Work Around the World
Studies in Global Labour History

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RENT STRIKES

A HISTORY OF COLLECTIVE TENANT ACTIONS ACROSS THE WORLD

EDITED BY LUCAS POY AND HANNES ROLF

UCLPRESS

Rent Strikes

WORK AROUND THE WORLD: STUDIES IN GLOBAL LABOUR HISTORY

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A history of collective tenant actions across the world

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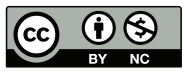

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List of contributors

Alejandro Belkin is an assistant professor at the University of Buenos Aires and a senior researcher at the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET) in Argentina. His main area of expertise is the history of labour and 'revolutionary syndicalism' in Argentina, and its links with socialism and anarchism. On these topics he has published two books and many articles in labour history journals.

Jordi Bonshoms-Guzmán is a post-doctoral researcher and lecturer at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. His research is focused on analysing the housing/financial complex that emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis in Spain, with the ascendancy of corporate landlords and asset-management companies. He has also examined the contentious politics of tenants' movements by analysing the repertoire of housing contention against the new cycle of housing financialisation. He has developed two tenant surveys in Barcelona with the Institute of Urban Research (IDRA).

Elinor Chisholm is a senior research fellow at He Kainga Oranga (Housing and Health Research Group) in the Department of Public Health at the University of Otago, Wellington. Her 2016 doctorate is a history of tenant collective action in Aotearoa New Zealand and an analysis of the power dynamics that prevent contemporary tenants from asserting their rights to adequate housing. In subsequent research she has looked at eviction experiences, the effect of housing interventions on wellbeing and the development of mixed-tenure communities. Her current research foci include ventilation behaviour, public housing tenants' neighbourhood experiences and the experience of living in employer-provided housing.

Nathan Crompton is a housing and harm reduction organiser based in Vancouver, Canada, unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. He edits *The Mainlander* and has recently completed a PhD in French history at Simon Fraser University.

Eugenia Crosetti graduated in Sociology at the University of Padua and holds a master's degree in Literary Studies from Leiden University. She is

currently a PhD candidate in Social Sciences at the University of Milan. Her research draws from women's, urban and post-colonial studies, with a focus on gendered perspectives to investigate social processes of production and reproduction and trajectories of deviance construction in urban contexts.

Marta Ill-Raga holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Ghent. Her academic career is defined by a sustained interest in the politics and consequences of accumulation by dispossession in urban settings. Her doctoral research focused on residential rent relations in Barcelona, where she ethnographically examined the conflictual dynamics between landlords and tenants through her involvement with the Barcelona Tenants' Union. Her work was part of the ERC-funded *Property and Democratic Citizenship* research project, which aims to unpack the articulation of landed property regimes in Western democracies, including the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the United States and Greece. Her research reveals how contemporary inequalities are structured along patrimonial lines, shaping housing precarity and broader strategies of social reproduction at both domestic and societal levels. Currently she is a lecturer at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) and a research collaborator at the Urban Research Institute of Barcelona (IDRA).

Giulia Novaro graduated in Historical Sciences at the University of Turin and obtained a PhD in Contemporary History at the University of Florence with a research project on women's living conditions and role in tenant mobilisations for housing in Turin and Rome's suburbs between the 1960s and 1970s. She is the author of *Abitare i margini. Politiche e lotte per la casa nella Torino degli anni Settanta* (Edizioni Gruppo Abele, 2020). Currently she is a research fellow in the Department of Social Sciences at the University of Florence.

Samuel Oliveira is a professor and researcher in History at the Celso Suckow da Fonseca Federal Centre for Technological Education in Rio de Janeiro (CEFET-RJ); he also works at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO). His research deals with the relationship between urban history, visual culture and social movements in the twentieth century. He has published dozens of articles in scientific journals and is a researcher of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) and the Carlos Chagas Foundation for Research Support in the State of Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ) in Brazil.

Nikos Potamianos is an associate researcher at the Institute for Mediterranean Studies – FORTH. He is member of the academic board of the academic journal *Ta Historica* and a founding member of the Greek Labour History Network. He has published extensively on the social, political and cultural history of modern Greece. He is the author of the monographs [in Greek] *A Social History of the Carnival of Athens 1800–1940* (2020) and *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Athens 1880–1925* (2015). Other publications include *Labour History in the Semi-Periphery: Southern Europe, 19th–20th centuries* (edited with Leda Papastefanaki; 2021); 'Do shopkeepers have their own moral economy? Profiteering, unfair competition and the black market in Greece, 1916–1945', *Social History* 47/1 (2022), 35–59; and 'Moral economy: A narrow and a broad view', *Critical Historical Studies* 11(1) (2024), 157–87.

Lucas Poy is an assistant professor in Global Economic and Social History at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. He is also a fellow of the International Institute of Social History. His research deals with the history of labour and socialism, with a special focus on the so-called 'Global South', transnational connections and the question of global solidarities. In addition to two monographs, he has published dozens of scientific articles about the history of labour and socialism. Before joining VU Amsterdam, he was a lecturer at the University of Buenos Aires and a senior researcher of the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET) in Argentina.

Mark W. Robbins is a professor of History at Del Mar College and holds a PhD in History from Brown University. His work on labour history, activism, memory, cultural history and consumer politics has appeared in journals including *Labor History*, *The Public Historian*, *Oral History Review*, *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, *The Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, *Michigan History*, *American Educational History* and *The Sound Historian*. He is the author of *Middle Class Union: Organizing the 'consuming public' in post-World War I America* (University of Michigan Press, 2017) and co-directs the South Texas Hispanic Farm Labor Communities Heritage Project.

Hannes Rolf is an assistant professor at the Institute of Urban History, Department of History, Stockholm University. He specialises in urban history, the history of housing and urban social movements. His main research areas are the tenants' movement, housing co-operatives and social housing, and he has authored and co-authored several chapters,

articles and books on these subjects. He is currently writing a book on the history of social housing in Stockholm during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Bart van der Steen is a historian of labour and social movements in Leiden, the Netherlands and Western Europe. He has published monographs on Dutch Trotskyism and the history of the Socialist Party in Leiden, co-edited *Researching Subcultures, Myth and Memory* (2020) and *A European Youth Revolt* (2016), and has published research articles in the *Journal of Urban History*, *Urban History* and *The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History*.

Philippe Urvoy is a historian. He is an associate professor in urban studies at the Geography department of Paris Nanterre University. He is a member of the Lavue (Paris Nanterre University/CNRS) and Cosmópolis (Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil) research groups. His research focuses on contemporary urban history, with an emphasis on the history of low-income and informal neighbourhoods, housing and urban social movements. His recent work also concerns collaborative research methodologies in urban history, being involved in several projects associated with dwellers' collectives. His work has been published in several books, as well as in urban studies and social history journals.

Lisa Vollmer is a housing and social movement researcher at the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space, Erkner, Germany. She has published on current and historical tenants' movements in Germany and the USA and is an editor of *sub\urban. zeitschrift für kritische stadtforschung*.

Jacob A. Zumoff is an associate professor and chair of the History Department as well as co-director of the Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latinx Studies at New Jersey City University, in Jersey City, New Jersey. His research focuses on the intersection of radical politics, the left and labour movements, and struggles against racial and ethnic oppression in the inter-war era in the Americas. In addition to many scholarly articles, he has published *The Communist International and United States Communism, 1919–1929* (2014); *The Red Thread: The Passaic textile strike* (2021); and (as co-editor) *Transnational Communism across the Americas* (2023). He is currently researching the development of the labour movement in twentieth-century Panama.

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1
Rent contention throughout history and across borders

Lucas Poy and Hannes Rolf

In 1936 Gothenburg, Sweden's second-largest city, was gripped by a major conflict between organised landlords and tenants. While the epicentre of the dispute was the working-class district of Olskroken, where tensions arose over whether the cost of modernising housing should be covered by rent increases, the conflict affected the whole city. Amid a broader wave of labour organising and industrial unrest, Gothenburg's tenants' movement had established itself as a militant collective, using rent strikes and picketing as effective strategies against landlords. In Olskroken union solidarity actions delayed evictions and provided financial support for evicted tenants, while state officials were forced to intervene as mediators.[1]

Their conflict was part of a rich historical trajectory. The Swedish tenants of 1936 were building upon the strength their movement had gained through confrontations with landlords in the 1920s and early 1930s. When the tenants' union secured victory in 1937, it paved the way for the large-scale expansion of Sweden's influential tenants' movement throughout the twentieth century. The significance of this struggle is still commemorated today, as evidenced by a commemorative plaque dedicated to the tenants in a statue at Olof Palmes plats, Gothenburg, featured on the cover of this book.

The Gothenburg strikers were part of a long but often forgotten tradition of tenant contention, encompassing different regions and periods and shaped by victories, setbacks and a variety of compromises and truces. While tenants in Ancient Rome certainly suffered at the hands of exploitative landlords, there is no evidence of collective tenant action until AD 68, when the emperor Nero tried to divert the tenants' annual rental payment from their landlords to the emperor's agents.[2]

The issue remained contentious in the 'Eternal City', eventually leading to collective action. Jewish tenants in the ghetto of medieval Rome had a principle called *tekanah*, which prohibited Jewish tenants from moving into a house left by another Jewish tenant without the latter's approval. This show of collective solidarity was aimed at the Christian landlords. Rents continued to be a source of tension and conflict in later periods, forcing popes from the fifteenth century onwards to intervene and protect, at different times, landlord and tenant (Jewish and Christian) interests.[3]

From the nineteenth century there is a substantial increase in historical records about conflicts over rent, in both urban and rural settings. Tenant farmers formed associations and demonstrated contentious repertoires similar to their urban counterparts. Notable examples include the Anti-Rent War in the Hudson River Valley in the late 1830s and the Irish Land War, which started in the late 1870s.[4] Tenant farmers often joined forces with agricultural workers and other rural poor, for example in Sweden in the 1860s, Japan in the 1920s or India after the Second World War, even though rural labourers in the last case have also taken collective action against their tenant farmer employers.[5] Collective action among urban tenants occurred in Stockholm during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[6] In England weavers in Bolton, Lancashire initiated an early example of a rent strike, and such strikes were to occur sporadically throughout the nineteenth century.[7] In Berlin, evictions several times led to riots during the nineteenth century,[8] while in 1871 Paris *communards* issued a rent stop.[9] During the decades following the defeat of the *communards*, tenants' associations were formed in Paris and rent strikes took place.[10]

The first decades of the twentieth century marked one of the highest peaks of tenant conflicts worldwide. Significant struggles took place during the first years of the century: New York and Buenos Aires witnessed notable rent strikes in 1907, coinciding with the year in which Sweden experienced its first instance of tenant organisation on a national scale.[11] A rent-boycotting movement emerged in Budapest in the same year.[12] However, it was during the First World War and its immediate aftermath that tenants' collective action became a force to be reckoned with. During this period of growing social unrest and increasing working-class militancy, rent strikes gained international traction, with various regions experiencing heightened tensions between tenants and landlords. Beginning in 1915, rent strikes occurred in multiple locations across the United Kingdom: Birmingham, Birkenhead, London, Belfast and Northampton were among the cities affected.[13]

Scotland experienced a significant impact, witnessing rent strikes in multiple cities including Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Kirkcaldy.[14] Particularly renowned were the Glasgow rent strikes of 1915. These gained widespread recognition due to the participation of over 20,000 strikers and the achievement of a favourable outcome for the tenants.[15]

Tenant mobilisation, often spurred by female activists, continued throughout the inter-war period.[16] The desperation felt by tenants, coupled with collective action, protests and radical uprisings in the context of growing labour unrest, forced governments in many countries to introduce rent control measures from the late stages of the First World War. Tenant struggles were widespread from that time and well into the 1930s: examples of locations where rent strikes and squatting took place include Barcelona, Berlin, Gothenburg, New York, London, Oslo, Panama City, Vienna and Veracruz.[17] Rent control policies persisted in many countries throughout the inter-war period.[18] Tenants' organisations also grew during these years: in 'Red Vienna', for example, the tenants' unions had almost 150,000 members at the beginning of the 1930s.[19]

A new period of increased collective action among tenants began in the 1960s; it then continued through the 1970s and into the 1980s. Sweden, for example, experienced a wave of rent strikes from the early 1970s to the 1980s.[20] In the United Kingdom rent strikes occurred occasionally through the post-war years, intensifying during the early 1970s,[21] with Northern Irish Republicans launching political campaigns involving rent strikes.[22] In the United States rent contention surged, and cities such as Ann Arbor, Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland and New York saw tenant strikes.[23] In South Africa the largest rent strike episode in history may have occurred in the early 1980s. More than 300,000 people participated in collective actions that were also a part of the campaign against apartheid. The protest was to leave an enduring legacy; as late as 1997 only 25 per cent of the Soweto population paid rent and rates.[24]

In recent decades the rise of financial capitalism has brought about a notable increase in real estate speculation, significantly impacting the housing sector. As a result housing struggles have gained prominence, encompassing various aspects such as tenants' movements, homeowner associations among those who can afford mortgages and advocacy for legal land rights and urbanisation initiatives in Global South cities. The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis has seen signs of a resurgence of housing and tenants' collective mobilisation in many places. In the years leading up to and during the Covid-19 pandemic, tenants' unions and rent strikes emerged in places where they had not been seen for decades. One such example is Spain, explored by Marta Ill-Raga and Jordi

Bonshoms-Guzmán in Chapter 13. In the third decade of the twenty-first century, in short, collective actions to defend the right to affordable and decent housing remain a prominent feature of social activism around the world.

What insights can we draw from past struggles? We hope that this book can provide inspiration and historical lessons for the tenant activists of today and tomorrow. As Mike Davis has pointed out, even nominally socialist governments have repeatedly failed to address the basic right of healthy and adequate housing for all.[25] If anything is to happen, it will take a massive effort of collective mobilisation to bring about changes, and the sharing of lessons from one place and time to another will hopefully have an impact.

Throughout the years collective actions of tenants have taken various forms, ranging from formal petitions to measures of direct action and physical confrontations, and have drawn on structures and organisations of different types. These actions, moreover, have been directed against different actors, including property owners, real estate investors, housing companies and state institutions. Tenants' struggles have often developed in close relationships with initiatives of trade unions and left-wing organisations, but the working-class character of tenants' movements was not always a matter of fact. At times it gave way to tensions and conflicts, due, for instance, to the participation of shopkeepers in pro-tenant coalitions or to the fact that some landlords belonged to the working class themselves. Women, and often also children, have played a crucial role in these struggles.

The uprisings of tenants that reverberated through the tenement houses of Buenos Aires and New York in 1907 present significant differences with the firmly established tenants' associations in post-war Sweden, which were integral to a broader co-operative movement and employed an array of legal and political strategies throughout the twentieth century, or with the activists who rally under the banner of the 'right to housing' to fight against gentrification, eviction and speculation in contemporary Barcelona. Yet all of them share important common elements that deserve further examination. Adopting a global and comparative perspective offers a vantage point to assess the divergences and resemblances in various case studies more clearly, thereby dispelling narrow viewpoints and contextualising each case within a wider framework.

Bringing together a dozen studies from different regions and periods, this book offers a comprehensive analysis of tenant struggles across varied geographical and temporal contexts, demonstrating

the common threads that bind them together and underscoring their relevance today. Any attempt at writing global history must consider significant national and regional differences and would necessarily be a collective task. This volume is intended as a starting point for further research on the global history of rent struggle and tenant organising, rather than an endeavour to synthesise the subject comprehensively.

Historiography and approach

Despite its significance, the collective agency of tenants has received less attention than industrial action; both social movements and scholars have displayed more interest in struggles in the labour market and the workplace.[26] This is unfortunate, not only because housing struggles played a significant role in shaping popular experiences but also because their study can enrich the field of labour history. To be sure, conflicts and organisations related to housing and rent issues can be distinguished from those emerging in factories and workshops, but they should not be placed in unrelated compartments, investigated by specialists from different fields. In many cases the experiences accumulated in the workplace and the organisations created for this purpose were used for organising workers in their homes and neighbourhoods. Housing struggles, in turn, also shaped and influenced labour politics in myriad ways. At the same time, while rent strikes were often similar to struggles in the workplace in terms of collective action and demands for better working/living conditions, they also differed in significant ways, such as the physical location of the conflicts and the involvement of other participants, including women, children and elderly people. Housing struggles have sometimes been treated by orthodox Marxists as uninteresting compared to industrial action. This attitude has probably affected the interests of labour historians as well.

Studies of tenants' organisations and conflicts are distributed unevenly across the globe. Research has concentrated on certain regions, such as Britain, the United States, New York City and Germany.[27] Some case studies of tenants' movements exist in other countries, such as Sweden or New Zealand.[28] While there are some works on Latin America,[29] collective action among tenants in the Global South is still under-studied.[30] To be sure, several authors have developed international comparative or otherwise more synchronic perspectives, ranging from classic studies in social movements theory to more specific comparisons of several rent strikes,[31] but there is still a noticeable lack

of scholarly attempts to examine the phenomenon of tenant collective mobilisation and rent contention with a transnational perspective.

The current state of research on the global history of rent struggles and tenant organising needs to be improved, and this volume intends to serve as a foundation for future investigations. The book connects local and national cases by offering an overview of tenants' struggles in different geographies and periods. It aims to trace global trajectories in the history of the contentious rent struggle.

There are several reasons why adopting a transnational perspective allows us to examine the similarities and differences between countries and regions while also recognising overarching structural patterns. First, a comparative and connected approach sheds light on crucial *structural aspects* of the landlord–tenant relationship and the power dynamics that shape it. Specific cases are frequently examined within the context of local labour and housing policies, yet they are often disconnected from similar struggles in other regions. This approach inadvertently takes various structural components of the conflict for granted and fails to explore them in depth. For example, what kind of (legal) regime existed to process the housing contract, and how was it different in diverse regions? Who were the tenants that decided to strike? What was the class composition of the tenants' collective and how did this influence the focus and strategies deployed in their conflicts? What was the relationship between the leaders of the movement and the rank-and-file? The tenants' migration background, their position in the workforce, their social, economic and political position are all important factors to consider in understanding their struggles. Who were the landlords? Were they large corporations or individual owners? Where were their properties located? Moreover, how did tenants' struggles play out tensions between different sectors of the capitalist class – for instance, between small homeowners interested in raising the rents and industrial capitalists concerned about housing for their workers? The actors in tenants' struggles and their relationship with each other, as well as with state institutions and other institutions of civil society, varied greatly across regions and over time. An examination of the physical and economic landscape in which tenants operated is therefore crucial to understanding their experiences.

Second, a comparative and transnational approach also helps to assess and understand the *material conditions* of working-class housing and the role they played in these conflicts. How much space did tenants have? What access did they have to toilet facilities and cooking spaces? How was heating provided and maintained? Were parts of their

dwellings shared among different families? It is not just about showing how uncomfortable and unhealthy housing conditions were for millions of tenants around the world, but also about examining social relations inside and among families, the dynamics of domestic tasks indispensable for the reproduction of the workforce and how the upbringing of children was taken care of. Comparing rent struggles from a global perspective involves analysing how different economic systems shaped the housing conditions of working-class families across different regions of the world. In so doing, the political economy of housing becomes an integral part of an exercise in global labour history.

Third, this perspective helps to understand the *reasons and contexts behind tenants' decisions to engage in collective action* and the factors that may hinder or prevent them from doing so. Understanding the motivations and constraints behind tenant mobilisation is crucial to grasp the dynamics of rent strikes and the broader history of labour struggles. Eric Hobsbawm once stated that tenants' unions typically 'flicker up and down'.[32] While a few countries, such as Sweden and Germany, have had long-lasting national tenants' organisations, collective action and organising among tenants have historically been periodical and relatively unstable. The richness of historical examples and national contexts in this volume allows us to elaborate on this and to analyse why tenant organising has taken such different organisational forms in different contexts.

Demands, actions, actors

Equipped with this perspective, it is possible to provide a sketch of a typology that combines features of different rent conflicts throughout the years and in different regions. First, organised tenants have sought to address various *demands*. Above all, tenants have consistently demanded *lower rents*, refusing to bear the burden of exorbitant housing costs. In practice, this has often translated into actions to *reject or limit rent increases* imposed by landlords. Furthermore, tenants have also demanded *rent control measures* by local and national governments. Claims for *renovations and maintenance* have been another recurring theme, with tenants stressing that landlords should provide decent and habitable spaces. In particular, demands associated with improper heating in the cold winter months have frequently recurred, as shown by several chapters in this volume. The issue of subletting has also emerged as a concern, with tenants demanding the *freedom to sublet* without

interference or control from landlords. Last but certainly not least, tenants' initiatives often focused on the *fight against evictions*. Beyond these immediate demands, tenants' movements throughout regions and periods have developed a rich history of discussions about their *broader objectives*, for instance between those demanding cheaper housing to promote home ownership, those calling for co-operative alternatives and those favouring the expansion of state-owned housing.

To obtain these demands, mobilised tenants and their supporters have deployed a *repertoire of actions*. The first subgroup comprises those that directly challenge landlords' material interests. The 'classic' measure of a rent strike is the *refusal to pay rent altogether*, denying landlords their expected income as a means of exerting pressure for change. Tenants have often adopted other strategies, however, such as withholding part of the rent, refusing to pay the percentage of a recent increase or diverting the remaining funds toward repairs or maintenance neglected by landlords. As shown in different chapters in this book, this strategy was usually combined with a denunciation of 'profiteering' by landlords and a demand for what tenants called a 'fair' price, accompanied by a discourse that several chapters of this volume insightfully connect with E. P. Thompson's notion of 'moral economy'. There were other alternatives, such as so-called *rent-reducing actions*, in which the tenants collectively cancelled their contracts, threatening action and rent strikes. Targeted *boycotts* of specific buildings or landlords have been utilised to ensure that certain homes were kept empty, thus exerting economic pressure on house owners. Additionally, tenants have deployed a variety of *initiatives to resist evictions*, both through legal channels and physical means. In some cases tenants have resorted to *squatting*, although that is a more frequent performance in other contentious repertoires.

A second subgroup is formed by those actions that, without withholding rent or physically confronting an eviction, were designed to attract public attention and garner support for tenants. *Denouncing landlords publicly* has been a common strategy, shedding light on exploitative practices and mobilising public opinion against them. The use of posters, leaflets and, more recently, social media outlets has been instrumental, playing a role in spreading information about the organisation and attracting protesters and sympathisers. Rent strikers have also used *public demonstrations*, organising street meetings, rallies and occupations of public spaces to amplify their demands. *Petitions to authorities* have been another typical instrument of action, as a formal avenue for expressing grievances and seeking redress. The *flooding of*

courts with demands has been employed as a tactic to overwhelm the legal system. In addition, rent strikers have occasionally resorted to other measures, such as ostracising the wives of landlords, in an attempt to isolate and marginalise those who benefit from unjust housing practices.

To carry out this repertoire of actions, tenants and their supporters have deployed a variety of *organisations*. Despite the very different contexts, we find some form of *tenants' association* in all the conflicts. These associations usually operate at various levels, including the building, neighbourhood, city and occasionally even the national level, although the last was less common. The stability of these organisations was never a matter of course. In many cases they did not survive the episodes of contention, even if they had achieved success. In other cases, however, of which the Swedish case is a good testimony, they managed to survive and even flourish over longer periods.

More often than not, these tenants' associations had to confront parallel landlord organisations. These associations often hinged on obtaining official recognition of a bargaining process by the state, effectively institutionalising the connection between tenants, landlords and authorities. Furthermore, tenants' organisations frequently had *affiliations with left-wing political parties and trade unions*, although this association was not without challenges and complexities. The influence between tenants' organisations and these political entities flowed in both directions, shaping strategies, ideologies and agendas. In some cases rent strikes also found common ground with student groups and organisations representing unemployed workers. Tenant organising and rent strikes have sometimes been used to further the goals of political organisations.

In all accounts of tenants' struggles in the most diverse regions and periods, a recurring theme emerges: the significant *agency of women*. Indeed, women actively participated in organising actions within the confines of buildings and in public spaces, leaving an indelible mark on the collective resistance. Notably, these actions of organisation and resistance often took place in liminal spaces that straddled the boundaries between the private and public spheres, such as courtyards and stairwells. Newspapers and other observers consistently highlighted the visibility of women (and children) in rallies and demonstrations that occupied streets and squares.

The pivotal role played by women in these initiatives is linked to their position within the household and their role in administering family budgets. Such a situation also connects rent strikes with other protests against the increased cost of foodstuffs and other products and services

indispensable for the daily reproduction of the labour force along the red thread of a struggle against 'unfair' prices and practices. Struggles over housing were often portrayed using a gendered lens, for instance drawing on expectations of how a 'proper home' should look and encompassing the notion of safeguarding the welfare of women and children. Gendered divisions within the movement often limited their influence on buildings or neighbourhoods, while men predominantly occupied leadership positions at broader levels. Illuminating the complicated dynamics of gender, household economics and societal expectations, several contributions to this volume attempt to provide a comprehensive understanding of rent strikes as a site of both empowerment and constraint for women.

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This book is a collective endeavour with a dozen chapters – case studies of specific regions and comparative assessments that bring together several struggles and geographies. Seeking to provide a global overview for academics and the general public, all contributions place their studies against a broader historical background and attempt to answer the questions posed in this introduction. Moreover, chapters reflect on the role played by ethnic, national and gender differences. The book includes studies about rent strikes and other episodes of resistance, organisation and direct action in which tenants protested and showed their initiative to fight for their rights. The authors come from over a dozen countries and various academic backgrounds, though most are historians, sociologists or geographers.

Several important insights emerge from the various contributions to this volume. As the chapters by Potamianos, Poy and Belkin, Novaro and Crosetti, and Ill-Raga and Bonshoms-Guzmán show, one of these is the role of housing as a space of social reproduction – and often of production for the market – and the importance of this for understanding the active role played by women in the struggle for tenants' rights. Another important thread running through the chapters, particularly those by Robbins, Rolf, Vollmer, Oliveira and Urvoy and Chisholm, are the contradictory roles of the state as regulator, active player in the housing market and repressive force. The impact of racial and ethnic difference, and the role of imperialism and colonialism, is a third important aspect that emerges in various chapters, for example those by Zumoff and Crompton.

The volume is organised in a roughly chronological order. The early chapters examine episodes of rent struggle before the Second World War.

Mark Robbins offers an overview of rent strikes and tenant organising in the United States after the First World War, emphasising the role played by inflation in the politics of the tenant movement. Focusing on developments in Greece during the same period, Nikos Potamianos looks at the interplay between rent control and tenant mobilisation with the help of the classic concept of 'moral economy'. The next two chapters focus upon Latin America. Lucas Poy and Alejandro Belkin explore the massive tenant strike that electrified Buenos Aires in late 1907, paying particular attention to the role played by women and the reluctance of trade unions to support the conflict. Jacob Zumoff considers two significant rent strikes that took place in Panama in 1925 and 1932, thus bringing to the discussion very relevant perspectives on colonial relations, race and class.

The book's latter part explores tenant contention episodes from the post-war era until now. Hannes Rolf focuses on the institutionalisation of collective rent bargaining in post-war Sweden, assessing the interplay between tenants' organisations, organisations of landlords, co-operative housing corporations and the state. Nathan Crompton examines the massive immigrant rent strikes in France from 1975 to 1980, discussing colonial relations and the role of *autogestion* in the organising of the rent strike. Bart van der Steen explores rent strikes in the Dutch city of Leiden in the same period, offering insights into the role played by local Maoists in tenant organising and how that affected their political organisation. Examining the case of West Berlin, Lisa Vollmer connects the issue of tenants' struggle and housing needs with the question of displacement amidst post-war programmes of urban renewal. Giulia Novaro and Eugenia Crosetti add a fascinating comparative perspective by examining episodes of rent struggle in Rome and New York, focusing on women's role in collective tenant action. With a case study of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, Samuel Oliveira and Philippe Urvoy look at the ever-present issue of land ownership and examine collective tenant action from 1959 to 1964, as well as the repression suffered by the movement after the 1964 military coup. Elinor Chisholm's chapter examines the rent struggle in Aotearoa, New Zealand, with a broad chronological view. Chisholm considers several episodes of rent contention from the early twentieth century to the present day, adding cases of housing struggles put forward by the indigenous population. Marta Ill-Raga and Jordi Bonshoms-Guzmán close the volume with a chapter that examines the rising present-day tenant movement in Barcelona through a historical lens, adding a very welcome connection to contemporary rent struggles and discussing the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Notes

1 Rolf 2021.
2 Frier 1977.
3 Willis 1950.
4 Clark 1979; Heskin 1983.
5 Olofsson 2008; Wakukawa 1946; Alexander 1980; Thankappannair 2022.
6 Rolf 2020.
7 Thompson 1963, 320; Englander 1983.
8 Weipert 2018.
9 Harvey 2013.
10 Shapiro 1990, 49–51.
11 Poy 2021; Rolf 2020.
12 Daunton 1990, 22.
13 Melling 1983, 95.
14 Gray 2018.
15 Castells 1983, 30.
16 Melling 1983, 112; Currie 2018; Hughes and Wright 2018; Damer 2000.
17 Naison 1986; Ealham 2010; Holsten and Zollhauser 2018; Annaniassen 1991; Behrens 2000; Srebrnik 1995; Mathieson 2016.
18 Willis 1950, 67–72; Zollhauser 2014; Eley 2002, 213; Kaplan 1977, 445; Castells 1983, 46; Fogelson 2013, 72.
19 Gruber 1991, 81.
20 Rolf 2023.
21 Lowe 1986, 88; Sklair 1975, 253.
22 Gilbert 2017.
23 Gold 2014; Corr 1999.
24 Chaskalson, Jochelson and Seekings 1987; Corr 1999, 134.
25 Davis 2006.
26 Damer 2018.
27 Heskin 1983; Lawson 1984; Fogelson 2013; Gold 2014; Huron 2018; Führer 2000; Lengemann 2015; Mattern 2018.
28 Rolf 2020; Chisholm 2016.
29 Suriano 1983; Bellucci and Camusso 1987; Durand 1989; Baer 1993; Behrens 2000; Yujnovsky 2004; Zumoff 2017.
30 Chatterjee 2014.
31 Just to mention a few: Castells 1983; Pickvance 2001; Wood and Baer 2006; Reick 2020; Poy 2021.
32 Hobsbawm 1987.

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2

Rent strikes, tenant organising and the cultural politics of inflation in the post-First World War United States

Mark W. Robbins

On 20 August 1921 500 Jersey City tenants crammed into Moose Hall for a meeting of the James F. Gannon Rent Payers' and Fair Landlords' Association. The tenants at the meeting reported a combination of steep rent increases, swift evictions and unsanitary conditions. One tenant present, Josephine Lufft, described how her landlord tried to force her to move despite her suffering from a medical condition. When confronted, the landlord reportedly claimed that 'everybody is jacking up rent, why shouldn't we?' By the time the meeting adjourned, many of the tenants had declared a rent strike; they would refuse to pay rent increases or to move out until their landlords treated them fairly. The Jersey City tenants were part of a nationwide trend of tenant activism during the period after the First World War. Tenants across the United States organised against profiteering landlords in an effort to combat the 'high cost of living' and the economic and cultural struggles that came with it.[1]

The First World War and its immediate aftermath led to substantial increases in the cost of living. As the economy shifted to and away from wartime production, the prices of most necessities increased dramatically. Retail food prices climbed by 86 per cent between 1913 and 1919, while retail clothing and dry goods prices escalated by 223 per cent from 1915 to 1919. Amidst this inflationary trend, rent increased by 58 per cent, according to one study, but varied according to local conditions.[2] As a National Industrial Conference Board report of 1927 noted, 'the course of house rents is dependent almost entirely on local conditions' – including the supply of homes, local population growth, the health of local industries and the cost of building materials. The stalled construction of homes due to wartime demands on industry and labour had a particularly powerful effect on rental markets, especially in places

with growing populations. While some communities did not encounter a rent crisis, others felt it deeply.[3]

As a complement to Nikos Potamianos's analysis of tenant politics in Athens during and after the First World War (Chapter 3), this chapter explores the rent crisis primarily in the post-war period in two locales with strong tenant activism. While the increase in rents was a national issue, this chapter consists of case studies to reflect the fact that most tenant activism occurred at the city or neighbourhood level. I begin with a lengthy discussion of tenant activism in one city, Jersey City, New Jersey, then shift to a brief analysis of tenant activism in a neighbourhood, using the example of Rogers Park in Chicago, Illinois. The two case studies represent urban communities of different sizes in different regions of the United States. They offer ample source material to work with, including newspapers, government documents, vital records and economic studies. Drawing on these examples, this chapter asks how the cultural politics of gender, class, race and consumption converged to animate local tenant activism in the heated context of a national post-war inflationary crisis.[4]

In addressing this question, I position tenant activism as a political mobilisation of Americans' increasingly important consumer identities, with the home serving as a physical and symbolic site of economic and cultural conflict.[5] Social and cultural historians of turn-of-the-century America, including Lisa Jacobson, Jennifer Scanlon and Marina Moskowitz, have elucidated how the home – both an object and location of consumption – acted as a forum through which many Americans asserted, negotiated and grappled with their social and class status.[6] While some works on early twentieth-century tenant activism touch on tenants' broader consumer identities, they typically focus on other themes.[7] Meanwhile, scholarship on early twentieth-century American consumer culture often pays little attention to its presence in tenant activism.[8] In bridging these areas of study I argue that the rent crisis served as a forum on inflation and wider cultural struggles relating to gender, race, class and childhood in early twentieth-century America.

Tenant activism provided tangible settings in which to express and reify early twentieth-century discourses on the home as a focal point for maintaining the wellbeing of women, children and, by extension, the nation.[9] Tenants often framed their activism as a broader effort to protect women and children from the physical and cultural dangers of a substandard, unsafe or unenriching household that failed to meet their expectations as consumers. Reflecting deep currents of

early twentieth-century nativism, activists and their political allies often posited their vulnerable consumer identities against supposedly non-white culprits of rent increases. In neighbourhoods with predominantly white-collar workers, tenant activists also presented their protests as a defence of their 'middle-class' identity against rising prices. The chapter begins with a discussion of a Congressional debate on rent increases and the ways in which limited action created the need for local responses.

Congress, inflation and the rental market

In the post-war period, politicians at the highest levels of government gave significant attention to the problem of exorbitant prices, including rent. As the chapters in this volume by Rolf, Vollmer, Oliveira and Urvoy, Chisholm and others demonstrate, debates over the proper degree of government intervention in rental markets can be seen in many locations and time frames of tenant activism. The post-war inflationary crisis brought urgency to this issue in the United States. Before a joint session of Congress on 8 August 1919, President Wilson declared that high prices were

> in many cases artificially and deliberately created by vicious practices which ought immediately to be checked by law … A process has set in which is likely, unless something is done, to push prices and the whole cost of living higher and yet higher.[10]

Members of Congress used similar rhetoric and took action by extending a wartime ban on the profiteering of food into the post-war period, along with prohibiting price gouging for fuel, clothing and feed. However, with housing costs dependent on local conditions and Congress unsure of its constitutional authority to regulate rental markets outside of Washington DC, Congressional action on rents was far less certain.

In response to scores of complaints from consumers in Washington DC, a US Senate subcommittee heard from a range of local residents about their problems with the high cost of living. Collectively the committee, and those who testified before it, connected rent increases to the broader issue of inflation, but fixated on profiteering as a primary culprit. One witness proclaimed that he was 'profiteered out of a home' and had had to move to a vacant storeroom 'among the rats' due to exorbitant rents. Another witness summarised that tenants had been 'browbeaten and bamboozled and bulldozed'.[11]

Several tenants linked landlords' profiteering to cultural anxieties in the areas of race, gender and nationhood.[12] On discovering that a different tenant was paying less for a similar apartment, Alfred D. Fairbairn, another witness before the committee, accused the owner of his apartment of rent profiteering and referred to her as an 'enemy alien', despite being told by the rental agent that she was an immigrant, but not an enemy. When Fairbairn moved to a new apartment he also accused his new landlord of profiteering, this time framing it as an attack on masculinity, femininity and childhood. He alleged that the owner discriminated against his four-year-old son for making noise and concluded that, by implication, 'it looks like it is a plan among certain landlords to destroy the morale of the women'. According to Fairbairn, by excluding and intimidating tenants with children, 'the landlords of this town are the greatest propagators of race suicide'.[13] He continued:

> A normal married man wants to become a father and a normal married woman wants to become a mother, but they are prevented from that in a town like this.[14]

Expressing a similar gendered cultural angst, Edward E. Britton, Vice President of the white-only Tenants' Protective League of Washington DC, testified that 'the question of morality' also pertained to the situation of young unmarried women renters. According to Britton, landlords rented parlours as bedrooms to make more money. Because they had no wholesome place to socialise, young women and their male companions frequented 'cheap dance halls' and spent time in cars, 'when the girls ought to have been at home'. Altogether, this testimony cast rent increases as a cause of economic and cultural turmoil.[15]

Despite the nationwide attention to rent as a significant part of the high cost of living, when Congress voted for a national ban on the profiteering of food, feed and clothing into the post-war period, rent was not included. When Rep. George Huddleston (D-Alabama) offered an amendment that would have prohibited rent profiteering, Rep. Philip P. Campbell (R-Kansas) questioned the authority of Congress to do so, noting that regulating rental markets was under the purview of municipalities. Ultimately the amendment was voted down; Congress only prohibited rent profiteering in Washington DC, where it had clearer jurisdiction. It was up to local and state governments to decide what to do for their residents.[16]

Rent strikes in Jersey City

As the United States increasingly became a consumer society in the early twentieth century, popular discourses, ranging from advertisements to political speeches, defined the home as a focal point of the American family and its consumer identity. Reformers, public officials and commentators in various publications detailed aspects of the proper family home, including its ideal location, ventilation and cleanliness, layout and colour schemes, as well as the consumer goods that should belong in it. Rooms, furnishings and colours within the home were to be organised on a gendered basis, with parts of the house designed to express and reaffirm normative ideas of masculine behaviour for men and boys and other parts showing and reinforcing cultural ideas of feminine behaviour for women and girls.[17] Rent increases, along with the rising prices of other commodities, put a financial strain on tenants' ability to meet cultural expectations for spacious homes filled with the requisite consumer goods.

