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# Tenant Organizing Manual



Written by the Housing Working Group of the  
NYC-Chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America

February 2018 | @dsa\_housing | tenants@socialists.nyc | labor donated

# Introduction

Real estate developers are buying old apartment buildings in gentrifying neighborhoods at a rapid rate. In order to realize commitments to investors and desired returns, these new corporate landlords must displace long term residents who often pay much less in rent than the landlord could receive on the open market.

And they do so, by any means necessary. That's why over 450,000 eviction cases – many of them illegitimate – were filed in New York City between 2013 and 2015.<sup>1</sup> It's also why homelessness is at a record high, with over 70,000 New Yorkers living in shelter in 2017.<sup>2</sup>

About 47% of New York City's rental housing stock is subject to rent stabilization – a system of regulations that gives tenants the right to a renewal lease at a percentage increase set by a city-appointed board.<sup>3</sup> These laws are set by state government in Albany. (More information about rent stabilization is in Appendix C on page 13.)

Real estate interest groups control politics in Albany. As a result, our rent laws are peppered with loopholes that encourage tenant harassment and prioritize private profit. Enforcement is nearly non-existent as landlords use a variety of tactics to evict long-term residents, including offering cash buyouts, withholding repairs, or pursuing frivolous housing court cases.

Tenants must come together to both enforce and strengthen our rights. We have to fight the profit motive that prioritizes landlords' greed over tenants' human right to a home. Rent stabilization, which generally applies to buildings with 6 or more units built before 1974, must be expanded to protect all tenants.

This manual is designed to help DSA members get started on forming a tenant association in their building, but many of the activities and tools can be adapted to organizing for tenants' rights on a block or in a neighborhood. New York City's tenant movement has been led for decades by working class people, first and foremost women of color, often the heads of their households. It is important to be humble, intentional, and to identify and respect the leadership of the people who have very likely lived in your building and fought for the neighborhood for longer than you! The activities in this manual are designed to help you talk to your neighbors in an intentional way that builds socialist political power. Building a strong tenant association to win repairs can



start with a simple conversation between neighbors. But as socialists, we know we have a much bigger task. Through these struggles we need to build an army of working class organizers and leaders who can challenge the real estate industry across the city and break their stranglehold on Albany. Let's get started.

*Activity: Tenant organizing is the most important thing you can do to fight gentrification and displacement in New York City. NYC-DSA is building an army of socialist tenant organizers to fight back against the power that real estate has over our city. We want to win material gains for each other and our neighbors, but this is also a long-term struggle to shift power from landlords to working class people.*

*It can be scary to enter into a long-term and intentional relationship with your neighbors. It is a powerful but also time-consuming process. What are some of the things you are looking forward to about tenant organizing? What are some of your fears or challenges? What do you hope to win from the experience? Use the space below.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://projects.propublica.org/evictions/#11/40.7900/-73.9600>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2017-AHAR-Part-1.pdf> <sup>3</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/rentguidelinesboard/pdf/17HSR.pdf>

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# What is a Tenant Association?

A tenant association is a group of neighbors that get together to discuss issues in their building and work collectively to improve their living conditions.

If you have issues getting repairs or consistently lack heat or hot water, chances are your neighbors are having the same problems. If your apartment has been newly renovated but you live in an older building, there is a good chance that your landlord is pressuring long-term tenants to leave in order to take their apartment out of rent-stabilization and charge much higher rent.

The only requirement for a tenant association is that you meet regularly. Most successful tenant associations meet monthly. If possible, it is good practice to pick a recurring date and time for your monthly meeting so that people can integrate it in their schedule and remember it more easily.

And the good news is, thanks to the victories of past tenant leaders, the right to organize is protected under New York State law.

## **Real Property Law Sec 230: Rights of tenants to form, join, or participate in tenants' groups.**

1. No landlord shall interfere with the right of a tenant to form, join or participate in the lawful activities of any group, committee, or other organization formed to protect the rights of tenants; nor shall any landlord harass, punish, penalize, diminish, or withhold any right, benefit or privilege of a tenant under his tenancy for exercising such right.
2. Tenants' groups, committees, or other tenants' organizations shall have the right to meet in any location on the premises which is devoted to the common use of all tenants in a peaceful manner, at reasonable hours and without obstructing access to the premises or facilities. No landlord shall deny such right.

## Why is tenant organizing important in the fight for socialism?

Private property is the cornerstone of capitalism and has served to maintain poverty as well as deprive people of the right to a home. The private housing market has long been a key site of white supremacy, used to cement racial and economic injustice across the United States. The fight for socialism and the right to a home is a fight against landlords and for tenants' rights.

New York City is the epicenter of the tenant struggle as developers, landlords, and speculators fight to provide housing only to the highest bidder. At the same time, we have some of the strongest tenant protections in the country. We benefit from some extraordinary victories in the past - nearly 900,000 apartments are rent stabilized in New York, which guarantees tenants with the right to a renewal lease and reasonable rent increases based on guidelines set by the city. More information about your rights as a rent regulated tenant are detailed in Appendix C on page 13.

Unfortunately, thanks to a powerful landlord lobby, New York's tenant protections are increasingly riddled with loopholes that prevent the laws from working as they are intended. In 2019, the laws will expire, providing landlords the opportunity to try to increase their profits, and tenants the chance to fight back against these trends.



