

# HOW TO ORGANIZE 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 of some kind to live in a building owned by someone else) who organize together to improve their housing situation.** These groups can 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. Apartment buildings are well-suited to organizing due to close proximity of neighbors who have a clear common enemy: the landlord.

**When created and operated with revolutionary intent, tenants 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.

Tenants unions can be compared to labor unions, as they increase bargaining power of their members. However, a significant difference is that labor unions are more clearly defined and encouraged in the legal system than tenants unions. This is actually a benefit to us, because **seeking reforms through the capitalist-owned courts and politicians is not an effective strategy for change.** Since the legal system is designed to benefit the very people who oppress and exploit us in our homes and jobs, the laws will always work to ensure that those in power can keep their power. The ruling class has to make sure that no matter how hard we lobby or who we vote for they can continue squeezing us for every last penny. **So instead of spinning our wheels engaging in their system, 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.

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 tenants unions. Instead, it should be viewed as a framework and jumping off point for people who want to begin organizing with their neighbors. Getting started may seem daunting, but together we can win!

**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. Do they have the same issues? Also talk to them about tenant organizations you've heard of that use collective action to solve their problems, and see what they think about the idea.
5. Be consistent. 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, ask about what issues your neighbors are having as a tenant, listen deeply, show compassion, and try to brainstorm together which exploitative practices by your landlord leads to their issues.
4. Keep track of names, unit numbers or addresses you visit, and notes about your canvassing. Note things such as 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.



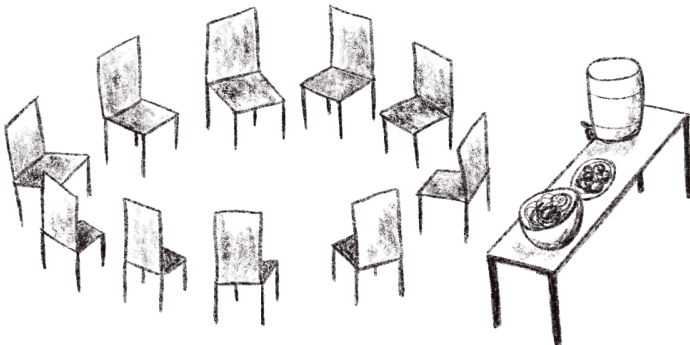
# Step three:

## Form an organizing committee

1. After a round of initial canvassing, follow up with your neighbors with more direct questions about their willingness to organize a tenants union. Take note of those who seem enthusiastic about the idea and make sure you have their contact info.
2. Invite those with high interest to join an initial organizing committee. This committee is simply a group of people able and willing to get the ball rolling on the actual formation of the tenants union. These may be the people in leadership later on, or they may not.
3. Set an organizing committee meeting date and location that works for everyone. Aim for something within a week or two if possible.
4. 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.
5. Begin planning your first open meeting for all the neighbors in your building. This meeting should be focused on 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 widely. 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 the open meeting with introductions. Have people share 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 compiled so far for wanting to form a tenants union at the building. 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 researched, discussed, and decided all together at a later date.
3. Gather any 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 collective demands, so make sure to take detailed notes.
4. Before ending the meeting, set the date and time for the second meeting to begin forming the union. Choose someone together who will 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 objectives

1. Begin the second open meeting with introductions and review what was discussed at the last meeting.
2. Brainstorm as a group why you want a tenants 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. However, when we unite together, things are much more achievable.
4. Gently push back against reformist suggestions like lobbying for "better" tenant protections. Remind attendees that a tenants union's strength and purpose lies in its ability to do direct, collective 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" (see the example in the back of this booklet). This mission statement will become a part of a "tenants union constitution", a document that will house everything agreed upon so far and form the basis for the burgeoning union's structure.
6. Set the date and location for next meeting.



# Step six:

## Identify and assign roles

1. Begin the third meeting by reviewing, editing, and voting to approve the mission statement.
2. Begin making a list of the roles that you think you will need in your tenants union, including one to three leadership positions (depending on how many people you have). You may want to consider continuing with the organizing committee model.
3. 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.
4. Brainstorm the relevant skills and experiences that the people present have. Has anyone door-knocked for political campaigns? Participated in rallies against police brutality? Organizing experience is not a requirement, but it is good to know people's backgrounds and what strengths they have. Skills to take note of may include home repair, deescalation, first aid, meeting facilitation, child care, and graphic design. 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.
5. Use identified skills and experiences to discuss who may be well-suited for the roles you discussed earlier, including leadership roles. Leadership does not have to be people with the most organizing experience or knowledge, but they should be people committed to learning and guiding the union in its efforts. Discuss how often you want to have elections. Plan to hold your first leadership election at your next meeting.
6. Choose someone to draft a list of roles for your constitution.
7. Set the date and location for next meeting.

