August 2021, **Introducing Door to Door**

There is a short story some tell about our current moment that goes a little like this: pandemic begat unemployment, unemployment begat rent strikes and eviction defense, eviction defense and rent strikes begat tenant unions, eviction moratoriums, and rent relief. It’s not wrong, though there may be some disagreement about the order and causal connection among those events. But in a somewhat more true retelling, autonomous tenant unions, like those in our network and the tenants’ movement more broadly, preceded the moment and prepared a substantial number of tenant militants for it. Members of an informal Autonomous Tenants Union Network (ATUN) had been meeting for years; when the
pandemic emerged, we had been planning our founding convention. Guided by the green thumb of tenant militants new and old, fed by the soil of a growing and increasingly radical tenants’ movement, the seeds of unemployment sprouted into rent strikes and eviction defense and so on.

Cultivating the radical — that is, leftist and rooted — flank of our movement for responding to and one day overcoming our increasingly extreme, propertyless living conditions (pandemic or no) is what ATUN was founded for. Throughout North America and regionally, through town halls, member exchanges, office hours, and committee meetings, we are spreading our network and the autonomous tenant union tendency in every direction, sharing experiences, practices, skills, and strategy, to each according to their need, from each according to their ability. And yet, until now, aside from videos of our town halls, occasional emails, and social media posts, we have not had a way to circulate the details of, let alone reflections upon, our net’s work. A few of us have responded to a call to change this, by starting a newsletter. Thus, we bring you Door to Door: Autonomous Tenant News.

Newsletters, newspapers, magazines, and journals have long been integral to social movements — as a way for people to be brought into the movement and for movements to internally develop, a place to read about struggles people wage and what they think about them, where we can study what conditions those struggles and debate our interventions in the short and long run. If journalism has been called “the first rough draft of history,” this newsletter is where we write that history ourselves, together. The multiplication of autonomous tenant unions — anti-capitalist, anti-racist, self-funded, and self-organized, independent from non-profits and the state, building grassroots tenant power through the free associations of landless neighbors — has been a truly historic event, one that ATUN’s founding has coalesced. The task here is to write and reflect upon the history we’re making, in hope that by accurately and critically assessing our circumstances and practices we can more likely fulfill our revolutionary aspirations. High aims for something we’re honestly approaching in a pretty low-key way at the moment, we know. But with your and your tenant unions’ aid, we think we think we can get there. Like the history we make, we’re asking you to write this newsletter together - with us.

Last, a word on the name we’ve chosen. As some of you know, we collected suggestions. From those we got back, the three of us unanimously favored Door to Door. We liked that we could imagine this newsletter someday arriving to tenants as union members knock, knock, door to door. And we felt that, more than anything on the flashier side, like rent strikes and eviction defenses, at the core of what we do as autonomous tenant unions is build relationships with our neighbors, one door at a time, around our immediate needs. The coming revolution in which the tenants’ movement will play an essential part will surely be waged in the streets, but we’re moving that direction now by going Door to Door.
Meet the affiliates!

**Tenant and Neighborhood Councils** (Bay Area, California)

Founded in May 2018 by DSA Communist Caucus members, TANC began 2020 with around 60 members, working to establish a platform and constitution over the early months.

Shortly after, the pandemic induced unemployment crisis struck—and TANC responded by launching its “Suspend Rent” campaign. In a couple months, TANC quintupled its membership to 300, supporting more rent strikers than even joined as members, having released a widely-circulated *Pandemic Organizing Guide* and holding several organizing and tenants rights trainings, as well as weekly organizing office hours.

In 2021, TANC has continued to work with striking councils, as they work toward securing rent relief, rent forgiveness, and rent reductions, while defending several councils of tenants against eviction, and beginning new habitability and harassment-related council organizing efforts. In May, TANC looked back on an incredible year of organizing, holding the union’s first annual convention—a weekend of political discussion, reflection, organizational proposals, and the union’s first large-scale in-person get together since the pandemic began.

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**Omaha Tenants United** (Omaha, Nebraska)

We started on a porch... some socialist renters were sick of the way landlords treated the tenants of this city. We decided to start an organization and pick some fights.

From initial meetings where we discussed housing issues and read the state tenant-landlord statute, we came up with potential items to organize around. We began to focus particularly around the issue of “slumlords,” or low-rent, low-maintenance landlords who skirt legality and mistreat tenants.

The first fight was with notorious slumlord Dave Paladino. He and his company were denying a tenant hot water. OTU talked with this tenant and together we took a direct path. Instead of calling a city inspector or just hoping for things to change, we wrote a letter and went to Paladino’s office together, demanding a solution. And guess what? We won!

