

HOW TO FORM A TENANTS UNION



By Eugene Housing and Neighborhood Defense

Adapted from the guide by LA Tenants Union

What is a tenants union?

Put most simply, **a tenants union is a group of tenants (people that pay rent to live in a building owned by someone else) who work together to improve their housing situation.** These groups could be comprised of renters from across a city, people that share a landlord/property management company, or people that live in the same apartment building. This guide will apply most directly to organizing tenants who share a building but can be adapted to other circumstances as well.

Tenants unions can be compared to labor unions, as they increase bargaining power of their members. However, a main difference is that tenant unions exist in a legal gray area whereas labor unions are more clearly defined in the legal system. This is actually a benefit to us, because **seeking reformist changes through the capitalist-owned courts and politicians will never truly alleviate, let alone end, our exploitation.** Instead, we need to organize to confront the ruling class directly and, with time, overthrow the current system to create a new one without landlords, bosses, or private property.

When created and operated with revolutionary intent, **tenant unions can be a powerful form of organizing.** They are a vehicle to build class consciousness, form networks of people willing to fight back against the ruling class, practice organizing tactics and strategies, and achieve and defend *real* wins for working people.

This guide was written based on the experiences and research of Eugene HAND and other housing organizations, however, it should not be used as a rigid manual on the only way to form tenant unions. Instead, it should be viewed as framework and jumping off point for people who want to get started on organizing with their neighbors.

Eugene Housing and Neighborhood Defense is committed to organizing a revolutionary housing movement with the working class of Eugene. We hope this guide will assist in creating one of the building blocks for this local and national movement: tenants unions.

Tenants Unite!

Step one:

Establish trust and support

1. First things first: you must build familiarity and trust amongst you and your neighbors! Talk to neighbors casually. Say hello in passing, offer to bring neighbors with mobility issues their newspaper in the morning, bring a simple meal to the family next door, help with carpooling if you are able, and check in on neighbors who appear to be struggling instead of calling the police.
2. Once you've broken the ice, ask for contact information. This will come in handy when forming the tenants union, but also in other situations such as a local emergency.
3. Host a get together with neighbors to build community. Plan a barbecue, yard sale, or kickball game in the summer, or a gift exchange, movie night, or potluck in the winter. Put up flyers and invite people by word of mouth.
4. When talking to your neighbors either at an event or at the mailbox, don't be afraid to mention any issues you're having with rent or repairs. Talk to them about tenant organizations you've heard of that use collective action to solve their problems.
5. Building trust to organize can take a long time. Capitalism intentionally breeds a culture of competition, antagonism, and distrust within the working class in order to keep us isolated from one another. We need to build relationships as neighbors and find common ground in order to stand up against those who exploit us. These are the first steps towards changing our neighborhoods and our society.

Step two: Canvass your neighbors

1. As you build trust, identify neighbors who you have strongest unity with. This means neighbors who agree on common issues and agree on the need to collectively organize to resolve those issues. Make plans to canvass your other neighbors together.
2. Do research on your property management company and/or landlord. Is your landlord a serial slumlord? Do they have a history of discriminatory practices? Do they own several other properties in the area? These are great talking points for canvassing.
3. When starting your canvassing, remember the golden rule of 70% listening, 30% talking. Don't lead with commands to organize, instead listen to your neighbors' issues, show compassion, and try to brainstorm together which exploitative practices by your landlord lead to these issues.
4. Keep track of names, unit # or addresses you canvass, and notes about your encounters. Note how long people have been renting at the location, what types of jobs people work and what their schedules are like, who has been evicted in the past and might have hesitancy to jeopardize their housing by organizing, who is renting with a Section 8 voucher, who has mobility issues and is stuck in a second floor unit, etc. These details allow us to connect neighbors with similar conditions and allows us to be mindful of individual barriers.

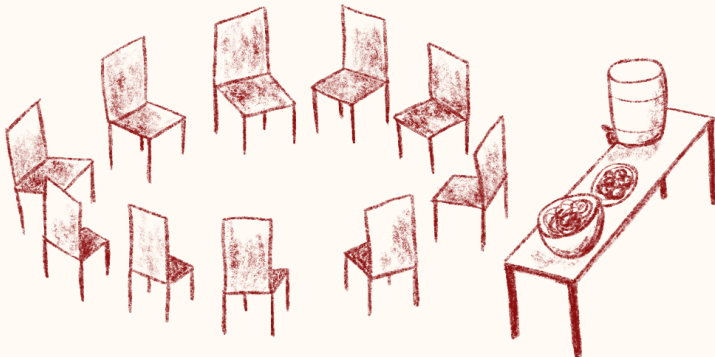
Step three:

Build your organizing committee

1. After a round of initial canvassing, revisit tenants with more direct questions about their willingness to organize a tenants union. Ask if people that seem interested if they are willing to find a time to talk further about organizing.
2. Invite those with high interest to join an initial organizing committee. Set a date and location that works for everyone to have a first meeting.
3. As an organizing committee, go over the information collected through canvassing and evaluate what the most important issues seem to be for you and your neighbors.
4. Discuss people's experiences in the past with organizing. Have people gone door to door for political campaigns? Participated in rallies against police brutality? Experience is not a requirement, but it is good to know where people are coming from.
5. Begin planning your first open meeting for all neighbors in your complex. This meeting should be informative and have lowest barriers possible for attendance. Review the following questions using canvassing notes: What times do most people get off work? Does anyone have mobility needs and require an accessible space? Are there families that may need childcare provided? Set a time and location based on the answers to these questions. Pick someone to facilitate.
6. Advertise the meeting. Go door to door, post flyers, and send texts, phone calls, and emails to everyone whose contact information has been collected.

