

TENANTS TALK

SEMI-REGULAR CHICAGO TENANTS NEWSPAPER

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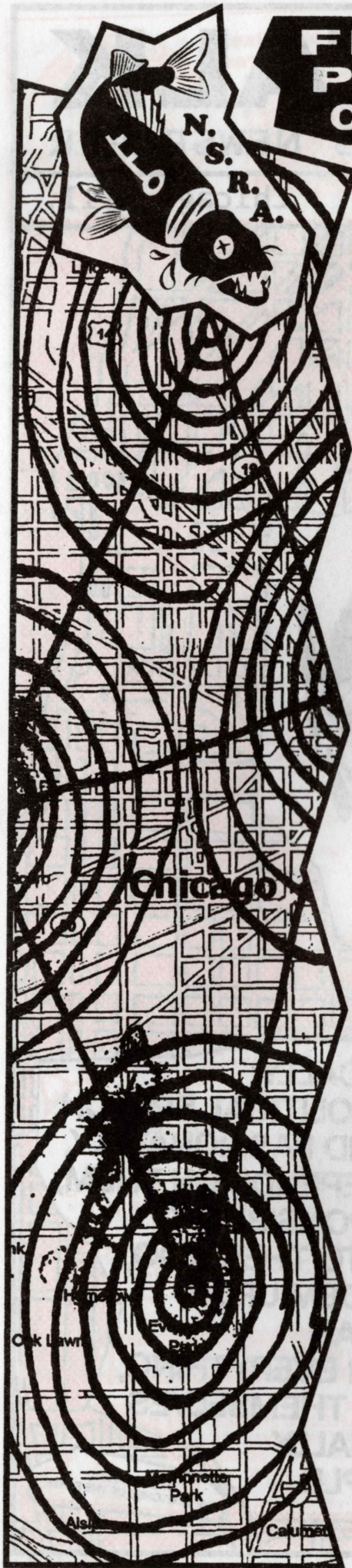
Chicago, Ill.



**TO EDUCATE THE MASSES POLITICALLY
DOES NOT MEAN, CANNOT MEAN, MAKING A POLITICAL SPEECH.
WHAT IT MEANS IS TO TRY, RELENTLESSLY AND PASSIONATELY,
TO TEACH THE MASSES THAT EVERYTHING DEPENDS ON THEM;
THAT IF WE STAGNATE IT IS THEIR RESPONSIBILITY,
AND THAT IF WE GO FORWARD IT IS DUE TO THEM TOO,
THAT THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A DEMIURGE,
THAT THERE IS NO FAMOUS MAN
WHO WILL TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR EVERYTHING,
BUT THAT THE DEMIURGE IS THE PEOPLE THEMSELVES
AND THE MAGIC HANDS ARE FINALLY
ONLY THE HANDS OF THE PEOPLE.**

FRANTZ FANON,
THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH

FLOOR-PLAN OF THE PAST AND FUTURE OF CHICAGO TENANT UNIONISM PART 1



The Ballad of the Chicago Tenants Movement

This is the tale of the contemporary Chicago tenant struggle. It begins, as all historical facts now do, with the pandemic. In those early days of 2020, many tenants anticipated that a mass wage freeze was imminent. It was feared that thousands of people would be left without the ability to pay rent.

The city and federal government stepped in quickly with eviction moratoriums, policies that drove landlords to hysterics for months. It was never entirely clear if the measures were intended to be in the name of public safety (containment of the virus) or were a response to the simple fact that rent can't be paid without income, and it would be politically absurd to evict the entire city. But of course, when the people who do not own their homes lose their income, the people who do own them lose it, too. *Mi casa no es su casa, pero su dinero es mi dinero*, as the landlord's prayer goes.

It was easy to recognize that this situation would startle the landlords from their profit-induced stupor. It was obvious that the landlords would have to awaken from their idle banditry of tenant's wages and saddle-up for a phase of activity more akin to a roving band of outlaws, securing the rent bag by more villainous means. The city's moratorium did not "prohibit landlords from initiating eviction procedures against tenants," after all, so long as tenants posed "a direct threat to the health and safety of other tenants or an immediate and severe risk to the property." There was a way to evict them. With their right-to-evict sanctioned on one side and the rock of mounting mortgage debt on the other, landlords commenced (or, rather, carried forward the tradition of) forcing and locking tenants out of their homes, destroying their belongings and generally harassing them. Nevermind the implications of de-housing people in a pandemic.

In anticipation of this moment, the Chicago Tenants Movement (CTM) was born. Given the scale and the sudden manner in which the crisis arrived, it's understandable that CTM took shape the way it did. The organization understood itself first and foremost as needing to protect tenants. But during its two years in the position of tenant bodyguard, the organization was never able to move beyond taking the corresponding position—that is, a defensive one—against landlord terror.

By this, we mean the organization was **reactive**. They ran a hotline where tenants could report issues and request aid, particularly in emergency situations. In this form, CTM was caught dashing from call to call, arriving at new scenes and looking at new situations with new

eyes. There was no possibility of long term tenant buy-in, no possibility of building unions, no matter how many tenants they encountered. It was trapped in a game of cat and mouse with the landlords and their barrage of legal and extra-legal evictions. The landlords were always prepared, the tenants never. How long can an organization constantly on the back foot last? And how can it be effective if it's showing up for the first time everytime? In the early months of 2022, CTM died much as it had lived. The tenants' defender lay in the street, having failed to return a single shot.

