

Tenant Spring

The All-Chicago Tenant Alliance

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Preface

At last, Chicago's tenants are waking up from their long, crazy nightmare about "tenants rights" and are replacing that dream with something real: tenant unions. Amid the excitement of the current period and encouraged by the signs of life, some have proclaimed that Chicago is on the verge of a "tenant summer." No doubt, we share their enthusiasm.

It has to be admitted, however, that our tenants are quite late to this fight. In many of the major and mid-sized cities in our country, the tenant union movement seems to have already taken root. The same appears true in Europe. But here in Chicago, it is still in its infancy. On the other hand, our organization, the All-Chicago Tenant Alliance, has just begun its sixth year of life. During the period that separates our birth from the present day, we have learned hard lessons and transformed our work dramatically trying to bring this moment into existence. While certainly not mature, our organization is no tyke, either. With respect to the certain trends and peculiarities that have arisen from our organizing conditions, we have been hardened against some, and made sympathetic to others. Our time in the struggle has been adequate enough to provide us this, if nothing else.

Therefore, we hope it is easy to understand how half a decade spent in the process of *organizational construction* under Chicago's

particular conditions could have resulted in the strongly-felt ideas which now loom over our activity like huge nimbostratus clouds. As a frenzy of fresh seeds are being planted in the ground, we hope our urgency to release some of these ideas from the atmosphere above the so-called housing justice movement appears seasonable and maybe even precipitates stronger growth. In any case, we aim to help break up the skies that badly cloud our movement.

This little book is addressed to both left-wing activists in general, anti-imperialists, those in the housing-centric social justice organizations, and, of course, those who are veterans of or are just entering the tenant union movement, including our own membership. It responds to numerous questions that have been posed to us over the years and offers a positive vision of where our struggle is at, where we believe it should go, and why. Although we would never suggest that our organization could look exactly like one in another place, we know from experience that tenant organizations in other locations have similar problems and similar questions. We hope therefore that comrades in the tenant movement in different parts of the world might also find this book helpful or at least stimulating.

We also recognize that it is likely unavoidable that this circulates beyond our intended audience and for this we want to warn the reader that it is very specific to our context and is based directly on the concrete problems that our organization is facing at the time of writing. We are aware that it is different from other works recently made available on tenant unionism, and may not carry the same appeal. We attribute this to its specificity and its function as an organizational document.

The development of a cloud into rain waters the earth just as it clears the sky, making way for the warm light of the sun. If we fail to break up the clouds over the movement, without a period of transition and growth, the summer will never come. With that in mind, we want to contest the idea of the tenant summer with another—that of the *tenant spring*.

- ACTA, Spring 2025

Chapter One

Why does ACTA, a tenant organization, find it so important to consider itself a “revolutionary socialist” organization?

The landlord-tenant relation only exists because it is a part of a larger system, the system of capitalism. Capitalism creates both the preconditions for the landlord-tenant relationship and the drive for it to grow and expand. The precondition which has led us to the present housing relations is the private as opposed to social ownership of the means of production, land, and resources. Until private property is replaced by social ownership, the increasing power of landlords to rule over tenants cannot be permanently destroyed and all reforms will be temporary half-measures.

The abolition of landlords and the self-abolition of tenants is our target, nothing less. If houses were the property of society collectively, there would be no landlords to demand rent and therefore no tenants forced to pay it. That is why we are a revolutionary organization first, tenant organization second.

Capitalism makes it possible for landlords to prioritize profit over the usefulness of housing because an economy based on private property provides owners with a legal and political dictatorship over their possessions. If these houses were owned socially, we would all

have to determine the best way to use them. Under the system of capitalism, however, they are private property, which means that the state protects the right of a small minority to determine how these houses are used. As a result, property owners have the state-given “right” to “use” their property to make money, if they wish.

This right is rooted in common sense. We have the right to our possessions. Throughout history people have struggled to build political systems where the objects they use in everyday life cannot be taken away from them just because someone more powerful desires them. Capitalism is premised on this abstract right to property, but under capitalism, this historical need of humanity is transformed into its opposite as ownership of property is abstracted from use of property. Landlords who buy property with no intention of ever using it in any real sense are granted the absolute authority to rip it away from those who do use it, and in fact depend on it. As time goes on this perverse sense of “ownership” becomes an increasingly central part of the economic structure of society. Today, as a rule, owners purchase excess houses *for the purpose of renting them out to tenants*.

Capitalism not only sets the stage for an intensification of landlord dominance, it incentivises it. Under capitalism, *productive activity* is done with the goal of *accumulation*, rather than the goal of directly satisfying people’s needs. In other words, useful things are only created if they have exchange value. Only needs that are profitable are met.

Accumulation, as the accumulation of capital, has this contradiction embedded in it as well. By accumulation, we mean the increase of the mass of the means of production as private property in the hands of the owners. In other words, accumulation refers to the accumulation of capital itself: the means of production and their value. In plain talk, these things are the basis of an individual’s wealth and are referred to, in headlines for example, as one’s “net worth.” Accumulation of capital—in short, *profit*—is the general condition of the capitalist class and the objective of all individuals providing goods and services for sale in the market.

Producers aim to produce for the general needs of society, but there is no central coordinating body to determine this need. Instead,

the general need of society is reported to the producers in the form of a quantitative valuation. As a result, no firm or enterprise surveys every possible consumer in order to determine the quantity of products needed to satisfy all needs. Instead, they base their appraisal of the general need on rates of return. In theory, a high rate of return should indicate a high need for a particular product. By maximizing their own profits, capitalist producers meet the general needs of society. In reality, profit is determined by its own set of complicated rules, rules distinct from any rational distribution of resources.¹

This contradiction between usefulness and exchangeability is at the core of our economic system. It exists within the basic material elements of our society, the commodities we trade and use. On one hand, capitalist production is a process of collectively creating useful things in order to meet real needs, on the other hand this process is carried out by individual producers only under conditions ripe for capital accumulation.

These individual producers enter the market as competitors. Profitability is the general condition of capitalist production, but specific producers achieve specific rates of profit under conditions of competition with one another. Competition is felt most directly between producers in the same branch of industry, for example Samsung competes with Apple in the production of phones. It drives a progressively more cutthroat condition of survival and, in the process, skews the odds toward those firms which are larger in terms of their material forces of production and their corresponding scale of accumulated capital as money. This competition results in the triumph of some enterprises, and the collapse of others. The winners consume the losers as spoils of war and accumulation takes the form of acts of centralization in the direction of monopoly power. We can see in this process how the competition of many transforms into the domination of a few.²

¹ It is commonly argued by economists and political pundits that the market tends towards an "efficient" distribution of resources. This argument is always circular. Efficient distribution is only justified in relation to the actual tendencies of the market, in effect comparing the market to itself.

² Recall how at the beginning of the cell phone era, the list of competitors was extensive; Motorola, Nokia, LG, Blackberry, Samsung, Apple will be memorable to those of us in the United States. Only two of these now dominate half of the world market; while a handful

The drama of capitalism makes all the world a stage. It has established an international division of labor and made the war between capitalists universal in and between every country on earth, to a greater or lesser extent. Due to the tendency for accumulation at the heart of the capitalist system, the political powers that rest on the centralization of capital tend to consolidate as well. Internationally, this consolidation of power is expressed as individual nation states brought under the control of the leaders of the capitalist class, who have monopolized the productive forces of the nation, including the armed forces. Nations themselves, therefore, begin to compete in the global market according to their “national interests.” As competition within the nation presupposes winners and losers, the same holds true internationally.

But capitalism is not only defined by the prevailing struggle between capitalists. More importantly for the fate of this economic system, there is the ongoing struggle between capital and the workers. A contradictory feature of this multi-directional fight is that, as capitalists compete against one another to their left and against the workers to their right, workers are forced into competition amongst themselves. Every mass of workers becomes the personification of their master’s ambition as they are subjected to perform their master’s drudgery. While one strata of the working class is able to rise along with the tide of capital by siphoning off the scraps of accumulation in their particular branch or firm, others drown as a consequence.

In every case, it is the working classes who are flattened under the rolling boulders of accumulation.

Profitability in the case of the capitalist landlord means that one and the same thing—any given house—is possessed by someone who “uses” it to make money while it is occupied by someone who uses it to survive. The contradiction between usefulness and profitability expresses itself once again in these two different relations to one and the same home. The result, when it comes to the house, is that the

of firms fight over the scraps. Forgotten are the hundreds of international companies who have tried to blast into the market only to disappear in a flash like shooting stars. In reality, their accomplishments were absorbed by their competitors and now form a part of their mass.

interests of the landlord and the tenant are diametrically opposed to one another. We can generalize this contradiction as the basic condition of housing in the United States today: there is a controller who does not use (the capitalist landlord) vs. a user who does not control (the tenant).

The landlord and the tenant's interests are diametrically opposed because their relationship is an economic one. Think about it this way: the tenant's interests are in the usefulness of the house. If the heat breaks down in the winter and leaves him freezing, he does not have the legal or political right to fix the heat himself *because he does not own the house as his private property*. He has to ask the proper owner to do it, the landlord, who always treats these impositions like the burden of the cross. "And to think," he says with a smug grin, "You people want to crucify me!"

But the landlord's interests are not in the usefulness of the house, they are in the profitability of the house. Fixing the heat will cost him money and therefore it will work against his interests. The tenant's gain is necessarily the landlord's loss, and vice versa.³

That is as simple as it can be stated and it should illustrate that, even in the case that a tenant has a "good landlord," the landlord's enthusiasm for maintaining the usefulness of the apartment will last only as long as the broader economic conditions of capitalist society leave him with enough of a financial cushion to do so profitably. But such conditions never last. Seemingly every decade a life-changing economic crisis paralyzes the world system. Not to mention those more localized, yearly crises that pop up in different corners of the globe, tearing life apart for everyone except the richest of the

³ In the long run, these repairs may maintain the sale price of the home. Some use this to argue that the interests of landlord and tenant coincide. This argument is easily dissolved by the reality of the situation, where landlords fight even the most important repairs tooth and nail. The truth of the matter is that the incremental maintenance of a building cuts into profits, and so most landlords put it off, hoping to sell the building just before the small issues grow into a massive necessary cost. The unlucky landlord who loses this game of hot potato almost never pays the repair costs incurred by the pillage of the building carried out by his progenitors. Instead, he appeals to the state for funding, diverting even more of the people's money into landlord pockets. The fact that only a minuscule percentage of the dutifully paid rents over those decades of decay went towards the building itself is lost on all. The landlord gets subsidized and the tenants who actually use the homes pay the price.

capitalists and the lucky ones in the middle class.⁴

For example, when the financial crisis of 2008 occurred and the Great Recession followed, millions of properties were foreclosed. “Mom and pop” landlords either couldn’t afford to pay their banks or sold their surplus properties in a desperate attempt to squeeze out whatever remaining cash they could in the panic. In either case, it meant tenants were evicted by the hundreds of thousands. The personality of the landlord is always irrelevant during hard times, and hard times will always come until the capitalist system is revolutionized and thrown away.

The landlord and tenant’s contradictory interests concerning housing are not independent of one another or arbitrary. The landlord’s money comes directly from the tenant, the former depends on the latter. In other words, while it is popularly understood in this order—*the working class would have no place to live if housing providers didn’t exist*—in reality, the situation proceeds in this order: landlords would have no money and no ability to make it from housing if a huge proportion of the masses were not dispossessed of the basic and necessary means of living.

The constant dispossession of the masses of their basic means of life and the concentration of those into the hands of an increasingly small and exclusive circle of capitalists is a precondition of landlordism and is the basis of the capitalist system. In fact, as a consequence of the 2008 crisis, houses that formerly belonged to millions of homeowners went on the market at low prices and were scooped up by the only people who still had any money to invest—small and big capitalist real estate speculators. At the same time, the existing rental housing stock now had to absorb mass tenantization—millions of homeowners converted into tenants in one sweep. The thrust of demand against the supply of rental stock could do nothing else but kickstart an increase in the price of rent,⁵ which has carried

⁴ The list of economic crises in the capitalist system is too long to even make an appropriately evocative set of references to here because they are so frequent. However, to get a picture of the problem in broad strokes, search “list of economic crises” in Wikipedia.

⁵ Disequilibrium between supply and demand is the inevitable scapegoat for the so-called housing crisis, but it has nothing to do with it—except in the way that salt has something to do with making the pain of a wound more acute.

through to the unbelievable levels we are facing today—all destined for the vaults of the rich!

The fundamental contradiction driving the landlord-tenant relationship, that contradiction between usefulness and profitability, is a contradiction that cannot be resolved without revolutionizing the system of private property. By replacing the system of private property with a system of social, collective ownership of the means of production we will put ourselves in the only viable position to orient production towards the satisfaction of the general needs of society, that is, socialism. This revolution has to be undertaken by the working class—the class to which tenants belong—against the capitalist class *because the working class is the group that is in an economic relation with the capitalists that can be turned and leveraged against them*. That's why ACTA is a revolutionary organization of the working class that believes in socialism. Going forward, if the reader has questions about why ACTA believes this or that, it's always worth revisiting this first point. We are revolutionary socialists.

Chapter Two

Isn't capitalism international? How is a small tenant organization in Chicago connected to such a global struggle?

"The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere."

"Truth is always concrete, never abstract."

There is strictly speaking, no tenant movement that encompasses the entire world. Housing is provisioned in different ways in different countries. The rent relation that binds landlords and tenants is common throughout the core imperialist countries, i.e. Europe and North America in particular. This similarity has already led to efforts to connect the various movements. For example, ACTA is a member and actively involved in the constitution of the Tenant International (TI). Though still in its infancy, TI is attempting to link up every front in the war on landlords around the world but is currently composed almost exclusively of European and North American organizations. This is not a result of eurocentrism, but a reflection of the way

housing is provisioned differently in the so-called ‘advanced’ countries versus the underdeveloped ones.