# What is a Tenant Association?

## Why is tenant organizing important in the fight for socialism?

### A quote to remember:

The decade following World War I is one of the most significant periods in the history of New York City tenant activity due to the extent that renters organized against landlords as well as the gains achieved through such mobilization. Relying on help from the Socialist party and its allied labor unions, tenants built effective building- and neighborhood-level organizations in several working-class communities of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan and forced hundreds of landlords to rescind rent increases or improve building conditions. Following passage of the Emergency Rent Laws [a series of statutes that granted tenants much more substantial protections against arbitrary rent increases and unjust eviction], the tenant movement experienced major changes. The Socialist tenant leagues faded from the scene, victims of both the court-based remedies passed in September and the ideological warfare that split the party during 1920. Several of the conservative associations in the Bronx and Manhattan, on the other hand, matured into stable organizations with memberships in the thousands. Throughout the early and middle 1920s they provided a range of legal and social services to desperate families. They also served as allies of state and local housing officials; it was their cooperative "pressure" and vacancy-rent surveys that justified the periodic extension of the laws throughout much of the decade.

Yet the orientation and tactics of tenant leaders after 1920 failed to serve the broader and longer-term interests of tenants. Concerned with legitimacy and their own

relationships with government officials, they limited their goals almost exclusively to the administration and maintenance of the rent laws and failed to press for more basic advances such as public housing or tougher code enforcement.

Eventually this reactive strategy produced failure. During the decade, New York's residential housing supply expanded rapidly, fueled by large tax incentives for new construction. The resulting high vacancy rate made it increasingly difficult to justify the continuation of "emergency" limits on rents. Thus, starting in 1926, the legislature began to exempt increasing numbers of apartments – based on rent per room – from renewals of the Emergency Rent Laws. For the tenant associations, this spelled the start of a cycle of decline: each reduction in the number of tenants covered by the rent laws decreased the constituency available to resist further cuts. By 1928 the movement was so weak that it could put up only token resistance, and the rent laws were phased out over the next two years.

Joseph A. Spencer, from "The Post World War I Housing Crisis" in *The Tenant Movement in New York City 1904-1984*, pp. 52-53, Rutgers University Press, 1986 (Ronald Lawson, Mark Naison, editors)

What would universal rent control mean for tenants in New York City? Why is fighting for it part of the socialist struggle?

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# What to do before your first meeting

- **Talk (and listen!) to your neighbors.** Go door to door and have a conversation with your neighbors about the conditions in your building and talk about forming a tenant association. Discuss your rights to a safe living environment and the right to live free from harassment or the threat of displacement in your home. Ask questions about what they think the issues are in your building. Ask and listen how those issues are affecting them. Dig deep on the issues: don't just stop at "it stinks the landlord hasn't been giving you heat," talk about how this lack of heat is affecting the person's life, "how have you been dealing with no having heat?"
- **If you are new to the building, ask** if there has ever been a tenant association before. First, it is respectful to admit that you are new and that your neighbors may know much more about the building and its history. Second, knowing about a prior tenant association may help you identify former tenant association leaders who can help you get your new group started.
- **It's never too early to get other tenants involved.** If you have a good conversation, ask someone to help you doorknock the rest of your building with you. Bring a clipboard or notebook with you so that you record people's name, apartment number, and contact information.
- **Decide on a date for a first tenant association meeting.** Choose one or two people to run the meeting, as a chairperson or a co-chair. If possible, try to include at least one long term tenant in the planning of the first meeting.
- **Set the agenda for the first meeting:** Work with one or two neighbors to set an agenda for your first tenant association meeting. A sample agenda is in Appendix A on page 12.

- **Do some research about your building and the owner.** A guide to using the City's open data on building information and property ownership is in Appendix E of this manual.
- **Make a turnout plan.** How will your neighbors learn about the meeting? What will encourage them to come? A few days before the meeting, make a flyer and pass it out under everybody's doors. You can also post flyers in common spaces – elevators, by mailboxes, or in lobbies. A sample flyer is in Appendix F on page 16. Call and/or email people whose contact information you collected from outreach and remind them about the first meeting.

*Activity: It's helpful to know what you plan to say when you are knocking on your neighbors' doors for the first time. Use the space below to write out some of the questions you might ask, and the conversation you plan to have. In organizing this is referred to as your "rap".*

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# What to do before your first meeting

## Sample rap for preparation for your first tenant association meeting

Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I live in apartment \_\_\_\_\_. I'm here to talk about starting a tenant association in our building.

How long have you lived here? Has there ever been a tenant association meeting in the building before?

Do you have any problems in your apartment? How do you feel like our landlord treats you? How have you observed how things have changed in this building while you have lived here?

Did you know that our building has a high number of code violations? If tenants join together we will have a lot more power over our landlord to make sure that our needs are met and that we are not pushed out of our neighborhood.

Many landlords in the neighborhood have been trying to push out long term, rent stabilized tenants. Do you feel like the landlord wants you to move? Rent stabilized tenants have rights, but we have to come together to make sure we know about them and they are enforced.

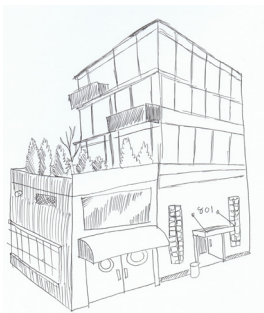
Would you be interested in coming to a tenant association meeting in the lobby? Do you want to help us plan this first meeting?

