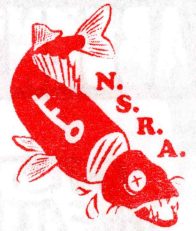


TENANTS TALK

SEMI-REGULAR CHICAGO TENANTS NEWSPAPER



Issue 3

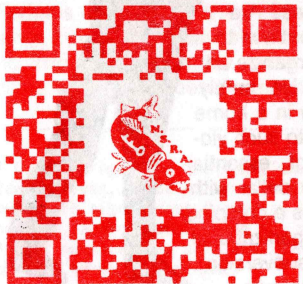
April/May 2023

Chicago

TENANTS WITHHOLD RENT!

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ABSENT UNITY, PRESENT UNITY AND SOLIDARITY

1. Preface from an organizer



Over the course of December and January, neighbors and fellow tenant organizers at 2330-8 N. Spaulding Ave. have been enveloped in a rent withholding. For the second half of December, our building's heat was working inconsistently and ended up completely shutting down during the record colds around Christmas-time. With our neighbors, we gathered together to withhold half of our upcoming January rent as a means of

getting our money back for the lack of habitability during the heat outages. Over half the building (around 21 units) committed to this action, totaling an estimated \$14,000 in rent withheld from our landlord, Mark Fishman. This is an ongoing action, as the property management company, M. Fishman & Co., have yet to respond aptly to our demands. As of now, we and our neighbors are continuing to withhold until the balance is wiped from our online payment accounts. Throughout this paper, we feature pull-quotes from tenants who have withheld.

For some of us, this has been the first major action in our time as tenants and/or organizers, and so far this has been an incredible learning experience. One result of this action, and a necessary component of this action working to begin with, is a newfound bond between our neighbors. Through knocking on each other's doors, discussing what happened and what we think we should do about it, creating and utilizing a building-wide group chat to strategize together, and spending time with one another, we now have a greater solidarity with the people we share this space with. It is the beginning step in fighting against the transient, isolating, powerless life of renting we all have grown accustomed to.

"The rent withholding action has definitely brought me closer to my neighbors and more involved in our little community! I'm so proud of the fight we put up and how strong we've stood together the whole time"

One of our fellow tenant organizers wrote a reflection and call-to-action during the peak of this action that we have adapted for length and included below. Our heating breakdown is in no way unique. Every person I know who has rented has issues similar to ours. My hope is that this writing compels you to work alongside us against the conditions as they are. Even if the wins don't come now, our relationship with space and those we share it with have been strengthened through our continued work together.

2. Absent Unity, Present Unity and Solidarity

In the coming days our solidarity will be tested. And it bears emphasizing in detail what kind of solidarity will be required to survive this test. It is assumed in what follows that unity as such is a condition which is inescapable by virtue of the fact that tenants who belong to a common landlord are inevitably bound to one another in both obvious and subtle ways. Unity as such simply refers to this given state of affairs: the unity of multiple tenants (Bob, Anne, Jamal, Sharon, et al.) into one group (the tenants of Building A). Before we talk about solidarity, some brief remarks about unity will come first because it is from unity that solidarity grows.

In the example above it goes without saying that the grouping of these apparently autonomous individuals has materialized by virtue of the landlord's possession of a large building in which they all happen to find themselves and, from the perspective of Bob, it is wholly accidental that he lives in a building with Jamal. From the landlord's perspective, on the other hand, their unity is quite intentional. Admittedly, he doesn't know Jamal from Bob, and doesn't know Bob from Adam, as the saying goes; these individuals are simply tenants, and he needs tenants in his units—not because he wants to "provide housing", but because providing housing is a requirement for him to collect and profit from rent—so he puts them there. Thus, we can say that this unity of tenants has been organized not by the tenants themselves, but by the landlord for the landlord. That tenants find shelter here is only a byproduct of the real movement. To the tenants, the cause, or, the source of their organization as common apartment dwellers lies outside of them, and therefore we will call this kind of unity an absent unity.

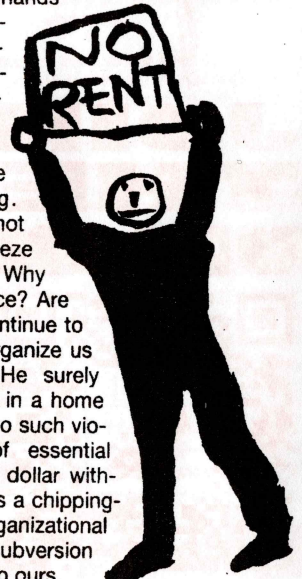
As opposed to this, I want to talk about present unity. Present unity can be conceived of as the inversion of absent unity. But it is very important to understand that the former is wholly dependent on the preexistence of the latter. Present unity is when, finding himself neighbors with Jamal, Bob knocks on Jamal's door and introduces himself. By this act, immediately what was at first only an accidental encounter to them becomes an intentionally organized encounter, by them. Prior to this act, the

conditions of renting an apartment in a building with strangers is imposed on Bob by an absent organizer (the landlord), who is himself merely a personification of the customs and laws determined by the current historical condition of his society's mode of administering shelter. Present unity can then be extrapolated outward from this organized encounter between Bob and Jamal: Bob and Jamal exchange phone numbers. Jamal meets Anne in the laundry room and they exchange numbers; Bob, Jamal and Anne then start a group chat and there they decide to hang posters in the laundry room asking other tenants to join. It is then logically conceivable that this intentionally organized unity of the tenants can extend to the entire building, hence subverting what was at first an absent unity of tenants into a present unity—an organization of tenants, by tenants built on the foundations of an organization of tenants by landlords, for landlords.

