



KINGSTON TENANTS UNION

KTU COVID-19 Livestream

March 27, 2020

DISCLAIMER:

We are not lawyers

The advice in this presentation is put together by
Tenant and Neighborhood Councils (TANC), a member-run housing organization
built out of the East Bay Democratic Socialists of America.

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TANC's Basic Principles

Tenants are stronger when they act together.

Confronting a landlord as an individual is daunting. But when we do it as a group, we can become more confident. No matter what, that's why you want to build a tenant council.

COVID-19 is not only a health crisis, but an economic and political crisis too. The current crisis is largely due to government negligence and the inability for capitalism to meet our basic needs. We need our needs met first and foremost.

For long-term power. The COVID-19 crisis is part of a long pattern of mistreatment of the working class. Serious change needs to happen. To do this, we have to get organized and stay organized over the long haul.

Against the housing market. The housing market, with its high rents, dilapidated rentals, and homelessness, benefits the rich at our expense. Landlords, speculators and venture capitalists benefit from the housing market while the rest of us suffer. Let's change that.

Against separation. We are divided by long histories of oppression and violence on the basis of ability, gender, language, nationality, race, sexuality, and other social differences. As we organize to meet basic needs, we must overcome these divisions. The rich and powerful will always try to pit us against one another.

Building working class organization. Our enemies—landlords, politicians, speculators, bosses—have their own political organizations that they use to get what they want. TANC is an organization of the working class, which includes anyone who is told to “work or die” because they lack meaningful ownership. TANC intends to become strong enough to take on the rich and powerful. Together, we can win.

Keeping ourselves and others safe and healthy. While organizing during the pandemic it's important to take precautions so that you don't endanger yourself or others. If you are not informed, please read how to [prevent the coronavirus disease](#).

Strategy: The Big Picture

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“Got Your Back Pledge” AKA “Strike Pledge”

- The basic idea: You plus any number of other tenants can't or won't pay rent. You get your fellow tenants to sign onto a “Got Your Back Pledge” letter that is then sent to the landlord. The letter notifies that landlord of the following:
 - There is now an established tenants council;
 - All issues relevant to COVID will take place through the tenant council, as a collective, rather than as individuals;
 - Certain tenants cannot pay rent during the COVID-19 crisis;
 - Tenants who cannot pay are asking for rent suspension due to COVID-19 crisis;
 - If the landlord retaliates, the tenants council is prepared to defend their colleagues;
 - The *maximum* tactic on the table is a rent strike, though other actions may be taken. Remember that a full-on rent strike can be risky. You want to know the risks before actually engaging in it.
- ★ Why we recommend this plan:
 - It automatically gives you some legal protection against retaliation by forming a tenants council;
 - It produces solidarity with those who cannot/will not pay without asking immediate action;
 - It forces the landlord to go on the record about their position in this difficult time;
 - It opens up new possible actions later on, and puts tenants in a better position for the long term.

How To Organize (quick)

Step 1

Plan and prepare. Gather materials, assess your situation, & stay safe!

Step 2

Connect and build. Talk to neighbors, collect contact information.

Step 3

Build a communication method and then have a tenants meeting.

Step 4

Notify the landlord and wait. Send the landlord an email/letter stating that (a) tenants have formed a tenants council, (b) some tenants cannot pay, (c) they demand rent forgiveness for the duration of the pandemic, and (d) the tenants council will defend these tenants if retaliation happens. Stay healthy and remain in touch!

The end goal
is to have a
letter to send
to your
landlord from
your newly
formed tenant
council

Step 1: Plan and Prepare.

- Consider who you already know.

If you have a good friend or a solid contact in your building, you'll want to start with them. If they get on board, you'll have extra help out the door. It's great to go into things with an ally.

- Gather outreach materials.
 - Digital flyers, building signs, sign up sheets
- Stay healthy.

Sample text message:

“Hey, hope you’re feeling alright. So, I don’t think I can pay rent this month because of the pandemic. I’m going to tell the landlord that I will not be paying this month, but I want to have support from other tenants before I do. Have time to talk about this?”

Step 2: Connect and Build.

When a landlord's tenants are organized to act together, they are in a more powerful position than when they act alone.

- **Building contacts**
 - The first step is to get organized into a tenant council with other renters
 - Start with your building. You may already know your neighbors, or at least recognize them
 - Travel to the other buildings, or contact them if you already have a phone number or email address
- **Connect with other tenants and get contact information**
 - Let the conversation flow, talk about your own experience
 - **No matter what, collect their contact information.**
Phone numbers are the most important.
- **Keep track of who you can't reach and circle back**
 - If someone isn't available, try them again later

Example questions:

“I know the housing market is wild right now. Have you had any issues with the landlord? Overdue repairs? Having any trouble paying rent? Are there any tenants in the building you're concerned for?”

Getting contact info from anyone:

“Either way, I think it's important for us to be able to stay in touch, especially with the pandemic. It's good to build some community and have each other's backs, you never know what will happen. Think I can get your email and phone number?”

