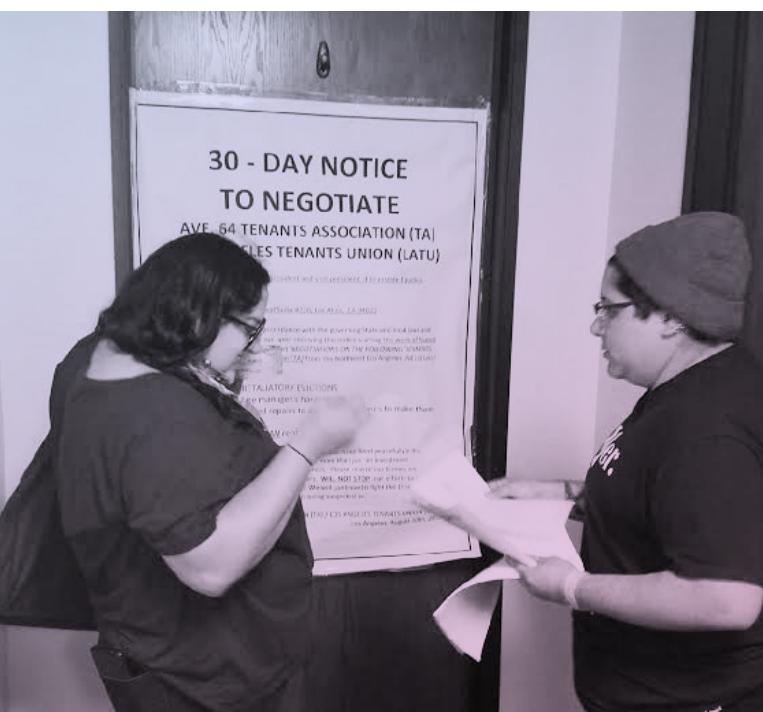
WHAT ROLES DO PEOPLE ASSUME IN THE BUILDING?

1. Review and affirm the mission statement from the previous meeting.
2. Brainstorm all the roles that people in the building already perform. This can include: child-care, senior-care, communicating with neighbors, trash removal, medical knowledge such as overdose response, etc.
3. List the roles, if any, that the tenants feel they need in order to accomplish the goals in the mission statement. Only list roles people are prepared to take on. Determine the people in those roles, the duration of their service, and how people will be selected to replace them.
4. Delegate someone to turn the notes into the "tenant association roles" section for the association's letter of agreement (or, tenant association by-laws).
5. Set the next meeting.

Step Four

WHAT COMMITMENTS WILL MEMBERS MAKE TO EACH OTHER?

1. Review and affirm the mission statement and the list of roles in the apartment building.
2. Brainstorm your commitments to each other as neighbors and members of the association. Be mindful of commitments that account for inclusiveness and do not make assumptions about each other. List commitments to which you are willing to be held accountable as a group.
3. After making the list of commitments to each other, write down guidelines for how you will deal as a group when someone violates those commitments.
4. Delegate someone to turn the list into the "membership obligations" section for your letter of agreement.
5. Set the next meeting.



Step Five

FINALIZE, SIGN, AND SUBMIT LETTER TO OWNER/MANAGEMENT.

1. Review and affirm the letter of agreement composed over the previous meetings.
2. Compose a cover letter that lists all of your demands to the landlord and/or management. This cover letter can be your association's first request for collective bargaining with the owners.
3. Create a signature page and collect signatures from as many tenants as wish to join the association—print and sign the lease-holder's name, unit number, and phone and/or email.
4. Make sure everyone who joined the association gets a copy of the cover letter and the tenant agreement.
5. Having collected the signatures, send dated copies of the cover letter and agreement document to the owner and/or to the management company. Send registered mail without the need for signature.



STORIES OF TENANTS ORGANIZING TOGETHER

Each community is different, just as each building is different. Each struggle has its own complex mix of circumstances that affect what people can achieve. To give an idea of what results can come from your tenants association, here are six stories from different tenants associations across Los Angeles that have formed with the support of the L.A. Tenants Union.