With absent and present unity now defined as that which is organized by the landlord in the first case and that organized by the tenants in the second case, when moving on to talk about solidarity in the face of changing conditions and situations, our attention should remain focused—always—on asking this imperative question: who is organizing this situation, the landlord or the tenants? When in doubt, return to this question. To make this pamphlet as practically useful as possible, we will continue by using concrete examples of these concepts of unity and solidarity, but may have to rely on abstract exposition to drive the main points home...

...In conclusion, we should remember why we are here in the first place. We have been made into an absent unity of violated tenants by the actions of Fishman. He organized us in this way, he made this grievance in us by his actions, or lack thereof, in neglecting the property we depend on for our shelter and well-being. Control of the temperature of apartments is in Fishman's hands

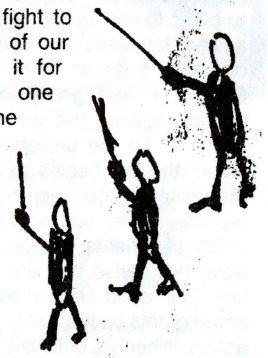
where it is handled in a manner that is dictated by keeping costs at a bare minimum to optimize profit-seeking. We did not choose to freeze on Christmas! Why is this his choice? Are we going to continue to allow him to organize us in this way? He surely does not sleep in a home that is subject to such violent failures of essential services. Every dollar withheld from him is a chipping away at his organizational power and its subversion of his power into ours.



While we have seen that present unity is built on absent unity, real solidarity is a product of present unity, solidarity is crafted using the tools established in organizing ourselves. Not everyone who is withholding rent was affected as dramatically as others. Nonetheless, they see in this an opportunity to reduce their own rent burdens too, and in doing so they move in solidarity with those who suffer the most. As tenants acting in solidarity, we see in our neighbors the potentiality of ourselves. In other words, Bob's radiator exploded while Jamal's didn't. But Jamal recognizes that he is a tenant organized by the landlord in this building no differently than Bob and therefore says to

himself, "Bob today, me tomorrow." Bob is The Tenant, Jamal is The Tenant. Jamal knows that his radiator is provided and maintained by the same agent as Bob's. By acting in solidarity with him, Jamal makes a present organization out of an absent one and as a result, both he and Bob stand a greater chance to benefit. Jamal learns of Bob's situation by the very tools that he has built, with Bob and Anne, through their own organizational efforts to take control over the conditions of their own life. Group chats, fliers, posters, meetings, shared research and door-knocking. This is present unity. Whether real solidarity can be built on this is our next test. Who is going to organize this

test, the landlord or the tenants? This is a fight to take a small piece of our lives and organize it for us, by us; for one another, by one another.



THE LAW

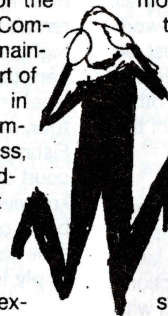
"The legal route we are pursuing is arduous and may not result in a clear cut "win" for us as a tenant group. It feels like, even as a group, union, association, whatever you want to call it, our power to influence our position and assert our rights is severely curtailed by Fitzmaurice's power to just barrel on with whatever they feel like doing, no matter the legality or ethics."

One of the founding American myths is that of "equal justice under law". It is a principle so fundamental that the discrepancy between "equal justice" and our real experience of the law is only apparent in the most extreme circumstances. If we examine the law from a tenant's perspective, however, the discrepancy comes into focus even in more ordinary circumstances. The constant legal threat of eviction looms over us like a specter which we must appease each month with rent payments. Its presence lingers in the doors, walls, and closets which make up our homes. Any transgression of the legal contract with the landlord risks awakening this phantom. But even before it is roused, the law exerts its compulsory influence over our lives. We limit our actions in the home in the hope that we will never have direct contact with this specter. Shouldn't this "equal justice under law" loom equally large for the landlord, ensuring that we also receive our end of the agreement?

Perhaps this equality is the case on paper, but when it comes to reality, the answer can only be no. The law does not haunt the landlord in the same way that it does the tenant. To the land-

lord, the law is instrumental. It is a tool. A necessary component of his job. Landlords have the freedom to see the law almost like a lawyer does, that is, as a means of ensuring profit. A trip to court might be inconvenient for a landlord, but at the end of the day it is part of the necessary work he must do to secure his rent money. For a tenant the opposite is true. Our freedom to use the law and its protections is only present in theory, while in practice this process has requirements which lie outside of legal equality. A brush with the law means a loss of valuable working hours, or worse, a loss of employment completely. We risk our homes when we seek legal equality. The landlord risks a small portion of his overall income.¹ Already we see an asymmetry forming between your and your landlord's relationships to the law.

Other requirements for potential action also favor the landlord over the tenant. In cases against the landlord, the burden of proof is strict, requiring tenants to have been vigilant in documenting everything to the standards of the court. In cases against the tenant, the landlord can rely on pre existing systems of documentation designed for this very purpose. These are built into the bureaucratic structure of the landlord's operation. Landlord-tenant Communication, financial information, and maintenance records are documented as part of the landlord's every day operation, in many cases even requiring a full time employee to organize. Through this process, the bureaucratic machine which the landlord maintains transforms previous rent into a legal advantage. Once again, we see the imbalance that arises between the professional landlord and the non-professional tenant. Tenants cannot be expected to have the time and resources to maintain such documentation at all times, and so many cases are lost before they even begin. This documentation is a necessary condition of our legal system, but one which ends up reinforcing that legal asymmetry.