As Paul C. Luken and Suzanne Vaughan note, a key part of understanding the power of popular discourse is analysing when people make 'texts active at any local moment of its use'.[18] Tenant activists regularly appealed to the theme of defending the family home; they declared that landlords, through high rents, poor maintenance and eviction, had threatened vulnerable women and children and denied them the proper moral and physical comforts of the home.[19] Their concerns reflected mindsets within the powerful early twentieth-century progressive movement, when reformers professed to be protecting or saving vulnerable women and children as they pursued a range of reforms, from protective labour laws to the creation of juvenile court systems.[20] Protesting tenants reified popular discourses on the American home and on the defence of women and children, not simply as passive consumers of these ideas. They actively shaped the meaning of these discourses in physical settings by using them to attain their version of economic justice in the rental market. This was particularly true in Jersey City during and after the First World War.

Controversy over rent increases in Jersey City took shape alongside broader concerns over rising prices during the war. One resident lamented how tenants 'already overburdened with the high cost of living are forced to dig further down and scrape up their last pennies' to enrich profiteering landlords.[21] Along with other prices, rents in Jersey City had indeed increased considerably during and immediately after the war. One study estimated that rents had risen by 61 to 70 per cent between July 1914 and November 1920.[22]

Like many residents of Washington DC, tenants in Jersey City complained particularly of the burden that the rental market had placed on families. H. M. Thompson, a parent of a two-year-old, wrote to the *Jersey Journal* that:

> not only are rents raised … but children are not wanted. So far I have not been able to locate owing to 'no children wanted'. I feel a great injustice is done to mothers who are caring and giving up their all for the children.

Cornelia Bradford, a settlement house activist and member of the Jersey City Board of Education, noted how such discrimination against children – or what soon became known in Jersey City as a 'war on babies' – damaged the long-term prospects of the city. She proclaimed:

> Certain it is if the houses with sunlight, good sanitation, healthful surroundings are locked and barred against families with children, we shall be doing our concerted best to injure our city by driving from it desirable citizens and we shall at the same time be doing our concerted best to bring about a menace to our city.

Bradford was concerned that overcrowding would lead to disease, drunkenness and crime.[23]

Complaints from families about rent profiteering and discrimination against children flooded the city government. James F. Gannon, the city's Director of Revenue and Finance on the Board of Commissioners, received 110 complaints in the first week of May 1918 alone. Reporting that most of the grievances were 'well founded', Gannon proclaimed:

> I think that the big stick should be inflicted freely upon the selfish and unpatriotic landlord who would … undermine the morals of our great county.[24]

As a member of the Jersey City government, Gannon could do more than air grievances. At a meeting of the Board of Commissioners on 7 May 1918, he began to mobilise city officials against unjust landlords, 'recommending that the Department of Public Affairs and the Department of Streets and Public Improvements arrange to co-operate with him in a campaign to force these landlords and their property owners to change their attitude'. Gannon believed the Department of Public Affairs could pressure landlords by 'rigorously' enforcing the health code on unscrupulous landlords, while

the Department of Streets could more closely monitor their water usage and charge accordingly.[25] As the city's tax assessor, Gannon also promised to use the power of his office to raise taxes on landlords in proportion to their rent increases. Or, as Gannon later put it, he would 'jack up their tax assessments as fast as they jack up rents'.[26]

Gannon's heavy-handed yet populist governance reflected Jersey City politics in the era of Mayor Frank Hague's political machine. Hague was a polarising political figure who dominated Jersey City politics through a curious mix of patronage, strict authority, 'moral purpose' and repression.[27] A political ally of Hague, Gannon spoke with moral purpose and referenced the mayor's support as he used the power of his office to go after alleged rent profiteers. Considering Hague's outsized influence in Jersey City's municipal politics, it would be tempting to view local tenant activism as merely a response to the populist tone of the forceful governance of Hague and allies such as Gannon. However, given that this period's tenant activism was national in scale, and that Jersey City tenants were responding to real economic changes and deep-rooted cultural anxieties along the lines of race, class and gender, it is more likely that the Hague machine was more of an important context than a catalyst for Jersey City tenant activism.

During the First World War and in the post-war era, tenant movements existed in many other cities, such as New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, Oklahoma City and Springfield, MA, with each location reflecting its own local context.[28] In some cities such as New York, the organised left played a central role in the movement. In Jersey City activists worked with mainstream politicians and generally did not link themselves to radical organisations, at least in publicised accounts of their activities. All told, they sought lower rents and better living conditions within the overarching structures of capitalism and American democracy, and against the backdrop of their own city's politics.

Just a few months after Gannon announced his strategy to curb rising rents, the Jersey City Board of Commissioners expanded on his efforts by drawing on the example of New London, Connecticut to establish committees to adjudicate disputes between landlords and tenants throughout the city. Needing to 'remedy' the 'evil of 'rent profiteering', the Commissioners appointed eight adjudicating committees to cover each part of the city – along with a three-person appeals board consisting of Gannon, a bank president and a representative of the Central Federation of Labour. The *Jersey Journal* called the 'New London Plan' a 'square deal', and remarked that 'for bringing this plan forward Commissioner Gannon deserves the city's thanks'.[29]

Nevertheless, rents reportedly continued to increase and many tenants remained on edge. By August 1919 the *Jersey Journal* referred to the rent boards as 'in a state of innocuous desuetude'; the newspaper speculated that tenants were reluctant to use them because their complaints were not anonymous.[30] The problem of discrimination against families persisted as well. One mother complained to the *Jersey Journal* that her landlord had not only raised rents but also insisted that children stay in their rooms, even going as far as to lock the back doors to prevent them from playing in the yard.[31]

In response to tenants' continuing concerns, Gannon boldly declared a February 1920 rent strike for all residents who otherwise faced the choice of paying higher rents or eviction. Such a rent strike, he believed, would flood the courts with rent disputes. Gannon hoped that the courts would decide in favour of reasonable tenants and that this inundation of the courts would pressure the state legislature to pass new laws to protect tenants in their disputes with their landlords. He called a mass meeting at City Hall for 2 February 1920 and estimated that at least 300 tenants would participate in the strike.[32]

The event was packed to capacity, with an estimated more than 1,000 attendees. According to the *Jersey Journal*, the crowd of tenants 'surged forward' to make complaints to Gannon's assistants. Urging tenants to stick together, Gannon proclaimed, 'I want a thousand cases of rent profiteering and a thousand juries to try them.'[33] Many landlords reportedly settled instead of facing the rent strike.[34]

Encouraged by the immediate results, Gannon was optimistic that the local tenant movement would spread beyond the city, just as the movement in Jersey City had previously drawn inspiration from reformers in New London. According to Gannon, 'the strike is already bearing fruit'. He added that:

> The people in West Hoboken and Weehawken are following Jersey City's course, and this only bears out my prediction that [the] rent payers' strike will be state-wide, if not national, in its scope before a very long time.

Gannon wanted to stop rent increases for tenants participating in the rent strike. Still, he also saw it as 'the most convincing method of showing the legislators of our state and country the necessity of immediately enacting legislation to relieve the housing situation'.[35]

Gannon celebrated the February rent strike as a success and invited the New Jersey Assembly Committee on Taxation to be present

for the declaration of another rent strike for March. He hoped that the committee would be inspired to support a bill requiring landlords to give three months' notice for eviction (six months' notice during the winter months) and another that would temporarily exempt from municipal taxes new housing construction in Jersey City, thereby increasing the supply of dwellings and hopefully reducing rents in the long run. Discrimination against tenants with children remained an issue, but pending legislation also aimed to criminalise this practice. Gannon's view was clearly expressed: 'Rent strikes are temporary means to check profiteering. The permanent and real remedy lies with the Legislature.'[36]

Shortly after the beginning of the March rent strike, encouraging news began to emerge from the legislature. The Assembly passed a bill that made it a misdemeanour for a landlord to refuse to rent to tenants on the basis of them having children. A few weeks later the Assembly passed the bill allowing for a municipal tax exemption on new buildings and giving tenants three months' notice on evictions. With the exception of the tax exemption bill, each bill passed the Senate and was signed into law, albeit with amendments. Even with these achievements, activists continued to pressure the legislature to enact additional reforms, ranging from legislation to cap yearly rental increases to a bill that would help cities develop new rental properties directly. This became all the more important after the New Jersey Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional for landlords to be required to give tenants three months' notice of an eviction.[37]

As the state government considered these reforms, many tenants were also focused on their immediate struggles with rent increases and the inflationary prices of other necessities. Articles and letters to the editor in the *Jersey Journal* continued to reflect persistent anxieties and disgruntlement with both rent profiteering and the high cost of living. As one letter to the editor observed,

> The housewife as a rule has the responsibility of household expenses, clothing of children, gas, rent, etc. and with the present lack of housing facilities and the steady, uncalled-for increase of rents, she is at her wits end.[38]

Tenants outside Jersey City expressed similar grievances over rent profiteering and inflation. One Brooklyn resident, for instance, deplored how 'the delicatessen, grocer and baker shops vie with the clothing, shoe and jewellery stores as to who can rob in the most judicious matter'. He also

complained that his landlord raised his rent 'from $28 to $55, and at the same time gave [him] notice to move on May 1'.[39]

In March 1921, following three years of activism largely under the leadership of Gannon, a committee of tenants organised a fundraiser in his honour. The event included music, comedy, dancing and praise for Gannon, with the proceeds going to 'distressed tenants'.[40] The committee soon morphed into a permanent organisation called the James F. Gannon Rent-Payers' Association. The organisation stood not only for rent payers directly, but also for the re-election of the current City Commission, which had been favourable to tenants' concerns.[41]

Before long, the Association planned 'street meetings' in front of the apartment buildings of alleged profiteering landlords. In these locations, their grievances would be expressed not behind closed doors but in the open for all to see. The first such meeting occurred in front of 215 Summit Ave., a building with eight apartments, where the landlord had reportedly increased rent and neglected to complete necessary repairs. Rent Adjuster Edmund B. Loughran, who worked under Gannon, had settled with the landlord, Isaac Newman, on a small increase as long as he completed the repairs. When Newman failed to do so, his tenants began a rent strike and co-ordinated with the Association to hold a street meeting in front of the building. The meeting was intended not only to put pressure on Newman, but also to make other landlords think twice before treating their tenants unfairly.[42]

On 3 September 1921 a crowd of 500 'lively' protesters gathered in front of the building. When the crowd realised that the landlord was not present, one person declared, 'Newman has a chicken coop down at Grand Street, let's all go down there.' The crowd, which included an estimated 50 or more children, processed to Newman's coop on Grand Street. The children proceeded to 'jostle' Newman, who requested police intervention. Traffic was blocked and, to clear the way for the trolley, police moved the crowd around the corner.[43]

There the meeting continued. Joseph Kelly, an officer in the Association, proclaimed to the crowd:

> It is tough when we have to get out on the street to battle for our rights against landlords … Look at the place [215 Summit Avenue] and see if you think there is anything around here that is worth $75.

While Kelly spoke, a woman in the crowd shouted, 'Get a coffin and put him in it.'[44]

Charles Hanson, another tenant, appealed to the theme of safeguarding families in his remarks. He declared:

> I have five children. I have travelled all over the city looking for a house for myself and my five children. As for myself, I could bunk on a park bench, but the children must have a roof over their heads.

He continued by remarking 'We don't want violence here … What we do want is to give this man [the landlord] lots of publicity.' Hanson concluded by tying rent increases to inflationary prices of other necessities, noting that high rents left tenants with little to no room to manoeuvre financially. According to Hanson:

> If we have inflated value in shoes and other articles, we have some alternative. We can patch our old shoes, and if food is inflated we can use substitutes, but housing is something we can't get a substitute for: we must have a place to live. But we can't do it when rent pirates are taking our homes away from us.[45]

When Rent Adjuster Loughran took the floor, he accused the landlord of being un-American, declaring, 'I understand this Newman is not even a citizen. I have not verified this, but he does not talk like one.' His words reflected the widespread nativist discourses of early twentieth-century America, a time in which an unprecedented number of immigrants came to the nation. Many Americans categorised new immigrants as non-white and subjected them to racism, particularly in the emotionally charged period of the First World War and its aftermath. According to U.S. Census records, Newman was Jewish and had immigrated from Austria in 1890, 31 years before being criticised by Jersey City tenants. Regardless of whether the rent increases were fair, Newman was judged at least in part according to nativist discourses that targeted Jewish immigrants, stereotyping them as greedy, uncaring and money-hungry.[46]

The use of nativist discourses in at least some Jersey City tenant activism took place during the same time frame in which many immigrants themselves participated in tenant movements in a variety of cities – often in working-class immigrant neighbourhoods that contained relatively few non-immigrants. While expressed at the neighbourhood level, this tenant activism often included the participation of multiple neighbourhoods that had socio-economic differences. Ultimately tenant activism in this period could be collaborative or fractured along the lines of race, ethnicity and class.[47]

Specifically in Jersey City, tenant activism may well have been diverse in its occupational class composition. While it is difficult to pinpoint clear demographic patterns in this activism, due to inadequate data on those involved, analysis of a published listing of 58 active participants in one post-war, city-wide tenant organisation does offer some insight. The organisation consisted of people who lived in a variety of neighbourhoods across the city and in households with breadwinners who were both working class and members of white-collar professions (based on locatable names in the 1920 U.S. Census).[48]

This limited sample of participant names also suggests that whereas the organisation was occupationally diverse, it was predominantly white in its racial composition. As a malleable cultural concept, race cannot be definitively measured by census data. Nevertheless, the substantial majority of locatable organisation members in the 1920 census were classified as 'white' English-speakers born in the United States.[49] In other American cities many non-white or immigrant tenants organised both in separate organisations and, at times, in collaboration with white tenants.[50] The racial exclusion and racially charged nativist rhetoric in the Jersey City movement was thus neither unique nor entirely representative of all early twentieth-century tenant activism.

Representations of 'non-white' immigrants as unclean further inflamed the nativist discourses used in the tenant movement. In early twentieth-century America popular writings and public health initiatives linked whiteness to cleanliness.[51] Loughran played to this cultural framework and, more specifically, used phrasing that appeared to reference 'blood libel' (the antisemitic accusation that Jews ritually kill non-Jews for their blood) in a statement that closed the meeting:

> I want to particularly call your attention to the composition of this audience: all clean-cut, clean-living men and women, Americans bringing up families and taking this orderly means of voicing their resentment against the profiteering exploitation of a foreigner. To those of you who are not members of this association, this spectacle ought to indelibly impress you with the thought that you, who have brought up sons to die as they did in the last war, to be put on the streets is a burning shame and disgrace, and if this public appeal does not impress the thinking minds of the community with the seriousness of the situation it is because there is sinister opposition working that will continue to eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jersey City citizens.[52]

Loughran defined tenants as white, clean, righteous, family-loving Americans; landlords such as Newman he cast as greedy, monstrous, unclean, unpatriotic and un-American.

The use of racialised nativist discourses had a tangible impact on Newman. Following the street meeting, with Loughran's support, a group of neighbourhood residents petitioned the Jersey City Board of Health to investigate the cleanliness of Newman's poultry store. After a health officer's investigation Newman was ordered to close the shop, forcing him to sell all his chickens just days after the street meeting. Loughran curtly remarked:

> This shows to what extent reprisals can be invoked. Commissioner Gannon takes every means to see that all city ordinances are observed by landlords.[53]

While Loughran and Gannon's leadership brought political clout and co-ordination to the local movement, the size and energy of the street meeting crowds served to underscore its fundamentally grass-roots character. The movement was rooted not primarily in opportunistic political leadership, but rather in economic uncertainty and cultural division.

Tenants continued to use the 'street meeting' strategy. They turned their attention next to the landlords Henry and Lena Bernzweig, who lived at 1151 Summit Ave. On 10 September around 1,000 tenants congregated in front of the Bernzweigs' home for fiery speeches and a verbal confrontation with them over their recent rent increase. Those expecting drama at the street meeting were not disappointed. As the meeting proceeded, Lena Bernzweig reportedly

> leaned from the window of their home on the second floor of the apartment house, and with both hands in tandem fashion and in close proximity to her nose … wiggled her fingers at the crowd, which jeered back at her.

Loughran tried to calm the crowd, but someone threw a tomato at the window as Lena Bernzweig 'ducked out of sight'. Throughout much of the meeting the crowd and Lena Bernzweig shouted back and forth, with members of the crowd calling her husband disparaging names such as 'grease ball' – a nativist insult likely targeting Bernzweig's background as an immigrant (he had immigrated from Poland in 1904). The Bernzweigs were temporarily forced to close their shop on the first floor due to the

animosity and commotion. Their young children looked on as the hostile crowd remained outside their home. When the Bernzweigs refused to withdraw the rent increase, Loughran issued a threat: 'We will continue to hold protest meetings here until you change your minds.'[54]

Nine days after the street meeting, Loughran proudly proclaimed: 'Newman is not getting the increases in rent he asked, and he has not tried to since he was serenaded. Bernswig [*sic*] is seeking any terms his tenants will give him.' However, a few weeks later Loughran stated that tenants were paying a $5 increase at Bernzweig's apartments, though this was half the increase that he had originally demanded. Based on his street meeting theatrics, Loughran had become the new public face of the Jersey City tenant movement. Gannon, however, took a cautious attitude toward the street meetings. According to B. B. Willis, Secretary of the Association, Gannon had in fact 'put his foot down on the proposition of outdoor meetings and "serenades" for rent profiteers'.[55]

It did not take long for Loughran and many members of the Association to turn on Gannon. At a meeting on 30 September the Association condemned Gannon for allegedly undermining Loughran and signing off on rent increases. B. B. Willis accused Gannon of 'open collusion with rent profiteers', and the Association passed resolutions to have Loughran be given control over rent negotiations in the city and to remove Gannon's name from the name of the Association. Loughran endorsed their actions and criticised Gannon's compromises with landlords, particularly in the context of shifting economic trends. With prices stabilising for many necessities by late 1921, Loughran believed that tenants should not pay any increased rent. He queried, 'Why should rents be raised when the price of everything else is going down?'[56]

Gannon, who was on vacation during the Association's meeting, responded through a telephone interview with the *Jersey Journal*. He accused Loughran of 'childish action' and encouraged him to resign. Joseph F. S. Fitzpatrick, Gannon's deputy, expanded on this criticism, proclaiming that Gannon 'has always frowned down on lawlessness and Bolshevism' and that he specifically

> opposed the plans for so called 'serenades' and open-air protest meetings under the windows of landlords, fearing that such demonstrations might easily furnish the spark that would ignite a conflagration and produce riots.

His words aimed to reaffirm Gannon's patriotism and to link Loughran to radicalism – fear of which was prevalent across the United States amidst

the first 'red scare' in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. Though Loughran temporarily walked back his criticism of Gannon, within a couple of weeks the infighting flared up again.[57]

The incident was a sign of fissures in Jersey City tenant activism. Divisions within the movement continued, centring on the issues of leadership, finances and tactics. Loughran formed his own separate tenants' organisation, officially incorporating the Jersey City Tenants' Association in April 1922. Despite these divisions, the tenant movement across the state had enough momentum to put pressure on the state government to pass additional reforms. The crowning achievement was the MacKay Anti-Rent Profiteering bill. This made, in a court of law, rent increases by 35 per cent over three years 'prima facie unjust, unreasonable, and oppressive'. When the governor signed the bill, Gannon, Loughran and a range of tenants all rejoiced, even as they resumed attacking each other in the coming months.

Meanwhile, though individual instances of rapid rent increases continued to take place, average rents, along with the broader cost of living, stabilised somewhat.[58] Tenant activism persisted in the coming months and years, and Gannon and his assistants, now backed by the MacKay law, continued to arbitrate rent disputes and represent unsatisfied tenants in court. Loughran remained president of the Jersey City Tenants' Association; he also became president of the Hudson County Tenants' Protective Association in 1924. Despite the continued efforts of Jersey City tenants to control rent increases well into the 1920s, their efforts did not appear to match the scale, energy and publicity of the movement in the immediate post-war years. The strength of the movement in that time frame was a direct response to the realities of rapid inflation.[59]

In this immediate post-war period, tenants across the nation had organised for fair rents and sought, to a large extent, to defend their version of a proper family home. Activists in the Rogers Park section of Chicago proved equally vigilant in their efforts to attain fair rentals and to defend this cultural ideal. They too linked the issue of rent profiteering to the high cost of living and to broader cultural discourses on gender, class and race. Their story is one of many that illustrates the cultural politics of tenant activism at the neighbourhood level.[60]

Tenant activism as middle-class politics: Rogers Park

On 29 February 1920, in the Chicago neighbourhood of Rogers Park, 14 tenants met in the flat of E. H. Wheeler to discuss alarming rent increases in their apartment building. Complaining of 'outrageous'

increases of up to 75 per cent, the tenants planned an organising campaign against their landlord, August Skogland. It began with a meeting at a local school, at which nearby residents criticised exploitative landlords and heard anti-profiteering speakers. Before long their efforts transformed into an energetic neighbourhood tenants' organisation that sought not only fair rents, but also economic justice for the 'middle class' amidst their struggles to contend with the high cost of living. Like the Jersey City tenants, their activism was about more than rents and prices. Rogers Park tenants similarly tied their grievances as renters to the cultural politics of defending white masculinity, femininity and childhood. However, they also linked these categories to their identity as members of the 'middle class' – an identity that they claimed was under threat.[61] Once again tenant activism provided physical spaces and specific culprits for the expression of broader cultural anxieties.[62]

In the immediate post-war period newspapers, magazines and a plethora of individuals and organisations lamented how the high cost of living had victimised the middle class. According to these assertions, white-collar workers, who constituted the nation's middle class, were left struggling to pay high prices while blue-collar workers went on strike for higher wages and elites extracted excessive profits. Regarding high rents, strikes and alleged graft in the building industry reportedly slowed the production of new homes and increased construction costs, allowing landlords to raise rents due to the low supply of, and high demand for, housing. As one columnist summarised, the 'white collar' 'middle class' had been 'squeezed and starved between capital and labor'. In many cases, popular discourse proclaimed that the middle class represented the backbone of America and implied that the nation itself suffered from its mistreatment. Across the United States white-collar workers shaped and responded to these discourses by organising as 'middle-class' consumers against profiteers and unions, often evoking the anger of working-class people who objected to being blamed for high prices. White-collar workers formed organisations that boycotted high-priced clothing, investigated food profiteering, established municipal markets and planted vegetable gardens to circumvent food profiteers; they also co-ordinated tenant activism in middle-class neighbourhoods.[63]

Rogers Park was one such neighbourhood. Consisting of a number of smaller neighbourhoods, Rogers Park included many white-collar workers who lived in both single-family homes and, increasingly in the early twentieth century, apartment buildings. One resident who lived on North Lakewood St. in Rogers Park described his surroundings as 'a very simple, family-oriented neighbourhood'.[64]

To Rogers Park tenant activists, as well as to other middle-class renters throughout the nation, rent increases not only threatened their ability to live in their preferred neighbourhood: they also compromised their ability to afford a middle-class lifestyle. Such a lifestyle consisted of affording the consumer goods and housing that differentiated them from working-class people. Although rising prices also placed economic burdens on blue-collar workers, on average their wage increases had come proportionately closer to keeping up with price increases than had white-collar salaries in recent years. This fuelled resentment by many white-collar workers.[65]

Unions, which had organised a myriad of strikes for higher wages (including in the building industry) in the post-war period, were often blamed for driving up prices. Tenant activism offered a physical space in which like-minded white-collar workers could band together to express their grievances as alleged victims of the post-war economy. As Rogers Park tenant John R. Patterson proclaimed, 'profiteering and labor unrest combined to make life far from easy' for the middle class, but 'it remained for the rent profiteer to give them [members of the middle class] an urgent grievance in common'. He noted that for that, at least 'we owe the grasping landlord our thanks'.[66]

Patterson, a librarian, led the efforts of the Rogers Park Tenants' Protective Association to create a fairer economy for middle-class renters. According to him, tenant activism in Rogers Park was about much more than rents. Linking the themes of protecting families and gender roles with their tenant activism, Patterson noted of women in the organisation:

> They feel that they are fighting for the preservation of the home, for a wholesome community in which to bring up their children, and they are living up nobly to the well-known reputation of the female species.

Similarly, William Forkell proclaimed at a Rogers Park Tenants' Protective Association meeting that:

> If it [rent profiteering] keeps on, the children as well as the wives and husbands, will be deprived of many necessities in order to pay the rent.

In Chicago and elsewhere, both men and women took part in tenant activism, often publicly framing it as a defence of women and children. During a New York City tenants' protest, women tenants marched on

the streets with signs stating, 'Here is a Rent Strike', attached to their baby carriages. Marguerite Edwards, a widely published newspaper columnist, accused 'rent profiteers' of 'destroying family life', 'flouting the rights of children' and being a 'menace to matrimony'. Whether expressed by male or female tenants or sympathisers, gendered appeals to protecting the family could serve as a powerful discourse for them to claim righteousness in their pursuit of economic and political power in the rental market.[67]

According to Patterson, the Association drew on women's social networks to ostracise the wives of alleged profiteering landlords. Patterson declared:

> You see even a landlord has friends, and although he is willing to profiteer comfortably in private he shrinks from the pitiless glare of publicity. His wife, who usually lives in the neighborhood, shrinks from it even more than he. Needless to say the wife of a profiteer is not very popular socially. We do not hesitate to mention names in our campaign or to ostracize offenders.

In addition to the 'social element' in its 'publicity campaign', the Association aired its grievances though newspapers, through advertisements at cinemas and through small placards that denounced landlords and promoted the Association.

Above all, much like the Jersey City tenants, the Rogers Park Tenants' Protective Association used the rent strike strategy to put direct pressure on landlords. In a series of rent strikes, members of the Association refused to pay substantial rent increases or to move out as a consequence of their non-payment. Participants hoped that their landlords would withdraw the rent increases rather than engage in lengthy and unpleasant battles with their tenants. If landlords did not relent, they would have to bring forcible detainer cases to a judge; this in turn could bring negative publicity to the landlord and give tenants an official forum to share examples of unjust rents or poor living conditions. By acting collectively, tenants would flood the courts with these cases, causing further delays in the payment of rents or evictions. Altogether, the Association found multiple means to disincentivise rent profiteering.

The activism of the Rogers Park Tenants' Protective Association fed into the wider efforts of tenants across the city of Chicago, both to contest individual rent increases and to put pressure on the Illinois government to enact new laws that would benefit renters. The Rogers Park Tenants'

Protective Association worked in collaboration with the broader Chicago Tenants' Protective Association. The latter had formed on 14 August 1919 at the 1021 Garrick Building when approximately 400 renters joined hands in protest of rent increases of up to 600 per cent. Patterson eventually served as its president and in this capacity advocated for white-collar tenants, remarking that:

> The class that is suffering … has been the so-called middle class, the clerk class, the salesman class, the professional men's class, the small business men, and this represents a large majority of the people.[68]

Both the Rogers Park and Chicago associations took part in multiple rent strikes in the immediate post-war years. In a similar way to those in Jersey City, these strikes included tense encounters between landlords and tenants and sensational headlines in the press. Chicago's landlord–tenant disputes also became a significant local political issue. Declaring that 'excessive increase in rentals' added 'to the already high cost of living', the Chicago City Council investigated rent profiteering. It established a committee to send rent complaints to the Board of Review of Cook County, intending that 'the property taxes of said landlords be increased proportionately with the increase in rentals demanded by them'.[69] Despite these and other measures, many tenants believed that more comprehensive relief could come through the state legislature.

With the courts inundated with forcible detainer cases and politicians under pressure to respond to tenants' grievances, the Illinois legislature was set by the spring of 1921 to reform landlord–tenant law. Tenant activists largely focused on two tangible reforms that were part of what became known as the Kessinger bill. The bill, which was technically multiple bills, would guarantee tenants the right to trial by jury, even if their lease had forced them to sign away this right. It also enabled municipal court judges to delay evictions for a period of up to six months. During this up to six-month period a tenant would pay rent at the level before the increase. Taken together, these prospective reforms held the potential to discourage evictions and rent increases. At the very least, municipal courts could give tenants more time to find reasonable accommodations.[70]

During the 1921 legislative session, the Chicago Tenants' Protective Association, including its Rogers Park participants, drummed up support for the bill. They once again called a rent strike in May of 1921 and held

rallies for the bill. Patterson summed up the mood of positive anticipation: 'We feel confident the bill will carry by a large majority.'[71]

Officers from the Association travelled to the state capital in Springfield to lobby for the bill. After arriving at the train station they processed to the Capitol, holding banners condemning rent profiteers. Their procession also spoke to the racial underpinnings of their tenant activism. A *Chicago Daily Tribune* account of the procession observed,

> Bringing up the rear on the way to the state house was a colored man with a canvas smock inscribed 'Rent Hog'. He was cuffed and dragged – mock stuff – all the way up to the steps and earned his $10 all right.

Such a demonstration culturally and physically aimed to dehumanise the African American man to disparage profiteering landlords symbolically. It underscored that the Association ultimately advocated not just for the middle class, but specifically for the *white* middle class.[72]

After this procession to the Capitol, Chicago tenants aired their grievances during a hearing on the bill. Patterson complained that his rent had increased by 135 per cent. He continued to reference the ubiquitous theme that tenants were defending their wives and children, declaring that profiteering landlords were 'robbing men of the money that should go to provide for the wives and children of their victims'. Drawing on nationalistic language amidst the first 'red scare', Patterson declared that the tenants were 'real red-blooded Americans. I say the rent gougers are bolshevists.' Much like the Jersey City tenant activists who emphasised the immigrant origins of some landlords, they cast themselves as American, white and righteous, while depicting landlords as symbolically or literally non-white, un-American and cruel.[73]

To the delight of tenant activists across the state, the Kessinger bill did indeed become law.[74] According to newspaper accounts, it did not take long for Chicago rent strikers to see the advantages of the new laws in court. With tenants receiving stays and jury trials, and with the potential of more landlords willing to negotiate, tenants had achieved meaningful power during a time of post-war inflation, even though rents in the following years remained high. The rent crisis also became a forum for tenants to express cultural anxieties rooted in the malleable themes of class, gender, race and family life.[75]

Conclusion

In the immediate period after the First World War, rapid inflation created an economic crisis for many Americans. Elevated food, clothing and housing prices inspired a range of responses, from the creation of municipal markets and boycotts of new clothing purchases to labour activism that focused on the need for wages to keep up with living costs. Tenant organising provided a powerful setting for consumer activism against the high cost of living. Abetted by a national discourse in newspapers, magazines and political speech that lamented the impact of rising costs on renters, tenant activists organised at both municipal and neighbourhood levels.

Even though rent increases impacted a diversity of people, post-war tenant activism often reflected and expressed the broader divisions and inequalities evident in early twentieth-century American society. In Jersey City tenant activists claimed to be defending a traditional family ideal, in which men would be able to provide wholesome and safe housing for their wives and children. According to this narrative, rent profiteering threatened a man's ability to provide; by extension, it imperilled proper womanhood and innocent children. Rogers Park tenants appealed to the same themes, while also linking them to a defence of the 'middle class'. In both settings activists either directly or tacitly defined themselves as upstanding, white and American, confronting an opposition that was unjust, non-white and un-American. Altogether, the rent crisis provided an organising point to adjudicate not just economic struggles, but broader cultural anxieties in early twentieth-century America. Drawing on the organising potential of activists living side by side, the tenant movement could bring together a range of cultural grievances and incorporate them into physical spaces of activism. As John Patterson noted,

> There is a world of possibilities in the forming of community neighborhood [tenant] auxiliaries, aside from aiding in reducing rents. There are many ills of the community that today are merely complained of without action. With the organization of neighborhood [tenant] societies[,] the neighbors will become better acquainted and can act as a body in bringing about many reforms in their communities.[76]

Notes

1 'Tenants of 30 apartment houses sign up to stand fast in rent strike', *Jersey Journal*, 20 August 1921.
2 This data reflects the change between July 1914 and July 1920. NICB 1920, 7.
3 NICB 1927, 130–1.
4 In his analysis of tenant activism in Athens (Chapter 3 in this volume), Nikos Potamianos similarly shows the impact of inflation in encouraging tenant activism and powerful anti-profiteering discourses during this time frame.
5 A number of scholars have shown that by this period Americans' consumer identities had already become a focal point in political, economic and cultural life. See, for example, Glickman 1999.
6 Jacobson 2004; Scanlon 1995; Moskowitz 2004.
7 Many works focus on tenant activism as an important component in the urban histories of single cities, with New York City receiving particular attention. See Fogelson 2013; Lawson and Naison 1986.
8 For examples of larger works on the history of US consumer culture see Glickman 1999 and Blaszczyk 2009.
9 See Altman 1990, 286–307; Luken and Vaughan 2006, 299–331; Jacobson 2004, 160–82.
10 *Supplement* 1921, 8765.
11 United States Senate 1919, 744–5, 750.
12 For discussion of links between tenant activism and ideas of patriotism, see Fogelson 2013, 78–81.
13 Fairbairn's words mirrored the rhetoric of this period's Americanisation campaigns, which linked popular ideas about gender, family and whiteness to being 'American'. See Ryan 2014.
14 United States Senate 1919, 739–43.
15 For discussion of gendered anxieties and reform relating to dance halls see Peiss 1986, 179; United States Senate 1919, 680, 686.
16 During the war other bills aiming to limit rents on a national level were proposed, but never became law. See Fogelson 2013, 81 and Schaub 1920, 25–6; Rep. Huddleston, speaking on H.R. 8624, on 22 August 1919, 66th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 58, pt.4: 4206; Rep. Campbell, speaking on H.R. 8624, on 22 August 1919, 66th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 58, pt.4: 4206.
17 While many commentators recommended detached, single-family homes over apartment buildings for families, this was not financially possible for many urban residents. Many renters still valued the idea of a single-family residence, even if within the apartment setting. Luken and Vaughan 2006; Robbins 2017, 132; Scanlon 1995, 49–78.
18 Luken and Vaughan 2006, 301. See also Smith 1995, 60–80.
19 Margaret Garb discusses how early twentieth-century discourses on home ownership conveyed gendered ideas about the home and household roles. As tenant activism in this period shows, many of these ideas also applied to discourses on renting. Garb 2005.
20 See, for example, Boris 2002, 73–86; Platt 1969, 21–38.
21 'Profiteering landlords', *Jersey Journal*, 16 April 1918.
22 NICB 1927, 188–9.
23 'City forces two landlords to relent', *Jersey Journal*, 10 May 1918.
24 '110 landlords here have put a ban on children', *Jersey Journal*, 8 May 1918.
25 Meeting of 7 May 1918, *Minutes of the Meetings of the Board of Commissioners of Jersey City, June 1917 to June 1918* (Jersey City), 620; '110 landlords here have put a ban on children'.
26 'Landlords lose', *Cincinnati Post*, 27 July 1921.
27 Rogers 2020, 21; Vernon 2011; Holli 1999, 13.
28 Silber 2024; Fogelson 2013; 'Rent strike is ordered', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 January 1921; 'Rent strike to begin Sept. 1', *Springfield Union*, 12 August 1921; 'Tenants add 2500 to member role', *Oklahoma News*, 29 June 1921.
29 Meeting of 8 October 1918, *Minutes of the Meetings of the Board of Commissioners of Jersey City, June 1917 to June 1918* (Jersey City), 213; Schaub 1920, 26–8; 'Gannon names board to hear rent disputes', *Jersey Journal*, 8 October 1918; 'Looks like a square deal', *Jersey Journal*, 9 October 1918.
30 'Why not fix fair rents', *Jersey Journal*, 29 August 1919.