Can I take down your name and your phone number to follow up with you for the meeting?

# How to run your Tenant Association

Meetings should be productive, enjoyable, and **as short as possible**. People start to lose focus and attention as meetings drag on and get less productive. You can get a lot done in an hour if everyone sticks to the agenda. No tenant wants to waste time at meetings that drag on and on, and no tenant wants to go to meetings that result in a lot of words and no action. Here are some tips to keep your meeting short, sweet, and straightforward:

- Have a written agenda, and stick to it. Give people room to speak, but don't allow the discussion to wander all over the place. And, never get into a long discussion of one tenant's leaky ceiling. Keep the conversation to identifying common problems and developing group solutions.
- Make sure that decisions are group decisions, and not simply one or two people deciding. Only if people are clear about what is being done and why it is being done will they fully support the action.
- Leave with next steps and make sure action is clear. *Who will do what? When will it be done?*
- Encourage people to talk, but also encourage people to listen.
- Bring butcher paper. Write the agenda on the butcher paper, and keep notes on it as well. It helps people feel heard to see their contributions recorded on butcher paper.
- Give your neighbors roles: Identify a timekeeper, a facilitator, and a notekeeper.
- Establish a way to communicate, like a Google group.



## Frequently Asked Questions about Tenant Association meetings:

### Where should we meet?

In your lobby or in someone's apartment. If you have enough space, your lobby is a great place for tenant association meetings. People are much more likely to come to a meeting if they don't have to leave the building to get there. When you're meeting in the lobby you can also ask people to join as they are coming home. Even if they don't come to the meeting, they will know a tenant association is forming!

### What should we bring to the meeting?

A sign in sheet, butcher paper, tape, a marker, chairs for older residents who may have a hard time standing for an hour.

### What if the police are called and try to shut down your TA meeting?

Landlords understand the power of tenant organizing. If tenants are educating each other about their rights and acting in solidarity, the landlord can't take advantage and evict them as easily. If the police or a landlord representative come and try to shut down the meeting you should have a printed copy of Real Property Law 230 (on page 3) and state that you all are simply exercising your legal right to organize. If they refuse to let the meeting continue or if your fellow tenants do not feel comfortable continuing the meeting you may decide to stop. Follow-up with tenants after and decide how you want to respond, but don't stop meeting all together.

### What if no one or only a few people come to your meeting?

It's okay if there's low turnout! You do not need 100% participation in your building in order to be successful. Every organizing project starts with a few people.

# How to run your Tenant Association

There are two goals for your first tenant association meeting. First, you should begin to identify a building organizing committee that will allow your tenant association to be successful. Second, you should start to identify common problems and make a collective plan to solve them.

## The Organizing Committee:

The organizing committee should be composed of people who represent the diversity in the building. It should be comprised of leaders - people who are trusted and respected by other tenants, and who are willing to do a little bit more work than most other tenants. The tasks of the organizing committee are:

- To keep charge of the day to day activities of the tenant association.
- To carry out decisions the association has made. If the tenant association decides to plan an action at your landlord's office, the organizing committee should make a plan to make sure that this action happens.
- To set up and run tenant association meetings and ensure that they happen regularly.
- To keep everyone informed of what is going on, and consult everyone on major decisions.

The organizing committee is NOT:

- Lawyers for the building.
- Responsible for doing all the work. The organizing committee should facilitate work that gets done, but associations' effectiveness will rest on the degree of active involvement of all tenants.
- Empowered to make every decision. All the residents need to ultimately make decisions together, the organizing committee makes collective decisions possible, but it doesn't call all the shots.

## Identifying Tactics to Solve Group Problems:

The actions your tenant association takes should be aligned with an overall analysis of the tenant association's power, targets, and strategy. The best tactics advance the strategy of the tenant association, are creative, and build upon strengths of your membership.

### Case Study: 80 New York Avenue

When tenants at 80 New York Avenue came together to fight for heat and rent stabilization in their building, they got creative. In June 2016, the tenants filed a lawsuit in Brooklyn Supreme Court and rallied outside the courthouse. Because the rally was held during the workday, many residents couldn't attend, some being young designers who wanted another way to get involved. These tenants made bright green and orange signs to hang in the street-facing windows. The signs read: "S-L-U-M-L-O-R-D: D-O-N-T R-E-N-T H-E-R-E."



For months, neighbors would stop on the street to read the signs and soon enough the neighborhood was familiar with the building's struggle. But the person who took the most notice was the landlord! His lawyer asked repeatedly that signs be taken down, but the signs remain still to this day.



## How to run your Tenant Association

But it takes more than signs to win. After numerous rallies targeting the landlord's office and city agencies, leafleting the community, news articles and TV coverage, and support from politicians, it was clear that the tenants needed to apply more pressure. So in June 2017, after the entire building experienced a gas shut-off caused by the landlord's negligence in March, a majority of units at 80 New York Ave went on strike. Five months into their rent strike, the landlord agreed to install heating units for all tenants in the building. Eventually, a judge ordered several tenants to resume paying rent, but the tenant association won a main demand: heat for all tenants.