Step 3: Building a Communication Method and Scheduling a Meeting.

- **Set up a communication channel for tenants.**
 - Use what is comfortable for the largest number of tenants, mass text thread or email, [Google groups](#), Facebook group
 - Be multilingual if your group is multilingual.
- **Encourage participation individually.**
 - Call and text people individually
 - Organizing is relationship building toward collective action.
 - Share the workload, ideally with a fellow tenant, but any friend will do.
- **Announce a tenants meeting to vote on the letter (if necessary)**
 - In-person meetings are not a good idea due to COVID-19.
 - It may be that a meeting is not necessary. For example, if your building is small and you've already been able to build consensus around the Pledge and letter to the landlord.
- **Have the meeting**
 - **Remind** everyone, have a **simple agenda**, have someone **facilitate** the meeting, have someone **take notes**.

Meeting Roles:

Reminder

Reminds everyone about the upcoming meeting

Agenda Creator

Creates simple agenda

Facilitator

Follows agenda, keeps meeting on task

Note Taker

Takes notes at the meeting

Step 4: Send the Letter, Expand.

- **Send the letter.**
 - Generic letter from tenant council to landlord. ([link](#))
 - Edit as you see fit. But the letter should announce that tenants are now **operating as a tenant council**, and it should list **specific demands** by the tenants
 - Send the letter once you have a critical mass of tenants sign on
 - [New York Consolidated Laws, Real Property Law - RPP § 230.](#)
<https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/laws/RPP/230>
 - If you never express your rights, or can't prove that you did, it's pretty difficult to claim your landlord is retaliating against you.
- **Onward: Find out how many other properties your landlord owns.**
 - You'll want as many tenants on your side as possible. KTU can help you learn what other buildings your landlord owns and where they are, so you can talk to all the other tenants.

One example is for the landlord to suspend rent while people are out of work. The reason it's important to announce that you're a tenant council and put your demands in writing is that, in addition to the strength of collective activity

Questions

Where does someone stand if they rent a space as a small business and you are out of work bc you are deemed non essential? I reached out to my landlord and they basically told me I was shit out of luck and that they had bills and I still owe them.

Questions

How can landlords keep us safe in regards to sanitizing their properties/common areas, especially if the building has many commuters from NYC? I apologize in advance if this forum is only about rent etc I was just curious. I have been spraying down the laundry room common area before I wash clothes in addition to the railings on my floor and outside door. Also, what happens if someone in the building tests positive for COVID-19?

Questions

I live in [REDACTED] Kingston New York as of April 1st I was given a rent raise plus an extra fee for them to redo the paperwork.

This is my third rent grade in the three years I have been living here. I work part-time in the health field and was laid off as of 1 weeks ago until further notice because of this virus. I have been owed money since January for the laundry room credit machine and have never been reimbursed for that either and I've asked many times if I can take it off my rent they say no because it's the laundromat company in their building.

I think it's only fair that they will put a hold to rent raises as of April 1st at least for 60 days until we are back on our feet again hopefully.

Questions

As of now some mortgages can be deferred for up to 12 months, eviction proceedings have been suspended, landlords have been encouraged to work with renters affected by this quarantine and job loss. My concern is that landlords and renters are still expected to pay as usual as it all has only been postponed. How are renters and landlords supposed to eventually pay their dues without income? Is the state or government working toward any type of debt forgiveness regarding this situation, or will everyone affected be in debt and evicted once this quarantine is lifted?



Call your representatives
and ask them to fight for
this bill:

<https://www.nysenate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/michael-gianaris/senate-deputy-leader-gianaris-calls-rent-suspension>

Questions

In light of the law which now prohibits landlords from collecting the last month's rent am I now entitled to either demand the return of this now 10 year old escrow deposit or demand that it be applied to the coming due rent? I have offered the latter option with no response yet from the real estate management company.

Questions

What do you recommend to landlords who want to do right by their tenants and don't want to put them in untenable financial situations during this crisis, but who will be accumulating potentially staggering debt themselves without rent income to pay their mortgages, even with forbearance options?

Questions

My landlord is willing to let me pay my April 1st rent late, and to waive the late fee that would normally occur for paying it late. She has both last months rent and a security deposit from me, worth two months rent total. She said she can use the last months rent I gave her as an emergency fund to deal with bills she pays for the house if I pay April 1st's rent late. However, she would want a plan in place for that money being paid back to her. I assume that we would be putting that in writing- that in writing it would say that I would be responsible for paying back the last months rent at some point or I would go into default on the lease and face penalties or eviction. I am hesitant to have anything like that in writing with such an uncertain future. Also, she can't accept May's rent being paid late because she doesn't have the reserves/resources to offer that without hurting her own financial situation. At this point I am really counting on rent freeze legislation to go through. If my landlord is only willing to accept April's rent being late if I sign something that says I will pay it later (or refund the last month's rent fund at a later date), should I sign something that says I will do that?