



Getting Past the Door

How We Moved from Canvassing to Organizing Buildings

Stomp Out Slumlords
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Changing Our Strategy

Shifting towards community organizing

For the past 18 months, volunteers from the Stomp Out Slumlords project have criss-crossed the District of Columbia, finding tenants facing eviction and talking to them about how they can defend themselves. We've knocked the doors of nearly 8,000 tenants being sued for eviction, we've spent hundreds of person-hours talking to tenants at landlord-tenant court, we've gotten to know militant tenants and worked alongside them to organize in their buildings. In the course of this work, we've learned a great deal about the dynamics of eviction and tenant struggle, and we've been forced to reevaluate core tenets of our project's original strategy.

We have struggled to execute the plan we started out with, but we have succeeded beyond our expectations in areas of work we had not planned to take on. While we began with an ambitious (and perhaps impossible in retrospect) strategy for using the landlord-tenant court as a strategic choke point to stop evictions, we have increasingly drifted towards more conventional forms of community organizing where we help renters construct building-level organizations to challenge and bargain with their landlords.

One thing has not changed: our overriding goal from the beginning of the project has been to connect with ordinary Washingtonians who aren't predisposed to come to DSA meetings and to help them organize to improve their material conditions. We believe we have made significant progress on this front, and we've been encouraged to connect with socialist organizers across the country who are also gravitating towards tenant organizing. We hope our lessons, both positive and negative, can help comrades join in the work of constructing a renters' movement that can win.

The Limits of Canvassing

In a report on our project issued in April of last year, we summarized our original strategic vision, informed by our prior experience in court:

The way to create a crisis in the eviction machine is by seriously straining the court system's capacity to process eviction cases and raise costs for landlords. (As we noted in our manual, actually taking an eviction to trial costs a landlord around \$10,000, more than a few months rent in most cases). Tenants can do that just by showing up: we had observed that a huge number of tenants never show up for the hearing to contest their eviction and lose by default, and that those who do show up don't know how to navigate the system. Tenants have a great deal to gain if they press their case, and they can wield enormous disruptive power through the rights they already have, but don't know how to use. We want to help unlock this power.

The goal of our project was to push people to show up for their hearing and arm them with basic knowledge about how they could defend themselves, and to thus “flood the court,” slowing eviction citywide and destabilizing the housing market. As we wrote in our original operations manual, we were inspired by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward’s analysis of the welfare rights movement of the 1960s—specifically their view that welfare claimants were able to “flood the rolls” of America’s feeble patchwork of a welfare system and force significant structural reforms by showing up en masse to demand relief. We began pulling landlord-tenant court filings, identifying tenants being sued for eviction, and knocking those tenants’ doors to talk to them about their rights and recommend go to court.

Currently we canvass more or less twice a month (in the Spring, we found that we were burning out our volunteers by trying to canvass every week; since reducing the number of events, attendance at any given canvass has improved substantially) with 10-20 canvassers hitting approximately 300-500 doors. We catch a bit less than a third of the tenants we target (or their family members) at the door and we leave flyers for those who aren’t home or don’t come to the door. Around 30,000 eviction cases are filed each year, and we’re able to speak to the defendant face-to-face a little less than 10 percent of them. Our analysis of canvassing outcomes suggests that speaking to a tenant significantly increases their propensity to show up for court, while leaving a flyer on someone’s door doesn’t have much of a measurable impact. Canvassing has proved effective at the individual level, but so far we haven’t been able to detect much of a disruption in the court.

Our monthly numbers:

- *2 canvasses*
- *10-20 canvassers per event*
- *300-500 doors reach*
- *approx. 1/3 of tenants reached*
- *~30,000 eviction cases per year*
- *<10% of those tenants reached*

In retrospect, it is clear we were irrationally exuberant about our capacity to overburden the court via a canvassing program. Unfortunately, we don’t see a clear path to scaling up our canvass operation to break through this impasse. We’ve been able to improve turnout and our efficiency at pulling cases at the margins, but we face significant headwinds. From talking to friends engaged in other canvassing projects, we understand that turnout of 10-20 people on a consistent basis for months on end is pretty respectable, and despite experimenting with a number of turnout strategies, we have not been able to turn out many more. We have volunteers canvass in pairs for a number of reasons (encouraging people to get to know one another, mentoring newer volunteers, safety), and given that we’re only targeting select individuals, it’s

logistically quite difficult for a canvassing team to hit more than about 50 doors on an afternoon. As we noted in April, it's difficult to see how to get from where we are to where we want to be without changing the nature of our group.

