Member unions of the Autonomous Tenants Union Network (ATUN) are glad to see this show of interest in tenant organizing and autonomous tenant unionism.

ATUN consists of about 25 tenant unions building power in cities across North America. Our founding convention was held in October 2020, but many of us have worked together for much longer. ATUN has provided much-needed moral support, political grounding, education and community to new tenant organizers and unions. For several years, we have held monthly tenant organizing town halls, and we have arranged one-on-ones, mentorship conversations, and regional meetings in order to foster relationships and cohere previously isolated organizing efforts.

Interest in tenant organizing has increased in recent years as a site of collective struggle as the gap between wages and rents widens and as more capital is extracted from communities by real estate. ATUN member unions share the perspective that tenant struggle, like labor struggle, is a crucial means of building working class power because it is rooted directly in the material conditions of tenants. In other words, it lays bare the irreconcilable conflict between tenant and landlord. Tenants facing crises quickly grasp how much power lies behind their landlord, and that collective action is the only way to fight back. We fight together to win back our immediate material needs, and to build unity to prepare tenants to broaden the struggle—to build a future without gentrification, without disrepair, without displacement and disruption of communities, without racist and discriminatory housing practices, and ultimately, to build a future without landlords.

To achieve that future, we believe that the tenant movement must be self-directed and autonomous. Autonomous tenant unions are member-funded. Progressive NGO circles will always emphasize developmentalist approaches to ‘the housing crisis’ that are completely out of touch with the everyday realities of working-class tenants. We remain independent of nonprofits, big foundations, and government funding in order to build power that is led by tenants. Autonomous tenant unions are member-run. Through organizing with other tenants and building tenants’ institutions, we help each other develop as leaders and we practice exercising democratic control within our communities.

Tenant-oriented initiatives such as DSA Resolution #20 and #21 present important opportunities for the growth of the tenant movement. Whether or not these resolutions are passed at the DSA national convention, we hope that DSA members seeking to build new autonomous tenant unions will make use of the resources, knowledge, and networks that ATUN member unions have developed collectively over the past several years. We look forward to working alongside other tenant organizers in and out of DSA to build tenant power everywhere.