Another material imbalance results from the financial costs which form a barrier between tenants and the justice promised by the law. Even if you cannot afford the initial investment for representation, you can be assured that your landlord can. In the case of large management companies or rental corporations, your resources are set against the resources pulled from a host of buildings. A potential legal battle is not one between two people, but rather between an individual and an army. This army arises from the collective resources of the other tenants which the landlord then wields against you. As one part of the landlord's total income, your power always begins as a fraction of his. Not one penny of this pre-court financial inequality between you and the landlord can be equalized by the law once you have entered its domain. On these grounds you and the landlord are apparently equals in all regards², so long as your real financial conditions are enough to keep you there. The asymmetry of resources here means an asymmetry of access to the law at all.

The results of this drastic legal asymmetry between landlord and tenant means that even the most favorable laws for the tenant are often toothless. Fighting the most blatant violation can be a risk too great to take. It is therefore not only our laws that have failed to protect tenants, it is also the legal system itself. We face a monstrously large problem in reshaping these systems to protect the people who need it most. If it can be done at all, this undertaking will be a multi-generational process of transformation with implications which spread well beyond the legal system. **But what comfort is this to the tenant without heat?**

What we know for sure is that we need ways to protect ourselves as tenants now. But where do we find a means of protection? If the preceding arguments have any merit, then we know one thing: **The law cannot be relied on to protect**

¹ Even disregarding the money and time costs, it is clear that you risk much more than the landlord in a legal battle over shelter. In the eyes of the law, however, these real risks are reduced to one and the same thing: a period of control over a rental unit. The fact that this period of access is a much more significant factor in your life than in the landlord's is irrelevant to the law. To acknowledge the differences in perspective between you and the landlord would mean the destruction of the legal system's abstract equality.

² This equality has been ordained by one of the most sacred powers—the rental contract, where all of human equality is reduced to the equality of the ability to sign your name.

us. We cannot wait for lawyers and politicians to come to our rescue. As long as we are pitted against landlords as individual tenants, we are doomed to failure. Here we find our answer: Only a **unified group of tenants** stands a chance against the unified resources of the landlord. To the unified power of the tenant union, the law begins to look much more like the utilitarian tool seen by the landlord, which we may either use or avoid. What's more, a union of tenants has economic power which does not derive its potency directly from the law. Our initial control over the landlord's income grants us the ability for uniquely powerful action. When we unionize, we become aware of and capable of using a truism which the landlord knows all too well: that all action is outside the legal system until it is brought into the legal system itself.

This process of bringing the real world into the domain of the legal system is not a natural process. Events in the real world must be transformed, described, and abstracted to fit the language of the law. It is this transformation which makes our lives and actions legible to a preordained system of judgements. Once this transformation is complete, we can no longer act or react directly. As the objects which the law is to pass judgements upon, we are effectively powerless. Even the union is reduced to a definition on paper, and once on paper, its constituents can be rearranged and divided as easily as numbers in a math problem. By the time we appear in court, the real struggle has already occurred, both in the process of bringing the legal system to bear on our lives, and in the critical period before that necessary transformation process even begins.

From this we can conclude that we have two types of potential action as tenants. The first type, which we will call real actions are actions completely prior to legal engagement, while the second, which we will call legal actions³ are actions which only attempt to bridge the gap between real action and the legal system itself. This legal action entails the documentation and transformation of the real conditions of our lives as tenants for the legal system to later work upon. Consequently, this legal action must be tailored to the needs of a system outside the needs of the tenant. Real actions, on the other hand, take place according to the needs of the tenant above all.

We are not the only ones limited to these types of action. The landlord too must split his resources between the two. Because of the landlord's bureaucratic apparatus, legal actions such as documentation of events and filing with the courts incur a much lower relative cost on the landlord's time and resources than similar actions would for the tenants. Once again the asymmetrical relation to the legal system weighs in favor of the landlord. Although legal action is a powerful tool for the landlord, he also engages in real action. For the landlord, real ac-

tions range from grievances we accept passively like "the landlord special"⁴ to more egregious transgressions of the rental contract, such as completely neglecting heat in the winter. While allowing an apartment to drop to dangerous temperatures might seem blatantly illegal, without legal action on our part, the very concept of "legality" means nothing to the landlord. The law cannot come to bear on anything which hasn't been brought into the legal system.

Legal actions, which bring our reality into the domain of the law, might therefore seem like a powerful strategic option. The power of these actions is diminished, however, by the previously discussed asymmetries which put tenants at a disadvantage, as well as the fact that these actions are inherently reactive. Legal actions are limited to reacting to the past actions of the landlord and are constrained by the restrictive bounds of the process itself. In order to use the law as a tool, we must simplify our own complicated reality, mounting an impromptu imitation of the landlord's bureaucratic apparatus to document and measure what we already know to be true. **Whether or not these actions succeed does not depend on the real needs and desires of the people involved. Instead, it hinges on our ability to perform this legal translation.** Considering these factors, undergoing the immense effort of involving the legal system is only effective in the most clear cut cases.