# Step seven:

## Outline commitments

1. Begin the fourth meeting by rereading the mission statement, and reviewing, editing, and voting to approve the list of roles.
2. Elect leadership based on the last meeting's discussion. Depending on how many people you have, you may want to consider passing votes based on majority or 2/3 approval.
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 agreements" section for your constitution.
6. Set the date and location for the next meeting.



# Step eight:

## Finalize the union

1. Start the fifth meeting by reviewing and voting to approve the membership agreements. Review all parts of the tenants union constitution 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 tenant'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 demand(s). These demands don't have to include everything you want from the landlord right away. Decide together on one or two demands that you believe are most urgently needed, and that most tenants at your building are willing to fight for. Include a line about when you are demanding a response by. Have tenants sign the letter.
4. You may want to discuss creating an email address for the tenants union, and including it in the letter so the landlord can respond to the group rather than an individual.
5. Send a signed and dated copy of the letter to the landlord and/or property management company. Consider sending using certified mail so you can be sure it was received successfully.
6. Make sure everyone who joins the union gets a copy of the letter and the complete tenants union constitution.



# Step nine: Fight together

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.

Now that you've made your union's formation and demands known, keep momentum going by setting clear goals and planning additional tactics to get demands met. Sometimes just knowing that all the tenants are united on a common issue is enough to get the landlord to cave, but sometimes you have to turn up the pressure.

Additional tactics could include hosting rallies at your property management office, contacting sympathetic press, and rent striking (collectively withholding rent). Research other tenants organizations and what actions they've done to get inspiration. Reach out to them to ask questions and collaborate. If you are located in Eugene, connect with Eugene Housing and Neighborhood Defense to get support from other tenants across the city.

Continue building the tenants union's power by bringing in new members through canvassing neighbors and holding open events. Meet regularly to evaluate how things are going, plan escalations, and develop camaraderie amongst neighbors. 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!**

# Example Tenants Union Constitution

## *Mission statement:*

The Green Tree Apartments Tenants Union is an organization of tenants from Green Tree Apartments at 1234 15th Avenue committed to collectively organizing to improve our living conditions. We encourage all who live in our complex to become a member of our union so that we may fight together to combat rent increases, get our maintenance issues addressed swiftly, resolve conflicts in a neighborly manner, and work towards creating a place where we can all feel at home.

Decisions to elect new roles or amend the constitution will be voted on at our monthly meetings and decided by majority vote. Anyone in the complex may join the union at any time by agreeing to and signing the constitution. Anyone may propose ideas for events, campaigns, or demands by presenting them for discussion at the membership meetings.

## *Roles:*

Organizing committee chair, Matilda Wormwood (Facilitates meetings, on boards new members)

Secretary, John Smith (Takes minutes, collects dues, sends out emails)

Conflict resolution officer, Clover (Addresses conflict between members)

Outreach officer, Taylor Swift (Makes and distributes flyers)

## *Membership agreements:*

All members of the Green Tree Apartments Tenants Union commit to the following obligations: Attend at least one meeting every three months, do not to talk to the landlord without first contacting the union and ensuring communication with landlord is done in writing, contribute \$10 in dues a month for printing costs if able, and attempt to resolve conflicts with neighbors without involving the landlord.

## *Initial letter:*

The tenants of Green Tree Apartments hereby declare the formation of our tenants union. We demand of our landlord, Slimy Snake, that all broken and leaking windows in the complex be fixed by an outside professional by the end of the day on July 10th. Many of us pay more than half our monthly income to rent, and we deserve to have safe, well-maintained homes in return. If you do not meet our demands, we are prepared to withhold our rent until repairs are performed. Please respond by July 5th informing us that you have received our letter.

Sincerely,

The Green Tree Apartments Tenants Union

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Eugene Housing and Neighborhood Defense is an organization dedicated to defending our neighbors from capitalist exploitation at the hands of landlords, developers, and other class enemies. We strive to engage and unite working people at one of our most important sites of struggle, our homes. To achieve this, we canvass door to door, host public meetings and events, create educational material, coordinate mass actions, and organize neighbors to build tenant unions and networks. We believe we can and will bring down the capitalist system and create a world where we can manage our housing together!

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](http://eugenehand.org)**



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