

THE TENANT

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STORY OF THE MONTH: FRONTLINES OF CLASS WAR: A FEDERAL BUDGET PROPOSAL DEFENDS LANDLORD PRICE-FIXING

By Sam P.

In August of 2024, the Department of Justice and the Attorney-Generals of eight states announced a lawsuit against the real estate company RealPage, for using AI to help corporate landlords to fix rent prices. RealPage, a 9 Billion dollar company, sells a valuable product to its clients—AI-powered algorithmic pricing. This tool is used to maximize landlords' profits by sharing private information including vacancy rates and current rents, then suggesting what rents landlords should charge. RealPage openly boasts that using its "services" allows landlords to avoid lowering rents or otherwise favoring tenants. And the largest landlords in the country are all too happy to join in; a January 2025 investigation by the Washington Post found that 19% of Boise's rental market is managed by companies named in the price-fixing lawsuits

Some might follow the story of RealPage this far and conclude that things are going alright. Sure, the so-called 'free market' overstepped, but surely a DOJ suit means things will be restored to some kind of equilibrium, right? This naive analysis unfortunately fails to account for the fact that unlike tenants, landlords and real estate companies like RealPage are politically organized and poised to take advantage of a staple of American politics—lobbying (read, corruption). Facing mounting legal challenges and municipal bans on its monopolistic practices, RealPage expanded its federal lobbying team, and real estate industry cartels increased their spending by millions.

Their efforts have borne fruit. A section of the latest federal budget proposal includes a ten-year ban on state regulations on AI technology. This follows a long-term strategy of corporate landlords and real estate interests called 'pre-emption', whereby lobbying at the federal level crushes state and municipal regulations seeking to provide a sliver of protection for working people. This corrupt, undemocratic victory of RealPage and landlords is a menacing defeat for working-class and poor tenants. (cont. pg. 2)

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Almost half of US households are considered “rent-burdened”, and almost 80% are living paycheck-to-paycheck. Our so-called representatives are issuing a resounding message: We don’t give a damn about you.

And why should they? The massive and entrenched powers of for-profit housing are organized. When they need to maximize profits they collude, and when threatened they respond, pouring the hard-earned funds taken from tenants into reinforcing their ability to further exploit us. With Congress spitting in the face of working tenants, we have only one course of action left to us: to educate, organize, and mobilize, to build tenant associations and struggle collectively against our class enemies and for our shared interests. If tenants in Boise want greater security, dignity, and equality, it is up to us to take up this vision and build a city-wide union capable of building a better future for the working-class majority.



THE HISTORY OF TENANTS UNIONS: ORGANIZING FOR HOUSING JUSTICE

By: a BTU Member

Tenants unions have a long and often overlooked history rooted in collective resistance to housing insecurity, exploitation, and inequality. These grassroots organizations have played a crucial role in the broader labor and civil rights movements, advocating for the rights of renters in the face of landlords, real estate interests, and discriminatory policies. From the early 20th century to today, tenants unions have evolved to meet changing economic and political conditions, but their core mission remains the same: to give renters a collective voice in a housing system that often prioritizes profit over people.

Early Organizing: 19th and Early 20th Century

Tenant organizing in the United States has its roots in the urbanization and industrialization of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As cities grew rapidly, so did the demand for affordable housing, especially among immigrant and working-class populations. In cities like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, tenement housing conditions were often overcrowded, unsanitary, and dangerous. Early tenant activism was frequently tied to labor unions and socialist movements, which saw housing as a fundamental right. (cont. pg.3)



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One of the first major examples of tenant organizing occurred during World War I and the postwar period, when rent strikes erupted in cities like New York due to wartime rent inflation. In 1917, a famous rent strike in the Bronx—led largely by immigrant women—demanded rent reductions and better living conditions. These early strikes were often spontaneous and community-driven, but they laid the foundation for more formal tenants organizations.

The Great Depression and the Rise of Organized Tenant Movements

The economic collapse of the 1930s intensified housing struggles. Mass unemployment made it difficult for many to pay rent, and evictions became widespread. In response, tenants across the country organized rent strikes and formed neighborhood councils to resist evictions, sometimes physically blocking landlords and police from removing families. During this time, leftist organizations such as the Communist Party played a significant role in organizing tenants, particularly in urban centers like New York City. These groups helped form some of the first structured tenants unions, including the Bronx Tenants League and the Metropolitan Council on Housing. These organizations provided legal assistance, coordinated rent strikes, and lobbied for stronger tenant protections.

In 1937, federal housing policy began to shift with the creation of the United States Housing Act, which provided for public housing and acknowledged the government's role in housing provision. Tenants unions were instrumental in advocating for these reforms, though the implementation was uneven and often segregated.

Post-War Struggles and Civil Rights Era

The post-World War II housing boom primarily benefited white, middle-class Americans through suburban expansion and mortgage subsidies. In contrast, urban communities of color often faced redlining, disinvestment, and slumlordism. In the 1950s and 1960s, tenants unions became increasingly intertwined with the civil rights movement. Black tenants in cities like Chicago and Los Angeles organized to demand fair housing, resist evictions, and expose racist practices. Tenant organizing also responded to urban renewal policies that displaced communities for commercial development or highway construction. Activists coined the term “Negro removal” to describe the impact of these programs. Tenants unions in this era began to focus on demands for community control of housing and an end to exploitative landlord practices. (cont. pg. 4)



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The Modern Tenant Movement

In the 1970s and 1980s, rising rents, deindustrialization, and cuts to social services created new housing crises. Tenants unions fought for rent control, legal protections, and housing subsidies. In cities like San Francisco, New York, and Boston, tenant organizing led to significant policy wins, such as rent stabilization laws and just-cause eviction protections. During the neoliberal shift of the 1980s and 1990s, public housing funding declined and privatization increased. In response, tenants unions continued to organize around issues of gentrification, displacement, and housing discrimination. The 2008 financial crisis and housing crash sparked a new wave of tenant activism, including anti-eviction campaigns and foreclosure resistance groups.

Contemporary Resurgence

In recent years, tenants unions have experienced a resurgence, fueled by skyrocketing rents, eviction crises, and growing recognition of housing as a human right. Organizations like the Los Angeles Tenants Union, the Philadelphia Tenants Union, and the Autonomous Tenants Union Network (ATUN) are examples of this renewed energy. These modern unions often emphasize horizontal, tenant-led structures and build power through direct action, mutual aid, and solidarity. They advocate for universal rent control, social housing, and stronger protections against eviction and harassment. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted housing precarity and galvanized rent strikes and mutual aid networks across the country. In response, some states passed temporary eviction moratoriums, often under pressure from organized tenant groups.

Conclusion

The history of tenants unions is one of persistence, solidarity, and grassroots power. From early rent strikes to modern campaigns for housing justice, tenants unions have helped reshape the housing landscape in favor of working people. As the housing crisis deepens, the role of organized renters is more important than ever.

WHAT WE'RE LISTENING TO



Podcast: Red Menace

Episode— Tenant Unions Under
Attack by Landlord Lobby
(May 5th)

WHAT WE'RE READING



Book: No Shortcuts: Organizing for
Power in the New Gilded Age

By: Jane F. McAlevey

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TENANT RESOURCES:

- Wrest Collective
<https://wrest.coop/>
- Intermountain Fair Housing Council (IFHC)
ifhcidaho.org
- Idaho Legal Aid
www.idaholegalaid.org
- Boise Mutual Aid Collective
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