The accuracy of this analysis was made abundantly clear in the events of the recent rent withholding by the Spaulding tenants in response to Fishman's legal failure to provide heat. These actions on the tenant's part are legal actions, and so they are dependent upon the legal system. While the tenants engaged in legal action, Fishman engaged in real action. Before the court even began to pass judgment on whether Fishman or the tenants were legally in the right, Fishman considered the withheld rent unpaid, increasing the requirements to resign while also reporting it to new landlords so moving tenants could not easily find new rentals. Tenants have become trapped in a frightening Catch-22 **simply for trying to assert their legal rights.** Are Fishman's actions legal or illegal? **The reality is that they are neither, and the question doesn't matter at all.** Fishman is free to **act with impunity** until the court comes to bear on the situation, safe in the knowledge that the difficulty of mounting a legal battle on the part of the tenants is a near impossible task. **In other words, the law does not apply to Fishman's real actions.**

Our only alternative to legal action is to refocus our resources on real action. This might mean leveraging the real economic power of the union into a full rent strike, or it might mean smaller actions which return agency to the tenants themselves (a "tenant special" to match the notorious "landlord special"). One benefit of

this type of action is its potential to be proactive. The law may be the landlord's greatest weapon when it comes to proactive tenant activities, but as a reaction, it constrains him just as much as it constrains tenants. The tables are turned, and it is now the landlord who must perform the legal dance. The requirements of the landlord's reactive legal action give the tenant union a powerful opportunity to disrupt the landlord as he attempts this delicate process. From this standpoint, the law serves as a guide to our opposition's actions, dictating exactly what he must do while we remain unconstrained in our strategy. Real action allows us to act independently of the landlord and the legal system, recentering our actions around tenant needs.

It is clear that the most powerful form of action available to us as tenants is **proactive real action.** These actions are the only type which directly address our needs as tenants instead of reacting to the landlord or relying on external systems. The landlord rightfully fears these real actions, because he knows that any course of action which strengthens the tenant union's position directly weakens his own. In other words, **our needs as tenants are directly opposed to the landlord's need for profit.** In this struggle, the landlord counts on the threat of the law and the corresponding allure of legal action to maintain a monopoly on real action. Until we undertake our own real actions, the landlord's monopoly remains intact and the struggle remains hopelessly tilted in his favor. But there is a precondition for our real actions. We cannot abandon the limited offensive power we gain from the law without something more effective to replace it. That new source of power is **the tenants union,** the single precondition for undertaking real action. By acting as a union, we derive our strength from our greatest advantage: **that the resources the landlord needs to mount his end of the struggle begin in the hands of the collective tenants.** The tenant union holds the key to the landlord's power over the individual tenant, now we must use it.



"So the lawyer's methods, to which K, fortunately, had not long enough exposed, resulted in this: that the client finally forgot the entire world, desiring only to trudge along this mistaken path to the end of his trial. He was no longer a client, he was the lawyer's Dog."
- Franz Kafka
The Trial

³ What we have here called legal actions should not be confused with the action taken by lawyers in court. Actions in court take place outside of the domain of tenant action, and therefore only the preparatory actions taken outside court (our legal actions) can be considered a possible course of action for the tenant union.

⁴ The fact that landlords cutting corners at the cost of tenant quality of life has its own colloquial expression goes to show how regular these actions have become. Although this lack of proper care is often seen as neutral, the landlords clearly understand the oppositional interests between the tenant and landlord that these cut corners express. This "landlord class consciousness" can also be seen from such events as the recent AAGOA "landlord self defense classes" held in LA. For a more immediate example of landlord real actions, see the later paragraph on the Spaulding rent withholding.

RENT WITHHOLDING, RENT STRIKE, RENT SABOTAGE

1. Rent withheld and rent strike

In January, 21 of the 45 tenants living in a Mark Fishman property on N Spaulding Ave. withheld half of their rent. This came in response to a prolonged period of faltering radiators over the previous month, culminating in a total heat failure on Christmas when temperatures were subzero. Within the North Spaulding Renter's Association, this event has simply been referred to as 'the rent strike'. The minutiae of this activity have been recounted elsewhere in numerous ways¹, so I will not rehash them here. Instead, I want to put down some thoughts about the strategic and tactical character of the action in a more theoretical manner as a contribution to our reflections. From this I hope to make some distinctions about what types of activities are at our disposal, not only in the extraordinary times but in the ordinary ones, too.

To begin, we need to distinguish between a rent strike and a rent withholding. While we have called the events at 2330-2338 N. Spaulding Ave. a rent strike, they were technically only a rent withholding.

What distinguishes a rent withholding is that it is retroactive and contractual. Tenants who participate in a withholding respond to some event that has already happened. They work to recuperate money that they paid out, but for which they did not receive an equivalent value. We can understand the principle behind a withholding by observing that when tenants pay rent on the first of the month, they become creditors to the landlord. He becomes their debtor, and has to supply them with services that add up to that initial value over the course of the month. So when the Spaulding tenants paid December's rent, they were extending an interest-free loan to Mark Fishman. He had to repay them in services. But when the heating failed in mid-December, this repayment did not occur. The tenants thus chose to withhold part of the next month's rent, in order to recuperate what was lost.

A rent strike, on the other hand, is forward-looking and oriented toward future action. In a rent strike, the tenants refuse to pay the landlord on the first of the month. But this action is not recuperative—that's the key difference. It is geared to coerce the landlord into transforming an ongoing state of affairs pertaining to the use-value of the tenants' housing. Say, for instance, that the heat at Spaulding had gone out in December and was yet to come back. A strike would be underway if the tenants refused to pay in January (and February, March and onward) until the heat was repaired.

Strikes and withholdings are thus distinguished by the different temporal directions they embody. Strikes are future-oriented; withholdings remember the past. Similarly, while both strikes and withholdings invoke the cash nexus—money exchanged for services—emphasis falls on different sides of it. The withholding is recuperative and emphasizes exchange-value, i.e. the exchange-value equivalent of what happened or failed to happen. The strike is anticipatory and emphasizes use-value, i.e. the withholding of exchange-value until the use-value of the commodity (the apartment, the building) is suitably modified. As unionists, we need to understand all of this, so that we can correctly assess our strategic options.

