

KC TENANTS

UNION

ORGANIZING

TOOLKIT



DEAR READER:

Our work is transforming Kansas City-- but most importantly, this is transformative work for the grassroots leaders involved. KC Tenants leaders transform personal pain into public power. We invest in our leaders by providing leadership development, training on organizing skills, campaigning, and political education. This is because we believe that the people closest to the problem are closest to the solution.

If you believe in fighting for safe, affordable, and accessible homes in Kansas City, would you consider becoming a monthly sustainer of KC Tenants at \$15-30? If so, visit kctenants.org/donate and support tenant power today!

***In Solidarity,
KC TENANTS***

WHAT ARE TENANT UNIONS?

Tenant unions are building, neighborhood, or city-based organizations made up of, and led by, tenants to fight for our collective interests and rights. Building-based tenant unions are generally made up of tenants who live in the same building and/or have the same landlord. Neighborhood and city-based tenant unions are networks of tenants who often have similar issues and stand in solidarity with each other, but may live in different buildings or have different landlords. KC Tenants is a city-based tenant union.



Every tenant union should be a multi-racial, anti-racist, anti-fascist, and multi-generational base of poor and working tenants organizing to ensure that everyone in Kansas City has a safe, accessible and truly affordable home!

WHY ORGANIZE A TENANT UNION?

We're stronger than we are as individuals. A well-organized tenant union can win demands that no individual tenant could win. Collective power is all we have to combat money and influence.

In order to build collective power with our neighbors, we will need to establish a community. We build our unions at the speed of trust. If you and your neighbors do not trust each other, we will not be able to fight for your rights against landlords and profiteers. Profiteers win when we isolate ourselves from our community around us and feel powerless. Coming together as one collective power to support each other builds the solidarity needed to fight and win our tenant rights from landlords!



PUBLIC VS PRIVATE RELATIONSHIPS

Our relationships are the primary source of our power. **A public relationship** is a relationship based on a mutual understanding of one another's values, vision, life, and motivations. This relationship is primarily about building power in the union.

Private relationships are what we have with our friends, families, partners, etc. Private relationships are different than public relationships. You're not part of a union primarily to make friends. Of course, you may make friends in the union. That's wonderful! But we have to be very careful to keep public and private relationships distinct. Letting private relationship dynamics interfere with organizing can disorganize our union and hurt our power.

ESTABLISHING SELF-INTEREST

Every person in our union must be clear about our self-interest if we want to build tenant power. You can't spell "union" without U n' !!

Organizing around self-Interest is the only honest way to relate to other union members. It is critical that you learn what motivates your comrades in the union. What's at stake for them? When you have an understanding of their self interest and your own, you all can find powerful ways to organize together around your mutual interests.



WHAT CAN YOUR TENANT UNION DO?

Tenant unions can come together and build community in all kinds of ways. Here are just some of the ways your community can build relationships and trust with each other:

- **COMMUNITY EVENTS:** Potlucks, parties, etc.
- **MUTUAL AID:** Raising money or arranging other kinds of support for a neighbor
- **RESOURCE SHARING:** Distributing info on service providers, tenants' rights, etc.
- **POLITICAL EDUCATION:** Holding trainings or workshops on key issues or ideas
- **KC TENANTS SOLIDARITY:** Getting involved with the citywide union for campaigns to change policy, etc.
- **COMMUNITY SAFETY:** Looking out for each other in a way that doesn't rely on law enforcement or other security that is likely to escalate and make things less safe
- **COLLECTIVE BARGAINING:** Coming up with demands for the landlords and forcing them to the table to negotiate
- **DIRECT ACTION:** Taking action to get demands met, get a crisis resolved, etc.

YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO ORGANIZE.

This is Jade. Jade is one of many Americans living paycheck to paycheck. Her hourly job laid her off due to COVID-19, and there is no way for her to make rent on May 1. Jade knows that as a tenant in Missouri, she has a **RIGHT TO ORGANIZE**. She also understands that we are stronger together than as individuals and decides to organize a tenant union within her apartment complex.