Nevertheless, renting houses does appear within limits in most countries in the world—as a rule, concentrated in cities—and there is reason to believe that the rent relation will increase globally, wherever capitalist development reworks nations in the image of the advanced countries. In the meantime, if the tenants’ struggle is to adopt a more geographically comprehensive orientation right away, it would have to consider itself less specifically as a part of the *housing* struggle. This brings it closer in principle to the most enduring form of struggle in history: land struggle.

In any case, ACTA is certain that the dwellings of the international working class, no matter their form or content, are one of the centers of a bitter war around the working class’ principal and most precious possession: their labor-power.¹ The tenant struggle is a particular expression of this war that has emerged with the development of capitalism in the core and semi-peripheral countries. For examples of housing/land struggles that are not quite tenant struggles, we point to the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra in Brazil*, the squatters movements throughout Africa, in particular *Abahlali baseMjondolo* in South Africa.

ACTA believes that it is advisable to be specific, because revolutions require revolutionary strategies and revolutionary strategies must be concrete. Therefore, we are happy to embrace the tenant struggle as our home, however, we will never turn away from the fact that we are internationalist in orientation and ambition, an orientation which derives from our commitment to revolutionary socialism.

How is this internationalism expressed then, if not directly through the tenant organizing?

To preface this, we’d like to say that the popular slogan about all struggles being interconnected is a one-sided truth. What is true is that all *oppression and exploitation* is interconnected. This is precisely due to imperialism, which has created the international division of labor and made a truly universal connective tissue out of the

¹ See Chapter 5.

productive activity of men.

These connections do exist in various material processes of imperialism. For example, there are real political connections between the IDF and American police forces and economic connections between American corporations and the exploitation of South America. But when it comes to the links between our activity in Chicago and the broader struggle, we cannot be satisfied with substituting these existing connections outside our reach, considered abstractly, for the real connections which must be created between our activity and the world. For this, we must be capable of making a concrete analysis of these conditions of imperialism in relation to specific objectives. It is the second part which goes so misunderstood. It is not going to cut it to assert that Chicago is connected to, for example, Palestine, unless we can first, show how the links actually function and grasp their development. Second, do this from the standpoint of the real fact of our political activity—in other words, our practice; e.g. reconstruct the Palestinian struggle to include the connections that we and our organized comrades are capable of intervening in objectively. Third, in the course of doing that, discover the limits of our current practice and develop it to a higher stage where we can intervene in the connections which lie beyond our limits.

If we take this challenge seriously, we're afraid that we will find that while the imperialists have made the connection between Chicago and the world system *in reality*, present anti-imperialists have by-and-large only made this connection *in theory*. This is a big problem. To seriously combat the vast links of oppression made by the imperialist system, we certainly must theorize them, but we cannot forget to attempt to *prove the reality* of these hypothesized connections with the test of organized, practical fighting. Practice is the criterion of truth.

Among other things, ACTA believes we must make material connections between organizations here and there and begin to organize together. The precondition of such connections is our own organization's capability to forge and maintain these real, practical links; and this shows us the way to a first link in the chain of connections: *build an organization capable of creating and maintaining*

such connections. This is the only basis on which our *organized resistance* can connect to other struggles in reality.

But this remains quite an abstract conclusion, although internationalism is at some level about having revolutionary principles. We uphold the view that it does not ultimately matter what we *think or say* about ourselves, it matters what our total activity amounts to. ACTA accepts the point of view that the abstract is a one-sided category while the concrete is the unity of the many determinations. In shorthand, we could say that thinking abstractly is to simplify, while thinking concretely is to complexify. But the latter is not reducible to compiling a bunch of information willy-nilly, it is about arranging lots of information in a way that leaves us with a guide to action. Therefore we will give a brief example of the role played by concrete analysis in ACTA and at the same time show how “internationalism” materializes in our organization.

At the most general level, it is certainly true that Burkina Faso and the USA are concretely connected by chains of debt and trade which flow through the IMF, and these connections impose themselves upon the actual people living in each country, changing their behavior. This is an abstract depiction of the interconnections and, more importantly, it vaguely describes the connections of imperialism, and says nothing about the interconnections of struggle let alone anything concrete.

“Burkina Faso” is an abstraction if we do not consider the social classes within it. If we split Burkina into the industrial working class, the agrarian class, and the bourgeoisie, just to name a few examples of classes present in Burkinabé society, we complicate our conception of Burkina Faso, but we also introduce connections which begin to bring us towards the level of the concrete. Forces begin to take shape and the trajectory of the country becomes clearer even as the overall picture becomes more complex. But if we were simply to conclude at this point that the national bourgeoisie must have an upper hand (because, for example, the analyst is satisfied to copy over his understanding of the class structure in the United States), we would have stopped before reconstructing a concrete conception of the country. We must continue our reconstruction of the totality by restoring additional elements until we have brought the picture into

focus.

In the case of Burkina Faso, the analyst should go on to review the influence of France, the US, Russia, the other African powers, the complicated relation between the Islamic insurgents of the north and Ukrainian and NATO forces, the supposedly “disinterested” parties such as Germany, and of course the Fulani and Tuareg. This list could go on indefinitely, bringing us closer to a concrete conception. We should also recognize the ideological distinctions within the Burkinabé classes, for example, between those who support the ambitions of the national bourgeoisie with less qualification and those who hold a more revolutionary socialist vantage point—in the specific case of Burkina Faso, we have the vestiges of Thomas Sankara’s influence which still motivates certain strata of the people.

For brevity, we will pause our example here with the hope that it has done a part to *concretize what we mean by concrete analysis itself*.²

But, what is the point of this type of detailed study of an African nation? What is concrete analysis for? As US revolutionaries we do not undertake this task in order to arrive at the “correct line” on the Traoré government to argue online and make slogans. We do not discourage general study and curiosity, but the type of analysis which produces real practical knowledge and leads us towards revolution is always oriented towards *particular* problems. Abstract knowledge may be useful one day, but it is no substitute for the cultivation of concrete knowledge on the part of the organization as a whole. The example of Burkina Faso is concrete for ACTA because we have made connections with organizations in Burkina Faso who are actually navigating the present conditions of the class struggle. By understanding these forces concretely, we can, firstly, know the real interconnections imperialism has given. In other words, we can locate ourselves in relation to Burkina and understand the *limits* of this relation.³

² We suggest reviewing the work of Amílcar Cabral for examples of concrete analysis in a different African context. In particular, *The Struggle In Guinea. The Facts About Portugal's African Colonies* is also exemplary, it is written under the pseudonym Abel Djassi.

³ An example of one such limit is that ACTA currently has no concrete way to stop the US military if it wanted to intervene in Burkina’s current trajectory. A more immediate limit is that ACTA members have yet to visit Ouagadougou and learn from the everyday activity in Burkina Faso. Nevertheless, these limits, once explored, conceal the path to

Secondly and much more consequentially, with an understanding of our relation and its limits, we can attempt to transform these relations by overcoming these limits. We are revolutionary socialists and we desire to act in ways which strengthen the oppressed, the international working class. In this case, that is through its subsections in both the US and Burkina Faso. As far as we're concerned, figuring out how to do this—*always concretely*—is the essential purpose of political organization as such.

Our connection is with a small school in the capital city, Ouagadougou, called the Centre Thomas Sankara. The organizers of the school are the teachers, they are called *sofas*, and they work with kids of elementary, middle and high school ages. The sofas are pan-African socialists and so they are engaged primarily in raising and spreading revolutionary consciousness among the young generation of Burkinabé. So the Centre is a place where kids can go to learn about revolutionary history in Africa and throughout the colonized world, as well as study directly the writing and speeches of Thomas Sankara, Amílcar Cabral, Kwame Nkrumah, and Samora Machel, etc. Most significantly, they are in the early stages of reviving Sankara's *Young Pioneer* program.

ACTA's role in this is through the assistance with curriculum and learning materials at the Centre. Several of our members belong to an international organization called Cat's Cradle Tiger's Eye (CCTE), an organization of comrades who specialize in pedagogy and develop our practice by making links between different communist or pan-Africanist fighters around the world and helping them with their political education.

In Chicago, CCTE's emphasis on pedagogy is at the very center of ACTA, as well. Like the sofas in Ouagadougou, we believe that fortifying a revolutionary movement means raising up the next generation of fighters. Therefore, there is a special division in ACTA made of four members who are beginning to organize a youth wing called the *Young Questioners*. They focus entirely on developing youth education. The mechanism for this education is completely specific

strengthening the actual relationship that exists. On the other hand, no amount of theoretical elaboration of a purely theoretical connection to Burkina Faso will make the leap to an actual connection.

to the ACTA infrastructure and relies on the effective operation of ACTA as a whole.

For example, ACTA's main activity is mass work and it is focused (currently) in the West Side of Chicago.⁴ Extensive direct experience has revealed that the tenants inside of the apartment buildings throughout these areas include thousands of children and young people whose parents have extremely limited resources. Door after door, parents tell us that more than anything else they want better for their kids. Better houses, of course, but also better futures, better ways to spend their time, better ways to learn and stay active and safe. On the other hand, poverty traps them, it is hard for them to travel to other parts of town and violence drives a common fear of spending excessive amounts of time outdoors.

In short, the YQ group's central objective is to learn the conditions. They use the reports from ACTA's mass work for this, including their own direct investigation at mass work themselves. Then, they attempt to develop education that is appropriate for the specific, concrete situation. Currently, this takes the shape of monthly packages that get delivered (also by ACTA's forces) directly to the doors of families in the apartment buildings. Each month, the learning materials are themed around problems discovered by talking to the families. For example, a recent theme was around young people's attitudes toward making mistakes.

Each theme is also given a specific international emphasis, so learning always introduces kids to revolutionary movements in other parts of the world; India, Palestine, Cuba, and of course Burkina Faso. Because we are simultaneously helping organize education in Ouagadougou, this has allowed us to join efforts. We send material that is made with the kids here to Ouagadougou. Materials produced by the Young Pioneers at the Centre are shared with the kids here.

We can see in this example, how ACTA's *basis of organization* is a dynamic foundation on which new forms and frontiers of the struggle can be built, including international ones. It is the material basis that permits the young people in slums of the West Side to know the young people in the capital of Burkina Faso. Of course, this basis

⁴ See Chapter 7.

of organization greatly improves our ability to organize more traditional types of international solidarity, too; arranging fundraisers that address our comrades' direct needs, helping them promote their own efforts to a wider audience, raising awareness of their struggle, etc. It is self-evident that our link with Burkina Faso is very small and still insignificant in the grand scheme. We are not delusional about our level of influence on the development of the present Burkinabé revolution nor about their current interest in ours.

But, these examples should illustrate that ACTA is dead serious about being an internationalist organization⁵ and would never flatter itself for making slogans and releasing statements that profess "our line" on this or that movement in some other part of the world. We recognize that if there is ever going to be a real interconnection *of struggle*, it has to begin like this. Our dream is for the Centre in Ouagadougou to grow and gain influence, and we aim to help it however we can.

At the same time, we want ACTA's influence and power to grow until at some point both of our organizations are powerful and linked *in ways that go beyond our current limits of youth education and raising consciousness, and take us into the realm of revolutionary strategy*. Our tasks will always be to break through the limits concretely and rise to a higher stage of fighting. If this is possible—and we are certain it is—our organizations here and there (ACTA, CTS, CCTE) cannot be given up or allowed to fall into ruin, or else the interconnection of imperialism will remain unbreakable. It is our organization which provides the motive force for acting upon all the conclusions of our analysis. No matter the precision and critical integrity of such analyses, the weapon of criticism must pass over into the criticism of our weapons or else theory remains a dead letter.

As our comrades الحوت and B.S.Ph have written succinctly, "*The lack of clear and precise political analysis gives excuses to the people in the belly of the beast to evade their responsibility to humanity by seriously engaging in the struggle to destroy the imperialist system.*"

⁵ We have similar links under development with an organization in Panamá City, Panamá.

Chapter Three

ACTA organizes tenants because they are “in an economic relation with the capitalists that can be turned and leveraged against them.” But how?

There is one central weapon available to tenants—the rent strike. All other fighting tactics and strategies without exception are centered around this tactic. This follows from all that was laid down in Chapter One. Landlording is a method of capital accumulation. What is the source of the landlord’s money? Obviously, it is the tenants’ rent, money which he can only rely upon on the condition that the tenants do not have a pot to piss in. As long as our society allows the private acquisition of property, as long as it allows “the market” to solve the housing question rather than the self-conscious masses of people governing their own relations, there can be no chance of the tenants pissing in their own pots.

At a certain level, the most significant problem that revolutionaries face today is how to contend with a market that has proven time and time again that it is capable of reworking every human relation in its own image.¹ Every problem presented to

¹ Land rent, for example, predates the dawn of capitalism by centuries, yet today the relationship between tenant and landlord has been warped into something distinct from its past incarnations. Tenants no longer “belong” to superiors appointed by some higher

humanity becomes integrated and solved by the market in such a manner that market relations, that is, capitalist relations of production and circulation, prevail. Like overgrown honeysuckle, the only way to stop the expansion of this invasive overgrowth is to uproot it, but first we must cut away the chaotic thicket. The market operates at a level of abstraction above any given individual, but it does not exist on its own. There are still methods of overturning these relations before the moment of a clean break with capitalism arrives.

A strike, whether it involves labor or rent, is one such method. On the one hand, it is consistent with capital's fundamental laws, arising as a strategy only because market relations have so thoroughly permeated society. The internal logic of the strike is entirely contained within the domain of values and profits, and, taken as an isolated activity, does not break from the economic processes that occur within capitalism. On the other hand, it directly threatens those processes which sustain the expansion of the market, weakening them from within. Because of the strike's consistency with the rules of the game, strikes alone will never achieve the final break from capital, but this same consistency is what makes them possible at all. A revolutionary tenant organization is one that is capable of using the rent strike as part of a larger strategy to weaken capitalism at the economic level and prepare for confrontation on a higher, political level.