However, in the early days before it became overwhelmed, CTM was able to kick-start a handful of tenants down a different path. North Spaulding Renter's Association (NSRA) was one such organization. It was initiated by a tenant named Kat and another, Ben, who organized a successful campaign to get landlord Mark Fishman to stop collecting rent at the outset of the pandemic. Kat and Ben appeared in CTM meetings and consulted with them. But they stayed focused on the protracted self-organization of their neighbors, i.e. creating a durable union of tenants. Unlike CTM, this was not a crisis management service.

When CTM burned out, NSRA remained. It wasn't a surprise. However, unlike CTM, NSRA is not a city-wide organization. It practices and has developed a theory of landlord-specific tenant-unionism. That is, it focuses on one individual property owner (Mr. Fishman) to whom its members pay rent. It calls this model of working 'Intra-Landlord Organization', or ILO. It is a self-imposed constraint, restricting the organization's activity to the limits of a single financial portfolio. But when scaled up to the level of the city at large, NSRA believes intra-landlord organization reveals a path toward what CTM failed to realize. What tenants need more than anything is not defense, but **power**.

The truth is that evictions and lock-outs, like every instance of landlord terror, are merely the off-gas from a more fundamental emergency. The landlord-tenant relationship itself. And this is a symptom of a still more foundational crisis: private property. Additionally, it is often the long-term, not the passing crisis in which tenants get most thoroughly ensnared. A landlord might back down from an eviction, but still send a tenant's debt to collections. They might turn a tenant's water back on today, but negatively embellish their rental history in an application reference which prevents them from renting tomorrow. If we keep these examples in mind, the spot-checks of tenant defense are obviously insufficient.

What tenants need are resilient organizations. What's urgent is not a 911 call-center for tenants—however operative—but something **durable**. An organization that might be capable of holding tenants firmly in an offensive formation, leaving them prepared for protracted struggle against landlordism as such. Organizations

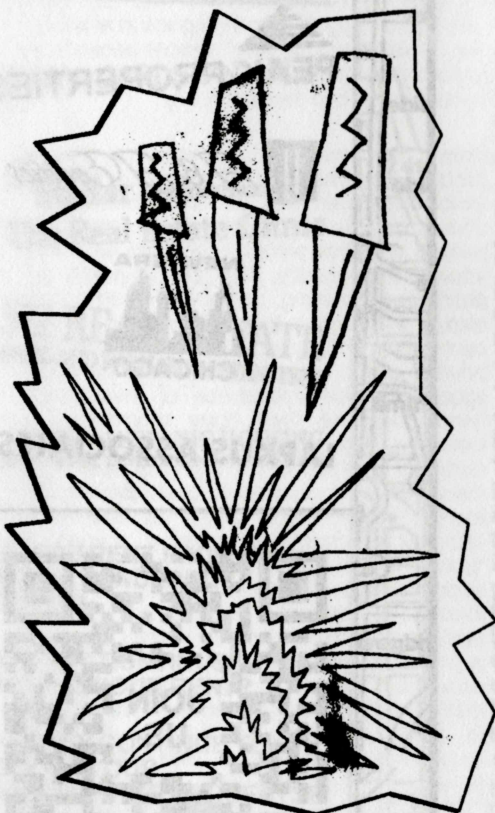
¹ This type of hyper-general language will be recognizable to anyone familiar with Chicago's Residential Landlord and Tenant Ordinance (RLTO) where statements purported to be tenant protections in word are landlord protections in deed. In the vast open country of 'risk to the property' landlords have a virtually limitless territory to roam. They have never had much trouble convincing the court that the most banal behavior of tenants are in fact disguised, nefarious plots against property.

like these would preexist all symptomatic crises and provide tenants a permanent high-ground from which to attack and defend. They would exist **at the source**, that is, drive a permanent wedge into the landlord-tenant relation for each particular building and each particular landlord.

Such organizations need to be created. But more than this, we need to create a tight network of them, spanning the whole city. NSRA dreams of propagating this movement by undertaking the work of identifying new properties to target, finding the tenants living in them, and training those tenants in the art of organization, drawing on its own experience. When that happens, an All-Chicago alliance of landlord-specific organizations will be born. We imagine this alliance as one that convenes regularly, allows one ILO to train another, sets up a "tenant school", and strategizes collectively. All while being able to mobilize on one another's behalf, for moments when the struggle becomes acute.

Blueprints for city-wide tenant organizations are available in nearly every other major city in the US. Look at Los Angeles (LATU), Kansas City (KC Tenants), Oakland/SF (TANC), Brooklyn (Crown Heights Tenant Union), Minneapolis, Boston, Houston. Even in dozens of small towns, local tenants have run laps ahead of the tenants of Chicago. Meanwhile, our landlords advance full-steam ahead, as powerful political actors with little standing in their way.

So what are we waiting for?



Outlines of NSRA's Organizational Philosophy

a. Intra-Landlord Organization

Why organize on a by-landlord basis? In broad strokes the ILO theory begins like this:

In addition to its existence on the soil, an apartment building has a duplicate existence as a number on a landlord's balance sheet. For the landlord, nothing beyond this sheet exists. His entire universe is contained therein.

A balance sheet is divided down the middle into two sides. An **asset** side and a **liabilities** side. Abstractly, assets are money coming in and liabilities are money going out. A 'liability' is sometimes called a 'promise to pay'. It goes without saying that whatever amount of money a landlord has promised to pay, he must first possess, which he does via the items on the asset side. Hence the reference to 'balance': if \$100 is scheduled to flow off the liabilities side of the sheet, there must be an equivalent \$100 coming in on the asset side. If his assets and liabilities are balanced at the moment that payments are due (it is standard for this to occur monthly), he should have no problem.