The withholding's emphasis on exchange-value has a downside. The extreme limits of withholding can be seen at Spaulding #1. In the time since January, the tenants have been lured into the juridical sphere by virtue of the fact that what a rent withholding ultimately attempts to do is challenge contractual terms, not the status of the contract itself. A rent withholding concedes the validity of the contract by implicitly agreeing that, in our case, a certain quantum of radiator heat is equal to a certain amount of that thing called money. Therefore, if the landlord does not deliver, the tenants do not need to pay. The choice not to pay is legitimate according to this logic. It should be protected by law, the state should protect tenants against retaliation by the landlord, or even punish him for non-fulfillment of contract, rather than punishing the tenants for the same thing (as happens in eviction proceedings, etc). As soon as a concrete situation between a tenant and a landlord becomes a contractual dispute, professional legal specialists are required to be brought in to then "represent" the tenants to the landlord and vice versa.²

The struggle inevitably becomes one over the interpretation of the contract as it pertains to the law at large, all for a grievance that is in the past and has ostensibly been resolved in its real history (the heat had already been turned back on). In this form it continues to linger in our present, as little more than a protracted haggling over a pot of money.³ What is more, this "struggle" is undertaken not by the immediately affected parties, but by their representatives: their lawyers.

By contrast, a rent strike keeps the world of laws and contracts at a distance. Here, the contractual equivalence between rent money and services is not essential. Nor is there a contractual dispute that invites the supervision of the state. This is because the whole interaction emphasizes use-value and thus dances around the state's legal net.

"[Fishman] strikes me as a gigantic baby with a wad of cash in its hand, and it's alarming that a company like this could hold as many properties as they do, and be responsible for the shelter of so many people"

Tenants withhold rent. But they do so as a means of economic coercion, like a boycott. Not paying puts economic pressure on the landlord. In the final instance, it attempts to coerce him into making desired changes.

None of this intrinsically involves the mediation of laws or equivalent exchange, though the state remains present and ready to intervene. The state can call it legal or illegal. People who look at the contract can call it justified or unjustified. But those things relate to it only as external sources of avowal, not inner principles of action. To put it brutally, a rent strike is not about money. It's not about getting money back, in any case. It's about altering the concrete situation. For this reason, a rent strike keeps the tenants in the center, as authorities on the use-value of their own housing, without their power and initiative being siphoned off by hired lawyers. It does not waste its time attempting to quantify services in money terms, nor does it necessarily check to see if the changes it seeks are protected by the law. It recognizes real power and meets it with real action. The real relation to shelter is emphasized; the contractual-relation to the landlord is subordinated.

2. Rent sabotage

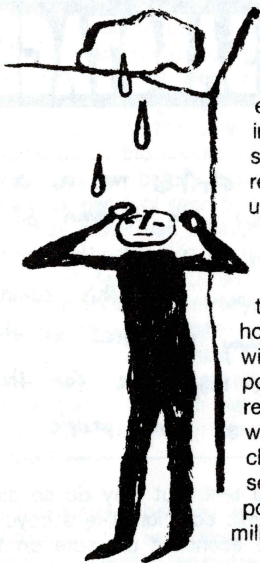
"We must work at forming a militant organization and conducting political agitation even in 'drab' and peaceful conditions, and even in the period of 'declining revolutionary spirit.' More than that, it is precisely in such conditions and in such a period that this work is necessary, because in the moment of outbreaks and outbursts it will be too late to set up an organization. The organization must be ready, in order to be able to develop its activity immediately."
- Lenin

We have argued that rent strikes are fundamental to tenant organizing. But rent strikes use money and private property as instruments of power. They work to take those instruments of power, which usually are used by the landlord against the tenant, and flip the script, so that tenants have the power. In other words, the tenant moves from being dominated by another's private property to using that other's pri-

¹ See Chicago Sun Times, "After 2 weeks with limited heat, some Logan Square tenants refuse to pay full rent"

² Please see "The Law" in this issue for a clear articulation of why engaging with the law via lawyers is foundationally a class issue.

³ I don't mean to dismiss the material significance of saving money here.



vate property against them. We have captured this idea, elsewhere, by saying that tenants' self-organization replaces an "absent unity" with a "present unity".⁴ We have also observed the limitation of rent withholdings and how withholding rent proposes a tenant's reading of the law without posing a challenge to law itself, resulting in a political morass for militant tenants.

While the strike is superior on that score, it is not entirely free of contradictions of its own. Socialists desire revolution out of the capitalist system. But doesn't a rent strike pose a challenge to the way an individual landlord wields his property without necessarily challenging the institution of private property itself? Can a rent strike be called revolutionary in this light?

Obviously, socialists and revolutionists must use the instruments found on hand toward our own devices—though critically. The productive question is not whether rent strikes are 'truly' revolutionary or not, but rather this: is there such a thing as a revolutionary tenant? It is only a tiger's leap from this question to ask the more blunt one, "do tenants have a distinct role to play in socialist revolution?" This question embarrasses us because American socialists are so housebroken that the mere consideration of ourselves as potential revolutionaries makes us blush. So let us consider first the less titillating but no less interesting question: If there is or can be such a thing as a revolutionary tenant, what does a revolutionary tenant do? What is their ordinary activity in day-to-day life, outside the exceptional circumstances that bring rent strikes and withholdings into our field of action? What is their culture?