JADE'S FIRST STEP IN ORGANIZING HER BUILDING WILL BE REACHING OUT TO HER NEIGHBORS. A TEMPLATE FOR HER LETTER IS INCLUDED ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE.

WRITE A LETTER TO YOUR NEIGHBORS:

Hi **[THEIR NAME or TENANTS OF UNIT #]**!

First off, I am not sick with the virus. This paper was only handed with gloves from my door to your door. It has not made contact with anyone or anything. I hope this is all right.

This is **[YOUR NAME]** from **[UNIT #]**. Just wanted to check in as the pandemic continues to escalate. How are you doing? You are welcome to call/text/email if you need help. If you need anything, I can support you by **[OFFER OF AID IF YOU ARE ABLE- HELPS TO BUILD TRUST]**.

If you are scared, isolated, and facing a great deal of uncertainty in your future, I want you to know that you are not alone. I'm feeling it too. And that's why we need each other now more than ever.

I am proposing that we meet as a building via **[PLATFORM OF YOUR CHOOSING]** to talk about our mutual needs, conditions in the building, and how we can support one another. I also wanted to see who else was worried about rent and bills and whether anyone has lost stability with their income because of the pandemic. **[YOUR STORY IF YOU ARE IMPACTED BY JOB LOSS OR SICKNESS OR SOMETHING- AGAIN, HELPS WITH TRUST]**.

My number is **[YOUR NUMBER]** - give me a text or call when you can. I'd love to talk to you soon.

[YOUR NAME]
[YOUR NUMBER]
[YOUR EMAIL]

**AFTER DISTRIBUTING YOUR LETTER,
YOU SHOULD CANVASS EVERY DOOR IN
YOUR APARTMENT TO CONNECT WITH
YOUR NEIGHBORS**

HOW TO CANVASS

The best way for you to establish relationships with your neighbors is through **canvassing**, another word for door knocking.

A **door convo** should be a short but powerful conversation that where you ask your neighbors about the key issues they're facing, you gauge interest in organizing around those issues, and you invite them to take action with you. Try to channel anger, hope, and action (AHA). The door convo can be the "aha!" moment where your neighbor realizes they are not alone and that if we organize, we can create the conditions to change our lives for the better. This is the seed being planted.

How do you prepare for neighborhood canvassing?

- **CUT TURF:** Where are you wanting to canvass? Create a map of doors and paths for your canvassing routes.
- **RESEARCH THE DOORS:** How many doors are you wanting to knock and how many people are needed to get that done? What is security like?
- **CREATE A FLIER:** Leave a flier for unanswered doors and to give to neighbors. Fliers should have important info. When is your next union meeting time? Who can they call if they have questions?
- **DRAFT A SCRIPT:** A guide of talking points for you to consider can come in handy if you get lost in conversation or want some help for your first time. Most scripts include a guide that looks like:
 - **Intro**
 - **Issue questions** (what's going on in your housing situation?)
 - **Anger** (what makes you angry about the conditions we face today?)
 - **Hope** (how could we change this? What if we could do something about this?)
 - **Action** (what are you willing to do? Would you come to a meeting? Follow up for a longer conversation? Can I get your contact info?).
- **BRING MATERIALS:** Bring tape to put up flyers. Bring a contact list and a pen to gather people's information.



ONE-ON-ONES

INTRODUCE yourself & your housing story

Ask about their **LIFE AND MOTIVATIONS**

Ask about the **ISSUES** they have with the apartment, landlord, etc. What would they change?

AGITATION: Do we deserve this? It's not our fault we can't pay rent right now. Do we have the power to change this?

Ask about their **VISION.** What would it look like if we won?

ASK: Are you willing to stand by and let these things happen? How can we come together?

PREPARE them and yourself for possible retaliation from the landlord

FOLLOW UP and build networks. Ask who else they know? Would they join us in a tenant meeting?