In accordance with this thesis, our task is to cause the so-called market to "decide" that it will no longer participate in solving the housing question. The rent strike achieves this by making capital accumulation from rent impossible. The rent strike is the direct stoppage of the accumulation process.² It is the only tactic available to

power and instead are pushed around by the whims of capitalist landlords looking for the highest return on investment. This transformation is a direct result of that rift between use and exchange engendered by capitalism, which allows landlords to almost entirely neglect the long term maintenance of his possessions in the name of short term profit—after all, the property's second existence as a thing of pure monetary value allows the landlord to liquidate and transform his holdings into something more immediately desirable much more easily than he would be able to the old fashioned way.

²The accumulation process is not limited to rent-seeking and therefore while we describe rent-seeking as *a* process of accumulation, we should not be misunderstood as saying that it is *the* process of accumulation. Rent-seeking is only one method among others for capitalists to plunder the working class. All methods, however, rest on the premise that

the inchoate movement that cuts at the rent relation itself, the relation which forms the basis of all landlord power. That is why we believe a socialist organization focused on tenants cannot justify any other type of war strategy without forfeiting its revolutionary character.

Despite its importance to the tenant movement, we have found that the rent strike is profoundly mystified and misunderstood. Allow us to clarify.

As all of the landlords, their journalists, their judges and lawyers and lobbyists (and some of our comrades, regretfully) love to remind us, the rent strike is not a legally protected act in Chicago. This means that striking can result in legal action against tenants on behalf of the landlord. The ultimate consequence which can be brought against tenants on strike is eviction. In modern times this penalty has taken on new significance. In addition to the violent removal of tenants from their home, evictions now appear on publicly accessible records of tenants, causing them increased difficulty in securing housing later.³

But this risk is not a static data point in the calculations we make as tenants weighing the dangers of going on strike, though it is often approached as such by organizers. Rent strikes are not risky in themselves. In reality, they carry a *degree* of risk and the risk of being evicted corresponds to the amount of economic leverage a tenant union has *in proportion to their landlord's total available capital*. Take as an example a landlord who has access to \$100 cash after deductions are made from his income due to rent held back in the strike. If it will cost him \$101 to pay a lawyer to evict the tenants, can he evict the tenants? Obviously he can't. He will have to come to the negotiating table or walk away from the building by force (seizure) or choice (sale or neglect). This theoretical demonstration shows a case where the rent strike is actually the opposite of dangerous, it is maximally safe from the perspective of the tenants' objectives, which are at the very

we've described: the dispossession of the majority from the means of production and means of life and the corresponding "dark side" of this reality—the concentration of wealth in the hands of a minority circle of capitalists, the masters of society.

³ It should be remembered that this difficulty stems, always, from the fact that the guardians standing at the doors of our houses are landlords, whose property *rights* arbitrarily pupate into the *power* to take away the right of others to use it.

least to stay in their homes. We conclude from this that the danger of the rent strike is not entirely determined by factors that are external to us, but also by factors that we can set in motion ourselves.

The problem then is that in practice there are few situations wherein a landlord's portfolio is of a vulnerable size relative to the size of the tenant union's capabilities to hold rent. If the landlord is large, like so many landlords are in Chicago, the union must also be large. In fact, as the size of the landlord's portfolio increases, the relative proportion of the union should also increase because as a capitalist accumulates, his resources tend to multiply and diversify. This means that his profits in rent can not only be reinvested into new apartments, they can go into other types of investments that provide him income which the rent strike cannot leverage. These incomes can ultimately serve him as a war chest and fund his assault on the tenant union.

Large landlords must be fought by large unions. Unfortunately the inverse is not necessarily true. Small landlords might be multimillionaires in other industries and merely dabble in real estate for a little spending money. It is generally easier to leverage a greater number of units relative to the small landlord's entire portfolio, but this does not necessarily mean that those forces will be strong *relative to his total capital*. In this instance, the petty real estate portfolio of the small landlord is only the sheep's wool disguising the wolf, who can wage war without much personal difficulty strengthened by capital hidden from our view.

While economic proportions can theoretically be determined with mathematical precision, there is a crucial gap between what is possible to determine and what can be determined realistically. The landlord's financial standing can at best only be approximated. This is all to say that although the particular risk taken by any striking union against their landlord *can* be estimated, and although the risk always varies with the proportion of units represented by the union relative to the total units in the landlord's possession, achieving favorable proportions with any consistency is rare at this stage in the tenant union movement. Therefore, rent strikes are, generally speaking, a risky endeavor right now.

But, to stop the analysis of the rent strike here, at the level of

immediate tactical questions would leave us with only a surface level understanding of the rent strike's significance. For ACTA the technical considerations of landlord-tenant conflict are only one side of a revolutionary strategy. A more complete strategy requires understanding the process by which capital reproduces itself, that is, via cycles of accumulation. This understanding is cultivated with an eye toward derailing this reproductive process.

The object of our strategic investigations, capitalism, remains an abstraction. "The capitalist system" is not a thing which can be poked and prodded except in the confines of our imagination. We cannot take hold of it, much less smash it as we could a glass tumbler.

All that can be smashed *in fact* are individual capitals that rest on the private ownership of *specific* property. This property will have *concrete* ties to a source of exploitation that give rise to a *concrete* accumulation of capital in the hands of a real owner. The specific "cycle" of accumulation (i.e. the capitalist's investment-return-investment+ process) in turn contributes to the average profitability of that particular branch of industry. Every branch of industry is related to all others through this average profitability of capital investment. A decrease in the profitability of one sector causes new investment to flow towards the more profitable branches. As a result, a change in the average profitability of a branch regulates not only the concentration of an individual's capital (i.e. his decision to continually reinvest his profits back into the same branch or not), but also the entry and exit of competitors and their sums of capital to and from this branch. Competition establishes the basis for the possibility of centralization of capital in a given branch. In our case, we are dealing with the real estate sector.

A revolutionary tenant organization should strive to destabilize the conditions of profitability in real estate. As we saw in chapter one, by making *lesser* profit *harder* to come by in a competitive environment, it will progressively corrode the possibility for, first, small scale landlords (the "mom and pops") and, next, the medium sized landlords to survive, eventually forcing their exit from the field, either by ruin or by the search for greener pastures. Their properties will be destined for centralization under the control of larger, more heavily armored investors. At the same time as housing centralizes

and approaches conditions of monopoly, the tenant-unions will be centralizing as their own opposing force,⁴ setting the stage for a much simplified and direct showdown: the masses of tenants on one side and the landlord giants on the other. At this point, the state will have no choice but to intervene in the crisis, and our struggle will increasingly take on a more *political* character.

Our strategy has to be devised at this level but this does not mean that our strategy should turn its back on any isolated landlord-tenant conflicts and cast its eyes on the abstract concept of the *real estate industry* and capital in general. Our strategy needs to engage with these *real movements* in order to tie the concrete but isolated landlord-tenant fights together. The individual fights must be conducted in a way that always sharpens the broader movement against its counterpart, the broader movement of capital.

What does this mean for our strategy today, practically speaking?

In proverbial terms, “*You’ve got to pay some agony for the ecstasy.*” We are going to lose battles in the course of trying to win the war. To put that into its properly dialectical terms: lost rent strikes *will* chip the armor of capital and begin the process of corroding the profitability of the real estate sector.⁵

Plainly, any rent strike which ACTA can manage to organize today faces great odds. But properly executed, each strike will come at a non-trivial cost to any landlord who has the misfortune of running into us. For example, the landlord’s lost rent (even if he recuperates some or all of it in the end through negotiations with the union⁶),

⁴ See Chapters 6, 7, 8.

⁵ See Chapter 8 for more on the connection between battles and the war.

⁶ Landlords, who are essentially just investors, pay attention to something known as the ‘time value of money.’ This is a financialized version of the proverb that teaches us that one bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Financiers attempt to quantify this value of birds today versus the value of birds tomorrow, and they do, with operations like discounting and swaps. Insofar as the effects of the “time value” of rent money can be actually felt over the duration of a rent strike, a rent strike lowers the landlord’s rate of profit.

On the other hand, if this is all bullshit, and the landlords are making things up, it is clear that the preaching of money-dealers is very influential on the simple mind of the landlord and leads them to the conclusion that time lost without rent, even if it is all recovered in the end, has cost them. That is to say, it shouldn’t be taken for granted that the time value of money is relevant as a force in a rent strike. But in the case that it’s not, if nothing else, the fetishism about money as a thing that can magically increase or

combined with his legal fees and all of the various expenses accrued on account of the extra work necessary to manage a tenant rebellion, will objectively lower his profitability below what it otherwise would have been. This is true *even if the struggle ultimately results in the tenants' displacement*. At the same time every strike, win or lose, has the potential to raise the general level of struggle in the movement, acting as a school for tenants.

But it is not enough to mechanically assume that all organizing experience leads to a development of consciousness or an intensified will to fight, much less a social movement incorporating those individuals. If this were true, the disconnected, isolated face-offs between tenants and landlords would have compounded into a flood of activity long ago. In addition to the fighting itself, the other necessary component for the struggle to act as a school is some structure to ensure connection and continuity. If the strike is successful, there must be a guiding force to direct energy to the other battles occurring in the city. If the strike is defeated, there must be some organization to both protect the tenants and offer them an alternative to despair. A defeat can be instructive to an organization with a definite strategy, but to an isolated union of tenants it is, more often than not, fatal. The more those tenants are integrated into the larger organizational momentum, the more likely their setback does not spell the end. "Losing the battle but winning the war" is only possible if there is a broader war to speak of—and an organization to conduct it.

As we have seen above, a proportional increase in the number of tenants *organized as the working class* establishes the conditions which improve the odds for fighting tenants and thus the conditions under which we can expect to regularly win rent strikes. The number of organized tenants can grow by no other means than by regularly incorporating new tenants into the struggle. At present, ACTA's cardinal tasks are two.

The first is to start hacking at and clearing away the first layer of this "chaotic thicket," i.e. those landlords who are estimated

decrease in quantity is one of the landlord's superstitions that provides the rent strikers convenient ideological leverage.

confidently to be of a scale that puts our organization—*understood at its current level of power to organize tenant unions*—in favorable, proportional conditions. Local petty landlords, “mom and pops,” owners with 3-5 properties or 100-200 total units, etc.

The second is to find and develop tenants who are lean, mean, fighting machines.⁷ Tenant soldiers, who are not afraid of the high levels of risk that are characteristic of the tenant movement during this early stage. It is in these dawning days of the war, when our forces are still small and inexperienced that the fighting is most dangerous. The good news is the task of recruitment is made much easier for us by the objective conditions of the class struggle today, which send tenants by the dozens into our field of activity. This is a consequence of the current intensity of landlord terror. At the time of writing, two tenant unions are on rent strike against great odds because they simply had no other options.

ACTA's role can be none other than to “prepare to lose, fight to win.” This requires our emphasis to be on ideological development. The school of the rent strike needs its teachers. To the graduates of this school, defeat is only a temporary break before they “redeploy”, willing and eager to continue the fight. This level of commitment requires ACTA to establish deep levels of trust and respect with every tenant we come into contact with. If we are successful in our role, the process of organizing their struggle will teach them that all isolated skirmishes are only tiny scenes belonging to a great worldwide drama which we are writing together.

We've got to pay some agony for the ecstasy. The rent strikes that lose but chip away at landlord power belong to the period of tenant spring. The struggle will only mature into tenant summer, the season which will see rent strikes that win and *blow away* landlordism entirely, when certain conditions arise, which we will now describe in more detail.

⁷ See Chapter 8.

Chapter Four

How can tenant organizing directly contribute to the revolution?

“A Marxist bases himself on the class struggle, and not on social peace.”

It is said that a revolution requires the right conditions. Conditions have to be revolutionary in an objective way. This means that the economic conditions have to be ripe for a change, like a prepared fruit, as a consequence of the contradictions inherent to the economic system *in combination with the class struggle*. On the other hand, conditions need to be right in a subjective way. This means that the strugglers need to be conscious of the need and possibility for a change, organized *self-consciously* and prepared to seize the opportunities to both grow the fruit and pick the fruit.

Objectively, by the simple act of fighting a landlord, to some degree a tenant union disables the landlord's way of making money *easily*. A tenant union that makes economic struggle their priority not only makes profit harder to come by, *it makes the profit margin smaller*. In other words, pitted against a tenant union that prioritizes economic struggle, landlords have to work harder for less. ACTA's objective is to raise the number of tenant unions fighting landlords on

the principle of economic struggle. In other words, we want 10 tenant unions fighting 10 landlords today. Tomorrow we want 30 tenant unions fighting 15 landlords. As we have argued above, it should not be possible to bring capital into the branch of real estate without having to contend with a tenant union driving down the rate of return.

These are the conditions that will objectively transform real estate from a safe branch of capital investment into one with constantly growing risks. As the expected rate of profit falls, capitalists will be turned away from real estate in increasing numbers. Private investment has been the state's go-to method for managing the housing problem since the earliest days of the nation, but it will begin to fail, and the people's need for housing will press on the state with increasing urgency. The old method will dissipate like smoke in the eyes of the legislators.

If capital flight ensues in the real estate industry, the first thing to expect is the centralization of capital. In other words larger landlords will begin monopolizing the rental market. The largest and most powerful investment firms will be the only ones heavy duty enough to tolerate the precarious conditions of the money market. Worried sick about lending to landlords whose promises to pay are continually broken, banks will hike interest rates, further driving down the profitability of the sector. These are all tendencies of the free market, but here they are manipulated by the cooperation of masses of *organized* tenants. All of the familiar powers of price-fixing¹ will affect

¹Price-fixing is when companies in monopoly positions in their market make agreements to set prices, rather than compete with one another. Theoretically, the removal of competition should mean that prices stay idle, rather than move. The implication is that competition should work to move prices lower, benefiting consumers. In reality, there's no reason cartels can't raise prices. By fixing prices, one or several companies are exercising their dictatorship over the means of production and society.