The threat of eviction does not always reveal an underlying antagonism between tenants and landlords.

In our original operations manual, we wrote that we wanted “to develop a cadre of tenant leaders in the poor, predominantly black neighborhoods where evictions are concentrated who can educate their neighbors about the process and agitate for a more defiant approach.” We have made progress on this

front, but not in the way we planned. We have certainly met organic leaders. When we canvass we meet tenants who have sued their landlord or started petitions about building conditions or joined a tenant association. A surprising number of tenants we talk to have been sued because they deliberately withheld rent in protest: it turns out rent strikes are breaking out all around us, albeit in a fractured and individualistic way. Tenants have joined us to canvass their neighbors who are facing eviction, but that has proved most successful when it's part of an effort to organize other tenants in their building to demand that the landlord fix problems on that property. We have not been able to get tenants to come to our regular canvasses. We have met plenty of tenants who are motivated to fight their landlord, but almost none who appear to be interested in our abstract goal of preventing eviction in general. It seems that there are significant barriers to bringing tenants into DSA spaces. However, we've had much more success helping tenants build their own organizations. We will discuss these efforts in more detail below.

At the outset of the project we also failed to fully understand the experience of facing eviction. One thing we have learned is that the threat of eviction does not always reveal an underlying antagonism between tenants and landlords. Most people we canvass are just short on income, so their most pressing issue is that they lost a job or had an unexpected illness or got cut from some public benefit, and fighting with the landlord is not actually as immediately relevant as getting a few hundred dollars together. Eviction is atomizing, and people are more likely to blame themselves than the landlord or the system. The very nature of court proceedings forces people into individualistic rather than collective strategies. In our experience, issues related to the quality of housing—a leaking roof, an unsecured front door, an abusive property manager—are much more likely to highlight the underlying antagonism between owners and renters and motivate collective action.

None of this should suggest that we have given up on our anti-eviction work or that we regard earlier canvassing as a failure. We still conduct regular know-your-rights canvassing and court support, and we intend to keep doing so for the foreseeable future. But instead of hoping that canvassing alone will push tenants into action, we

now view it as an entry point to meet tenants, learn about their problems, and gather leads for further organizing. And in fact, canvassing continues in properties we're trying to organize: it allows us to establish ourselves as a resource for residents, gives tenant leaders experience talking to their neighbors and builds their confidence, and leads to a viable strategy to fight that particular landlord. But we've also widened our focus and started looking for other entry points for organizing.

The Possibilities of Organizing

We now have organizing teams supporting sustained campaigns in four buildings, we're exploring possible organizing leads in four or five more, and we're training more organizers every week. If we decide there's potential for organizing at a given building, we set up a team of two to four volunteers to lead the organizing so that we don't send waves of different strangers in. The work of building relationships with tenant leaders and supporting them through a long and challenging campaign is significantly more demanding and requires more long-term commitment than showing up for an afternoon of canvassing. Most of us had very little prior organizing experience and are learning as we go. We actively recruit skilled and reliable canvassers to become organizing volunteers, and we try to make sure they're paired up with more experienced organizers at the outset. The organizing volunteers meet up on a more or less monthly basis to reflect on experiences in the field and discuss strategy, though we're still developing a more structured training program.

We have worked out a sequence of steps we usually use to begin organizing when we find a promising site. Some leads for organizing come through our regular outreach program, and when we come canvassing we try to identify potential leaders. Occasionally tenants get referred to us by legal service lawyers and service NGO staff we've gotten to know who understand the importance of collective action but can't organize it themselves. If we meet someone who seems promising, especially someone who is already taking action or trying to reach out to neighbors, we hold an extended one-on-one conversation to encourage them and try to inspire them about what collective action with more people could accomplish. We start bringing tenants together to collaborate on outreach and discuss common ground. We bring more tenants into the conversation, and when the time is right we encourage people to come up with demands for the landlord. Sometimes, we organize info sessions with lawyers, both to help tenants feel more confident asserting their rights and to demonstrate our ability to offer meaningful support. Usually we put demands in a petition and try to get as many tenants as possible to sign. We organize delegations to building management and then sometimes to the owners. And to back up demands with real force, we try to get tenants ready to rent strike.