// 01

BRAESIDE TENANTS ASSOCIATION, HIGHLAND PARK

Overcoming Fear and Stopping Landlord Harassment

As with so many tenants associations, the Braeside Tenants Association formed in response to a crisis. Their 10-unit, rent-controlled building in Highland Park was purchased by a new landlord, and almost immediately a few different "retenanters" (managers employed by the new owner) began to arrive with cash-for-keys buyout offers, telling the tenants they had to accept these offers and move out. According to Maja, one of the tenants, her immediate response was one of fear. "We had strangers on the property at all hours of the day and night, waiting for tenants to come home," she recalls. "We didn't know what our rights were, and that made us scared."

However, after organizers from the Northeast Local of the L.A. Tenants Union held a Tenants Rights Workshop on the property, the Braeside tenants began to speak more openly with one another about their situation. Eventually, they decided to form a tenants association. According to Maja, this was a crucial step in overcoming their collective fear. Forming a tenants association, she says, "helped us feel like we were together, in the same boat, fighting for the same thing. Nobody felt that

we could be picked on, because we were now part of a group."

The tenants' first action was to send a letter to the building's new owner, with all of their names, signatures, and apartment numbers. The letter stated very clearly that the Braeside tenants would no longer be communicating as individuals with the landlord or the management company. Instead, they demanded that any future communication—including any cash-for-keys buyout offers—be directed to a single email address, accessible by all members of the tenants association. Maja says that the association never received a direct response from the owner acknowledging this letter, but that immediately after they sent it, "retenanters" stopped coming to the building and harassing the tenants to leave. *"If you look at the timeline," Maja says, "the harassment stopped right after we sent the letter."*

At the time of writing, almost six months have passed since the Braeside tenants formed a tenants association. The owner and management company have not harassed the tenants again, nor have they continued to pressure them to leave. Maja and the other members are now beginning to use their association to achieve other practical goals as well, such as pressuring management to do repairs in a timely fashion. The main thing they still need to practice, according to Maja, is how to use their shared email account "to write as one, as 'we,' rather than as 'I' or using our individual names. Only using apartment numbers is huge, because it doesn't put any one individual on the spot. If an email says, 'Apartment 7 needs a window repair...' and if the undersigned is the tenants association, it is very difficult to point the finger at any individual tenant. Asking collectively for repairs means that one name won't stick in management's head as a sole troublemaker."

// 02

ROBINSON TENANTS ASSOCIATION, RAMPART VILLAGE

Building Trust, Remaining United, and Staying in Your Building



The Robinson building is an 8-unit, rent-controlled building located in the Rampart Village neighborhood of L.A. Almost immediately after the building was purchased by a new landlord in early 2016, the tenants began to be subjected to intense pressure and harassment. Retenanters-managers employed by the new owner—as well as the new owner himself came to the building at all hours of the day and night, trying to force the tenants to accept cash-for-keys buyout offers. The tenants, some of whom had lived in the building for almost four decades, were told that they'd "lived there long enough" and that, one way or another, the new owner was going to get them out.

According to Uver, a tenant in the Robinson building and also an organizer with the L.A. Tenants Union, his and his neighbors' first reaction to all this was one of panic, suspicion, and fear. "At the beginning," he recalls, "everyone was polarized. Everybody assumed that we had no rights and would have to leave. Gentrifier white people were coming in and we were finished."

With the help of lawyers from Inner City Law Center, however, the tenants in the building decided to form a tenants association. Uver says that the first—and in some sense the most important—outcome of this decision was that *the tenants in the building began to trust one another*. As Uver puts it: the tenants "realized that we could inspire one another, not oppose one another. We could comfort one another and give one another support." In short, forming a tenants association helped to show the tenants "that we weren't really all alone, that there were other people backing us."

The Robinson Tenants Association has been through a lot since its creation, including two separate Tenant Habitability Plans (THPs) and months of constant, illegal harassment by their landlord. *Nevertheless, nearly two years since the owner first tried to force them out, the tenants of the Robinson building are still there*. According to Uver, their success is almost entirely attributable to forming a tenants association. "Had we never united," he says, "we would have never stayed." Uniting in an association made it possible to resist the landlord's divide-and-conquer tactics, as when the landlord would threaten Uver by telling him, "One of you is going to go, and then the rest will follow." "That was his approach," Uver reflects. "And that, I imagine, is the approach of everyone who wants to displace people from buildings. That's why they single people out, to find everyone's individual weaknesses."

Forming a tenants association allowed the Robinson tenants to fight as one, which is exactly how they have prevailed against the owner's efforts to isolate them. Unity has made it possible for them to defend their homes.