First of all, a revolutionary sees it as a strictly historical misfortune that shelter is held as private property. They do not necessarily have a positive macroeconomic vision of how this must change. But they know it must be one that properly accommodates the most banal fact of them all: people appear on earth by no choosing of their own. They arrive ass-naked and screaming into the world and the absolutely mandatory first step that must be taken by the newborn's receivers is to shelter it again. The socialist knows that shelter is one of the preconditions of life. They understand their society as having a duty to receive its new members

and to pledge itself to paying careful attention to the organization of the production and reproduction of these preconditions. They know that the past inequalities created in lieu of this—racism and slavery, imperialism and colonialism, patriarchy and the subjugation of women, etc.—must all be destroyed with the sledgehammer of revolution. They know that there is a profound contradiction between markets⁵ on one hand and the necessary preconditions of life the other. The "first-principle" observations here are highly general, while the housing struggle is only one of many fields where revolutionary fever must take hold of the masses. So how does the tenant act on revolutionary principles?

Our position is that the tenant must attempt to build a bridge between revolutionary principles on one side and day-to-day life on the other. This requires an organization able to sustain a revolutionary culture, even through unrevolutionary times. And while we do not deny the importance of the commonplace objectives of the popular tenant movements, we believe that organizing must resist the temptation to hone in on the ends to the detriment of the means. This paradox has no easy-to-explain justification. But we must not be afraid to live in that paradox. Our end is an international socialist revolution. But we know that there can be no end where there is no beginning. There is no now and then, the revolution is in process. This means that we are revolutionaries and our pedagogy must at its source train us to know ourselves this way in spite of the reality that the vast majority of our time will not be spent in heightened, revolutionary situations. Just as a revolution produces its revolutionaries, so does a union produce its unionists.

If this thought appears to be in reverse, it is only because we fail to think dialectically. So perhaps one of the first things we can say about revolutionary organizational culture is that it must be one of political desire. The revolutionary tenant must concern themselves with a certain degree of intellectual activity directed at a critical understanding of their world politically and historically in order to change it. However, as soon as we think we have arrived at such self-consciousness through study, we just as soon claim an image of ourselves that is defined by our desire for a radical new world.

But how long can this mirror-gaze last before our appearance dissolves under the corrosive force of the encroaching future? Revolution perpetually arrives never-quite-complete and thus it continually beckons us back into the sensual world every time the class struggle flares up, only to send us back home again to the revolutionary organization, our political center, where we dissect our mutilated desires. This is indeed a pedagogical problem and we might suggest that the union itself is a school, if nothing else, one where ten-

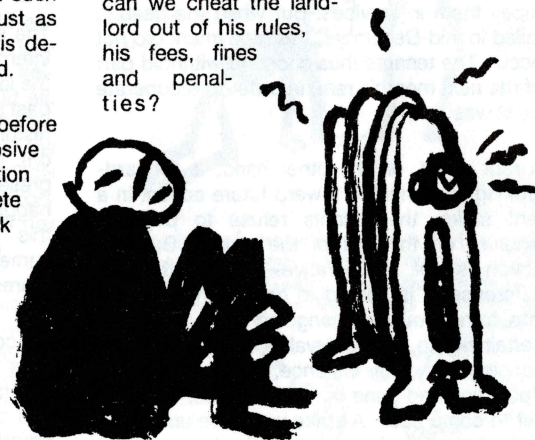
ants must continually reinvent a genuinely radical pedagogy.

A revolutionary tenant attempts to understand the reality of renting, of course this includes a basic education in legal and monetary policy, its links to financialization, central banking and the highest levels of the state. But more than anything else, they must aim their school at that moving target of the future, desired yet not imagined. The organization must have a bullet-proof soul to survive a paradoxical life that constantly asks it to throw up images of the future today, knowing that what is desired will not be imaginable until tomorrow.

To live coolly inside this contradiction, the revolutionary's day-to-day practice must be filled with experiments in how tenants can steal back, piece by piece or in large heists, the ability to watch over their own fortunes, to extract their lives out of the landlord's nightmare and return it to their own collective dream. They must begin organizing their lives in this way immediately, where opportunities arise to do so.

They must be willing in these actions to break juridical and unwritten rules. It isn't cavalier to say so, especially when we consider how laws (both juridical and normative) allow landlords to place draconian constraints on all meaningful political work directly in the lease. By simply congregating in the common areas of their building, tenants violate the contract. By knocking on their neighbor's door, they break lease along with the social codes of white propriety. By passing out flyers and information about the union, they commit crime and risk annoying those used to social quiet.

The revolutionary tenant violates these laws because the revolutionary tenant answers to a different purpose. They reject with disgust what our good liberal doctrinaires and their police say about what is right, what is good, what is allowable in life. They abhor the ideology that calls for the quiet and never-disruptive neighbor. For this, they are called saboteurs. They must be saboteurs. How can we cheat the landlord out of his rules, his fees, fines and penalties?



⁴ See Absent Unity, Present Unity, Solidarity in the current issue.

⁵ By this I mean the so-called "housing markets." For our purposes this includes not only the market for finished, complete homes and apartment buildings, but everything down the chain required to produce, manage and trade housing. General commodities markets for building materials (lumber, steel, glass, brick, fuel), labor markets, land markets, etc. More significantly for most tenants and their landlords are the financial markets, where credit and money is found, where mortgages exist to be securitized and exchanged.

How can we wage permanent conspiracy against power—that-is? How can we shed with revolutionary hatred the ways we have been shaped by racism, sexism, all the social violence of class society? These are the questions to which a proper culture must address itself among revolutionary tenants.

Rent strikes and rent withholdings will continue to emerge for tenants in extraordinary times as actions available to be taken when the conditions call for them (and conditions certainly will call). But for all of the ways that these activities must inevitably parlay with the legal and monetary realms—realms completely alien to our

dream of socialism—there remains beneath it all a foundational political life that urgently needs to be laid down in both theory and practice. Because, after all, when the rent strike ends the landlord will be there just as he was before asking for your rent check.