Every building is different, and are flexible in how we approach organizing. In some buildings, we support an existing tenant association, in others we have helped set up tenant associations, and in others tenants form informal committees of action without much formal structure. In some buildings tenants talk about rent strikes from

How we start organizing a building:

Phase 1:

- *identify leads*
- *hold informal conversations among emergent leaders*

Phase 2:

- *hold regular meetings*
- *formulate collective demands*
- *get people to sign on*

Phase 3:

- *organize a delegation to the landlord*
- *escalate public actions*

the outset, in some people are more circumspect and need to do a lot of preliminary organizing before we can have that conversation, and in some circumstances, rent strikes don't make sense at all. In some properties tenants are already meeting actively, in some rent strikes have already begun, and in some we need to basically start from scratch. Demands can be idiosyncratic: some tenants are angry they have been overcharged for water bills, some want to have management abate mold, some are sick of being berated by rental office staff, some want carpets cleaned. In general, we meet tenants where they are and build a campaign around their demands.

Sometimes following tenants' lead raises difficult political questions. We frequently hear complaints about building security: that buildings don't have front doors that lock or lights in common areas, that non-residents can come get drunk or high in common spaces, that residents live in fear of violence. Tenants turn to solutions that seem obvious: get the cops in here, evict the bad tenants. Of course we don't want to minimize threats to people's physical safety, but we worry that calls for a crackdown on bad behavior might spill over and hurt the most vulnerable. In general, we try to redirect people away from blaming "bad tenants" or turning to the police by pointing out management's responsibility for allowing security to deteriorate. Over the long term, we hope that organized communities develop the capacity to mediate problems between tenants and deal with harmful behaviors in non-repressive ways, but clearly we're not there yet. For the moment, there are struggles we feel we can't ignore: at one property we're organizing at there have been two fatal shootings in the last year and residents want a fence around the complex so gangs can't use it as a battlefield.

We are working to develop links between the different struggles we are supporting, pushing building-level leaders to canvass in buildings with whom they share an owner or manager or to meet with groups that are just starting to organize to encourage them. In the medium term, we are interested in building a city-wide tenant union that can draw struggles in different buildings together and fight for meaningful reforms (on the model of efforts in LA, Philadelphia, and Palm Beach County, among other places around the country), but we want to be patient about how we approach this project. We want to make sure that such an organization really belongs to the organic leaders who are struggling where they live, so we're waiting until a critical mass of our contacts genuinely want to lead the way. For now, we hope that strengthening building-level organizations and fostering connections between them will create a foundation for a bigger class-based organization.

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Which Way to the Masses?

Recently, the question of “base-building” has provoked some controversy in the DSA with some sharp disagreements about how we can make our work can take on a mass character, appeal to ordinary people, and reflect the diverse interests of the diverse working class in the U.S. As we have noted already, one of our primary concerns since this project’s origins was to figure out how the DSA can relate to struggles breaking out around us in our community and help organize the unorganized. We’ve had some success on this front, and we hope we can ground a discussion of what base-building looks like in the practical and messy realities of organizing.

We have always been conscious the demographic composition of our group, and it’s impossible to ignore our outsider status when we’re out in the field. We’re mostly operating in neighborhoods and buildings east of the Anacostia River where almost all tenants are black and lower-income, and as we have noted, the huge majority of those who step forward as rank-and-file organizers are women. We have been intentional about recruiting women and people of color to our volunteer organizing group, but like the DSA as a whole, our group remains disproportionately white and male. Meanwhile we’re almost all college graduates in our 20s and early 30s, and we mostly have professional or white collar jobs and live in gentrified areas of Northwest DC. To organize across these differences, we’ve had to recognize them and actively win over people who may be understandably suspicious or even hostile towards us.

Beginning our long-term relationships with resources of material value—like know-your-rights pamphlets, legal aid contacts, clinics, etc—has been crucial to our success. To sustain the work, we need to get to know the people we organize with, take a genuine interest in their problems and perspective, and develop relationships that aren't purely instrumental.

We've never had much interest in recruiting tenants into the DSA. We don't try to hide our politics or shy away from big-picture conversations, but strategically, we think tenants can do a lot more good organizing in their buildings than coming to general meetings on the other side of town. This attitude has been reinforced by our experience: we have succeeded when we help tenants build their own organizations in their own buildings, we have failed miserably when we've tried to get them to come to DSA events. At a more theoretical level, growing the membership of the DSA is not as much of a priority as developing our capacity to support working class organization and struggle. To win any significant pro-tenant reforms, much less socialism, it's absolutely essential that tenants learn to fight for their own interests. Whether they join the DSA or remain fellow travelers doesn't seem hugely important.

