

Organizing After Crisis

How to keep going—and keep winning

Stomp Out Slumlords
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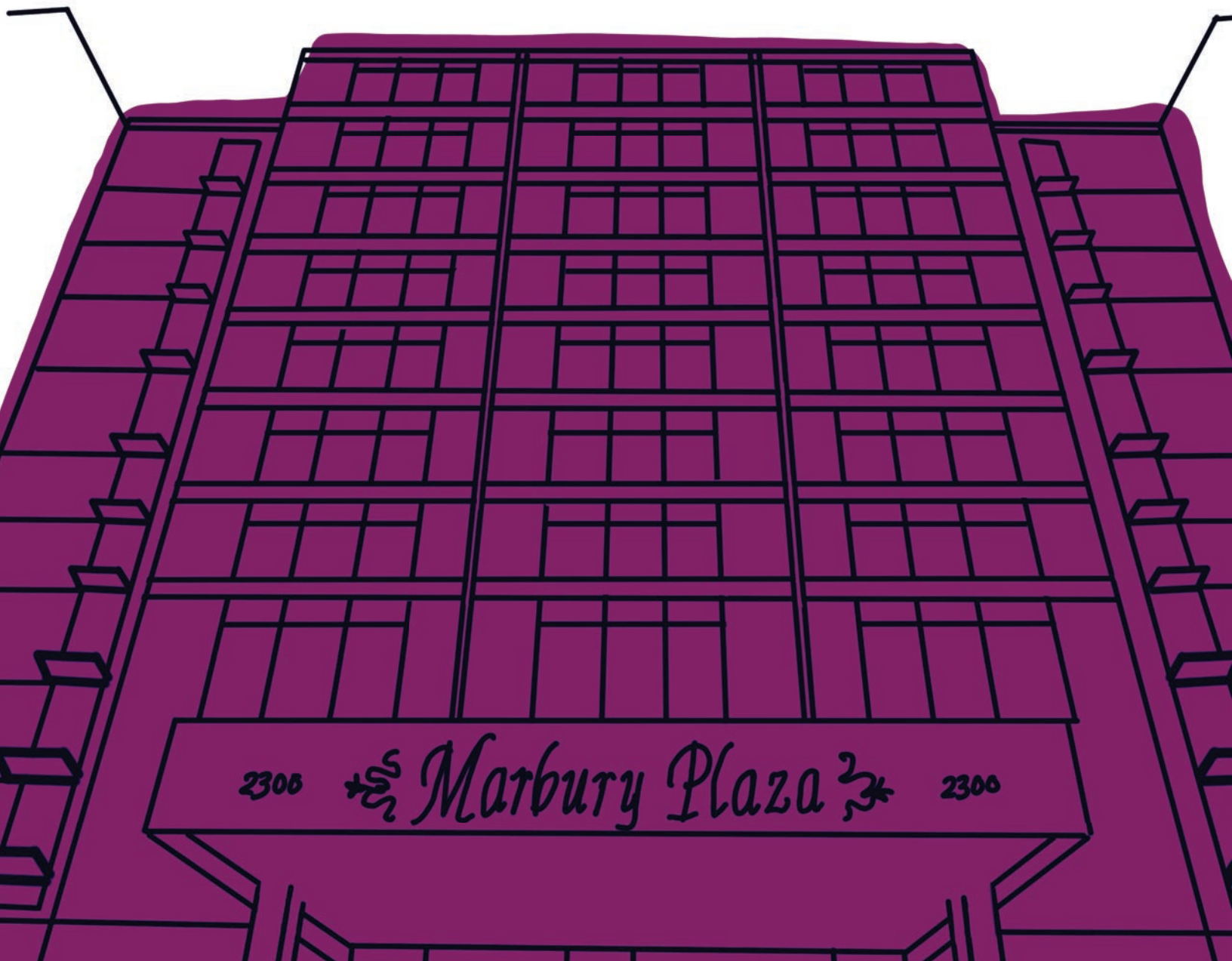


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Part 1: Owning Our Victory

When we published our last report at the beginning of 2021, we recognized that the tidal wave of evictions we had feared since the beginning of the pandemic was probably not going to happen. At that point, Congress had recently passed a bipartisan \$900 billion relief bill—including \$25 billion in emergency rental assistance—and the Biden administration was on its way to passing its \$1.9 trillion rescue plan including another \$20 billion in rental assistance among many other housing programs. We felt incredibly relieved, since most of the tenants we had led into the rent strike of 2020 were already in tens of thousands of dollars of debt, and most simply had no way to pay it off. In the previous months we had seriously considered the possibility that we would have to physically resist mass evictions like the Communist militants of the 1930s. Once it became clear that the federal government was actually spending money to bail tenants out, we understood we needed to carry out a less dramatic but equally important struggle to ensure tenants actually got that money.

Before entering into the details of the fight over the details of rent relief, it's worth pausing to consider just how dramatic the federal government's fiscal response to the pandemic was. The aforementioned December 2020 relief package is barely remembered today, a minor interlude between the much larger CARES Act and the Biden administration's American Rescue Plan Act. That small, forgotten recovery package was also larger than the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the Obama administration's stimulus program in the face of the Great Recession. We have previously noted that protections for tenants facing eviction during the coronavirus pandemic were much more effective than measures designed to protect



We have always believed that the impetus for major reforms comes from the spontaneous disruptive protest of millions of ordinary people. Now we have seen that process play out with our own eyes, not just in a history book.

homeowners during the foreclosure crisis. And in the final accounting, tenants made out better, receiving nearly \$50 billion in direct rental assistance between 2020 and 2021, while distressed homeowners in 2009–2010 received just \$28 billion in indirect aid. But this comparison might underrate how radically fiscal politics have departed from the days of the Obama administration. The supercharged Keynesianism that characterized the federal response to the more recent crisis may have stopped short of stabilizing the rental housing market, but the government bailed out states and local governments, chronically underfunded public transit systems, and multi-employer pensions, in addition to expanding welfare benefits of all kinds and even sending direct stimulus checks. In total there was more than \$4 trillion in stimulus in less than a year, including the familiar corporate bailouts. For those who remember the brutal austerity that accompanied the last recession, the government's commitment to preventing a general deflation was remarkable. At least for a time, decisive blocs of politicians from both parties broke with habits of austerity and neoliberal common sense about managing recessions.

In 2021 we argued that tenant protections during the pandemic had been relatively strong because tenants had been much more rebellious and demanding than Americans typically were in the face of economic dispossession. We connected the militancy and the effectiveness of tenant protest and rent withholding to the previous summer's uprising, writing:

In a moment where ordinary people fought and often overtook the police for control of the streets in virtually every city in the country, any kind of protest threatened to advance from simple disruption to active rebellion. If the CDC had never issued its moratorium and police had actually begun carrying out evictions of even a fraction of the estimated 30 million people who had gotten behind on rent over the summer, riots would not have been a surprising outcome.

We believe this logic holds up today as an explanation for the eviction moratorium, and to some extent it applies to all the measures the government took in that period to insulate the population from painful economic shocks. In 2020 it was plausible to suppose that if masses of children suddenly went hungry or retirees stopped receiving pension checks or bus lines shut down, more unrest could erupt. Though it was by no means the aim of protesters in the streets in the summer of 2020, one of the



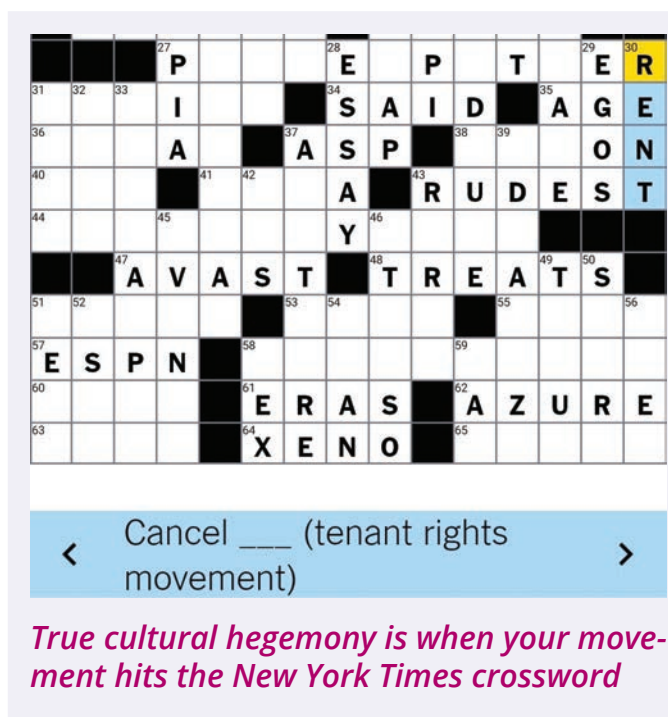
Social Issues

The eviction moratorium is about to end. Rent relief hasn't arrived. These renters decided to take action.



most important outcomes of the George Floyd protests was probably to consolidate an expansionary turn in economic policy and protect Americans from a much more painful recession. It is puzzling that just three years later, discussions among liberal pundits about the pandemic-era stimulus policies mostly boil down to implicit arguments over how much credit to give the Biden administration. The masses never get their due.