In the early years of this century, for example, a cartel of tech companies such as Hitachi, Samsung, Sharp, Epson and others were caught fixing the prices on LCD screens for televisions and computers. From the sentencing memorandum filed in the California courts: "...The conspiracy's breadth and its pernicious effect can hardly be overstated. The conspirators sold \$71.9 billion in price-fixed panels worldwide. Even conservatively estimated, the conspirators sold \$23.5 billion—AUO [AU Optronics Corp.] alone sold \$2.34 billion—in price-fixed panels destined for the United States. The conspiracy particularly targeted the United States and its high-tech companies...But the harm extended beyond these pillars of America's high-tech economy. The conspiracy affected

the price of rent in the medium-term, but tenants will no longer be defenceless against landlord extortion. A unified tenant organization capable of reaching this point will be ready to force a political crisis between the masses of tenants, the landlord monopolies, and the state.²

It should go without saying that this is only the most general shape of the movement to come. In reality, there will be no such clean progression of conditions. The movement will go in erratic bursts, steps forward, steps backward and to the side. These events represent a practical possibility worthy of pursuing strategically—a clear end which can be appraised over the course of actual events. As we will argue, navigating this type of zig-zagging is precisely the type of concrete activity that necessitates a single, centralized organization.

By expanding in a centralized way, we will move beyond the limits of spontaneous and isolated *defensive* battles between landlords and tenants. This type of struggle arises constantly due to a landlord's negligence or abuses of power that oppresses the tenants and violates their rights. In response, tenants attempt merely to reassert their rights. Decades of this lullaby have rocked the tenant movement to sleep. The economic weapon must wake it up. Without it these legalistic scraps and squabbles will always end—usually in defeat for

every family, school, business, charity, and government agency that paid more to purchase notebook computers, computer monitors, and LCD televisions..."

The lawsuit resulted in about \$900 million worth of fines leveled against the companies by the US government using the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890 as their legal basis. History is riddled with examples of capitalist cartels engaged in these kinds of games. The LCD screen cartel should have known better, if there is one thing this country will not tolerate it is expensive televisions.

In passing, it is worth pondering why it is that landlords are free to compete but, alas, the rent just keeps going up. It is also worth conceptualizing trade union activity when it comes to collective bargaining, for instance, as price-fixing of the price of labor-power, or tenant union activity of the same character as price-fixing of the price of rent. If the capitalists are happy to collude and conspire to the detriment of the consumers of their products, we should be happy to collude and conspire to the detriment of the consumers of ours.

² We take it for granted that a movement isolated in one city has significant limitations from the perspective described here. Obviously, capital is not local, it is international. We have already discussed our efforts on the international plane (Chapter 2). There are also national organizations in development that are attempting to link the North American cities, most familiar are the Autonomous Tenant Union Network (ATUN) and the Tenant Union Federation (TUF). ACTA does not presently belong to either organization.

the tenants—and “peace” will return until somewhere else in the city a conflict arises again under circumstances that haven’t changed. When tenants do win some sort of codified victory, the following period of peace and quiet serves only to lower our guard, freeing landlords to erode the victory and sharpen their methods of oppression.³

This cycle of disjointed peace-followed-by-skirmish-followed-by-peace must be broken and replaced with a continuously expanding but strategically centralized war of attrition against landlords. This is to say that the struggle of the working class against capitalists must be fought with the understanding that victory in this war is the only way to definitively solve the puzzle of the “housing crisis.” As long as capital continues to find a working class that becomes stupid with affection toward the brilliance of “democracy” every time they get handed a new right to housing, this crisis will be inevitable and permanent.⁴ That magical fountain of profit—a working class with pacifist tendencies—will never stop producing its opposite: an easy war that makes landlords out of enterprising capitalists as if it were an assembly line. Against this, ACTA understands its double task described in the previous chapter to be

³The nationwide movement in the 80s to introduce a Tenant Bill of Rights in cities across America was fought tooth and nail by landlords and realtor associations. In Chicago the convergence of electoral and tenant forces reached its zenith when Alderman David Orr passed the Residential Landlord-Tenant Ordinance (RLTO). When the storm clouds dissipated, landlords set to work making up their lost ground. Today the most “revolutionary” parts of the legislation, the rights to repair and deduct, rent withholding, and non-retaliation are widely understood to exist only on paper. The section which entitles tenants to interest on their security deposit has caused the most headache for absentminded landlords. As a result, landlords now charge “one-time move in fees”. Today, the most “pro-tenant legislation in America” weighs far heavier on tenants than landlords.

⁴A brief word of contempt is owed to that variety of leftist who has proudly put on the hat of “Left-NIMBY” and has allowed themselves to be consumed by back and forth pissing and moaning with their ideological opponents. The individuals on both sides of these arguments amount to the same thing, people who have very special ideas about policy. The socialists among them can be credited for recognizing the simplicity of the fact that the housing crisis has nothing to do with supply and demand and has everything to do with class society, but it is an indictment of the working-class movement that these people are tied up with their debate hobbies and not singularly focused on training tenants in the art of war. Do they forget that their policies are only as good as the power they have to enforce them?

rooted in the principle of raising the *general* level of *class* conflict between tenants (the workers) and landlords (the capitalists). In other words, we need to prevent peace and deepen the state of war between tenants and landlords.

This principle can be summarized like this: *ACTA aims to raise the general level of class conflict (capitalist landlords vs. working class tenants) to its apex.*

At first glance it might appear needlessly provocative to read about our desire for “war,” but what we mean by war needs only to be understood in its context. We are talking about class struggle in that old familiar way. Perhaps it goes without saying that for everything written above to develop, a certain type of revolutionary consciousness will need to develop in tenants as well. ACTA believes that this consciousness can only form in the process of organizing the class struggle itself. The objective conditions of that struggle will not advance if organizations of the working class watch the struggle from the sidelines, or even worse, fail to form altogether. But neither will the enthusiastic participation of the working class occur automatically without the influence of clear, accountable, revolutionary leadership.

Labor unions are a useful comparison here. In the long history of labor unions, capitalists have done everything they can to secure “labor peace.” This so-called peace is always defined from their point of view because they are the class that rules over the means of production and, therefore, over society. Peace means offering concessions to the workers’ unions in such a way as to pacify them and keep them working without apocalyptically disturbing the bosses’ ability to make profits. Over time, the trade union leaders took these concessions and progressively dismantled the working class’ power and drive to fight. Most consequentially, when they haven’t completely forfeited it, the unions have consistently mutilated their ability to go on strike.⁵

The consequences have been disastrous. Here are some examples

⁵ A canonical example of trade unions relinquishing the legal right to strike is the infamous “Treaty Of Detroit,” a contract negotiated in 1950 between General Motors and the United Auto Workers under the leadership of Walter Reuther. This contract signed away the right of the workers to even *bargain* over certain issues.

of working class oppression that the labor unions nearly unanimously have no apparent interest in confronting, because they have accepted the capitalists' vision of "peace":

- While the wage-scale has gone up for some sections of the working class, there still remains a racist and segregated division of labor that confines black and latino workers to a lower wage scale than white workers, keeping them in the most menial, degrading, precarious and dangerous types of jobs, if not unemployed outright.
- Automation is eliminating jobs and making the labor process increasingly dull and dehumanizing for the ones who are spared.
- The classic manufacturing industries and the new tech industries continue to pollute and poison the planet, changing the climate in a way that is killing more and more people, animals and plants each day, gravely threatening the future of our children.
- Huge capitalist companies continue to exploit and oppress the people of Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Latin America, keeping dozens of nations in these regions poor and underdeveloped. The American military continues to wage hot and cold wars in every corner of the globe to ensure that this remains possible indefinitely.

We can add to this, coincidentally, that the cost of living continues to rise, in general. Most emblematic of this is the price of securing housing.⁶ The weakness of the workers movement and its failure to decisively defeat capitalist profiteers has brought us to this point. If you're asking yourself, "Does ACTA blame the 'housing crisis' on the workers movement?" Our answer is unequivocal: yes! It has

⁶ Although the Consumer Price Index used to measure inflation strategically omits housing prices, it is evident to every tenant that rent is a constantly increasing burden. In fact, every rise in "property values" leads inevitably to an increase in rent. At the same time, rent increases signify more potential profit and drive the property values even higher. Tenants pay the price when homeowners and landlords see their investments grow. It is in the name of homeowners and landlords that rents are constantly pushed higher.

done so by conceding to what the capitalist class means by “peace,” taking bribes to weaken the fighting power of the working class.

The working class has the power to change all of this *as organized workers*, but the way workers are currently organized—if we can even call it that—deters it. The vigor and consciousness of the North American worker has atrophied as a consequence of years of enfeebling “peace”. We have become passive, self-interested, individualistic, politically uneducated, incurious, uncreative and frail in the face of adversity. Workers rarely engage in extended strikes anymore. The ratio of organized workers to workers without unions has fallen in absolute terms. This reality betrays a broken understanding of the basic structure of capitalist society among the leadership of the once powerful unions. They neglect the central historical problem that constrains the working people in monotony and suffering. *The seizure of the means of production*—the means of life itself—no longer factors into the strategy of union leadership who instead focus on advancing their own careers providing palliative care for the decrepit workers movement.

As tenants, our organized power cannot strike those capitalists at the center of production as directly as workers once could. Nevertheless, there are other advantages to be found in striking at the other critical organ of capitalism. In order to summon every potential reserve of power at our disposal, ACTA intends to avoid the mistakes of the workers organizations. The greatest of those mistakes can be preempted by establishing a tenant organization on different foundations, that is, on permanently revolutionary foundations. These foundations *cannot* be laid by, first, making an abstract analysis of the history of the trade union movement and, once that is completed, attempting to prescribe alternative principles for our movement based on their mistakes.

But this is counterintuitive. Didn’t we just say we wanted to “learn from their mistakes?”

All the specific tasks of our organization arise from a single, general aim. This aim is to retain our revolutionary orientation all the way to the revolution. History teaches us nothing definitive about how to accomplish this. In fact, it is the reverse: our efforts toward building the revolution teach us about our history. For example, we

have no abstractly valid basis to say that the trade unions forfeiting striking power was a mistake. It is our present *concrete activity* that has shown to us the actual and potential power of the strike. With this experience, we produce concrete analysis of our conditions and a war strategy that prioritizes economic struggle centralized around the strike. Looking to the past and seeing all of the defeats that occurred in the absence of deploying the strike, we make our conclusions about history. It is mysticism to then turn around and say that it is history which teaches the principle of the strike. History has only provided us the material to understand the workings of the strike. Only our own practice teaches us the true significance of this weapon. Practice is the criterion of truth.

Under no circumstances will we find ourselves in the conditions of the past. Just as soon as we yell out *deja vu*, we will discover that the past which appears to have reproduced itself before our eyes lacks exactly this—the cry of *deja vu*. The conditions determining what is possible do not repeat themselves and, therefore, the risk of making the exact same mistakes is a phantom of our imaginations. Our conditions are our own. Our problems will be our own to solve. We are standing in a river, the question is not whether we are standing in the same river a second time—it is whether we can navigate *our own* river safely to the other side. ACTA aspires to become an organization capable of navigating these difficulties and it measures itself as being up to the task.

We take the attitude of being active creators of our world and therefore instruments of its change. This calls for an organization capable of surviving drastic changes without losing focus on our general aim of revolution. As part of the world, we simultaneously change ourselves through our own activity. The strict division in thought between the categories of objectivity and subjectivity collapses into a dialectical spiral. Bringing the objective conditions of revolution into being will not be a smooth or steady process, as we have already alluded to, and much of the pain that may come with this experience will be the pain of bringing ourselves into existence again and again.⁷

⁷ Paulo Freire has repeatedly emphasized the necessity of recreating the self, an often painful process. “Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman

Subjectively, ACTA must *learn to* adapt its activity to the criterion of revolutionary struggle, *hasta la victoria de la revolución siempre*. This necessarily means to repeatedly cast our past-selves into the fires of self-criticism. No achievement is exempt from the requirement of self-criticism. We can never rest on our laurels or grow complacent when we could be pushing forwards towards our ultimate aim. It is crucial that we keep in check our satisfaction with our own achievements at every stage. This is all we mean when we talk about the necessary rejection of “peace.” We have every intention to keep the struggle directly in front of us; never avoiding it, never attempting to “leap over” or go around it. *Toward the struggle, always.*

Concretely, this revolutionary orientation is made in two ways. The first and the most important is the constant construction of the central organization, which, as we have said, enables the ongoing escalation of building struggles beyond individual conflicts. The second is by way of a dogged politicization of that activity as it occurs. We begin to talk about revolution and socialism with tenants as soon as it is prudent. But we also know that this kind of abstract jargoneering is useless and can even be detrimental to short- and long-term ambitions without an intricate and *specific* kind of education that takes seriously the task of bringing individuals from point A (non-revolutionary) to point Z (revolutionary).

For example, one of the aforementioned unions that is on rent strike at the time of writing this is entirely Mexican. We noticed right away that the unionists speak with clear pride in their national history and identity. So we looked for ways to explore how their own activity might belong to a lineage that they had already embraced. Initially, we made the obvious comparison with the land struggles during the revolutionary period in Mexico because there were familiar classes in conflict; peasants (which we associated with tenants), landlords, capitalists, etc. At our weekly meetings, we set time aside for political education, and we consistently attempted to bring this content into the learning, in one way or another. After a couple months of this, we began to see the unionists making these associations independently with one another, without us prompting them.