One of the major questions we've wrestled with is how we can make ourselves relevant to the struggles of the people we meet, and we've come up with some preliminary answers. We don't need to conceal our aims: people aren't put off by our political analysis, but they aren't really won over by our views alone either. We don't need to

persuade people that the present system sucks; most of the people we meet are already plenty angry. We haven't had much success recruiting people on the basis of prefabricated demands. We've found that we're not very good at predicting what people's animating grievances are and that working with people to formulate their own demands helps them take responsibility for the work of organizing. Our main contri-

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bution has been what we might call organizational capacity—doing things like helping to write agendas, making sure people sign in to meetings, maintaining contact lists, printing flyers, and reminding people to do the thing they committed to doing. Since we have some experience with organizing, we can make suggestions about strategy, propose tactics people might not think of, and bring in outside resources (like legal training). We can pose alternatives that tenants choose between. The tenants bring local knowledge, grievances that can become demands, networks of friends and relatives they can mobilize, and the will to fight.

So what can we do to motivate people to organize? We don't think the answer is a well-reasoned policy position or an inspiring narrative or an exegesis of Marx or nice

graphic design, although we're not against any of that stuff. In our experience, people are predisposed to join in a campaign when they see that it has a realistic plan and that they can transform their immediate material conditions by participating. We think that counterposing universalistic and particularistic approaches is unhelpful. We need to embrace the particularities of people's lives and illustrate in practice how they fit into larger structures and struggles. Ultimately, our program is to organize the class, and as far as we can tell, the path to get there is to equip people to fight their own battles and win.

Case Study

Our First Building, Garden Terrace

Over the course of 2018, the Stomp Out Slumlords project shifted from an anti-eviction canvass to a more flexible tenant organizing project. This change was motivated in large part by our successes in an apartment complex in Northeast DC we have referred to as Garden Terrace. Our work in Garden Terrace was a critical learning experience for us, and despite major challenges and errors on our part, our work there has served as a model for our efforts at other buildings where we have begun organizing.

First Steps

We first started paying attention to Garden Terrace in late 2017 when we noticed that management was filing to evict more than a 100 tenants a month in a property with 376 units. The building is located on top of a metro stop in Ward 7, a predominantly black working-class area of DC that's just starting to see an influx of new development and the early stages of gentrification. It was built by a politically-connected developer that specializes in "transit-oriented" mixed-use projects that relies on city support for many of its projects, and its construction was subsidized to the tune of \$65 million. It's managed by Edgewood, one of the largest (and most hated) management companies in the region. After some research, we decided to target the property in a sustained way. We began canvassing the property intensively, and in December we organized a know-your-rights training a block away from the building with the hopes of getting more leads in the building. We hoped to test whether we could use our flood-the-court strategy at the level of one building, raise the cost of eviction for that landlord, and try to win concessions. We won concessions after all, but the road to them was much more complicated than we thought.

After our first meeting, we focused on recruiting tenants to come along with S.O.S. volunteers for know-your-rights canvassing within the building (when we tried to get them to go elsewhere, they tended to flake). We recruited one tenant from the train-

ing and a few more after we knocked their doors, and in short order we had a team of five canvassers, all of them women, of whom two stood out as the most consistent. A trio and then a pair of organizers from S.O.S. were detailed to the building “full-time:” working in the property became their role within the project, and other organizers steered clear so that tenants could get to know the people they were working with personally. Our organizers would hold informal meetings in common areas of the building before canvassing in which we would explain the project, give out legal information (not advice!), and try to discuss tenants’ goals for change in the building. More and more tenants began to get involved in small ways.

The conversations we were having in these meetings and on the doors drifted away from evictions, the original focus of our project. Unsurprisingly, we heard tenants complain that the rental office was abusive, that they would sue tenants for being a dollar short or a day late, that they frequently sued for no reason at all or because they had made clerical errors. Everyone was mad about being threatened with eviction, but we realized many people saw the court notices as more of a routine annoyance than an existential threat and only one of many grievances. We also heard that tenants routinely got huge hikes in their water bills that weren’t explained by their usage, security was lax and people felt unsafe in common areas at night, residents’ cars were being ticketed and

Garden Terrace Timeline:

Nov 2017: begin anti-eviction canvassing

Dec: know-your-rights training

Jan 2018: recruit team of tenant canvassers and hold informal pre-canvass meetings

April: formulate demands to management and circulate petition

May: tenant association forms

Summer: tenant association presents demands to owner; open conflict among tenants

Sept: renewed circulation of the petition

Oct: delegation to developer

Nov: developer promises timeline of changes

Dec: old management fired

Jan 2019: tax credit bill introduced; tenants push for further changes

towed from the garage without explanation, and despite the fact that the building is new and looks like a luxury property from the outside, maintenance is poor and many of the apartments are falling apart. In general, tenants felt disrespected by the management of the building and wanted them replaced.