In our region, some permanent gains have been won. Most notably, temporary rent freezes in the two Maryland counties outside of DC, Montgomery and Prince George's, became permanent rent control over the last two years. And DC has tightened tenant protections around the edges. But surveying the national scene there's no cause for triumphalism about the long term consequences of the 2020 social explosion. While we witnessed a break with austerity at the federal level, our experiences demonstrated how hollowed-out state capacity limits public policy. Like many local governments, DC didn't actually have the administrative capacity to process rental assistance applications and outsourced the whole process to the corporate consultancy Deloitte, which, as we will discuss later, floundered at its most basic tasks. We hoped that seeing the state stop evictions and otherwise intervene widely in the economy to control the crisis would raise popular expectations and create momentum for permanent reforms, but it was not to be. Today, rental assistance has dried up, along with most of the exceptional anti-poverty measures implemented during the pandemic, and we have witnessed a return to the normal, scandalous level of eviction and punishing rent hikes we were accustomed to before the crisis. Meanwhile, the fact that all these crisis-fighting measures were adopted by establishment politicians and that the period we are analyzing saw only marginal progress for socialists at the ballot box should remind us that the capitalist class is much more politically flexible than is sometimes supposed by those who predict revolution exploding from every crisis.



Despite the fleeting and limited nature of what was ultimately accomplished, we believe it's important to recognize the radical kernel in economic policy since the advent of the pandemic. We have always believed that the impetus for major reforms comes from the spontaneous disruptive protest of millions of ordinary people. Now we have seen that process play out with our own eyes, not just in a history book.

This sincere belief was crucial to our work during the period covered in this report. It was a hard time, and we could not have endured it without consciously maintaining an attitude that we were winning. Our writing focuses on the economic consequences of the pandemic,

but obviously we were also living in fear of the virus itself most of the time. Going back into an ersatz lockdown from time to time disrupted the logistics of organizing and took an emotional toll on all of us. We went long, worrying periods without achieving any tangible results. The nature of the work itself—digging deep into one another’s hopes and fears, pushing to keep going in the face of adversity—could be emotionally exhausting. To avoid burning out or giving up, we needed to be proactive about maintaining a positive mindset. Identifying and celebrating the good, whether in our daily lives, our organizing program, or the broader global situation, was critical to that work. Of course, there was more to it than that—we also needed to promote a spirit of trust, honesty, and true camaraderie among all our organizers and leaders. But it would have been very difficult to cultivate those sentiments if we didn’t all share a sense that we were accomplishing something real together. We want to share this latest report in that spirit. We really do believe that we are still accomplishing something real together. Not just in our little group or in the slightly less little tenant movement, but in the American working class as a whole. All around us, we see signs of growing class consciousness and rising expectations: more tenants protesting, more workers organizing and striking. But the history of social movements suggests those stirrings could be a short phase if they don’t find a durable organizational form. In order to build, we need to be able to see what works and learn from it.

The End of “Cancel Rent”

By the beginning of 2021, we felt more secure than we had since the beginning of the pandemic, but it was still far from clear how the crisis would be resolved. Eviction moratoria had been renewed at the local and federal level, suspending at least for the moment the prospect of a violent confrontation with the state. But the moratoria had to end eventually: what would happen over the long term? Since April 2020, we had successfully pushed hundreds, possibly thousands, of people to withhold their rent, and the open-ended moratorium only legitimized this refusal to pay. We sought to shift the economic insecurity and pain from tenants onto landlords and create a crisis in the housing market that could only be resolved through massive public intervention. In January and February of 2021, we believed we had reached that point, but we had no guarantees. Congress had passed billions in rent relief, signaling that the state might be assuming financial responsibility for unpaid rent, but so far we didn’t think it was enough money. But for the moment, almost no one had actually gotten rental assistance, and





it was totally unclear how anyone could get help in practice.

Local governments had dangled the possibility of providing rental assistance since the beginning of the pandemic but hadn't actually delivered any aid. DC and other local jurisdictions had used some funds from the CARES Act for local emergency rental assistance programs, but the quantity of money was totally inadequate to the task. We worried that if these programs worked, it would disorganize and weaken the rent strike, relieving the economic pressure on landlords and the

state to find a collective solution. At first, we didn't have to worry: of all the people we knew who applied for help, only one actually got it. So when news of a big new rental assistance program broke, we were skeptical. We doubted whether the government would have the wherewithal to distribute the funds, we worried that onerous means testing and documentation requirements would shut people out, and we still feared that there wasn't enough funding to go around. Meanwhile, we weren't immediately sure that this bounty of rental assistance, which would inevitably end up in the pockets of abusive slumlords, was really what we were fighting for. After all, we had organized under the slogan "cancel rent," not "rent relief."

Despite our misgivings, we grasped that we would not be able to stand aside from the distribution of rental assistance funds. We had successfully built a sizable base, and that meant we could only articulate demands and pick fights that resonated with that base. Tenants we talked to were intensely anxious about back rent they knew they couldn't pay, and we could see the strike would not survive if we tried to prolong it artificially. Even before rental assistance was widely available, there were people who gave in to pressure from the landlords and started paying by borrowing from friends or family or spending down savings or going back to work despite the risks posed by the virus. Only the heroic efforts of committee leaders and our organizers kept the bulk of strikers from giving in. People heard the news that there was financial assistance on the way and started to talk with us about it. We needed to formulate a program. If we had tried to dogmatically apply our old slogan and continued to press for cancellation rather than getting rent paid off, it was unclear how we could actually apply effective pressure to get it. So we started gradually adjusting our approach.

Our overriding goal was to keep our base organized and to bring together the core of a new tenant movement by training and politicizing the leaders who had stepped forward over the preceding year. That meant we needed a program to keep our committees active and to unite people from buildings all over the region. We wanted to keep people fighting, to avoid becoming passive recipients of help from above. And for the first months of 2021, the state made it easy. Even as the second major stimulus bill in a handful of months passed, there was nowhere for tenants to go to apply for the money. So we agitated about the slow pace of help and cultivated an antagonistic attitude towards the state. If we wanted the money, we would need to fight for it. To help maintain the rent strike, we told people not to pay out of their own pocket just before help arrived. We kept putting up a steady program of one-on-ones and small building-level actions like delegations and banner drops where people repeated that they would not pay. Throughout the relevant period, we maintained a citywide structure of SOS lead organizers checking in with building organizers checking in with tenant leaders checking in with other tenants. We continued to convene a monthly meeting of a few dozen tenant leaders and organizers from around the metro area where we settled on most collective strategic decisions through messy ad hoc consensus, while a coordinating committee of seven organizers continued to hold the organization together.

By mid-April, we were ready to act collectively. On a Saturday, we mobilized a protest of more than 100 tenants in front of the downtown condo of the mayor's deputy in charge of the rental assistance program (who gave himself the nickname "Johnny Business" for his tight relationship with DC's corporate elite, and who has since been ousted for sexually harassing at least two colleagues), demanding to

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know where the money had gone. Our timing was fortuitous, or maybe our pressure worked: two days later, on Monday, DC rolled out its new emergency rental assistance program, STAY DC.

Fighting for Every Dollar

STAY DC, which was designed and managed by Deloitte, operated with all the efficiency and sensitivity to the needs of poor people one would expect from a leading management consulting firm. Tenants had to apply through a needlessly complicated website and submit documents demonstrating their financial hardship, but their applications would only be reviewed after the landlord submitted their own application. For people unaccustomed to doing much business online, especially seniors, the online application proved to be an impenetrable labyrinth, prone to sudden crashes, and with many opportunities for mistakes that would lead to rejection. Documentation requirements were stringent and confusing language on the website meant that people sometimes couldn't understand what they needed to submit. The designers had clearly been more concerned with preventing the undeserving from getting

help than with making sure everyone who needed assistance got it. The website was English-only, even as immigrants were some of the neediest tenants. The whole process was agonizingly slow and not at all transparent: there was almost nothing tenants could do to check in on the status of their applications while they waited months for a reply. Even when funds were issued, there was no way to verify if a landlord had received the money.

We decided to respond to the rollout of STAY DC with a two-pronged approach: we organized a program to help tenants submit applications while continuing to protest the deficiencies we encountered. In the past, we had generally shied away from "mutual aid" projects in favor of concentrating our efforts on confrontation with landlords and the state. Many of the committees we supported carried out

food distribution efforts, but this was mostly the initiative of members themselves, and we always used those events as opportunities to agitate people and encourage them to join the strike. Previously, we would direct people to other organizations when they had problems other than the fight with the landlord, and we strenuously avoided casework. But when it came to STAY DC, there was nowhere to send people, at least not at first. Absurd as it seemed, when the program first went out, there was no physical office a tenant could go to to get help applying—not from the gov-



ernment, NGOs, or in most cases, the landlords themselves. People looked to us for help, and seeing no other options, we decided to act. We had always been able to raise large numbers of volunteers from the ranks of the DSA (and to some extent other activist networks), and for the first time since our anti-eviction canvassing efforts were suspended, we had a low-barrier-to-entry task for volunteers.