In the union's chat, for example, one day, a tenant shared an image of a brigade of *soldaderas* and encouraged her neighbors to remember what they are made of and where they come from. While this was very motivating to see, it would not be terribly remarkable in and of itself. For us, however, the event revealed a new level at which education could now be focused. We recognize that an appreciation for history is one thing, but the application of revolutionary ideas into our actual behavior is another. At the following meeting, we decided to focus on Emiliano Zapata, while also wanting to draw the focus out to a higher level by linking the Mexican Revolution to an explicitly socialist revolution, in order to move beyond what might be understood as a primarily nationalist struggle toward something that specifically used concepts like the workers' organization of society, division of labor, exploitation, proletarians, the bourgeoisie, etc. We also anticipate a near future where the basic organizational problems of running their union will need to be met with increasing seriousness, and we suspect that we can use Lenin to help with some of this.

All of the above was made possible as material for education by the historical fact that Lenin wrote favorably of the prospects of the Mexican Revolution and Zapata had written enthusiastically about the similarities between the Russian and Mexican revolutions. We used these writings to enter into a small "curriculum" that we created *specifically* for the tenants in the union to investigate the concepts above. These are not surface level connections or disconnected history lessons. History is always examined in order to elevate the significance of the present struggle, as it presents itself concretely. The ongoing strike, an immediate instance of class struggle, both provided the opportunity to reflect on history, make judgements about it and imbue it with a living significance. The tenants are able to see their own struggle as part of a larger picture. It should go without saying that the work of politicization is never complete, and the present ideological level at any given time is nothing but a limit to go beyond.

These are the subjective conditions of the revolution we aim to create. These are the conditions *of the development* of more class-conscious, more revolutionary fighters who are organized ever more

impeccably—the conditions of all of this *in motion*. The present members of ACTA recognize the need to continue rising indefinitely to this aspiration. As organizers with this outlook, we need to earn the mantle of leadership. Experience shows us every day that this forward march towards revolution will continue as long as we join tenants *authentically* in the mutually humanizing act of becoming organized, self-conscious participants in the class-struggle; fighters who believe that what is at stake is nothing less than the future of humankind.

Chapter Five

If “there still remains a racist and segregated division of labor,” it follows that there is a racist and segregated distribution of housing. How does ACTA account for this?

“In this world one thing alone retains its links with reality and is thus able to transmit the changes in reality and provide the ballast of a concrete element to this delusory system. This one thing is wages.”

Though now in decline, the United States has been the leading empire in the world since the end of World War Two. As such, most corners of the earth have felt the wrath of our capitalists and their military. Here inside the empire, we have all reaped the benefits, although the distribution of the rewards of imperialism is not equal. ACTA’s horizon is not to redistribute these rewards within our borders, we aim to tear out the root of imperialism. Nevertheless, the unequal effects of imperialism are concrete and influence the conditions of our struggle.

It is a highly unfortunate reality that our workers movement has been party to the plunder of the working classes in the other parts of the world. This is a shame and embarrassment. The high wages

enjoyed by our workers are not arbitrary, they are concessions won by class struggle *waged in the context of the international division of labor*. Because all productive activity is connected materially and socially yet at the same time privately owned, it appears that there *could be* no other outcome from the US working class' demands for higher wages than for the owners of the means of production to simply shift their sources of profit from one locale in the division of labor to another, avoiding any significant or catastrophic decline in their profits.

However, because our labor unions have been stripped of their revolutionary orientation, the glow of cheap devices illuminates the satisfied faces of our narrow-minded "organized" workers. This has taken the pressure off capital. A once worthy opponent has bowed out of the ring. Put very simply, the workers could be using their key weapon, strikes, to force the hand of capitalists to do just about anything they can imagine. For example, US and Canadian workers could struggle to close copper mines in Panamá. The workers could struggle to raise wages in African countries. It is a stomach-turning fact that what is happening in Palestine as we write this would not be happening if workers throughout the western countries belonged to revolutionary rather than reactionary unions.¹ Instead, our bourgeois trade union leaders gave away the workers' legal power to strike as soon as the capitalists flashed cash bribes in their faces.

All of these facts notwithstanding, this is not a well-rounded or acceptable perspective. It has to be recognized that the capitalists organize and wage class struggle in ways that go beyond the undue powers that accompany their ownership of the means of production and thus give them dictatorial reign over, for example, the organization of the productive process in factories and offices. They are not indifferent obstacles to working class power. They attack worker organizations in the struggle over the workers' demands on

¹ This should not be conflated with that myopic notion of those socialists who lament the absence of an "israeli workers movement" bolstering the left wing in an apartheid, oppressor state while upholding that state's legitimacy. We should also not be mistaken for exaggerating the role that our revolutionary workers movement could play, nor are we suggesting it could or should replace the guerrilla war as the center of resistance. Our regret is not that the "workers movement" of the west can't replace this armed struggle, but that our workers are not prepared to offer their weapon of true solidarity with the Palestinian guerrillas to augment the efforts to free Palestine.

their own oppressive terms. The history of capitalism is chock full of the most brutal and violent examples of repression against strikes, slow downs, walk outs, sabotage, factory occupations and every other kind of tactic the working masses have employed in the fight. Because the capitalists are also wedded with the state, they have the police, the national guard, the CIA, the FBI and the military more or less at their disposal. Not to mention the fact that their wealth allows them to contract and command private armed militias to surveil and suppress worker rebellions.² This has undoubtedly played a significant role in the dimming of the workers' revolutionary light. It is perfectly reasonable to assume that whatever concessions the bosses have made to the workers in the form of wage increases have been made because they amounted to less money than the costs of suppressing the workers' organizations.

Wages move in tango with the costs of living; at bottom, high wages are not the product of an abstract desire. The essential conditions of capitalism were rapidly established on American soil as soon as Europeans settled and colonized this place, and this meant the presence of both people who owned the means of production and people who owned³ nothing but their power to work. The ones who possessed nothing else were forced—by direct and legal violence in the case of slavery or by the supposedly neutral conditions of “free” society in the case of proletarians—to offer their labor-power to the people who owned the means of production at a price⁴ that is *always* conditioned by the relative negotiating power of the workers and

² See the Pinkertons.

³ Technically speaking, slaves did not own even their own labor-power. Their body possessed it, but their master owned it as his private property. This point belongs above the level of analysis that is occurring here, but we felt it was important to mention.

⁴ There is a common confusion around the question of whether or not the labor-power of southern slaves was paid for by the slavocracy. Without a bare minimum level of subsistence, no one can live, let alone work. Slaves were given their subsistence directly by their masters, however meager and in whatever form. Concretely, occasionally slaves kept their own small plot on the plantation for producing their own subsistence, whereas wage workers are given money to buy the same things. In any case, both the slave-driver and the boss provide subsistence to the worker from the pool of labor (or value) they have accumulated in the course of exploiting workers. Workers are always paid with the product of their own labor or, what amounts to the same thing, the labor of another exploited worker and, in this sense, no boss has ever paid a worker.

owners, but with a bottom limit determined by the absolute minimum consumption necessary for the workers to survive. This reality is the original source of *all* working class organization. The struggle for higher wages originates from this original condition of labor, the split between the owners of the plantations, factories, tools, and material, and those who have no tools but their own bodies.

Wages are the value of labor-power, expressed in price over time; i.e. "\$15 per hour." *The standard of living* is the collection of raw materials that are used by the laborer in the process of reproducing their labor-power, i.e. housing, food, clothing, education etc. Wages are determined by the values (and prices) of these standards of living. Wherever money mediates the relation between individuals and the products of their labor, wages and the standard of living form an inseparable unity.⁵

To return to the question at hand, the observant reader will see in this unity the essential inseparability of the question of wages from the question of rent. If we examine the division of labor and *hence the division of wages*, we find that different wages can imply nothing else but a different standard of living. It is obvious that a person's standard of living is *predicated* on the condition of their dwelling. High wage workers live in good houses in good neighborhoods, low wage workers live in slums. From houses and slums we arrive at the question of rent without difficulty, and of course we find our friend, the tenant, who just one moment ago was the worker.

Our interpretation of exploitation in capitalism is fundamentally Marxist. Exploitation corresponds with the amount of work a person is forced to do over and above the amount that would be necessary to provide for himself. To make a simplified explanation, say that if a person's wages are \$15 per hour, and he works for 8 hours every day, then he ostensibly requires \$120 per day to live. In order to have a reason to employ him, his boss must be able to sell the product of his labor for at least \$120. In this scenario, assuming normal conditions of the market, the boss would break even and the worker would have produced no surplus labor, no surplus value, and thus would not be

⁵This unity renders absurd those silly questions economists are always asking, such as, "Do high prices cause higher wages, or do high wages cause the inflation of prices?" Does inhaling come before or after exhaling?

exploited. But say the boss was able to sell the product of the worker's day of labor for \$130, pocketing \$10 for himself. That \$10, we call surplus value and the amount of time the worker spent that corresponds to the production of that value we call surplus labor. This is exploitation, simplified, in the Marxist sense.

It follows from this that whatever can be done to decrease the worker's wages relative to the amount of work that he does *increases* the degree of his exploitation. Obviously, if the worker's rent is low his wages can stay low. Low wages do not necessarily result in high rates of exploitation (because a low wage worker may be employed in a low productivity occupation), but exploitation is much more prolific among low wage workers precisely because it sets such a low threshold for his labor time to pass over from necessary to surplus labor time. There is therefore a natural correlation between low rents and high exploitation. What is being argued here is that low rents are the basis of low wages.⁶ Not, as is more commonly implied in orthodox economics, that low (or high) wages cause low (or high) rents.

⁶ Obviously, our answer to this is not that we should struggle to raise the rents in order to raise the price of labor power! No thank you. We'd like to imagine a *real transformation* for a change, and no longer preoccupy ourselves with wages, rent—value. We do not want to raise wages, we want to bring our nation's *qualitative* standards of living into decency, which means, to us, into harmony with all of the people of the world. That entails different things for different American people. People of European descent will need to lower their standards, while people of African and Latin American descent can raise theirs, generally speaking. Beyond this, it is then only a question about free time. In other words, it is a net good that the monetary and material costs of reproducing ourselves are kept low because this opens the door for mankind to pass its spare time in the pursuit of different experiences. But as long as the means of production are owned privately rather than socially, the surplus time of the masses of earth will be squandered in the production of more value.

Concomitantly, this condition establishes a (unequally distributed) perpetual rise in standards of living—as measured by consumption, not free time. This feedback loop compels the working classes to fight to keep themselves in chains, to the delight of capitalists everywhere.

Put in slightly different terms, if exploitation is the difference between work that is necessary for society and work that is surplus, that gap can be closed by a *decrease* in the duration of working time just as well as it can be done by an *increase* in the worker's level of consumption, as is typically the approach. This means nothing shy of eliminating the capitalist class in all its manifestations because surplus labor is performed under the dictatorship of capital and entrenched by a workers movement that has accepted high levels of consumption rather than free time as the measure of freedom.

However, what is experienced by the tenants of African and Latin American origin who pay relatively low rents is not what is experienced when other types of commodities are bought for low prices. The typical reason that prices fall (outside of market aberrations, including big swings in supply relative to demand) is from a systemic lowering in the costs of production. The typical pattern for achieving this revolves around some combination of increased productivity and/or an increase in the exploitation of labor via technological innovations or a prolongation of the working day by producers in competition. What a landlord sells for low rents is an adulterated product, not a product made with “improved” techniques. Adulteration is how a slumlord lowers his costs of production. A slum is an adulterated house.⁷

Let us shed our ambiguity: in our present conditions, low rents are desirable. What is not desirable are houses left in ruin, where rats crawl through baby cribs and piss leaks through collapsing ceilings onto the heads of poor tenants.⁸ In capitalism, low rent and slum quality housing are two sides of the same reality. Revolutionary tenant-unions will be in the position to enforce the ‘artificial’ collapse of the link between rent (exchange value) and quality (use-value). A tenant union can pull a landlord down contradictory paths, like

⁷“In London there are two sorts of bakers, the “full priced,” who sell bread at its full value, and the “undersellers,” who sell it under its value. The latter class comprises more than three-fourths of the total number of bakers...The undersellers, almost without exception, sell bread adulterated with alum, soap, pearl ashes, chalk, Derbyshire stone-dust, and such like agreeable nourishing and wholesome ingredients...Sir John Gordon stated before the committee of 1855, that “in consequence of these adulterations, the poor man, who lives on two pounds of bread a day, does not now get one fourth part of nourishing matter, let alone the deleterious effects on his health.” Tremenhare states...as the reason, why a very large part of the working class, although well aware of this adulteration, nevertheless accept the alum, stone-dust, etc, as part of their purchase: that it is for them “a matter of necessity to take from their baker or from the chandler’s shop, such bread as they choose to supply.” (Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I)

⁸ When we talk about housing conditions, we are talking about the oppression, degradation, and brutalization of the working class, not exploitation in the sense defined above. Insofar as we might struggle to leave rents untouched or even lower them, the value of labor power will follow, and thus the tenant union struggle does not directly combat exploitation. It is up to the workers organizations to similarly enforce a system-breaking strategy: to rip apart wages from the value of labor power while at the same time struggling to mandate that the capitalists do not make up the difference by the further exploitation, oppression, degradation and brutalization of the working classes elsewhere.

execution by quartering. It can demand the repair of a building at the same time as it can demand that the rent goes untouched. Specifically in the case of tenants organized in slums, it is exactly this kind of tampering with the 'logic' of capitalism that should be the focus of our strategy.⁹ This is the kind of strategy that will drive small-scale capital out of the sector and throw the "housing crisis" back in the faces of the state and the monopolies. It is also the kind of strategy that hinges upon the expansion of the struggle, requiring a leadership that maintains class-struggle as its infinite horizon, not "peace."