31 Lisa Jacobson notes that early twentieth-century child experts asserted the importance of the home as a site for children's play to counteract the seemingly dangerous 'allures of mass recreation'. By implication, blocking children's access to potential play areas in the home and to a backyard could be seen as hurting their development. 'No families with small children need apply', *Jersey Journal*, 6 September 1919; Jacobson 2004, 161.
32 'Gannon calls a "Rent payers' strike" to checkmate profiteering landlords', *Jersey Journal*, 31 January 1920.
33 'Gannon is deluged with complaints against profiteering landlords', *Jersey Journal*, 3 February 1920.
34 'Thanks Commissioner Gannon', *Jersey Journal*, 6 February 1920; 'Profiteering landlords run to cover', *Jersey Journal*, 4 February 1920.
35 'Profiteering landlords run to cover'.
36 'February rent strike was a complete success', *Jersey Journal*, 26 February 1920; 'March strike of rent payers starts tonight', *Jersey Journal*, 28 February 1920.
37 'Pro baby bill passes House', *Jersey Journal*, 3 March 1920; 'Housing situation brightens', *Jersey Journal*, 8 April 1920; 'Anti-baby bill passed', *Jersey Journal*, 13 April 1920; 'The Hansen Law', *Jersey Journal*, 3 May 1920; 'Five bills aimed at the rental problem in N.J.', *Jersey Journal*, 11 May 1920; 'Landlords need not give three months notice', *Jersey Journal*, 14 July 1920.
38 'Queries and letters sent to the Editor', *Jersey Journal*, 14 April 1921.
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41 'The rent payers to do their own stump speaking', *Jersey Journal*, 28 April 1921.
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47 Fogelson 2013, 81–4; Silber 2024, 360.
48 'Dr Hanrahan comes to boost tenants' union', *Jersey Journal*, 3 April 1922.
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51 Baigell 2017, 5; Molina 2006; Markel and Stern 2002, 757–88.
52 'Landlords lambasted at first street meeting of rent strikers'; Fraser 2016.
53 'Hit landlord by closing his poultry shop', *Jersey Journal*, 8 September 1921.
54 'Landlord "serenaded" by angry tenants, while sife at window wiggles fingers at crowd', *Jersey Journal*, 12 September 1921; 1920 U.S. Census, Jersey City, Hudson County, New Jersey, digital image, s.v. 'Henry Bernzweig', Ancestry.com.
55 'Dege's tenants ask Mayor to O.K. protest meeting on street', *Jersey Journal*, 20 September 1921; 'Tenants charge "double-crossing" in the City Hall', *Jersey Journal*, 1 October 1921.
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67 'Revolt of the consumer'; 'Overseas hero cheers tenants on in rent war'; 'Dealing with the landlord', *Lansing State Journal*, 6 October 1919; 'Rent hogs or the race', *Richmond Item*, 10 August 1919.
68 'Landlords get chance to tell why rent soars', *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 15 August 1919; United States Senate 2021, 942.
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3

Shop strike! Rent control, moral economy and tenants' mobilisation in Athens, 1914–1936

Nikos Potamianos

No instance of tenant organising is known in Greece before the First World War. However, Athens house owners in the last decades of the nineteenth century had protested against the taxes on real estate[1] and established associations to intervene on issues such as the creation of urban infrastructure or the legal provisions for evictions.[2] Tenants' collective action only developed when the state began to intervene in the rental market and rents became subject to regulation in the context of the extraordinary circumstances of the First World War. Such intervention took place in an atmosphere of discontent when prices rose substantially in the 1910s. However, it was first and foremost the politicisation of the issue that created the necessary space and provided the impetus for the tenants' organisation and collective action. We can evaluate the importance of this factor better as we are currently experiencing the 'neo-liberal condition' of de-politicisation of the economy.

This chapter provides an account of tenants' collective actions over rent control: their class composition, the variety of the organisations that represented them, their specific demands, their repertoire of action and their views and perceptions. As regards the last, this chapter uses the concept of 'moral economy' to shed light on beliefs and attitudes about fairness in the market that contributed to the unification of the heterogeneous social category of tenants.[3] The concept was introduced by the British Marxist historian E. P. Thompson in the 1970s and has since become commonplace in the social sciences. Having been applied to contexts of many different types, moral economy was defined in very different ways by historians, anthropologists and political scientists. However, Thompson conceived it as the alternative popular economics to the liberal political economy that was rising in the eighteenth

century; that is, as a set of beliefs that opposed the domination of the market logic in economic transactions and social relations – in particular in times of crisis, when the prices of basic goods should be regulated.[4] However, his approach, in order to be used here, needs to be modified so that the moral economy is not necessarily based on well-established practices, traditional entitlements or reciprocities between lower classes and elites.

Almost nothing has been written on rent control and tenants' mobilisation in Greece before the Second World War: practically all we have is a jurist's survey of laws and some *en passant* mentions in works on inter-war housing or the rental market in the second half of the twentieth century.[5] As will be shown in this chapter, the main peculiarity of the Greek case of tenants' mobilisation is the decisive role played by shopkeepers and craftsmen. My research focuses on Athens, but will also draw upon some evidence from other Greek cities. At the same time, it should be stressed that the issue of rent control largely concerned the national political arena and was the subject of policies of the central state. In this chapter tenants' collective action is examined from its beginnings in 1914 until 1936, when Ioannis Metaxas imposed his semi-fascist dictatorship and put an end to public discussions. The sources used consist mostly of reports, comments, articles and resolutions of associations and unions published in newspapers and found in archives. This material not only provides information on rental market structures and friction; it also allows us to approach the perceptions of the social actors involved in the conflicts on rent control.

The housing structures in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Athens have been under-studied, and there is no statistical evidence available about the rental market and its relation to owner-occupied houses. There is a broad consensus that small ownership was the dominant pattern regarding property of houses, as it was regarding agricultural land.[6] The institution of 'horizontal property' was introduced only in 1929; before this year landlords owned whole buildings, not single apartments.[7] However, the buildings were usually small (most houses had one or two floors, particularly in the working-class neighbourhoods of Athens),[8] and many peasants, artisans or ex-servants could afford to own a house.[9] A common practice was to build houses gradually, adding rooms or floors when the owner had enough money.[10] Moreover, the land around Athens, which was gradually transformed from agricultural to urban plots as the city grew, belonged to a large extent not to large landowners but to peasants, many of whom built houses there both for themselves and to let.[11]

On the other hand, the diffusion of property does not equal owner-occupancy, and one can detect in the sources that 'a large part of the urban population in Greece is renting their house'.[12] There had been a rental market in Athens ever since the city became the capital of Greece in 1834, and public servants, politicians and provincial middle-class families began to flow in.[13] Rental housing for the poor also developed, particularly when the agricultural crisis at the end of the nineteenth century, combined with economic development based on small-scale industry and services, led to a substantial growth of Athens (from 69,000 inhabitants in 1879 to 317,000 in 1920).[14] In 1921 an inquiry into workers' housing revealed, apart from the very bad housing conditions, that workers' house ownership was very scarce.[15]

Housing conditions were aggravated further when, in 1922–3, 1.5 million refugees came from Anatolia and Thrace after Greece's defeat in the war with Turkey. Radical measures were taken to manage a situation that had become critical. The 1920s were marked by a wave of significant reforms and state intervention in housing and urban planning, including the extension of rent control, the encouragement of building co-operatives and the largest project of social housing that ever took place in Greece.[16] The state soon withdrew from the housing market. In the period after 1945 the public policies in favour of lower classes' housing were based on the absence of the state: that is, on the toleration of the extensive unauthorised building by newcomers on the periphery of Athens.[17] Both forms of state intervention and 'state absenteeism' served to reinforce house ownership by the lower classes, creating the high rates of house ownership and owner-occupancy familiar to scholars of contemporary Greece.[18] However, it seems that in the first decades of the twentieth century most poor people in Athens rented their houses.

Rent control

Rent control was first introduced in Greece in 1916, during the First World War, following the example of the belligerent countries.[19] This was accompanied by the introduction of other measures against profiteering, which were intended to deal with the unprecedented rise in prices of essential goods – a rise that would become much greater after the end of the wars (in 1922, as regards Greece) and until the economic crisis of 1929.[20] From 1914 onwards labour unions began to demand rent control. However, the driving force behind its enforcement was not the demands of the relatively weak unions, but the broader social

pressure on the government to protect people from high inflation and a housing crisis, in the same way as it had banned evictions during the Balkan Wars (1912–13). The broader context of rent control was the rise of state intervention in the market; this began in Greece during the last decade of the nineteenth century and culminated in the inter-war years.[21] The First World War was crucial for its further development and legitimisation all over Europe.

The political juncture was also favourable for market regulation from another point of view. An intense political conflict (culminating at certain moments in a low-intensity civil war) occurred in Greece from 1915 onwards, between the party of the Liberals and its royalist opponents over reforms in the state and economy and the involvement of Greece in the First World War.[22] Consequently the governments of both political camps (royalists in 1915–17, 1920–2 and 1932–6, and Liberals in 1917–20, 1923–5 and 1928–32, together with military dictatorships in 1922–3, 1925–6 and 1936–41) had an additional motive to try to secure the consent of the popular classes as best they could. Despite the fact that the Liberals were more oriented to social mechanics and state intervention in the market, it was thus the royalists (liberal in terms of economic policy) who first introduced rent control.

The 1916 law banned the eviction of a tenant who was regularly paying the rent and regulated the amount of rent in favour of tenants: rents were frozen for one year, after which small increases were permitted every year. From the beginning the moratorium on rents included commercial rents (shops and workshops) as well. Eventually new provisions were introduced in subsequent years as regards the special treatment of conscripts and public servants, subletting a room or the whole apartment, the right of owners to evict the tenant if they were to reside in the house themselves or the application of rent control on new houses.[23] Initially the law was applied in Athens and Piraeus, but it was very soon extended to other cities (in 1918 to Thessaloniki) at the request of municipal councils. In 1927 rent control was imposed on all prefectures' capitals and cities with a population of over 10,000.[24] In some periods regulation was stricter and the permitted increase of the rents was low; this was the case in particular in the 1910s and in general until 1925. In other periods rent control was relaxed, for example in the 1930s, when prices fell after the 1929 crisis,[25] while the decrees of 1925 and 1927 had already allowed for substantial increases in rents.[26]

We lack a systematic study of the effects of inter-war rent control. However, there are various indications that it resulted in a significant decrease in average rents in the context of the skyrocketing inflation

that followed the war. According to official data, in 1925 the increase in rents of houses under rent control reached 350 per cent compared to 1914 (500–600 per cent in the case of shops), while the inflation rate was 1,200 per cent.[27] The 1927 rent control decree permitted the increase in the rents of houses under rent control to 1,250 per cent compared to 1914, while (according to an estimation of real estate brokers) the increase had reached 3,000 per cent for (mostly new) houses that were not subject to rent control.[28] According to the first researchers into family budgets in Greece, the expenditure of a four-member family on housing fell from 17 per cent of its income in 1914 to 6 per cent in 1924.[29] This rate certainly increased again in subsequent years.[30]

An indirect indication of the significant decrease in incomes from real estate is that rent control was widely considered a major attack upon property. The restriction of the rights of owners in the case of rent control was considered – of course with a dose of exaggeration – comparable to the extensive forced expropriation of big estates during the agrarian land reform of 1917–25 (one of the more radical land reforms in non-communist Europe).[31] In fact, the 'League for the defence of property' formed in the early 1920s focused on the rights of owners in both settings: urban landlords hit by rent control and inadequately compensated owners of large rural estates that had been expropriated.[32]

But if agrarian land reform numbers among the expected policies of a bourgeois state, why was the sanctity of private property not respected in the case of urban landlords? An important factor was the nature of this social group: many of the landlords were small owners, and it was easier to impinge on the interests of the lower middle class than those of the higher bourgeoisie. In other cases, it has been pointed out that rent control works in favour of employers: if rents remain low, employers do not have to increase wages as much, enabling them to benefit from inflation in order to increase prices and profit.[33] Finally, fighting inflation and preserving the value of the national currency had always been a significant goal for government economic policy. This goal was combined with the task of protecting the lower classes' incomes from the loss of their purchasing power during a turbulent period in which the rulers' need to gain their subalterns' consensus was heightened. One would thus expect tenants' mobilisation to be taken seriously.

It is important to stress that rent control was always considered a temporary measure to be applied in a period of conflict (which in Greece began with the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, when evictions were postponed, and ended in 1922 when the country suffered a defeat against Turkey) and extraordinary post-war circumstances. As a result

it had to be renewed annually until 1925, then every three years after 1927. Consequently a public discussion took place every year regarding the overall usefulness of rent control and the specific terms that should apply; from 1922 onwards the end of rent control and the necessary transitional provisions were issues always raised by the relevant government. This constant negotiation contributed to forming associations of landlords and tenants. Both blue-collar and white-collar unions mobilised as well, as did shopkeepers' and master artisans' associations, all seeking to represent their members' interests.

Tenants' organisation and mobilisation

The tenants' mobilisation in Athens began in 1914, a few days before the outbreak of the First World War,[34] when the rise of prices was combined with the first wave of refugees from Asia Minor. The Athens Labour Centre, founded just four years earlier, organised a successful demonstration to protest against the rise in rents; it demanded the freezing of prices for three years and the building of social housing by the Municipality of Athens.[35] In the years that followed the Athens Labour Centre and the Piraeus Labour Centre both repeated their protests against profiteering and the mass evictions of tenants, demanding that measures should be taken against the rising prices of both foodstuffs and (with less emphasis) rents.[36] At the time their ideological and political perspectives were based on social liberalism and somewhat vague socialist ideas; they also deployed a discourse against profiteering to which we shall return. Labour unions' protests contributed to the creation of an atmosphere favourable to state intervention that facilitated the introduction of rent control. However, they were too weak to be considered the decisive factor behind this development.

Tenants did not identify themselves with the working class. Yet labour centres were the most important organised forces that intervened on the side of the tenants when martial law prohibitions were relaxed and a bitter struggle about rent control developed in the early 1920s between tenants and owners. Thus in 1920 the Panergatikon Labour Centre of Athens demanded a zero increase in rents up to 200 drachmas and eviction only after three months' non-payment of rent.[37] The Centre referred to 'capital's greed', an increase in food prices and new taxes as factors that aggravated the situation of labourers, white-collar workers and the petty-bourgeoisie, and threatened that they would not pay any increases in their rents. However, its threat of a rent strike was not realised

and remains isolated in the sources: the tenants' repertoire of collective action consisted mostly of rallies, press articles and memoranda to the governments – with the exception of the shopkeepers' strike, as we shall see below.

In the labour unions' discourse, demands related to rent control were usually combined with demands regarding inflation and profiteering in general (and especially in foodstuffs).[38] On this basis, white-collar workers participated in these actions from the beginning: among the organisers of the 1914 demonstration was the Athens Association of Employees in Commerce, which then represented a number of office clerks together with shop assistants. In 1922 both white-collar employees in the private sector and civil servants mobilised for issues relevant to rent control.[39] When in 1923 a new rent control decree was suddenly published, the association of employees of banks and big companies responded immediately. At their assembly they decided to participate in a demonstration of protest.[40]

It is true that white-collar workers did not manage to create strong organisations in the inter-war years and labour unions were far more capable of mobilising masses of people. However, we should not overlook the fact that the public sphere was dominated by the viewpoint of the 'labouring bourgeois wage-earners' who were in their majority living in rented property and who by and large identified themselves with protests against high prices.[41] Newspapers, written by educated wage-earners and read predominantly by white-collar workers and professionals, tended to support demands for rent control.[42] Most judges were living in rented accommodation and they were accused, no matter how conservative they were, of tending to favour tenants in their decisions.[43]

However, there were some points of divergence between blue-collar workers and white-collar employees as regards rent control. Significantly, the first rent control decree distinguished houses based on the amount of rent required: low rents increased less or not at all, but a bigger increase was allowed for higher rents, while the highest rents were not controlled by the state at all. Subsequent decrees allowed for bigger or smaller rent increases depending on the year in which the rental began, but they also provided for a smaller increase of the lower rents.[44] As a result, while tenants with lower incomes were more protected, the landlords of the poorer tenants, mostly small property owners, saw their incomes collapse and kept protesting strongly.[45]

The efforts of the governments to address this thorny question often tended to remove the special protection for lower rents, leading workers to mobilise against these plans. Labour unions, both those controlled by

communists and other more conservative ones, usually insisted on distinguishing between workers' houses and other houses, treating the former more favourably in the annual renewals of rent control.[46] In 1921 the Labour Centre of Athens preferred to organise a rally about rent control separately from the other organisations representing the tenants, in order to underline their different views on the subject.[47]

Nevertheless, despite these frictions, tenants' actions were by and large moving in the same direction. Succeeding a probably stillborn Tenants' Association of Athens,[48] the Tenants' Solidarity League played a unifying role in the early 1920s. Established in 1921, with a leadership consisting mostly of royalists but also of some liberal cadres, the League consistently cultivated its relations with the associations of workers, public servants, white-collar workers of the private sector and shopkeepers and master artisans.[49] In 1923 it organised a large rally in which representatives of all the above organisations took part, including communist workers.[50] The League published a newspaper and elaborated positions regarding rent control that would both unify tenants and confront the arguments of house owners. Their demands included the minimising of rent increases, a longer duration of the rent freeze (extending to three or five years instead of one), the sub-tenancy of one or two rooms to be allowed without the agreement of the owner of the house (something that seems to have been a common practice before 1916) and prevention of tenants from being easily evicted if the landlord wanted to use the house for himself or to build a bigger house. Moreover, they proposed a system that would satisfy small landlords without burdening the poorest tenants: a fund would be created in which rich house owners would deposit part of the increased rents of their houses, and these would be distributed to poorer landlords whose only income was their rents.[51]

It should be stressed that there were many women among the thousands of people who gathered at the League's rallies,[52] as well as at the rallies of the house owners' associations.[53] In Greece women had only recently begun to participate in political demonstrations in greater numbers.[54] They were certainly present in the earlier food riots against high prices, however, while women in Europe and the Americas played an often prominent role in protests against high prices of foodstuffs and rents in the years during and after the First World War.[55] High prices was an issue close to their responsibilities in the household, as women in the male-breadwinner family were usually responsible for provisions and consumption. Moreover, with reference to rent control, women were identified with the house as a place. Women in Greece were largely

non-unionised and not yet enfranchised, so did not appear easily in mobilisations over high prices organised by labour unions and other professional associations. The creation of associations of tenants and house owners facilitated women's mobilisation on rent control, and in general assisted their entry into the public sphere.

Shopkeepers/master artisans and rent control

The Tenants' Solidarity League was not long-lived,[56] and the efforts to build new 'committees of tenants' in 1924 were not a success.[57] Furthermore, the associations of blue- and white-collar workers reduced their interventions on rent control in the years that followed; some workers even felt free to demand the abolition of rent control, hoping that this would boost the house construction sector.[58] In 1924 the General Confederation of Greek Workers was among the organisers of a tenants' demonstration. It also participated in a committee on rent control in 1927,[59] but on both occasions the prominent role was now played by GSEVE, the Hellenic General Confederation of Professionals and Craftsmen – that is, the organisation of shopkeepers and owners of small craft industries.

This development was due to a change in the nature of the rent control issue. From 1923 onwards most governments explicitly declared their intention to abolish the regulation of the housing market and commercial rents, as the 'extraordinary circumstances' created by the wars had come to an end. The abolition would begin with shops and workshops, since in their case state intervention appeared less justified as responding to an urgent social need and protecting the weaker members of society. Consequently small businessmen became the more militant defenders of rent control, as they were the first who would suffer from its loss. Workers' and white-collar unions then assumed an auxiliary role, supporting the tradesmen in their struggle.[60]

Shopkeepers and master artisans were, from the beginning, an indispensable part of the tenants' bloc. They participated in all their collective actions and ensured that house and commercial rents were perceived and treated in a more or less uniform way. In doing so they differentiated themselves from the wealthier businessmen represented by the Athens Merchants' Association or the various Chambers of Industrialists and Merchants. These more prosperous men adopted a more moderate position, accepting bigger increases in commercial rents and demonstrating a deeper respect for real estate property.[61] Eventually

the issues regarding rent control rose high in the priorities of organisations of the petty bourgeoisie; its preservation became a major demand that contributed to the organisational unification of an archipelago of individualist small businessmen. A key factor explaining this development, combined with the threat that the abolition of rent control would begin with the shops, is the fact that few of them owned their shop premises. We lack official data, but the percentage of tradesmen who retained their shop at the same address for at least 10 years is a very telling indication. According to evidence from five commercial city guides of Athens, published between 1875 and 1919, this rate was only 11 per cent for barbers and 6 per cent for carpenters and cabinet makers.[62]

Small businessmen thus mobilised on issues regarding the terms of rent control (such as the need for consent by the owner of the property if the businessman wanted to take someone as a partner),[63] but mostly defended rent control in general. As they had to be determined and militant to achieve such a goal, they enriched the repertoire of tenants' collective action in Greece with strikes. These were not rent strikes, as their action was not aimed directly against property owners: they rather closed their shops and workshops, seeking to exert pressure on the government. The first time the small businessmen threatened to strike was in 1923–4, when the government suddenly attempted to abolish rent control; it was forced to retreat.[64] In 1925 a new government dealt with their threats to strike more decisively, while the 'General Association of Property' declared that they would register the shops on strike and boycott them.[65] The following year, under the military dictatorship of Theodoros Pangalos, shopkeepers and master artisans organised a big demonstration, forcing the government to withdraw the repeal of rent control. In return they supported the electoral campaign of the dictator, who was trying to be elected President of the Republic.[66]

The time for the strike came in 1927. Faced with the abolition of rent control for shops by a government that had been formed by all the 'bourgeois' parties, small businessmen carried out their threat and went on strike. Among their various demands (concerning taxes and anti-profiteering laws), the preservation of rent control was dominant, and it was mainly on this basis that they drew support from labour unions and white-collar associations as well as the Communist Party. The strike was successful, but the demonstration was attacked by the army and resulted in a bloodbath, with three strikers killed and 12 wounded. The leaders of the shopkeepers and craftsmen were prosecuted, but the government was forced to back down in order to save its unity, as two of its parties supported the strikers' demands.[67]

In 1927–9 businesses in Greece, particularly small ones, experienced a crisis as policies for monetary and economic stabilisation destabilised an economic environment that had been favourable for their growth. The extension of rent control and a decrease in rents were among the measures shopkeepers and master artisans asked to be implemented by the state to ensure their survival.[68] However, it was in 1930 that the next major incident of the conflict took place, when rent control would expire and new negotiations had to be held. A large volume of memoranda and relevant documents from both tenants and landlords is to be found in the archive of the then prime minister, Eleftherios Venizelos.[69] Once again small businessmen were the main actors of the tenants' camp; the associations of the house owners exclusively attacked the 'noisy shopkeepers'.[70] Equally telling is the fact that a (short-lived) new association of tenants formed in 1929 specifically represented those renting shops and workshops.[71] In 1930 there appeared, for the first time, a group of shopkeepers and craftsmen who rented their shops in the free market; they argued that the rent freeze should stop so that all shopkeepers could compete on a level playing field.[72] Despite this, however, the organisations of small businessmen managed to obtain a three-year extension of rent control.[73]

The rent control on houses was eventually abolished by 1934, although a kind of protection was maintained: a threshold was determined by the government above which the rent was considered 'unfair' and not legitimate.[74] However, rent control on shops was preserved until the Second World War.[75] Of course, this rent control only applied to those shops that had been rented previously; no evidence has been detected on the number of shopkeepers who benefited from continued market regulation. Small business organisations continued to intervene on issues of rent control in the 1930s, albeit without giving them priority, until the imposition of Metaxas's dictatorship in 1936; they also demanded the introduction of a permanent 'protection of commercial housing'.[76]

As for the tenants, there was an unsuccessful effort in 1933 to mobilise for the maintaining of rent control. A new tenants' association was founded by a retired general[77] and both communist and conservative labour unions asked for a regulation of rents. All they achieved, however, was a one-year extension for the poorest tenants, as only one demonstration took place, organised mainly by shopkeepers.[78] The issue did not seem to be a priority for them; in fact, the communist Confederation of Workers gave the impression that they rather wanted to propagate their positions on housing.[79] I believe the main reason a rent freeze was downplayed was that the severity of the problem had been reduced;

prices were falling and houses were being built throughout these years.[80] Moreover, the new royalist government appeared more determined than the previous one to put an end to rent control. It was the same political wing that had introduced it 17 years previously, but during the years that followed it had been more strongly identified with the interests of property owners.[81]

Conclusions: moral economy versus property

Rent strikes in Greece never became part of the repertoire of tenants' mobilisation; tenants' organisations remained weak and their actions sporadic (a situation that was the rule globally, as noted in the introduction to this volume). Yet in the first decades of the twentieth century various forms of tenants' collective action appeared. These mostly arose after the politicisation of the issue of rents when the Greek state began to intervene in the rental market, responding to a wave of inflation and following other states involved in the First World War. Rent control became part of some pro-lower class policies (together with labour legislation, anti-profiteering laws and agrarian land reform) that were introduced during a period of deterioration for the living standards of the poor (the result of wars, waves of refugees, high inflation and proletarianisation), on the one hand, and the rise of state intervention in the economy, on the other. Rent control also had the advantage of constituting a measure with zero economic cost for the state – perhaps a telling indication of the generally low-cost social protection policies adopted by the Greek welfare state. Rent control worked at the expense of what was probably the weaker fraction of the middle classes and in favour of both small and big employers, who would not have to increase wages to correspond to an increase in rent prices.

Tenants drew on structures and organisations of different types. A short summary of the findings on tenants' mobilisation in inter-war Athens would be as follows: labour unions began a mobilisation against high rents in the 1910s, then continued to intervene on the issue; however, it seems eventually to have become less important for them, partly because quite a strong protection of lower rents survived until 1934. White-collar employees intervened as well, although somewhat sporadically and certainly without forming a significant actor within the tenants' camp owing to their weak organisation. Tenants' organisations were created, but these in general were short-lived and not very active – the exception being the League of 1921–3.

What made the case of Greece exceptional was the dominant role played by shopkeepers and master artisans in the tenants' collective action, particularly from 1923 onwards.[82] They were the first to mobilise every time there was a discussion about abolishing rent control (as abolition would begin with commercial rents) and, while a shopkeepers' strike happened only once, its threat actually became the tenants' principal weapon in exerting pressure on the state.[83] In Greece, as in other European countries, small businessmen turned politically and ideologically to the right in the first half of the twentieth century,[84] but they were slow in transforming their associations, according to the patterns of big businessmen. Until quite recently shopkeepers' and master artisans' organisations and collective action in Greece retained strong similarities to labour unionism.[85] Consequently, as few of them were the owners of the property of their shops, they displayed a tendency towards militant collective action regarding rent control. Conversely, rent control was an issue that contributed to their collective expression and class formation.[86]

The conflicts on rent control were, to an extent, a 'civil war' between different factions of the middle classes.[87] This was a dimension of the rent control question of which people were conscious in those years, and one can find various assertions on how the end of the struggle would lead to a much-needed unification of the 'bourgeoisie'.[88] The struggle over rent control produced a very clear dividing line that defined the two opposite camps, landlords and tenants; it also divided the middle classes between those who lived on urban property, on the one hand, and small businessmen and educated white-collar and liberal professions, on the other (or at least those who did not own houses or shops, or who did not prioritise this status at that particular juncture). Such a dividing line was based on the possession of property and on the extent of the rights that property owners should have.

This dividing line was expressed in ideological and cultural terms as well. House owners were unified under a common perception of property as the basis of social order, social institutions such as family, and national virtues such as hard work, thrift and saving.[89] Tenants, including white- and blue-collar workers, public servants and small businessmen and professionals, converged in using a particular political discourse against profiteering that developed in those years of high inflation.

This political idiom of 'shameful profiteering' had developed particularly to address the issue of high prices in foodstuffs, attributed to the greed of the 'profiteers'. Both communist workers and conservative judges used the same violent rhetoric against profiteering and urged that

the state should adopt strict measures against them and protect wage earners. Governments introduced laws to prosecute profiteering and, at times, imposed price controls. The discourse against profiteering was combined in many instances with new notions of exploitation introduced by socialists in the public sphere in the 1910s. Yet what immediately strikes the researcher is the obvious similarities that exist with the 'moral economy of the crowd' (in its dialectic relationship with state paternalism), as described by E. P. Thompson.[90]

I have argued elsewhere that we should insist on a strict definition of moral economy in the context of Thompson's initial analysis; since in our case there are no backward-looking mobilisations referring to and seeking to restore *ancien régime* regulations of the market, moral economy would not provide an appropriate context of interpretation.[91] However, I would now revisit and modify my earlier interpretation: the concept of moral economy can be also be used in a broader sense, in which perceptions about an appropriate economic behaviour that resists the domination of the laws of the market are not necessarily characterised by reference to practices of the past as a source of authority, but may draw upon modern trends, such as the increased state intervention in the economy from the end of the nineteenth century onwards.[92] In this broad sense, the Greek idiom of profiteering can be thought of as part of a 'new moral economy' that emerged all over Europe during and in the aftermath of the First World War. This new moral economy was expressed by protests against high prices and with reference to price controls and other measures taken by states during the first 'total war', which the protesters demanded be imposed again or become better, more strict or permanent.[93]

The tenants of Athens adopted this idiom and attacked landlords as profiteers who sought to make excessive profits in an immoral manner. As expected, workers were particularly inclined to use a discourse that opposed unfairness and carried a heavy moral charge against the greed of capitalist property owners who would throw them into the street in order to get richer, while they also invoked their right to survive.[94] What is more impressive is that shopkeepers and master artisans also adopted the idiom of profiteering, despite it being originally addressed mostly against them. The shopkeepers and master artisans thus accepted notions of fair and unfair profit, mostly as regards rent control but also in some other cases.[95] Attacks upon 'excessive enrichment' and 'avarice' of landlords abounded in their discourse, together with notions of exploitation that focused on the 'usurious', unfair and immoral ways of proprietors getting rich at the expense of the tenants.[96] Moreover,

while small businessmen often affirmed that they respected property as a fundamental principle of bourgeois society,[97] sometimes there was a 'but'. They adopted a stance that saw property as a 'social function' and not merely an individual right. Proprietors' rights could thus be restricted legitimately by the state in favour of the people or small capital. The small businessmen also saw real estate as a safe investment whose return should be lower than the return on capital invested in risky business.[98]

As a matter of fact, in two cases property was juxtaposed to labour: in both cases, it was shopkeepers from provincial cities who articulated an argument drawing upon the discourse that legitimised rural land reform. The owners of the shops were compared to the large landowners whose estates were expropriated and distributed to their farmers 'for reasons of public necessity'; property should be protected by the state only to the extent it was used by its owners, as peasants or shopkeepers.[99] These positions went too far for many and should perhaps be attributed to some left-wing elements in the unionism of small businessmen, which in general was dominated by royalists.[100]

At any rate, notions of moral economy that challenged the logic of the market often went hand in hand with the attribution of value to working people in the discourse not only of left-wing workers but also of conservative small businessmen. Such a conviction provided a basis for the convergence of the two elements in the issue of rent control. Tenants' inter-war mobilisation developed in an ideological and political environment characterised by a polarisation between moral economy and property. This occurred over years of serious challenges to property, both by communists who threatened to abolish it and by proponents of various forms of capitalist statism who proclaimed that its rights should be restricted.[101]

Notes

1 *Proia*, 21 December 1894.
2 Archive of Panayis Kyriakos, file 1, documents 727 and 761; *Syllogos*, 10 July 1889; *Efimeris tis Kyverniseos* vol.A, n.311, 7 November 1891; *Rizospastis*, 21 November 1908.
3 The relevance of moral economy as regards conflicts on rents was already hinted at by Englander 1983, 13.
4 Thompson 1971.
5 Malainos 1930, 182–4; Gizeli 1984; Leontidou 1989; Oikonomou 1987; Delladetsimas 1991; Siatitsa 2019.
6 On the diffusion of small property as a specific feature of nineteenth-century Greek society see Dertilis 2005; Voulgaris 2019; Potamianos 2022b. For contemporary assessments about the very dispersed nature of house ownership see Apostolopoulos 1917; Zaharias 1920.
7 Marmaras 1991.
8 See, for instance, Simonetis 2004, 40.

9 Examples of ex-maids: Apostolou 1985, 49; Voutyras 1994, 386; letter of the maid Alexandra Ioannou, 20 December 1929, archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki museum, file 173.77.
10 Anastasakis 1990.
11 *Νέαι Ιδέαι*, 25 November 1882; Vellianitis 1888.
12 *Viomichaniki kai Viotechniki Epitheorisis* 1 (1914), 93–4.
13 Biris 1999, 198, 236.
14 Leontidou 1989; Agriantoni 1999.
15 Leontidou 1989, 134.
16 Gizeli 1984; Karadimou-Gerolympou 2002. The houses built for tens of thousands of refugees were not rented, but sold to them as a bargain: property was expected to keep them loyal to the 'bourgeois social regime' (Leontidou 1989, 234; see also Liakos 1993, 37–9).
17 Oikonomou 1987. According to Leontidou 1989, 236–8 and 249 the politics of toleration of the illegal building had begun already in the 1930s.
18 Tsoukalas 1987, 278–80; Oikonomou 1987, 71.
19 Svolos 1918; Magri 1997; see also this volume's Chapter 1 and its Conclusion.
20 Potamianos 2015b, 469–93.
21 Hadjiiossif 2002; Petmezas 2012; Liakos 2019.
22 Mavrogordatos 1983; Hadjiiossif 1999.
23 Malainos 1930.
24 Decree 'Περί ρυθμίσεως εν γένει των μισθώσεων επί παντός είδους αστικών ακινήτων', *Efimeris tis Kyverniseos* v.A, n.130, 1 July 1927. Requests from various cities regarding the implementation of rent control locally can be found at the Archive of Prime Minister's Political Office, file 300 (1919), General Archives of the State (Athens).
25 Prosecution for profiteering in foodstuffs also became slacker in these years: Potamianos 2020. In Italy rent control was abolished in 1930–4: Iannello 2024.
26 *Embros*, 31 March 1925; Memorandum by Hellenic General Confederation of Professionals and Craftsmen, Federation of Professionals and Craftsmen of Athens and National Association of shops' tenants, n.d. (beginning of March 1930), archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki museum, file 173.24.
27 According to the minister P. Tsitseklis (*Embros*, 22 February 1925). The difference was even bigger in early 1923, when the increase in house rents reached 150 per cent compared to 1914, while the general price increase was 650 per cent.
28 Pratsikas 1927–8, 453–6.
29 Fountanopoulos 2000, 103–4.
30 According to a 1930 research project on the budgets of lower- and middle-class families with an average of six members, the family income spent on housing ranged from 8.5 to 11 per cent: Sbarounis 1935, 280–2.
31 Franghiadis 2007; Petmezas 2012.
32 Geniki Enosis Idioktisias 1924; *Embros*, 5–11 July 1924.
33 Iannello 2024; Oikonomou 1987. It was on this basis (how to avoid an increase in wages) that the journal published by the Hellenic Federation of Industrialists had protested against high rents in 1914 and supported a programme of social housing (although not the regulation of the rental market): *Viomichaniki kai Viotechniki Epitheorisis* 1 (1914), 93–4. For a similar protest in 1870s Paris see Magri 2000, 367.
34 The only previous tenants' mobilisation we have detected took place in 1895, when a committee of 'landless and small owners', under the leadership of an early socialist agitator, organised a rally in Athens and a petition against a law that facilitated evictions: *Asty*, 9–11 July 1895.
35 *Nea Imera*, 29 and 30 June; *Estia*, 30 June 1914; *Ιδρυτική πράξη σύστασης ΕΚΑ. Πρακτικά συνεδριάσεων 1910–1914*. Athens, 2004, 555–7.
36 *Chronos*, 11 and 14 July 1915; *Athinai*, 15 July 1915; memorandum, 17 September 1915, archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki museum, file 173.77; *Astir* (Piraeus), 5 January and 9 February 1916; memorandum of Labour Centre of Athens, 22 July 1920, Archive of Prime Minister's Bureau, GEK, file 357.
37 Resolution of 26 July 1920, archive of Panergatikon Kentron Athinon, ELIA.
38 See, for instance, Livieratos 1976, 98–9 and 100 for a resolution of Thessaloniki Labour Centre and a rally organised by Piraeus Labour Centre in the summer of 1922 and *Patris*,

11 July 1922 for the demonstration of Athens Labour Centre; Livieratos 1985, 43–4 and 163 for the demands of the General Confederation of Greek Workers in 1924 and 1925.

39 *Neai Archai*, 11 July 1922. Public servants were more interested in rent control provisions that referred specifically to them: *Embros*, 27 July and *Neai Archai*, 2 August 1922. In Chapter 2 of this volume Mark Robbins refers to a case of white-collar tenants' activism in Chicago during these same years of high cost of living.

40 *Dimokratia*, 31 December 1923. See *Eleftheron Vima*, 23 February 1926 for a similar response of many white-collar associations and *Embros*, 2 July 1927, of public servants' confederation.

41 *Kathimerini*, 5 November 1919. Some telling examples: *Εμπρός*, 18 May and 18 June 1917 and 9 May 1919.

42 Very telling examples of this point of view: *Akropolis*, 1 March 1909 and 1 August 1912, *Laos tis Ellados*, 29 June 1917, *Embros*, 9 May 1919, *Kairoi*, 22 June 1920, *Kathimerini*, 6 January 1923, *Ethniki*, 8 March 1927.

43 Delladetsimas 1991, 234. A conservative judge, in a letter that he did not in the end send for publication in a newspaper, attacked landlords as profiteers, blackmailers and despicable usurers: Kazakopoulos 1998, 58 (1914).

44 Decree '"Περί εκτελέσεως του ν.ΔΞΗ" και του άρθρου 5 του ν.732, *Efimeris tis Kyverniseos* v.A', n.127, 11 July 1916; decree '"Περί ενοικιοστασίου", *Efimeris tis Kyverniseos* v.A', n.139, 23 June 1918; decree '"Περί ενοικιοστασίου", *Efimeris tis Kyverniseos* v.A', n.153, 11 July 1920.

45 *Viomichanos*, 19 June 1916 and *Embros*, 3 July 1922.

46 See, for instance, the resolutions of Labour Centre of Piraeus in *Kathimerini*, 1 March 1923 and of the General Confederation of Greek Workers in *Elliniki*, 2 April 1925.

47 *Embros*, 24 May 1921.

48 They appeared with a declaration in *Valkanikos Tahydromos*, 29 November 1919, but they do not seem to have survived. Among the names of those who signed the declaration that of Spyros Theodoropoulos, a well-known liberal lawyer who was involved in the early labour movement, stands out.

49 *Embros*, 23 and 24 May 1921 and 23 March 1923; *Protevousa*, 17 May 1922; *Esperini*, 1 June 1922; *Neai Archai*, 9 July 1922.

50 *Embros*, 27 March 1923.