We set to work, pairing volunteers with tenant committee leaders to help people get their documents together and submit an application. We set up application clinics open to the community (some of which were attended by local officials themselves) and got assistance and promotion from Janeese Lewis George, a DSA-backed member of the DC Council. We brought in dozens of new volunteers and submitted hundreds of applications. We tried to make sure that the application program strengthened our organizing structure and cemented tenants' leadership. Committees in each building took responsibility for getting the word out about assistance and signing their neighbors up to sit down with the volunteers. We continued to connect with new people and expand the reach of our organization, recruiting people we helped to join in protests and delegations or to pitch in as volunteers in our outreach efforts. Lots of renters had no idea they could get rental assistance until a neighbor showed up and told them. In some cases, leaders persuaded people who were still paying the rent to stop and apply for help instead. In all cases, we tried to make conversations around STAY DC political. Rather than making apologies for the difficulties with the program, we tried to agitate people and told them they were right to feel indignant about the hoops they had to jump through. Rather than reassuring people that everything would be okay if they followed the rules, we honestly said we had no idea what was happening after we sent applications in. When months passed and people asked us what was going on, we didn't try to soothe them, we suggested that we raise hell until the checks came.



Protesting at Chairman Mendelson's home

We decided to respond to the rollout of STAY DC with a two-pronged approach: we organized a program to help tenants submit applications while continuing to protest the deficiencies we encountered.

As it happened, we had plenty of opportunities to raise hell. Almost as soon as STAY DC rolled out, the DC government started chipping away at emergency tenant protections. In May, Chairman of the DC Council Phil Mendelson floated a proposal to end the local eviction moratorium as well. Since funds were avail-



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able to help people with the rent they owed, he argued, there was no reason to stop landlords from collecting what they were owed. At that point, more than 10,000 applications had already been submitted to STAY DC and not a single one had been approved. In fact, the city's legal service providers discovered that in the majority of cases, landlords hadn't even filled out their portion of the application. As they testified to these facts in online council hearings, we demonstrated outside councilmembers' homes. In previous showdowns, Mendelson had easily exercised control over other council members and rolled over tenant advocates, but this time he was defeated and the eviction moratorium was preserved. The tenants movement was exceptionally well organized and militant, and thanks largely but not exclusively to Lewis George's victory, the council had become noticeably more progressive since the 2020 election, a shift that has continued into 2023.

Over the summer, negotiations over the long-term fate of the eviction moratorium continued at the local level. We sent more delegations to councilmembers' houses. In early July, the day before the federal moratorium was scheduled to expire, we organized an all-night vigil at Freedom Plaza next to the White House and attracted hundreds of people. We understood that there was no way we would be able to stop evictions forever, but we fought for all the time we could get. At this point, STAY DC had still spent very little money, and local leaders worried that the program wouldn't get funds out the door by the deadline—and that the city would have to forfeit money to the federal government.

Chairman Mendelson and Mayor Bowser blamed tenants for not applying to STAY DC and suggested that loosening eviction protections would press more people to submit their applications. Of course, the main barriers to distributing funds had nothing to do with tenants' willingness to apply: landlords still dragged their feet in cooperating, the online portal remained inaccessible to thousands who didn't know they could call a scrappy band of socialists for help, and once applications were in, months passed before applicants heard anything. Landlord non-cooperation was one of the strangest puzzles to us. They were turning down free money after spending a year pleading poverty! We suspected they wanted to preserve an excuse to clear low-income residents out of desirable properties, though we could never discount pure incompetence or ideological hostility to state assistance going to rent strikers. We kept trying to explain the dilemma facing tenants in the media and in the streets. But by the middle of the summer, landlords finally figured out it was in their interests to help people apply, although many, many tenants did not trust management enough to cooperate with them.

A Return to Normalcy?

Gradually, the DC government cleaned its act up, adding translation to the online application portal, loosening requirements for what documents people needed to submit, and most importantly, setting up in-person events like the ones we had already organized to help people through the process. Meanwhile, a compromise over the eviction moratorium emerged after federal protections were vacated once again by the courts. Landlord-tenant court would open gradually, but landlords would not be able to take tenants to court for non-payment without first applying for STAY DC, and people who had applied for assistance could delay court proceedings as they waited for funds to arrive. Finally, as summer turned to fall, checks started arriving and massive back rent balances were wiped away. We helped people apply for second and even third rounds of assistance, with some getting more than a year's worth of rent. In fact by October, 70 percent of the funds the District had received from the federal government had been distributed. Applications for STAY DC closed in October, so we made one big push to get people signed up. Almost no evictions occurred in 2021, although landlords were allowed to go after tenants who had been behind on rent when the pandemic began. The phase-out of the eviction moratorium and the gradual flow of rental assistance money meant that the cancel rent campaign ended quickly. By the beginning of 2022, the vast majority of tenants we organized had gotten money from STAY DC and mostly turned their attention to other issues. We convened a few marches in the spring of 2022 where we tried to bring attention to the people who had been left out and protest the program's failure to hold

In the chaotic, frightening days of the early pandemic and the beginning of the rent strike, we had always maintained that not fighting was far riskier than fighting. Here was the proof in plain dollars-and-cents terms, and it was a lesson that rent strike leaders took to heart and continue to refer to as we keep picking new fights.

bad landlords accountable. But it became clear that the issue was no longer salient enough in the base's life to justify being a political priority. When the summer of 2022 arrived, we concluded it was time to start concentrating on other issues.

By the end of 2021, nearly 60,000 tenants, representing about a fifth of the households in the District, had gotten approved for assistance. It turned out that DC rolled out more money to more of its population than almost any other state or territory. Given how much pain and suffering the slow pace of the program caused here, this honor mostly highlights the disastrous state of social policy and local-level capacity to deliver services in most of the country. Of course even after the money was gone, problems persisted. Nominally the rental assistance was targeted at the working poor, but functionally it was a bailout for the slumlords that rent to them. Some of DC's most abusive property owners pocketed millions that they declined to reinvest in basic maintenance. In many of the places we organized, conditions continued to deteriorate as the landlord received huge subsidies. In some cases, shadier landlords double-dipped and collected money from multiple programs, inflated rent balances of tenants applying for assistance, or quietly charged tenants rent while also pocketing rental assistance. Meanwhile, the assistance didn't go far enough. Thousands of people who asked for help never got it, and the barriers to entry for the program kept out people who could have qualified.



Disrupting a public DC Council candidates' forum in March 2022

Rather than stomping out slumlords, we helped them get hundreds of millions in federal subsidies. Policymakers wanted to restore normalcy, and they more or less succeeded. But the lessons learned, the organization built, and the leadership developed in the course of the struggle really could alter the long-term balance of power.

The people who got the worst deal were probably those tenants who had done “the right thing” throughout 2020 and endured serious financial hardship to keep paying rent. They did what the landlords and the government and almost every NGO said they should do, and got nothing. There was no backward-looking assistance for the people who spent down their savings or sold their furniture or borrowed money they couldn’t pay back or stopped supporting family back in Ethiopia in order to pay. It was hideously unfair. It also decisively proved that the rent strikers had been right. In the chaotic, frightening days of the early pandemic and the beginning of the rent strike, we had always maintained that not fighting was far riskier than fighting. Here was the proof in plain dollars-and-cents terms, and it was a lesson that rent strike leaders took to heart and continue to refer to as we keep picking new fights.

In drawing up the balance sheets of the cancel rent struggle, we have to count these moral and practical lessons about how to confront an unjust and hostile social order as one of the most important assets. The cancel rent movement was successful enough as a defensive fight. Virtually no one in our network was evicted for over two years, and tenants’ economic security improved rather than deteriorated. We thought things might get worse, they mostly didn’t, and in itself that is a very good thing. On the other hand, none of the things we won did much to alter the balance of power between landlords and tenants over the long run. The rental assistance money ran out and the eviction protections expired and now evictions are rebounding, rents are rising, and living conditions are as bad as they’ve ever been. Rather than stomping out slumlords, we helped them get hundreds of millions in federal subsidies. Policymakers wanted to restore normalcy, and they more or less succeeded. But the lessons learned, the organization built, and the leadership developed in the course of the struggle really could alter the long-term balance of power.



In October 2021, there were still breadlines in Columbia Heights—this is from a weekly food distribution from one of our tenant associations

Even as the fight that brought us all together wound down in early 2022, the organization we built persisted. Top tenant leaders who had fought to cancel rent not only kept fighting against slum conditions, unfair rent hikes, and other abuses in their own buildings, they also kept participating in a citywide structure and political protests. Some have started organizing in new buildings. Some even moved to take control of their housing and the land it stands on, as we will discuss in the section below. Our organization isn't very big, and it's more of a cadre than a mass organization: we work a lot harder at holding onto relationships with key leaders than in maintaining comprehensive membership rolls. But we have helped hundreds of regular working class people fight for their lives and win, and now a few dozen of them have moved on to committing to the struggle itself and seeing themselves as leaders in a wider movement. These leaders, as well as a corps of politically-motivated volunteer organizers, have been trained in organizing methods cribbed from successful unions. We don't just know that fighting is the right thing to do, we know how to do it. We know how to spot leaders, how to agitate and push our neighbors through deep organizing conversations, and we know how to delegate, how to stand up to threats and bribes, and how to strike. That knowledge makes us extremely powerful. Nothing about our future is certain and as we discuss in later sections, we still struggle sometimes to hold everything together. But we believe we are well positioned to start rebuilding a regional autonomous tenant union and to be a leading vehicle for any future tenant struggle.