The inseparable wage-rent unity described above can only lead us to the perspective that the tenant struggle is the worker struggle. It is no different in essence than the trade union struggle. It is only different in form. The wage-rent unity, the connection between standard of living and labor-power is revealed in this. The extremity of the blunder made by the working-class movement by narrowing its focus to wages without recognizing their unity with the *composition of labor-power*, i.e. the factors necessary to restore the worker each day, is enormous. In effect the historical movement has brought wages and rent into contradiction by allowing wage gains to be captured by landlords under the banner of "market forces" without providing any leadership or instrument of struggle at the workers' homes. This short-sightedness is exemplary of the workers movement's

⁹ In the case of tenants in affluent neighborhoods, strategy based on system-breaking is also the order of the day. But different conditions require a different approach. Rents are high in these neighborhoods and this is reflected in the quality of the housing (certainly not without exception!). The white tenants should struggle to lower the rents while demanding that their conditions remain well-kept. The point is not to make a general strategy. The point is to indicate the general tendency that the struggle needs to follow to crush the dictatorship of landlords. Tenant unions are the only instruments capable of carrying out any strategy.

It goes without saying that tenants in the slums should fight to lower rents, too, because, while the prices they pay are relatively low, as a rule, rent composes a larger share of their wages in absolute terms than it does of the wages of tenants in fancy neighborhoods. In popular jargon, despite their lower rents, poor tenants are more "rent burdened" more prolifically than their well-to-do counterparts. For example, in West Garfield Park, 4 out of every 10 tenants give more than 50% of their wages to their landlord. In Logan Square, only 1 in 10 do such a thing. (American Community Survey, US Census). This is despite the fact that rent is \$1.42 a ft. in Garfield Park and \$2.19 a ft. in Logan Square. There is a division in the composition of labor-power that corresponds to the division of labor. Strategy needs to be specific to these divisions.

disinterest in keeping the entire slate of broader revolutionary political demands out of its range of vision.

As stated in the previous chapter, an obvious consequence of this trend is the housing crisis itself, born from the impotence of workers without the totalizing perspective that recognizes wages and the standard of living as *one*—not two opposite “relational” sides. If we want to remedy this impotence we must restore—or perhaps establish for the first time—an organized, practical movement (a struggle!) which understands *the composition of labor-power* in its proper place as an identity with *wages*. Labor-power, that weapon which workers sell to the capitalists is composed of *something*, gains its use-value from *something*, replenishes itself and emerges renewed each day from *something*—the given standards of living—accorded to the worker by his place in society. None play so great a role in this rejuvenation of human potential than the conditions of his dwelling,¹⁰ where his health is restored and replenished, where his sanity is maintained and his life is kept on track, all in order to continue working and living—to continue fighting. Housing is labor-power. The tenant struggle is the worker’s struggle for himself.

The prospects of struggle for the oppressed nations in the US, i.e. *African-Americans*, *Latin-Americans*, etc., are also based on the continued exploitation of the world. But imperialist exploitation is not automatic or static, nor is it enforced by the capitalist class without interference: *it is conditioned by the class struggle. The US working class bears responsibility in the imperialist set-up.* It must be self-conscious of this in its struggle to break that set-up. For example, if the African nation within the US is to develop and rise to political equality with the Europeans, as measured by the standard of living, this does not theoretically have to be subsidized by the further brutalization of the workers of Continental Africa or El Salvador. It can be subsidized by the landlords and, of course, the high wage workers in the US. It goes without saying that this could occur only on the condition that our working class leaves behind its narrow-mindedness and adopts a revolutionary point of view.

¹⁰ The sheer volume of scientific research that shows the intimate connection between the conditions of housing and a person’s health could fill a small library. The conclusions are indisputable.

It is self-evident that the international division of labor and the consequent divergence of wage scales and standards of living do not start at our nation's borders and extend outward to the rest of the world from our working class as a homogenous block. The divergence penetrates inward, shattering our own workers as well. From this perspective, revolutionary tenant organization is a crucial struggle for the national liberation movements within and without our country.¹¹ Racist segregation is the local product of our empire's organization and management of the labor process on a global scale. Segregation has always been studied primarily from the perspective of jobs and housing. The material basis of these paired intuitions (which are certainly correct) have previously gone unaccounted for and therefore their necessary innerconnection has remained unexamined. Our perspective corrects this. Jobs, housing, wages, rent, division of labor, standard of living, etc.—the individual categories of past research into segregation all slot into an order when we begin

¹¹ Historically speaking, there have been two periods of concentrated tenant organization in Chicago, both focused on the racially discriminatory nature of housing provision. The first period was during the Great Depression, when the Communist Party USA was highly focused on reversing evictions in the southside slums. Their unemployment councils can be thought of as historical antecedents to the modern tenant union. The second period was in the 60's during the frenzy of activity which surrounded MLK Jr.'s Freedom Movement when it came north, emblematic of this was the campaign known as the *Movement To End Slums*.

Needless to say, neither of these efforts ended the slums. It is not a coincidence, in our opinion, that for different reasons both movements did not center tenants in the struggle based on their economic relation to capital, though the Communists came closer. In the case of MLK, the freedom movement treated *housing* too abstractly. This allowed them to mix the tenant struggle with the struggle for black homeownership/landlordism against redlining while ignoring the concrete ways through which the interests of homeowners and tenants come into opposition in society dominated by *value*.

MLK was also focused on neighborhood integration to the exclusion of a concrete analysis capable of apprehending the laws of motion specific to property values in the context of segregation. Arghiri Emmanuel refers to this bluntly: "There are pleasant districts where whites live and unpleasant districts where blacks live. And yet everyone is free to live wherever he likes. What happens then? As soon as some blacks settle in a district, the whites leave it and go off to find somewhere else to live. As there is plenty of room elsewhere, whatever blacks may do, there will always be pleasant and unpleasant districts. It would be pointless to advise blacks to go and live in the pleasant districts. These were not chosen by whites because they are pleasant, they are pleasant because whites live there. If the blacks moved in they would cease to be pleasant!" (Emmanuel, *Unequal Exchange*)

from the Marxist position that socialized production is based on private property and proceed to uncover all of the consequences determined by this fact.

Segregation is a direct legacy of the colonization of Africa, the export of African labor-power to the American plantations and the crisis that was created within the class-struggle by the attempts to integrate the mass of ex-slaves into the division of labor beyond the confines of the agricultural South. There is no space here to recall the enormous wave of terror that has been inflicted on the black masses since their arrival in the cities at the hands of both white capital and white labor organized under self-interested leadership. Unfortunately, this terror wave has not ebbed much. Look no further than the division of Chicago into distinct white and black metropolises. We could talk similarly about the conditions of migrants from Latin America, especially Mexico.

To state the obvious, tenant unions need to be built to oppose landlord terror where it is most despotic and oppressive—specifically *racist*, i.e. in the slums—and the only thing standing in our way is our own disorganization.¹² But ACTA has every intention of rectifying this. The tenant movement is in its spring. It is a blank slate, free from the aristocracy of “organized” workers and their leaders dictating to anyone what the dreams of the working class may be. The field is wide open for revolutionary leadership and ACTA wants to earn it.

One of our guiding principles in these early days of the tenant union movement must be to combat the tendency—already apparent in numerous US tenant unions¹³—to build our struggle by copying and pasting the models given to us from the labor movement. This is a grave error, one that will be potentially impossible to reverse. Tenant unions do not combat exploitation directly because they do not manipulate the relationship between necessary and surplus labor time. But tenant unions are able to condition the boundaries of exploitation by fighting back against the degradation and oppression of workers and enforcing changes of the wage level by interceding in the determination of rent. It is up to the trade unions to go beyond their current limits, adopt a revolutionary point of view and to fuse

¹² See chapter 6.

¹³ See the Connecticut Tenants Union for the exemplary case.

their strategic scope with the organization of workers in their home life, i.e. as tenants. If we can manipulate the price of rent toward the destruction of landlords, it will be up to the workers organizations to make use of the simultaneous devaluation of labor power to press the attack on the bosses rather than allowing them to enact a corresponding decrease of wages. If rents increase in the course of the battle—as a consequence of struggling to improve the conditions of slum housing, for instance—the labor organizations must also ensure that the effects of this crush down on the shoulders of the capitalists rather than on our brothers and sisters in the international working class. Revolutionary leadership in combination with the weapon of the strike is indispensable on both sides of the struggle. Unless they are happy with their current trajectory toward the sewer of history, western trade unions are going to need to join us in the recognition that success in the tenant struggle will revitalize the field of battle for all the *workers* of the world.

Chapter Six

Instead of using coalitions, ACTA wants to fight a city-wide, “strategically centralized war of attrition against landlords.” Why?

This follows the revolutionary line. A revolution that eliminates private property is the minimum condition for soberly addressing the housing question for the entire population. But revolution is not something which occurs in a single decisive moment; it is a process. An organization can only make concrete steps toward what *it* views as the climax of the class struggle according to *its own* concrete analysis of the concrete situation.

Some working definitions are in order for this chapter. What we mean by ‘tenant organization’ is any group like ACTA: these organizations attempt to organize tenants *specifically and exclusively into unions*. What we mean by ‘housing justice organization’ is any group like One Northside or Pilsen Alliance: these organizations might work to improve the material conditions of tenants occasionally but they might also work in defense of the interests of homeowners and they typically also include other broader initiatives around things like education, youth empowerment and violence prevention. What we mean by ‘coalition’ is any group like Lift The Ban or its chief carrier, the Chicago Housing Justice Coalition: These

are organizations of organizations, so to speak; they are *assemblies* of the two types of groups listed above. Coalitions can also include individual politicians, like aldermen.

An organization or a coalition that has as an *ultimate* objective something shy of the socialist revolution, for example Lift The Ban (LTB), is a reformist project *from our perspective as revolutionary socialists*. Our intention is not to make a point about the legitimacy of the effort to lift the ban on rent control in and of itself—we are making a point about the *disorganization of the movement*. Under such conditions of disorganization, the timeless debate between reform and revolution as two commensurable paths which we must choose between is right at home. It is no surprise that these conditions lead organizers to elevate a particular method or even individual tactics to the level of the total struggle. The final aim of LTB is stated in its name. Its objectives are pursued independently of the movement as a whole, and therefore all other organizations which are also strategically independent can do nothing but react according to whether LTB's plans at any given time contradict or harmonize with theirs. This purely external connection is similar to that kind of anarchy that prevails in the market.

Consequently, activity of individuals in their effort to lift the ban on rent control has no organic existence *inside* of the movement. Because it is imposed on the revolution by organizers from without, it cannot assume its proper place in the strategy of the revolution. Once again, let this not be misunderstood. This is not a preposterous claim that ACTA is somehow *actually* in the revolution, while everyone else is not. We do believe we are actually in the revolution, but if we were to flip the perspective, the organizers central to LTB might be saying the same things about themselves that we do (as unlikely as that seems). If so, they might well say the same things about ACTA that we're saying about them. This is to say that they do not know our plans and cannot plan for the actions we take. Each group simply reacts to the other's maneuvers as best they can according to the degree to which their objectives align.

Our claim here is simply that the revolution is disorganized to all hell. We can't properly evaluate the sum total activity of the "housing justice movement" from the perspective of the revolution. The best

we can do is evaluate ourselves and make speculations about others. Our point of view about ourselves, of course, is that our activity is revolutionary. We can't say anything with confidence about others. On top of this disorganization arises the notion of *reformism* which has a real, distinct existence opposite the revolutionary process. This reform or that reform *may* support or it *may* hinder our revolutionary process—it is a dice roll. Whether the contradictions have been heightened or not can only be conclusively analyzed *after* the fact. And these considerations, ultimately, can be made from our point of view alone. All activity that happens *to* us, from the outside, can only be evaluated for its impact *on* us, i.e. the organization we believe is revolutionary. Such is the fate of a city organized like ours.

Let us imagine for a change a situation where the effort to lift the ban on rent control was a strategic consideration of the revolutionary movement in advance of the fact. In this situation, the self-identified movement would weigh the decision to lift the ban on rent control for its totalizing effects: *How many organizers are necessary to pursue this? How much money will it cost to pursue? Could our effort be directed better elsewhere? What are the prospects of success? What kind of sacrifices and concessions will we have to make with aldermen and the real estate industry? Will it force our other types of activity to be suppressed or toned down? In the event of a victory, do we anticipate this will leave the working class satisfied and peaceful, or does it bring them to a higher level of organization with a stronger appetite for fighting? Will it provide them with new opportunities to satisfy that appetite?*¹

In other words, reforms as opposed to revolution will remain just that—a hostile dichotomy—unless all tactics under analysis are brought into the unity of the same strategic and practical point of view. *This idea is severely misunderstood.* The true connection between reforms and revolution does not compare them side by side as

¹None of this, technically speaking, requires LTB and ACTA (to use an absurd example) to merge. The very minimum requirement for these considerations to be plausible would be that LTB and ACTA have created a practical link of activity wherein we were not planning or taking action without the input of the other. However, we believe that if an arrangement like this were actually possible between the present organizations in Chicago, it would likely exist already. If this is how the coalitionists perceive the relationships between their own member organizations to be, we would welcome the news.

equivalent options. Putting them at the same level in this way, like adding tenths to hundredths without a common denominator, leads inevitably into error. Considered dialectically, a given reform may take on a broader strategic significance. But this dialectic between reforms and revolutionary tactics *can only be* animated² when it belongs to a unified revolutionary system. Without this strategic unity, there is no basis to investigate the relation of one tactic with another and therefore no proper basis to speak on either. Without the unifying system, pursuit of reform frequently becomes an end in itself while the opposing rejection of reform remains at the level of dogmatism.

Put more plainly, all efforts to lift the ban on rent control should be taken into consideration by the leadership of *one* revolutionary tenant movement and pursued (or not pursued) on this basis alone. Tenant Organization A should not have to consider whether or not to “join the coalition” with Housing Justice Organization B, one it has no share of control over, where there are no common principles or systems of accountability. All there can be with a coalition, at best, is an accidental and temporary coincidence of interests between two or more organizations which otherwise do not cooperate.

A coalition therefore appears other than what it actually is.

Take another coalition, the Just Cause for Eviction Ordinance Coalition (JCEO), as a different example of the disorganization inherent to this manner of organizing.