By April, everyone agreed that we needed to move from discussing people's grievances to making demands. The group of tenants we were working with and some neighbors they invited along met and came up with a list of 16 demands ranging from fixing the trash chutes to making the building more wheelchair accessible to increasing the frequency of security patrols to expunging tenants' rental history when they were sued for eviction in error. We made a petition and started to canvass the whole building with it. By the end of May more than 100 tenants had signed. The group decided that before they presented the demands to management, they should formally incorporate a tenant association. They felt this would give them more legitimacy to bargain on behalf of tenants. We were lukewarm on the idea: we agreed that the group could use more structure, but we also worried that the core group of rank-and-file organizers would get bogged down in disagreements about bylaws when they should be talking to more people and trying to escalate the pressure on management. We also worried that holding an election would provoke divisive status competition without actually representing the will of a substantial portion of residents at the building. But by late May, tenants decided they wanted to incorporate and hold an election, and we weren't going to stand in their way. At that point, conflicts among tenants threatened to derail the entire organizing project.

Conflict

When we wrote our last report, we were already dealing with growing controversies and contradictions within the group. From our first meetings at Garden Terrace, some of our contacts wanted to target "bad tenants" as well as management. We heard a number of complaints about these offenders: they damaged common areas, they let strangers into the property, they got drunk or high and got aggressive, they kept pit bulls they refused to pick up after. Some of these complaints reflected the complex social composition of the building: technically, it's "affordable housing," subsidized through the low-income housing tax credit program, but it's not aimed at the poor—minimum income for a tenant applying for a \$1,200 a month studio is \$39,852. As such, many of the tenants paying full rent are white collar professionals (we have met paralegals, teachers, social workers, and middle managers of various sorts), but there are a large number of lower-income tenants with Section 8 vouchers and a substantial number of formerly homeless families the city has relocated out of a recently-closed family shelter. It should be said that whatever their socioeconomic status, the huge majority of Garden Terrace residents are black. Many people we spoke to blamed various nuisances on people with vouchers, including people who had vouchers themselves. In discussing strategies to improve quality of life in the building, some people proposed setting up a hotline for people to report their neighbors for rule-breaking. This line of thinking made us uncomfortable, and we tried to

point out the landlord's responsibility for some of the problems people blamed on tenants and tried to redirect anger back towards management by suggesting that tenants should focus on insisting they enforce rules fairly. Despite our opposition to the idea, some tenants we worked with wanted to make monitoring other tenants' behavior a piece of the organizing program. This strategic disagreement ended up being one of many fissures that opened up in the tenant group.

Apart from the "bad tenants" question, the group was beset by the kind of conflicts common to any cooperative project. There were disagreements about strategy: one tenant in particular was outspoken and militant (she was particularly fond of smearing Garden Terrace on social media), and the rest (who had been in conflict with management for less time) were more interested in consensus-building, compromise, and playing nice. There were also disagreements about participation: the most active tenants were annoyed that they shouldered so much of the burden and gotten angry at people they believed weren't pulling their weight. They weren't wrong to be frustrated, but other tenants felt alienated and didn't want to get more involved when their reward for showing up was being chastised for not showing up more. Conflict occasionally broke out in person, but it was worst in a group chat for tenants, where they argued bitterly and edited various memes to ridicule one another. There were periods in late April and May where some of the leaders refused to speak to one another. Our attempts at mediation met with middling success. Most tenants agreed to keep working together but there was lingering bitterness. One of our best friends in the building, one of the first contacts we made, refused to participate in the formation of the tenant association and moved out of the building not too long after.

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When an election for tenant association leadership was actually held, the women who had led the organizing to that point felt burnt out. The building leads weren't aggressive about turning out their neighbors, and none of them wanted to run to be president. Attendance at the meeting was small, about 10 tenants and our volunteers, and a tenant we didn't know well—and one of the only men who had

ever canvassed with us—was elected president unopposed. In retrospect, failing to encourage one of the existing leaders to run for president was one of our greatest strategic miscalculations. Most of the core leaders we knew were elected to the other positions (vice-president, secretary, etc), but from this point the new president tried to monopolize decision-making and silence disagreement.