51 *Skrip*, 24 May 1921; *Embros*, 24 May 1921, 20 June 1922 and 1 April 1923; *Kathimerini*, 13 March 1923. The General Confederation of Greek Workers adopted the proposal of a special fund for poorer landlords: *Elliniki*, 2 April 1925.

52 *Skrip*, 24 May 1921; *Embros*, 20 June 1922 and 27 March 1923.

53 *Embros*, 20 June 1922; *Ethniki*, 26 February 1927.

54 Potamianos 2023.

55 See, for instance, Frank 1985; Taylor 1996; Radcliff 1995. Poy 2021 refers to the predominant role played by working-class women in tenant mobilisation. See also the chapters by Robbins, Poy and Belkin and Novaro and Crosetti in this volume.

56 The last time we find a mention of the League is at the *Proceedings of the Board of the Athens Tradesmen Federation*, 12 June 1923 (GSEVEE archive, Athens), while their president is described as a speaker in a tenants' rally at *Embros*, 27 September 1924. However, local tenant associations can still be found in the 1930s, such as an association in Larissa: Archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki Museum, file 186–03 (resolution of 6 November 1932).

57 *Embros*, 18 January and 20–27 September 1924; see also *Apogevmatini*, 1 April 1926, and *Eleftheron Vima*, 29 May 1926.

58 *Rizospastis*, 28 February 1927; *Eleftheron Vima*, 10 March 1930. Of course this was an argument articulated mostly by the associations of landlords, as well as merchants of building materials: *Embros*, 4 March 1925 and 4 March 1927; *Eleftheron Vima*, 14 July 1927.

59 *Embros*, 27 September 1924 (in Patras as well); *Embros*, 2–4 July 1927 and *Eleftheron Vima*, 14 July 1927. The few other detected occasions in which workers' organisations formulated demands about rent control were in 1925 by the General Confederation of Greek Workers (Livieratos 1985, 163) and in 1933 by the Labour Centre of Piraeus (*Athinaika Nea*, 19 July 1933).

60 See, for instance, the support of both communist and conservative workers for the large strike of shopkeepers and craftsmen in 1927: *Skrip*, 10 March 1927, *Kathimerini*, 11 March 1927 and *Rizospastis*, 10 and 11 March 1927.

61 Potamianos 2015b, 491–2.

62 Potamianos 2015b, 490. According to an earlier newspaper 'inquiry' on the blacksmiths of Athens, only four out of 125 of them owned their workshop: *Asty*, 31 January 1894. Shopkeeper unionists from provincial cities estimated that only 1 per cent (Patras) or 10 per cent (Karditsa) of shopkeepers owned the property of their shop: *Mellon ton Epagelmation kai Viotechnon*, 6 May 1935 and *Efimeris ton Epagelmation*, 16 February 1927. It seems that in Britain shopkeepers were more affluent and used to own the property of their shop in considerably larger numbers: Winstanley 2003 has estimated that between 20 and 25 per cent of the shops in three small English cities were owner-occupied, but to this percentage an unknown number of shops should probably be added to account for those that belonged to their parents or to female members of the family, where the rent paid to them was actually a mechanism of generational inter-dependency.

63 *Embros*, 18 January and 26 August 1924. According to the 'General Association of Property', what shopkeepers actually wanted was to legalise the side payments ('key money') when a shopkeeper would leave a space for someone else to rent: *Eleftheron Vima*, 14 August 1924.

64 *Enosis tou Ellinismou*, 30 December 1923, *Dimokratia*, 31 December 1923, *Embros*, 1 January 1924 and *Eleftheron Vima*, 2 January 1924.

65 *Embros*, 19 and 21 February, 19 and 20 March 1925; *Elliniki*, 6 April 1925. See also *Eleftheron Vima*, 23 September 1924.

66 *Eleftheron Vima*, 23 February 1926, *Embros*, 2 April 1926, *Apogevmatini*, 31 March and 1 April 1926 and *Efimeris ton Epaggelmation*, 7 April 1926.

67 *Kathimerini, Skrip* and *Rizospastis*, 8–11 March 1927. Harsh repression of demonstrations and strikes was not at all uncommon in inter-war Greece.

68 The archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki museum, file 173 contains resolutions and memoranda by the second tradesmen's general assembly, 5 July 1928; Federation of Tradesmen of Epirus, 25 October 1928; a special committee elected by the second tradesmen's general assembly, 20 June 1929; GSEVE and the Federation of Tradesmen of Athens, 27 October 1929.

69 Archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki museum, file 173.

70 See, for instance, the resolution of the Bourgeois Union of Proprietors in *Eleftheron Vima*, 10 March 1930, or the memorandum of the Bourgeois Associations of Proprietors of Athens and suburbs, 27 June 1931, in the archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki museum, file 173.59.

71 *Mellon Epaggelmation*, 7 and 21 April 1929. A common memorandum of GSEVE and the National Association of Shop Tenants 'Zoi' in 1930 can be found at the Archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki Museum, file 174.24.

72 Memorandum of the tradesmen who pay free-market rents, March 1930. Archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki Museum, file 173.55 (signed by 700 persons).

73 Law 4784 '"Περί ρυθμίσεως εν γένει των μισθώσεων επί παντός είδους αστικών ακινήτων", *Efimeris tis Kyverniseos* v.A', n.211, 21 June 1930.

74 *Eleftheron Vima*, 3 July 1933; *Athinaika Nea*, 19 May, 18 and 22 July 1933, 24 August 1935.

75 *Athinaika Nea*, 21 August 1936, 24 August 1937, 2 September 1939.

76 *Agon*, 21 August 1931; *Epagelmatika kai Viotechnika Chronika*, 11 June 1933; *Eleftheron Vima*, 14 July 1933; *Athinaika Nea*, 2,4 and 21 June and 9 July 1931, 25 June 1933, 15 July and 9 November 1935, 3 August 1936; *Mellon Epaggelmation kai Viotechnon*, 1 January, 11 June and 1 July 1935; *Akropolis*, 24 June 1935; Memorandum of the Chamber of Tradesmen of Herakleion 1 December 1936, Archive of Aristeidis Dimitratos, ELIA, folder 6.1.

77 *Athinaika Nea*, 14 and 25 May 1933, 17 August 1934.

78 *Akropolis*, 22 and 24 June 1933; *Eleftheron Vima*, 14 July and 9 August 1933; *Rizospastis*, 21 and 22 July 1933; *Athinaika Nea*, 25 June, 11 and 19 July 1933

79 *Rizospastis*, 21 July 1933. It is telling that Piraeus Labour Centre in its memorandum of 27 November 1932 on various questions (including the high prices in food stuff) did not mention housing and rent control at all. Archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki museum, file 173.06.

80 Although not without imbalances at the expense of the poorest: there still were shortages in small houses according to newspapers' inquiries into the rental market: *Athinaika Nea*, 6 August 1931, 4 May and 20 September 1932, 24 July 1933, 24 August 1934. However, the greater imbalance remained that in the commercial rental market, since no new commercial centres were created after the First World War and so very few central shops were added to

the available building stock of Athens: *Mellon Epaggelmation*, 21 April 1929. This pattern could account for a great deal of the militancy of the shopkeepers.

81 See, for instance, an earlier assessment by the communists and an article by the leaders of the National Confederation of Urban and Agrarian Property: *Rizospastis*, 14 February 1927 and *Vradyni*, 6 November 1926. Certainly things were more complicated than a simple identification of the royalists with the proprietors.

82 Shopkeepers played an important role in the Swedish tenant movement as well, although not to the extent that happened in the Greek case: Rolf 2021.

83 It is telling that one of the tenants' short-lived organisations also used as its principal weapon the threat that shopkeepers who were its members would strike: *Eleftheron Vima*, 23 September 1924.

84 Crossick and Haupt 1995; Koshar 1990.

85 See, for instance, Hadjiiossif, Dimanopoulos, Katsoudas and Potamianos 2020.

86 Potamianos 2015b.

87 This division accounts, according to Englander 1983, 54, for the defeat of the landlords and the imposition of rent control, as the owners found themselves isolated in this issue.

88 *Eleftheron Vima*, 23 February 1926 (Anastassiadis, president of the Athens Chamber of Commerce and Industry); *Embros*, 10 March 1927 (Petropoulakis, president of a landlords' association); *Mellon epagelmation*, 21 April 1929 (Nikoletopoulos, legal adviser of the Athens Chamber of Commerce and Industry); Memorandum of the tradesmen who pay free-market rents, March 1930, Archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki Museum, file 173.55.

89 See, for instance, the discourse of various Associations of Proprietors in 1922–23 (*Embros*, 17 and 21 June, 3 and 4 July 1922; *Kathimerini*, 8 February 1923) and the memoranda of the National Confederation of Urban and Agrarian Property, 10 February 1930 and the Committee of the People of Property, 19 May 1930, in the archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki museum, file 173.

90 Thompson 1971.

91 Potamianos 2015a; Potamianos 2019.

92 Potamianos 2024.

93 Bianchi 2004.

94 Memorandum of Labour Centre of Athens, 22 July 1920, Archive of the Prime Minister's Bureau, GEK, file 357; Resolution of 26 July 1920, archive of Panergatikon Kentron Athinon, ELIA; *Embros*, 27 September 1924. See also *Valkanikos Tachidromos*, 29 November 1919, and *Apogevmatini*, 1 April 1926, for a similar anti-profiteering rhetoric by associations of tenants.

95 Potamianos 2022a.

96 *Efimeris tou Chrimatistiriou*, 22 June 1922 (memorandum of GSEVE); *Eleftheron Vima*, 23 February 1926 (Piraeus Chamber of Tradesmen); *Efimeris ton Epagelmation*, 26 February 1926 (presidents of GSEVE and of Athens Chamber of Tradesmen) and 16 February 1927 (various speakers in the assembly of GSEVE); *Agon*, 21 August 1931 (president of the Athens Tradesmen Federation); *Mellon Epagelmation kai Viotechnon*, 1 July 1935 (resolution of Athens and Piraeus Chambers of Tradesmen and Tradesmen Federations); *Akropolis*, 25 July 1935.

97 Resolution of the second tradesmen's general assembly, 5 July 1928 (Archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki museum, file 173.22); Memorandum of the committee elected by the second tradesmen's general assembly, 20 June 1929 (Archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki museum, file 173.49).

98 Memorandum of GSEVE and the National Association of Shop Tenants 'Zoi', March 1930 (Archive of Eleftherios Venizelos, Benaki Museum, file 174.24); *Akropolis*, 25 July 1935.

99 *Efimeris ton Epagelmation*, 16 February 1927 (Karditsa) and *Mellon Epagelmation kai Viotechnon*, 6 May 1935 (Patras).

100 It seems, however, that in the 1930s the influence of the communists and other left-wing groups grew: see, for instance, *Rizospastis*, 24 July 1933 (Thiva).

101 Two examples of this kind of discourse by members of the Liberal party: *Πορίσματα κυβερνητικής επιτροπής περί της βελτιώσεως των συνθηκών του βίου*, Athens 1919; *Eleftheron Vima*, 11 June 1930 (Loukas Nakos). One could conceive these ideological foundations of statism as a 'new paternalism', related to the 'new moral economy' in manners perhaps similar to E. P. Thompson's classic analysis.

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4

Women's activism, trade union hesitancy and state repression in the 1907 tenant strike in Buenos Aires

Lucas Poy and Alejandro Belkin

The year 1907 witnessed a notable surge in industrial unrest in Argentina, with a series of sector-specific conflicts and two major general strikes. Amidst this backdrop of labour disputes in the workplace, a protest of exceptional significance unfolded when thousands of tenants demanded a reduction in their rent burden. This gave rise to a unique movement of housing struggle that electrified the city of Buenos Aires, at the time a cosmopolitan and thriving metropolis of more than one million inhabitants. Facing attacks by the state, and deploying a diverse repertoire of actions and organisational resources, thousands of tenants – many of them migrants, with a strong prominence of women – acted together; they went on strike for several weeks to put an end to the voracious rule of landlords. Although it was ultimately defeated and unable to improve the conditions of tenants in the long term, the 1907 rent strike caused a profound impression in public opinion. Up to the present day it remains a milestone in popular accounts of the history of the labour movement in Argentina.

Not surprisingly, the event has also attracted academic interest. In the 1960s and 1970s different scholars had already published important works about urban development and the situation of workers,[1] but it was in the 1980s, after the demise of the last military dictatorship, that Argentine social, urban and labour history flourished. The early twentieth century attracted plenty of attention, with several specific works on the 1907 rent strike published in this context.[2] After the 1990s, for several reasons, Argentine labour history entered a period of crisis in which these discussions lost momentum,[3] although foreign scholars continued to add important contributions.[4] Over the past 15 years a new generation of scholars has rejuvenated the field by bringing in

new perspectives, particularly from gender and feminist studies, and researchers have examined the tenant strike with innovative inquiries and insights.[5]

In this chapter, drawing on a variety of primary sources, we support many of the conclusions of the 1980s historiography while also incorporating the insights of recent literature and placing this conflict in the broader context of tenant struggles around the world. We focus on the role played by women and the tensions that this female presence created among the ranks of male-dominated trade unions and left-wing political currents. We argue that the rent strike occupies a somewhat paradoxical position in the history of the Argentine working class. While tenants' willingness to confront landlords and state authorities was undoubtedly rooted in the broader context of radicalisation and activism shaped by the local labour movement in the early years of the twentieth century, a significant portion of trade union and left-wing leadership was hesitant openly to support and extend the strike. This chapter argues that one of the reasons behind this hesitancy was the central role played by rank-and-file women. This shaped a form of conflict that many (male) trade union and socialist leaders found unfamiliar and difficult to reconcile with their world-view.

Although grounded in the academic realm of social history, this chapter also seeks to enrich broader discussions among housing activists. Housing, with its profound impact on people's lives – providing shelter, a place to rest, a space for sustenance and care for children – holds a pivotal position in the working-class experience. As aptly pointed out by Madden and Marcuse, the housing crisis transcends national borders. It has evolved into a global concern that fuels the fight for the right to housing.[6] With this chapter, we want to contribute to our understanding of the historical foundations underlying the enduring struggle against landlords and the forces of the capitalist market.

The remainder of this chapter is organised as follows. The first section surveys the main social and economic features of Argentina and Buenos Aires at the beginning of the twentieth century, focusing on the housing situation. Following this, the second section provides an overview of the rent strike, offering a concise description of its key characteristics. The subsequent sections focus on the attitude of trade unions and left-wing organisations and on the pivotal role played by women in this struggle. The final section presents the conclusions drawn from the study and suggests avenues for future research.

Housing, the labour market and the working class in Buenos Aires at the turn of the century

In the last third of the nineteenth century Argentina experienced a process of immense social and economic transformations.[7] Economic growth drew on agricultural exports and brought about a significant expansion of transport and communications. Urban industries and services, in turn, emerged as by-products.[8] The formation of a labour market that could meet the needs of this emerging capitalist economy drew upon two basic mechanisms: first, the incorporation of the local rural population through coercive resources that limited their chances of subsistence; second, and most importantly, the massive influx of European immigrants. While in 1869 the total population of the country amounted to approximately 1,800,000 people, the next census, in 1895, reported that Argentina's population exceeded four million.[9] Against the background of a constant movement of workers between urban and rural occupations, the labour market was shaped by the needs of agricultural production, the decisive influence of seasonality, the rotation across sectors and the prevalence of a mainly unskilled workforce.[10] Without access to land due to the predominance of large estates, and required in the countryside for only a couple of months in the year, hundreds of thousands of workers looked for jobs and dwelling in the cities, mostly Buenos Aires. Those who had experience in a certain trade could practise their profession independently. However, most of them had to find less skilled jobs in workshops and factories of various sizes, mainly dedicated to the production of consumer goods or to the provision of various services required by an ever-increasing population.[11]

The experiences of these workers were heterogeneous. The most skilled could leverage their control of the productive process to impose better conditions on bosses, but they still had to face constant power advances from them, with regulations, piece rates, fines and a growing industrial discipline. Those who lacked knowledge of a trade had to work in a wide range of places that attracted temporary workers, mainly in the building industry and in the docks. Some large factories, including those manufacturing shoes, tobacco, bags and matches, were major employers of low-skilled, often female workers. Many unskilled labourers would work in rural areas during the harvest season and return for the rest of the year to the city, where they tried to find employment as porters, stevedores or journeymen in the barracks. Thousands of women and children were a vital part of this labour market. The common experience of exploitation and oppression in factories and workshops, in the docks,

in the building trades and in working-class neighbourhoods was a breeding ground for the development of working-class consciousness.[12]

In this context, Buenos Aires experienced very rapid urban development. In 1850 it had 50,000 inhabitants, but 40 years later it hosted over half a million. By 1909 a municipal census registered a population of 1.2 million, placing the city among the 10 largest urban conglomerations worldwide.[13] This rapid transformation underpinned a process of differentiation between neighbourhoods of a city that became more heterogeneous as it grew. As historian José Panettieri has suggested in a pioneering work, in the late nineteenth century it was possible to distinguish 'two' cities co-existing in Buenos Aires: next to the city of the rich it was possible to find 'the "other" Buenos Aires, which lay buried – the Buenos Aires of the native and foreign poor'.[14] As one moved away from the central area near the Plaza de Mayo, the strong social differentiation of a city divided between the opulence of the northern suburbs and the poverty of the southern slums became apparent.[15]

In this rapidly growing environment, with increasing social differentiation between different neighbourhoods and worsening living conditions in those where most of the working class were concentrated, the huge rise in the price of urban land made it very difficult for workers to buy a home of their own. The cyclical nature of agricultural employment meant that many workers only resided in the city for a part of the year, only increasing the significance of temporary and precarious housing arrangements. Many of the urban poor rented rooms in *conventillos* (tenements): by 1881 the city had more than 1,800 of them, and as the decade progressed the situation deteriorated further. The information provided by official institutions in a municipal census reported that at the end of 1887 there were a total of 2,835 *conventillos* in Buenos Aires, housing 27 per cent of the population.[16] The proportion was much higher in downtown areas: 94 per cent of the *conventillos* were concentrated in the south and the centre of the city by 1904.[17]

In this period, as is still the case nowadays in many places across the world, housing expenses emerged as the main financial challenge for workers. According to the historian James Baer, by the turn of the twentieth century renting a room in a *conventillo* consumed between 20 and 30 per cent of workers' incomes.[18] A study made in 1901 by *La Prensa*, a respected commercial newspaper, estimated that housing consumed between 30 and 35 per cent of the income of working-class households; it contrasted this with studies by a French economist who had pointed out that the proportion was 14 per cent in Brussels, 15 per cent in Hamburg and 11.75 per cent in Liverpool.[19]

As also occurred elsewhere the '*encargado*' or '*casero*' (main tenant) of the *conventillo*, who shared a part of the owner's profits in exchange for his repressive role in day-to-day administration, became a deeply hated character. According to historians Mabel Bellucci and Susana Camusso, landlords ceded part of their earnings to these people

> in exchange for facing the multiple tasks of the house, from cleaning and collecting rents to maintaining order. They rewarded his work with the best room (with a window to the street), management of the pantry and a position of power that made him the repository of the varied reactions of the inhabitants. His figure embodied abuse and arbitrariness.[20]

Conventillos were not only expensive but also offered terrible living conditions, compromising the health of workers and their families. Andrew Wood and James Baer have noted that 'rooms were generally quite small, usually no bigger than 9 × 12 feet, and offered little ventilation other than the doorway opening onto a common courtyard'.[21] In the opinion of historians Leandro Gutiérrez and Juan Suriano,

> notwithstanding the relative differences in spatial distribution, the construction, and the number of inhabitants, these houses … lacked the basic elements of comfortable living.[22]

It was normal for seven or eight people to share a single room. Toilet facilities were scarce and in terrible condition; estimates from the Buenos Aires 1904 census record that a latrine could be used by 70 people and a shower by 60.[23] *La Vanguardia*, the main socialist newspaper, protested in 1907 that workers had to devote 'a third of his salary for a *covacha* [tiny room] that looks more like a pigpen than a human dwelling'.[24] Elaborating on this, the historian Inés Yujnovsky has pointed out how the unhealthy, overcrowded dwellings were usually condemned as places fit only for animals, not for human beings: 'the idea of filthy dwellings was constantly repeated; pigsties, rat-holes: from socialists to Catholics, tenements were associated with animal dwellings'.[25]

The precarious living conditions of the working poor sparked a sense of concern among segments of the press, the state and the ruling classes. The worries were mostly related to the dangers posed to public health by such a concentration of people living in reduced spaces with very poor hygienic conditions.[26] As Yujnovsky remarks, 'the prevailing language was linked to positivist conceptions of social Darwinism and to

imaginaries of health and disease transposed to the sphere of society'.[27] At the time the local expert Juan Bialet Massé spoke passionately of:

> the dirtiness, the passions stalking behind every wall, in struggle and daily contact, the fights of the neighbours developing hatred among children since an early age, the continuous change that removes any idea of stability and kills patriotism … that is the *conventillo*, the focus of all evils.[28]

In 1908 a report from the newly created Department of Labour warned that most *conventillos* were 'inadequate and unhealthy … those that might do a bit better become unhygienic because of the accumulation of inhabitants in one room'. Such overcrowding encouraged all kinds of diseases to develop and spread, especially considering that workers were 'predisposed to acquire them due to the fatigue of daily work, poor nutrition and misery'.[29]

Although, on certain occasions, suggestions from concerned lawmakers and reformers gained some traction – leading to some timid attempts at urban planning of *casas para obreros* (workers' housing) – tenants were generally left to face market forces alone. The overcrowding of workers in dwellings with poor infrastructure and unhygienic conditions was not an unforeseen event, but rather a consequence of the process of real estate speculation. The phenomenon was indeed admitted by the writers of Buenos Aires' municipal census, who recognised that 'the existence of so many *conventillos*, even in the most central parts of the city, has the reason of being the great income they produce'. This was undeniably disproportionate 'in relation to the low value of these constructions'.[30]

The tenants' strike of 1907: an overview

Terrible as they were, by the first decade of the twentieth century these housing conditions had existed for quite a long time. As happened in the New York rent strikes that took place in this same year,[31] sources reveal that what aggravated tenants the most was not only high prices but the suddenness of the increase. According to historian Juan Suriano, one main cause was an increase in municipal taxes, announced in August 1907, which the owners immediately transferred to rent prices.[32] The conflict began in September 1907, in a building with around 130 tenants located in the downtown district of San Telmo, following the owner's

announcement of a 47 per cent rent increase. The tenants appointed a commission to defend their rights, presided over by one Amaro Crocci. Demanding a reduction of rents, they resolved to go on strike and requested the support of all the tenants in the city. Those involved organised groups of strikers who went around the tenements, encouraging others to join the movement. The tenants' children also played a role in spreading their parents' demands, passionately proclaiming 'the just claims of their parents' in the local streets at all hours.[33]

Initially, their calls seemed quite unsuccessful; by mid-September only 15 tenements had joined the cause.[34] However, from that moment on, the movement began to spread quickly. The fact that the movement did not begin simultaneously in all the tenement houses but spread like wildfire over the course of one or two weeks suggests that a 'contagion' effect played an important role, with news of the strike in one building quickly spreading to others. By 20 September 1907 more than 100 tenement houses were in rebellion; this number increased in a matter of days to 160. By the end of the month the strike included 400 *conventillos* and 20,000 tenants with their families.[35]

At the peak of the protest, almost 2,000 buildings were involved in the strike. Suriano has calculated that 100,000 people participated, while Yujnovsky has described the figure as being around 120,000.[36] According to Baer, at one point or another almost 10 per cent of the population of Buenos Aires was engaged in the conflict, which also spread to other cities in the interior provinces.[37] The core of the movement were the most crowded *conventillos* around the city centre, located in districts such as San Nicolás, Monserrat, Balvanera, Concepción, San Cristóbal and San Telmo.

Both contemporary observers and researchers have pointed out that strikers borrowed actions, discourses and methods from more 'traditional' conflicts in factories and workshops. The very concept of a 'strike' ('*huelga*' in Spanish) was clearly related to the vocabulary of industrial action.[38] Refusal to pay the rent, of course, would lead to eviction; after a few days in which the legal machinery was put in motion, physical confrontation to prevent strikers from being removed from their houses became a decisive component of the protest. It took the state only a couple of weeks to start to react with repressive measures. By late September evictions and police actions in striking tenements started to happen almost every day.

Actions in the buildings were thus one of the most important features of these rent strikes. A typical organisational step was the setting up of campaigns to warn neighbours and tell them to stay away

from certain buildings. Some of these texts were bilingual, which was necessary to unite the transnational crowd that inhabited the buildings. As Baer explains:

> speeches were sometimes given in the immigrant tenants' native languages, and many *conventillos* joining the strike were in neighbourhoods where there were Russian, French and Turkish immigrants.[39]

As in industrial conflicts, the striking tenants also found it necessary to expand the visibility of their struggle by occupying public space. In these weeks Buenos Aires witnessed a peculiar form of struggle when a '*marcha de las escobas*' ('broom parade') filled the streets. As we shall see later, this was an event in which women played a prominent role, and which raised interest and even sympathy among the commercial press. Of course, protest actions were not always so cheerful and peaceful in tone. By the end of October 1907 public expressions of protest became more violent and clashes with the police occurred. 'Until yesterday the so-called tenants' strike had taken place amid a virtually complete tranquillity. But yesterday the strike had its ungrateful, bloody, tragic note,' observed one of the major Argentine commercial newspapers.[40] The day before, the police had attacked strikers protesting in front of a building in San Telmo. An officer had fired a shot that hit the forehead of a young worker, Miguel Pepe, who died immediately. The crime sparked outrage and fostered mass mobilisations: on Sunday 27 October the strikers organised a huge demonstration throughout the city in which 15,000 people took part, according to commercial newspapers, or 40,000 according to the anarchist press.

Just as actions spiralled from grassroots (building) level to interventions in the public space, such as streets, main parks and squares, organisational structures were also shaped in different layers. An organisation called *Liga de Inquilinos* (Tenants' League) had been set up in 1905, although without great success, following the initiative of typographic workers. In 1906 the anarchist-oriented *Federación Obrera Regional Argentina* (FORA) had advised each tenement house to elect its own representatives.[41] As a result, a *Liga contra los altos alquileres e impuestos* (League against High Rent and Taxes) was established. From the very start of the 1907 rent strike, tenants in different *conventillos* elected delegates to participate in this organisation. Representatives from different buildings would meet in neighbourhood committees, articulated in turn with the central committee of the *Liga*, the strike's main organiser.

The attitude of trade unions and left-wing currents

By 1907 the local labour movement was strong: Buenos Aires was home to dozens of trade unions, several federations, lively anarchist networks, daily newspapers and a growing Socialist Party. While all these groups expressed sympathy for the strikers, not all of them played an active role in the actual organisation of the struggle.

The anarchist current seems to have been the most vocal and dynamic in supporting and promoting the strike. An anarchist female leader, Juana Rouco Buela, later wrote in her memoirs that:

> The whole of Buenos Aires was in turmoil. We anarchists were the ones who controlled this grandiose movement, in which bloodshed ensued, provoked by the authorities who could not cope with all the people who had risen on strike, demanding a just cause: the lowering of rents.[42]

The main anarchist daily, *La Protesta*, understood that the tenants' struggle, seeking reduced rents and better living conditions, could create opportunities for the commencement of a revolutionary movement capable of toppling the entire social system. The movement, they claimed, had to adopt 'an insurrectionary character to be successful; otherwise it will be suppressed by the authoritarian force that undoubtedly stands ready to safeguard capitalist interests'.[43] Stressing the possibility of transforming the conflict into a social revolution, the anarchist press associated the rent strike in quite messianic terms with the 'salvation of the world' and the 'redemption of the human race':

> Do not allow, oh people, this spark that emerged with the potential to ignite the redemptive blaze to be extinguished due to a lack of support and a conducive environment. Fan it with the winds of your rebellions, so it becomes a flame that can later turn into a roaring fire, saving the world and redeeming the human race. […] Let this strike be an enormous underground convulsion that leaves nothing standing of this social and barbaric structure.[44]

However, the engagement of the FORA, the main anarchist trade union, was less clear. As Baer has pointed out:

> The support of the member unions was there, but when the strike came it was organised by the tenants apart from the

national labour federations and the focus was limited to rents.[45]

Indeed, even the main anarchist newspaper, *La Protesta*, which covered the conflict daily, was critical of the FORA leadership's passivity. They condemned the 'indolence of the trade unions […] with the current strike' and claimed that a 'large part of the tenants is waiting for the call of FORA'.[46] Eduardo Gilimón, a prominent anarchist leader, penned an extensive article that thoroughly examined the strike's development and harshly criticised the apathy of labour organisations. He began by praising the show of force and emphasising the strike's exceptional nature; in his opinion, 'no movement of greater significance and importance in this city' had occurred in the city. Gilimón was enthusiastic about the potential revolutionary implications of this conflict, suggesting that 'perhaps the secret of the social revolution lies within the tenant strike'. To him, the exceptional nature and profoundly transformative potential of the strike made the absence of labour organisations even more reprehensible. Gilimón lamented 'the passivity' of most trade unions since 'it was logically their responsibility to support the strike, offering their moral and material assistance, and doing everything in their power to spread and extend it quickly.[47] After persistent pressure from *La Protesta* and a month after the strike's initiation, the Federal Council of the FORA finally issued a brief statement of solidarity. It was a declaration with no practical effect, however, calling neither for any mobilisation nor for any show of force.[48]

What about other political currents active in the labour movement? The *revolutionary syndicalists*, a group influenced by the Frenchman Georges Sorel, who had just broken with the Socialist Party the year before, welcomed the struggle. They celebrated its appeal to direct action – the only path through which, in their view, real and enduring accomplishments could be attained.[49] They highlighted 'the good and decisive results of the action exercised directly by tenants against landlords – action which has the virtue, like no other, of being effective and categorical'.[50] However, they did not put forward specific trade union initiatives to support the strike, limiting themselves instead to calling for the widest possible support for the struggling tenants, urging workers to support the movement.

The *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT), a labour federation with an important presence of revolutionary syndicalists and socialists, also took no initiative to assist the strikers. During the session of the Executive Board on 27 September 1907, it was mentioned that the tenants had requested a delegate. Juan Loperena was appointed for that task,[51]

but no other references to the strike were recorded in the meetings of this leading body. Nor did its National Committee engage in any way. It did not convene at all between 10 August and 6 November, thus avoiding any discussion during the peak period of the struggle. Indeed, the evidence indicates that the leadership of the UGT disregarded any organised involvement in the tenants' strike.

The third main actor of the labour movement, the Socialist Party, was in fact quite critical of the strike. To be sure, its main office in downtown Buenos Aires became the main venue for the protestors' daily meetings and *La Vanguardia*, the party's newspaper, carried information about the strike day after day. However, references to the conflict were mostly limited to the information section of the newspaper, as the party was reluctant to give this method of struggle open support. In the context of strong competition with its anarchist adversaries, the Socialist Party seemed more interested in criticising the violent nature of the protests and expressing its preference for promoting co-operatives as a means of solving the housing problem.

On 24 November, while the strike was still at its peak, the official party organ published a very critical editorial article signed by Enrique Dickmann, a prominent party leader. The housing problem, he acknowledged, was indeed 'most serious, most pressing and most urgent' for the urban working classes – but the 'tenants' unrest' (the socialist press explicitly refused to call it a strike) was not a solution. On the contrary, Dickmann argued, it had been damaging to the political left:

> It has been an instinctive, thoughtless, incoherent and disorderly – not least sympathetic – outbreak of a large part of our working-class population … What does it mean a reduction of 1, 2, or 3 pesos per room, which in a short time will certainly return to its original price … leaving unchanged all the other terrible conditions of the house, or perhaps making them worse?

Dickmann believed that the protest had not contributed to any form of solution. This, according to the party, lay in increasing the availability of houses for workers. They promoted housing co-operatives and a public policy at the municipal level. On the national level they demanded the removal of taxes on building materials to encourage construction, declaring:

> There is no other remedy or solution possible. A consumer strike is a contradiction in itself and an absurdity. Tenants are consumers.

> Take co-operative and political action with the extent and intensity that you have done 'strike' and you will see the splendid results of such fruitful work.[52]

The role of women (and children)

Case studies from different regions and periods included in this volume emphasise the key role played by women in tenant actions, and the 1907 rent strike in Buenos Aires was no exception. Local tenements were places where women had a large presence. When *La Prensa* published a series of articles and photographs about life in working-class neighbourhoods, the editors explained that

> the images have been taken in buildings, some of them with 90 rooms, at a time when most of the men were at work. Because of this, it will be seen that in almost all the illustrations children and women predominate.[53]

Contemporaries were also aware of this noticeable presence of women during the conflict; they participated in meetings, rallies and direct actions. Inés Yujnovsky has convincingly argued that the overwhelming presence of women is one of the factors that influenced the strike's impact on public opinion.[54] Bellucci and Camusso, for their part, discussed the situation that occurred when public officials showed up in the *conventillos* with an eviction order:

> Although at first they manage to get the evicted person to move part of his furniture to the courtyard, within an hour the women would put back the furniture in the room. These procedures take place during the working hours of the factories, therefore only women and children are in the houses.[55]

Many contemporary observers pointed out the somewhat 'natural' role played by women in this kind of conflict, as they were usually in charge of household expenses. Talking about the New York rent strike of 1904, historian Jenna Weissman indicated that women were its central actors:

> Drawing, once again, on their experiences as consumers and managers of the household budget, East Side women used the neighbourhood as a staging ground for their anti-landlord protests.[56]

Indeed, contemporaries insisted on drawing a line of continuity between this strike and a boycott of kosher meat shops, organised some years before in the same neighbourhoods.[57] As Christopher Mele has pointed out:

> The multiple social roles of immigrant women – as social club members, shoppers and workers inside and outside the home – placed them in central positions of resistance. Women had key access to information and control of its dissemination throughout the neighbourhood.[58]

The already cited report of *La Prensa*, published in 1901, showed that these commercial transactions often happened *inside* the *conventillos* because of the visit of street vendors:

> It is not yet 6 o'clock in the summer and every tenement is invaded by five, ten, 20 and even 30 peddlers and delivery boys who bring provisions, bread, milk, meat, vegetables, which they deliver from door to door, or more commonly in the courtyard, where dozens of women discuss and haggle, penny by penny, what they must deliver in exchange for the groceries. Many of the everyday purchases are made in the house.[59]

Locus of everyday life, of cooking and childrearing, the *patio* was thus also the place of bargaining – and of struggle. Between the bedroom and the street, *patios* became crucial spaces where women shared experiences of exploitation and struggle. In a recent insightful article, Hernández and Carballo argued that the courtyard was an 'environment of intercultural socialisation but also of political reflection and resistance':[60]

> There they discussed ideas while the children played, or as they washed clothes, or peeled potatoes, or listened to a guitar. There, in the mouldy and damp courtyards, in those places that served to change the stale air that was breathed in the rooms for something not much better, a good part of the day was spent and chats were shared with those cohabitants who were in the same situation, where the oppression of the landlords responded to the intentions of the owner and where the abuses in the rental prices were no less than the labour abuses in which the salary obtained was not equivalent to the work done.[61]

On weekends, these spaces of sociability and political discussion were enriched by those usually working outside the home. As the playwright Luis Pascarella put it in his famous book *El conventillo*, published in 1917:

> On Sundays and holidays, the *conventillo* looked very different. The courtyard seemed cleaner and more spacious because people had tidied up their junk and slept in. And as the day wore on, the hustle and bustle of the weekdays took on new shades of colour. The same individuals, scuffed, washed, in their new clothes, looked like strangers. Unfamiliar faces were to be seen. Dressmakers and seamstresses, workers and labourers who during the week only stayed in the tenement for the time necessary to eat and sleep on Sundays mingled with the rest of the neighbours, formed groups and circles where they shared the *mate* as in any *ranchería* and read and commented on the police news, the adventures of the patio … Disputes and rivalries of trade and ideas arose, with a predominance of insults against foremen and bosses, which in most cases dissipated with the effect of the alcohol. The strike in this or that factory, the attitude of the police, gave rise to the most conflicting comments; everyone had a saving idea, an infallible means to put an end to bourgeois tyranny.[62]

It is also interesting to note how female strikers would very often refer to what was expected from them as women. As a New York striker quoted by historian Jenna Weissman observed, 'I *simply did what any sensible girl would do*. I am not a labor leader or a regular striker and I am also not a troublemaker. I simply joined the strike because I saw it was impossible to exist on a small salary these days and then pay exorbitant rents to the landlords.'[63] Examining the case of Buenos Aires, Wood and Baer pointed out that:

> In public displays, women often banged on pots and pans to dramatise their close connection to housing and related consumer issues, while others participated in actions in which they symbolically swept away the owners and their high rents in what they called 'broom parades'.[64]

It should not be forgotten, in any case, that for many women the home was not only the place where reproductive work was taken care of, but also the site for market-oriented work activities. As Bellucci and Camusso have pointed out:

> for the working woman of that time, the room of the *conventillo* was the unit of production, since her family life and the reproduction of the conditions of existence of the family itself took place in that reduced space.[65]

When the strike started, working-class women soon intervened in radical actions. The anarchist newspaper *La Protesta* described a *conventillo*:

> whose manager wanted to show he was brave, beating barbarously a young boy of tender age … These courageous women, after knocking him to the ground and preventing him from any movement, came up with the humour of taking off his underpants, throwing him into the street in such a way, provoking the laughter of all the spectators of this curious and amusing *sainete*.[66]

According to the same source, a landlord went to the police station to protest that:

> It was not possible for him to stay at home in his house because of the hostility of the women, who mistreated him in word and deed, spitting on his greedy face, and not allowing him to sleep, threatening him with a boiling water bath.[67]

The mass mobilisations that followed the assassination of Miguel Pepe showed a very prominent presence of women – far more than was usual in labour activities in the city. According to a press report, when the funeral procession began, 'a woman with a red flag headed the column', while the coffin was 'carried by women'. Behind it, 'no less than 700 women were following the coffin'.[68] At a rally that same day two women, Juana Ducla and Sara Michel, joined several men in speaking to thousands of protesters.[69]

Children were always present in *conventillos*, in great numbers. A reporter who visited a tenement house recalled that there were 'a hundred quarrels among the boys, inevitable, moreover, where children are counted by the hundreds: in one of them alone there are 137 under ten years of age! What a hell!'[70] The Catholic press highlighted the presence of children and women, albeit with a tone that tried to stress their suffering and innocence. When officials came to perform an eviction, for example:

> The singing went on; each piece of furniture was surrounded by a swarm of dirty little children of all races and of all nations, who helped to carry it along with the women, whose enthusiasm, if possible, was even greater than that of the men.[71]

The anarchist press highlighted their conscious activities, recalling that the tenants' children helped to spread the demands, proclaiming 'at all hours in the streets of the neighbourhood the fair claims of their parents'.[72] A reporter from the popular magazine *Caras y Caretas* described the actions, not without amazement:

> Even the children took an active part in the war against rent. In front of our eyes nearly 300 boys and girls of all ages paraded through the streets of La Boca, raising brooms 'to sweep out the landlords'. When the demonstration reached a tenement house it received a new stream of boys who joined in, to the applause of the crowd.[73]

The weakening of the strike

By early October 1907, the rent strikers seemed to be succeeding. Pressed by the force of the strike, many landlords were forced to yield: they cancelled rent increases, suspended evictions and abolished certain rules and obligations that had been strongly rejected by tenants. Even though many landlords rallied behind an owners' association, they struggled to act in unison and legal procedures to enforce evictions sometimes took more than a month, obliging them to negotiate. The press reported that several landlords visited the organising centres of the movement to put on paper their acceptance of the demands. However, it proved very difficult for tenants to maintain these victories over time. The coercive measures of the state, expressed more directly in eviction orders executed with the help of the police, contributed to undermining their position.