An asset might appear, at first glance, an extremely obvious thing, but further analysis reveals complexities beneath its surface. Few assets affirm this more clearly than an apartment building. In its asset-existence, an apartment building exists at a given time as a number which signifies a certain amount of money. Say, \$100. This money is stamped on to the asset side of the balance sheet, because it is something the landlord owns. But we must understand that while \$100 looks permanent written down there on the sheet, it is only a static representation of something that is actually dynamic. It's only a name. Just as the Nile River is only a name fixed permanently in place on this page, while it describes a thing that by definition cannot cease its legendary movement.

The asset which an accountant names "\$100" refers to a **flow** of money. It's a river of money, though it appears like eddying stillwater. Flow, in the parlance of investors, is 'cash-flow.' It's what every asset provides to its owner in a given proportion. When this asset is an apartment building, the source of the flow is the tenants. They are the river's source. It's not hard to see how this material is at home in the financial concept of **liquidity**.

Now, let's say this asset is balanced by a corresponding \$100 on the liabilities side. Again we are looking at a fluid state of affairs. The tenants' rent flows "into" the balance sheet, but it does not stop there. If that were the case, "\$100" this month would pool-up, rising to "\$200" next month and then "\$300", etc. But it remains "\$100". This is because as soon as rent payment arrives, it goes right

back out to the landlord's creditors in the form of a payment for debt (e.g., a mortgage, though in real life it's usually a more complex financial instrument)². Just like tenants' rent is recurrent, so are our landlords' debts. We owe them, they owe the banks.

The Intra-Landlord Organization is only a fancy name for a tenant-union which recognizes this state of affairs and organizes accordingly. Canonically, mass tenant organizations work on a block-by-block or neighborhood basis, indiscriminately targeting every building in a specific area. But this approach silences the fact that **different buildings belong to different economic flows**. They are each assets belonging to specific landlords, who manage them as items on specific balance sheets. Real leverage therefore comes not from 'absolute mass', i.e. from the total number of tenants recruited, but from the 'relative mass' of tenants in proportion to particular balance sheet flows, i.e. the proportion of a given flow that has been organized.

The ILO strategy is a brand of tenant-unionism that emphasizes the tenant's unique capability to interrupt liquidity. It presupposes a weapon of choice: the rent strike.

The rent strike is the tenant's heaviest sword because it realizes directly what other weapons can only threaten to realize. For example, when activists pressure lawmakers to require that landlords assure the temperature of their units, landlords comply at a level that is proportional to their willingness to take on the financial penalties associated.³ These types of acts surely go "against the landlord." But only the sense that a shield goes "against" an opponent. They don't **necessarily** result in retaliatory economic violence against him. Therefore these types of measures might be said to be strictly defensive, shields rather than swords. The same goes for the other incidental weapons like mobilizing voters and influencing popular opinion.

Not the case for the rent strike. The strike doesn't beat around the bush, it beats around the bank. It takes advantage of the umbilical cord that ties the ILO to the landlord's circuit of capital. It is a blade that is not available to a constituency of voters and lawmakers. Tenants alone can swing the sword and cut the cord. This is about economic coercion. Even when direct tenant action does not culminate in a proper strike, it is the **threat** of the strike that lives, as it were, rent-free in the brains of landlords. The power to sever liquidity is what backs a tenant-union's demands.⁴

b. Two commitments: notes on the relationship between means and ends

NSRA fancies itself a revolutionary, communist organization. What does this mean? It means we believe that one of the bedrock preconditions required for mankind

² The cash flow-to-debt ratio is not precisely 1-to-1, in reality. Allowances must be made for profit, after all. But these divergences are immaterial to the point being demonstrated.

³ Chronic violation of the heat ordinance in one of the long-standing petty crime sprees for which landlords enjoy general impunity as a class. If a violation is even reported in the first place, trivial penalties might come in the form of direct fines and auxiliary legal and administrative expenses. Apologists might point out that landlords nonetheless eat the costs associated with legislative compliance. But they often profit even here. For example, it's plausible to say that when the heat ordinance was first codified and regular heat services mandated, landlords had to install new technologies and upgrade rental properties. But where do these fixed capital investments materialize on the balance sheet? Do these raise or lower the book value of the property? Do they give the landlord an excuse to raise the rent or lower it?

to begin the project of saving its own life is to eliminate the **private** ownership of the means of production. Currently, by and large, the tools and materials that the broad masses of people need to live and reproduce themselves are owned by a minor share of individuals and firms.

This results in a state of affairs where the people who directly produce and consume these materials do not own them. They become a certain class of people who are at the mercy of the class of people who do.

There are few places where this contradiction is more immediately evident than in an apartment building, where the person who owns it may have never set foot inside it, while the people who live there have no say in the manner of its operation. We are against all of this, to say it simply. Which is to say, we are communists.

How does tenant unionism relate to this? Many people are used to thinking of tenant unionism and communism as related, because the two seem to inhabit the same circle of associations. Socialists are not the only activists to have organized tenants, of course. But the sense of common ground between socialism, communism, labor-unionism, and tenant-unionism is undeniable in the popular imagination. Everyone knows they are all of a piece; and to a great extent this common ground can be historically demonstrated.