It’s not always that easy, but it shows the truth at the heart of our organization: Tenants have power in numbers, we just have to use it. We want to work with tenants to support them in doing what they are already capable of doing. Through this process, we hope that the tenants will learn more about their own power — the power of an organized working-class community.
Excerpt from “Affordable Housing Is A Scam!”
by the Los Angeles Tenants Union

Article available online at https://latenantsunion.medium.com/

Writing about the rise of homelessness in the 1980s, progressive social critic Jonathan Kozol cited a HUD deputy assistant secretary in the Reagan administration as saying, “We’re getting out of the housing business, Period.” This led Kozol to famously conclude, “The cause of homelessness is lack of housing.”

Thirty years later, the inaccessibility of housing has dramatically worsened, but not for the lack of development. Today, the U.N. estimates that 60% of all global investments are in real estate and 75% of that number is in housing. In cities around the world, downtown skylines are a forest of construction cranes. Single-family neighborhoods are now dotted with small-lot developments and generic luxury apartment buildings. Investors stealthily convert rent-controlled apartment buildings in historic neighborhoods into boutique hotels and short-term rentals for tech-industry contract workers. And the process of social cleansing follows everywhere nearly the same templates engineered for upzoning, upscaling, and uprooting.

The crisis of housing access is driven by the commodification of housing, which we define as the need to increase real estate investment value through planned scarcity, waste, and monopoly ownership. For all the promises of “opportunity” and “improvement” that accompany gentrification, the result for tenants is rent-gouging and social cleansing. “Affordable Housing,” while held out as the solution to the affordability crisis caused by real estate speculation, only further accelerates the crisis of displacement in the ways we’ve outlined.

Tenants from the Kingswood Apartments in Los Angeles formed a tenants association to push back against unaffordable rent increases in their “affordable housing” building in East Hollywood, July 31, 2019.

The history of “Affordable Housing” is part of a decades-long assault on non-capitalist housing alternatives illuminates where our debates about housing solutions should begin. We need to start the conversation
at a different place than that of housing supply, especially when the actual meaning of “Affordable Housing” is predetermined to serve the interests of a for-profit housing system (even in those instances where the “Affordable Housing” developer is part of the nonprofit housing developer industry). The failure of “Affordable Housing” has been carefully detailed here in terms of affordability covenants that expire, AMI income categories that exclude the poor, and the use of “Affordable Housing” to privatize public housing, remove rent controls, and accelerate both real estate speculation and displacement.

To build tenant power, we believe we must articulate a different vision. For that reason, we put forward three challenges to our movement:

1. We challenge the tenant movement to center discussions around public housing in its analysis and demands. Let’s have lively debates about what public housing can mean and be, learning from the past while holding onto what we’re imagining as a movement today.

2. We challenge the tenant movement to reject the slippery language of “Affordable Housing” and to openly demand social housing solutions outside of the market. The commodification of housing is fundamentally incompatible with the human right to housing. There can be no reconciliation of the two.

3. Finally, activists must demand housing solutions that build on the political vision already manifest in the autonomous tenant power movement, pushing for housing that supports local autonomy. L.A. Tenants Union organizes collective struggles at the level of apartment buildings and neighborhoods. Our housing should support neighbors working together to build community.

Since the founding of the L.A. Tenants Union in 2015, members have argued that ours is not a housing movement but a movement of tenants — empowering tenants in the fullness of our lives, not just around housing. Thus, we need a housing system that encourages autonomous collective ownership of public apartment buildings, that channels resources to tenants to build and maintain their own housing as a social context for autonomous collective action at the level of the social, political, cultural, and economic. And we need to see social housing as part of all aspects of our lives. “Supportive housing” should be a universal concept integrating medical care, childcare, education, cultural expression, cooperative economic endeavors, environmental justice, food justice, and justice in terms of race, gender, sexuality, class, and immigration justice.

A primary component of the commodification of housing is to alienate our need for accommodations from the fullness of our lives. A radical housing vision rejects that separation and restores to our notion of housing the experience of social life. We propose this is the vision of the future whose seeds already exist in spaces where LATU members organize mutual support and put community into practice through tenants associations and local neighborhood chapters.

Why demand “Affordable Housing,” when we could demand the whole city?
Monthly Townhall: A Movement of the Evicted
by the Eviction Defence Network (BC)

In April, we heard from tent city leaders in British Columbia (BC), from tenant union organizers in Portland and Chicago who are building solidarity between housed and unhoused tenants, and from members of Echo Park Rise Up in Los Angeles.

Street communities resistance: organizing in the tent city and beyond

Wanda, tent city leader and organizer in Surrey, BC, opened the presentations: “The longest tent city here was called the strip. It was hard, we fought against bylaw and police officers everyday. They would bully us, take our belongings and throw them in the garbage”. Despite the conditions, residents organized for justice and their right “to be treated as humans”. “We managed to start street meetings, to gather the community and talk about issues bothering us. We wouldn’t allow bylaw or the police to attend these meetings”.