Towards the end of October 1907 the strike entered a critical period. On 24 October a crowd accompanied the funeral procession of Miguel Pepe, killed by the police two days before. On 27 October a demonstration filled the streets in downtown Buenos Aires and clashes with the police occurred. The state's response hardened, intensifying its repressive aspect: evictions, incarcerations and deportations multiplied. The strikers opposed the evictions and managed, in some cases, to

prevent them. On 21 October, when an officer of justice arrived at a tenement building to carry out the eviction of a tenant, the inhabitants of *conventillos* located in the neighbourhood had arrived en masse 'and indeed, the police withdrew without carrying out the eviction'.[74]

As these confrontations increased the number of arrested tenants, some committees decided to circulate 'subscription lists to assist those affected by the present movement, which are becoming numerous'.[75] Given the worsening situation, a 'pro-victims committee' was formed, inviting workers and tenants 'to inform this committee of any detained comrades'.[76] The change in the judges' attitude, resulting in an increase in evictions, was noted by the syndicalists. In their press, they stated:

> The bourgeois justice system that had so far restrained itself with dilatory procedures has broken its apparent circumspection, taking charge of the interests of the property owners. As a result, several striking tenant evictions were carried out. But the measure was not accepted passively by the masses, who energetically intervened, leading to a series of violent conflicts.[77]

The government resorted to the Residence Law as a means to suppress the conflict. This piece of legislation, sanctioned in 1902, granted the government the authority to deport individuals it considered a threat to public order or state security. Between 17 and 23 October seven militants were expelled from the country. Several of them were labour leaders, including the secretaries of two of the most significant anarchist labour organisations, the FORA and the union of workers on the waterfront. Despite the limited participation of unions in the tenant strike, labour leaders appear to have become a target of the government. Even the socialist newspaper *La Vanguardia* expressed surprise, as in its opinion, 'the prevailing tranquillity among proletarian ranks ruled out the possibility of an extreme measure on the part of the authorities'.[78]

By late November and early December the strike had concluded, and the demobilisation of the tenants was exploited by the landlords to launch a counteroffensive. *La Protesta* summed up the situation:

> The bosses of *conventillos*, who, forced by the strike, agreed to the request of their tenants, now, after the moment of agitation, have again raised the rents as before the movement.[79]

Conclusion

Despite its ultimate defeat, the rent strike of 1907 became an important landmark in the history of the Argentine labour movement. This chapter has summarised the harsh housing conditions experienced by those living in tenements and *conventillos* in early twentieth-century Buenos Aires and explored the main features of a conflict that impressed public opinion. It has also examined the repertoire of actions and organisational forms adopted by the striking tenants, from those concentrated at the level of the building, such as picket lines, propaganda actions and various sociability measures, to those that brought the conflict into public space, for example mobilisations and confrontations with the police. Moreover, this chapter has also explored the different attitudes of anarchist, revolutionary syndicalists and socialists, as well as considering the cautious, somewhat hesitant stance of the trade union leadership.

In particular, we wanted to highlight in this chapter the decisive role of women in working-class families, and to argue that exploring this sort of struggle has very important consequences for our understanding of the connection between working-class conflicts in the workplace and the home. Almost 40 years ago the historians Bellucci and Camusso aptly summarised the potential consequences of an approach that integrates both spaces in the making of a truly broad labour history, arguing that:

> In practical terms the working class was distributed in two territories: the factory, where most of the men worked, and the home, where most of the women worked – at the time, the strike was a form of struggle which articulated both territories.[80]

Indeed, if 'men were the cornerstone of workplace organisation', in the words of Jeremy Adelman, women played a much more decisive role in terms of organisation at home, building or neighbourhood level.[81] As Wood and Baer have explained:

> Because housing and other consumer concerns often struck women first, many gathered in their courtyards, on neighbourhood streets and in local markets to discuss their situation. Along with their male colleagues, thousands banded together to mobilise other tenement residents, circulate petitions and organise demonstrations.[82]

Moreover, we have shown how the rent strike both obscures and complicates an overly simplistic division between public and private

spheres. A single-family house was inaccessible for a large part of the working poor of Buenos Aires in the first decade of the twentieth century. As shown in the previous sections, the *conventillo* itself was hardly a 'private' or purely domestic place. Work was performed in the rooms, the *patio* could become a marketplace and a space for political discussion, and children were taken care of by different families in a communal manner. Suriano has argued that 'in this small world lived dozens, sometimes hundreds of people who divided their stay in the house between the restricted privacy of the room and the bustling crowd in the courtyard',[83] while Yujnovsky observed that 'there was a certain continuity that went from the courtyard of the tenement to the street and the neighbourhood'. As a result, 'tenements were conducive to sociability and, in addition, the poor living conditions meant that a large part of the day was spent in the street'.[84]

There is still much research to do in order to explore these issues further, and to consider them on a comparative and transnational scale. Scholars of the New York tenant strikes, for instance, have pointed out the importance of women's organisation at grass-roots level, in contrast to the greater male presence in the organisations' highest levels. In the case of Buenos Aires, evidence significantly indicates the unions' unwillingness to intervene decisively in such a massive and radicalised movement. We believe that no minor part of the explanation may lie in the female dominance of the movement's leadership – something difficult for male-dominated unions to assimilate. We expect that future research will allow us to develop these comparative questions further, and in doing so enrich the history of tenant organisation on a global scale.

Notes

1 Panettieri 1968; Scobie 1972; Bourdé 1973; Scobie 1974.
2 Suriano 1983; 1984; Bellucci and Camusso 1987.
3 Poy 2016.
4 Castro 1990; Baer 1993. See also an important contribution in English by Argentine historians in Armus and Suriano 1998.
5 I. Yujnovsky 2004; Rey 2013; Belkin 2017; Hernández and Carballo 2019; Alvarez 2022.
6 Madden and Marcuse 2016.
7 For a more thorough discussion of the developments summarised in these paragraphs, see Poy 2014a.
8 Adelman 1992; Cortés Conde 1979.
9 Devoto 2003.
10 Pianetto 1984; Sabato 1985.
11 Dorfman 1970; Schvarzer 1996; Rocchi 2006.
12 Falcón 1984; 1986; Poy 2014b.

13 'El Censo de 1909 de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires', 102–5. There is a rich literature about urban development in Buenos Aires in this period. See, among others, Liernur and Silvestri 1993; Gorelik 1998; Silvestri 2012.
14 Panettieri 1968, 47. All translations from Spanish are by the authors.
15 Scobie 1974; Poy 2011.
16 *Censo general de población, edificación, comercio e industrias de la ciudad de Buenos Aires, Capital Federal de la República Argentina* 1889.
17 Suriano 1984.
18 Baer 1993.
19 Suriano 1984, 209.
20 Bellucci and Camusso 1987, 56.
21 Wood and Baer 2006, 865.
22 Gutiérrez and Suriano 1992, 39.
23 For further details about housing in Buenos Aires in the period see, among others, O. Yujnovsky 1974; Korn and de la Torre 1985; Armus and Hardoy 1990; Ballent and Liernur 2014.
24 *La Vanguardia*, 11 November 1907.
25 I. Yujnovsky 2004, 124. Complaints about unhealthy conditions were a crucial component of many tenant movements across the world, especially during these years, as shown by other chapters in this volume.
26 Armus 2007.
27 I. Yujnovsky 2004, 125.
28 Bialet Massé 1968, 245.
29 *Boletín del Departamento Nacional del Trabajo*, 30 June 1908.
30 *Censo general de población*.
31 Lawson 1984; Weissman 1986. See also Chapter 2 in this volume by Mark W. Robbins.
32 Suriano 1983.
33 *La Protesta*, 31 August and 12 September 1907; *La Vanguardia*, 14 September 1907.
34 *La Protesta*, 11 and 17 September 1907.
35 *La Protesta*, 22, 24 and 25 September 1907.
36 Suriano 1984, 15; I. Yujnovsky 2004, 122.
37 Baer 1993; Alvarez 2022.
38 This was a common pattern that can be found in other tenant strikes of the period. As Weissman summed up in her assessment of the 1907–8 New York rent strike, 'referring rather self-consciously to themselves as "strikers", to their non-cooperating neighbors as "scabs", to building-level tenant groups as "tenant unions", and to the withholding of their rent as a "rent strike", Lower East Side tenement dwellers drew on familiar political rhetoric – on the language of the labor union – in conducting their protest' (Weissman 1986).
39 Baer 1993, 358.
40 *La Nación*, 23 October 1907.
41 Suriano 1984, 14.
42 Bellucci and Camusso 1987, 72.
43 *La Protesta*, 1 October 1907.
44 *La Protesta*, 19 September, 1907
45 Baer 1993, 362.
46 *La Protesta*, 19 and 24 September 1907.
47 *La Protesta*, 27 September 1907.
48 *La Protesta*, 28 September 1907.
49 On this political tradition, see Belkin 2018.
50 *La Acción Socialista*, 1 October 1907.
51 Junta Ejecutiva de la UGT, *Libro de Actas*, 124.
52 *La Vanguardia*, 24 November 1907. For the socialists, the model was the single-family home, accessible through socialist-oriented cooperatives such as 'El Hogar Obrero', established in 1905.
53 *La Prensa*, 8 September 1901.
54 I. Yujnovsky 2004, 123.
55 Bellucci and Camusso 1987, 65.
56 Weissman 1986. See also Chapter 10 in this volume by Novaro and Crosetti.
57 On the 1904 meat strike, see Hyman 1980.

58 Mele 2000.
59 *La Prensa*, 8 September 1901.
60 Hernández and Carballo 2019, 103.
61 Hernández and Carballo 2019, 112.
62 Pascarella 1917, 88–9.
63 Cited in Weissman 1986.
64 Wood and Baer 2006, 869. On the 'moral economy' of women in this period, see Andujar et al. 2016.
65 Bellucci and Camusso 1987, 2. For an insightful reflection that connects the history of rent strikes with Social Reproduction Theory, see Bonshoms-Guzmán and Ill-Raga 2022.
66 *La Protesta*, 12 October 1907.
67 *La Protesta*, 12 October 1907.
68 *La Protesta*, 25 October 1907.
69 *La Vanguardia*, 25 October 1907.
70 *La Prensa*, 8 September 1901.
71 *La Voz de la Iglesia*, 1 October 1907.
72 Belkin 2017. For a case study on the participation of children in an industrial conflict, see Scheinkman 2016.
73 *Caras y Caretas*, 21 September 1907 (quoted in Suriano 1984, 63).
74 *La Vanguardia*, 22 October 1907.
75 *La Protesta*, 26 October 1907.
76 *La Protesta*, 30 October 1907.
77 *La Acción Socialista*, 1 November 1907.
78 *La Vanguardia*, 18 October 1907.
79 *La Protesta*, 6 December 1907.
80 Bellucci and Camusso 1987, 4.
81 Adelman 1992, 15.
82 Wood and Baer 2006, 869.
83 Suriano 1984.
84 I. Yujnovsky 2004, 131.

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5

The left, the labour movement and Afro-Caribbean migrants in the Panama tenant strikes of 1925 and 1932

Jacob A. Zumoff

In 1925 and 1932 activists in Panama organised tenants in two rent strikes against the high costs and poor quality of housing.[1] The two strikes shook Panamanian society, since the demand for quality, affordable housing and well-paid jobs touched the issue of the domination of Panama by United States imperialism, and the dependency of the Panamanian 'oligarchy' on this imperialism. Furthermore, the rent strikes brought into question the role of the Panama Canal's largely West Indian working class in the country. The tenants' demands came up against the oppressive role of the United States in the isthmus. Achieving them required the working class – including the mainly West Indian Canal workers – to take the lead in fighting for Panama's national liberation from imperialism. This chapter examines two aspects of the events. First, it explores why the two rent strikes had such significant impacts on Panamanian society and politics, and second, how the strikes intersected the role of Afro-Caribbean migrants in the isthmus's working class and in Panamanian society more broadly.

The unique nature of Panamanian society gave the housing question special importance. From 1903, when Panama separated from Colombia with the support of the United States, until 1979, when the Canal Zone ceased to exist, the 3,000 km^2 Panama Canal Zone dissected the Republic of Panama. The Canal Zone was essentially a United States colony, while the Republic of Panama was a United States protectorate. The first article of Panama's 1904 Constitution declared the country to be 'an independent and sovereign nation', but the third article qualified this, stating that:

> the Republic's territory remains subject to the jurisdictional limits established by public treaties with the United States of America for the construction, maintenance, or health of any form of inter-oceanic transport.

Furthermore, Article 135 guaranteed that:

> the government of the United States of America will be able to intervene, anywhere in the Republic of Panama, to re-establish public peace and constitutional order if it has been disturbed.[2]

The United States in fact intervened four times in Panama between independence and 1920.[3] As a result of this imperialist arrangement, Panama's most valuable economic resource – the Canal – was effectively in the hands of another country, which further reserved the right to intervene in Panama at will. Even the country's nominal currency, the *balboa*, was pegged to the dollar at par, while the United States dollar had been legal currency in the Republic of Panama since 1904.[4]

Unlike much of Central America, where agriculture dominated, Panama was an urbanised society, with its most valuable resource being its location. The Canal provided US imperialism with tremendous economic and military benefits while blunting Panama's economic development and preventing the country from exercising sovereignty over its own territory. Excluded from profiting from the US-controlled Canal, the country's ruling class looked to real estate as one of its main sources of wealth. Panamanian capitalists lacked the interest or resources to establish significant heavy industry. They focused instead on real estate, commerce or services, which prevented the growth of an industrial working class outside of the Canal Zone. The Panamanian oligarchy benefited from their connections to the United States while being oppressed by US domination.[5] In 1938 the left-wing writer Diógenes de la Rosa described how:

> the rentier landlord and the commercial bourgeoisie, joined together not only socially but biologically into the same person, did not even try to produce what could be got more cheaper from abroad and whose sale at home brought unrivalled profits.

The Panamanian landlord-capitalist, according to de la Rosa, was 'no more than a parasitical layer, attached to the imperialist placenta, lacking the initiative, the courage, and the culture of other bourgeoisies

that had to struggle tooth and nail for a place in the sun'.[6] The oligarchy would not struggle for the country's sovereignty or development.

Another way in which the Canal affected Panama was the creation of a cosmopolitan society divided by race and ethnicity. The Canal drew some 100,000 foreigners to Panama, including thousands of West Indians or *Antillanos*, Afro-Caribbean migrants from the British and French Caribbean colonies, who provided the bulk of the labour force for building and operating the Canal in the early twentieth century.[7] Since residency in the Canal Zone was limited to Canal workers or military personnel and their families, the completion of the Canal in 1914 saw the Zone's population decline by more than half – from 68,810 people in 1912 to 22,858 in 1920. Many of these former Zone residents moved to Panama City, adding to its already explosive growth. The population of Panama City duly swelled from 20,000 residents in 1903 to 60,000 in 1920; by 1930 it had reached more than 114,000. The Canal Zone prevented the city's physical expansion. In 1932 one newspaper estimated that 95 per cent of Panama City's population lived in rented housing.[8]

The neo-colonial nature of Panama was also reflected in the country's working class. The Canal both necessitated the existence of a large industrial working class in the Canal Zone and blocked the development of an industrial working class in the Republic of Panama. The largest, most powerful sector of the proletariat on the isthmus comprised foreign-born workers toiling on a foreign-owned enterprise, while most workers in the Republic were unskilled labourers.[9] Such a situation hindered the development of a strong labour movement in the Republic, meaning that the struggle for affordable housing became one of the few avenues of social struggle open to Panamanian workers.

The 1925 tenants' strike

Housing conditions in Panama City and Colón were atrocious. Families were crowded into two or three rooms in tenement buildings that housed up to 24 families; landlords subdivided buildings to cram in as many tenants as possible. Two- or three-storey buildings, each floor with a common balcony and often a common sink and toilet, were built around a courtyard and divided into rooms by walls that did not reach the ceiling. The corrugated zinc ceilings kept water out, but not noise. Tenants often cooked on charcoal stoves on the balcony, placing inhabitants at a continual risk of fire. Demetrio A. Porras described a typical tenement in bleak terms:

> The rooms are separated by a thin partition with a duct for ventilation at the top. There are also two toilets and a bath that only urgent needs could force one to use. The houses are made of wood with a zinc roof that is occasionally painted.[10]

The struggle for decent housing was thus central in the fight to improve the population's living standards.

The first rent strike was precipitated by the National Assembly's attempt to raise taxes modestly on landlords' profits. Since most landlords had been under-reporting their profits, even a small nominal increase represented a large real increase. In response to Law 29, passed in February 1925, landlords shifted the burden of the new taxes on their poor and working-class tenants, sometimes trebling their rents. In response, the *Liga de Inquilinos y Subsistencia* (Tenants' and Subsistence League) – organised in 1924 by the *Sindicato General de Trabajadores* (SGT), a left-wing organisation formed after a split from the *Federación Obrera de la República de Panama* – agitated against rent increases and poor living conditions. By the autumn of 1925 the Liga de Inquilinos claimed to possess 6,000 dues-paying members.[11]

On the last day of September, at a mass meeting in Panama City, the Tenants' League announced that a rent strike would start at midnight. In response, the Panamanian government ordered the expulsion of five 'undesirable' foreign leaders of the tenants' movement for supposedly threatening 'public order'. The government raised the possibility of affordable housing, proposing a seven-person committee (three representatives of the landlords, three of tenants and one appointed by the government), but this did not stop the tenants' strike. On 10 October the League defied the Panama City's mayor's order banning public meetings. Police then attacked the tenants' meeting, killing several, injuring dozens more and arresting 30 tenant leaders. An estimated 4,000 people attended the funeral of tenant organiser Marciano Mirones.[12] In Colón five foreigners – two Colombians and three Peruvians – were arrested and deported.

By 12 October, the tenants' struggle had spread throughout the working class and moved into workplaces; it became 'a general strike involving all crafts' in Panama City and Colón, according to one newspaper. On that day the police raided the League's office in Panama City and killed an organiser; they later fired on a tenants' rally and killed another protester. This prompted President Rodolfo Chiari's government to request that '300 American troops [be] sent into the city to assist Panamanian police in maintaining order'. The US authorities refused to

allow their troops to be subordinated to the Panamanian police, so the Panamanian government ceded temporary control of Panama to the US military.[13] On 13 October at 1.30 p.m. three US infantry battalions and a machine-gun battery entered the city. For more than a week the US Army occupied Panama City. These troops attacked tenants and, in what historian Andrés Araúaz has labelled 'systematic repression', more than 66 strikers were arrested when they met in defiance of military orders.[14] On 15 October public-sector employees returned to work.

President Chiari announced that landlords agreed to reduce rents to January levels and to offer a 10 per cent discount through September 1926, when the National Assembly would resolve the issue. With much of the tenants' radical leadership in jail or deported, moderates assumed leadership in the Tenants' League. The government announced a public works programme to combat unemployment, including 200 low-rent housing units. The government also established a rent claims commission to hear tenants' complaints and ordered landlords to submit a listing of all rental properties, including conditions and rents. On 24 October US troops withdrew, ending what the Panamanian historian Herbert Nelson Austin has described as 'one of the most scandalous and humiliating interventions by the United States since the birth of the Republic'.[15]

Even while offering reforms, the government increased repression against radical tenant leaders, including banning the Tenants' League from meeting in Panama City. Nonetheless, because it achieved reforms and demonstrated the effectiveness of mass struggle, the 1925 tenants' strike is widely considered to be the start of the modern left-wing and popular movement in Panama. For the first time, working-class and poor Panamanians mounted a campaign against the oligarchy that controlled Panamanian society. Only the intervention by the US military kept the strike from creating a deeper social crisis – an intervention that underlined the depth of the oligarchy's dependence on the United States.[16]

The Great Depression and the 1932 rent strike

While the reforms implemented in response to the 1925 struggle temporarily mitigated living conditions, they did not solve the fundamental causes of the strike. This would have required threatening the interests and power of the Panamanian oligarchy and their patrons in the Canal Zone and the United States. The strike highlighted the essentially colonial

relationship between the United States and the Republic of Panama, compounding economic deprivation with national humiliation. After the 1925 rent strike Panama experienced a construction boom, financed by United States investors flush with Wall Street profits. This created incentives for landlords to build new housing stock without improving existing buildings. The Wall Street Crash in October 1929 left many landlords overextended and indebted; the Great Depression further battered workers' living conditions, especially as the government cut public spending. Panama could not devalue the balboa since it was tied to the dollar, a situation that aggravated the economic situation.

Between 1925 and 1931, rents in Panama City rose between 50 and 75 per cent as conditions deteriorated.[17] Unemployment also soared; by July 1932, according to one newspaper, 75 per cent of workers were unemployed.[18] In 1932 President Alfaro painted a grim picture of the situation in Panama, marked by the:

> lack of capital, lack of confidence, lack of credit, decadence of commerce, languishing industry, misery among the masses, restlessness of spirit and confusion in the face of the general depression.[19]

The Depression threatened the political dominance that the Liberal Party and its offshoots had enjoyed since Panama broke away in 1903. In April 1930 the Communist Party was founded, followed in September by the Socialist Party. These two parties provided a voice for the discontent of the Republic's workers and its poor.[20] There is much confusion about the relationship of these early parties, but César del Vasto, in his history of the Communist Party, indicates that Diógenes de la Rosa split from the Communists in support of Trotsky. Another political group that grew in this context was Acción Comunal (AC), a right-wing nationalist group founded in 1923. AC's militants were upset by corruption in the Liberal establishment and felt that their social advancement was blocked by foreigners.[21]

On 2 January 1931 Acción Comunal ousted President Florencio H. Arosemena in a coup. The US ambassador, Roy T. Davis, met with the coup leaders, who promised not to interfere with the functioning of the Canal. In keeping with the United States president Herbert Hoover's movement away from direct military intervention into Latin America, Davis agreed not to send troops to topple the new government as long as it found a 'constitutional' pretext for naming a new president. Acción Comunal appointed Ricardo Alfaro, Arosemena's vice president and a

former foreign minister, as interim president. (Harmodio Arias, the older brother of Acción Comunal leader Arnulfo Arias, was elected in June 1932, but did not take office until October.)[22]

In July 1932 representatives from working-class and poor neighbourhoods of Panama City formed a Renters' Committee to demand lower rents. In response, landlords announced a rent reduction of one balboa for every two rooms. The Renters' Committee rejected this as inadequate and, in response, resuscitated the old Tenants' League of Subsistence, which claimed to represent more than 8,000 tenants; the League drew upon the assistance of several of the leaders of its namesake from 1925. On 20 July the Tenants' League issued a manifesto demanding a 50 per cent reduction in rents, free rent for the sick or unemployed and free rent for volunteer firemen and police. The Tenants' League gave the landlords until 30 July to meet these demands or face a general rent strike.

The landlords in turn organised a group to advance their interests. Sir Josiah Crosby, the British minister to Panama, noted on 20 July that 'the President of the Republic told me in the course of conversation the other day that activities of the Tenants' League were causing him some anxiety', given the poor state of the economy and the wide public support for the League. Crosby also noted that Alfaro:

> was contemplating the adoption of suitable measures to counter the communist agitation, but he added sadly that he was unable to apply the only really effective remedy, which lay in finding work for the unemployed.[23]

Indeed, the tenants' demands exposed the inability of capitalism in Panama to provide decent living conditions.

When the landlords rejected their demands, the Tenants' League declared a rent strike in Panama City, starting on 31 July. Unlike in 1925, Colón tenants did not strike but agreed to enter negotiations with the government and landlords. The government denounced the strike as being led by Communist subversives set upon the destruction of private property.[24] On 3 August the English-language *Star & Herald* noted 'alarming rumors which circulated yesterday that grave disorders were impending'. However, the writer added that:

> Strike leaders insist that their movement is a peaceful one, and point out that they have even appointed members of their organisation to do private police duty and avoid disturbances.[25]

The *Panamá-América* newspaper described how one landlord placed the furniture of a tenant who was three months in arrears on the street and sealed the door; members of the Tenants' League then arrived, broke the lock and returned her furniture. The landlord called the police, who again put the tenant's furniture on the street and locked the door; tenant activists once more broke the seal and moved her furniture back inside. The landlord then agreed to let the tenant stay temporarily.[26] The strike highlighted that the Panamanian ruling class could not provide decent housing for the population; nor could capitalism in the isthmus provide decent jobs for the working class. The strike raised the question of who was going to decide how to use Panama's wealth (including the Canal): the working class or a small layer of parasitic oligarchs?[27]

The landlord group issued an open letter to President Alfaro, claiming to be targets of outside agitators and urging the authorities to protect property rights. The letter claimed that the strike threatened landlords' property as well as their personal safety and 'hint[ed] at the possibility of armed forces of a foreign nation again having to invade Panama to maintain Law and order here', according to the *Star & Herald*.[28]

The threat of a United States invasion hung over Panama permanently (since it was written into the national constitution), but became especially acute during times of social unrest; the humiliation of 1925 lingered. For decades Liberal politicians had forestalled any threat to their power by warning against provoking an invasion, but Acción Comunal claimed to represent the promise of Panama for Panamanians.[29] On 4 August President Alfaro met with Davis to emphasise the seriousness of the situation. According to Davis:

> Since rumors have been current that American troops may intervene, as was the case in 1925, I believe it advisable to inform the President that I considered such intervention to be most remote and stated that this is a problem which should be settled by Panama.

Davis added that 'the Panamanian government should be encouraged to make preparations to maintain law and order'.[30] In Washington Edwin C. Wilson, who handled Latin American affairs for the State Department, consulted with General Douglas MacArthur, then Acting Secretary of War, to ensure that the military would neither intervene nor send arms to Panama because MacArthur remained 'unalterably opposed to putting arms in the hands of Panamanians for fear that they might be used at some time against our troops'.[31] The position of United States diplomats

at this time was that Alfaro only needed to act strongly, and that the rent strike did not justify military intervention.

On 10 August a newspaper reported that the British and United States ministers had warned the Panamanian government of their concerns about the strike. Crosby, the British minister, denied this report in a confidential note to the Foreign Office, going on to criticise President Alfaro as having 'demonstrated unmistakably his inability to take a strong line in an emergency'. Talking about the landlords' reference to United States intervention, Crosby added:

> Such plain-speaking was, no doubt, tactless, but intervention from the side of the United States is the last thing which the patriotic Panamanian desires, and the fear of it constitutes one of the steadying factors in the present situation.[32]

In a subsequent note Crosby stated that the US representative, Davis, opposed intervention out of 'fear lest the Panamanian Government, after secretly inviting it, should in public assume the *rôle* of the outraged virgin and thereby expose the United States to the obloquy of all Latin-America'. Nonetheless, Crosby added, Davis 'was content to let the outside public imagine that there was a likelihood of intervention since that might serve to deter some of the hotheads from excesses'.[33]

United States intervention appeared less likely in 1932 than in 1925 for several reasons. The United States president, Herbert Hoover, preferred a policy of 'co-operation' with Latin American governments instead of explicit gunboat diplomacy (later to become known as the Good Neighbour Policy under his successor, Franklin D. Roosevelt).[34] At this time most Panamanians, of all political persuasions, opposed another invasion. Finally, the country had just voted in a new president who was due to assume office in October. Neither interim president Alfaro nor president-elect Arias appeared eager for a repeat of the 1925 debacle, and inviting another United States invasion would have discredited AC's nationalism. Nonetheless, in Panamanian the possibility of United States intervention was always present even if everybody wished to avoid it.

On 11 August President Alfaro presided over discussions between the landlords and the Tenants' League. They agreed that until the National Assembly passed a rent law, evictions would be paused; that unemployed or ill workers and firemen would get free rooms; that policemen could pay rent with government-issued bonds (*bonos del Estado*); and that rents would be reduced by $1.50 per room, which meant reductions from 20 to 30 per cent. The landlords' representatives

broke off talks and rescinded their concessions on 13 August. They did so on the pretext that a tenants' representative reportedly denounced them as *ladrones burgueses* ('capitalist thieves') during negotiations.[35]

Meanwhile the rent strike was heating up. On 15 August the National Assembly passed Decree 139, which 'temporarily suspended' civil liberties. The decree declared sick or unemployed tenants did not have to pay rent, granted firemen and police officers discounted rents and established a rent reduction 'of one and one-half balboas for room, that is a 30 per cent reduction in rents of B/5.00, the median price of the great majority'. It went on to denounce seditious violence and to order that 'police authorities will continue preventing violent acts or resistance to authority on the part of anybody trying to prevent rent payments'. Finally, the decree announced that the National Assembly would meet on 1 September to discuss the issue. Under the bold headline 'Martial Law', the English-language newspaper *Panama-American* reported that:

> police authorities will continue to suppress and prevent all acts of violence. They will arrest persons who attempt to prevent tenants from paying rents or the moving of tenants from one building to another at their own pleasure.[36]

The first people arrested were three men who, 'in the face of the decree … openly insulted a property owner'.[37]

Between 17 and 18 August the police arrested a further 17 tenants. The *Panama-American* described a march to the mayor's office by 300 women and girls demanding freedom for imprisoned strikers. After mounted police ordered the protesters to disperse:

> [T]he women refused to obey orders … and declared they would carry out their plan. The police then charged the group, routing the women and girls.
>
> Capitan Nicolas Ardito Barleta, in charge of the Panama City department of the police, led the policemen against the women. Before the mob was dispersed, Capitan Barleta warned the women to refrain from attempting to march to the mayor's office. At one time he took out his revolver and menacingly shouted he would smash the face of 'the first one to pass me on the street'.[38]

On 17 August the National Assembly issued Decree 142 that organised a 300-strong 'Association of National Reserves' – a paramilitary group

'with the purpose of co-operating in the work of public order during the situation created in the capital created by the so-called tenants' strike'. According to historian Thomas Pearcy, the law's goal was to incorporate Acción Comunal supporters into the National Police as part of consolidating power after the 1931 coup. It is significant that Alfaro decided to do this in the middle of the rent strike to reinforce the state's repressive powers.[39] As the historian Armando Muñoz Pinzón has noted, these governmental actions:

> reflected the fear of the defenders of order, who saw the non-payment strike as a communist-led movement against the foundation of Panamanian capitalist society.[40]

According to the *Panamá-América*, one purpose of the Reserves was 'to prevent with all energy all attempts at disorder that could provoke a North American military occupation', presumably through demonstrating that the Panamanian government was capable of maintaining order without direct involvement by the United States.[41]

On 19 August police raided the headquarters of the Tenants' League as well as individual homes. There they seized documents, confiscated the League's printing press and arrested 27 strike leaders. 'Panama's Rent Strike Crushed' was the headline of the English-language newspaper *Panama-American*.[42] The government evidently hoped that a combination of a B/1.50 reduction in rents and police repression would end the strike. In the week following the arrests, landlords evicted several hundred tenants for being in arrears. Those members of the Tenants' League who remained free issued a leaflet, in English and Spanish, encouraging tenants to continue the strike. This appears to have been successful as, according to the *Panama-American*, 'house owners continue[d] to find it extremely difficult to collect rents'.[43]

The repression effectively ended the strike, but it opened what the Socialist Party parliamentarian and tenant spokesman Demetrio Porras referred to as 'the second stage of the struggle, which consisted in obtaining a just law that protected tenants' interests'.[44] While the focus was largely parliamentary, the Tenants' League held several large protests to demand reform. In early September Harmodio Arias became President as the Depression worsened; Panamanian hospitals ran out of medicine and basic supplies as private companies refused to sell to the government for fear of not being paid. The Banco Nacional de Panamá suspended payments on the national debt for lack of money and the government reduced salaries for government employees.[45]

On 5 September the National Assembly formed a commission to resolve the rent issue, but did not pass motions by Porras to release imprisoned tenant leaders. On 14 September the commission issued a report that advocated a Tenant Board but issued no decree on housing.[46] Through October, Porras tried to pass laws to reduce rents in the face of strong opposition, often by deputies who were themselves landlords. When the Assembly debated a housing bill, Porras and other lawmakers passed a series of amendments to reduce rents. After President Arias refused to support the amended bill, the Assembly threw out the amendments, amid angry protests outside the Assembly.[47]

In November 1932 the Assembly passed a final rent law. It established a tripartite board consisting of representatives from tenants, landlords and the government with power over rents, living conditions and the resolving of tenants' complaints. The rent law also instituted a rent reduction and provided loans for Panamanian citizens to buy houses.[48] The 1932 strike, like its predecessor, secured reforms and demonstrated the power of popular protest.

One important effect of the rent strikes is their contribution to the rise of the women's movement in Panama. The strikes' focus on the home – traditionally women's sphere – instead of work – traditionally men's domain – contributed to women's prominence in the struggle for housing in Panama (women were also actively engaged in earlier and later struggles, as discussed elsewhere in this volume). For example, as Giulia Novaro and Eugenia Crosetti argue in this volume about later campaigns for better housing in New York City and Rome, the tenant struggle in Panama 'blurred the boundaries between domestic and public spheres'; they were in effect 'moments of rupture' for women activists that drew them into broader political struggle.

In 1932 the Tenants' League organised a Committee of Women Tenants. This committee oversaw the '*olla común*', which provided food for strikers and unemployed workers. Clara González, a left-wing women's activist, participated in the strike and stressed the importance of women within it. The Tenants' League advocated women's suffrage and the period after 1932 was marked by increasing struggle for this – although not all women won the right to vote until 1941. María Rosa de Muñoz and Armando Muñoz Pinzón affirm that:

> throughout the tenants' struggle, women – as wives, daughters, sisters and other relatives of striking and unemployed workers – played a role as tenant activists and participated in different activities.[49]

Antillanos and the strikes

Workers from British and (to a lesser degree) French colonies in the Caribbean comprised a significant section of the working class in the isthmus, especially in the Canal Zone. After the completion of the Canal in 1914 made thousands of workers redundant, West Indians and their descendants formed an increasing portion of the population of the Republic, especially in Panama City and Colón. Given their important role in keeping the Canal Zone functioning, West Indians had great social power – yet at the same time they faced brutal exploitation and racist oppression at the hands of the Canal authorities. The Canal Zone was racially segregated, with mainly US-born white workers ('gold workers') paid more and enjoying a quality of life similar to that of the United States; West Indian workers ('silver workers') meanwhile suffered worse conditions, lower pay and segregation in every aspect of life. West Indian workers had a history of militancy as they demonstrated in early 1920, when between two-thirds and three-quarters of silver workers in the Canal Zone – about 15,000 workers in total – went on strike, threatening the world market. Canal Zone authorities broke the strike and deported several of its leaders.[50]

The 1920 strike posed the possibility of joint Hispanic–West Indian working-class struggle, even if the strike ultimately failed. In the wake of the defeat, many West Indians left Panama, often for Cuba or the United States. The leadership of the organised labour movement in the Republic of Panama was at best indifferent to West Indian workers and did not fight for unity between West Indian and Hispanic workers. Nor did the left see the West Indians as allies in the struggle against United States imperialism; indeed, elements of the labour movement supported the expulsion of West Indians from the country.[51] This attitude reflected a growing anti-West Indian sentiment in Panama during the 1920s. Acción Comunal, the nationalist group, saw West Indians as a manifestation of the foreign domination of their country. In 1924 one AC supporter, Olmedo Alfaro, published a book titled *El peligro antillano en la América Central: La defensa de la raza* ('The West Indian danger in Central America: Defence of the race'). Through the 1920s and 1930s a series of laws restricted the rights of *Antillanos* to migrate to or live in Panama.[52]

Since West Indians comprised a significant part of the working class in Panama City and Colón, it seems logical that they would have played a role in the rent strikes there. Referring to the 1925 strike, the historian Robin Elizabeth Zenger notes that:

> Working class-conscious West Indian men and women tenement dwellers almost certainly joined in the neighborhood organizations and rent boycott of this movement, although they have since fallen out of the historical record for the most part.[53]

Given the widespread nature of the strike, it is likely that West Indians participated, at least passively by not paying rent. Nonetheless, although historians have provided conflicting analyses of West Indians' activity during the strike, evidence suggests a subdued West Indian role (as opposed to the prominent role of Puerto Rican immigrants in the Harlem rent strikes of 1964–5 or North African immigrants in the French rent strikes of 1975–80, discussed in this volume). There are several reasons for this. Acción Comunal and other right-wing nationalists stressed pro-British sentiment among West Indian workers, but perhaps more important factors were West Indians' vulnerability as permanent aliens subject to deportation, the large linguistic and cultural divide between Hispanics and West Indians and the racism that existed in Panama.

