

Working Group Strategies for a Community or Tenants Union

Venus Youngblood

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One of the primary trials I've come across while organizing has been focus on part of the other non-tenant organizers. While intent and follow-through seem to come easily to them, fresh ideas and strategy have been more difficult to come by and especially more difficult to organize around. I don't blame the individuals, as everyone that I've worked with has showcased themselves to be dedicated to the cause, but rather the organizations and structures they've been accustomed to in other organizing projects they've worked on that have also lacked foresight and proper coordination.

With Tenants/Community Unions in particular, the stakes are higher for the individuals we rally around and try to support. Landlords are not justified in any of their retaliatory tactics and county and state officials are rarely if ever relied upon for assistance in situations that can be dire for the tenant.

Thus, a proper organizational structure requires discipline and patience. For the Tenants Union in the which I'm involved, I've designed working groups. I hope this blueprint can be of use to others as well.

For the sake of capacity, most working groups can be broken up into just four parts:

1. **Building Organizing**
2. **Research**
3. **Logistical Strategy**
4. **Media Relations**

Building Organizing

Tasks:

1. Door Knocking

2. Mapping
3. Mobilizing
4. Direct Action
5. Planning
6. Data Entry

The tasks for building organizing should all have to do directly with being both physically and emotionally present to the tenant and addressing their direct and immediate needs. I've designed it as such so that those who are planning long-term strategy need not concern themselves with physical attendance at every canvassing as we try to canvas 2-3 times a week. Also, forcing every member of the union to participate is not only a huge logistical challenge but also may prevent possibly useful individuals in other areas from wanting to join and being consistent in action.

Research

Tasks:

1. Landlord and Management Discovery
2. Developing Demands and Estimating Escalating Tenant Strategy
3. Regular Landlord and Management Briefs for Tenants
4. Contacting Landlord and Management Teams

One of the spaces I've found that we've had the most trouble in as an organization has been research and long-term planning. I think being persistent on part of pressure on the landlord is just as important as being consistently in attendance for canvassing as it's the most effective way to stay up-to-date on their behavior and inevitably escalating measures as far as tenant placation/expulsion. A few of the items here such as the Landlord and Management Discovery process can prove to be difficult and require means beyond time on part of the individual so it's also important to have a Treasury/Bank Account for your org before engaging in any costly activities.

Logistical Strategy

Tasks:

1. Direct Democracy
2. Meeting Roles
3. Keeping in contact with Legal Aid, County Officials, HUD, State Officials
4. Writing

For Logistical strategy, I've found keeping up to date on and planning out things such as an agenda for our next meeting or, keeping CONSTANT contact with Legal Aid and county/state officials to be nearly a full-time job in itself, sometimes even requiring interpersonal relationships to be built so that we gain the most accurate and useful information from these individuals(as they sometimes have a backwards way of speaking). Additionally, there have been some tenant union organizers who already have pre-existing ties to county health officials due to other projects/ or it being their real-life job to do so, making this the most effective use of their time. Written works explaining our struggles contemporarily are also vastly useful to the cause as they expose the public to our work.

Media Relations

Tasks:

1. Finding Tenant Leaders and Putting Them in Contact with Our Resources
2. Photography
3. Consistent Contact with Media
4. Phonebanking
5. Volunteer Outreach

Many tenant organizers have pre-existing links to the media through other organizations they may be affiliated with such as DSA, FTP and BRRN. Maintaining these contacts while also putting potential tenant leaders in contact with them as well (to eliminate the middleman and assist in the process of autonomy on their part) is often key to long-lasting success. While it's important to be weary of mainstream media coverage of impoverished conditions, it also puts a spotlight on the landlord and can assist in the process of helping them do what's actually right for the tenants they lord over. These are not the only roles/groupings necessary for a tenants union and the overall usefulness of this document really depends upon your local conditions and everything here should be approached with caution.

Edit, add to and otherwise change this document as you like, but it's extremely important to be organized and efficient when unionizing tenants as you're dealing with people's living conditions and concrete day-to-day lives.

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