YUCCA-ARGYLE TENANTS ASSOCIATION, HOLLYWOOD

Building Community for the Long-Term Struggle



In August of 2015, a month after the L.A. Tenants Union was established, members met a group of the tenants at a Neighborhood Council meeting in Hollywood. Everyone had come out to hear about plans to demolish the Yucca-Argyle Apartments. In place of the existing 44-unit, multi-building apartment complex, the developer Bob Champion intended to build a 32-story tower for luxury apartments, a hotel, and shopping. If the development was approved, the demolition would remove 40 rent-stabilized apartments from the city's stock.

After a series of meetings with members of the Tenants Union, over twenty Yucca-Argyle households decided to form an association. The reason and urgency was clear, according to Yucca-Argyle tenant and Union member Shauna Johnson: they wanted "to save our homes and stop demolition."

An initial campaign to oppose the development forced preliminary promises from the developer, offering a guaranteed right-of-return to the tenants. Champion brought these promises to the table not because the tenants were willing to negotiate; rather, as the result of tenants threatening to mobilize large-scale community

opposition to a project that would destroy rent-controlled housing and displace 44 households in the middle of a housing crisis. In an asymmetric conflict where developers appear to have limitless money and power, *sometimes tenants' only and most important power is the power to say no!*

While the tenants underwent the years-long process of lawyers and draft agreements, the association had to remain constantly vigilant. They communicated with neighbors the real consequences of accepting cash-for-keys deals whereby tenants gave up their rights for a small amount of money. For Shauna and her neighbors, the pressure to accept such offers was combined with daily intimidation. "An entity called Del Richardson Associates (DRA) occupied one of the units in the building." DRA held regular social events in the building, including workshops on how tenants could purchase a home with their buyout amounts. Having the tenants association allowed the tenants to communicate with each other independently and dispel the lies that a \$10,000 buyout would somehow magically translate into a mortgage on a home in Hollywood.

The outcome of the struggle for the Yucca-Argyle Tenants Association remains uncertain. But for Shauna and her neighbors, *"the main benefit of forming a tenants association is creating community; this is not common in Los Angeles.* I've lived in here for 25 years and didn't know my neighbors. It's good to connect with your neighbors who feel the same way that you do, and use your voices together."

CONCLUSION

// 04

**VERNON AVE TENANT ASSOCIATION,
VENICE**

Coming Together to Fight Evictions and Landlord Harassment



Since forming in April 2017 with commitment from 5 households, the Vernon Ave Tenant Association in Venice, CA, has unified as a group, supported each other when members faced unjust evictions, and practiced the process of documenting and communicating everything in writing. Their owners have attempted to evict several of them, first by illegally trying to raise their rents and later through lies.

When the Vernon Ave tenants joined the Westside Local of the L.A. Tenants Union, they heard for the first time about the Housing and Community Investment Department of L.A. (HCIDLA), aka the housing department. Soon thereafter, they learned how to submit complaints. Three out of five households opened cases with the housing department, learning together and orienting each other to the process. The complaints to HCID were crucial evidence against the landlords and may have contributed to one of them winning her case, and to the other's case ultimately being dismissed by the landlord.

After forming and sending a letter to their landlords stating their demands, the Vernon tenants have experienced less harassment. They are urging the landlords to meet regarding repairs, and are now switching their focus to the new management company the owners have brought on. They are unified and resolved to fight, no longer afraid, and held their first protest to denounce landlord harassment of working class people from the Oakwood neighborhood in Venice during the L.A. Tenants Union's Days of Rage 2017.

// 05

**51815 EAST 2ND STREET TENANTS
ASSOCIATION, BOYLE HEIGHTS**

Employing a Rent Strike as the Ultimate Form of Resistance



The tenants association at 1815 East 2nd Street, also known as the "Mariachi building," has had a major impact on the public narrative of what it means to go on "rent strike." Just a few years ago, if one mentioned the idea of a rent strike as an organizing tactic, fellow renters and organizers would often deem it too risky or too radical. However, the urgency of today's displacement crisis has forced tenants, as well as allied organizers and attorneys, to

take more courageous and daring steps together, particularly against corporate landlords who are unscrupulous in their tactics and disregard of the working class people of Los Angeles. As a non-RSO building, when the Mariachi building tenants received 60% to 80% rent hikes, they essentially had two choices: move out and leave their community because of the astronomical rents around them in Boyle Heights or stay and fight to show this landlord and other tenants that it is possible to resist. The Mariachi building tenants chose to stay and fight, because as tenant Francisco Gonzalez put it, "we really didn't have another choice."