INTERLUDE: Summer Camp, ATUN-Style

Two and a half days, 19 tenant union delegations, 16 panels, two languages, more than 200 people, one big dance party, innumerable tacos: August 2022 marked the first-ever national convention of the Autonomous Tenants Union Network (ATUN). SOS was proud to bring a dozen tenant organizers to Los Angeles, including eight who came up through pandemic rent strikes in their buildings. It was the first opportunity many of us had to engage with comrades from around the country (certainly in person) — and the first time on a plane (!) for four of us. Above all, we're grateful for the generosity of the Los Angeles Tenants Union both for hosting the convention and for being such a shining example of what is possible when we come together in struggle and community. We'd love to bring the next convention to the East Coast so that we can return the favor (and avoid canceled cross-continental flights!).

While we're not convinced that a unified program for the entire country exists yet, but the convention demonstrated that we're all on the same general theoretical page: building a mass movement of tenants that is

determined to demand more and better of the unjust world we've been told to accept — a tenants' utopia, as one member put it, where we're no longer tenants, and class distinctions have no meaning.

We loved squeezing in one-on-one conversations with other unionists between panels and at parties. Something that came up again and again was the importance of community building and social bonding at all levels: within a union committee, at a particular property, in the neighborhood, and beyond. (In that regard, even the trip to LA itself — traveling together, going to the surprisingly cold Pacific ocean, getting pics with Freddy Krueger on Hollywood Blvd, learning to swim at the hotel pool — strengthened our collective identity.) Several organizers' favorite part of the weekend was hearing from the Hillside Villa Tenants Association about how they forced the LA City Council to expropriate their building — a first in California, possibly the country, and an inspiration to us all, especially because the traditional use of eminent domain has been to destroy affordable housing. We also appreciated the group self-reflection that the ATUN organizers structured into the convention program, something we'd like to replicate back home to sharpen our strategy and build up our popular education.

The weekend did reveal some real political and practical differences across ATUN, though. Unions across the country have led rent strikes, protests at the houses of those in power, eviction blockades, community cookouts, and marches on the landlord. But certain formations have gotten hung up on online activism, email campaigns, and hewing to some theoretical communist horizon instead of organizing the unorganized. Some seem to spend more energy labeling other groups and laws as "counter-revolutionary" instead of doing the work required to bring us closer to the revolution, like moving everyday people to action. To us, it's counterproductive and frankly premature to tell tenants that, for example, their fight to turn their building into a limited-equity co-op isn't radical enough. We're not going to get to communism without moving people to talk to their neighbors first, and more importantly, doing it ourselves. Here in DC, exercising tenant purchase rights or pushing for rent freezes aren't going to immediately decommodify housing, true. But these are the small-scale sites of disruption from which we can build working-class power into something much bigger.

Ultimately we think these disparities come down to real differences in experience and accomplishments across the 19 tenant unions that participated in the convention, and in ATUN generally. Some unions are just starting and are understandably green; a minority have been around for five years or more and have engaged, and won, serious struggles like

citywide bans on evictions and rent hikes or building-wide concessions. But it seems that the majority of unions have been around for a few years in name and have yet to develop substantial participation beyond a small politicalized cadre. It's worth considering the reasons for this, and how we can train our fellow unionists to win — we think that's the greatest value in a structure like ATUN.

That training is key to overcoming the movement's next hurdle: its composition. It was clear that the majority of ATUN delegates came to the movement through theory first, rather than the practice of defending their own homes or fighting in the workplace. One of the biggest advancements we've made in the pandemic era is focusing on developing organic leaders to create a real base of working-class agitators. As we've acknowledged in past reports, this isn't something that came easily or early to the project — but it's been essential to our growth in terms of membership, diversity, and success. We think it's significant that we brought a majority of organizers who did not come to the tenant movement through DSA or traditional left spaces: our group ranged in age from 9 to 79 and included people who were undocumented, on Section 8, working minimum wage, working for a salary, with children, and retired. We think our success here comes down to the leadership development model we embraced during the pandemic, and the emphasis we place on meeting people where they're at and pushing them to ever greater heights. This is something that we're still working on, and that all tenant organizers can stand to do more of.



Part 2: Stomp Out Slumlords Community Development Inc.?

As the cancel rent campaign wound down and we returned to a kind of normalcy (at least economically), we found ourselves fighting on new, occasionally unfamiliar terrain. We were taken by surprise in the summer of 2021 when five of the properties we were organizing were sold in a two-month span. In DC, the sale of a building has special implications, triggering the city's Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA), and we saw a chance to use the tenant purchase process to secure permanent gains after more than a year of desperate defensive battles. Over the next year, we helped people exercise their rights and navigate all the complexities of the process, and while we did win some meaningful long-term improvements, we also became intimately familiar with all the contradictions and limitations that come along with putting tenants in control of development.

A Short History of Tenant Purchase

TOPA was a product of the radical rebirth of democracy in Washington in the 1970s. Despite its lack of representation in Congress, Washington had a local elected government for most of the 19th century. But during Reconstruction, as the District's population was swelled by recently freed and enfranchised African Americans, the white city fathers and the Board of Trade demanded that Congress end local democracy and install an unelected territorial government, and they got what they wanted. This colonial regime lasted more or less untroubled for a century, until the civil rights movement began challenging racist authoritarian rule throughout the country. By the mid-1960s, local activists organized a formal campaign for home rule with support from national civil rights leaders while militant local protests erupted against police brutality, welfare bureaucracy, freeway construction, underfunded schools, bus fare increases, slum housing conditions, and the war in Vietnam. The rising tide of unrest led to and continued after the 1968 rebellion, eventually pushing Congress to restore home rule in 1973. Radicals took over the government they had fought to create; Marion Barry, the ex-SNCC organizer, Free DC campaigner, and future "mayor for life," is a famous but far from unique example. In the first years of home rule, the activists in office experimented with uncommonly progressive governance. When an early wave of gentrification led to mass evictions and mass protests in the late 1970s, the government responded with a series of anti-displacement policies, including tenants' right to purchase.

In the first few years after TOPA was enacted, tenant organizers capitalized on its potential and created dozens of resident-owned housing co-ops with thousands of units across the city. These cooperatives weren't perfect models: sometimes properties fell apart because of poor financial management, some residents used democratic self-management to enact discriminatory policies, some preferred to pursue



A tenant meeting to discuss tenant-purchase options at Sarbin Towers, one of our half-dozen TOPA projects

property speculation rather than affordability and even dissolved themselves and sold out. But limited equity co-ops were an actually achievable model of social housing that has done immense good for their residents: these early co-ops represent much of the remaining affordable housing in the District's gentrified wards. And because management is directly accountable to residents, co-ops tend to have better conditions than the city's neglected public housing and lower rents than privately-owned subsidized rentals. Despite these early positive examples, in the decades since, economic trends and broader housing policies—especially public funding models—have constricted what tenant purchase can achieve.

For the decades that followed the passage of TOPA, anti-displacement measures were mostly redundant due to the social and economic crisis that hit the District. The city's population had declined steadily since its peak in the late 1940s as the suburbs grew rapidly. Desegregation of schools and housing accelerated white flight, which in turn led to shrinking tax revenues and declining public services. The government elected by the newly-enfranchised Black majority inherited a whirlwind. Violent crime rose in the 1970s and skyrocketed with the introduction of the crack era in the late 1980s. The War on Drugs and Reagan's cutbacks devastated the city. Private and public investment evaporated and the Black middle class followed its white counterpart into the suburbs, deepening the fiscal crisis. Faced with a crumbling tax base, the District government was forced to appeal to Congress, which suspended local self-government and appointed a financial control board to manage the city's budget. During the dark days of the 1980s and 1990s, tenant organizations that did exist focused on rehabilitating properties that had been functionally abandoned by absentee owners, and TOPA functioned as a tool for reinvesting in blighted areas.

But the turn of the millennium, as crime fell precipitously and expansion of the Metro system linked disinvested areas with the downtown core of white-collar employment, gentrification returned with a vengeance. The control board and the neoliberal elected governments that followed it pursued a development strategy based on a theory of attracting a “creative class” and succeeded. Property values and rents skyrocketed in neighborhoods that still bore the scars of the street battles of 1968. Low-cost rentals vanished as landlords of slum properties worked to turn them over for sale or repackage dilapidated tenements as luxury apartments. The Black population fell faster as the white population rose for the first time since the Second World War. While mortgage bubbles popped nationwide and shocked financial markets around the world in 2008, the DC housing market remained inflated. The boom meant that

real estate was changing hands more than ever. There were more and more “opportunities” for tenants to exercise the right to buy, but as prices rose, the economics became increasingly complicated.