NOW THAT JADE'S ORGANIZED HER BUILDING THROUGH **ONE-ON-ONES**, SHE WILL FOLLOW UP WITH A TENANT MEETING WHERE THEY CAN BEGIN TO LAUNCH A **STRATEGIC CAMPAIGN**.

ELEMENTS OF A STRATEGIC CAMPAIGN



WHAT ARE YOUR DEMANDS?

Demands should be specific (what do you want), name a target (who can do it), be time-bound (when does it need to happen), and shared among the group (we all want this).

EXAMPLES OF DEMANDS: A THREE MONTH RENT SUSPENSION, NO LATE FEES, NO EVICTIONS, MAINTENANCE THAT HASN'T HAPPENED, NOTICE BEFORE ENTRY



WHO IS YOUR TARGET?

Who has the power to fix the problem? This is often your landlord. In what ways can you put pressure on them socially, financially, or politically?

EXAMPLES OF PRESSURE: WRITE A LETTER TO YOUR LANDLORD, NAME SHAME THEM ON SOCIAL MEDIA, CIRCULATE A PETITION, CONTACT YOUR REPRESENTATIVE FOR SOLIDARITY



WHAT ARE YOUR TACTICS?

Devise a set of tactics, informed by what you know about your target. Make sure to have an **escalation plan** in the case you don't get a response or your landlord threatens retaliation.

*EXAMPLES OF TACTICS: LETTERS TO THE LANDLORD, PRESS BRIEFINGS, GETTING YOUR CITY COUNCIL PERSON TO CONTACT THE OWNER/MANAGER, SIGNS IN WINDOWS, SOCIAL MEDIA PRESSURE, **RENT STRIKES***

JADE'S ESCALATION PLAN WENT SOMETHING LIKE THIS . . .

Jade and some of the tenants in her building **met as a small group** and **defined their demands** (i.e. a 3 month rent suspension.) Then they **gathered signatures on a demand email** and sent it to their landlord.

Having not heard back from the landlord, they **set up a Facebook page** for their tenant union, and **name shamed the landlord on social media** for their lack of action. They also created an **online petition** and got hundreds of signatures.

The landlord contacted Jade and her neighbors and refused their demands, so Jade led the efforts to **contact a city councilperson** to stand in solidarity with the tenant union. This councilperson wrote their own letter to the landlord.

The tenants then **organized a mass call-in** to the landlord's office and cell, and **sent complaint letters** to the charities and church the landlord worked with.

Again, the landlord refused their demands, so Jade and her neighbors **planned an action** to circle the landlord's house with cars and **contacted the local news**.

Under political, social, and economic pressure, the landlord responded to the tenants' demands and Jade and her neighbors won a three month rent suspension.

The newly formed tenant union met to celebrate and **make plans to hold their landlord accountable**.



RENT STRIKES

Rent strikes are highly organized escalation tactics, involving mass withholding of rent, that you take with your neighbors and roommates when a landlord doesn't meet your demands. A rent strike means collectively withholding rent even when people have the means in order to meet a demand.

Rent strikes are serious and need to be executed strategically to be effective. The most successful rent strikes are part of a broader **STRATEGIC CAMPAIGN** that includes rallies, pickets, media, petitions, rent reductions, and other tactics to win your goals from a specific target.



BEFORE ESCALATING TO A RENT STRIKE, HAVE YOU...

- ***Built relationships with your neighbors and/or formed a tenant union?***
- ***Attempted collective negotiation with your landlord?***
- ***Attempted a one-on-one with every tenant under the landlord?***
 - If you live in a large building, then just the tenants in the building are enough.
 - If you live in a small property, then you will need to reach out to the landlord's other properties.
 - If you live in a landlord's only property, then unfortunately it is extremely unlikely a rent strike will work and negotiation is the best bet.
- ***Presented clear, collective demands to your landlord that haven't been met yet?***
- ***Gotten commitments to strike from a supermajority (i.e. >75%) of tenants under the landlord?***
- ***Organized a collective backup plan if the rent strike fails?***

TENANT UNION MEETING AGENDA

PURPOSE: To get to know one another, discuss our housing, and figure out how to support one another moving forward.