However, as soon as this link is established, a new problem emerges. We seem to be **tenants in real life, communists in the realm of the imagination**. Being a tenant is a more concrete experience. We wake up and sleep in our apartments. Landlords send bills that arrive in the mail. The sheriff knocks if we don't pay rent long enough. Communism, by contrast, is not so tangible. It seems to exist only as an intention. As a desire for and commitment to a political future. A communist appears stuck referring to things that seem fantastical, far removed from the here-and-now immediacy of the tenant's reality.

Nevertheless—we hold that we are communists first, tenants second. We hold that to view ourselves the other way around, as tenants **only**, or as tenants in the only **real** sense, would be a betrayal. We wage war on the specific landlord because he has presented himself as a convenient object on which to work. But we will not do this at the expense of making peace with the institution of landlordism itself. That would be to make peace with the institution of private property, and behind it, capitalism writ large.

Therefore, we must always be hunting for some dimension of our activity that brings communism closer despite not knowing exactly where "it" is. Some might call this a paradox, but NSRA calls it the contradiction that gives us life.

What does this look like? "Doing communism" cannot be measured, of course. Tenant unions have to "do" tenant struggle, which means they have to concern themselves with particular activities that improve how tenants experience

life in the landlord's yoke. These activities have generally recognizable forms, established by long historical experience. We have already named several: rent strikes, eviction defense, lobbying governments for support, etc.

Carefully deployed over the medium to long term and rooted in a coordinated network of ILOs, these activities can put tenants in a position to orchestrate controlled demolition. At minimum this could recalibrate the machinations that now exist between tenants and landlords, trapping the latter within an unfamiliar regime. One where tenants have to be considered seriously as a negotiating partner, not just as an increasingly minor paper tiger to be pushed over in the forward march of capital.

The pie in the sky aim is to detonate commercial real estate as an attractive investment for capital—that is, as **assets**—using synchronized, tidal waves of rent strikes, like so many well placed packs of C-4. This is a tall order. It will require a careful consideration of the economic and political situation at every step, a forecast that lies well beyond the scope of this article.


But truth-be-told, for NSRA, it is not positive what any of this has to do with communism. In any case, these forms of struggle are the **means**. As tenant-unionists, the ends are the destruction of the landlord-tenant relationship. But as communists, **the end** is full scale revolution. As so positioned, it seems obvious to us that the communist tenant-union must direct its efforts forcefully toward the critique of this relationship itself—the relationship of means and ends. If it is not enough to equalize the landlord-tenant relationship, our tenant-unionism will demand that we find a way to shatter it. And when we sweep away the debris, we will likely discover that this is still not enough. Our communism will then implore us to figure out what is. Communism or nothing.

On one level, as a microscope can reveal the complex within the simple, within the universe of tenant-struggle a whole dynamic set of means and ends can be found and analyzed. But as a telescope then reveals what was just discovered to be complex as an infinitely simple and insignificant element of a larger picture, the tenant-union is only one speck in a sky full of galaxies. The question is how or if tenant-unionism can become a vehicle to carry this higher voyage. Either way, NSRA views this problem as a pedagogical one, i.e. as something that requires practical and theoretical investigation. It is pedagogy that we strive to make synonymous with our culture. And so goes one of our mantras: **el sindicato es una escuela y nada más...**


In issue #5 of Tenants Talk, we will conclude these outlines by describing what it means when we say that our organization is a school, how this is the only way for the struggle to persist through contradiction, followed by the conclusion which charts a first step toward forming an alliance of ILOs across the entire city. In the meantime, the entire piece is available right now in a stand alone pamphlet, available directly from NSRA at our Sunday tables or wherever you might find us.


* The rent strike is not like a labor strike. 'Strike' in the case of rent is a misnomer. A rent strike is more like a supercharged consumer boycott. In a typical boycott, a part of the market abstains from purchasing a certain commodity. It follows that boycotters must then abstain from consuming the product, as well. This leaves the merchandise in the hands of the seller, who may ultimately find a market that is not shopping with the same political considerations. But for tenants on strike, the boycott is enhanced by the fact that they stay in their homes, they continue consuming the product. This is why landlords react like rent strikers are stealing from them. If we fetishized the right of property as they do, we'd be happy to agree.


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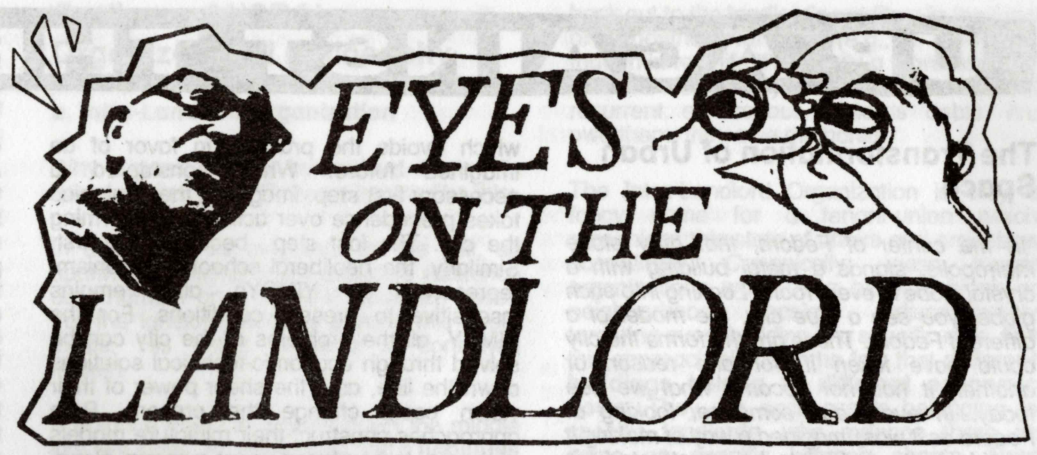
**DO YOU RENT FROM ONE
OF THE LANDLORDS
ABOVE?**