### List of Some Tenant Organizing Tactics!

- Group call in days to 311 with common complaints.
- Housing court lawsuits against the landlord.
- Rent strikes.
- Grow a bigger group! Find out what other buildings your landlord owns and go talk to the tenants who live there. Turn out in solidarity with tenants of other buildings in the neighborhood that are taking action. This can garner reciprocal support for an upcoming action at your building and build morale.
- Use social media, especially when you can't get the official press to cover.
- Group call in days to the management company.
- Meetings with your elected officials to ask them to take action.
- Press conference at the building.
- Elected official and media tour of distressed apartment.



### What other tactics can you think of?

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*Activity : What tactics did the tenants use to win? Why was it important for the tenants to put signs in their window? Why did the tenant association wait to go on a rent strike? How do the tactics complement an overall strategy for the tenant association?*

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As you will learn, it may be easy to get repairs, but it is more difficult to win transformative change – like stronger tenant protections. Leadership development is crucial to keeping your neighbors motivated for the longer fight!

# How to run your Tenant Association



## Tips for a Successful Action:

- Decide when and where to do the action, and make sure it's at a time when as many people in the building are available as possible. The best time to get press to come is in the morning during the week, but that might not be the best time for tenants. This is a balancing act!
- Make a turnout plan. Make sure you have time to door knock, flyer, and make phone calls in your building about the action. (If you don't want your landlord to know about the action, you might not want to leave a flyer.) Are there other neighborhood groups or tenant associations that would come out in support or solidarity?
- Reach out to your comrades in NYC-DSA! The fight for housing is a city-wide priority. NYC-DSA members will and can come out to support your fight.
- Write the run of show. Who is going to MC the rally? Who is going to speak? Are they prepared? Identify strong tenant leaders who can speak about their personal story to the press.
- Make fun visuals (banners, signs) that display the tenants' message.
- Write some fun chants and identify a chant leader who will keep energy high during the action.
- Draft a media advisory, and send it out the afternoon before. A sample media advisory is in Appendix B on page 12.
- Have fun!

## Leadership Development:

Social justice organizations build their power when all the people who are directly impacted by an issue come together. Leaders are the people who have the respect of other residents, and can help build unity in your TA. When it comes to the fight against gentrification in New York City, the leaders in your building will most likely be a long time resident and/or a person of color who is paying less rent than more recent tenants.

Leaders may know more about your building than you do! They might be good spokespeople for your cause, and can speak powerfully at direct actions or press conferences about their personal struggle against displacement and gentrification. Other leaders might be less interested in public speaking, but are respected in the building and the neighborhood and have followers that they can bring into your struggle. Still other leaders are going to work alongside organizers to do the necessary work that will help your TA grow in strength.

The best organizers work behind the scenes to make the movement happen strategically and successfully, often in one on one conversations. Organizers ask others to speak to the press, facilitate meetings, and take on new roles. One of the most important jobs an organizer has is to help identify new leaders and bring them into the struggle. These categories are, of course, blurry. Both leaders and organizers should motivate other members, and work from a place of humility, connection and interdependence.

What are some characteristics of an organizer? Of a leader? Of both?

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# How to run your Tenant Association

Leadership development is the time that an organizer commits to organizing skills building, political education, informal discussion of current political/social economic events, giving and receiving feedback, or more.

Leadership development is not a top-down process – it is about encouraging member-leaders to take on new roles, speak from personal experience, and develop new skills. Leaders usually have deep knowledge about their building, block, or neighborhood. Leadership development is about activating this knowledge, and working together with your members to leverage it to advance the goals of the tenant organization.

## Some Leadership Development Best Practices

### Don't:

- Assume:
  - Political experience, or lack thereof: New York City is a union town, and a town of renters! Many people already have organizing experience and/or knowledge and experience about organizing and tenant organizations.
  - That you know the right way to organize your tenant association. The best organizers are constantly learning from leaders and collaborators.
  - What people's issues are. Aside from rent (usually!), there may be other issues that tenants have. Learn what they are by asking.
- Talk too much and/or lecture. It's boring and condescending. Listen more than you speak!
- Place yourself at the center of actions and assume a leadership role. Your job is to find people who can lead others, not the other way around.
- Speak to the press and at rallies, or take up a ton of space.
- Make this about getting people into DSA. Focus on building a committee and getting tangible wins. Try to encourage building natural relationships with DSA, rather than forcing your personal political perspective.

- Do everything yourself! Find a balance between providing answers to questions and working together toward collective goals. Empower people to be able to get their own answers and become experts.

### Do:

- Center women of color as the visible leaders. Visible means not just doing the work but being recognized as leaders with decision making power. Center people with the most at stake in the fight, which is often people with families who have been living in your building for a long time.
- Be aware of your privileges, especially if you have white privilege. Be aware of who you are. For example: If you are a man house-visiting a woman, if she doesn't want to let you in right away it may be best to talk in the hall or outside rather than prioritizing getting in the door.
- Ask questions and be curious. People can tell if you are bored or not listening.
- Be thoughtful about language barriers in your building and have someone who can translate if needed.
- Be friendly! Talk to your neighbors in the hall, help them, hold the doors open. Be a good neighbor.
- Share! Be honest about who you are and where you come from, especially if you are gentrifying the neighborhood. Share a little bit about who you are and why you are doing this.
- Map your building with the leaders. Try to figure out who knows who, who would be best to talk to who.
- Give examples of other tenant organizing success stories!