OUTCOMES: We have a plan to organize and get our landlord to meet our needs in the building.

AGENDA:

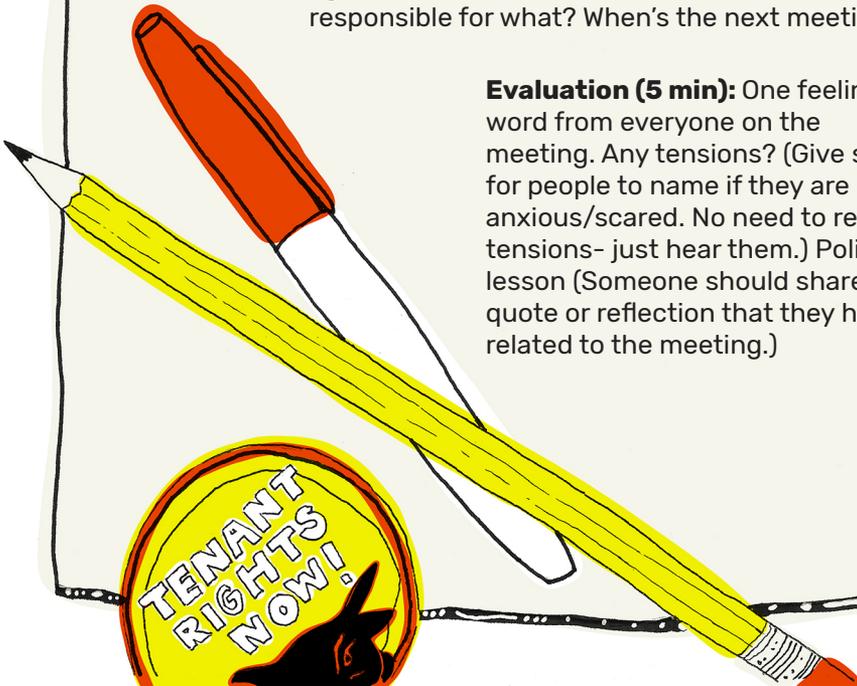
Intros (15 min): How are you doing? What support do you need? How long has everyone lived here? How have you been impacted by COVID-19? (You should model vulnerability and active listening.)

Demands (15 min): What do we want? How could things be better? What would satisfy our needs as tenants? Can someone write up a demands letter?

Target (15 min): Who can satisfy our demands? What do we know about our target? What don't we know? Which tactics will move our target? Who can do research?

Agreements and next steps (10 min): Do we want to form a tenant union? If so, what are our agreements about how we will function? Who's responsible for what? When's the next meeting?

Evaluation (5 min): One feeling word from everyone on the meeting. Any tensions? (Give space for people to name if they are anxious/scared. No need to resolve tensions- just hear them.) Political lesson (Someone should share a quote or reflection that they have related to the meeting.)

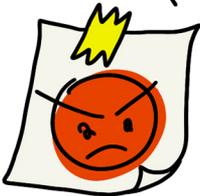


KNOW YOUR RIGHTS.

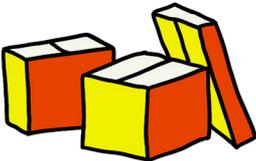
As a renter in Missouri you have rights: a right to a safe, sanitary, and livable home; a right to not have your utilities shut-off by the landlord; a right to privacy and respect; and a right to not have your landlord retaliate against you for reporting housing code violations. **You also have the right to ORGANIZE.**



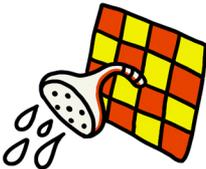
LIVING CONDITIONS. Your landlord must provide safe, sanitary and livable housing conditions. (No mice or insect infestation, working plumbing, heat, ventilation, etc.)