Following her, Tana - former resident of Anita Place Tent City and organizer with Maple Ridge Resistance and Red Braid Alliance - exposed the exceptionalization of unhoused tenants. Framing them as “drug users, liars and thieves”, as she put it, serves to obscure the only common denominator shared by unhoused communities: the lack of housing accessible to low income families, compounded by status of race, gender and immigration.
People who are part of street communities end up chronically in and out of jails and streets, institutionalized and policed shelters not because of their own faults but as a result of systemic violence targeting in different ways low income, Indigenous and racialized working class communities.

**Rethinking solidarity**

Chris from Tenants United/ Hyde Park Woodland in Chicago and Colleen from Don’t Evict PDX shared their reflections around building tenant union solidarity alongside unhoused resistance and organizers. From fundraising drives in Chicago to eviction defense in Portland, solidarity between housed and unhoused tenants has been instrumental to dig deeper into what this means in action.

Rather than building one way relationships of aid mirroring non-profits dynamics, Colleen shared the importance of fostering the multiple ways we are in relationship with each other and the necessity of being honest about capacities and motivations. Stop the Sweeps also presented their fight against Business Improvement Districts (BID) who have been financing anti-homeless ordinances across the country.

Organizers talked about how cities play a central part in the creation and continuation of houselessness. As an organizer with the PDX Houseless Radicals Collective stated, “we formed a collective for all houseless people in Portland and connected with other camps to encourage them to form their group, so we can come together and have a voice. (...) We’re not interested in the idea of working with city council, government or nonprofits. They’ve repeatedly failed. Their help always comes with strings attached, and you always end back in camp at some point”.

**Who’s the threat? Houseless communities against state violence**

Closing the townhall, Queen from Echo Park Rise Up shared her story: “I got to Echo Park in 1990. When I lost everything, I moved a block down there to the community living in the park”. At the park, she met Wall Street, “the smartest person i know”, who observed: “Unhoused and homeless has a stigma attached to it. When cops stop me, it doesn’t matter what I’m wearing, they’ll ask if I’m homeless. I get the feeling that if I were to tell him yes, they might treat me a little harsher. The words used to describe ourselves affects how we are treated. So if anything, I want to refer to ourselves as a community”.

Queen and Wall Street highlighted the strength and resilience of tent cities against the racist and anti-poor violence of the state determined to eliminate peaceful communities of people supporting one another. The attacks they faced shows us the threat organized unhoused communities represent to a system set to protect private property over people’s lives. “That night, they mobilized like 400 police in SWAT gear,” recalled Queen from the city-led attack on Echo Park’s community.

Despite state-led displacement, the fight continues. As in Maple Ridge, Portland and beyond, LA organizers took their fight to a new level and are now organizing within the jail-like Project Roomkey where some residents of the tent city were relocated. “In some of these
projects, you're only allowed to leave from 12pm to 4pm in the afternoon. They tell you you'll go to one place and you end up two cities away. The lies they gave to get everybody out”.

**Fighting back: tent city lives forever!**

Yet, these weren’t stories of despair. Presenters talked about their experiences, the wins and loses of unhoused and housed tenants determined to build power for the survival of their community. “At one point there were about two hundred people living in Echo Park, including a big hispanic community” Queen said. “They were working people that, like me, were your neighbour and ended up down there. We formed a community, there’s nowhere else I felt safe but the park. Now they scatter people to the point where they're going to be bound to do a couple things they're not supposed to be doing”.

A thread in all these stories was the decision of tenant’s unions and autonomous political organizations to support the leadership of unhoused leaders. Like in LA, where Queen underlined how some groups have been instrumental to their fight: “It's been hard but having the support from Street watch and Rise Up LA is making it so mentally we’re sound and ready to keep this fight going”. Communities disorganized by the constant threat of violence and displacement could count on the commitment from groups like Stop the Sweeps, Red Braid and Street Watch LA to stand alongside them by providing logistical, material and political support.

Closing the presentations, Queen’s points resonated with all of us: “Nobody wants to be homeless, we didn't choose this life (...) But if we are together and we are united, a lot of things can be achieved”. Along Tana’s words, they set the future possibilities of what needs to be done: “we need permanent solutions, geared to the people, not the banks and landlords.”
Upcoming Events & Meetings

Spanish practice
Weekly: every Sunday
11am Pacific Time, 1pm Central Time, 2pm Eastern Time

Organizing Committee Meeting
Bimonthly: first and third Wednesday
4pm PT, 6pm CT, 7pm ET

ATUN’s Townhall
Monthly: second Saturday
10am PT, 12pm CT, 1pm ET

Delegates Council Meeting
*Delegates of ATUN affiliates only*
Monthly: third Saturday
10.30am PT, 12.30pm CT, 1.30pm ET

Organizing Roundtable
Monday, August 30th
5pm PT, 7pm CT, 8pm ET

For more information, visit atun-rsia.org, @atun-rsia on Twitter or contact atuntenants@gmail.com