**DO THEY CONTINUE
RAISING YOUR RENT?**

**DO THEY CONTINUE TO
IGNORE YOUR
MAINTENANCE REQUESTS?**

**START A TENANT UNION!
WE WILL SHOW YOU HOW!**

**SCAN THE QR CODE TO GET
IN TOUCH!**



Tenant action is gaining momentum. In recent years, landlords have become more and more emboldened in their ruthless extraction of profit. As a result, tenants are stretched thin, ready to snap back against these so-called "housing providers." Already we see inspiring groups of tenants starting to band together, refusing to be pushed around! Here are some examples from a summer that has proven even more fissile than the last one:

Lawndale Rent Strike!

Tenants facing egregious conditions in Lawndale have begun to withhold rent, refusing to be pushed out as building conditions decline. Multiple buildings in the 312 Real Estate portfolio have come together to form a tenant union, using their collective power to level the playing field. The strike will continue until 312 takes their maintenance requests seriously and improves their living conditions.

O'Shea Neighbors Unite!

In Beverly, a group of tenants are facing "soft eviction" through rent increases and non-renewals. This comes after their apartments were purchased by Levav Properties, a large corporate landlord. The tenants have formed an organization to push back. O'Shea Neighbors United spoke to the press on July 19th.

When speaking to Tenant's Talk, an O'Shea Neighbors United tenant named Kelis Knight described what it's like to see how gentrification unfolds in her neighborhood:

"I have seen some changes take place over the years whilst in Beverly and I know change will happen as it should. I totally understand that "change," is inevitable but, with everything it becomes a question that should be addressed in an open dialogue when it comes to these types of changes. I would say that the rent increases and the term "mass evictions, gentrification, or priced out," is the new silent trend that is occurring in the front yards of Beverly. Honestly, I was totally caught off guard and never would have expected something this ugly and/ or this magnitude would come and break the hearts of so many of our Beverly neighbors."

Knight expressed excitement and hope moving forward. Since the press conference, the tenants involved in O'Shea Neighbors United have negotiated relocation assistance from Levav. See the full interview on the NSRA substack.

Creation of the Fair Tenants Union!

Notorious slumlord Gary Carlson has allowed the conditions in his buildings to grow so poor that the Chicago Housing Authority canceled its contract with him. However, the cancellation has left tenants who use CHA Section 8 vouchers without housing, since they can't rent with Carlson anymore and don't have other affordable options. In response to this situation, the Fair Tenants Union was formed, bringing tenants together to demand a safe and affordable post-Carlson place to live. Recently CHA announced it would provide relocation assistance to the tenants displaced, scoring a win for the union.

A Bigger Fish to Fry!

Tenants in the Ellis Lakeview Apartments in Kenwood have been facing years of indifference from their landlord. This year, they tried a new strategy, which finally seems to be paying off.

The strategy involved targeting how the building was financed. The landlord, Apex Chicago, originally purchased the building using a loan. Like all scumbag slumlords, Apex Chicago hoped to spend as little as possible on building maintenance, while servicing the loan with tenants' money. However, by allowing the building to fall into an extreme state of disrepair, which included a profound pest infestation, Apex Chicago violated the terms of their loan. Tenants picked up on this fact and called on the lender, Freddie Mac, to foreclose on the building. They succeeded! Freddie Mac began the foreclosure process this summer.

It's expected that Freddie Mac will attempt to sell the building quickly. This gives tenants a valuable chance to act. In fact, these events are unprecedented in the Chicago tenant movement, so the tenants will be breaking new ground if they proceed. One possible way forward: the tenants could ask the city to assume receivership of the property, with an eye to adding it to the affordable housing stock.

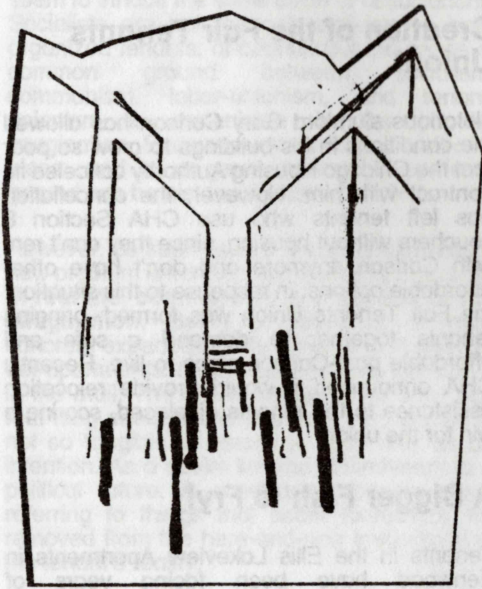
Involved in one of these situations or similar action? We'd love to speak with you for the next issue of Tenants Talk! Reach out to us on Instagram (@nsra.chicago), on Twitter (@NorthRenters), via email (northspauldingrenters@gmail.com) or text (443-347-4626)

UP AGAINST THE WALL

The Transformation of Urban Space

"In the center of Fedora, that gray stone metropolis, stands a metal building with a crystal globe in every room. Looking into each globe, you see a blue city, the model of a different Fedora. These are the forms the city could have taken if, for one reason or another, it had not become what we see today. In every age someone, looking at Fedora as it was, imagined a way of making it the ideal city, but while he constructed his miniature model, Fedora was already no longer the same as before, and what had been until yesterday a possible future became only a toy in a glass globe."

- Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*



All too often among urbanists, looking forward involves closing the eyes and retreating into the city of the mind. This should come as no surprise. It is, after all, easier to imagine a city without problems than it is to make one. As a result, imagining the future has come to be seen as radical in itself. As opposed to this forward looking imagining, the definite task of the radical tenant is to look to the city of today. The seeds of the city of tomorrow exist in the city of today. Whether those seeds can grow and develop freely or whether they are uprooted and displaced depends on our action, or inaction, **now**.

The recent collection of writing called *Make the Golf Course a Public Sex Forest!* is one example of radically-oriented speculation, presenting transgressive utopian fiction about public space as an essential start to making such a space. Writing on the collection, the editors declare that "public space is what we need, not in the narrow sense of government-funded projects but rather in the sense of open, non-hierarchical containers for a range of different uses and possibilities." In response to this urgency there is only dreaming, analysis, and inquiry of the sort

which avoids the practical in favor of an imagined future. When considered a necessary first step, imagining these utopias takes precedence over actively transforming the city. The last step becomes the first. Similarly, the neoliberal school of urbanism, represented by YIMBYs, also remains insensitive to present conditions. For the YIMBY, all the problems of the city can be solved through economic-technical solutions down the line, as if the sheer power of their vision could change the present. Both approaches construct their miniature models of the city to be placed under a crystal globe, all while the city transforms around them.

Again and again, these grand visions of the future city fail to materialize, primarily because the real forces of urban change occur prior to any conscious plan. The capitalist city operates according to the indomitable logic of the market, and as a result its transformations appear as unpredictable as natural forces, following laws and tendencies, but never subject to absolute control. To those who the market benefits, this is as it should be. Any extra-economic influence on the city becomes relegated to the public sphere and the private remains safely in the hands of the market. If we are not satisfied with the status quo and want the city to change, however, it is more important to understand the interpenetration of public and private than to view public and private as distinct spheres. To do so we must look to the process beyond the immediate appearance of the city.

The city, at first glance, appears to follow the famous "determination in the last instance" by economic forces which determine the demographic layout of neighborhoods. It is ultimately economic influences such as rent and cost of living increases which push people out of their homes, and the changes in the market correspond with gentrification of certain neighborhoods. Because of this, changes in the private space in the city seem to lead the transformation of public space, which is determined by the demographics of the neighborhood around it. Stopping the analysis here, as the most steadfast apologists of capitalism tend to do, leaves us no room to act against the market. At this economic point of the analysis, the market and all of its unsavory effects are an inevitable driving force in society. We know, however, that there is more at work than the market in the process of urban change. This can be seen most clearly in the phase of that change which we call gentrification.

In the process of gentrification, the interrelation of public and private space is at its most evident. It is undeniable that the state's influence on public space plays a role in the gentrification of neighborhoods, and that disruptions of public space such as increases in policing or public development projects oil the wheels of change in the private space of a neighborhood. In the process of urban transformation, public spaces are never "for" the public of the present. The shape of these spaces is tailored to the public of the future, as

envisioned by economic interests in the city. All too often we find ourselves caught up in the same forward looking energy, trying to build a utopian city without engaging with the city as it is—already rich with the people, places, and practices which will find their fullest development in a socialist society. It is also these aspects of the city which economic development inevitably effaces in its headlong rush into the future. As radical tenants we must see these conflicts between the vision of the city to come and the city of today and recognize them as potential sites of struggle.

Cruising and Public Space

"The human being has the need to accumulate energies and to spend them, even waste them in play. He has a need to see, to hear, to touch, to taste and the need to gather these perceptions in a 'world'."

- Henri Lefebvre, *The Right to the City*

Social practices which take place in public space seem to be peripheral and nonessential parts of the city's development. This illusion arises when the history of the city is seen from the perspective of individual spaces such as neighborhoods, rather than the history of people and practices.¹ By shifting our perspective to that of the people, we see the development of the city as a series of struggles over the space in which we live. "Public" and "private" spaces cease to be separable categories of space. We need access to both to live in the city.

From the people's perspective, social practice becomes the primary filter through which we experience the city. Therefore, to understand the city, we must understand the people who live within it and the way they interact with the city. The predominantly gay practice of cruising, seeking out others for sexual encounters in public spaces, is one such practice. Cruising begins with a failure of private space. Men initially turn to public spaces for the satisfaction of their sexual needs because they have roommates at home, a wife, or even no private space available to them at all. Many closeted gay men partake in cruising to avoid making this identity public, which brings us to a major difficulty in classifying cruising spaces as "public" at all. In reality, popular cruising spaces such as public restrooms, public theaters, or secluded spots in the terrain of public parks cannot be easily categorized as public or private. Although they are publicly accessible, the privacy of the location is what makes cruising spaces viable. This difficulty to classify cruising is a boon to moral crusaders and gentrifiers alike who can pull on any public aspects of these environments in their calls to keep sexuality relegated to the private. In one moment public means "publicly owned", while in the next it refers to "publicly accessible". For many cruisers, pushing sexuality back into the private sphere also means an end to cruising in the area at all, due to the very failures of private space which brought them there in the first place.

¹ This perspective is reflected in tenant organizing when tenant unions form around neighborhoods, rather than the much more central social relation between tenants and their landlord.