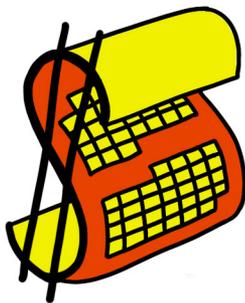
NO RETALIATION. Your landlord may not retaliate against you for reporting housing code violations.



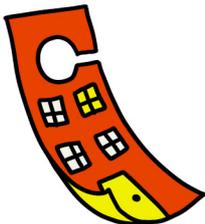
NO SELF HELP EVICTION. Your landlord may not force you or your things out of your home without a court order.



UTILITY SHUT OFF. Your landlord may not disconnect your utilities under any circumstance.



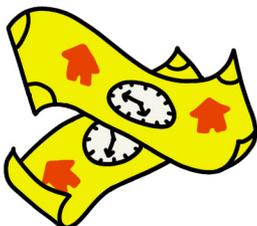
DEPOSIT. Your landlord may not charge you more than the equivalent of two months rent for your security deposit. The landlord must return your security deposit within 30 days from the date you move out along with an explanation for any deductions for repairs.



PRIVACY AND RESPECT. Your landlord may not enter your residence without your permission or reasonable advance notice.



DISCRIMINATION. A landlord may not deny you housing or treat you differently from other tenants because of your race, color, national origin, sex, disability, religion or family status. Sexual harassment is also prohibited.



LATE FEES. Your landlord may only charge you for fees (including late fees) that are provided for in your lease.



DECEPTIVE BEHAVIOR. Your landlord may not misrepresent the condition of the home to get you to move in or make other false statements to you.



LANDLORD SELLS THE PROPERTY. If your landlord sells the building to another, the new owner must provide you with notice, contact information and a copy of the deed before collecting rent.

KCMO TENANTS' RIGHT TO COUNSEL ORDINANCE

- When facing eviction, ALL TENANTS in Kansas City, MO have the right to a free, guaranteed lawyer provided by the city
- The city must inform tenants of this right. Landlords must tell tenants of this right
- For information and to request legal help for your eviction case, call **816-474-5112**
- You can only get a lawyer when an eviction is filed against you in county courts
- Enforced by Housing Department of KCMO
- Overseen by a Tenants' Committee

HEALTHY HOMES

- Tenants have the right to be living in truly healthy, safe and accessible homes
- KCMO Health Department will send an inspector to your home for free
- It is illegal for landlords to retaliate against you for calling Healthy Homes
- Healthy Homes will fine your landlord if they do not make fixes in a timely manner
- Landlord permits can be revoked if landlords refuse to address issues
- Tenants can call an inspector by calling **311** or **816-513-6464**
- Enforced by the Health Department of KCMO



RESOURCES

KC TENANTS HOTLINE: 816-533-5435

Call us with any questions, concerns, or incident reports. Our grassroots leaders staff the line. They are people who are impacted by these issues as well.

INCIDENT REPORT

This form can be found on our website, and is intended to be a safe place to report incidents related to housing/homelessness/COVID-19. If you or someone you know is in crisis, facing harrasment from your landlord, or if you just have a question about your rights, please submit your story and basic information to this form.

about KC TENANTS

KANSAS CITY TENANTS (KC TENANTS) IS A MULTI-RACIAL, ANTI-RACIST, MULTIGENERATIONAL GROUP OF TENANTS IN KANSAS CITY. WE KNOW THAT POOR PEOPLE AND COMMUNITITES OF COLOR WILL NOT BE ABLE TO LIVE IN KC IF WE FAIL TO IMAGINE AND WIN SYSTEMIC CHANGE. WE BELIEVE THE PEOPLE CLOSEST TO THE PROBLEM ARE CLOSEST TO THE SOLUTIONS. KC TENANTS ARE ORGANIZING TO ENSURE THAT EVERYONE IN KC HAS A SAFE, ACCESSIBLE, AND TRULY AFFORDABLE HOME.

kctenants.org