Tenant purchase, and especially co-op conversion, has always depended on public subsidies. Generally speaking, most tenants can’t afford to buy, and only an affluent minority can buy their building by pooling their resources and pursuing traditional mortgages from a bank. Since the passage of TOPA, the DC government has offered low-interest loans to co-ops that agreed to remain affordable over time. This policy was part of a shift in how all levels of American government tried to create affordable housing, from first directly operating public housing in the wake of the New Deal to subsidizing the operations of private landlords from the ’60s onward, and then to providing subsidized financing to developers to buy or build below-market-rate rentals. The latter model of providing sub-

sidization via loans has benefited financial intermediaries, corporate or nominally non-profit, but it is much less generous to tenants, who still need to pay rents that are high enough to cover the costs of day-to-day operations as well as a mortgage that, however generous the terms, still needs to be paid back.

Over the years, the DC government has been an unreliable source of financing. In various periods of austerity, assistance for tenant purchase has been cut quickly. While DC has increased its affordable housing trust fund dramatically during the last decade, it has also changed how funds are allocated in ways that have favored well-capitalized developers (both for-profit and not) and put would-be co-ops at a disadvantage. Meanwhile, as urban land values continue to go up, subsidized loans simply aren’t



enough to allow tenants to buy their buildings without drastically raising their own rents. Under TOPA, tenants have to match a price set by a buyer making an initial offer to their landlord, and current prices are based on assumptions that rents will rise substantially. The market is pricing in displacement. The tax revenue bonanza that has allowed DC to increase the nominal amount of its trust fund results from the same process of urban capital accumulation that is forcing non-professional jobs and low-income tenants out of the city.



The Buena Vista Co-op threw a party to celebrate the final inking of their ownership paperwork

As financing has gotten trickier, the path towards tenant purchase got harder, and TOPA increasingly became a process for negotiating the price of displacement. Developers have responded to strong protections against involuntary displacement by buying tenants out, and often tenant associations incorporate and trigger their rights only to negotiate with the original purchaser and agree to leave on negotiated terms. Buyouts have gotten larger over the years and continue to rise: two years ago, tenants we were organizing were getting offers of \$30,000 per household to move out, which was significantly higher than the pre-pandemic norm, and over the past year, we have heard of buyouts higher than \$70,000 for a single family. Casual observation reveals why these sums are still good investments for developers: one apartment building we work at in Columbia Heights is for sale at a price of about \$200,000 per unit, and a prospective buyer was offering a \$40,000 buyout. We could look across the street to a recently flipped building and see condominiums for sale starting at \$700,000. Tenants rejected the offer. They knew enough people who had accepted buyouts in the past, expecting to buy a home, who had ended up in an equally lousy apartment in a far-flung suburb spending even more on rent and transportation and isolated from jobs, families, and community institutions.

But it's the rare well-organized, class-conscious group that understands what secure, affordable housing is really worth. Buyouts are accepted more than they're rejected, and they look like a better deal when the path to improving conditions while remaining relatively affordable is difficult and uncertain. In these conditions, securing lasting improvements via TOPA proved to be an uphill battle. When buildings started

getting sold in the summer of 2021, we were justifiably excited about the prospects for carving out sizable blocs of permanently-affordable housing and improving conditions, but we failed to anticipate how difficult and divisive the process would be.

How TOPA Works, or Doesn't

At first, helping tenants use their TOPA rights involved a lot of paperwork. Informal committees had to become legal entities capable of engaging in negotiation by incorporating, adopting bylaws, electing officers, and then signing up a majority of residents as members. The law requires tenants to respond to an offer of sale in 45 days, and in places where we had strong committees and a robust organizing program, this was easy. The people who had led rent strikes were easily elected as leaders in this new phase, neighbors were happy to declare membership, and in most cases electing a formal leadership provided an opportunity to induct new leaders into positions of responsibility (though in some cases, people were elected without much vetting, and this later caused major problems).

Once tenant associations submit their registration and activate their rights, they have a period of four months to decide what to do, at the end of which they must vote on a final outcome. Tenants can purchase themselves, they can negotiate a deal with the original buyer to let the sale go through, or they can make a deal with a third-party buyer willing to buy the building on the same terms. Buyers can offer a variety of benefits, from improved conditions, limits on future rent increases, new amenities, and cash, either in exchange for moving out or with no strings attached. Tenants tend to bargain more frequently than they buy, since forming a co-op can have a high upside but also a fairly uncertain proposition that takes an incredible amount of work. The third-party purchasers with whom tenants negotiate range from ruthless flippers and con men to wholesome Christian non-profits.

Ultimately, tenants decide how to exercise their TOPA rights by voting, and these internal tenant association votes can be contentious, even bitter. People were suddenly faced with a stark choice between staying put and leaving with a fistful of cash. Compromise proves difficult: ultimately only one entity can buy a building, and there are unavoidable tradeoffs between catering to tenants who want improved conditions and affordable rent and tenants who just want to leave with as much money as possible. As people passed from the stage of forming an organization to making a decision, the sense of solidarity people felt during the cancel rent struggle started to wear thin.

In a number of buildings, leaders began to turn on one another, factions formed, meetings devolved into shouting matches, anti-committees formed and started agitating against our program for the first time, and tenant association WhatsApp groups became even more toxic than the DSA discussion forums. Developers tried to interfere in the process and flood the associations with their propaganda, but they were only successful insofar as they had a base of supportive tenants who helped their efforts. Once we moved from the rent strike to the TOPA process, we found

we weren't fighting the landlord class or the state: we were intervening in conflicts between groups of tenants who had different ideas and interests.

Nonetheless, we intended to win, and we had the tools to do so. Throughout the pandemic, we had adopted union organizing techniques we learned from comrades in UNITE HERE, and we saw that a TOPA vote isn't especially different from a union authorization election. We started charting: we worked with leaders to rate every potential voter as a supporter, an opponent, or neutral. We doubled down on a campaign of one-on-ones and trained leaders to have long conversations with neighbors to assess where they stood. As always, we were extremely conservative about these assessments, always assuming that anything short of a definitive "yes" was a "no." We leaned into the deepest possible agitation, trying to understand people's visions for their future, painting a picture of the community that we could build by fighting to stay, and drilling leaders to get personal about what they were fighting for. The fundamentals worked: the tenants associations we worked with chose a path to preserving permanent affordable housing whenever it was possible to do so, and we predicted how more than 90% of people would vote in advance.

All five of the tenant associations we helped through TOPA achieved some measure of success: three brought in non-profit affordable housing developers, one became a co-op, and one negotiated a collective agreement with a for-profit developer to limit rent increases and improve their quality of life. Two more sales are still up in the air as of this writing. We are proud of this record, but the cost of victory was high. Internal struggle was not pleasant for volunteer organizers, but it was genuinely traumatic for building leaders, who suddenly became targets for abuse from neighbors



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who saw them as obstacles to a big pay day. In some cases, the fires of internal conflict tempered steel and key leaders emerged even more committed and capable than they had been during the rent strike movement. But a number were exhausted and burnt out and drifted away from our citywide organization, and people who had dedicated themselves to fighting for buyouts saw us as enemies.

In the aftermath of these fights, we found that voting for affordable housing was only one step in a long and torturous process. All the flaws in the neoliberal model of nudging private finance into developing affordable housing were exaggerated by macroeconomic volatility. In the summer of 2022, interest rates spiked, complicating financing for housing development across the country, and jeopardizing most of the projects we were involved in. Projects only survived due to desperate lobbying of local government and assistance from an unlikely source: Amazon. The world's largest retailer has established a \$2 billion "housing investment fund" in the Washington region as a salve for public resentment over the massive subsidies the company is receiving to build its satellite "HQ2" in Northern Virginia. We discovered that Amazon is currently investing more in affordable housing than all the state and local governments in the region, but that fund is starting to run dry, too. Chaos in financial markets trickled down to the streets of DC and drastically delayed desperately-needed renovations and deepening disaffection among tenants.

The path to redevelopment has been hardest in the project we have been proudest of: the

Buena Vista co-operative. At the beginning of 2022, the poor, mostly undocumented Latino immigrants who live in the property voted overwhelmingly to reject promises of massive buyouts (from a developer who had previously been convicted of felony fraud) in favor of buying the building and preventing displacement in one corner of Columbia Heights, probably the city's most gentrified neighborhood. It was a massive victory after years of abuse and neglect from a truly evil slumlord, but since the vote was cast, deep divisions have emerged. Conditions in the building are terrible, but the co-op doesn't raise enough from residents' rents to carry out a costly renovation, and the process of getting public financing for a renovation will take years. The management company that the residents hired to handle daily operations hasn't lived up to its promises or even retained Spanish-speaking staff. Over the last year, the small nucleus of residents who wanted buyouts have fought a rearguard action against the



In the midst of all this, we kicked our anti-eviction canvassing back up in March 2022, which has since brought in two new buildings that are now on rent strike

co-op, exploiting people's entirely reasonable grievances about deteriorating conditions to sow distrust of the leadership and the process. An emerging anti-co-op committee is disrupting meetings, encouraging non-participation in the ongoing process of conversion, and even agitating for a rent strike against the co-op, which at worst, might tilt it into bankruptcy and allow a bottom-feeding developer to grab the building, and at best, further slows progress towards a renovation. The co-op continues to make progress, addressing key repairs, preventing rent increases, and fighting for every dollar it can get from the DC government. But for now the wait continues, and the longer residents wait, the more likely it is that the original consensus about staying in the property collapses and the campaign of sabotage succeeds.