It is worth noting the role of British officials in this context. Barbadians, Jamaicans and others from the Anglophone West Indies were British subjects and as a result entitled, on paper at least, to British protection. By its nature, colonialism was based on oppression rather than protection of colonial subjects – so just as colonial officials sought to police and control the colonies, British officials in Panama aimed to keep their colonial subjects in line rather than protecting them. Since 1923 the British representative in the isthmus had been His Majesty's Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Republics of Panama and Costa Rica, Major Charles Braithwaite Wallis.[54] Twenty years earlier Wallis served in Sierra Leone and wrote a book about the Hut Tax War of 1898–9, when Africans revolted against a tax the British instituted to finance colonialism. This revolt, Braithwaite wrote, demonstrated:

> The nature of the Negro in all his primitive savagery and barbarism, a barbarism which generations of missionary effort towards civilisation seem, somehow, to have failed to eradicate.[55]

There is no evidence that he changed his racist views. In Panama, Braithwaite reported that during the strike, West Indians 'did not join the rioters'.[56]

The *Daily Worker*, published by the Communist Party in the United States (CPUSA), published six articles sympathetic to the strike that did not mention West Indians. Since Communists in the United States

made opposition to Black oppression central to their propaganda, it is likely that they would have emphasised any West Indian role.[57] Similarly the English-language *Workman*, the main West Indian newspaper in Panama, treated the protests as a Panamanian affair, with little West Indian involvement. Even though the *Workman* sympathised with the strikers' demands, it did not mention West Indian participation and noted Panamanian government warnings that foreigners should keep out of the strike. An editorial piece counselled West Indian readers 'to wait patiently for the outcome' of a government-appointed committee.[58]

Accounts of people arrested or active in the 1925 tenants' strike include mainly Spanish names, suggesting a limited West Indian role. A Panamanian police officer's report on the clash between police and protesters that occurred on 10 October only includes people with Spanish first and last names; those identified by nationality are Panamanians, with some Colombians and Peruvians. A list of dozens of people arrested between 10 and 12 October includes only two identified as Jamaicans; the rest, with Spanish names, are described as Panamanians. The six strikers who died were not identified by nationality, but all had Spanish names except for Lorenzo Brown. Since English- and Spanish-language newspapers frequently reported the nationality of West Indians who were arrested for various crimes, it is likely that they would have mentioned any significant West Indian support for the tenants' strike.[59] West Indians' aloofness from the strike makes sense in the context of the all-sided hostility they faced: from Canal Zone authorities because they were Black; from Panamanian nationalists because they were English-speaking and Protestant; from British authorities because they were colonial subjects; from the Panamanian government because they were foreigners.

There is evidence that tenants' leaders did appeal for West Indian support. Besides the *Workman* articles cited above, Wallis reported to the Foreign Office in London that:

> during the recent disturbances in Panamá the thousands of British West Indians did not join the rioters, although continued efforts were made months before to induce them to do so.[60]

Unfortunately, the nature of these efforts remains a mystery. There is no evidence that the organisers of the tenants' strike put forward demands relating to the specific oppression of *Antillanos*, such as full citizenship rights or opposing the 'gold' and 'silver' system of discrimination in the Canal Zone.[61]

Over the next eight years the *Antillanos* assumed a more important role in the politics of the Republic, especially with the growth of the *criollo* population: Panama-born descendants of West Indian immigrants. By 1932 *criollos* made up about 20 per cent of Colón's population and 15 per cent of Panama City's. Harmodio Arias's law firm had provided legal services to West Indians and his political campaign drew upon *criollo* electoral support. However, anti-West Indian sentiment remained strong. It is captured by a statement in December 1931 from the *Panamá-América* newspaper that this population:

> lives and grows unconnected from the native people by language, racial and religious ties … feeling more British than Panamanian, even when they are born in Panama.

In 1928 an amendment to the Constitution stripped Panamanian citizenship from *criollo*s until they became adults; this left many stateless, since the British did not confer subjecthood on children of West Indians whose parents were not legally married. In 1930 the National Assembly outlawed naturalisation of prohibited immigrants, and in 1931 a new passport law forbade the foreign ministry from issuing re-entry permits to prohibited immigrants.[62]

Evidence suggests that *Antillanos* were more active in the 1932 strike than in 1925. The historian Michael L. Conniff asserts that 'West Indians found themselves caught in the middle' of the strike, and although 'most West Indians did stop paying rent and many participated in marches … they carefully avoided illegal acts and violence'.[63] According to Elizabeth Zenger, another historian, no West Indians were arrested on 19 August, nor did newspapers mention their participation. This could reflect either the fact that West Indian tenants supported the strike but took careful precautions against being arrested, or that they did not in fact participate in the strike.[64]

The *Panama Tribune* was the main newspaper for the West Indian community in Panama in the 1930s. Its coverage of the strike indicates the *Antillanos*' contradictory situation, combining support for lower rents with an acute sense of vulnerability. The paper was sympathetic to the strike when it began, stressing 'that workers are now facing an acute crisis, thousands are out of work, and those fortunately employed are receiving reduced salaries'.[65] The next issue of the paper was even more enthusiastic:

> Unable any longer to stem the tide of unemployment or see any hopes of a change in the near future which would ameliorate their

> sufferings, and being pressed on every side by insistent landlords and unable to provide satisfactory for their loved ones, the Panama Federation of Labor has taken up the cudgels on behalf of the people and started a fight, which if successful would bring about some alleviation in the present condition of the laboring class.[66]

An editorial stressed that 'our community should take more than ordinary interest' in the strike since 'our community is sure to benefit' if the strike won. The editorial emphasised that 'West Indians are the greatest sufferers from the exorbitant rentals charged for inadequate and oftentimes filthy tenement quarters in the terminal cities of Panama and Colon'. The paper concluded with the observation, 'If we can take no active part, at least here is one thing to which we can throw the full weight of our moral support.'[67]

By late July, though, the paper was taking a more cautious approach, running the remarks of Abdiel Arias, a prominent landlord, that:

> The very leaders of the Tenants' League who are soliciting membership among West Indians are the ones that have been, and still are demanding, through the local press the expatriation of West Indians under the pretext that the West Indians are depriving them of work.

The article stressed that given increased government opposition to the strike, 'West Indians who identify themselves with this movement are endangering themselves to a great degree'.[68] The next issue reiterated that 'we are in deep sympathy with the demands to reduce the costs of house rent to the poor people of Panama and Colon', but added a caution: 'we wish to warn our community to refrain from any overt connection with any radical group'. Finally the editorial stressed, 'As a foreign element we will be used merely as a scapegoat to be sacrificed by either of the contending parties and crushed between the opposing groups.'[69]

By August, as the Tenants' League refused to compromise, the *Panama Tribune*'s coverage had become less sympathetic – especially after a tenant leader denounced the landlords.[70] Still, the paper advised 'those who would maintain the present social order' to alleviate the suffering of the masses because:

> the rent strike in Panama has met with instant response, not only from the abject poor and destitute, but also from that great

> body of middle class people who are now finding themselves in a precarious position.

In late August the paper urged West Indians to follow the law while complaining that when landlords evicted tenants for non-payment:

> West Indians in the majority of cases are bearing the brunt of this unwarranted attitude of the landlords and seem helpless under the conditions to which they are subjected by the homeowners.[71]

The paper's response was not simple anti-Communism or anti-radicalism. A half-page sympathetic article (with photograph) about James W. Ford, the Black CPUSA candidate for vice president of the United States, demonstrated this.[72] Since the Communist struggle for Black equality in the United States resonated among West Indians in Panama, similar appeals by Communists in Panama might have attracted sympathy.

The government sought to break the strike by dividing the working class and poor along racial and ethnic lines. President Alfaro blamed the Hispanic Panamanians' poor living conditions on West Indians: 'A very important factor, essential in the solution of the rent problem, is the situation created by the large West Indian population.'[73] Alfaro accused the tenant leaders of inadvertently 'aiding thousands of West Indians working in the Canal Zone', according to the *Panama American*, since 80 per cent of the 10,000 Canal workers were West Indians:

> These 8,000 West Indians, the president said, send money to their families in the Antilles or make deposits in foreign banks in Panama, so 'the 'don't pay' strike will mean that the West Indians will send out of the country an additional $50,000 every month.[74]

Even after the strike ended, opponents of rent reform scapegoated West Indians. When Demetrio Porras introduced a bill in the National Assembly in October 1932 to reduce rents by 30 per cent, Domingo Díaz, president of the Assembly, opposed it on the grounds that it meant favouring foreign tenants over Panamanian landlords.[75]

The government feared that West Indians would join the strike. On 11 August Crosby informed the British Foreign Office of 'the welcome intelligence' received from Davis, the United States ambassador, 'which he had from the lips of the President, that our West Indians were behaving themselves in an orderly fashion'.[76] Crosby's phrase demonstrates how His Majesty's Government colluded with United States

and Panamanian officials to oversee their colonial subjects. Two weeks later Crosby elaborated his remark. While 'our West Indian subjects have been happily committed as a class to refrain from active participation in the strike movement,' he reported, the Panamanian foreign minister, Juan Enrique Genzier, 'had informed me that one or two of our coloured nationals had lately come to notice as instigators of trouble'. Crosby responded that he 'was willing to admonish any offending British subjects whose names and addresses might be furnished to me'. The next day Crosby issued an appeal 'to all British subjects to support the public authorities loyally during the present crisis', urging them to carry out 'their duty, moral no less than legal, to discharge their obligations'. Crosby's French counterpart issued a similar statement.[77]

The Panamanian government printed copies of Crosby's statements and distributed them to West Indians. In response, the leadership of the Tenants' League issued a leaflet in English to 'comrade West Indians', advocating that 'a union of Panamanian and West Indian tenants is necessary because all of us suffer the same exploitation of the high rents'. The leaflet concluded:

> Fear not, get compact to avoid the reprisal, keep on the strike until the league of tenants and subsistence advice to Panamanians and West Indians tenants the end of the strike. Unite our forces and we will march to victory.[78]

The leaflet proves that the Tenants' League appealed to West Indians, while the syntax indicates that this was not written by a native English speaker. An article in *El Mundo Obrero*, a Spanish-language paper published by the CPUSA in New York and directed to the Hispanic Caribbean and Central America, stressed that:

> The greatest effort must be expended to secure unity of black and white tenants. This must be done through defending Black tenants, especially Jamaicans, against discrimination, segregation, abuse, etc. We must remember that the exploiters try to divide the workers' ranks, making Black workers the object of special attacks. In 1925 the police carried out the massacre in the Plaza de Santa Ana under the cry, 'Kill the Negroes'. Black tenants must be included in all [strike] committees and in the struggle's leadership.[79]

However, this does not appear to have happened, although the composition of the Panamanian Communist Party is unclear. In July

1932 Josiah Crosby, the British diplomat in Panama, sent a confidential report on Communists in Panama to the Foreign Office. In this he asserted that:

> the number of professed communists within the Republic – as distinct from those who may be no more than sympathisers or merely in association with them for one reason or another – is by no means large.

Crosby estimated 'that there [we]re less than a couple of hundred avowed communists in the country', with some 70 in Colón and the rest in Panama City. Communists had influence in the SGT in Panama City and a similar union in Colón, Crosby wrote, but he added 'that no West Indian or other British subjects are reported as being actively affiliated to these societies'.[80] Roy Davis, the United States diplomat, estimated that there were '70 active members' of the Communist Party in Panama City, which was 'made up almost entirely of Panamanians'.[81]

For its part, the Socialist Party opposed anti-West Indian racism in the 1930s. 'Many West Indian residents' participated in the Socialist Party's May Day parade in 1934, according to the *Panama Tribune*. Later that year Demetrio Porras, the Socialist Party deputy in the National Assembly, nominated a West Indian lawyer for second vice-president of Panama. The historian Marixa Lasso observes that while the SP's opposition to anti-West Indian prejudice is clear, 'what is much less clear is the West Indian response to the Socialist call'.[82]

More research on Communists and Socialists in Panama remains to be done. Nonetheless, it is possible to conclude provisionally that while both Socialists and Communists opposed anti-*Antillano* racism and called for working-class unity, neither party provided a systematic analysis of the relationship between the fight for national liberation in Panama and the fight against racial oppression. The leaflet quoted above urged West Indians to support the strike, but did not raise any specific demands addressing the special oppression that they faced. Had the Tenants' League combined the call for lower rents and better housing with the call for full citizenship rights for West Indians, for example, it would have clearly emphasised the common struggle of Hispanic Panamanians and West Indians. More broadly, this failure contributed to the largest, most powerful section of the working class on the isthmus – the West Indian Canal workers – remaining aloof from the struggle for national liberation.

The impact of the 1932 strike

The Depression, the Acción Comunal coup in 1931 and the 1932 tenant strike, amid the rise of fascism in Europe, contributed to a realignment in Panamanian politics. AC attempted to mediate between the landlords and the tenants, and according to Armando Muñoz Pinzón, 'did not identify itself fully with the popular tenants' cause'.[83] Further, neither the Alfaro nor the Arias governments solved the rent problem, reinforcing the sense that AC had betrayed the interests of the population. Gandásegui concludes that this discredited AC, allowing the Communist and Socialist parties to assume leadership of social struggle for the next three decades.[84] The strike propelled Demetrio Porras, Socialist Party member of the National Assembly (and son of former president Belisario Porras), to prominence.

After the rise of Hitler in Germany in 1933, the Communist International moved towards the policy of the 'Popular Front against Fascism', which encompassed dropping left-wing 'class against class' rhetoric and seeking alliances with liberal capitalist parties. The immediate goal shifted from over throwing capitalism to protecting capitalist democracy against fascism. The class-collaborationist, popular-front perspective spread throughout the international Communist movement; 'throughout Latin America, CPs now called for alliances with forces once considered mortal enemies', as scholar Marc Edelman observed.[85] In Panama Communists and Socialists formed what the historian Katherine Marino has called a 'diverse group of Socialists, Communists and liberal democrats' in 'opposition to the authoritarianism of the *Acción Comunal*, belief in the need of social democracy in Panama, opposition to US imperialism and demand for women's right to vote'.[86] This popular-front alliance seems to have led to support for bourgeois nationalism instead of emphasising that the working class (including its *Antillano* component) could lead a consistent and victorious struggle for national liberation.

The strike did not eliminate the domination of the country by the United States, nor did it establish decent housing and full employment. Accomplishing these goals permanently would have required expelling the United States from the Canal Zone and creating a workers' and peasants' government on the entire isthmus – a move that would have required the entire working class, including its *Antillano* component, taking the lead in the fight for national liberation. In 1936 Panama and the United States negotiated four treaties that reduced direct United States power in the isthmus, but maintained the neo-colonial relationship between the two countries.

The Socialist Party gained prominence because it opposed both these treaties and the United States presence in Panama. In 1936 the Socialist Party, along with the Communist Party and a section of Acción Comunal, supported the Frente Popular formed by the Liberal Doctrinario, Liberal Renovador and Liberal Demócrata parties. Domingo Díaz Arosemana, the Popular Front candidate, lost to the Partido Liberal Nacional by less than 2,000 votes in an election marked by fraud and police violence. That the Popular Front meant sacrificing the needs of the workers to obtain support from a section of the bourgeoisie was underlined by Díaz's opposition, as president of the National Assembly in 1932, to a bill introduced by Socialist deputy Porras to reduce rents by one-third, on the argument that such a reduction meant subsidising foreign tenants at the expense of Panamanian landlords.[87]

Harmodio Arias's administration carried out a policy of stimulating industrialisation and agricultural development, as did populists elsewhere in Latin America, such as Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas. This weakened the power of landlords and commercial capitalists, i.e., the traditional oligarchy.[88] In this sense, then, the 1932 strike propelled the Panamanian ruling class to pursue policies that lessened the country's *direct* subordination to United States imperialism. Arnulfo Arias, elected president in 1940, articulated this vision as *panameñismo*.[89] While outside the scope of this chapter, United States imperialism has continued to oppress Panama, despite the transfer of the Canal Zone to Panama in 1979 and the assumption of control of the Canal itself by Panama in 1999. Most starkly this has been shown by the United States invasion of Panama in December 1989 and the recent threats of President Donald Trump to retake the Canal.

As other contributors to this volume show, struggle for housing remains important throughout the world. The two rent strikes in Panama were unique because they intersected the question of neo-colonial domination in Latin America and the rise of a strong working-class movement.[90] While there were similarities with contemporary tenant struggles – such as those in Athens, Jersey City and Chicago discussed in this volume – the question of fighting colonial oppression differentiated them. This chapter indicates that the question of housing in Panama in the 1920s and 1930s touched upon the key issue in Panama: the role of the 'oligarchy' in the Republic and United States imperialism's domination and oppression of the entire isthmus.

As a result, the two rent strikes in the isthmus crystallised Panama's situation. While the strikes contributed to the rise of popular and working-class struggle, they also exposed the weakness of these movements – in

particular the inability to connect the fight for national liberation to the struggle against racial oppression. Consequently, as this chapter shows, left-wing leaders of the tenants' struggles failed to attract significant support from Afro-Caribbean immigrants, the backbone of the isthmus's industrial working class, limiting these movements' power.

Notes

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2 *Constitución de la República de Panamá* (1904). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Spanish are the author's.
3 Meditz and Hanratty 1987, chapter 11. Of course, in 1989, during the lead-up to the handover of the Canal to the United States, the United States invaded Panama again. As this chapter was being completed, in March 2025, the United States was once again making noises about military action against Panama.
4 'Ley 84 de 1904, Sobre la moneda (de 28 de junio)', in Torres Ábrego 2001, 307.
5 Soler 1976, 26; Beluche and Quintero 2014, 32–44; Sigler 2013, 624; Sigler 2014, 265; Beluche 2021, chapter 1. On the economic development of Panama, see Zimbalist and Weeks 1991, 22–3.
6 De la Rosa 1999 [1938]. On how the Canal affected the United States and Panamanian economies, see Maurer and Yu 2008.
7 The terms *West Indian* and *Antillano* are both problematic, but for lack of a better alternative they are used interchangeably to refer to Black immigrants from the British and French Caribbean colonies and their descendants. On the workforce of the Canal, see Greene 2009.
8 Gandásegui 2004, 193; Sandoya 1989, 33–5; Sigler 2011, 120, 129; Lecompte and Schachar 1980, 29; *Panamá-América*, 4 August 1932.
9 De la Rosa 1999 [1938], 320.
10 Porras 1947, 49; Zenger 2015, 90–1.
11 The description of the 1925 rent strike is largely taken from Zumoff 2017, which contains a fuller bibliography. Alexander Cuevas is the main historian of the strike, who has published several studies of the strike over the years (listed in the References below).
12 Chapter 4 by Lucas Poy and Alejandro Belkin in this volume describes a similar episode during the Buenos Aires 1907 rent strike.
13 Dana G. Munro to U.S. Secretary of State, 12 October 1925, 11 a.m. and Munro to Secretary of State, 12 October 1925, 3 p.m. in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1925*, Vol. II, 663–6.
14 Araúz 1994, 180.
15 Nelson Austin 1999, vol. I, 301.
16 Gandásegui 2004, 199.
17 Muñoz Pinzón 1974, 9–12.
18 Muñoz Pinzón 1974, 13–17.
19 *Panama Tribune*, 4 September 1932.
20 Gandásegui 2004, 199.

21 Víctor F. Goytía, quoted in Pérez and De León Lerma 1964, 9, 23; 'Acta de Fundación de la Institución Acción Comunal', 19 August 1923, in *Panamá: sus problemas y sus hombres*, 9–11; Pearcy 1996, 695–6, 699–702; Robinson 2012; Del Vasto 2002, 29–30. One reference work refers to 'the Socialist Party, which by 1933 was labelled the Partido Comunista de Panamá/Communist Party of Panama', thus eliding the differences between the parties altogether. See the entry on Demetrio A. Porras in Leonard 2015.
22 Hoover 1952, 333; Nelson Austin 1999, I: 334–5; Cuestas 2004, 77; Pearcy 1996, 702; *New York Times*, 5 June 1932; *Montreal Gazette*, 8 June 1932.
23 Muñoz Pinzón 1974, 19–22; Confidential Dispatch 181, Josiah Crosby to John Simon, July 20, 1932, FO 288/205, The National Archives, Kew, UK.
24 Muñoz Pinzón 1974, 27–9.
25 *Star and Herald*, 3 August 1932.
26 Communists internationally used this tactic; see, for example, Zumoff 2021, 24; Naison 1986.
27 *Panamá-América*, 4 August 1932.
28 *Panama American*, 5 August 1932; *Star & Herald*, 5 August 1932.
29 Langley 1968, 222.
30 Roy T. Davis, confidential telegram to Secretary of State, 4 August 1932, LC 819.00/1658, in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files: Panama – Internal Affairs and Foreign Affairs*, microfilm reel 1.
31 Edwin C. Wilson, memorandum, 5 August 1932, LC 819.00/1661.
32 *New York Times*, 11 August 1932; Dispatch No. 204, Josiah Crosby to John Simon, 11 August 1932, FO 288/205, The National Archives, Kew, UK.
33 Confidential Dispatch No. 205, Crosby to Simon, 11 August 1932, FO 288/205.
34 McPherson 2014.
35 *New York Times*, 11 August 1932; *Panama-American*, 12 August 1932; *Panama-American*, 14 August 1932; Muñoz Pinzón 1974, 30–2.
36 *Gaceta Oficial*, 16 August 1932. https://panama.justia.com/federales/decretos/139-de-1932-aug-16-1932/gdoc/. Accessed 15 March 2024; *Panama-American*, 15 August 1932; *Panamá-América*, 15 August 1932.
37 *Panama-American*, 16 August 1932.
38 *Panama-American*, 18 August 1932; Muñoz Pinzón 1974, 36.
39 *Gaceta Oficial*, 17 August 1932; Pearcy 1996, 703.
40 Muñoz Pinzón 1974, 37–8.
41 *Panamá-América*, 18 August 1932.
42 *Panama-American*, 19 August 1932.
43 *Panama-American*, 25 August 1932.
44 Porras 1947, 50.
45 García 2003, 56.
46 Muñoz Pinzón 1974, 44–6.
47 The struggle in the Assembly is described in detail in Muñoz Pinzón 1974, sections 4 and 5 and Porras 1947, 55–6; See also 'Panamá and the Canal Zone: Annual Report, 1932', Crosby to Simon, 2 March 1933, A 1572/1572/32, contained in British Freedom of Information (FOI) response 2022/15122, 13 July 2022.
48 *Panama Tribune*, 13 November 1932; Porras 1947, 51.
49 Del Vasto 2002, 37–8; Marco Serra 2014; Marco Serra 2007, 108; Marino 2021, 208; Muñoz Pinzón 1974, 27–9. An article from 2007 commemorating the 77th anniversary of the Communist Party includes González in a list of early Communists; see Ruiz 2007; Rosa de Muñoz and Muñoz Pinzón 2006, 96.
50 Burnett 2012; Gandásegui 2004, 195; Maloney 1989; Parker 2016; Warner 2016, chapter one.
51 Zumoff 2017, 522–3.
52 Alfaro 1924. See Milazzo 2012; Zumoff 2017, 532–3; Arrango Durling 1989, 25–41.
53 Zenger 2015, 95.
54 *London Gazette*, 30 October 1923.
55 Wallis 1903, 2.
56 Major Braithwaite Wallis to Sir Austen Chamberlain, Panamá and Canal Zone Annual Report, 1925, A 1821/1821.32 in Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 371/1158, The National Archives, Kew, UK.

57 The attitude of the CPUSA towards Black oppression is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, in the early 1920s, the Communist International forcefully intervened to make their American comrades understand the need to fight for Black liberation. See Zumoff 2014, chapter 14.
58 *Workman*, 22 August 1925; 17 October 1925; 24 October 1925. See Zumoff 2017, 529–30.
59 This analysis is taken from Zumoff 2017, 530–1, and based on 'Nota del Capitán Jefe' and *Estrella de Panamá*, 11 October 1925.
60 Wallis to Chamberlain, Panamá and Canal Zone Annual Report, 1925, A 1821/1821.32 in FCO 371/1158.
61 Zumoff 2017, 543.
62 Conniff 1985, 80–3; Lasso de Paulis 2007, 70; Putnam 2014, 175; Warner 2016, 125; Zenger 2015, 112–13.
63 Conniff 1985, 82–3.
64 Zenger 2015, 113.
65 *Panama Tribune*, 3 July 1932.
66 *Panama Tribune*, 10 July 1932.
67 *Panama Tribune*, 10 July 1932.
68 *Panama Tribune*, 24 July 1932.
69 *Panama Tribune*, 31 July 1932.
70 *Panama Tribune*, 7 August 1932; 14 August 1932.
71 *Panama Tribune*, 21 August 1932; 28 August 1932.
72 *Panama Tribune*, 14 August 1932.
73 *Panama Tribune*, 21 August 1932.
74 *Panama-American*, 14 August 1932.
75 *Panama Tribune*, 30 October 1932.
76 Confidential Dispatch No.205, Crosby to Simon, 11 August 1932, FO 288/205.
77 Dispatch No.211, Crosby to Simon, 25 August 1932, FO 288/205.
78 Dispatch No.212, Crosby to Simon, 25 August 1932, with enclosed transcribed copy of leaflet, Foreign Office (FO) 288/205, The National Archives, Kew, UK.
79 *Mundo Obrero*, September 1932.
80 Confidential Dispatch No.181, Crosby to Simon, 20 July 1932, FO 288/205.
81 Roy T. Davis, Report No.1149, 'Communist activities in Panama City (Tenants' League)', 12 July 1932, LC 810.00/1655.
82 Lasso de Paulis 2007, 72–4.
83 Muñoz Pinzón 1974, 66.
84 Gandásegui 2004, 202.
85 Edelman 1987, 16.
86 Marino 2013, 311–12.
87 Gandásegui 2004, 202–3; Porras 1947, 73–4; Rascón Palacio 2010; Ricord Bernal 2018; Ricord Bernal 2017, 141–52; *New York Times*, 10 June 1936.
88 Beluche and Quintero 2014, 32–6.
89 Mendoza Patty 2021, 32, 88–9; Robinson 2012.
90 In that sense, they inverted the relationship described by Jordi Bonshoms-Guzmán, in that rather than borrowing from labour strikes, rent strikes in Panama contributed to the rise of a stronger organised labour movement; see Bonshoms-Guzmán 2024.

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6

The Swedish rent model: collective bargaining and the institutionalisation of rent struggle in post-war Sweden

Hannes Rolf

Introduction

This chapter turns to the Swedish historical context to examine the changing relations between organised tenants and landlords during the expansion of the post-war housing programme, especially during the period of rent control in Sweden between 1942 and 1978.[1] The unique solution of collective bargaining in the rental market was made possible by the strength of 'interested organisations' and their actions during the post-war era, making this an intriguing case to study and analyse.

The chapter examines the actions, resources and organisational changes of three significant 'interested organisations'. These are the national tenant federation HRF (*Hyresgästernas Riksförbund*, known today as *Hyresgästföreningen*), the municipal company federation SABO (*Sveriges allmännyttiga bostadsföretag*, known today as *Sveriges Allmännytta*) and the national landlords' association, SFF (*Sveriges Fastighetsägareförbund*, known today as *Fastighetsägarna*). The actions of these organisations, and the shifting institutional settings in which they took place, were largely responsible for changing how tenants and landlords articulate and advocate their collective interest – in effect, changing the nature of the Swedish collective rent struggle.

For the last half-century Sweden, a medium-sized country in northern Europe, has had a system of collectively bargained rents based on the principle of use-value and backed up by a strong security of tenure. This system gradually evolved from strict post-war rent control

into a system where the large and influential 'interest organisations' could negotiate terms for rent setting without direct state interference, but within a specific juridical framework. As this system is internationally unique, this chapter first considers the historical roots of the rent-setting system by reviewing the actions of the rental market's three major 'interest organisations'.

The collective tenant mobilisation and rent strikes that occurred during the inter-war period had given the tenants' unions a position of power and some influence, at least in the major cities. By the end of the 1930s HRF was on the verge of becoming an influential housing actor.[2] The 1942 rent control effectively removed the main principles underlying landlords' power: the ability to evict tenants and to dictate the rent. Another change was the advance of the labour movement in Sweden; the social democrats clung firmly to power nationally from 1932 until 1976, the very end of the research period studied in this chapter. At the same time social democrats also held power in many municipalities, easing the move toward a housing system where non-profit rental units were seen as the essential tool for decommodifying housing policy. Municipal socialism had long been a part of labour movement politics,[3] and the post-war Swedish social democrat reform programme focused on the municipalities as agents for social change.[4] This was especially true when it came to housing. The Swedish rent model can be seen, it is argued, as coming from the mix of strong social movements, rent control and municipal socialism.

Swedish social movements have historically had a strong tendency to form formal organisations with local, regional and national branches. The Swedish rent model was shaped with the labour market as a role model in many ways. Åmark has argued that the organisations of the Swedish labour market strived for a rational, calculable order, with predictability preferred over chaotic, free market reign. Both sides strived for as good a deal as possible for their class interests, but short-term losses were acceptable as an offering for long-term gains. Such an approach, however, called for organisations that could discipline their members to make long-term, calculable deals.[5] As Lundh has noted, labour market organisations have adopted strategies intent on maintaining and strengthening the positions of their organisations.[6]

While there are differences between the labour and rental market organisations, they acted similarly, advancing the interests of the groups they represented and the organisations themselves. Korpi has examined the organisational resources and political allies of the labour market organisations to determine the power resources of the respective sides.[7]

This is also true of the rental market organisations, but a third important factor is the institutional context – especially the legislative boundaries of the relationship between tenant and landlord organisations.

The new rent control system from 1942 changed the role of the rental market organisations. The threat of using militant methods such as rent strikes and mass evictions gradually disappeared from the table, even though these methods had been crucial for the establishment of collective rent bargaining. The ways of *claim-making*[8] were changed from *transgressive contention* – that is, attempting to change the power relations with innovative methods – to *contained contention*, in which all acting parties employed well-established means of claim-making.

In Tilly and Tarrow's system[9] a political actor is called a *member* if they have a secure standing in day-to-day politics and a *challenger* if they lack this but regularly make their presence available. As the *political opportunity structures* changed, a shift occurred. Contentious repertoires tend to change with institutional changes, and changes to the status of the actors themselves. The organised tenants and municipal landlords became members to a more significant degree, while the formerly influential organised landlords appeared as challengers, trying to regain their former status. Kemeny, who differentiates between dualist and unitary rental systems, argues that the latter, such as those of Sweden, tend to be more corporatist; housing interest organisations are therefore more likely to influence policy in these countries.[10] Bengtsson has further argued that even if there are theoretical problems with simply defining the Swedish housing system as corporatist, the organisations have, in several ways, been accepted by the state in corporatist arrangements – even if these arrangements have only sometimes been formal.[11] How these arrangements replaced the old power resource of collective mobilisation and militancy is something that has to date received very little scholarly attention, but makes for an interesting case study.

Source material

This chapter draws on organisational sources, such as internal reports, congress protocols and, in particular, annual reports. Different names, such as *verksamhetsberättelse*, *årsberättelse* or *årsrapport* in different organisations, refer to these reports, but the content is similar. In the Swedish organisational tradition, the annual reports fill an essential role for formal organisations, providing a way for the board to sum up how it has used the mandate that it received upon election. Annual reports

on a local level are typically written every year before the so-called 'annual meeting', at which the old board steps down and a new board, usually consisting of several senior board members, is elected. An annual report is typically produced at the end of a national organisation's one- to three-year mandate. As the yearly reports describe organisational changes, political advocacy and the other claim-making or otherwise mobilising activities of these organisations, they are a rich source for this type of study. While these reports do not cover all of the organisations' activities, and sometimes tend to understate controversies, they provide a useful overview of the actions and development of the organisations.[12]

Another type of document used in this chapter is old published interviews with the organisations' key representatives.[13] The material from Kubu's interview with leading representatives from housing organisations is of particular interest. While these interviews are no doubt edited, Kubu's stance as a reporter was to question all authorities, including representatives from the private and public sector and the labour movement. The interviews thus give exciting perspectives. As many of the interviewees died several years ago, these documents offer unique insights into the reasoning of some very influential individuals.

Housing and its organisations

During the twentieth century interest organisations, in many cases influential, emerged from the distinct class interests of workers, employers, farmers, consumers and others in Sweden and elsewhere. Both landlords and tenants had made their first attempts at organising during the late nineteenth century, with varied success. As local officials became increasingly interested in regulating urban planning, sanitation, fire taxation and increasing taxation, landlords saw their organisations as a way to protect and advance their interests. With the emergence of organised tenants and labour, increasing energy was spent on defensive measures against the perceived threat of socialism. There were also attempts at forming national federations, which resulted in the SFF (established in 1914) and the HRF (established in 1923).

HRF's main task after formation was to campaign for a new rent law. However, it also played a crucial role in disciplining the more radical tenant activists who favoured local autonomy, rent strikes and boycott actions over political advocacy, central collective bargaining and co-operative housing construction through the sister organisation, the Co-operative Housing Association, HSB. HSB was seen as a second branch

of the tenants' movement.[14] A division soon emerged within the tenants' movement between a faction that favoured housing co-operatives as the primary tool for solving the housing issue and a faction that preferred direct action and municipally-owned housing. Even though the housing co-operatives were influential, municipally owned rental apartments became the favoured solution, especially after the Second World War.[15]

The history of the Swedish rental market is an interesting parallel to that of the labour market, where organisations were left to settle matters with minimal legislation concerning labour–capital relations. The inter-war period saw an internationally high level of industrial conflict.[16] One intense political issue was strikebreaking action, which was becoming increasingly professionalised. The radical parts of the labour movement took increasingly violent actions against it; these resulted in clashes and shootings, including the nationally famous shootings in Ådalen in 1931.[17]

During the inter-war period Sweden experienced a high level of industrial conflict, resulting in several violent clashes. A number of contemporary governmental investigations suggested limiting the right to strike and picket. In the end, however, legislation was rejected. Instead the leading central organisations of labour and capital decided in the famous 1938 *Saltsjöbaden agreement* upon large-scale collective contracts and bargaining, as well as on the self-disciplining of their member organisations to ensure social peace. This agreement is regarded as a prerequisite to the post-war 'Swedish model', in which the class struggle was to be monitored by interest organisations in return for them keeping a lid on the militant pot.[18]

Even though some of the Swedish city municipalities had begun as early as the mid-nineteenth century to construct and supply rental apartments for some of those in need, the rental market of the early twentieth century was predominantly private. The private-rental market of this inter-war period saw large-scale collective conflicts. Militant action similar to that of the labour market during the inter-war period also occurred in the rental market, if not to as large an extent. The rent strikes, pickets, boycotts, mass evictions and the fight against tenant strikebreakers were particularly noteworthy in Gothenburg, where they frequently became intertwined with labour market conflicts.[19]

The newly founded tenants' unions used boycott action and picketing, targeting especially stores and businesses owned by landlords engaged in a conflict. During early 1930 so-called rent-reducing actions, in which the tenants collectively cancelled their contracts, threatening boycott action and rent strikes, resulted in significant gains for the

tenants; such large-scale resistance forced the organised landlords to accept the tenants as collective bargaining partners. Annual bargaining took place between the ombudsmen of the tenants' unions and landlords' associations in Stockholm and Gothenburg. The process also encouraged organisations on both sides to centralise and create tools for self-disciplining in order to manage resources during conflicts. The significant inter-war conflicts in Gothenburg saw state mediation and exhausted the organisations' resources.[20]

The rental market was thus obviously a contentious area, and the state saw a need to solve this, at least in the major Swedish cities. In 1939 a new rent law recognised the legitimacy of rental market organisations, but protective legislation such as security of tenure, a central demand of the tenants' movement, was still not implemented. However, shortly after the new law was enacted, the outbreak of the Second World War changed everything. Housing production fell rapidly and the cost of heating rose. The threat of soaring rents made the government issue a rent control act, with the result that rents, like other goods and costs, were regulated from 1942. During the rent control period security of tenure was enacted and rent increases from the pre-war level had to be accepted by rental boards. Both a state-level board, *Statens Hyresråd*, and municipal rental boards existed, with both organised landlords and tenants having representation on these boards.[21]

Rent control meant that a 'base rent' was set at the rent level of 1 January 1940, with landlords being obliged to get permission to increase rents above this level. However, heating costs could sometimes result in extra fees for the tenant.[22] This meant that the rental market's previous tendency to have rent set by collective bargaining was halted, even though the representatives of the organisations had room to make deals in rent tribunals and boards. It also meant that the tenants, compared to before, had a new power resource, their fixed rents combined with security of tenure. However, perhaps most importantly, the inter-war collective action had defined the tenant–landlord relationship as similar to a class relationship, giving legitimacy to interest groups representing each collective interest. The rent struggle had thus been accepted as something real and enduring that the emerging welfare state could help to solve.

