Tenants unions are renter-led organizations that advocate for tenant rights, build renter power, and push for larger policy change. These unions may choose to affiliate based on living in the same building, renting from a particular landlord, or experiencing similar negative living conditions. Tenants unions provide infrastructure to organize into bigger networks beyond municipal boundaries. Advocates for affordable housing and anti-displacement policy note that tenants unions play an essential role in building a political base necessary for realizing anti-displacement policy and enforcing tenant protections.

**HOW A TENANTS UNION WORKS**

Renters can form a tenants union first by canvassing to gauge interest. Unions can form in a single building, across multiple buildings in a neighborhood, or even across an entire city or state.

Anyone who lives in the area of the tenants union can be a member, but not everyone must be an active member for the tenants union to exist; that said, higher and more active membership increases the union’s power.

When a union first forms, members set up a structure for how it will operate. For example, a tenants union may choose a few spokespeople to represent them and liaise with landlords. In addition, a tenants union may decide to designate several other positions such floor captains, secretary, or treasurer.

Once formed, a well-organized tenants union can have the power to self-advocate regarding a variety of grievances. Organizing tactics can include forcing direct negotiations with building managers, filing collective complaints to city or state agencies, or even calling for a rent strike.

Becoming a member of a tenants union may involve paying dues, often on a sliding-scale, depending on the union’s institutional capacity.

In some states and jurisdictions, tenants unions have a legal right to organize.

**CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS**

- Third party dispute resolution and mediation between unions and landlords can help tenants unions meet their needs under tense circumstances.
- Code enforcement and inspection is a municipal tool that tenants can use to enforce legal living conditions and pressure unresponsive landlords.
- Unions are stronger when representatives are familiar with legal resources (both public and nonprofit) and have relationships with legal advisors.
- Tracking all documentation from negotiations with landlords, building inspections, and mediations can help renters better understand and assert their rights.
- Tenants unions have strength in numbers. Authentic interpersonal relationships, opportunities for leadership, accessibility and other factors impact recruitment and sustained participation.
CONSIDERATIONS

Dependent on Tenant Energy and Labor

Tenants unions aren’t a legislative policy fix; they require constant work to maintain their power and efficacy. Over-burdened renters may not have the time or energy to put into participating in this type of union structure.

Landlord Retaliation

Tenants who organize with a union may face backlash from landlords, particularly as renters begin to show a real threat to landlord power. Some jurisdictions have passed legislation which recognizes that renters have the right to organize while others have not. Depending on the strength and enforcement of tenant protections in a given jurisdiction, retaliation can look like worsening living conditions, harassment, or eviction.

Mediating Informal Structure and Interpersonal Conflict

Forming and participating in a tenants union is organizing. This means it can come with all the hardships and pitfalls that organizing a community entails: clashing personalities, conflicts over leadership, and differences in strategy.

HISTORY OF TENANTS UNIONS

Tenants have been organizing themselves for as long as the renter-landlord structure has existed. The landscape of tenants unions has shifted significantly over the last 50 years, however, mediated by changes in governmental housing initiatives, urban development policy, as well as shifts in the power and tactics of racial and economic justice movements.

As conditions changed, (e.g. the fall of public housing and “urban renewal” policies), many organized tenants unions shrank, disappeared, or merged with other housing-based organizations. In the face of these changes, renter mobilization was integrated into local non-profit organizations focused on developing affordable housing with tenant-specific activism replaced by community development nonprofits. Renter organizing has recently witnessed a resurgence, however, bolstered by a growing tenant population and rising rent burdens.

Organizing for Green Infrastructure

Tenants unions are a powerful way for renters to advocate for green amenities. Through a united front, renters can promote access to green space, composting programs, and “green” building features. It is important to note that green amenities are deeply tied to quality-of-life conditions that tenants unions already fiercely organize around: healthy buildings, safe infrastructure, and good air quality. Organizing for green infrastructure need not be confrontational; when it comes to energy-efficient features, landlords may also find financial incentives to participate.

LEARN MORE

for guides on facilitating a successful tenants union campaign and policies that your tenants union could advocate for, such as a renters bill of rights.