More guidelines on how to have effective one-on-one conversations with potential leaders are in the Appendix D on page 14!

## Next Steps: Join the Fight for Tenant Power!

With this manual, you are ready to get started talking to your neighbors and building a tenant association! Organized buildings are a crucial first step to building tenant power in New York – but they are only the first step.

Tenant associations must be connected to one another in the larger fight for renters' rights in New York. Policies like universal rent control undermine the landlords' business model and stop gentrification in its tracks, but they can only be won if tenants come together and fight for them.

We need a movement that brings thousands of working class leaders together in the struggle – to put people over real estate profits and demand housing as a human right.

NYC-DSA is learning about loopholes in rent regulation that benefit landlords, and how they came to pass. We are learning how to campaign comprehensively and strategically; we are mapping the power in New York State to identify ways that we can put it back in the peoples' hands; we are working together with other NYC-DSA working groups to approach the human right to a home like the feminist, racial justice issue that it is.

Join NYC-DSA's Housing Working Group and be a part of this campaign! You can sign up by emailing [tenants@socialists.nyc](mailto:tenants@socialists.nyc).

## Appendix A: Sample Meeting Agenda

- Introductions: Name, how long you have lived in the building, and what brought you here tonight.
- What is going on in the building? In the neighborhood? What do we need to fight for?
  - a. Conditions
  - b. Displacement
  - c. Buy-outs
  - d. Illegal hotels
- Making a plan to do something about it, together!
  - a. Who has power? Our landlord. If we organize, we can shift power:
    - i. More access to media
    - ii. More access to elected officials
    - iii. Change unjust laws!

- b. Get your rent history: in order to fight back we need as much information as possible.
- c. Fill out apartment condition survey
- d. Take a vote to organize!

- Next steps:
  - a. Letter to the landlord
  - b. 311 call in day at the building
  - c. Identify floor captains
  - d. Set a next meeting date
  - e. Collect apartment repair surveys

## Appendix B: Sample Press Advisory

### MEDIA ADVISORY

Contact: Name | E-mail | Phone number

### Wednesday:

Tenants to march on landlords, demand heat & fair rent. As winter approaches, tenants at 80 New York Avenue are upping the pressure on their landlord to settle with their demands for safe heat, fair rent, and an end to harassment.

### What & Who:

The residents of 80 New York Avenue, members of the Crown Heights Tenant Union, and other neighbors, friends and housing advocates will march on Gold Management's offices. Speakers will include a long-time tenants, new tenants, Crown Heights Tenant Union members and housing advocates.

### Where & When:

Wednesday, November 16th, 9:00-10:30 am. 164 Clymer St, Brooklyn, NY 11211.

### Why:

Across New York City, tenants are suffering from rent hikes, harassment, and unsafe living conditions due to weak rent laws and policies that benefit landlords and developers at the expense of residents. Tenants of 80 New York Ave have joined together in a tenant association and launched a campaign to end landlord abuse, harassment and illegal rent hikes in their building.

Gold Management bought 80 New York Avenue in 2015. Several apartments were renovated and



## Next Steps: Join the Fight for Tenant Power!

rented out at market rate after the new owners harassed residents until they left. Long-term tenants who refused the buy-out and have been resisting ongoing harassment are facing a second winter without heat. The new residents are being illegally overcharged at over three times the correct rent stabilized rate. All tenants have been subject to dangerous conditions, including illegal work on gas lines. With support from the Crown Heights Tenant Union and MFY Legal Services, the 80 New York Avenue Tenants Association filed a lawsuit to fight back against landlord abuse.'

Demands:

- Heat and hot water for all residents!
- Management must reinstall the boiler for the central heat and hot water for all apartments.
- Fair rent! All renovated apartments must immediately be returned to rent stabilized status.
- An end to harassment! All tenants deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, and to live in a safe, warm, pest-free home.

*The 80 New York Avenue Tenant Association is a member of the Crown Heights Tenant Union (CHTU), a union of tenant associations organized in response to rampant gentrification, displacement, and illegal rental overcharges in the neighborhood to protect tenants' rights.*

## Appendix C: Your Rights As A Rent Regulated Tenant

This fact sheet is just a quick guide and does not replace legal advice!

**All NYC tenants have a right to a habitable apartment.**

- Heat and hot water; elevator service (if there was an elevator in your building wne you moved in); superintendent service on a 24-hour-a-day basis; regular cleaning of hallways and common areas; proper garbage disposal; extermination services
- To working appliances
- To a paint job, every 3 years

- To take the landlord to court -- either by yourself or as a group -- if the landlord fails to maintain the building and/or your apartment

Without the benefits of rent stabilization, it is difficult for tenants to enforce their rights as a landlord may retaliate against tenants for sticking up for themselves.

### What is rent stabilization?

Rent stabilization refers to apartments that are regulated by the state Rent Stabilization Law (administered by the Division of Housing and Community Renewal, or DHCR for short.) Generally, any building built before 1974 with 6 or more apartments may have rent stabilized apartments in it. Some newer buildings may be rent stabilized if they receive tax benefits (like J-51 or 421-a) from the City or State.