Rent control and the changed playing field

The rent control period came with massive institutional changes, both to the direct relations between tenant and landlord and to the housing

market in general. The state and municipalities emerged as prominent housing actors, changing the conditions for and institutionalising the rent struggle. As with most Swedish social movements of that era, the tenants' movement increasingly consisted of stable interest organisations combined with an influential central organisation, HRF. The power basis of the HRF shifted during the period of rent control from a more direct collective, action-oriented challenge to a more institutionalised member of the system. Radical socialists, communists and syndicalists had played an important role in the early tenants' movement, but they gradually became more marginalised in favour of social democrats.[23] As the architectural historian Boris Schönbeck pointed out, the large-scale conflicts had drained the organisations' resources; centralised bureaucracy and decision-making were therefore effective from an organisational perspective.[24]

Rent control did not allow for direct collective bargaining. However, as Bengtsson has pointed out, even though the interest organisations did not collectively negotiate rents, they did negotiate with each other, making deals on the rental boards that implemented rent control.[25] Thus, just as in the labour market, a 'culture of negotiation' between ombudsmen from the organisations did appear. The rise of non-profit housing co-operatives (such as HSB and Riksbyggen, products of the tenants' and labour movements) and the municipal companies also empowered HRF, as it could enter into solid alliances with these companies and the construction workers' union.

SFF was active in protesting against rent control during the 1940s and 1950s, but ceased much of this during the 1960s.[26] As the organisations of industrial capitalism became de-radicalised, right-wing liberals and conservatives saw SFF as a suitable organisation to battle the social-democratic post-war programme.[27] The perceived threat of the social democratic socialisation of land and property spurred a campaign, and SFF advocated against this by contacting private enterprises and politicians.[28] While no direct socialisation of the kind feared by SFF occurred, the massive land acquisition and construction of the non-profit municipal sector established, at least in part, a nationalised housing sector. Housing construction in Sweden was never anti-capitalist, however, but rather an expression of state power acting countercyclically and in the interest of industrial capital.[29] The interests of private landlords weighed much lighter than those of industry.

One of the problems for SFF during the post-war years was the apparent feeling that they were increasingly playing second fiddle, with SABO taking the leading role. The municipalities were legally obligated

to provide housing, and were able to do so at more favourable conditions than other actors. The post-war loan system allowed the municipal housing companies as much as 70 to 100 per cent of the cost, while the co-operative sector received 70 to 95 per cent and the for-profit companies 70 to 85 per cent.[30] Given all this, there were significant incentives for the municipalities to start their own housing companies, and most did so. In the following decades municipal housing companies emerged in cities all over Sweden and, in line with the social democratic housing programme, started the construction of mainly municipally owned tenement buildings.

When SABO was formed in 1950, one of the explicit ideas was to co-ordinate building plans and to create a united front, a cartel against what were seen as private construction cartels, cutting the ties as much as possible to private enterprise, thus increasing predictability by taking control of the whole chain of production.[31] Alf Johansson, Director General of the Housing Authority, argued at the first SABO congress for rationalisation and extended public control of housing production. SABO had an essential role in the envisioned system.[32] Albert Aronsson, chairman of SABO and CEO of one of the largest municipal housing companies, Svenska Bostäder, was interviewed in 1971. He envisioned a system where most of the housing stock was publicly owned along with a small, privately owned sector, mainly consisting of small homeowners.[33]

During this period, the main political question for SFF was the abolition of rent control. One of its main arguments was that the increasing costs and non-increasing rents made housing maintenance hard, thus ruining the Swedish housing stock. One of the instruments that SFF used to further its interest was the *Näringslivets byggnadsdelegation* (Business Building Committee). Formed in 1945, this consisted of landlords, banks, insurance companies, employers and interest organisations from industry to combat the threat of post-war socialisation and to further the interests of private enterprise in housing and construction issues. SFF saw the work done within the committee, such as holding conferences, printing pamphlets and providing construction funds, as necessary to this process.[34]

According to Kubu,[35] organised landlords had trouble advocating or getting propaganda across. In Elvander's study of interest organisations in the 1960s, SFF appears as a relatively weak interest organisation, lagging behind HRF and SABO in power and influence.[36] SFF noted difficulties in getting its political ideas across; it was viewed as reactionary, not aligned with the new times of modernist mass housing. A recurring theme was financial issues. SFF appears to have struggled to

get funds for propaganda and other means of influencing policy-makers and other influential actors.[37] The landlords had previously been quite influential at the local level, but following the changes in local municipal governance, they found themselves at a loss with a role as challengers.

From an international perspective, McCrone & Elliott note that unpopular private British landlords also became politically marginalised; they had little parliamentary support and having their interests subordinated below those of industrial capital.[38] Headey states that in both Britain and the United States, interest groups favouring middle-class owner-occupied housing have historically been politically favoured.[39] This contrasts with Sweden, where working-class housing was preferred. However, as we shall see, even if Swedish politics did not favour individual private landlords, the rent control imposed in 1942 appears to have strengthened SFF as an organisation. Like the other interest organisations of Sweden, it went through a centralisation process. In 1964 individual members in about 100 locations became direct members of the central organisation SFF instead of local SFF branch members.

Centralisation serves many purposes in an organisation, both in simplifying decision-making and in allocating resources. SFF suffered in the 1960s because its member organisations differed significantly in numbers and economic resources. In a similar way to what was happening in HRF, a re-organisation was decided at the SFF congress in 1966 and was implemented at the beginning of 1968. In this 35 regional local organisations were formed, merging economic resources and manpower. Most of these were placed in southern Sweden, with no less than seven regional organisations in Scania.[40]

The rent control law of 1942 put much pressure on HRF to adapt. The new rent control law, with its rent tribunals, where the local tenants' unions were to send representatives, and the housing crisis, which was the reason for rent control, put pressure on the local and central tenants' organisations. Several tenant strongmen interviewed by Ivarsson and Tengling stated that the organisation was weak in the early 1950s. Rent control had made the local claim-making and tenant activists abundant. HRF had had economic troubles, according to the interview, and struggled with finding a purpose for its existence as the construction of non-profit housing increased. It focused on giving legal aid and working within the rent tribunals rather than conducting many outward campaigns. The organisation only had a handful of employees, instead relying on voluntary work by its members. According to Bengt Hallberg, the union secretary, HRF managed to keep up a facade of strength, concealing the bad shape the organisation was in.[41]

Certainly the bad shape was not reflected in the annual reports, which maintained an optimistic tone – even though the focus was on housing construction as the leading solution rather than any other actions by the tenants themselves.[42] As Hallberg was one of the architects of the organisational changes of the 1960s, he may have exaggerated the poor shape of the organisation in the 1950s. The housing regime changes were undoubtedly going in the direction that HRF wanted.

Much like HRF, SABO was dominated by social democrats during the years studied in this chapter. The rise of the municipal non-profit sector, as opposed to co-operatives and owner-occupied housing, was the preferred housing solution by the social democrat left wing.[43] Notably, political scientist Nils Elvander even counted SABO among the organisations of the tenants' movement, showing the thin line of the period between state and supposedly autonomous organisations such as HRF and SFF, as well as SABO.[44] It should be noted, however, that different municipalities chose different paths and that non-social democrat-dominated municipalities also created their own housing companies.[45]

Growing organisations, growing influence?

The numerically prominent and influential tenant movement is something that sets Sweden apart from other countries. Eric Hobsbawm has stated that tenants' unions 'flicker up and down', which is relatively correct from a historical perspective.[46] The collective organisation among tenants has typically been a local and episodical phenomenon, even though some places, such as Britain and New York, have a long tradition of tenant organisation. In Germany, another country with a long tradition of landlord and tenant organisations, the dramatic political shifts, regional differences and geopolitical changes of the twentieth century affected the tenants' movements in their efforts to build organisations and gain influence.[47]

Another aspect that sets Sweden apart is the importance of municipally owned or controlled non-profit housing companies and foundations organised within an interest organisation, SABO. It is interesting in considering this to compare Sweden to Denmark, a country with a similar modern political history. Both countries emerged during the twentieth century as solid welfare states of the social democratic regime type in Esping-Andersen's typology.[48] Both possessed broad universalistic, solidaristic and de-commodifying policies. While these regimes have changed a lot during the last decades, their implementation was crucial to the unfolding of history through the twentieth century.

However, the Swedish and Danish regimes were not identical. Esping-Andersen argues that Swedish social democrats managed to accomplish greater political control over the economy – achieved at least in part during the post-war years by a housing policy programme based on robust and active state intervention, This is quite unlike what happened in Denmark, where homeowners were heavily favoured.[49] While both states have focused on universalistic rental units as the primary tool for social housing policy, a significant difference has been that the Swedish municipalities, to a large degree, have themselves owned the non-profit housing companies. The Danish system, in contrast, allowed for a different sort of tenure in which tenant-controlled housing societies have played the leading role.[50] Neither Denmark nor the other Scandinavian countries have a tenant movement similar to that of Sweden.

SABO and HRF served to complement each other. Despite representing opposing sides of the tenant–landlord relationship, the representatives from both organisations were often social democrats. Negotiations could thus mainly be handled within the labour movement. Both organisations saw rapid growth during the post-war years. The HRF membership rate increased rapidly, rising from 102,465 members in 1945 to 607,254 in 1980.[51] While the inter-war members mainly came from Stockholm or Gothenburg, the post-war HRF recruited people from all over Sweden. In 1935 as many as 89 per cent of HRF members had been members of a tenants' union in either Stockholm or Gothenburg; by 1964 this had changed to only 40 per cent.[52] The new members appear to a large extent to have been small city municipal tenants. According to Erik Svensson, the chair of HRF from 1957, non-organised tenants typically lived in privately owned tenements in smaller cities.[53]

Many new members were collectively recruited from the housing co-operative federation HSB, traditionally considered the 'co-operative second branch' of the tenants' movement. To get a chance to own one of their popular apartments, you also had to be a member of a tenants' union. Over 50 per cent of HRF members in 1968 were also HSB members.[54] This percentage later dropped, but when the HSB/HRF collective membership ended in 1985, the membership numbers of HRF were reduced by about one-third.[55]

One example is Gothenburg, a militant stronghold during the inter-war period, with hardly any HSB members in the tenants' unions during that period. As rent control set in, the quota of HSB members increased, and the non-HSB-affiliated dwindled. By 1961 HSB members

made up 50 per cent of the total membership.[56] It is unclear whether old members also became HSB members. Still, it seems evident that the quota of members only interested in the tenants' unions dropped, even declining in total numbers as the street presence and militancy of the tenants' movement dwindled. In 1974, the last year with available figures during this study, 22,644 of the total 54,185 members (41 per cent) were HSB members, and membership in both categories decreased.[57]

HRF had, since its very beginning, had an internal rift between those in favour of a more centralised structure, aiming at political influence, and those in favour of a more federative form, in which activity and mobilisation in the local neighbourhoods were favoured. This division was partially political, between social democrats and more radical groups, and partially organisational, between those favouring centralisation and those promoting decentralisation. The conflict played out during the 1930s as a division between the tenants' unions in Stockholm and Gothenburg. By the end of the decade the centralising Stockholm position had won.

In 1939 'standard statutes' were decided upon and, even though the older tenants' unions could keep their statutes, newer ones were encouraged to use the more standardised set. Districts were implemented between 1942 and 1945 to consolidate resources, standardise fees and ensure that the financially important HSB members, who by statutes were also required to become members in a tenants' union, did join one. Once a federative organisation comprising independent tenant unions, HRF had gradually shifted into one centralised organisation.[58] One of its tasks became to find new tenant unions in places where these had not previously existed, thus ensuring that the rapidly growing movement was kept within specific organisational structures. The rapidly increasing municipal housing sector certainly assisted this process, as new rental units were built in places that had previously had a minimal rental housing stock, thus providing new tenants for HRF.

In 1964, at its 19th Congress, Hallberg described HRF as having changed from 'a fighting organisation' to 'a service organisation' and then to 'an interest organisation'.[59] A decision was made to merge the 194 local tenants' unions into 22 large regional organisations, each with an employed ombudsman and a clerk to handle essential matters.[60] This centralisation process was, interestingly enough, followed by a decentralising process as the changes from rent control to collective bargaining increased the need for local units in more direct contact with the local tenants, and so-called contact committees were formed. These were to become essential organisations, often managing social events along with

cultural and youth activities in local neighbourhoods. The increasing number of non-Swedish-speaking labour immigrants in the municipal tenements also increased the need for local representatives.[61]

SABO grew during the period, almost quintupling its number of member companies in the three decades following its foundation in 1950. By 1980 SABO had about 240 member organisations owning about 700,000 rental units, which can be compared to the nearly 800,000 rental apartments owned by members of SFF.[62] At the same time the housing system became more integrated, with increasingly standardised construction norms and municipal housing agencies supplying apartments from providers in both the public and private sectors. However, there was a tendency for private landlords to acquire the better-off tenants, with the less affluent ones going to the SABO member companies.[63] The newly constructed SABO tenements provided housing for workers in Swedish industry, which may explain why so many smaller towns started municipal housing companies. All in all, somewhat over 35 per cent of the population lived in a rented apartment by 1980.[64] While many municipal flats were built during the Million Homes Programme, one-third of the constructed units were small houses.[65] The small house has to this day remained the type of housing most Swedes live in.

SFF also appears to have benefited from the increasing importance of interest organisations. The organisation grew after a recruitment campaign started during the Second World War.[66] SFF reported its membership count in various ways, focusing on periods of local organisations, individual members and represented properties. While SFF was formed in 1914, the earliest membership count I have found is from 1922, when the organisation had 24 local landlords' associations as member organisations. By 1940 this had grown to 55 organisations with a reported 13,354 individual members. Rent control appears to have provided a further incentive to join; in 1950 the organisation had 118 member organisations and about 29,000 individual members.

In the following decade the growth slowed down; after almost 20 years of rent control, the organisation had increased to 126 local associations and 35,725 individual members. In 1974 the number of individual members had dropped to 23,995, and 33,937 represented properties. By 1977, it had dropped to about 22,000 members with about 30,000 properties, suggesting either a drop in private landlords or somewhat of a crisis for SFF as the rental market was deregulated.[67] Kubu indicates that the decrease in members was associated with smaller landlords selling their properties, either to municipal companies or to larger private ones.[68] The CEO of SFF, Claës Breitholtz, observed that an

older category of small owners, widows and others were becoming less common as members.[69]

Ending rent control?

Rent control was supposed to be a temporary solution. Still, since a new housing crisis arrived after the end of the Second World War, it became politically impossible for the social democratic government to deregulate the rents. Directly regulated rents therefore remained for decades until the large-scale municipal housing production had created a housing surplus in the late 1970s. This also meant that a third player, the municipal housing company organisation SABO, entered the game in 1950, making the situation more complex. In 1957 a deal was struck between HRF and SABO stipulating that rents in municipal houses should be collectively bargained.

This deal was made despite reluctance within SABO concerning whether or not a non-profit company, created for the benefit of the tenants, really needed to negotiate rents. Together HRF and SABO formed a 'Rental Market Committee' with representatives from both organisations to handle bargaining procedures and disputes. Even if collective bargaining on the rental market initially came into existence during the rental conflicts of the 1930s, it was now institutionalised, and the idea of the non-profit municipal sector as the primary beacon for housing policy became apparent. This was to be advanced even more in 1974, when it was decided that the non-profit municipal rents would be benchmarks for all rent-setting according to use-value – a position they retained until 2011.[70]

The 1957 deal meant that an increasingly large part of the rental sector, the non-profit domain, was exempt from rent control; it also started a process in which the private sector was supposed to mirror the non-profit sector, and the system of collectively bargained rents thus moved on to the private sector. Striking a similar deal with SFF was more controversial within the tenants' movement, where many still remembered the bitter conflicts of the 1930s – but when the time came in 1968 to change into a system of collectively bargained rents based on a system of use-value, both HRF and SFF agreed. The changed legislation met very little resistance in Parliament.[71]

The end of the strict rent control was approaching, and the committee was drafting the Government Official Report (SOU). Erik Svensson of HRF and Claës Breitholtz of SFF were committee members.

What happened was in fact a historic compromise, perhaps similar to the 1938 Saltsjöbaden treaty of the labour market. The report suggested a system of use-value for rent-setting, in which factors such as the condition of the apartment, its surroundings, the level of comfort it offered and other benefits in the property should be considered when setting the rent. The rent was to be compared with similar apartments, but factors such as the property's age or costs were not considered. The governmental proposition was very similar to what had been suggested by the committee. Herman Kling, then Minister of Justice, stated that the strong organisations were now ready to take responsibility for the rent-setting.[72] According to Breitholtz and the second CEO of SFF, Folke Berg, the decline of older properties due to a lack of renovations spurred HRF into accepting the end of rent control.[73]

There appears to have been an ongoing discussion about the fees paid by the local organisations to the central organisation. Pressure was also added from the massive housing programme, the so-called 'Million Homes Programme', from 1965 to 1975. SFF decided on an outgoing propaganda campaign and an effort to rid organisations of 'non-serious' landlords as a reaction to reports of increasing housing speculation and dwindling maintenance of properties. Several members were subsequently expelled from the organisation.[74]

Since its beginning, landlord organisations had emphasised economic resources as the most important factor in organisational strength.[75] Given that the organisation's members were primarily made up of businesspeople and that the entrepreneurial ideal was strong among the members, the focus on financial resources is easy to understand. In the SFF organisation inquiry presented in 1979, funding was mentioned as a vital issue. Nevertheless, the importance of improving the relationship with other key stakeholders, especially in the construction industry, was also noted.[76] By the end of the period SFF had established itself as an essential actor, even if private landlords no longer had the strong position they once enjoyed. It had achieved its primary goal of ending direct rent control, even though the collective bargaining system was a compromise and not its ultimate goal. Rent control had not been favoured by either side, in fact, and had in the end had few defenders.

Erik Svensson, chair of HRF, appears to have been essential in replacing direct rent control with collectively bargained rents.[77] Svensson was hailed by SFF strongmen Claës Breitholtz and Folke Berg as a more compromise-oriented chairman than the previous HRF leadership had been; he was also a skilled negotiator.[78] In Kubu's 1971 interview with him, Svensson claimed that the willingness of the government to listen to

HRF's proposals had increased. He was also unequivocal in his dislike of rent control, which he perceived as lowering the standard of tenements by failing to provide adequate funds for renovations. According to Svensson, it was essential to have a flexible system in which rents were bargained collectively at a local level following local conditions.[79] The basis of this system was agreements on collective bargaining and tenant influence procedures that were set up with municipal landlords and several private landlords during the 1970s. Standardised contracts were agreed upon with SFF and SABO.[80]

Several new laws, setting minimum requirements and enabling forced administration in mismanaged properties, were implemented during the 1970s, further impacting the power relations between tenant and landlord. Collective bargaining was legislated on 1 July 1978, with the right to negotiate rents and have the rent-setting tried in court if the parties could not agree. However, as SABO noted, the new legislation followed what was already praxis for the organisations.[81] As the pricing of co-operative housing was de-regulated in 1968, the social role of the co-operative sector was essentially dropped and the social role of the SABO companies was emphasised.[82] The HRF/SABO alliance was duly strengthened, although it would face troubles in the coming years.

Rent strikes reappear

While in the post-war era the militant repertoire of the tenants' movement had been less important than before, it had not disappeared completely. In Gothenburg boycott actions were issued regularly until 1955 and were used as threats as late as 1965.[83] These were relatively undramatic events. However, tenant militancy flared up again, beginning in the late 1960s, when the rental market organisations appeared to have settled matters. The 1970s turned out to be a contentious decade, with challenges arising from both left and right. The liberal and conservative parties pushed for political appointment to the SABO board rather than internal recruitment. The idea was that the board should reflect political majorities rather than being automatically dominated by social democrats.[84] From the left new, often communist radicals expressed heavy critiques toward the newly constructed neighbourhoods and the increasingly discussed segregation, rising rents, poor social services and social issues. One explicit purpose was to enter the social democrat-dominated organisations and radicalise the pacified workers, tuning them to their revolutionary potential.

Researchers Maj-Britt and Gunnar Inghe, writing about social problems in welfare in Sweden, noted that, despite the increasing housing standards, there were still some problems. Many families, especially those living in rural Sweden, were overcrowded, and the standard of much of the older housing stock needed to be raised. While Sweden had done a lot, the Inghes noted, it had started at an internationally low standard of housing, so much work remained to be done. Increasing rent costs and rising birth rates meant that many families had to settle for small, crowded homes.[85] In interviews with tenants living in the Stockholm suburb of Tensta, then still under construction, many complaints were voiced concerning the lack of mass transit, essential services and the hazardous environment for the children. Several interviewees declared that they only wanted to stay there temporarily; they had moved to Tensta because they could find no other housing available.[86] The new suburbs, like Tensta, became increasingly questioned in the public debate and negatively portrayed.[87]

Tenant mobilisation and rent strikes, mostly non-sanctioned by HRF, happened in several places throughout Sweden. Critiques about modernisation and sanitation projects also emerged. Most of them occurred in the newly constructed post-war housing projects; they targeted non-profit student home foundations or municipal housing companies that were members of SABO. In contrast to what had happened in the inter-war period, the rental apartments targeted were now, in almost all cases, municipally owned. It is ironic that the large SABO municipal rental sector, partly due to the inter-war tenant mobilisation, became a target of militant tenant activism and rent strikes. Sometimes the tenant activists focused on local tenants' unions and contact committees. On other occasions they formed parallel networks or competing organisations with established tenants' unions.[88]

As the 1970s and 1980s rent protests showed, the SABO companies were far from immune from criticism from organised tenants. Instead, they were accused of being a little better than private landlords, completely failing to fulfil the social role they were supposed to have. The high rents of the 1970s coincided with a high rate of unoccupied housing units, especially for the SABO companies; by 1974 this had reached 13.4 per cent of the municipal housing stock and 51 per cent of the private stock.[89] These new conflicts were a significant problem for HRF and SABO. Both organisations were dominated by social democrats and used to being able to handle issues through party comrades negotiating issues with one another. The old communist party VPK (formerly SKP)[90] had changed into a Eurocommunist party, and many of the new radical

tenant activists came from the more radical new parties, in particular KFML (later called SKP). The Swedish Maoist movement had many similarities in its approach to the housing struggle with that of the Dutch movement outlined in Chapter 8 of this volume by Bart van der Steen; both focused on local neighbourhood organising.

According to Sven Bergenstråhle, a former Maoist tenant activist who later became president of the International Union of Tenants, radicals saw HRF as a valid target. While the labour union leaders had been battling communists for decades, the social democrat leadership of HRF had not had that much of a communist opposition since the 1930s. It was caught unaware. HRF president Lars Anderstig noted that the internal dissent during the 1970s took much effort to manage.[91] In Norrköping a contact committee was excluded from the organisation after fiery annual meetings.[92] 'The rent issue' became contentious, and protests continued into the 1980s.[93]

However, despite this, and the social democrats' loss of power in 1976 to a liberal-conservative government, housing policy changed very little before the neoliberal reforms that were to come during the 1990s. HRF had, during the period examined in this chapter, based its strong position on parliamentary political support and alliances with other organisations rather than the collective mobilisation that had once been its main strength. From an organisational perspective, this had apparent advantages, but it also created a reliance on other actors. This was to impact upon HRF during the decades following the period discussed in this chapter.

In 1980 HRF published an investigation into the collective bargaining system. It stated that the role of the non-profit municipal housing companies was crucial, primarily since their rents provided benchmarks for all rent-setting. The negotiation procedures established with SABO were based on voluntary agreements. Since the question had been raised in the organisation, the HRF investigation discussed the possible use of militant tactics such as rent strikes. It was concluded that the rent strikes of the 1930s had been aimed at landlords who refused to negotiate or had unreasonable demands. Since the tenants had now legislated the right to intervene and to try rents at a rent tribunal if the parties disagreed, the investigation concluded that militant methods had no role in the repertoire of HRF. However, the investigation stated that if the power relations were to change heavily in favour of landlords, tenants should be prepared to pick up militant methods again.[94]

The rent strikes continued until the mid-1980s, since when they have been virtually absent from the Swedish rental market.[95] Much

of the post-war housing system has evaporated in the last decades. Municipal housing companies are no longer the norm for rent-setting, nor are they any longer non-profit. SABO now has private companies as associated members, and parts of their member companies' housing stock have been privatised. HRF has been clinging to protect what parts of the system it can. However, with hostile governments, renovictions, second-hand contracts and short-term leases increasing, spurred on by the current housing crisis, tenants and their traditional organisations have lost much influence. Despite the changed power relations, HRF has yet to pick up rent striking again. Nevertheless, resistance outside of conventional channels is happening;[96] sooner or later rent strikes will probably reappear, in Sweden as elsewhere.

Conclusion

As Korpi has noted, Sweden is the country that had the longest-reigning social democratic party; as such, it is an excellent empirical example to examine the possibilities and opportunities of reformist socialism.[97] While there were aspirations that in part succeeded in de-commodifying the housing market, no extensive socialisation of the housing stock took place. SFF lost influence and started the research period as a challenger, but steps were taken to incorporate the private landlords into the housing regime and to give them influence. Landlords' associations had long been influential in local politics. They could also become influential nationally – a position they have kept and probably enhanced today. While it can be argued that the collectively bargained system was a form of rent control, it was more than anything a system that considered the interest organisations as legitimate representatives of opposing concerns. These organisations favoured long-term, calculable deals; they were mainly interested in staying, or becoming, members of the political system as the political opportunity structures allowed. Today, with neoliberalisation, power relations and political opportunity structures have certainly changed – but not so much the ways of the organisations interested in them.

Leading organisations in the rental market benefited from the new housing market order, mirroring the increasing importance of interest organisations elsewhere. HRF, in particular, also benefited from the increased, state-fuelled construction rate, as well as the state's general willingness to interact and promote interest organisations. The political ties between HRF and SABO appear to have affected the relationship between those two in a mutually beneficial way, making an

early settlement for collective bargaining possible. A steadily increasing number of HRF members also lived in SABO apartments. There are some parallels to the labour market, but the rental market saw far more state interference through infrastructural power and institutional changes. The tenants were also organised in one big organisation, with no real competitors. Even though both SABO and SFF were landlord organisations, they had very different points of departure, representing different organisational logics.

Organisational changes and actions appear to have many causes, but responding to outside pressure and achieving internal cohesion appears crucial. A third factor seems to have been the need to gather and distribute resources from more affluent parts of the organisations to less affluent ones. This required centralisation, with a central organisational core. Redistribution of resources tends to happen in organisations. For example, the welfare project studied at the time was made possible by the balance of forces and the new historic bloc facilitated by the rise of the labour movement, dominated by social democrats. As this chapter shows, the organisations had dual interests, both as champions for the class interests they represented and for the organisations themselves. Both sides appear to have agreed that disciplined organisations handled power resources most successfully, and thus attempted to free themselves from managing state boundaries – or at least to be part of them.

It is little wonder that SFF wanted rent control gone. However, it is interesting that HRF also replaced direct rent control with a system of collectively bargained rents coupled with the security of tenure. HRF, SABO and SFF all saw collective bargaining as preferable to rent control; it offered a way to avoid high transaction costs from large-scale conflicts and negotiating individual rents with tenants. Through the joint efforts of these organisations, rent also came to be seen as something similar to wages – an issue that should be determined by interest organisations representing tenants and landlords. In other words, the rental market was treated as an area for a class struggle in which a compromise was considered necessary. To understand the specific institutional solution that is rent-setting by collective bargaining, it is essential to understand this. The interest organisations of Sweden were, and to some extent still are, considered legitimate representatives of class interests. That rent-setting should be settled by these class interest representatives, in a similar way to wage-setting, was not a far stretch.

HRF and SFF appear to have had a less strained relationship than they did during the inter-war period. As a result of this, and of the institutional changes, major confrontations such as those during the 1930s

did not occur. It appears instead as if both of the organisations counted on the system with a politicised housing market and a state apparatus involved in housing construction would continue; they both sought to establish a predictable system, in which rent-setting would be done by collective bargaining.

A system such as this is also valuable for organisations as it secures their roles as representatives of their class interests. While the system has tendencies toward corporatism, one should also remember that the organisations themselves had engaged in collective bargaining before rent control; they then re-established that system when the state abandoned rent control. If anything, abandoning rent control appears to have favoured the local branches, as much more information on local circumstances now became necessary. The self-disciplining role of both organisations against tenant radicals and 'non-serious' landlords seems to have increased in importance as the rental sector was reformed in the 1970s.

Overall, it appears as if organisational interests and logic influenced the actions of the organisations to a high degree, promoting the idea that the rent struggle was an affair between the three organisations. HRF's role as a member of the system, and its reluctance to become a challenger, remains a top priority to this day, putting it in conflict with housing activists.[98] What remains of the Swedish rent model is now under political pressure and subject to erosion through policy changes and financial practices.[99] As housing is becoming a major global political issue,[100] tenant mobilisation may once again become an important factor. That, however, remains to be seen.

Notes

1 The author wishes to thank colleagues at IBF and the Department of Economic History, Uppsala University. Thank you to Professor Bo Bengtsson for help, comments and encouragement, and to the Lars Erik Lundberg Foundation for funding this research project.
2 Rolf 2020, ch. 53.
3 Stromquist 2023, 17–24.
4 Ekström von Essen 2003, 12–13.
5 Åmark 1994, 83–103.
6 Lundh 2008, 17.
7 Korpi 1978, 347–9.
8 McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2003, 7–9.
9 Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 20–1, 59, 240.
10 Kemeny 1995, 66–7.
11 Bengtsson 2003, 25–27.
12 Annual reports and other organisational materials are available for HRF at the Labour Movements Archive and Library Stockholm and for SABO at the Swedish National Library

and the archives of Sveriges Allmännytta, both in Stockholm. Unfortunately at the time of writing the SABO archive was in the process of being moved, which meant restricted access to annual reports from SABO. For SFF, annual reports and other organisational materials are available at the Swedish National Library, Stockholm.

13 Kubu 1971.
14 Forsell 2003; Rolf 2020.
15 Strömberg 1989.
16 Andersson 1990, 13ff, 21.
17 Hirdman 1988, 177–9; Olsson 1980, 321ff.
18 Casparsson 1966; Johansson 1989, 45ff.
19 Rolf 2021. For similar cases, see Chapter 4 by Poy and Belkin, Chapter 5 by Zumoff and others in this volume.
20 Rolf 2020, ch. 4.10; Rolf 2021.
21 Victorin 1980, 12–16.
22 Baheru 2020, 158–60.
23 Rolf 2020.
24 Schönbeck 1994, 327.
25 Bengtsson 2003, 8–9.
26 Elvander 1966, 266.
27 Söderpalm 1976, 152–3.
28 SFF 1946.
29 Brunnström, Gladoić Håkansson and Uppenberg 2020; Strömberg 1984. Also, for comparison, see Chapter 9 by Vollmer in this volume.
30 Boverket 2007, 60.
31 Ramberg 2000, 175–6.
32 SABO 1950, 30–33.
33 Kubu 1971, 110–11.
34 SFF 1946; SFF 1955; SFF 1966; SFF 1976.
35 Kubu 1971, 57.
36 Elvander 1966, 41–3, 177, 195, 198.
37 SFF 1989.
38 McCrone and Elliott 1989, 39–41.
39 Headey 1978, 240.
40 SFF 1967; SFF 1989.
41 Ivarsson and Tengling 1988, 92, 105, 124.
42 HRF 1948; HRF 1960.
43 Strömberg 1989.
44 Elvander 1966, 41.
45 Blackwell, Holgersen, Polanska, Richard, Rolf and Wallstam 2023; Strömberg 1989.
46 Hobsbawm 1987, 47.
47 Führer 2000. Also, see Chapter 9 by Vollmer in this volume.
48 Esping-Andersen 1990.
49 Esping-Andersen 1978.
50 Bengtsson 2013b.
51 HRF 1948; HRF 1980a.
52 HRF 1935; HRF 1964; Hyresgästernas Centralförsamling i Göteborg 1935: Hyresgästernas Centralförsamling i Göteborg 1962; Hyresgästföreningen i Stockholm 1935; Hyresgästföreningen i Stockholm 1964.
53 Kubu 1971, 150.
54 Ivarsson and Tengling 1988, 182–6.
55 Forsman and Svanberg 2016, 202.
56 Hyresgästernas Centralförsamling i Göteborg 1924; Hyresgästernas Centralförsamling i Göteborg 1935; Hyresgästernas Centralförsamling i Göteborg 1962.
57 Hyresgästernas Centralförsamling i Göteborg 1975.
58 Rolf 2020.
59 Ivarsson and Tengling 1988, 122.
60 HRF 1968.
61 HRF 1976; Forsman and Svanberg 2016.

62 Victorin 1980, 129–30.
63 Strömberg 1984, 130–1.
64 SCB 2018, 9.
65 Blackwell, Holgersen, Polanska, Richard, Rolf and Wallstam 2023, 88–9.
66 SFF 1944.
67 SFF 1922; SFF 1941; SFF 1961; SFF 1975; SFF 1978.
68 Kubu 1971.
69 Kubu 1971, 166.
70 Boverket 2007, 15.
71 Bengtsson 2013a.
72 Bengtsson 2003.
73 Kubu 1971, 169–70.
74 SFF 1989, 8.
75 Rolf 2020.
76 SFF 1979.
77 Ivarsson and Tengling 1988, 105–8.
78 Kubu 1971.
79 Kubu 1971, 156–63.
80 HRF 1976; HRF 1980a.
81 SABO 1979.
82 Boverket 2007, 14–15.
83 Rolf 2020, 359.
84 Ramberg 2000.
85 Inghe and Inghe 1969, 87–100.
86 Bengtzon, Delden and Lundgren 1970.
87 Franzén and Sandstedt 1993, 29–32.
88 Rolf 2023.
89 SABO 1976, 6.
90 Rolf 2023.
91 Wredberg 1987.
92 Ivarsson and Tengling 1988; Forsman and Svanberg 2016.
93 Ivarsson and Tengling 1988; Rolf 2023.
94 HRF 1980b.
95 Rolf 2023.
96 Polanska and Richard 2021.
97 Korpi 1978.
98 Polanska and Richard 2021.
99 Gustafsson 2022.
100 See, for example, Chapter 13 by Ill-Raga and Bonshoms-Guzmán in this volume.

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7

'*Autogestion des luttes*': immigrant rent strikes in France, 1975–1980

Nathan Crompton

> *Un mouvement ne peut être dirigé que par les gens qui sont concernés* ('A movement can only be led by the people who are most affected').[1]
>
> Assane Ba, 'Vingt ans après' (2002)

> The [importance] of the SONACOTRA conflict … lies in this: residents taking the conflict into their own hands, and the forms of organisation they have given themselves in doing so: delegates, coordination committees, general assemblies, and political unity across the different ethnicities involved.[2]
>
> *L'Autogestion?: États généraux pour l'autogestion socialiste* (1976)

Introduction

The *années 1968* ('1968 years') in France were a time of political contestation that extended late into the 1970s. One of the period's most remarkable and singular events was the nationwide immigrant rent strike against high rents, tenant repression and substandard living conditions in immigrant housing. The rent strike occurred in hundreds of buildings and lasted five years, from early 1975 until its quasi-negotiated resolution in late 1979. While the rent strike is not as well known as other 1970s episodes, such as Lip or Larzac, it deserves an important place in the history of post-1968 France.

The rent strike took place in a subsection of French housing called the *foyers* or immigrant 'hostels'. Though often referred to as

the 'SONACOTRA rent strikes', bearing the name of the state-owned hostel provider for migrant workers in France (National Society for the Construction of Housing for Workers), the rent strike also extended to numerous hostels run by smaller *foyer* organisations.[3] The rent strike was notable not only for its remarkable duration (it lasted half a decade and consisted of 'the longest struggle ever waged by immigrant workers [in France]'), but also for its reach and scale: by 1979 nearly 100 buildings were engaged in 'total rent strike' (*en grève totale des loyers*) and the movement touched hundreds more hostels across France.[4]

The genesis of the movement dates to early 1975, sparked by immigrant tenants of a hostel in a northern suburb of Paris who opposed SONACOTRA's push for another rent hike. Their rallying cry was succinct: 'No improvement in the conditions of the home [*foyer*], no increase in the cost of rent [*loyer*]'. Though SONACOTRA briefly relented, the respite proved short-lived. In September 1975 management returned with renewed demands for higher rent. In response, a formidable surge of almost 30 buildings entered a full rent strike. Within months the number of buildings would double. By 1978 the movement had burgeoned to 133 hostels engaged in rent strike across France, with an estimated 28,000 tenants involved in a co-ordinated non-payment of rent. This chapter aims to engage with the outcome of the strike, the historical context for its emergence and the political singularity and 'interiority' of the strike itself (to use a phrase employed by a number of the Maoists who participated in the rent strike movement).[5]

Given these basic co-ordinates, the importance of the rent strike has arguably failed to be incorporated into the historiography of the period and today risks being overlooked in the popular memory of the 1968 years. Studies that have discussed the rent strike usually do so in passing, often within wider accounts of immigrant and mass politics in 1970s France. Lectures and articles published with a dedicated focus on the rent strike are few and far between. Given the ample archival material from which to draw upon, much more demands to be written.[6] Drawing on first-hand testimonials, existing research and periodicals of the time, this chapter aims to contribute to our understanding of the rent strike by adding at least three considerations.