Why does capitalism make it so difficult for us to live our values every day? What as-of-yet unknown desires are waiting to be discovered when we approach the solution to “the riddle of history?” Can we act in new ways, right now, in our homes? How can we sabotage the absent organization of capitalist society and replace it with our own? What do we have to give and

take from our comrades worldwide? What can we teach ourselves about how to manage our own housing? How can we modify our buildings, or even break them in ways that improve our lives and hinder their operation as rent-extracting machines?

These questions must concern us no less than those about when and how to engage with the law, when to weaponize our rent money and certainly no less than the questions related to the standard-fare organizational tasks that must go on during the dog days of building a new type of militant, revolutionary tenant union.

ACTIVE SOLIDARITY

I was out this past Sunday and hadn't had my usual caffeine fix yet. Before I could take my phone out to search for nearby coffee shops, I noticed that Colectivo Coffee was just a few steps in front of me. Not only could they give me coffee, but I—knowing they recently went public with their unionization efforts—could show some solidarity with the workers there. After ordering my coffee I asked if they were one of the union shops. The barista tepidly replied that “Ya, we all are, but it's still in the process.” I grabbed my coffee and said I supported them. Then I went on my way.

Is this solidarity? Does politics in general boil down to simply saying that you believe in a cause? If so, why do my attempts at solidarity feel so insubstantial, like slapping a bumper sticker on my car and calling it a day? Clearly I crave something deeper when I practice this form of politics, this thing we call solidarity. How can we make the tiger's leap from the passive world of slogans into the active world of struggle?

Before we answer that question, we need to interrogate why individual sloganeering is the most common mode of “solidarity” we see today. If there is an active alternative to things like bumper stickers and Instagram posts, there must also be a reason why the latter is more prevalent.

Perhaps this can be traced alongside the general trajectory of left-wing political power over the past few decades. Political labor struggles reached their zenith in the 1930s and 1940s. The result was a racialized regime of collective bargaining that significantly raised the living standards of the white working-class. The same could not be said for non-white workers, who struggled against racist hiring policies and exclusionary unions when it came to selling their labor-power. This arrangement held until the 1970s, when a prolonged economic crisis and a falling rate of profit propelled companies to relocate their factories—the breeding grounds of labor struggle—to countries where workers were paid less and had fewer protections. Intense union-busting by companies and anti-worker, pro-business policies by the state piled on top of this capital flight. This attack struck a racially divided working-class that was unable to

effectively fight back. Thus, the levers of societal control workers once had relative access to began to vanish. You can't strike or bargain over workplace control if your factory relocates to Indonesia; you can't act in solidarity if there's no organized struggle to support.

That history can't be the whole story, though. Class struggle didn't end in the 1970s, it just changed form and saw its class character de-emphasized in the public eye. International



movements against neocolonialism and border apartheid roar on in places like Chiapas and Palestine. Popular movements against anti-Black violence and transmisogyny continue to flow in the United States. Movements for queer, disabled, and Indigenous futures join them. Feminist struggles continue as well. Yet it appears that voicing individual support is often the only way non-insiders participate in these movements.

There are stakes at hand in these struggles. Our ability to live and build a better world together hinges on the success of these movements. Given that fact, it's worth asking what these individual and passive acts actually do to advance those struggles. Does putting a 'Black

Lives Matter' sign in your window actually increase the possibility of Black emancipation? Or does it make you feel like you're doing something and signal to your neighbors that your moral conscience is in the right place?

These types of acts make us feel good. They make us feel like we aren't actively ignoring the ills and struggles of the world. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, though; we should get a sense of satisfaction from attempting to participate in the social construction of a better world. There should be both comfort and excitement in solidarity. But if these acts end at individual satisfaction and a whisper into the world of struggle, are they really doing anything? Are we okay with the idea that our ability to affect the world is relegated to our individual actions at specific venues like the ballot box, the courtroom, or social media?

If not, then it is up to us to embark on a different path of solidarity—an active solidarity. This active solidarity would require social participation in the support of an ongoing struggle. It would require actions that increase the ability of the struggling group to achieve their present goal. But what kind of actions bridge the gap between stochastic individual performance and an integrated social struggle?

Paradoxically, the distinction hinges more on the context of the action rather than the action itself. In the right context, say on the fiftieth day of a strike, signs in a window can act as a morale boost for the striking workers instead of just signals of virtue. It gives the workers a little slice of social power that can motivate them to continue their struggle against their bosses. Or in the context of my coffee solidarity, if the workers asked the community to come in on a specific day and voice their support, my individual voice would become a constituent component of a concentrated social support.

A common thread between these actions is that they involve interactions between people. They don't cast off our beliefs into the world of “discourse,” they operate through actual relationships with other people who would benefit from our support. Building these face-to-face relationships creates bonds that allow information and ideas to flow outside of official

channels of politics—channels that are designed to reproduce the stunted form of politics we're trying to break free from. To practice solidarity in this way, you must open yourself to others. You have to engage with real people and figure out how to act effectively.

More involved actions like joining a picket line, providing food to workers, or organizing a solidarity strike are increasingly potent examples of the same thing. Those acts are quantitatively different from the symbolic acts of solidarity above in this context, but exist on the same qualitative plain. All of those examples of active solidarity occur in tandem with a group engaged in struggle and increase the leverage the struggling group has over its opponent. They are qualitatively different from individual acts that reflect your beliefs, but reach out to nobody in particular. It is the social context of a solidaric act that determines the qualitative character it takes.