**As a rent stabilized tenant, you have rights.**

**You have a right to keep living in your apartment.**

Under most circumstances, you have the right to keep living in your apartment whether or not your landlord issued you a renewal lease. If your landlord does not offer you a renewal lease, your old lease remains in effect. You do not need the landlord's permission to have a roommate.

Rent increases are subject to annual guidelines published by the City's rent guidelines board. Visit [www.nyc.gov/rgb](http://www.nyc.gov/rgb) to learn what recent annual increases are.

Succession rights: you have the right to "inherit" your apartment from your husband, wife, child, stepchild, parent, grandparent, or any "non-traditional family member" provided you have lived there with that person (and can prove it!) for at least 2 years before they moved or died.

Landlords are still able to raise rents or evict rent stabilized tenants, and loopholes in the rent laws encourage them to do so.

### How do I know if I am rent stabilized?

If you live in a building with 6 or more units built before 1974 and your rent is less than \$2700 a month, you are likely rent stabilized. To be sure you, you have to request

## Next Steps: Join the Fight for Tenant Power!

your rent history. Visit [www.amirentstabilized.com](http://www.amirentstabilized.com), call DHCR at 718-739-6400, or visit one of their offices across the City.

Once you get your rent history, you may want to get help interpreting it. Come to a NYC-DSA Housing Working Group meeting and sign up for our email list to hear about upcoming trainings on your rights as a rent stabilized tenant, how to read rent histories, and more.

## Appendix D: Guidelines for Organizing Conversation and One-on-One Meetings:

The basic elements of the organizing conversation are:

- **Introduction:** Who you are and why this conversation is important.
- **Getting the story:** How long has the person lived in the building, what has changed while they have lived there? What do they like about the neighborhood? What is unsatisfactory?
- **Agitate and educate:** Who decides? Why are things the way they are, who has the power to determine living conditions and policies, what role do unit members have in determining work and professional conditions?
- **Our vision:** Imagine how things could be different if you and your neighbors had a voice; what would your home look like, and how would things be better for all of us, the community and the people you serve if you had a voice in the decision-making? If tenants voted together -- and our elected officials didn't work for landlords -- what kind of world would we live in?
- **Inoculation:** articulate potential objections or the opposition's most powerful arguments, provide an evidence-based refutation, and refocus the conversation to the solution and the power of collective action. If you think someone may be intimidated by their landlord, raise the issue! Let them know that tenants have the right to organize.
- **The ask:** Move the tenant to action: Will you take a stand by joining with your neighbors to help build the tenant association and the community group? Will you help make a list of your neighbors, talk to them about their problems in their apartments, come to the tenant meeting, bring two people with you, come with the organizer to talk to neighbors, refuse to move from your apartment, wear a button, enlist coworkers? Conclude by keeping the door open for future contact!

The objective is to have at least one organizing conversation with as many neighbors as you can early on in forming your tenant association. This will help the organizer with strategic information about the building -- the people who have lived in the building for decades are the experts! The organizer will be able to identify potential collective issues in the building, assess individual commitment levels, and move neighbors into action! Organizers should be careful not to preach, exhort or "sell" the vision. Instead, the organizer should aim to follow the 70/30 principle: spend 70 percent of the time listening and no more than 30 percent of the time speaking.

### What is a one-on-one?

- A tool used to build healthy, authentic public relationships based on common core interests values, and vision for the future.
- The goals of a one-on-one are to identify leaders, discover their core-interest and to discern how and why they might join an organizing effort.

### Things to do in one-on-ones:

- Create structure - schedule the meeting in advance, be on time and meet for 30-40 minutes.
- Discover core interest - what do they long for?
- Explore areas importance to the person - family, life story, occupation, history in neighborhood, faith, plans and ambitions for the future, politics, organizations they belong to, challenges they have faced (not all of these at once - go deep, not broad)
- Mostly listen - 75% of the time.
- Build a public relationship.

## Next Steps: Join the Fight for Tenant Power!

- Be curious – ask “why?”
- Be courageous – take risks, learn about the other person and about yourself.
- End clearly – don’t go on forever.

### Things NOT to do in a one-on-one:

- Sell your organization or recruit the person to an event - the meeting should be relationship-not task-oriented.
- Provide therapy.
- Focus on making friends.
- Make it a group event – remember that it’s a one-on-one.
- Drill the person with questions – it’s a mutual conversation.

- Visit the NYC Rent Guidelines Board:  
[www.nyc.gov/rgb](http://www.nyc.gov/rgb)
  - Is your building rent stabilized?
- Visit the Department of Buildings website:  
[www.nyc.gov/dob](http://www.nyc.gov/dob)
  - Is the landlord filing for alteration permits? For what units?
  - What contractors are they using?

These are just some quick tips to get started on your own building. NYC-DSA has a team of campaign researchers who are working to identify who our landlords are and how they control New York City. Come to a Housing Working Group meeting and get involved!

## Appendix E: Tips for Researching Your Building

- Visit the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development:  
[www.nyc.gov/hpd](http://www.nyc.gov/hpd)
  - Check how many 311 complaints your building has
  - Check how many code violations your building has
  - Who is the “head officer” of your building? Do a quick search and see what kind of reputation, if any, they have.
- Visit the NYC Department of Finance’s City Record: [www.nyc.gov/acris](http://www.nyc.gov/acris)
  - When was the last time your building was sold?
  - What is the name of the LLC that owns it?
  - What is their address?
  - Who is the lender?
  - Who signs the mortgage on your building?
  - Does your building receive any tax exemptions?