What TOPA Taught Us

We have drawn a number of lessons from our experience with tenant purchase over the last two years. The first is that state action (especially money) is essential to delivering affordable housing, even when tenants have the option to purchase or bargain collectively. TOPA is not a substitute for public spending on affordable housing—at its best it's an effective and democratic method for disbursing that spending. Meanwhile, we have seen that the system's reliance on private developers and finance is a disaster, even when those developers operate in good faith. After a big wave of acquisitions in 2022, the better non-profits have tapped out their capacity and don't have the staff time or financial resources to acquire more buildings. That means that tenants looking for a developer to help them stay in place in 2023 don't have anywhere to go, and sometimes accept buyouts for a lack of alternatives. Co-op conversion is always an option, but it's impossible without exemplary leaders ready to devote thankless hours to the cause. The state could act as a buyer of last resort, but it doesn't. We intend to change that: inspired by the example of the Hillside Villa struggle organized by our friends in the LA Tenants Union, we are planning a campaign for DC to start acquiring buildings from slumlords in order to create genuinely social housing—not by lobbying for legislation, but by using the sale of a massive, militantly organized building to turn the screws on the DC Council.

Another lesson is that the work of organizing is never done. Getting a majority support for any plan in any social group takes work, and once a majority is built, it doesn't sustain itself. Even after a decision is made, people develop doubts or get distracted and fail to follow through or start wondering if they regret their choice. If the organizing work that built the majority stops, consensus can collapse and the best laid plans can go off the rails. Even in the long periods of waiting that are inevitable during the development process, organizing conversations have to continue. And organizing work doesn't necessarily get any easier after a victory. At Buena Vista we found that internal tensions among residents got worse once the external enemy was defeated and the victorious tenants actually had responsibility for managing the building. Even after substantial victories had been won, even after people had clear practical evidence that the way to win was to stick together, solidarity didn't come naturally. The only way to overcome the entropy of victory is to keep doing the work, constantly extending an open hand, accepting criticism, reorganizing people as

doubts develop, and refusing to give in to factionalism or resentment when conflict erupts. None of that comes easily, and we find that leaders always need support to continue the work, especially when it comes to the inner struggle of maintaining the will to soldier on.

Finally, our adventures in community development have reinforced our belief in the primacy of class struggle. TOPA is probably the most robust form of legalized collective bargaining between tenants and landlords in the United States, as far as we are aware it is one of the only contexts in which a tenant organization has genuine power under the law. But tenants can't rely on the regulations to protect them, we need to take action to make the regulations relevant. We worked with tenants to achieve substantial gains through tenant purchase, but none of it would have happened if a massive extralegal struggle had not pressured owners into selling in the first place.

Part 3: How We've Survived Six Factionless Years as Leftists

It's worth considering how we've managed to make it this far without imploding. For the remainder of this report, we're going to zoom out to consider what has allowed us to continue this work through the pandemic and after the crisis. Organizations are usually created to solve problems and judged on how they solve them: bicycle advocacy groups might be evaluated for the success of cyclist-friendly legislation, community-based nonprofits by the numbers of people they serve or enroll as nominal members, the grants they win, or even the length of time they manage to stay afloat. Radical political organizations with ambitious scope are unusual in that, in terms of the broad social criteria they themselves posit as essential, almost all of them are complete failures. In that context, membership numbers or historical significance can be humiliating reminders of their ultimate irrelevance.

Stomp Out Slumlords is distinctive—though hardly unique—in having two overlapping sets of objectives. First, we aim to fight evictions and bad conditions and offer a countervailing force to landlord power in Washington, DC without becoming a service-oriented nonprofit and succumbing to the domesticating forces that this entails. Secondly, we want to build a revolutionary movement to overthrow class society. In terms of the first set of goals, we can take credit for significant, if inevitably insufficient, victories over the years. In terms of the second, we have clearly not been any more successful than any other recent left-wing organization.

But while it isn't really surprising that we have not succeeded in building socialism in one district, we think it is important that our two sets of goals have never yet clashed in damaging ways. This is pretty rare. Left-wing organizations ranging from radical labor unions to political parties have frequently been ravaged both by internal struggles over their political line and by conflicts between that political line and

their day-to-day organizing activities. Somehow, we have maintained a balance. We aren't storming the White House, but we've also never taken a dime of city government or foundation money and we have never been beholden to a politician or a corporation (though we have occasionally pursued tactical alliances with councilmembers). Across the city, our efforts remain singularly focused on challenging landlords and politicians, not on managing tenant discontent on their behalf or on directing working class anger into more easily containable channels. We've also continually pursued concrete, materially effective organizing rather than chasing revolutionary phantoms or engaging in distracting and pointless doctrinal struggles.

While not everyone on the Left will agree with us on the value of such an approach, we think there are enough people out there burned out from endless ideological splits and party-form bureaucratization that our experience has something useful to offer. With that in mind, we offer both a set of lessons we've learned over the years and a number of important points of self-criticism.

Inspired by the example of the Hillside Villa struggle organized by our friends in the LA Tenants Union, we are planning a campaign for DC to start acquiring buildings from slumlords in order to create genuinely social housing—not by lobbying for legislation, but by using the sale of a massive, militantly organized building to turn the screws on the DC Council.



What We Do Right

Putting Ideology in Its Place

SOS is not a reading group, though we sometimes organize reading groups. It is not a debating society, though we often engage in debate. It is not a space to work out points of unity or draw up jargon-laden manifestos, though many of us have done our share of that. There are no doctrinal litmus tests and no universally-shared opinions on the merits of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia or any other divisive issue; we do not devote meeting time to crafting statements of protest or solidarity on issues that are unrelated to tenant organizing in the District; we do not officially endorse or campaign for political candidates. SOS is a tenant organizing project. If you join us, it is because you are a tenant or want to help tenants organize.

This may seem to be a pretty weird policy for a group that claims to be made up of revolutionary socialists, but it is grounded in theory as well as practice. The forms of solidarity we are creating are not dogmas that we dig up somewhere in a Marxist text and then convey to less-engaged tenants from a position of superiority. They are formed in struggle—both against concrete enemies like specific slumlords, but also through understanding how those enemies are connected to larger structures. We are successful in creating revolutionary consciousness to the extent that we have been able to cultivate people’s sense of community, solidarity, and personal investment through agitation and collective action, not because of the verbal political statements we issue. We do not expect that being part of SOS will be anyone’s whole political being, and so we do not seek to meet every political need.

At the same time, SOS exists within the broad political frame of Metro DC DSA. That means that if you are opposed to DSA’s politics on a general level, you aren’t likely to work with us—which doesn’t mean you can’t disagree with particular tendencies within the organization’s big tent. Despite the tensions that can sometimes arise between a project focused on disruptive protest and bottom-up organizing and a political formation most visible through its electoral activities, the relationship between SOS and DSA is symbiotic. To put it bluntly, the larger Metro DC chapter is the space where SOS members can do all the typical leftist organization stuff they don’t get to do in SOS, which leaves SOS free to focus on what we do best. Of course, many people have been active both in SOS and the broader chapter, but there are also participants in

the project—especially tenants who join us in the course of organizing their buildings—who aren’t part of DSA at all.

Of course, by not pursuing an explicit ideological agenda at the organizational level, we are giving up something—namely, developing the “Marxist cadre” so beloved of every miniature Leninist and Maoist sect around the country. Considering the record of these groups, we feel that the loss is not significant. While some of them may occasionally stumble on a viable organizing strategy, eventually a wedge forms between those members who are in it for the vision of a socialist utopia to be achieved by imitating methods laid down a century ago and those who want an organization that is effective in meeting their immediate material needs. No such organization has been able to keep these two forces in produc-



tive tension for longer than a few years. Eventually, disputes over doctrinal issues lead to implosion and demoralization, helping to salt the earth for future organizing efforts.

We think that by maintaining an uncompromising radical stance in practice and a great deal of flexibility in theory—while discouraging doctrinal debates unrelated to immediate strategy—we have been able to build an organization that has a more sustainable internal culture than most similar groups.

The Personal Is Not the Political

Small, volunteer-based organizations that demand a great deal of personal investment from their members are fertile ground for the growth of friendship, romance, resentment, rivalry, and every other kind of connection on the spectrum of human social behavior. That is hardly avoidable, and it wouldn't be helpful to avoid it even if we could. But in many organizations, these kinds of connections can get in the way of organizational change and development. For instance, Francesca Polletta's *Freedom is an Endless Meeting* documents the crises radical groups often face when an established leadership clique fails to integrate newer members who lack longstanding social connections.