The new president turned out to have a quite conservative orientation. He wanted the association to report tenants for breaking rules and to take a conciliatory line with

management. The association had agreed to deliver the demands to management, but he delayed the delivery and blocked our suggestion that a large delegation of tenants come along as a show of strength. When the board finally met with the property manager, he emphasized that the association and management should have a collaborative relationship and offered to spy on bad tenants. He did not demand to know when management would meet the demands or threaten any consequences if they failed to do so. After the meeting, he upbraided other tenants who had spoken up and been more demanding, saying that they had been divisive and made the group look unprofessional. The president and the people close to him became increasingly hostile to the outside S.O.S. organizers, accusing us of having a radical political agenda (which is true of course, but hardly a secret) and saying we couldn't be trusted because we're white. We didn't think these criticisms were made in good faith, but we

Fissures We've Seen Among Tenants:

- *voucher-holders vs. tenants who pay market rate*
- *generational divides*
- *conflict between ethnic, linguistic, and racial groups*
- *people who favor confrontation vs. those who are slow to escalate*

You can't prevent all of these conflicts, but you can anticipate that certain divides in your tenant group can lead to conflict. It's important to foster conversations between these groups (before they even harden into groups) so that tenants don't become polarized against one another.

we were always concerned that we were pushing our agenda at the expense of following tenants' lead, and in response to this conflict we tried to subtly shift our approach. We scaled back the presence of outside organizers at the building and re-committed to a policy of not going there unless we were doing something with a tenant. We discouraged our friends from defending us or demanding apologies for slights and encouraged unity within the tenant association. In the end, our attempts at de-escalation were disappointing.

Ultimately the problem with the tenant association was passivity more than it was a conservative "line." A month passed and management took no action in response to the demands, but the president showed little interest in pressuring them further. Attendance at meetings was poor,

and the association's main activity were social activities (which featured plenty of free food and well-attended) and handing out flyers telling tenants "if you see something, say something." Anti-eviction canvassing slowed down. Nothing much was happening and conditions were still bad. The tenants who had remained close to us grew increasingly frustrated, as did we, and we decided further action needed to be taken, even if it had to occur without the tenant association's approval. We didn't think the president of the tenant association had much legitimacy to make these decisions. The huge majority of tenants who had signed the petition on the expectation that a group was organizing to push these issues had never voted for him or approved his policies. We decided to start canvassing to gather more signatures on the petition, and to hold public meetings to plan next steps.

Continuing the Struggle

In August we began more or less where we had left off before the formation of the tenant association: canvassing and holding periodic meetings in common areas, now with a reconfigured group of core tenants. It took some time to get organized again, but this time tenants had a much more coherent program. They added a new demand: since Edgewood had not responded to their grievances, they should be fired as a management company. They reached consensus on two points. First, the next step would be to go over the management company's head and deliver demands to the developer that actually owned the building. Second, the demands needed to be accompanied by a credible threat, and as such, tenants should start exploring how they could go on rent strike.

Some tenants had already started withholding their rent without telling us, and several got lawyers through a legal aid service to defend themselves. We were supportive of the rent strike strategy of course, but we counseled that tenants should wait and start withholding rent together at a coordinated moment, and we emphasized that they absolutely, positively needed to save that money to protect themselves (if a court decides not to abate a tenant's rent, they need to pay everything they owe to avoid eviction). We recruited some legal service lawyers we had met at landlord-tenant court to put on an information session at Garden Terrace where tenants could ask about when they might have the right to withhold rent. Our leaders grew more confident: a group of them intercepted a city councilman at a meet-and-greet near the building and presented the petition to him, demanding his support. Our meetings grew, and in short order we were involving more people than the tenant association. Word spread fast that a rent strike might be brewing; people brought it up to our organizers unprompted. Tenants were polarized: some were strongly supportive of the idea; some disapproved and stressed that no matter what people need to pay their rent. People with vouchers were unsure about their ability to participate and got conflicting information from case workers. Some people hedged, and needed to be organized a little bit more before they were really ready.

But before we could test our ability to coordinate an effective rent strike, we started

getting concessions. In September tenants got a notice that they would now get rent credits to offset elevated water bills. These bills had been one of the first collective complaints we had heard, and the change is going to put tens of thousands of dollars back in tenants' collective pockets each year. Then in the first week of October, we went ahead and organized a delegation to the office of the developer where tenants explicitly threatened to rent strike if their demands weren't met. The meeting itself was something of an anti-climax since we only spoke with a mid-level staffer with limited decision-making power. But we quickly realized the landlord really was rattled: the principal of the company called the leader of the delegation a few days later, met her to walk through the building, hear complaints from tenants, and bargain.