## Next Steps: Join the Fight for Tenant Power!

### Appendix F: Sample Tenant Association Meeting Flyer

1236 Pacific Street Tenants/New York Communities for Change

# ATTENTION ALL TENANTS!

## UPDATES ON TENANT ORGANIZING:

1) Thanks to a successful 311 day, the department of health issued a stop-work order for dust in the hallways while they check for lead. We still need the department of Buildings and HPD to do a full inspection of the building so

**\*\*keep calling 311 to report issues!\*\***

2) Many residents have already requested their rent histories to determine whether our preferential rents are legal. Please bring your rent history to the next tenant meeting.

**\*\*To get your rent history call 718-739-6400 and ask for it to be mailed to you!\*\***

## WHEN:

Wednesday, May 27th 7:30 pm

## WHERE:

Building Lobby

## TENANTS UNITE!

For more information please call:

Sam 347 XXX XXXX

Nefertiti XXX 691 XXXX

## Next Steps: Join the Fight for Tenant Power!

### Appendix G: Apartment Repair Checklist

#### TENANTS' INSPECTION CHECK LIST

Use this form as a worksheet for landlord notification, legal proceedings, and tenant organizing.

Tenant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Owner/Agent: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 City: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

If using this form to notify landlord of apartment conditions for court evidence or DHCR complaint, you must sign & date at bottom.

##### Inside Whole Apartment

- ☐ Painting overdue (3 years)
- ☐ Peeling/flaking paint
- ☐ Heat: ☐ inadequate ☐ none
- ☐ Hot water: ☐ inadequate ☐ none
- ☐ Inadequate water pressure
- ☐ Rusty water
- ☐ Exposed wiring
- ☐ Weak electrical current (lights dim)
- ☐ Window guards missing
- ☐ Missing/broken smoke/CO2 detector
- ☐ Fumes/smoke entering apartment
- ☐ Vermin: ☐ rats ☐ mice ☐ roaches

##### Entry/Hallway Inside Apartment

- ☐ Door defective / not self-closing
- ☐ Door frame broken or sagging
- ☐ Door lock loose or defective
- ☐ Peephole missing or broken
- ☐ Bell not working
- ☐ No chain on door
- ☐ Defective intercom
- ☐ Floors rotted broken or buckling
- ☐ Walls/ceilings cracked/buckling/holes
- ☐ Collapsed ceiling
- ☐ Defective / leaking radiator
- ☐ Defective electrical switches / fixtures
- ☐ Missing face plates on switches or fixtures
- ☐ Defective/broken/inoperative windows
- ☐ Mold

##### Kitchen

- ☐ Defective stove
- ☐ Defective refrigerator
- ☐ Gas leaks
- ☐ Plumbing leaks
- ☐ Cracks / holes / rust around sink
- ☐ Leaking faucets
- ☐ Drain obstructed
- ☐ Defective cabinets
- ☐ Floors rotted / broken / buckling
- ☐ Walls/ceilings cracked/buckling/holes
- ☐ Collapsed ceiling
- ☐ Defective / leaking radiator
- ☐ Defective electrical switches / fixtures
- ☐ Missing face plates on switches or fixtures
- ☐ Defective/broken/inoperative windows
- ☐ Mold

##### Bathroom

- ☐ Defective appliances: ☐ sink ☐ bathtub ☐ shower ☐ toilet
- ☐ Missing or cracked bathroom tile
- ☐ Leaking faucets
- ☐ Drain obstructed
- ☐ Plumbing leaks
- ☐ Floors rotted / broken / buckling
- ☐ Walls / ceilings cracked / buckling / holes
- ☐ Collapsed ceiling
- ☐ Defective / leaking radiator
- ☐ Defective electrical switches / fixtures
- ☐ Missing face plates on switches or fixtures
- ☐ Defective/broken/inoperative windows
- ☐ Mold

##### Dining Room (if any)

- ☐ Floors rotted / broken / buckling
- ☐ Walls/ceilings cracked/buckling/holes
- ☐ Collapsed ceiling
- ☐ Defective / leaking radiator
- ☐ Defective electrical switches / fixtures
- ☐ Missing face plates on switches or fixtures
- ☐ Defective/broken/inoperative windows
- ☐ Mold

##### Living Room / Sitting Room

- ☐ Floors rotted / broken / buckling
- ☐ Walls/ceilings cracked/buckling/holes
- ☐ Collapsed ceiling
- ☐ Defective / leaking radiator
- ☐ Defective electrical switches / fixtures
- ☐ Missing face plates on switches or fixtures
- ☐ Defective/broken/inoperative windows
- ☐ Mold

##### Bedrooms (#1 Main, #2, #3, #4, etc.)

- ☐ Floors rotted / broken / buckling
- ☐ Walls/ceilings cracked/buckling/holes
- ☐ Collapsed ceiling
- ☐ Defective / leaking radiator
- ☐ Defective electrical switches / fixtures
- ☐ Missing face plates on switches or fixtures
- ☐ Defective/broken/inoperative windows
- ☐ Defective doors
- ☐ Mold

