

KC TENANTS

COVID

ORGANIZING

TOOLKIT



DEAR READER:

We are experiencing a public health crisis. COVID-19 will affect our poor and working class community the most, only worsening long standing inequities. People who are housing-insecure or currently homeless are at a higher risk of being exposed to the virus, becoming ill, and suffering catastrophic health outcomes. Many tenants simply don't have rent money because they've been laid off. All of this is unacceptable. If you are a tenant in Kansas City (and surrounding areas), KC Tenants has your back.

*This zine is an abbreviated version of the **KC TENANTS COVID ORGANIZING TOOLKIT**. This toolkit can be found at kctenants.org and is intended to support you to organize with other tenants, no matter your previous exposure to organizing.*

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 tenants 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.



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]

THERE IS NO COLLECTIVE POWER WITHOUT DEEP RELATIONSHIPS. JADE WILL FOLLOW UP THE LETTERS TO HER NEIGHBORS WITH ONE-ON-ONES.

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.

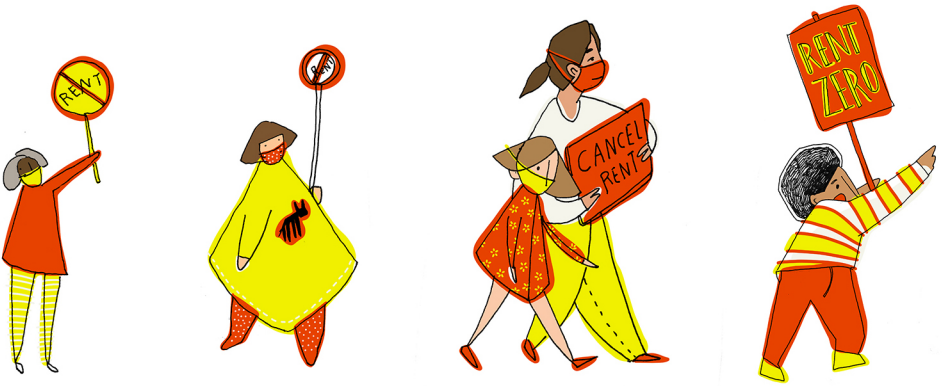
The newly formed tenant union met to celebrate and **make plans to hold their landlord accountable**.



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:

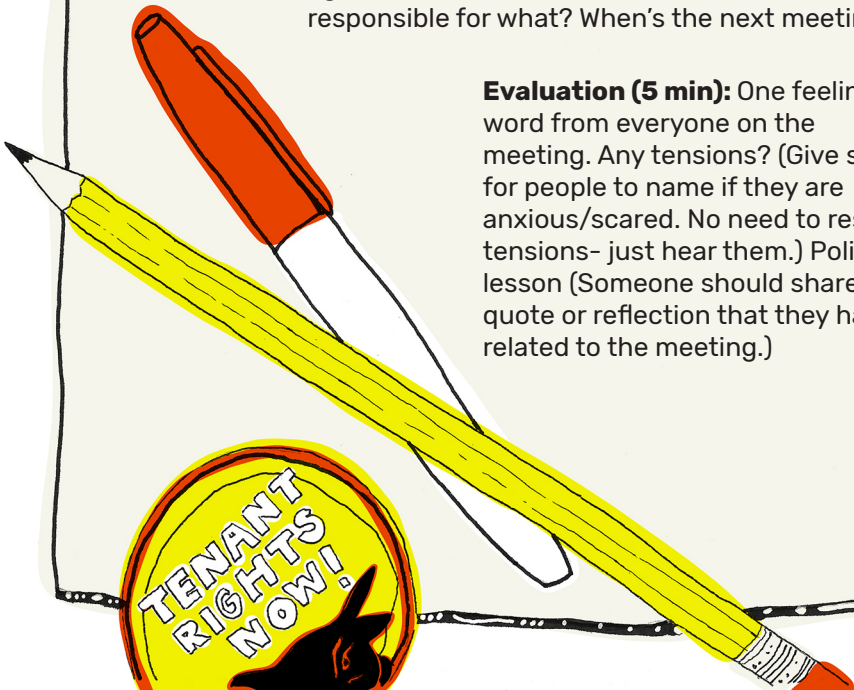
Intros (15 min): How are you doing? What support do you need? How long has everyone lived here? How have you been impacted by COVID-19? (You should model vulnerability and active listening.)

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.)

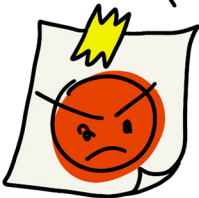


KNOW YOUR RIGHTS.

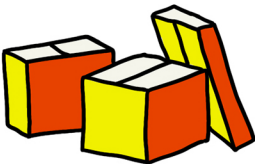
As a renter in Missouri you have rights: a right to a safe, sanitary, and livable home; a right to not have your utilities shut-off by the landlord; a right to privacy and respect; and a right to not have your landlord retaliate against you for reporting housing code violations. **You also have the right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



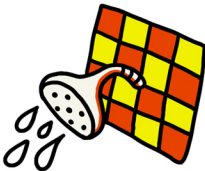
LIVING CONDITIONS. Your landlord must provide safe, sanitary and livable housing conditions. (No mice or insect infestation, working plumbing, heat, ventilation, etc.)



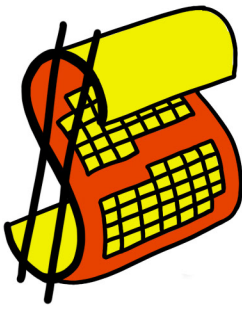
NO RETALIATION. Your landlord may not retaliate against you for reporting housing code violations.



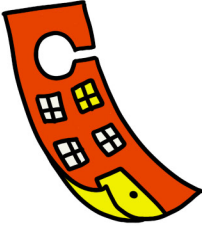
NO SELF HELP EVICTION. Your landlord may not force you or your things out of your home without a court order.



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



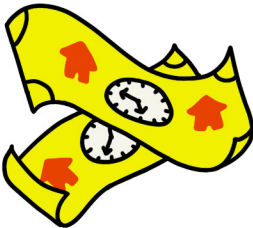
DEPOSIT. Your landlord may not charge you more than the equivalent of two months rent for your security deposit. The landlord must return your security deposit within 30 days from the date you move out along with an explanation for any deductions for repairs.



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.

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