The Mariachi building went on rent strike after their landlord, Frank BJ Turner, repeatedly refused to meet the tenants at the negotiating table and began eviction proceedings on numerous units because of their refusal to pay \$800 rent increases. Francisco explains that, to-date, 12 of the units in the 20-unit building are participating in the rent strike. Seven of those units are currently moving through eviction court proceedings. These tenants do not pay their rent to their landlord and instead pay their rent via money order to their lawyer, who in turn deposits the funds into a secure bank account. The remaining five units that are not currently being evicted (but have had their rents increased) also hand their rent checks over to the lawyers as an act of solidarity with the tenants who are in eviction proceedings, and as an act of resistance to the rent hike.

The Mariachi building's rent strike has garnered both local and national attention from both English- and Spanish-language media outlets. Their case is used by tenants' rights activists as a symbol of resistance and inspiration for others who find themselves with their back against the wall after a rent hike. Francisco explains the popularity and influence of their case throughout the city, "People ask about us, the mayor wants an update on our case, our councilman Jose Huizar wants to know what's going on with us because we are waking people up! We are inspiring people to join together and we are inspiring people to fight! For us it's not about whether we win or we lose, it's about showing these investors and corporations that they should think twice if their going to make money their sole focus because we are going to get in their way."



// 06

MARMION ROYAL TENANTS ASSOCIATION, HIGHLAND PARK

Saving Money, Buying Time, and Resisting Harassment by Going on Rent Strike



In May 2016, the 60-unit, non-RSO Marmion Royal building in Highland Park was purchased by a new owner, Gelena Skya-Wasserman of Skya Ventures. Almost immediately, five of the tenants received 60- or 90-day eviction notices, and most of the others understood that the same thing would soon happen to them.

After attending an initial Tenants Rights Workshop with the L.A. Tenants Union, neighborhood activists from the North East Los Angeles Alliance (NELAA), and lawyers from Eviction Defense Network, the Marmion tenants realized that they had two main options: either give up and leave their homes of many years or stay and fight the unjust actions of the building's new owner. They decided on the latter. A number of the tenants formed an association and, with the help of organizers from NELAA, they planned a march through their neighborhood. **More than 200 people showed up in support.** Clearly, the injustice of the new owner's treatment of the tenants had touched a nerve in a community that was already suffering from gentrification and mass displacement.

For Oscar, one of the original five tenants who received a 90-day notice, this show of community solidarity was life-changing. It was "a huge relief" to know that his neighborhood was willing to support him like this, he recalls. "As if an angel came to the door to help you."

At first, the Marmion Royal Tenants Association attempted to negotiate with the building's new owner about the five tenants who had received notices. But when it became clear that Skya-Wasserman was unwilling to compromise, **all 47 members of the association went on rent strike in solidarity.** "We kept money orders and held the funds in an account until our eviction cases went to court," Oscar remembers. "Everyone knew that if you had time, you could think about what you wanted for the future."

The tactic worked. Although the tenants eventually lost their court cases and were forced to move, **they had saved eight months' worth of rent by fighting back.** The case of the Marmion Royal Tenants Association demonstrates that even non-RSO buildings can win huge victories if the tenants organize and stay unified in their resistance.

The Marmion tenants achieved other major victories as well. For instance, they fought back against the owner's attempt to use sandblasting work as a means of harassment, **holding a picket line for four straight days and preventing the work from happening.** The association was also proactive in its engagement with media, using both English- and Spanish-language outlets such as the L.A. Times to raise awareness about their struggle.

But for John, one of the NELAA organizers who met weekly with the Marmion tenants, the biggest success of the tenants' struggle was the larger Highland Park community that it made visible. Local businesses donated food for the tenants' meetings; local rabbis and pastors and even the Neighborhood Council held fundraisers and offered the tenants space to meet. "And every building is like that," John emphasizes. The social networks of individual tenants spread out into their communities, and if these communities can be made aware of what is happening to them, the communities will rise up and defend its members in any way they can.



**L.A. TENANTS UNION
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