Paired with the simultaneous economic displacement of people's private spaces which gentrification entails, cruising as a social practice is effectively eliminated.

The elimination of cruising ultimately takes place through specific mechanisms such as increased police activity in the neighborhood. Drives to "clean up a neighborhood" are thinly veiled calls for police to intimidate existing residents and make way for the next wave of investment. This is not a unidirectional causality, police presence increases as a neighborhood gentrifies, but that same police presence further constricts the social possibilities of public space. Those who partake in social practices such as cruising are removed from the very concept of "the public" and pushed out of the neighborhood both economically and socially. People become reduced to detritus to be washed away in service of the city itself rather than the very life which forms the social basis of the city. In other words, the city is no longer a space for people. Instead, people exist for the city, as the fuel for the city's own process of change.

This conceptual and physical exclusion of people from the concept of "the public" is at the core of the gentrification of public space. Displacement of the people who engage in a particular social practice such as cruising weakens opposition to the economic forces in the neighborhood, but more importantly it can be consciously carried out without threatening the autonomy of the market. This is possible in part because the distinction between public and private space provides the state with a field of jurisdiction "above" the economic sphere. Morality, decency, and criminality are all "extra-economic" concepts which are unevenly applied, privileging a specific idealized public over the one which actually uses the public spaces. Once cruising has been deemed "indecent" it can be safely eliminated from public space, leaving the people cut off from their social connections, and unable to push back as the rents go up. In this way, the state manipulates

the conditions of the housing market just as the landlords advocate for the "free market" with a two-faced smirk. The wildfire of gentrification follows the paths set for it while burning larger than any of us.

Even popular semi-private locations for cruising are not exempt from state interference. Samuel R. Delany's influential essays in Times Square Red, Times Square Blue, describe how economic and developmental interests gradually eroded the cruising scene in the Times Square porn theaters. Delany argues that this transformation reduces the number of interclass interactions between individuals, to the detriment of social cohesion. Despite (or perhaps because of) Delany's passion for this lost community, his hope that people will see the intrinsic social value of cruising fails to appreciate the scope of the problem. The process of gentrification is an intersection between otherwise distinct processes, leading to confusion about the forces motivating the change. It is tempting to see evictions, policing, and cost of living increases as either primarily part of the economic restructuring of the city or as one aspect of a socio-cultural process such as the homophobic moral crusades following the AIDS crisis, but we must resist the inclination to view either of the overarching processes as dominant. Instead, we should recognize gentrification as one phase of the broader development of the city and, simultaneously, as a crucial step in certain oppressive cultural processes. This double perspective allows us to view gentrification from multiple standpoints. Through this framework, we can see the intersection of these processes in gentrification as a way of tapping into the motive force of each other, constructively intensifying the momentum for the divergent portions of the processes to come. What this means for the radical tenant, is that this period of overlap gives us a critical opportunity for solidarity and unified struggle with other social conflicts in the city centered around race, sexuality, gender, or nationality.

Conclusion: The Right to the City

"Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor."

- Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

It is clear that our cities are not simply dead objects in which the living reside. These spaces are social products, produced and reproduced by our collective social practice and therefore subject to the tendencies and laws of capitalism's systems. But cities are also sites where we satisfy social and material needs. As we live in cities, the diversity and imagination of human sociality seizes upon the inanimate physical space, personalizing and humanizing it. Parks become bustling centers of activity, we affectionately name our streets, and our homes take on poetic qualities in our minds. The market's need to quantify and commodify the space we live in is not easily compatible with the human qualities of social space.

But the aim of the radical tenant is neither stopping the transformation of the city entirely nor accelerating the flow in the hopes that the city will develop into a socialist space. Instead we must choose our battles strategically, allowing the truly social elements of the city which already exist to develop to their full potential. This means both recognizing these practices and understanding them as moments of struggle. To neglect these struggles is to abandon the aims of radical tenant organizing in favor of short term concessions and gains. It is these very conflicts between our need to shape our environment and the market's need for constant expansion which we must take up as radical tenants, whether we find them in the apartment complex or in the neighborhood park.

★ OUR FRIENDS IN BURKINA ★

Burkina Faso is a small country in West Africa. It sits in the Sahel region, bordered by the Sahara to the north and the Sudan savanna to the south. It's an area with rich political history, which continues to this day.

The area now known as Burkina Faso was colonized by the French in 1896 and gained legal independence in 1960 as the Republic of Upper Volta. It turned towards self-determination in 1983 following a coup led by Thomas Sankara, a young revolutionary who would be a pivotal leader. Sankara's coup came after a wave of popular revolutions in Africa. These included the struggles led by Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Sékou Touré in Guinea, Amílcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau, and Patrice Lumumba in the Congo. The common thread in each was an anti-colonial, pan-African socialism that sought to unite the continent and break free from the chains of colonialism and capitalism.

Under Sankara's leadership, the country was renamed from the Republic of Upper Volta to Burkina Faso—a combination of Mossi and

Dioula words meaning 'Land of Upright People.' It subsequently embarked on a revolutionary process that included a nationwide literacy program, a massive vaccination drive, land redistribution to peasant farmers, railway and road construction, great strides towards gender equality, and the planting of over a million trees. This process came to an abrupt halt in 1987 when Sankara was assassinated by his former comrade Blaise Compaoré, who some believe was assisted by the French.