Step four: Host an open meeting

1. Begin with introductions. Have people give their name and answer an icebreaker question such as how long have they lived there or their favorite thing about the neighborhood.
2. Go over the initial findings from canvassing and the main reasons collected so far for wanting to form a tenants union.
3. Gather additional concerns from attendees. Is rent going up? Do people have mold? Who is experiencing harassment from the landlord? Some of these will become your demands, so make sure to take notes about the discussion. Try to answer any initial questions people may have, while also making it clear that this is just the first meeting and many things will need to be decided all together at a later date.
4. Before ending the meeting, try to set the date and time for the second meeting to begin forming the union. Choose someone together who can facilitate that meeting.
5. If there were people who didn't make it to the first meeting, catch them up on what happened and inform them of the next one. Be inviting and consistent, you never know who was simply busy or may just need a small push to participate.



Step five:

Develop your purpose

1. Begin the second open meeting with introductions and review what the tenants discussed at the last meeting.
2. Brainstorm as a group why you want a tenant union in your complex. List the ideas on paper. These can include: pressuring the landlord to make repairs, mediating conflicts between neighbors, stopping landlord harassment, creating an eviction defense team, participating in larger struggle in your area against gentrification, reducing the need for police in your neighborhood, etc.
3. Discuss the importance of having a group of people working towards these goals. Could an individual tenant rent strike to put pressure a landlord? No, they would likely be evicted. But when we unite together, things are much more achievable.
4. Push back against reformist suggestions like lobbying for "better" tenant protections. Remind attendees that a tenants union's strength lies in its ability to do direct mass action and combat exploitation on the ground. Instead of spinning our wheels trying to get small wins from a broken system, we are constructing the foundation from which we can create an entirely new system free from landlords.
5. Delegate someone to turn the list about why you're forming a tenants union into a "mission statement". This mission statement will become a part of a "tenants union agreement", a document that will house everything agreed upon so far and form the basis for the burgeoning union's structure.
6. Set the next meeting.

Step six:

Identify and assign roles

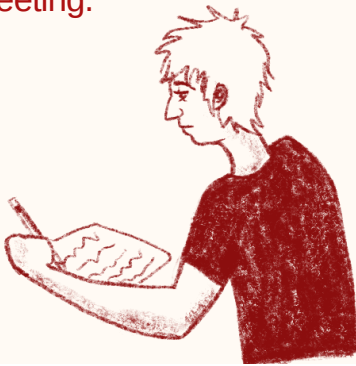
1. Review and affirm the mission statement.
2. Begin making a list of the roles that you think you will need in your tenant union, including 1 or 2 leadership positions. Other roles you might want are a meeting note taker, someone to onboard new members, a designer for event flyers, a point person for an eviction defense squad, etc.
3. Brainstorm the skills that the people present have. These may include home repair, deescalation, first aid, meeting facilitation, child care, and graphic design. Based on these skills, discuss who may be best suited for which roles. Identify any necessary skills that may be lacking in your current group and who would like to take on learning one or two of these.
4. Discuss who is interested in a leadership role and how often you will hold elections. Leadership does not have to be people with the most organizing experience, but they should be committed to learning and guiding the union in its efforts. Plan to hold your first leadership election at your next meeting.
5. Assign someone to draft a list of roles for your tenants union agreement.
6. Set the next meeting.



Step seven:

Outline commitments

1. Review and affirm the mission statement and the list of roles.
2. Elect leadership based on the last meeting's discussion.
3. Brainstorm your commitments to each other as neighbors and members of the union. List commitments to which you are willing to be held accountable as a group. These could be "attend at least one meeting a month", "be ready to respond to an eviction defense", "don't talk to the landlord without another union member present", "contribute \$10 in dues a month", or "do not call the police for disputes at the complex".
4. After making the list of commitments to each other, write down guidelines for how you will respond as a group when someone violates these commitments. Are some commitments more flexible than others? What will you absolutely not tolerate? Conflicts and disagreements are inevitable but with clear guidelines and a strong focus on relationship building many struggles can actually make the union stronger rather than just creating tension.
5. Delegate someone to turn the list into the "membership obligations" section for your tenants union agreement.
6. Set the next meeting.



Step eight: Finalize the union

1. Review and affirm all parts of the tenants union agreement composed over the previous meetings.
2. Create a signature page and collect signatures from as many tenants as wish to join the union-- print and sign the leaseholder's name, unit number and phone and/or email.
3. Compose a letter that announces the formation of your tenants union and lists your initial demands.
4. Make sure everyone who join the union gets a copy of the letter and the tenants union agreement. Send signed and dated copies of the letter to the landlord and/or property management company.
5. Congratulations on forming your tenants union! This is an amazing accomplishment for both the members of your union as well as the revolutionary housing movement and working class struggle as a whole. Keep momentum going by setting clear goals and planning additional tactics to get demands met such as hosting rallies, contacting press, and rent striking. Build union's power by bringing in new members through canvassing neighbors and holding open events. Celebrate the small and big wins together, and never forget the ultimate goal to topple the capitalist system and build a new world where we can own and manage our housing together.



**Love your neighbors with conviction,
defeat landlords, stop evictions!**



Eugene Housing and Neighborhood Defense is an organization of tenants dedicated to defending our working class neighbors from exploitation by the capitalist class. We are developing networks of tenants to combat landlords, property managers, and developers and fighting to build a world free from these class enemies. Get in touch with us to learn more and to get involved in the movement we are building. **Together we will win!**

Learn more at **eugenehand.org**



eug.hand



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