He promised to fix the issues listed in the petition and, in a turn of events that surprised us, he agreed to look for a new management company. Days later, he put what he agreed to in writing in an email to the tenant leaders (interestingly, he negotiated with the tenants who had been active in mobilizing others and making demands, not the tenant association president). We were skeptical of these commitments at first, but by the end of October and the beginning of November, we were seeing real changes: a guard was posted at the front desk at night, locks were repaired on side doors, carpets were cleaned for the first time in years, common areas and apartments were repaired. In the weeks that followed, we organized the largest meeting we've had to date at Garden Terrace, with more than 40 people in attendance, including representatives from the tenant association. We discussed things the landlord still needed to fix and possibilities for further escalation if promised changes do not materialize.

Towards the end of 2018, we got word that Edgewood is gone and a new management company has been put in place, but organizing continues apace. In recent weeks, we made an interesting discovery: the city councilman representing the ward where Garden Terrace is located introduced a bill to give the property a huge tax break. Ostensibly, the bill would require the building to remain affordable for a certain period of time, but for no more than what is already required by tax credit program that originally funded the project. Unsurprisingly, tenants were outraged at the prospect of this naked giveaway

“But before we could test our ability to coordinate an effective rent strike, we started getting concessions ... the landlord really was rattled.”

to the developer they've been fighting. They are planning to oppose the bill, though they may offer to withdraw that opposition in exchange for fulfillment of certain outstanding demands, like improving accessibility for disabled tenants beyond what is required under the ADA. We are hoping to use negotiations over the tax break as leverage for a collectively-bargained agreement about comprehensive improvements

to the property. Meanwhile, we have been trying to bring some of the most committed leaders along to help organize in other buildings: we've had tenants from Garden Terrace canvass other buildings managed by Edgewood and attend meetings of new tenant groups that are just getting starting to get organized to encourage them to be demanding. We hope that we can deepen the Garden Terrace leaders commitment to organizing by linking them up with other tenant struggles across the city.

Appendix

Our Efforts at Organizing a Rent Strike

In DC, there are some legal protections for tenants who go on rent strike: courts can lower the amount of rent a tenant owes because the landlord has failed to deal with housing code violations, though this can usually only happen after the landlord sues the tenant for non-payment. In our experience, is fairly common for tenants to withhold so they can go to court and get the landlord to agree to make repairs before they pay up. Tenants who do this can sometimes get lawyers through a legal aid service to defend themselves. We always recommend that tenants should wait and start withholding rent together at a coordinated moment, and we emphasized that they absolutely, positively need to save that money to protect themselves (if a court decides not to abate a tenants' rent, they need to pay everything they owe to avoid eviction). We've seen tenants win significant repairs and important changes in management practices through somewhat sporadic and disorganized rent withholding, and we've shown up for other organizations in the community that are organizing rent strikes. So far we haven't pulled off a truly organized rent strike ourselves, but we have no doubt that the tactic is effective.

What isn't effective, however, is taking a rent strike lightly or embarking on one without proper planning. A few tenants have undertaken rent strikes at Garden Terrace without saving the full amount they owed, spent the rent (for completely understandable reasons), and then been ordered to pay up. We had to raise emergency funds for them to make up the difference in order to secure their continued tenancy at a critical juncture in our organizing. Moreover, a rent strike can be divisive and alienating, especially when a militant minority takes action without winning the support of a critical mass of their neighbors. Rent strikes work, but it's important to be patient and do them the right way, by saving every last cent of rent, and ensuring that large numbers of tenants to join in.

We made the attached flyer when we were discussing organizing a rent strike at Garden Terrace, but we didn't distribute it widely. Passing out a flyer is no substitute for having in-depth conversations, especially when preparing for something complicated and high-risk like a rent strike, and we mostly intended the flyer as a guide to have conversation. The legal information obviously only applies to DC, but we hope the strategic perspective is relevant wherever you are.

 MetroDCDSA (202) 681-8272
 @dc_dsa tenants@dsadc.org

Don't hesitate to contact us to request assistance or support.



Metro DC
Democratic Socialists
of America

If you're living in slum conditions, you have the power to make a change.

D.C. law says that all tenants are entitled to safe, dignified housing, but the government usually fails to punish landlords who violate the law. City inspectors are ineffective: they usually let landlords off the hook, and even when they do cite landlords, the fines are so low that the landlords don't care. Suing a landlord takes so much time and money that it isn't an option for most tenants. But tenants can and do win by going after the one thing landlords care about above everything: the rent.