It wouldn't be entirely unfair to call SOS cliquish—after all, some of the core members have known each other for close to a decade—but we have always emphasized the separation between the social and political aspects of our organization. That doesn't mean we don't have social events, but we have always made it clear that you don't need to be friends with anyone in SOS to organize with us, and not being an active organizer doesn't have to mean falling out of any social circles.

This separation helps to create a healthier internal culture than in many other organizations, which have a tendency to blur these lines. This often leads to one of two pitfalls. Sometimes the political organization becomes a glorified friend group and loses sight of its goals and strategy—in these cases internal friend-group drama tends to translate into organizational dysfunction. In other cases, members are made to



Scenes from an anti-displacement walking tour in August 2022

feel that their social lives are contingent on their performance as organizers, leading to overcommitment, burnout, and widespread feelings of inadequacy. Not all of us have fully unlearned the mindsets and behaviors that lead to burnout, but they do not shape our organizing in the way that they often do in other groups.

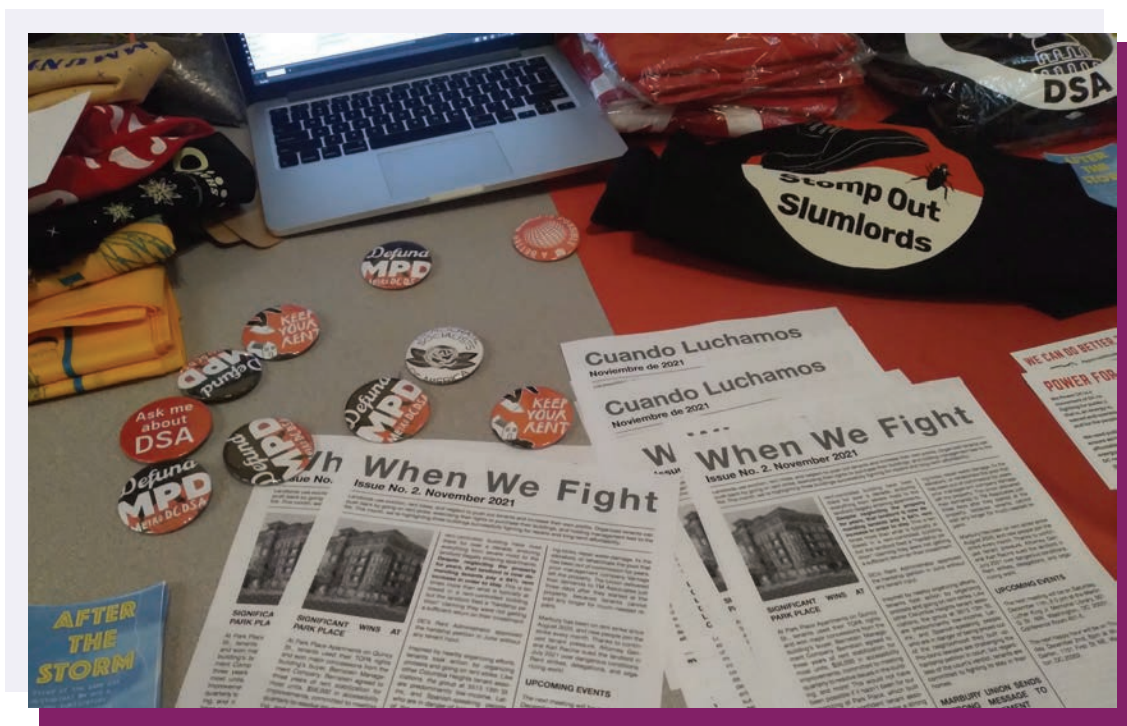
At the same time, we have certainly taken advantage of our social ties to recruit and grow the organization. Some of our most active participants are people who were initially brought in as someone's friend, partner, or roommate. Being able to draw upon these connections is vital, but we have always striven to make it clear that joining SOS is not an extension of the preexisting relationships you might have with others in the group—being our comrade is not the same thing as being our friend. This policy helps keep SOS from developing some of the cultlike features so common in small radical groups, where an “us against the world” mentality encourages members to think that taking a break from organizing is equivalent to cutting themselves off from their only community.

Reflect and Reassess

For many left-wing organizations, an overly mechanistic application of Marxist analysis makes it appear as if there were only one strategy to follow in any given context, which makes organizational flexibility very difficult to maintain. Our approach is the opposite. We have written several reports like this one, and in each of them we have tried to be as honest as we could about what we got wrong since the last report, as well as what we got right. That's not because we're trying to perform humility; it's because changing our mind has been fundamental to our growth and development as an organization. Being comfortable with changing course as the situation warrants means we can take advantage of evolving circumstances without sacrificing our fundamental principles.

Structured, regular exercises in reflection and reassessment help us ensure that when we change our minds, we are doing so for reasons that are grounded in our overall understanding of the political economy of housing in the capital. We try to avoid lurching from tactic to tactic in pursuit of an existing movement to tail or a hot-button issue to exploit. Rather, we try to map out the political and economic forces at play in a particular moment and pinpoint where we can intervene using the strengths we have (the ability to mobilize working-class Washingtonians and not just the usual activist suspects), without relying on the resources we do not (money, staff, or insider access).

It has also been important to us to share the products of this reflection and reassessment with others. Without the need to apply for grants or posture as a revolutionary vanguard, we don't have to maintain the appearance of never losing a fight or encountering a serious obstacle. Organizing work is hard and unpredictable; sometimes it requires taking more steps back than forward. By making public our own thought process, we aim to make it easier for other groups to follow—or not follow—in our footsteps.



Every so often we talk about resurrecting our newsletter, which had ... two editions

Our focus on structured, written reflection also comes from a sense that left-wing groups often fail to keep useful records of their work that might come in handy not just for contemporaries but for organizers down the road. In DC, we are familiar with a number of previous organizations whose legacy we carry, but not all of them have left us with a set of lessons we can use. For some, we only know about their day-to-day experiences thanks to the dedicated work of local oral historians who revisit these struggles much later. By writing things down and making them public, we hope to spare future successors the need to watch us ramble on camera for hours on end about fights we barely remember.

We especially value writing things down in an accessible way, as free of Leninist phraseology and leftist jargon as we can realistically make them. Leftist Standard English has its rhetorical charms but its high level of unsubstantiated abstraction and superficial polemicizing means it is rarely a useful basis for making decisions. And, in the end, our goal in these reports is not to be right—we fully expect that future reports will cast doubt on things that we now feel confident about, as they have in the past.

Meeting People Where They Are

We began to build SOS by talking to people who were getting evicted, and canvassing remains an important pillar of our work to this day. Unlike many canvassers, though, we don't just knock doors with a pitch in mind. Rather, we ask questions. What's it like to live here? Do you like your landlord? Do things get fixed on time? These questions

help us to propose strategies, but there's no one approach we're selling to everyone we talk to. We always start with tenant problems, not organizer solutions.

This is a marked contrast to many other radical organizations, which start with a clear vision of what the workers should want (a party, a mutual-aid network, a rank-and-file labor union) and then try to get real-life workers to agree. When this approach fails, they become demoralized and move on to the next community, or drop out of organizing entirely. Our strategy is also a contrast to NGOs, which have grants and staffing policies that politically constrain the menu of services they are able to offer their target communities.

The fact that we start with real problems means that we are also able to identify real solutions even when the kinds of approaches we favor don't find purchase. In TOPA buildings where the pro-buyout consensus is too strong, for instance, we don't waste time fighting losing battles to win a co-op—rather, we try to make sure that tenants can get the best deal using strategies that work, regardless of whether they're pursuing the option that we would prefer. For us, those strategies are always rooted in collective power and organization—we want people to fight for themselves, and we want them to fight back collectively, whatever it is they're fighting for. If it seems like the will for collective action is missing, we go elsewhere after a frank conversation.

This approach builds trust among tenants who aren't necessarily predisposed to trust us. Everyone, but especially working-class people, can tell when someone is trying to sell them something. Being willing to give way and adapt your strategy to someone else's needs is the only way to build organic leadership and organization; if you aren't, you'll quickly find that people stop answering the phone.

Where We've Struggled

Growth, Maintenance, and Movement-building

At the height of the pandemic three years ago, it seemed to us that the organizing we were doing was expanding exponentially. A year earlier we had been working in a handful of buildings; by mid-2020, we had active campaigns in some two dozen, not just in DC itself but also in neighboring Maryland and Virginia counties. We were regularly training new organizers who had come in from DSA or other activist organizations as well as tenant leaders who were anchoring campaigns in their own buildings. Our protests were growing and getting more media coverage. This period of expansion allowed us to dream about what might happen if that trajectory continued: could we build a movement that could really represent tenants across the DMV, wielding their collective economic power to achieve lasting political wins?