##### Public Areas of Building

- ☐ Broken or no locks on front door(s)
- ☐ Front door(s) defective
- ☐ Broken stoop steps
- ☐ Broken or no intercom
- ☐ Inadequate light: ☐ entrance ☐ courtyard/alley ☐ hallways
- ☐ Broken mailboxes
- ☐ Defective/broken/inoperative windows
- ☐ Walls/ceilings cracked/buckling/holes
- ☐ Paint in hallways dirty or peeling
- ☐ Hallways not cleaned
- ☐ Elevator not working
- ☐ Stairs broken or loose
- ☐ Laundry room: ☐ dirty ☐ machines broken
- ☐ Mold
- ☐ Inadequate garbage cans
- ☐ Garbage cans not covered
- ☐ Garbage not collected / not put out for collection
- ☐ Fire escapes rusty / broken / defective / missing
- ☐ Basement not secure
- ☐ Roof not secure
- ☐ Exposed wiring in basement
- ☐ Many vacant apartments
- ☐ Great tenant turnover
- ☐ Drug dealing on stoop / in hallways
- ☐ Illegal apartments in basement
- ☐ No rent receipts given
- ☐ Rent receipts incomplete (no date/ NYC address for landlord, etc.)
- ☐ Inadequate / no super service
- ☐ Other (specify and use other side if necessary):

Tenant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_

For help in organizing a tenants' association, contact:

NYC DSA Housing Working Group, tenants@socialists.nyc



## Timeline of Key Events at 80 New York Avenue

**December 2014:** Mendel and Chananya Gold buy the building for \$2.3 million dollars. At the time of their purchase the eight unit building was entirely rent-stabilized and the tenants rents ranged from \$575 - \$1,200 per month.

**December 2014:** Mendel and Chananya Gold begin to harass long term tenants: repeatedly offering them buyouts, removing the central heating system, not providing basic services, refusing repairs, and using construction as form of harassment. When one tenant refused several buyout offers, the Golds moved forward with more aggressive forms of harassment: on a winter night, the building supervisor knocked on her door and told her to ignore any loud noises because a crew was working nearby. In fact, the crew was covering up the entire door to her apartment while she was still inside. When the Fire Department responded, the Golds claimed the crew only did this because they thought the unit was vacant. Many tenants leave the building. Some tenants stay and take Gold to housing court to stop harassment, but do not make significant progress in stopping harassment.

**February 2015:** The Golds begin a gut renovation of 5 vacant units without proper Department of Building permits. Later in the year, Golds start advertising the rooms in the renovated apartments individually and collect about \$4,000 for each apartment a month.

**August 2015:** New tenants move into the renovated units.

**November 2015:** Some newer tenants lose hot water and cooking gas because of a gas leak. Though the gas-shutoff is short-lived, some tenants discover the cause: management is stealing gas from some newer tenants to heat long-term tenant's water. Long-term tenants and affected newer tenants begin to discuss problems in the building and hold a small meeting.

**January 2016:** The tenants at 80 NY hold their first building-wide meeting and vote to start their tenant association. Six out of eight apartments are represented at this meeting. Each apartment commits to get their rent histories and the group prepares a list of collective demands to deliver to their landlord at a future date. The group decides to invite attorneys to their next meeting to get advice on taking legal action.

**June 2015:** After several meetings, tenants go public with their campaign and file a lawsuit in Brooklyn Supreme Court alleging illegal deregulation and rent overcharges. The suit demands the restoration of illegally deregulated apartments back to rent stabilized status, restoration of services and an end to the bullying and harassment of all tenants. Tenants of 80 NY Avenue, members of the Crown Heights Tenant Union, and other supporters rally in front of Brooklyn Supreme Court in support of their case and to publicly demand their landlord to stop the harassing tenants. The tenant association hangs bright green and orange signs in most of the street-facing windows that broadcast an eye-catching message: "S-L-U-M-L-O-R-D: D-O-N'T R-E-N-T H-E-R-E."

**November 2016:** After participating in several Crown Heights Tenant Union rallies and marches throughout the summer, the tenant association holds its own rally at Gold's office in South Williamsburg. With allies, they distribute almost 1000 flyers to the landlord's community, in both English and Yiddish, exposing the extreme harassment in the building.

**February 2017:** Facing another winter without heat, tenants hold another rally at 80 New York Ave. Several politicians, including Public Advocate Letitia James, speak out against Gold Management.

**March 2017:** Due to dangerous gas construction, DOB shuts off gas for the entire building. Most tenants go around one month without heat and long-term tenants also lose hot water. Angered by worsening conditions, tenants begin to organize towards a rent strike later in the spring.

**May 2017:** Tenants rally outside of DHCR, threatening to strike at the end of the month if their demands are not met. The rally highlights their demand to return all units to rent stabilization. The Rude Mechanical Orchestra plays in support of the strikers.

**June 2017:** The rent strike begins on June 1st, with a majority of the units participating.

**September 2017:** Gold files a lawsuit against two of the striking units in Housing Court, in an attempt to end the strike.

## Timeline of Key Events at 80 New York Avenue

**October 2017:** Long-term tenants win heat after two years in the cold! Some tenants also win a rent reduction. Tenants celebrate.

**November 2017:** Tenants rally outside New York County Courts in defense of the strikers, attracting media coverage from local cable news stations. The judge orders the strikers to resume paying rent at the end of the month, effectively ending the strike for some of the participants. However, some long-term tenants are still on strike as of January, 2018!