Compaoré ruled the country until 2014, when popular protests forced him to resign and flee to the Ivory Coast. This was followed by a series of elections and coups, with the country now being led by the 35-year-old military officer Ibrahim Traore, who serves as President, and well-known pan-Africanist Kyélem de Tambèla, who serves as Prime Minister. The two leaders have followed public sentiment in their moves to reduce French and Western influence in the country, and are forging an alliance with Mali, Guinea, and now possibly Niger with the hopes that African unity can aid in their pursuit of self-determination.

The Thomas Sankara Center

Inem Richardson is our comrade in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. She runs the Thomas Sankara Center for African Liberation and Unity, a small library for the public and a school for Burkinabe youth. She has recently rekindled the Young Pioneer program that previously existed during the revolutionary period under Thomas Sankara. The program aims to teach the students about the principles and histories of revolutionaries like Kwame Nkrumah and Thomas Sankara, and develop them into strong, caring people that will move Africa towards a united, self-determined future.

Interview with Inem Richardson

We asked Inem and the Pioneers some questions to get to know them and their situation better.

(See next page...)



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"I'm a housing provider. I'm giving them housing"



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ABOUT TENANTS TALK



Tenants Talk is produced by members of N.S.R.A. However, it is not intended to be an NSRA-specific organ. Rather, the paper covers the entire Chicago scene. We hope that Tenants Talk will one day speak for a wider alliance of tenant organizations, as this alliance comes progressively into existence.

What's the housing situation in Burkina Faso (BF)? Do most people rent? Is it affordable? Is there social housing?

Inem: Very few people in Burkina Faso rent. Private ownership of land is still a relatively new phenomenon and renting was never introduced into the country on any large scale. It is a little more common to rent within Ouagadougou but even here most families own their own homes. Most people live with their family, including extended family, well into adulthood. Traditionally when a woman gets married, she moves into her husband's home with her in-laws. In this case, many Burkinabe will stay in their childhood homes for most of their adult lives. This has changed a bit but it is still sometimes practiced. Rent is not affordable in Ouagadougou where there is a housing shortage. State provided social housing is also not so common but there is not widespread homelessness because social solidarity within the country makes it very very common for people to just live with extended family, relatives or sometimes friends long term if they do not have any place to stay.

Is the question of housing part of the revolutionary process there currently? Was it during the Sankara era?

Inem: I don't hear housing talked about so much within the context of Ouagadougou but more so in regards to the internally displaced peoples who are fleeing imperialist warfare and thus are losing their lands and are rendered without housing. The needs of internally displaced peoples are being taken seriously and the state is more so focused on a solution for those suffering from this crisis. During the Sankara era land reform was a major part of the struggle. It was mostly concentrated on the farmers in the rural areas who were exploited by what are understood to be feudal customs. In reality feudal customs regarding land were introduced by Europeans during the colonial period because prior to colonialism, the peoples of what is now Burkina Faso had no concept of the private ownership of land.

Interview with the Pioneers

What do you know about the United States?

Celia: I think the U.S. is a bad country because it took Africans to be slaves.

Esther: I believe that the United States has a plan so that Africa will remain divided forever. They created the CIA to overthrow Pan-African presidents and even to assassinate other Pan-Africanists.

Aida: It is a big and very rich country.

Sofiane: There are a lot of Africans in the United States. There is also colonization there. There are workers too. It is not a good country because they helped colonize Africa.

What motivates you to be a Young Pioneer?

Celia: Because I want to defend Africa and to chase the terrorists away.

Djibri: Because I want to help my country.

Esther: To struggle for Africa, to teach others about how the white people colonized us and about how we resisted and about how there were revolutionaries and how we also can become revolutionaries.

Sofiane: To fight the colonizers. I want to take up the defense of Africa.

Aida: Because during Thomas Sankara's time there were Young Pioneers. To help Africa progress.

Fatas: Because I want to help Africa to become independent. To help Burkina Faso become revolutionary.

What does Burkina Faso mean to you?

Celia: Burkina Faso is my country. Burkina Faso is a good country because it doesn't enslave others.

Esther: Burkina Faso is a country who had a revolutionary who was ready to sacrifice himself for Africa. Burkina Faso must unite with other African countries so that they will become one single country and so that they will have one single currency.

Aida: The land of upright men. It is an agro-pastoral country. Burkina Faso has a lot of cultures.

Fatas: Burkina Faso is a good country because Thomas Sankara helped Burkina Faso. I love the history of Burkina Faso and the history of Thomas Sankara. I would like to share the history of Thomas Sankara.

Djibri: Burkina Faso is a good country because the police defend us here.

Sofiane: Burkina Faso is the land of upright men. Burkina Faso is rising up to fight against the colonizers.

What did you know about the revolution and Thomas Sankara before becoming a Young Pioneer?

Celia: Thomas Sankara was assassinated. He helped a lot of people have access to food and water.

Esther: Thomas Sankara struggled for Africa. He was a revolutionary. He made Burkina Faso a revolutionary country. He said that he is only in power to listen to the people. He understood that one man could not change a country alone.

Aida: Thomas Sankara was a Pan-Africanist. He named the country Burkina Faso. At the Thomas Sankara Center, I learned that he created hospitals and promoted food sovereignty.

Fatas: Thomas Sankara helped Burkina Faso. He helped people work and farm.

Djibri: Thomas Sankara helped women. Thomas Sankara was a revolutionary. Thomas Sankara was nice.

Sofiane: Thomas Sankara was a strong man from Africa. He wanted to defend Africa but he could not totally defend Africa because white men came to Africa to take down our strong leaders.