Many tenants withhold their rent in protest of slum conditions and landlord abuse—a tactic we call a rent strike—and they win. In the 1960s and 1970s, thousands of people in D.C. went on rent strike and pushed the government to pass new laws to protect tenants, like rent control. And tenants still use rent strikes to win better conditions.

Remember: there is power in numbers.

The more people go on rent strike, the more the landlord will feel the pain. If you live in slum conditions, your neighbors do as well. Talk to them and try to get them to join in in any action you take.

If you receive vouchers, you can still go on rent strike by withholding your portion of the rent. You can also lobby the D.C. Housing Authority not to pay the slumlord; they can give you a waiver saying that you shouldn't have to pay. But if you lose an eviction case, you're at risk for losing your voucher. That's why saving your rent each month is crucial when on strike. If you are able to pay all of the money you owe for the months you were on strike, regardless of whether you receive vouchers, you cannot be evicted for nonpayment, even if the judge sides with the landlord in your case.

Our organization is dedicated to supporting tenants who want to fight for justice. If you have any questions about the information in this pamphlet, or if you want help taking action, please get in touch by calling or emailing us.

Rent Strike 101

Don't pay for what you don't get



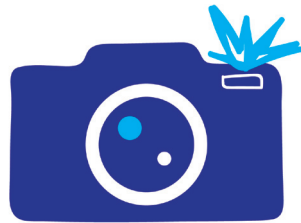
Don't pay for what you don't get

In D.C., going on rent strike—withholding rent to make demands of your landlord—can be legally protected in some ways. Any landlord renting out a unit must keep the apartment habitable. If a landlord fails to maintain a property and there are substantial housing code violations, they are violating their obligations under law. If a landlord does not fulfill their responsibilities, tenants may not be required to pay the full rent. A judge or jury can decide to lower a tenant's rent until a landlord repairs the unit—this is called a “rent abatement.”

Rent strikes are a powerful tool, but they can also put tenants at risk of eviction. Courts aren't always fair: even if the facts are on your side, there's no guarantee that you'll win. It's important to rent strike in the right way. Protect yourself by following a few simple steps:

Step 1: Collect evidence

You need to be ready to defend yourself in court. To win you need to prove that bad conditions exist, that the landlord knew about them, and they have not been fixed.



If you are thinking of taking action against your landlord, you should:

- **Take pictures and videos of any violations** that exist in your home or the common areas of the building and save them somewhere that will be easy to find. Under D.C. law, you can film the landlord or their employees without permission.
- **Inform the landlord about these violations**, ideally in writing. If property management gives you a ticket number or some other way to keep track of your complaint, make sure you write it down.
- **Get a notebook.** If you talk to the landlord or property management on the phone or in person, you should take notes about what is said and when the conversation occurred.

Step 2: Give notice

Like Frederick Douglass said, “power concedes nothing without a demand.” If you want to make a change, you need to make your demands clear and explain what will happen if they aren't met.



Give your landlord a written warning before you start holding back the rent. Make a list of all the bad conditions in your home, explain that these are a violation of your lease and the D.C. housing code, and say that if the violations aren't addressed you will go on rent strike. Give your landlord time—at least 30 days—to fix the problems. Keep taking notes, photos, and videos.

Step 3: Save your money

When you begin withholding rent from your landlord, you must save it. Far too many people begin to withhold their rent, spend the money, and end up getting evicted. If you save all the money you withhold, you will not be evicted even if you lose your case. To win your case you must convince a judge or jury that you are willing to pay if the landlord does what they are supposed to.

If you're taken to court, you may be told to pay your rent to the court-controlled escrow. Under D.C. law, you can't ask the court to let you to put in escrow in advance—you must withhold the rent yourself and wait for the landlord to take you to court. When you do go to court, make sure you have everything which you might owe saved.

Step 4: Go to court

You should expect that your landlord will take you to court and try to evict you, but you shouldn't be scared of getting taken to court: in court you can defend yourself and win. If you get a notice to go to court, make sure you're there at 9 AM on the day of your hearing. If you aren't there, you will lose by default. If you know in advance you cannot be there on the day of your hearing, you can call the clerk of the court at (202) 879-4879 and ask them to reschedule.



Try not to go it alone. Your landlord will have a lawyer. Tenants with lawyers generally get evicted six times less frequently than those without an attorney. You can get legal help in the court building by going to the Landlord Tenant Resource Center in Room 208 or the Law Students in Court office in Room 210. You can also seek assistance before your court date by calling the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center at (202) 626-3499 and asking about getting a free lawyer for an eviction case.