JCEO’s stated objective is to pass legislation that establishes seven legally valid reasons for which a landlord can end a rental agreement. This effort is being pursued as a response to the current situation in Chicago that allows landlords to evict tenants for any reason, or for no reason at all. At the time of publication, JCEO is made up of over 100 (!) distinct organizations.³ Evidently, these organizations are in agreement, whatever that might mean, with the stated objectives of the coalition. And by virtue of the sheer number of these member

²The imagery of the dialectic you should imagine here is that of Frankenstein’s monster at the moment a bolt of electricity jolts him upright off the table when the terminals on his neck close the circuit. Without this system, the monster is only an ‘artificial product of the dissecting room,’ an assemblage of body parts from different corpses; such is the city “organized” under the principles of coalition-building.

³According to their website: <https://www.justcausechicago.org/supporters.html>

organizations, JCEO appears as an example of strong, quality organization which grounds a compelling and vital objective.

But if JCEO's objective is so vital and if the effort to achieve it is strongly organized, what is preventing its 25 member organizations from formally merging into one and the same organization and pursuing it with complete ideological unity on the basis of their combined and coordinated material forces? In other words, why a coalition instead of an organization proper?

The reason is because the individual member organizations pursue contradictory objectives outside the coalition and that is where their passions and material power to organize lie. Not only do they act contradictorily toward other member organizations, their actions also contradict the coalition's own objectives and principles. For example, take one of the JCEO member organizations, Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT). On November 17, 2020, they published a paper called *Green Stormwater Infrastructure Impact on Property Values*.⁴ This article champions certain ecologically-minded technological innovations in home construction *for their ability to raise the selling prices of houses*.

It seems certain that a positive assessment of rising home prices would conflict with the outlook of the Democratic Socialists of America, another member organization in JCEO. Meanwhile, on the websites of JCEO and a handful of their member organizations, statements like these are abundant: "As of 2018, almost half of all Chicago renters were rent burdened which means they spent more than 30% of their income on rent, yet low-income households represent the largest share of Cook County renter households. The supply of affordable rental units has been dropping at an increased rate in Chicago since 2012."

So which is it? Do we want expensive houses or cheap houses? According to CHJC, we want them cheap. According to CNT, we want them to be expensive. Coalitionism as a general organizing principle is precisely what allows this nonsense to prevail and, ultimately, it is the working class who suffers because the self-appointed leaders of the different fronts of the war are either unable or unwilling to

⁴<https://cnt.org/publications/green-stormwater-infrastructure-impact-on-property-values>

conceive their objectives as one part of a unified whole and have no obligation to make their principles clear.

We could say here that it is likely unimaginable to the directors of JCEO that raising the value of houses corresponds to a rise in the power of landlords and in turn weakens the tenants' ability to resist eviction. But this ideological malaise is not what is at issue. What is at issue is that, independently of what the directors of CNT and the other member organizations *think*, there is obviously no instrument through which they can criticize or influence one another using the criteria of their shared principles and objectives. A coalition can only pass over into organization if it sheds its temporary and incidental character and all members subordinate themselves to a permanent internal unity.⁵

Coalitionism is the opposite of organization, it is *disorganization*.

Another variation of coalitionism which is similarly disorganized occurs when two or more *tenant organizations* coexist in Chicago but they remain divided for one reason or another. Experience has shown us that typically the reason used to justify these divisions is geography. It's said that the city is too big and too segregated and this is reflected in diverse objective organizing conditions from one neighborhood to the next. For example, neighborhood X is all two-flat greystone buildings of English-speaking black tenants, while Neighborhood Y is all multifamily buildings with corporate landlords and Mexican tenants.

This attitude, again, is a sign of disorganization. "Geography" and "conditions" are used to mask the fact that what really cements the division of two or more organizations—which indeed might be geographically divided—are their principles and organizational practices. This is not meant to provoke. It's just the fact. Take a real example: because Chicago Union of Tenants (CUT) is up north and ACTA is out west means that interested onlookers can dismiss our division as one of a "turf war." This is an embarrassing consequence of *our disorganization*. There is not a turf war between ACTA and CUT, there is a political battle occurring over leadership in the tenant movement.

⁵ An outcome which seems impossible as long as, among many other reasons, each of these distinct groups have their own *paid* organizers.

ACTA is up to the task of solving the geography riddle. We believe that geography is a problem that *must* be addressed by *our* organization. To reach across neighborhood lines and shake hands with the organization over there is not solving the problem, it is avoiding it.⁶ It says “Ok, you all take care of that, we’ll take care of this, hopefully it will all work out. Nevermind finding out what one another thinks of the fundamental questions of strategy or the analysis of the situation.” This does nothing but reinforce geographic division. ACTA stays out of Rogers Park not because it is CUT’s “turf” but because we do not have the material forces to organize there. If we did, CUT would not deter us. What would be excellent is if CUT and ACTA could fuse and become the material forces of one another, but again, disorganization currently deters this. Disorganization in this instance materializes as disagreement over the very question at hand: *coalition or organization?*

The positions around the question can be summarized as follows. On one hand, there is the view that the city *should be* organized on the basis of geographically and ideologically divided coalitions. This is the apparent view of CUT, Autonomous Tenants Union, Tenants United, Southside Together, i.e. the tenant organizations and housing justice organizations. Needless to say it is also the view of the non-profit coalitionists. It is in so many words, *The Chicago Way*. This perspective on the question holds that the fragmented state of the movement is actually a strength. There is no need to speculate about whether or not this is accurate. This is the default condition of the movement and it has been for decades. Disorganization is the status quo.

On the other hand, there is the view that the housing movement

⁶This is not a claim whatsoever about the legitimacy of making connections, agreements, and collaborative alliances. ACTA engages in this kind of activity. The practice can only be judged in the context of the concrete problems encountered by one organization adhering to one and the same strategy. There will always remain groups with contradictory and antithetical ends and it may even be necessary to temporarily work with such organizations. It is the *spirit* of coalitionism, which does not seek to understand these boundaries and creeps into the relation between groups who really do share the same ends, which we are criticizing. In the latter case, coalitionism is nothing more than an excuse to avoid coming to consensus on the pressing tactical problems facing the movement.

in this city should be centralized on the basis of one revolutionary tenant organization, i.e. it should be brought into one strategic system. Each and every tactic regarding the war against capitalist landlords must be evaluated on this basis. This is the view of ACTA. Do we stand alone?

The Chicago tenant organization closest in ideology to ACTA is CUT. To their credit, they see the significance of creating tenant unions as a means for the working class to realize the power granted by its economic position within the capitalist system. CUT also contains dedicated and smart organizers, people we call our comrades. They are at least sympathetic toward socialism. But, CUT disagrees with the principle of centralization even internally. They are coalition building, so to speak, in their own organization. What else can you call a horizontalist structure? Is it not an appropriate way to describe a coalition? In CUT, individual members play the role of individual member organizations in coalitions, they operate autonomously except insofar as their interests vaguely coincide on the abstract principle of—in CUT's case—"tenant organizing."

It follows from this abstract organizational principle that merely organizing tenant unions at the building level—*no matter where or with what kind of relation to the whole*—is a sufficient approach to the war on landlords. We disagree.

Chapter Seven

ACTA “does not have the material forces to organize in Rogers Park.” What are its forces and which neighborhood are they in? How do these develop, and how can we call ourselves the All-Chicago Tenant Alliance if we are not in every neighborhood?

ACTA's most basic practical activity is what we call mass work. Mass work is when our organizers go into the neighborhoods and build links with tenants. Mass work is a process of investigation. We have done mass work in a number of ways, but the most consistent and reliable way to begin, in our experience so far, is door-knocking. Door-knocking is therefore the most fundamental practice in ACTA's operation, it is what all other forms of mass work are built upon. It is the most simple activity that puts the organizer face to face with the tenant. Just as it is any given tenant's first exposure to ACTA, mass work is also the typical method to introduce ACTA members to external work. At one and the same time, mass work involves going out (the organization into society) and pulling in (society into the organization). It is the most basic element of centralization. Centralization is this *real activity in its process*.

At the time of publication, ACTA reliably sends out 12 to 20

organizers every Saturday to do mass work. These forces are not sent out randomly, they are divided up and deployed according to a plan which is developed each Saturday morning. This plan is always specific to the day and utilizes the number of available organizers who have shown up, but it follows the development of mass work week-to-week, month-to-month, because the purpose of mass work is to learn what is going on with people, form relationships and establish preconditions for recurring meetings in the effort to create tenant unions. From the initial contact, ACTA members tend to the unions, guiding them to the level of self leadership and ideological maturity required by the overall struggle. Therefore, successful mass work results in "Units" of organizers who have found organizing prospects and make strategies for developing them into unions until they stand on their own two feet.

It can be seen how mass work is the nutrient that feeds ACTA's system. Just as nutrients are taken into the body and are destroyed by their conversion into energy, ACTA's organizers enter the system by mass work but soon develop beyond this early phase of the cycle by establishing or joining organizing units engaged in constructing specific tenant unions. This process is by no means one-directional. Frequently, unsuccessful organizing units dissolve and the individuals are released back into Saturday mass work.

But for every durable, medium to long-term organizing unit that forms, an equivalent number of members are pulled out of mass work. If we are to continue expanding our activity to meet the sheer volume of landlord terror, a relatively continuous stream of organizers need to be entering the organization. Currently this supply of organizers is drawn in from the outside, but it is our hope that the unions will act as a method of transmission for the most developed tenants into the ranks of general organizers.

On any given Saturday, a handful of our organizers are door-knocking, while others are in the early stages of union-formation (i.e. returning to prospective buildings) and others are in later stages of union-formation (i.e. planning regular meetings with tenants in prospect buildings). The planning necessary for directing this kind of operation requires a headquarters for a weekly strategy meeting to take place, i.e. *a center*. Our center is where ACTA's strategy (i.e. its

theory) and the efforts to realize it (i.e. its practice) begin. It is also where we re-incorporate the results of our practice into our strategy (i.e. critique). Therefore, it is not correct to visualize the center as “the head” or central intellect of the organization, while the organizers are the workers and the body. It is better to conceive of the center as the loom where all the many theoretical and practical threads of ACTA are woven together into a unified cloth. Although the physical center is currently the location where we create this unity, physical proximity is not sufficient to overcome the tendency of theory and practice to drift apart. The real unity between our theory and practice is a result of the rotational character of ACTA’s structure, which does not confine our leadership to ideological, theoretical, and strategic work without organizing buildings and does not limit general members to organizing buildings without participating in developing the ideology, theory and strategy of the organization.¹ All the multifaceted activity of ACTA must be coordinated and linked concretely.

ACTA’s operational center is currently located on the southern edge of Humboldt Park. This leaves us in a good position to organize in Chicago’s West Side because we can easily get our forces from our HQ to the apartment buildings and back with short car, bus or bike rides. Because of this, the major share of our activity has been focused in “K-Town” and the surrounding neighborhoods, e.g. Garfield Park, North Lawndale and Austin, etc. This area is currently a soft geographic limit. The number of organizers available and their distribution between mass work, union-formation and unit work are the components of a second limit. There are also more infrastructural limits, such as the physical size of our center relative to the number of people who need to meet there at a single time, the volume of propaganda and organizing literature we can effectively produce, etc. The effective combination of our forces against their various limits is the essence of strategy and, to repeat, this strategic endeavor rests on its center. *The center is essential.*

ACTA cannot expand beyond these limits without making changes to the existing structure of the organization. The class

¹More in Chapter 8.

struggle between tenants and landlords is latent wherever housing is in control of the dictatorship of landlords and, unlike our organization, the extent of landlord domination does not remain within neighborhood limits. Landlord hegemony exists all across Chicago and therefore we need an all-Chicago strategic assault.

The city-wide reach of landlord terror poses a problem to the organization. Tenants who are spontaneously prepared to join the struggle do not appear in a series of neat, concentric circles moving out from our center. Landlord portfolios span neighborhoods and eager organizers come into the movement regardless of neighborhood. Nevertheless we are limited by geographic distance. The natural tendency is for disconnected centers to spring up in different parts of the city, each following its own isolated goals and strategy. If we take what has been said above seriously, then this must be understood as the most pressing problem for the tenant movement as a whole, and therefore for our organization. How to expand without losing the connection to a strategic center is the major concern of ACTA today.

As we have seen, coalitionism is one of the go-to means that organizations use to “expand” their sphere of activity in Chicago. We reject this on principle, for reasons we have started to describe above. The center is the crux of ACTA’s organizing practices. Actual centralization should not be misunderstood as something literal or merely physical, *per se*. It does not mean that ACTA cannot establish multiple organizing *centers* across the city. It does mean that these centers must be established in a manner that proceeds dialectically from the principle and practice of centralization.² The theoretical and practical processes of these distal centers must be carefully interwoven with ACTA’s current processes if we want to ensure the same strategic unity. A process of expansion that sacrifices or attempts to “leap over” our *real centralization in practice* is an artificial

²The Los Angeles Tenants Union might be organized as an assemblage of locals, but this does not confirm or deny the presence of centralization in their organization. That has to be judged on the basis of other things, mainly how the strategy is transmitted between the different outposts of their group and the hierarchy of authority. ACTA has no insight into LATU’s structure at this level, the example is only to show that outward appearance cannot be taken as essence and that it is certainly possible that LATU might be centralized with multiple “centers.”

one, and one that is doomed to fail.

An approximate example of this type of attempt can be seen in one of the schemes of the now defunct Chicago Tenant Movement. After forming, CTM's main activity was gradually dragged toward the operation of an eviction hotline. At one point, they attempted to overcome this and organize the city into regional sections where building-level organization could be carried out, but the theory was preemptive and abstract. There was little to no building-level organization to speak of in the first place. No rich organizational life had been consolidated *at the center* of their organization that could be expanded. This example only partly illustrates a mistake we are at risk of making. In CTM's case, the organization made a leap from its abstract principles of a citywide movement to a strategy, *rather than starting from the real, actual life of the organization and expanding to reach concrete strategic objectives*. If they had done the latter, CTM would have discovered an extensive series of concrete steps to take in order to develop itself from its existence as a crisis response organization into its desired existence as a multi-neighborhood, tenant union organization.