The answer to that question has so far turned out to be “no,” as the first half of this report shows. While we are still doing more than we were pre-pandemic, the 2020 wave in tenant organizing eventually gave way to the same demobilizing forces experienced by activists across the country. People went back to work and lost the free

time they were using to organize; the mood of panic and desperation that enabled government officials (like those at Trump's CDC) to push the limits of what was normally politically possible ultimately abated; the combination of real material wins and real limits on what seemed achievable in the future led many tenants across the city to step back from the brink of radicalization.

Even if circumstances had been more propitious, however, we weren't really prepared for exponential growth on the level of organizational structure. SOS had evolved as a compact formation with a central core of a few people and concentric circles around that amounting to several dozen others (counting tenant leaders but not the rank-and-file members of the building organizations they lead). Rather than being delegated to less-active members, new tasks like training and leadership development tended to be directed toward people who already had a lot on their plates. While not ideal from an organizational perspective, this also made a certain amount of sense, since such jobs required significant amounts of experience and reliability. But without being entrusted with tasks of this kind, other members never got a chance to develop skills they could put to work later.



Protesting Mayor Bowser at a ribbon-cutting

A further issue was constant attrition, largely due to the transient professional-class DC context from which most of our organizers originate. Some of the people we had trained most assiduously had to move out of the city, and while we don't hold that against them, it meant their skills were lost to us—in brutally economic organizational terms, they became a failed investment. This meant that rather than steadily growing our ranks, we were often barely treading water.

Initially, we had also envisioned that the line between organizers entering SOS from the activist side and tenant leaders entering it from the building side would gradually become blurred, creating a steady progression from active tenant to tenant leader to building organizer to trainer of organizers. This did not happen, for a variety of reasons ranging from linguistic to cultural to logistical. While we still generally orient ourselves toward a political merger between the grassroots tenant movement and

the activist intelligentsia that helps sustain it, we have not found a way to contain both within a single, homogenized organizational structure.

These are not excuses; these flaws reflect core aspects of the SOS organizing model, and it is quite possible that in fixing them we would end up with a different and perhaps even a less effective organization. They are, however, significant obstacles to our theory of change, and at the moment we have not found a fully satisfactory replacement.

Internal Political Structure

Related to the lack of expansionist momentum in recent years is a growing sense that we do not know how to manage or prepare for the leadership transition that every lasting organization will eventually have to undertake. While the core Coordinating Committee routinely incorporates new members, the group that was around for SOS's founding still contains some of the most dedicated, consistent, and influential voices in the organization. It is fair to say that if they move or have to retreat from organizing for one reason or another, we'll have to seriously regroup to figure out what SOS will look like.

In some ways, this is not in itself a problem. Much of the day-to-day organizing is now done by people who have been doing it for years and don't need active supervision—in fact, they may appreciate the opportunity to step up. But the uncertainty that would come from the loss of the overall strategic direction (and technical work like graphic design and supervision of trainings) that the core leaders currently provide certainly seems daunting.

In principle it seems the solution should be simple—we should practice gradually offloading more and more work from the core members to avoid the problem of single points of failure. This is where the decreased organizational capacity of present-day SOS begins to pose a problem, however, and just as in the case of the growth dilemma outlined above, the lack of a solution tends to lead to a vicious cycle.

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Over the years, a number of members have proposed reforms that would limit the structural role of the founding members, but it is not clear that this is fundamentally a constitutional problem. Leadership is decision-making, but it is also informal authority, a reputation for reliability and strategic acumen, and many other qualities. Given the way that SOS has evolved, the leadership of the core group has become the glue holding the organization together. It is this that will be most difficult to replace.

Disruptive Dissensus, and Then What?

The initial SOS organizing model derived from the ideas outlined in Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's essay "Disruptive Dissensus," which argues that the attempt to convert sporadic bursts of working-class mobilization into institutionalized mass organizations that pursue political power is a dead end. Instead, the working class (or, in their formulation, poor people) can only exercise power by disrupting the normal course of social life, forcing elites to offer concessions in order to halt the chaos. Once the tide recedes, the organizations that wash up on the beach will be empty husks without a real working-class constituency and thus will fall into the hands of middle-class liberals. As we detailed in past reports, our subsequent experiences led us to retreat from our skepticism of organizing at least on the building level, and by mid-2020 on the citywide level as well. This made sense, and ultimately this transition was what allowed us to notch all the wins we can now take credit for. We do not think SOS is an empty husk, still less one dominated by liberals.

Yet we can't really say that the last three years have validated the mass-organization model either. Our local movement's one attempt to create a classic organization of the kind derided by Piven and Cloward turned swiftly, as they would have predicted, into a liberal-dominated and largely dormant NGO. Our hesitant initial efforts to turn SOS into a radical alternative one came too late, by which point the organizational energies were already too sapped to allow this to happen.



Birddogging Councilmember Robert White in May 2023 when he refused to address a 9% rent hike of rent-controlled units

On the one hand, it is becoming clear that the ruling class no longer feels as compelled to offer lasting concessions to mass protest as it did in the 1960s when Piven and Cloward were active. A wave of uprisings might get you some more or less temporary handouts from the state, but it will not result in the kinds of stable entitlement structures or legal protections that were on offer in the heyday of the civil rights era—in part because the right-wing majority on the Supreme Court is unlikely to permit it. (Even beyond this, it is noteworthy that the three big federal economic packages of the pandemic era, despite representing the largest bonanza of govern-

ment spending in U.S. history, failed to create any significant permanent social programs.) This means that anyone following the Piven/Cloward playbook is likely to be increasingly disappointed with the results of each mobilizational wave.

On the other hand, organizational institutionalization in the current context virtually requires becoming a grant-seeking nonprofit and all of the restrictions on political advocacy and militancy that that entails. At the outer limit of our hopes in 2021 was a collective entity with a thousand dues-paying members, but even if that were achieved and dues were set at \$100 a year (well beyond most tenants' actual willingness to pay), this would only support a single staff member and no office space. Applying for grants, on the other hand, requires competing with other service-oriented nonprofits on their own terrain; the Department of Housing and Community Development does not accept "contributions to the real movement to abolish the present state of things" as proof of efficacy.

The Campaign Commitment

So what now? One thing we have learned from Piven and Cloward is that the current low point in mass mobilization is certain to be temporary, and at some point in the coming years things will start to pick up again. But that only makes it more imperative to enter into the coming wave with a clear strategic vision that neither takes refuge in left-wing platitudes nor in preemptive pessimism, both of which we have always striven to avoid. History also shows the weakness in building organizations for organization's sake—but even our short local history demonstrates that having an active group like SOS at the ready when crisis strikes is imperative to winning the most concessions from the political class.

The biggest difference between who we were in 2017 and who we are today is that we have cultivated a tenant network of actual leaders, who are not only engaged in struggles in their own buildings, but have actively agitated their neighbors into joining the fight and are willing to jump in when the next campaign arises. While our group of volunteer organizers has fluctuated for all the reasons we outlined above, our focus on maintaining relationships with the building leaders we have brought in since the pandemic is the reason for all the wins we've had since 2020. We have drawn on each other's energy and commitment in our darkest moments, when it seemed like these campaigns were at the brink of collapse. We have trained one another to be better organizers and better people, and the strength of our relationships with leaders who can move others to action is ultimately the reason why a small organization like ours is able to respond quickly when crises arise.

What the past two years have shown us is that the key to maintaining engagement among our base is having a campaign that speaks to their present struggles. When no one had work and no one could pay rent, we fought to cancel rent. When people began going back to work, we fought for rental relief to be distributed justly and quickly. When our members' buildings went up for sale, we fought for tenants to ben-

efit as much as possible through the TOPA process. When those sales stalled or new buyers didn't keep their promises, we turned again to fighting the landlord through strikes and delegations. Through each of these campaigns, whether at the building or the city level, we have kept the goals concrete and achievable, even as we have tried to turn people's eyes to the further horizon of de commodified social housing. Our greatest source of strength is the real and permanent changes in consciousness that ordinary people develop when they fight for their own rights and win.

Occasionally we talk to progressive intellectuals who envision a "Wagner Act for tenants" that would create more of a legal framework for collective bargaining over housing. We are skeptical to say the least. Bargaining can only occur when the relevant parties want to bargain, and landlords (and bosses and other elites) never negotiate without a credible threat. Rent strikes create that threat, and those who want to alter the balance of power between landlord and tenant should focus on expanding and protecting the strike weapon, rather than bureaucratizing tenant-landlord conflict.

This is our focus today and for the foreseeable future: building on the successes of the rent strike movement. At the moment, we're supporting five rent strikes across DC, including one that started in July, and we're investigating a strategy for launching protected rent strikes over conditions in Virginia's hostile legal environment. We do not intend to pivot into a new existence as a community development corporation or a dues-fueled mass membership organization. In the future, we hope to shift more and more from defensive struggles to offensive ones, from resisting displacement to pursuing a positive vision, like pushing for social housing. But we will do so by fighting with the same old weapons, and sharpening them against every slumlord who crosses our path.



Marbury Plaza tenants celebrating a victory in court, April 2023. Their militant rent strike caught the attention of DC's Office of the Attorney General, who brought suit against their slumlord.