There is clearly a quantitative difference between having your neighbors put signs in their windows and organizing a solidarity strike at your workplace—the latter would almost certainly lead to a greater increase in power than the former. But the low-stakes nature of sign-posting can offer an on-ramp for people interested in the struggle, who may not yet be militant or in a situation that lets them do something more intense. These actions deepen the relationships that allow for political information to flow and trust to grow, creating the rich humus from which more audacious actions sprout.

Take NSRA's recent rent withholding as an example. The rally held at the Spaulding building created an opportunity for varying quantitative degrees of active

solidarity. Those who showed up were able to increase the tenants' leverage by putting direct public pressure on Fishman via their visible support and the spread of information regarding the situation. They also gave the struggling tenants socially-generated motivation to continue their fight. This was a relatively low-intensity event of solidarity, which allowed for easy participation.

However, the rally did not make Fishman forgive the withheld rent. This leads us to ask the question: what act of solidarity could force Fishman to give in to the tenants' demands?

"I've learned that our landlord legitimately fears tenants organizing in any capacity and will stop at nothing to fight against tenants having control over our living conditions."

If we assume that Fishman's ultimate pressure point is his bottom line—the profits he extracts from tenants—then it follows that stopping his flow of money could work. Tenants in Fishman's other buildings could organize themselves appropriately and stop paying rent until he agrees to the demands of the Spaulding tenants. It is impossible to know what level of financial damage would make Fishman fold, but the critical artery of his business would suddenly be constricted in that act of solidarity.

Both of those examples—a rally and a rent strike—increase the leverage of the tenants, but on quantitatively different levels. Conversely, if there were a house in Irving Park that had a 'I Support Tenant's Rights' sign in the front yard, that wouldn't affect the Spaulding tenants in the least. It

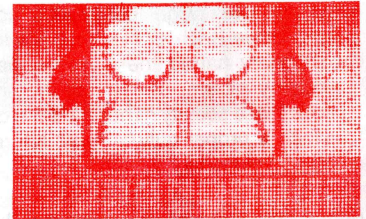
would just signal a moral position to their neighbors—it would be passive, not active solidarity.

Now we have the theoretical framework of what active solidarity looks like: an act that engages with other people and increases the leverage of a specific group in struggle. Let's use that framework to analyze my coffee solidarity. Did I engage with other people? Yes, I talked directly to a worker and knew about the union through my social circle. Did I increase the leverage of a struggling group? Though only to a tiny degree, yes. I gave a member of the struggling group moral support. So yes, it was active solidarity after all.

And if I were to return to the shop and build a relationship with the baristas there, this small act could develop into larger acts, perhaps ones that bring together their union and our tenant union.

Why does any of this matter? Why is active solidarity—increasing the leverage of a struggling group—something people should do? To committed socialists and anti-capitalists in general, the answer should be obvious, but it's worth saying. We exist in a capitalist totality. Every act of production and circulation of capital—from wage labor to paying rent—is a constitutive part of the whole of capitalist society. If we want to escape from the horrors produced by private ownership and the violence that it requires, we must embrace those around us and support the struggles of those working against capital. If this support is carried out strategically and frequently, so as to increase the possibility that a struggling group will achieve its goals, we will increase the likelihood that our collective struggle will succeed.

This practical unity, the combining of forces to help each other out, is the essence of active solidarity.



A/C FOR FREE! DON'T PAY THE FEE!

In May it will have been 1 year since Dolores McNeely, Janice Reed and Gwendolyn Osborne, three elderly tenants in Rogers Park, died in their apartments from heat exhaustion. Their landlord repeatedly ignored tenants' complaints about dangerously hot temperatures. But guess what?

There is no law in this city that requires landlords to provide safely cool apartments during the summer.

As heat related deaths become more frequent and extreme temperatures become a more immediate crisis around the world, surely it is time that the city matches its winter heat ordinance with a cooling ordinance to protect tenants from negligent, profit-rabid landlords. But we can't wait for the aldermen!

With summer fast approaching, tenants need relief **RIGHT NOW**. NSRA believes that Mark Fishman's policy to charge tenants \$50 to have their A/C installed in their units is low-down, dirty, sociopathic price-gouging and nothing else!

If you feel like we do and already have an A/C unit, the tenant union is offering FREE A/C installation and training on how you can install it yourself in the future!

Save your money! If you do not have a unit and don't want to pay \$250 dollars to rent one from Fishman, let us know and we will try our best to locate one and install it for you.

Text us at the number below, a fellow tenant will reach you and schedule a time to visit and help :)

ABOUT N.S.R.A

North Spaulding Renters Association attempts to fix building issues and negotiate lower rents by organizing tenants to fight together. We also host cultural and educational events based on a common desire to build a sustainable, militant socialist culture in our union that takes our activity and interests beyond the narrow scope of the housing struggle in Chicago, with the goal of investigating the tenant's role in socialist revolution.

"What do we want to do with our lives? How do we get there?" // **Develop radical culture with us.**

JOIN N.S.R.A



TABLING SCHEDULE

With the weather warming up, N.S.R.A. will continue tabling as a means of spreading the word and recruiting new tenants. Catch us out and about in the Logan Square / Humboldt Park area **every Sunday @ 11 a.m.** until it's freezing again.

Location	Date
Logan Square Monument Park	11 a.m. April 23, 2023
Unity Park	11 a.m. April 30, 2023
Humboldt Park (Kedzie & North)	11 a.m. May 7, 2023
Palmer Square Park	11 a.m. May 14, 2023
Logan Square Monument Park	11 a.m. May 21, 2023

TEXT US @ 443-347-4626