What distinguishes ACTA at our present stage from CTM then is that our activity is consolidated around mass work (as described above), and we have two dozen organizers all quite trained or currently training in the work of building-level organization. Our activity is at a stage where expansion is a real possibility, created by an influx of organizers from other parts of the city. Of course, the potential work in each area greatly exceeds the capabilities of the youthful movement, but we cannot simply assume the rest of the city will supply the manpower to organize the west side right now. The struggle will need to mature before the potential work can be realized to absorb our available organizing power. In the meantime, potential forces from other parts of the city are eager to join the movement, but ACTA must be capable of integrating them. The task of establishing centers in other parts of the city is something we always knew we would have to address at some point. Now it has become feasible because people from other parts of the city have become involved. We still face limits to our geographic reach and our current

forces, but these two limits are no longer objective limits.³ The development of the struggle has transformed these from objective problems into theoretical problems to be solved. We are now in a position to restructure our organization and advance beyond our previous limits. The distant strategic problem of establishing additional physical centers of our organization and integrating them with the actual center has become an immediate problem for us to solve.

But just because the possibility exists doesn't mean we can leap out into every other part of the city recklessly to justify our claim to being the *All-Chicago* Tenant Alliance. We *are* the All-Chicago Tenant Alliance, we understand the contradictory identity of *being* with *becoming*. ACTA is not an organization, it is a unity of real active processes. We can't roll out a map of the city on the table and begin walling off organizing boundaries with our pens, writing the names of organizers into the zones. We have to walk the real earth, encounter boundaries as real boundaries and overcome them in our real activity, which, as we have already seen, is built on the elemental unity of strategy, implementation, critique. i.e. of centralization. This activity is the soul of ACTA and it is also the flesh. These can only be artificially separated in thought *because they can't be separated in reality*.⁴ God was able to create Adam's body *before* giving it a soul because he is God, and we all know what happened to Adam. We are not gods, we are humans and therefore we know that it is walking that makes the road.

Expansion can only be done by building carefully in a way that begins with the real facts of our central practice and continues to preserve and develop our center by transmitting it through every step, until it transforms itself organically from what it is now—all-Chicago in principle—to what it wants to become, all-Chicago in fact.

³ Objective limits are imposed by conditions outside of our immediate control. We do not treat these as impossible limits to overcome, they simply mean that we must work consciously elsewhere to develop either our own capabilities or the objective situation. In this example, concerted work within our geographical limit created the notoriety required to attract organizers in other parts of the city.

⁴ A body with a dead brain inside it is a dead body. And from where does a brain in a glass jar receive its blood apart from the system of the flesh? Which of the two brains mentioned has the power of abstract thought?

There are any number of possibilities for how a centralized organization can be built, as long as each link in the chain is connected to the one before it, so that the center analyzed above—the most basic organizational unit of ACTA—is carried through to every nook and cranny of the organization, no matter the physical (geographic) arrangement or *design of the transmission* at every scale.

It should be self-evident that centralization cannot occur without a simultaneous link to the periphery of the organization. A central core without a clear and effective connection to its branches is not actually a center at all. A spiderweb is more than its capture spiral, it is also its radial threads. In ACTA centralism is a democratic principle. We do not see democracy and centralism as contradictory forces within the organization. The rank and file do not act as a check or balance opposite to the leadership. Instead, they act as co-creators of the organization. The leadership provides the rank and file with strategic continuity and opportunities to take leadership in the organization and in turn, the membership extends the actual reach of the organization, stepping into the position of leadership themselves. This reciprocal connection between the leadership and the rank and file of the organization imbues the organization with vitality and fuels purposeful growth.

It is common for democracy to be treated as synonymous with elections and representatives, a view which treats democracy as an abstract ideal rather than living, breathing participation in an organization. Practices such as elections or rigid parliamentary procedure should not be mistaken for democracy, especially when they so often become anti-democratic. Only true participation and activity in the organization by its members should be considered true democracy. ACTA seeks democracy as an actuality and this means sober reflection on every facet of the organization. If an organizational practice empowers members to deepen their organizational activity we may call it democratic.

The opposite of actual democracy is not leadership or formalization. The true opposite of democracy in an organization is inactivity and impotence. If the organization cannot develop, expand, and pursue its aims, then any supposedly democratic structures will only lead to an illusion of democracy. Opportunities

for creative participation in the organization and positions which provide members with ownership over particular aspects of the struggle are necessarily democratic, in that they provide deeper popular control over the organization. For example, ACTA's general membership are encouraged to take on leadership projects designed around pressing organizational problems of the moment. These projects offer general members opportunities to transform the organization in significant ways, from taking on leadership of a union to implementing new practices or even additional organizational divisions. Only the development and expansion of the organization can reliably provide these types of opportunities. Trying to institute formal democratic processes without corresponding developments in the organization's activity can only lead to stagnation and over-bureaucratization.

We have seen organized tenants mistake formal democratic processes for actual democracy. An emblematic case of this recently occurred, in fact. Under ACTA's influence, a group of tenants organized a group chat and began arranging meetings. This union-to-be formed in response to the sale of their building to an investor who immediately informed them he'd be throwing them out in order to renovate their units and raise the rents. At the meetings, the tenants began to formulate demands for the new landlord. The building was naturally split between those who participated a lot, those who participated inconsistently, and those who did not participate at all. Rather than building a strong core to push the organization forward, the tenants who did meet put all decisions to a building-wide vote, subsuming all of their activity under the requirements of soliciting the input of every unit, including those who had not attended a single meeting.

As a result, the tenants became bogged down delivering letters to every door requesting votes from the members and the union was unable to take a single step towards its true interests. These tenants believed they were being democratic, but in actuality there was no real activity to speak of—democratic or otherwise. Instead of power, only impotence was “democratized.” Needless to say, if the active tenants had seriously pursued the tasks required of them, many of the inactive tenants would have seen the organization as something

worth getting involved in.

This anecdote also gives us a look at another side of the problem of democracy. These tenants prioritized absolute and universal democratic procedures for everyone in the building rather than limiting them to those engaged with the union. As a result, they spent time soliciting votes from tenants with *no intention to carry forward or be bound by the results of the vote*. The tenants had not taken the time to determine who should participate in each vote and ended up with democratic stagnation. Healthy democracy cannot take the question of who is eligible to participate in elections and votes for granted. An overly broad vote where every disinterested party chooses according to personal whims can be just as undemocratic as an overly narrow vote where only a few make decisions for the many.

It is clear to us that democracy cannot be distinguished from an organization's activity or formally grafted onto an existing organization from the outside. The idea of "democratizing" an existing organization without transforming it from inside out is absurd. This is because living democracy hinges upon actual participation in the organization. If leadership is not to be a symbol, representing the interests of the organization, the organization must integrate these interests in concrete ways. Votes and decision making must be tied to the process of participation in the organization. It would be absurd to let someone who simply signed their name on a contact sheet make major organizational decisions, but this also extends to the series of increasingly central votes that are necessarily tied to ever smaller circles of membership. The guiding principle for establishing these circles must be based on the extent of the responsibilities and commitment of these members.

In the same vein, it would be absurd to require the leadership of the organization to vote on particular decisions such as which building to hold a tenant meeting in. ACTA's unit structure divides not only the labor, but also the power and responsibility, allowing others to take charge of organizational work. The difference between the inductee, the general member, and the leadership is their level of integration into organizational life. No member's power should outstrip their responsibility to the organization. From this perspective, the process of building a democratic, city-wide organization is not about connecting

various organizations under a single formal democratic process, it is about connecting the actual practices and life of each organization into a strategically unified, living process.

Chapter Eight

ACTA wants to create tenant unions in buildings everywhere in Chicago, but not without simultaneously creating a system of linking them into a strategic center. What does this imply for tenants in buildings?

In addition to its leadership, i.e. organizers who specialize in educating, agitating and training tenants in organizing tenant unions, once established, the tenant unions themselves make up a share of ACTA's forces. Naturally, ACTA's objective is to build durable tenant unions far and wide. But it would not be enough to build tenant unions far and wide *without at the same time building up a system of linking these unions together and bringing them under a single, unified strategic center*. This is a reiteration of the point made in Chapter 6 but this time from the perspective of the building-level organizations, i.e. the tenants and their unions.

Tenant-unions at the building level are battalions, they are not the army itself. ACTA is the army as a whole. Imagine, for analogy, if in the US Civil War the 54th Massachusetts Infantry was not linked through a larger chain of command to the entire Union army? Could it (or would it) have taken Fort Wagner? On the other hand, could the survivors of the 2nd and 6th Infantries have continued fighting if they were not absorbed as reinforcements into the other companies of the

Iron Brigade?

This analogy should make the problem clear enough. On one hand, we need to build up battalions. On the other hand, we need to develop the army. The concrete tasks necessary for each of these two sides are different and therefore will require that ACTA be filled with people who carry out different work, but this doesn't necessarily mean that everyone will specialize in this or that type of work permanently. Just as in a real army, the soldiers move through the ranks, so too in ACTA. The tenants, pulled out of their building fights, must make their way into the leadership of the organization. The leadership of the organization at one time or another must have their hands in the building-level organization and the ongoing fighting. There is no other way to ensure that as many members as possible become well-rounded and all-seeing strugglers in ACTA, something that will be critical for the durability and tenacity of our organization over the long term. Centralized structure; decentralized personification.

The necessity of the distinction between the tenant unions and the tenant organization stems from the reality that in every army there are battalions that win and battalions that lose. It is the army itself—i.e. ACTA—that prevents losses at the battalion level from being absolute by considering them from the point of view of the army and the context of the war at large. That these fighting units belong to a higher organization with a higher purpose than any given local battle is what allows the systematic evaluation of “losses” and “wins”. It is what will prevent us from falling into the traps and ambushes associated with chasing down small and easy victories on one hand, and going to extremes to avoid small losses on the other.

However, this distinction also recognizes the reality that organized tenants who make up the battalions are the ones in the “immediate” lines of fire. They are the practical forces. It is their rent which hammers the landlord in a rent strike. And it is the roof over *their* head which is at stake in any given building level struggle. They are the direct, physical targets of landlord terror. It follows from this that the organized tenants of ACTA are required to have a certain type of consciousness, which is basically the psychology of a soldier. Put frankly, the organized tenants of ACTA have to want to fight and have

to develop a passion for fighting. Following what has been laid out above,¹ ACTA seeks out conflict. Therefore, our organization needs to raise a military of tenants who *understand* this point of view as one that is strategically and theoretically legitimate and furthermore, are in a position to adopt the correct attitude for carrying it out.

The attitude is summarized and expressed well in the words of one of our present tenant-unionists, Comrade Anay, who aspires to lead her children by example: *"You see your mother always fight. You need to be the same way."*

This is not cavalier, it would be cavalier if we were promoting the idea that conflict is good in and of itself and not in relation to our principle of class struggle.² For example, it would be cavalier if we were suggesting that tenants should randomly vandalize and destroy their buildings simply because they know they belong to the landlord, rather than suggesting that they should assess that tactic as one potential link in the chain their organization forges to connect its line, strategy and objectives to its concrete tasks of realizing them.

ACTA tenant unions need to lure the reaction of the landlord according to the degree in which they are organized to defend themselves against and survive that reaction. More importantly, they must do this *because* they have learned and internalized the principle that these reactions are the materialization of his diminished monetary profit which is the key to ending the capitalists' dictatorship over our housing. All of this follows *directly* from our fundamental line.³

This is why the organizers of ACTA must understand ACTA's line, we need huge improvement in this regard. It is also why the organizational structure of ACTA—especially at the point where the organizers and tenants interact directly, i.e. in our organizing units—must practically carry ACTA's strategy from its center, teach it and spread it, and then return to the center with its problems and experience for reflection. Another area where dramatic improvement is required in our organization.

From the point of view of tenants in unions, this is why the

¹ See Chapter 4.

² See Chapters 1, 4.

³ See Chapters 3, 4.

importance of ACTA's organizers—the organizational side—cannot be downgraded, sidelined or bemoaned for their unique role and why it can never be an accepted attitude among the organized tenants that, because the organizers are not in the “immediate” line of fire, that they are therefore “outside organizers.”⁴ We are in one organization: ACTA. The cadres and organizers of ACTA are not “outside” fighters, just like no one—privates, lieutenants, generals, majors, sergeants, colonels, etc.—are “outside” of the military. No individual part is less “inside” than any other. All make up a single, integrated organism.

The war on landlords requires a division of labor to prevail. For an organization of the working class to be worthy of its position in this war, it must rise to this necessity. Most importantly, the individuals in ACTA must move through and between that division of labor in the pursuit of the all-around development of our fighters.

“La pelea es peleando.”
Victoriano Lorenzo

⁴ This view is narrow on multiple counts. First of all, ACTA's leadership are tenants, in buildings, with landlords. Secondly, it is demonstrably false that “outside organizers” do not have anything personal at stake by participating in fights at buildings in which they do not live. Believing otherwise is indicative of inexperience and a misapprehension of the scale and power of the enemy's force! ACTA is currently in the crosshairs of the lawyer of one landlord against which they're helping tenants organize a fight. No doubt, if action is pursued in court, the names of ACTA's leaders will be revealed, they will be targeted and the organized dictatorship of landlords will conspire against these individuals indefinitely in similar ways that they will retaliate against the tenants in the ‘immediate’ line of fire. It is also certain that the attacks on the central organization of ACTA will only increase as ACTA's activity becomes more effective. The position of organizer or leader is only safe until the organization becomes a serious threat to capitalist hegemony. ACTA seeks to become such a threat.

ALIANZA DE INQUILINOS DE TODO CHICAGO



ALL-CHICAGO TENANT ALLIANCE