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When We Fight We Can Win: How We Stopped An Eviction

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Part of a series of articles on praxis titled "when we fight we can win"

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## When We Fight We Can Win: How We Stopped An Eviction

Iswed Tiggjan

As a membership delegate for the South-East Queensland Union of Renters I first met David at a talk the union held in Moorooka. I didn't get much of a chance to talk to David then, but my comrades did. All I really remember was the woman he was with telling us during the Q and A that David needed union support.

David informed one of my fellow delegates that he was a disability pensioner living in public housing, and that he was in the midst of a long battle with the Department of Housing who seemed determined to evict him. David came to our next meeting and filled us in on what had been happening. About his long running dispute with the department, and their apparent determination to send him back into homelessness. One thing he said during the meeting particularly stuck in my mind.

*When you finally get into public housing they tell you that it was worth the wait because now you have a home for life...but that is a lie... now they are taking my home away from me.*

By this time David had joined the union, and our members took part in an email writing campaign encouraging the department to rescind their eviction. This was effective for a time, but only briefly. Midway through June, David was issued an eviction notice. Police soon visited David at his home to inform him that they had every intention of forcefully throwing him and his possessions onto the street and gave him a date and time for doing so: Friday the 17th of June at 10am.

At the time they likely thought this would be a routine eviction. Rock up, violently toss someone out of their home and onto the street, back to the cop-shop by lunchtime. How wrong they'd be.

Soon after the eviction was announced Greens state MP, Michael Berkman, who had been working with David for a number of years announced a resistance rally for 9am on morning of the eviction. At this point the union began to mobilise its members and networks in preparation for a fight.

By 7:30am the crowd had already begun to gather. First there were comrades from the Electrical Trade Union (ETU), repaying solidarity shown by SEQUR members on a recent picket at the University of Queensland. They were soon joined by a mass of SEQUR members, who were quick to spring into action in order to prepare defensive positions for a confrontation with police.

By the time the police arrived they were confronted by a crowd they stood little chance at overcoming. Time continued to tick on and the crowd continued to grow - by 11 up to 90 people had taken up positions in David's front yard and were beginning to spill out onto the street. Along with SEQUR the crowd saw members of the ETU, AMWU (Australian Manufacturing Workers Union), RAF-FWU (Retail & Fast Food Workers Union), BRA (Brisbane Renters Alliance) and even a number of Greens politicians.

By 1pm we found out that at least for the day we had won. While we were ensuring the police couldn't take away David's home, David fought for himself in the Supreme Court of Queensland and won a temporary reprieve. The court ruled that the war-

rant of eviction could not be enforced until 3pm on Monday, with the warrant itself expiring at 6pm of the same day. The date and time of a new battle had been drawn.

The weekend saw a flurry of activity as the union, along with different groups began to organise their forces for Monday. Our display of collective force had kept David in his home once and was our best chance for doing so again.

So over the weekend some members of the union busied themselves with calling, texting and talking to as many people as they could about Monday. Others spent their time plotting our logistics and strategy for the day. But most impressive was the members, along with their fellow community members that spent the weekend at Davids, helping him clean his unit and yard, to turn his unit back into a home after months of the department trying to strip it away.

If any four days could encapsulate the meaning of the term solidarity then the flurry of activity from Friday through to Monday was it.

By the time 3pm Monday came around and the warrant became active again close to 100 tenant unionists and community members were gathered outside David's yard. If the State government had hoped that their attempts at evicting David would go more smoothly the second time around then they were sorely disappointed.

So obvious was the collective power that we had gathered in David's front-yard the State government and police force again threw their hands up for the day and gave up, allowing the warrant to expire. At least temporarily, the organised force of a mass of people had won out against the power of the state. David would be remaining in his home.

What this means more long term is that now the process of evicting David must start from scratch and make its way through the layers of bureaucracy that is the *Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal* (QCAT) system.

At this stage it is still uncertain what the outcome of the tribunal process will be. However, since the beginning of the struggle SEQUR, BRA and other actors have been working with David to help him clean his property and remedy the Department of Housing complaints. We believe that the department's excuses for evicting David no longer remain valid and no further eviction notice should be issued. But we know we can never rely on tribunals for justice.

If another eviction notice is given then we've shown that we can fight and that we can win. If the state government wants to continue to pursue David then they are going to be confronted by a movement that is only growing in capacity and experience.

The Queensland State government knows as well as we do that whether or not this fight ends here it has signified a monumental shift in the tenants struggle in this state. An anti-eviction mobilisation like this hasn't happened in Brisbane in at least a generation. They are only going to become more frequent and more vital as our housing crisis escalates.

We now know that when we fight against evictions we can win. That we can keep people in their homes by our own collective action. That is an incredibly powerful lesson to have learnt.

But this is only a starting point. While David may be safe for now across the city there would have been dozens of evictions happening at the same time that we were unable to stop.

The reality is that the tenants movement in Brisbane is still new. SEQUR itself is still not even a year old. This is a first step but far from the final step. Tenants can best defend ourselves when we are organised together into a collective force - that is when we act together as a union.

250 members is a good start for a year of union efforts, but it is far from bringing together all the tenants in Brisbane. We are far from having the power in numbers that we need to ensure that Brisbane is an eviction-free city.

If you are a tenant, or support tenant rights, then join the union. And if you're a worker then make sure to join your bloody labour union too. Our unions are our fighting organisations and they are where we are strong, they are where we can defend ourselves and where we can actually win victories and improve our conditions.

Conditions are continuing to deteriorate for workers and renters across Australia. Our politicians, bosses and landlords aren't going to improve things for us. If we want to see our wages increase, our rents go down or a single step of progress on the climate crisis, then we're going to have to fight for ourselves.

A single fight might seem small but every fight is a battle in the wider class struggle. Every battle teaches us how to fight bigger and better next time. Every fight is a step in the growth of working class power and towards socialism.