First, it grasps the rent strike in its full duration. Some studies have erroneously considered the rent strike to have peaked in 1975, the year it detonated but was just getting off the ground. Second, it analyses the 1975–80 rent strike through the framework of self-management and *autogestion des luttes* ('self-management of struggles'). This helps to theorise and historically contextualise the autonomous nature of the rent

strike as an immigrant mass movement, anchored in practices of self-organisation at a principled distance from the trade unions and official institutions of the French left.[7] Third, this chapter seeks to place the rent strike within a wider context of post-war capitalist and colonial France, intimately bound up with the emergence of decolonial and national liberation movements in the 1950s and 1960s.

These two latter aspects – self-management and national liberation – are intimately related. Some national liberation struggles, such as the movement for Algerian independence, were themselves declarations of autogestion during and after liberation in 1962. Many of the largely Maghrebian workers residing in the SONACOTRA *foyers* had first come to politics through the experience of post-revolutionary Algerian autogestion. To draw out this point I surveyed a wide range of source materials, including government reports and commissions, as well as periodicals from mainstream newspapers and periodicals of the far left. I have also drawn on numerous reports, newspapers and dispatches produced by the strikers. In recent years a number of interviews and first-person reflections have been conducted by French researchers and historians with *foyer* residents and rent strike organisers, producing an immensely rich and invaluable resource for understanding the strike.

Postscript to decolonisation, prelude to rent strike

In the 1970s immigrant workers comprised roughly 20 per cent of the French workforce, mostly concentrated in industrial and blue-collar sectors. Between 1968 and 1975 this total number rose from 881,000 to 1.14 million.[8] A large portion of immigrant workers originated from Algeria, but as the post-war years of relative economic growth unfolded, many would arrive in the French hexagon from the Antilles, North Africa, Yugoslavia, parts of East Asia and elsewhere.[9] These workers brought with them their culture, identity and deeply rooted traditions of political experience and struggle. Senegalese and Algerian workers brought not only ideas of self-determination and national liberation, but also a theory and practice of economic self-management (*autogestion*), with Ahmed Ben Bella's socialist government in Algeria (1963–5) and parallel experiences in Senegal.[10]

These immigrant workers developed theories of self-organisation that contributed to the uncompromising autonomy of their movement in the 1970s, proclaimed in embryo during the general strike of May '68. While the wider movement remained largely silent on the struggles of immigrant

workers during May and June 1968, the Maghrebian Action Committee immersed itself in the events of May and proclaimed, '*Vive l'Autogestion!*'[11] The post-May period was marked by a major proliferation of immigrant struggles: a wave of strikes by immigrant workers initiated in 1971, the birth of the *sans papiers* movement with the hunger strikes of 1972–3, the years-long hostel tenant strike launched in the mid-decade and the continued militancy of immigrant automobile workers well into the 1980s, among other important high points of resistance and political assertion.

Before discussing these events, and their relationship to the *autogestion des luttes* of the 1970s, it is necessary to first excavate an earlier experience of autogestion and anti-colonial revolutionary politics, embedded in the immediate post-revolutionary period in Algeria following Independence in 1962.[12] This will help to illuminate the lineage and political genealogy of immigrant self-organisation in late 1970s France, including the hostel rent strike. For three years, from April 1962 until the overthrow of Ben Bella's government in June 1965, agrarian and industrial workers across Algeria carried out self-management on a large scale.[13] After the defeat of the French army in 1962, Algeria quickly became an epicentre of autogestion, marked by a spontaneous and *ad hoc* burst of worker and peasant activity from below. This early burst of autogestion was then translated into social policy under Ben Bella, becoming a guiding principle in the reconstruction of an economy based on local ownership, industrial self-management and rural-worker control of the agrarian sector.[14]

An important catalyst in this process was the creation of democratic 'management committees' in factories and estates, as ordinary Algerians moved in to run the economy and create a new democratic system. Eventually this was followed by the official affirmation of economic autogestion across the country by a series of government decrees in the autumn of 1962, culminating in the more comprehensive *Décrets de mars* of 1963.[15] Members of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) would come to describe the rise of the management committees in this way:

> In an upsurge of revolutionary enthusiasm, workers and peasants occupied closed factories and [abandoned] agricultural estates … Fully conscious of their new responsibilities, they organised themselves with admirable control and elected their management committees. In this way the system of *autogestion* emerged quite naturally as the logical conclusion of a continuing development of thought and action, and the revolutionary accomplishment of the working class.[16]

Part of the context for autogestion was the status of the *biens-vacants*, the properties and vast unoccupied farmlands left behind by thousands of *pieds-noirs* (French settlers) who departed from Algeria after French military defeat. Almost immediately after the ceasefire in 1962, competing interests within Algerian civil society began to lay claim to the agrarian and industrial *biens-vacants*. These lands, formerly integrated into the colonial mode of production and its complex system of resource extraction and labour exploitation, were suddenly thrust into a political and economic vacuum. Former military commanders, private speculators and workers' collectives all moved in to make use of and assert title to the abandoned properties. This set off a profound social and revolutionary turmoil that was often resolved only through direct conflict. In places such as Meloug, where farmworkers drove out a private owner installed by the local prefect, this led to clear victories for the workers.[17]

These moments and events in political independence and decolonisation, as we will see, underwent a colonial boomerang effect in the 1970s, coming home to roost in metropolitan France.[18] More than a decade after Algerian independence, the self-management of agricultural lands, industry and housing in post-revolutionary Algeria would be re-doubled, echoed and reincarnated in the struggles of immigrant workers in France. This took both the form of political affirmation and critical negation: an affirmation of the spirit of decolonial autogestion and a critique of colonial racism within the management of the migrant *foyer* system in France. SONACOTRA was identified as a colonial institution, and tenants embarked on an *autogestionnaire* fight to construct a new form of housing in which 'workers would themselves appoint the leaders of those hostels'.[19]

Immigrants, workers or national liberation struggles? From the housing question to the birth of autonomy

By the 1970s, the structural contradictions of colonial development produced a continued process of mass migration from the periphery to the core of the international economy, particularly from North Africa to metropolitan France. Despite Algerian independence, the Algerian economy remained dependent within the global and 'Eurafrican' system, fixed in its role as an exporter of cheap (i.e. systemically under-valued) labour.[20] As we will see, it is difficult to discuss the immigrant movements and uprisings of the 1970s in France without grasping these historical continuities. One place to begin is the immigrant housing struggles

that occurred across France in the late 1960s, several years before the eruption of the rent strike.

Some historians have insisted on a sharp distinction between classical workers' struggles and other forms of post-68 contestation in France, such as housing struggles, anti-racism drives, battles for immigrant rights and similar movements. Historian Laure Pitti has argued that the very concept of *immigré* regrettably displaces the centrality of workplace demands.[21] She argues that the term *luttes de l'immigration* ('immigration struggles') has been conceived retroactively by historians, superimposed onto what were essentially workers' struggles.[22] In reality there is widespread use of the term *luttes de l'immigration* and *luttes des immigrés* in the archives.[23] Some observers at the time argued that housing struggles were at the heart of the immigrant rights movement of the 1960s, and that until 1971 it was difficult to anticipate an expansion beyond the struggles in the *foyers*.[24]

This debate assumes that class can be isolated as an independent abstraction. However, in reality sites of immigrants' struggles were numerous and overlapping. For example, the distinction between factory and housing struggles was constantly shifting. Consider the reverberant strikes of Oyonnax in the early years of the decade: in 1971, 270 Algerian workers were lodging in a *foyer* with only 180 beds, forced to sleep in shifts, on the ground or not at all. They ultimately rejected their conditions and decided to strike.

This strike, backed by the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT), lasted four days, eventually forcing the state to respond.[25] The municipality's 'solution' to this overcrowding was to create even more overcrowding, doubling the number of beds in each room from 3 to 6.[26] When residents resisted the measure, the police were sent in at 3 a.m. on the morning of 8 October 1971 and all *cartes de résidents* (resident cards) were confiscated, leading to expulsion from France for some participants.[27] In response to the raid, the residents simply shifted their strike to the workplace during the day. To sleep, they relocated to the floor of a local church. This complex conflict, and many others like it, defy strict categorisation as either a workplace struggle or a housing struggle – it was obviously both. What can be declared by way of classification is that it was an exemplary struggle.[28]

These localised struggles would create the groundwork for the eventual national five-year tenants' strike against SONACOTRA in 1975. At the same time, groundwork was also being laid through a parallel set of struggles taking place outside the immediate factory and housing contexts. These were part of a wider movement against racialised

violence in the streets and expulsions by the Minister of the Interior, and in support of the national liberation of oppressed minorities, in particular the struggle for Palestine.[29] Within this context, expulsions, hunger strikes and street protests became highly politicised moments around which a growing number of immigrants coalesced to form several important autonomous organisations. Perhaps the best-known among these flashpoints was the so-called Bouziri Affair. Saïd Bouziri was a Tunisian activist scheduled to be deported alongside his wife in 1972, on the heels of new immigration restrictions under the French government's Marcellin-Fontanet measures. Bouziri led a successful hunger strike against the expulsion, giving rise to a new set of tactics anchored in direct action.

This period of successful direct actions and street mobilisations led to the creation of independent immigrant groups – in Bouziri's case, the *Mouvement des travailleurs arabes* (MTA) founded in 1972. Concrete victories continued into 1973, when the movement prevented Minister Paul Dijoud from passing another repressive round of laws:

> In '73, when Dijoud was in Stoleru's place, he wanted to pass very dangerous laws. Exemplary struggles were waged, and these laws were ultimately not passed. The same goes for the laws prohibiting the arrival of families, which condemned immigrant workers to live as celibate singles [*célibataires*]. Here, too, the mobilisation pushed the government back.[30]

The MTA was both the culmination and the political next step of the Palestine Committees, dissolved in 1972 to 'give birth' to the MTA.[31] Successes in 1972–3, and direct action strategies such as Bouziri's, put wind in the sails of the migrant justice movement. However, they also led to debates about the nature of 'personal' strategies such as the hunger strike, aimed at halting an individual's deportation order.[32] Two organisations, the Committee to Defend the Lives and Rights of Immigrant Workers (CDVDTI) and the *Comités unitaires Français immigrés* (CUFI), debated about what might be the best strategic response to individual cases of expulsion.[33]

The debate was soon resolved on two sides at once, for two reasons. Firstly, with new victories the tactic of direct action against expulsions became more widespread and accepted within the movement.[34] Secondly, the risk of a 'personal' strategy was overcome by the growing rise of mass events: theory was answered with practice in the birth of an independent mass movement – including, as we will see, the non-payment of rent at

SONACOTRA. Starting in 1975, this would become one of the highest-profile and most prolonged of the autonomous struggles.

In short, initiatives such as the Palestine Committees, followed by the MTA, helped to set the foundations of, and impart concrete organising lessons for, the emerging struggle in the hostels. In fact by the early 1970s the Palestine Committees had in some instances already begun to be embryonically engaged within the migrant hostels. Their members identified SONACOTRA as a colonial institution in a milieu beyond the factory that called out for mass mobilisation and direct tenant control.[35] Consistent with their previous engagement, MTA figures such as Saïd Bouziri also became active participants in the hostel rent strike.

Contours of the immigrant housing system

Proportional to the industrial growth of the French economy and the post-war demand for labour, immigrant workers arrived in metropolitan France in increasing numbers from the 1950s onward. The French imperial nation-state was intact, and its colonies continued to be the primary source of migration.[36] Those who arrived in metropolitan France had to face both the housing shortage and the patchwork known as the French housing system. By the 1960s most immigrants were staying in housing and shelter classified by a number of categories or sub-types: the *bidonvilles* ('shanty towns'), the *cités de transit* ('transition estates'), urban squats, worker hostels, the HLM (*habitation à loyer modéré*, i.e. social housing) and private market housing.

The *bidonvilles* consisted of both informal and quasi-formal settlements that had been erected in most major cities across France – usually near peri-urban industrial areas such as Nanterre in the Paris region or Oullins near Lyon. The term was first used in North Africa in the 1930s, according to Françoise de Barros, before being imported to metropolitan France in the post-war period.[37] The basic existence of the urban slum predates this period, but the term *bidonville* carries a particular colonial connotation, often referring to the makeshift and extra-legal settlements inhabited by North African and other migrant communities. Closely related to the *bidonvilles*, especially starting with the Algerian War, were the *cités de transit*, a temporary form of low-rise social housing built for migrants beginning in the 1950s. These were 'transition estates' intended temporarily to house tenants displaced by slum clearance and the co-ordinated destruction of the *bidonvilles*. France's *cités de transit* were built with cheap architectural methods and materials. They were

intended for 'transitional' tenants who would in theory stay for no more than two years, according to planners, although the average inhabitation period was often much longer. The early 1970s saw a dramatic expansion in the construction of *cités de transit*, alongside the accelerated demolition of slum housing and the *bidonvilles*.[38]

An important element of this patchwork system were the hostels, which shared many features with the *cités de transit*. Both forms of housing were run largely by SONACOTRA (National Society for the Construction of Housing for Workers), the French government agency founded in 1957 and tasked with providing lodging for immigrant workers. The main difference was that, unlike the *cités de transit*, the hostels were not oriented towards families. Though these bachelor accommodations were mostly run by SONACOTRA, some were managed by smaller regional bodies such as the *Maison du travailleur étranger* in Lyon, etc.[39] The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a continued expansion of the hostel system.[40]

There was also the HLM, a form of permanent social housing in France built on a mass scale for the French working class in the post-war years. Some immigrant families were given access to the HLM, but in terms of its accessibility HLM housing was comparable to private housing, the least accessible form of housing for immigrants.[41] Discrimination from private landlords, social housing managers and French tenants in both types of housing was a firm reality for new and second-generation immigrant renters. Lastly there were the squats, which are difficult to measure or assess definitively. In their monumental housing study conducted between 1968 and 1973, Manuel Castells and his team of sociologists studied a total of 10 urban squats in the Paris region and found that a majority of the squatters were immigrant workers.[42]

The 1960s saw conflicts at each level of the housing system, but in the wake of May '68 these struggles accelerated. Notable housing mobilisations erupted in Nanterre and Marseille in 1969, and then in Ivry and Saint-Denis on the periphery of Paris, with rent strikes that same year. Housing was a central issue for 400 striking Algerian workers in Oyonnax, 1971–2.[43] The conflict of Penarroya in March 1972, carried out over 33 days in Lyon by 500 Algerian and Moroccan OS workers (*ouvrier spécialisé*), became a symbol of immigrant workers' struggle against deplorable working and living conditions.[44] A *Front de mobilisation des travailleurs africains et immigrés* (Front for the Mobilisation of African and Immigrant Workers) was also created in 1974, bringing together residents from more than a dozen *foyers* in the Paris region. The group called for the creation of a 'co-ordinating committee', but

unfortunately the effort did not come to fruition.[45] It would be another year before a genuinely mass based co-ordinating committee was born with the launch of the 1975 rent strike.

'Autogestion des luttes': uprising in the hostels, 1975

The hostel movement began in early 1975 when immigrant residents of a hostel in Saint-Denis rejected SONACOTRA's demand for yet another rent increase. The residents responded with the simple slogan: 'No improvement in the conditions of the home [*foyer*], no increase in the cost of rent [*loyer*]'.[46] SONACOTRA management, though momentarily chastened, eventually came back with an additional rent increase in September 1975. This time the response was massive: 27 buildings went on strike. Seven months later the number would increase to 56 buildings across France. By 1978 133 buildings would be drawn into the strike.[47]

From its earliest stage the movement divided into two broad inter-hostel co-ordinating committees: a committee organised by the trade unions and parts of the traditional left, on the one hand, and an autonomous and unaffiliated Co-ordinating Committee run exclusively by tenants, on the other. The former, aligned with the CGT (*Confédération générale du travail*) and the PCF (*Parti communiste français*), had started at the Allende hostel in Saint-Denis in early 1975. Residents at other hostels in Bobigny, Courneuve and elsewhere in the Parisian suburbs were also being supported by the CGT effort, with further involvement from established organs of the workers' movement and 'official' immigrant organisations in France: the CFDT, the CNL (*Confédération nationale du logement*) and the AAE (*Amicale des Algériens en Europe*), among others.

Outside the CGT-aligned co-ordination, a separate and autonomous co-ordinating committee took shape: the *Comité de coordination des foyers Sonacotra en lutte* (CCFSL – henceforth Co-ordinating Committee or 'CC'). This body was solely comprised of tenants, with no direct involvement from parties, unions or outside organisations. A number of its early members had been involved in a rent strike at the Romain-Rolland hostel in Saint-Denis in January 1975, and the core demands of the strike at Romain-Rolland would later form the basis of the Co-ordinating Committee's joint platform: reduction in rents, abolition of onerous and paternalistic 'rules and regulations' (*règlement intérieur*) and the recognition of a Romain-Rolland tenant committee (*comité de résidents*).[48]

A meeting between several hostels in November 1975 led to the creation of the Co-ordinating Committee. The committee began to draft a joint platform, unanimously approved in December with the following demands: reduction in rents, abolition of onerous and paternalistic rules, recognition of tenant committees and the demand to fire all racist hostel managers (*gérants racistes*).[49] Added to these was the overarching demand for the official recognition of the CC as a legitimate negotiating partner with SONACOTRA. This platform, with its four or five core demands, would become the unshakably consistent foundation for a movement that endured for five years. Movement documents and first-person accounts reveal a profound sense that living conditions were intolerable and that strikers were waging a just fight, with frequent invocations of *nos justes revendications* ('our just demands').

In addition to the consistency of its aims and demands, the scale and growth of the movement were also significant. Some studies have erroneously considered the strike to have 'peaked' in 1975.[50] On the contrary, the movement continued to grow with each passing year.[51] In the first year of the mobilisation, observers estimated there were some 20,000 tenant strikers in hostel residences across France; by 1978 authorities put the number at 28,000, with strike actions in nearly half of all hostels.[52] The CC of late 1975 brought together 27 buildings in the Paris region; by July 1978, 130 had joined. That year they changed their name to the *Comité de coordination des foyers en lutte*.[53]

Part of the vitality and success of the Coordinating Committee derived from its spontaneous and democratic character. The CC was resolutely committed to its autonomy, placing a fundamental priority on the importance of an immigrant-led movement:

> The time when French people talked in the name of immigrant workers is gone. From now on it is us who are speaking up to affirm our demands and our struggles.[54]

Concretely, the movement was anchored in a self-managed and horizontal structure. Each building had its own resident committee, which became a grassroots ('*basiste*') catalyst and conveyor belt for the struggle. The CC's structure consisted of a system in which two tenant delegates were elected per building; this in turn coalesced into a wider network of tenants who met through regular General Assemblies.

'For us it is not for organisations, but for those who struggle, to lead the movement,' in the words of the CC.[55] This spontaneous, militant and non-hierarchical nature of the movement frequently brought it

into conflict with more traditional elements of the mobilisation. As the strike developed, the CGT became eager to resolve the conflict through negotiations directly with management; it opted for negotiations at the individual building level (in direct contrast to the CC's position of global demands at the level of all hostels, addressed only through formal negotiations between the CC and hostel management). From May to August 1976 the CGT, the PCF and the *Amicale des Algériens en Europe* carried out a renewed drive to push for building-level negotiations (*'foyer par foyer'*) instead of generalised negotiations.[56]

According to one observer, the CGT was wary of the hostel mobilisation; it sought a quick resolution, 'cautious about endorsing an effervescence that it couldn't control'.[57] Yet this circumscription and localised resolution proved impossible. The mobilisation was genuinely vast, with support rallies sometimes reaching tens of thousands in the streets of Lyon and Paris. Nearly 30,000 people marched in the streets of Paris in April 1976 in response to the government's deportation of tenant strike leaders.[58] However, this did not stop the unions and the PCF from attempting to broker an *a priori* compromise. On at least one occasion, in March 1977, the trade unions (CGT, CFDT and FO) entered into negotiations with SONACOTRA 'on the back of the Co-ordinating Committee'.[59]

While rent increases triggered the initial revolt, the *conditions* within the hostels and the lack of basic tenancy rights also became a central focus of the mobilisation. In legal terms, hostel tenants were categorised as 'occupants'; they did not have the rights accorded to French citizens who held a legal status as tenants (*locataires*). The legal rights of French *locataires* at this time included the recognition of residents' committees and other constraints placed on the unilateral powers of landlords. Hostel 'occupants', in contrast, faced restrictions on the right to have visitors and were banned from engaging in various activities, including partaking in collective meetings, having sexual relations in one's room, drinking coffee in one's room, etc.[60] Hostel managers regularly entered rooms unannounced, unconstrained by normal tenancy rights; in so doing they earned the *foyers* ignominious popular monikers such as 'prison housing' and 'barracks housing'. As such, the demand for legal status would become the 'hard kernel' of the movement.[61]

The rent strike was seen as a fight for liberty and dignity, and the right to live freely in one's own home. In short, it was a fight for the 'right to intimacy', with parallels to the dormitory grievances in student housing at Nanterre that famously helped to trigger the events of May '68. In fact, Henri Lefebvre and many others have pointed to

the anti-racist commitments and emerging links born from the radicalisation of university students at Nanterre, whose campus was located directly adjacent to Nanterre's immigrant *bidonville*. This and many other aspects help us to consider the family resemblance, if not immediate overlap, between the immigrant CC and the post-'68 emergence of independent 'action committees' (*comité d'action*) and other forms of self-organisation outside the constraints of established political and trade union structures.[62]

Some strikers have argued retrospectively that this aspect of intimacy and domestic self-determination contributed to the notion among strikers that the trade unions were inherently maladapted to this struggle, since trade unions could only properly understand the workplace, not the intimacy of the home.[63] However, it should be pointed out that the French left more broadly, workerist or not, was kept at arm's length from the CC. New movements based in community organising, tenant unionism and the living environment (*cadre de vie*) were kept out of the CC, even if organisations such as the CSCV (*Confédération syndicale du cadre de vie*) played a support role in the rent strike.[64]

The independence, autonomy and militancy of the Co-ordinating Committee was a profoundly political phenomenon that preserved a spirit of struggle and helped to propel the movement forward. This autonomy reverberated with wider non-hierarchical and *autogestionnaire* trends in France at this time, and was exhibited in the movement's lack of an ossified and well-remunerated leadership. The persistence of unaltered movement demands was a productive anchor for a rotating cadre of elected leaders, delegates and spokespeople; firm demands and an unshakable platform, on the one hand, but accountable and democratic leadership on the other. This was partly enabled by the relative unanimity around the platform itself, referred to as the 'unity platform'. To be sure, the CC still saw the emergence of a *noyau impulseur*, to use a term employed to describe the informal development of influential personalities and actors within social movements, including in non-hierarchical struggles such as Lip at this time. However, non-hierarchical principles kept the *noyau impulseur*, which Donald Reid has translated as 'propulsive nucleus', in a dialectical position of democratic mobilisation and accountability.[65]

While well-known 1970s migrant activists such as Saïd Bouziri were involved in the rent strike, the movement did not opt for a leadership structure or media strategy centered on charismatic individuals. Its strength came from deep bonds of solidarity instead of a media shortcut, refusing to fall back on star power or individualist *mythos*. Assane Ba

recalled that at any given moment in the struggle there might be a few dozen delegates who rotated in the press strategy of the Co-ordinating Committee:

> We were around twenty delegates, and the media did not choose one or the other; they took the one we had put in place that day … If we only focused on playing the public opinion card, we would have failed to create real social networks of solidarity.[66]

Despite sympathetic reporting in the left-wing press (*Libération*, *Tribune Socialiste*, *Rouge*, etc.), the movement also wanted directly to control its own message and means of information. In 1977 the Co-ordinating Committee founded the *Bulletin d'information des foyer Sonacotra en lutte* – a large-format newspaper in which it reported widely on the status of the strike, decisions of the general assemblies, on-the-ground analysis and ripostes to mainstream reporting and misinformation on the strike. Like *Libération* and other experimental publications of this time, the *Bulletin* was an experiment in self-managed publishing. The movement also employed other unconventional means of communicating with the public that circumvented mainstream channels, for example posters and other visual print media. In 1976 the CC's cultural commission significantly integrated members from the Vincennes Experimental University's *Atelier graphique* (graphic and printmaking workshop).[67]

Continuities of empire

The fight against SONACOTRA's managers was also an anti-colonial fight. Roughly two-thirds of hostel managers were ex-military members, many of them colonial personnel carried over from previous assignments in the Algerian War and elsewhere in the French empire.[68] In the eyes of tenants, they ran the hostels as if they were enemy territory. At SONACOTRA the colonial continuities were visible. In fact, the institution of SONACOTRA was an adaptation from the previous SONACOTRAL (*Société nationale de construction pour les travailleurs algériens*), renamed in 1963. SONACOTRAL had been created during the Algerian War, partly as a way to placate Algerian workers living in shanty towns, substandard housing and other unsafe living conditions. The agency was built and funded with the strategic colonial aim of breaking up dense networks of FLN and anti-colonial life in the slums. The Nanterre *bidonville*, in particular, was considered an FLN stronghold.[69]

But colonial authority also took the form of a soft power. The agency's *cités de transit* and its overall housing continuum were implemented to convince workers that Algerian independence was unnecessary, since an adequate life could be provided within France's empire. This housing was built 'with the goal of making families interested in the continued existence of French Algeria'.[70] Funding for migrant residences and the creation of a specific state funding body, the FAS (*Fonds d'action sociale*), became the *volet social de la guerre d'Algérie* ('the social aspect of the Algerian war').[71] This was in effect a continuation of broader colonial policy in Algeria, in which the Algerian working class forced urban concessions and minor victories.

In his *Wretched of the Earth*, published in 1961, Frantz Fanon highlighted the state response to urban struggles within the colonies, reshaping colonial authority in an attempt to integrate the colonial proletariat into a newly reformed social structure.[72] This created a highly complex relationship, simultaneously altering the colonial regime while creating shifts for colonised subjects who, in moments of resistance, were able to 'turn the colonial system to their advantage'.[73]

By the early 1970s large capitalist firms in France were beginning to sense their inadequate control of immigrant housing in the face of growing militant sentiments. Their response was a two-pronged approach of repression, including the deportation of 'political' immigrants, combined with the renewed investment and construction of housing for immigrant workers and families. Between 1966 and 1976 SONACOTRA constructed more than 200 additional large-scale hostels.[74] These investments were conceived as a means to both placate and control. Control entailed measures such as the Marcellin-Fontanet decrees of 1972, which tightened restrictions on the freedoms of immigrant workers by, among other things, requiring employers to provide certificates stating that workers had found employment and 'adequate' housing. This was discussed by one autogestionist coalition at a conference in 1976, attended by immigrant activists from the rent strike Co-ordinating Committee, FASTI (Federation of Associations in Solidarity with Immigrant Workers) and other organisations. They framed the problem in this way:

> For large enterprises and their representatives within the state apparatus, it's all about rationalising the process of immigration through better organising and planning in order to meet the needs of capital … sometimes by eliminating the most glaring abuses of housing, and linking this housing to employers if possible, in order to systematise control.[75]

If this was the carrot, however, there was also the stick. In 1976 the government began a wave of targeted repression against rent strike leaders. On 21 February 1976, 18 delegates from eight different buildings were expelled from France. Some were deported; others went into hiding. In a context of growing mobilisation, these expulsions were eventually overturned. News of the expulsions prompted a demonstration of 24,000 people at Barbès in Paris. When one comrade was finally able to return from Algiers, 20,000 people went to welcome him at Orly airport. In short, the co-ordinated repression of early 1976 backfired, serving only to strengthen the rent strike. As Assane Ba put it: 'Our adversaries had made a strategic error in carrying out the expulsions: it only amplified the movement.'[76]

For many strikers, the repressive character of the French state demonstrated the fact that in practical terms the Algerian War had never ended. Sociologist Choukri Hmed emphasises the racialised and 'indigenous' (*indigène*) character of the movement, with direct continuities from the Algerian War carried into the 1970s.[77] Many immigrants in 1970s France expressed the sentiment that French repression against immigrant self-organisation was a direct revenge for self-management and self-determination within Algeria. 'Why Algerians especially?' asked one immigrant named Yusef. 'Because the Algerians have tried to build an economic order with a bit of justice.'[78]

One of the strike leaders interviewed by Hmed was Mustapha (first name only, not a pseudonym).[79] Mustapha was an Algerian who had been active in the FLN during the war of national liberation until he was forced to flee Algeria. In 1956 he ended up in France. Once in Paris, Mustapha rejoined the French section of the FLN before being imprisoned by the French state for his activities. Eventually he participated in the student movement during 1968, joined the Palestine Committees and took part in early rent strikes in Saint-Denis in 1974. In 1975 Mustapha was actively involved in the creation of the CC. Hmed points out that many of the initial structures of the CC were modelled on the FLN, with its central bureau and numerous 'commissions'.[80] Throughout the rent strike Mustapha participated in the creation of the new struggle while also drawing on his experience of Algerian national liberation, thus 'reliving the circumstances of the Algerian war' (*revivre les circonstances de la guerre d'Algérie*).[81] Often this revivification was a double movement with both cultural and historical-political dimensions.

Culture, autogestion and the management question

Samba Sylla, another hostel resident and CC activist who immigrated from Mali to France in 1965, framed this double movement as an alternation between local and global scales. The *foyer* 'recreated our villages, our customs, our solidarity' – yet the village that it recreated was also a global village, with solidarity anchored in a multinational experience of shared decolonial and national liberation struggles. 'As immigrants,' he emphasised, 'we had the experience and the memory of struggles for independence.'[82] This does not mean that all hostel residents had the *same* political and cultural experience. In particular, SONACOTRA buildings housed a majority of Algerian and Maghrebian residents, while black African residents were more likely to live in association-run buildings. In contrast to the 'authoritarian paternalism' of the former, the latter was marked by

> the 'communitarian' management of 'black' households based on internal hierarchies, designed to replicate regions-of-origin and favouring collective spaces.[83]

This could explain the somewhat delayed arrival of association buildings into the fold of the rent strike in 1977 – as suggested by Assane Ba in his analysis of the relative cultural freedoms experienced in his Charonne building, run by one of the smaller associations.[84] In his post-strike analysis Samba Sylla also stressed that while cultural identity and political solidarity went hand in hand, they were not one and the same thing. The resolute autonomy of the CC was not primarily an affirmation of the right to cultural difference, nor an expression of autonomy in exclusively racialised, ethnographic or communalist terms. Autonomy stemmed from a profound critique of the inertia of established organisations of the French left.

This inertia included the undeniable fact of racism and paternalism within the traditional ranks of the PCF, which sat within a wider devolution of post-war Eurocommunist reformism. Much like Saïd Bouziri, hostel residents such as Sylla and Assane Ba were attracted to the French Maoists and joined their cause.[85] The Maoists were identified as both a conduit of Third World liberation struggles and a novel form of revolutionary engagement capable of breaking with the ossified structures of the PCF.[86] The autonomy championed by the CC came into conflict with the PCF's reformism – yet it also butted up against the PCF's version of cultural difference. The PCF had proposed that the hostel

movement be organised into sections, divided according to nationality.[87] By contrast, the CC emphasised the explicitly multinational character of the movement. More important than nationalist or ethnic distinction was a shared *tiers-mondisme*. As Ba states, 'We asserted ourselves as immigrant workers from dominated countries.'[88] Despite competing culturalist currents, the Maoist position held sway within the movement. This current was summed up by Alain Badiou as follows:

> We formalised this state of affairs by speaking of the 'international proletariat of France'. This term was intended to ensure that, in accordance with Marx's instruction in the *Communist Manifesto*, representations centred on origin or identity – particularly national identity – should never be placed in a central position in popular movements or in political processes.[89]

With the late 1970s came the rise of the cultural festivals, affirming a right to difference through celebration and cultural exchange. The CC partook in these events and participated in the development of dialogues between cultures in a context of political unity. The multilingual and multinational character of the hostel movement was seen as a strength and a source of unity, in both political and cultural terms. In June 1977 the CC organised a festival at Champigny framed as a 'Celebration of the Unity of 24 Nationalities' – a reference to the two dozen different nationalities comprising the hostel movement.

These dynamics and priorities also played out in the development of cultural programming ('*animation*') in the hostels. The original creation (and continued financing) of SONACOTRA had been the partial result of Algerian and wider immigrant resistance to the French state.[90] Yet the day-to-day management of that housing initially showed little signs of conceding to tenants. Only after 1968 would rules for the governance of these buildings begin to be gradually loosened. The demand for recognition of residents' committees would become a key demand of the hostel strikes, inscribed from the beginning in the CC's joint platform of December 1975. In 1972 the government had passed a circular pertaining to life in SONACOTRA residences which opened the way to cultural programming ('*animation*') and other support for tenant activities, including tenant-led initiatives.[91]

These reforms would open the door to tenant self-management in some buildings, as tenants were gradually – and reluctantly – given greater control and autonomy within their places of residence.[92] Yet by 1975 it was still a regular occurrence for hostel managers to prohibit the

use of hostel premises for cultural activities.[93] The process of a relative and limited thawing of bureaucratic control included management committees in the hostels, as well as 'residents committees' in both the hostels and the *cités de transit*. One member of Lyon's ruling political class described these committees at a meeting held in October 1975 in the following terms:

> Through these committees a sort of *autogestion* is achieved, especially with regard to matters concerned with animation. At first it was necessary to designate the representatives, but after a few years … elections are now taking place.[94]

In reality, the animation committees were an attempt to contain and channel resident self-organisation. As one *foyer* resident in an association-run building in Charonne put it, the animation committees were created to 'prevent things from getting out of hand'.[95] In short, a bowdlerised and 'official' autogestion was created to pre-empt a more actualised form of tenant democracy. This reflected a wider development within French housing policy in this period, with Giscardian politicians occasionally proclaiming 'autogestion'. Minister Albin Chalandon invoked the idea of 'self-managed cells' (*cellules autogérées*) within HLM housing in a speech to the French National Assembly in 1973, although he quickly clarified that these *cellules* would only be designed for inhabitants to 'give their opinion'.[96]

In *Sonacotra* (SONACOTRA's official periodical), the organisation would cast autogestion as both a threat and as something to be recuperated, enumerated as one of the 'rights of residence'.[97] Yet SONACOTRA's refusal to grant basic tenancy status suggests a strictly limited vision of residents' rights – let alone autogestion. To some degree, autogestion touched everything and anything in this period. Rent strikers and their landlords alike could not help but find their aspirations inflected through the ambient spirit of the moment – or what Lip worker-priest Jean Raguenès called 'the perfume of self-management'.[98]

Standoff at Garges-lès-Gonesse

Nearly five years into the rent strike, tensions culminated in an open confrontation in the summer of 1979. On 22 June 1979, after a court decision against the non-payment of rent, a total of 1,000 CRS forces were deployed to evict the 250 residents of a SONACOTRA hostel in the

municipality of Garges-lès-Gonesse. Residents at the hostel had been engaged in rent strike for three and a half years.[99]

The conflict would prove to be a determining moment in the movement for housing justice in France's *foyers*. The eviction immediately inspired France-wide headlines and the struggle became a national flashpoint, with visits from support delegations across France. In the coming weeks and months the Co-ordinating Committee devoted significant resources to the conflict at Garges-lès-Gonesse, sending delegates and calling for mobilisation and support. The CC echoed and reiterated the core demands of the Garges Residents' Committee (GRC): legal status as *locataires* (renters), improvements to living conditions, a legal and just rate of payment, the replacement of racist hostel managers – and the overarching demand for the recognition of the CC.[100] This was accompanied by two immediate CC statements on 23 and 29 June, followed by the publication in July of an extensive report on the struggle at Garges.[101]

Ever since 1975, the French state and hostel administrators had tried every tool and manoeuvre available in their attempt to put an end to the rent strike, ranging from deportations to legal tribunals to 'garnished wages' (the process whereby an employer, or any other source of tenant remuneration, allows the landlord to extract the unpaid rent from this remuneration). SONACOTRA had attempted to obtain spectacular and high-profile legal victories, but mostly what transpired was a strategy of case-by-case rulings. Very often these rulings came down against SONACOTRA (for example, on the question of *saisie-arrêt sur salaires* or garnished wages, described above). The CC argued that the non-payment was the responsibility of SONACOTRA for refusing to address the grievances and refusing to enter formal negotiations with the CC.

In response, the state pursued a million paper cuts approach, consisting of individual tribunal rulings. The archives reveal an endless cascade of threatening letters outlining the arrears for each tenant, painstakingly documenting the record of non-payment and the grand total of arrears. Ultimately, such strategies proved incapable of discouraging the rent strike, both on their own and taken together. This ultimately culminated in the unusual and escalating aggression of the Garges eviction itself. The sheer brutality of the CRS presence – numbering 1,000 officers in uniform – was matched by the brutality of their tactics. They confiscated goods, including legal papers and identity documents, and threw personal possessions into rubbish bins. Residents on site during the eviction were *matraqué* (struck with batons); one was given

a violent blow to the stomach 'because it wouldn't leave traces', in the words of one CRS officer.[102]

Part of the reason for the popular outpouring of support for evictees at Garges was the feeling that the conflict had come to a head. Repression at Garges was viewed as the government's 'testing' of a possible new hardening of its strategy – a test that would 'pass' if it were not resolutely opposed from below. Monique Cheran has described the approach like this:

> What is happening in Garges is a sort of test in the implementation of an arsenal of particularly repressive, racist laws against immigrant workers.[103]

On the ground, strikers felt that defeat at Garges would be fatal. As one striker put it in an interview with *Libération*: 'We are not desperate, far from it. But we know that if we lose here, we lose everywhere.'[104] These would prove to be prescient sentiments. As Assane Ba put it in a reflection published 20 years later:

> From the moment SONACOTRA won locally [in Garges], it was the entire Co-ordination Committee that lost.[105]

Starting in June 1979, evicted residents set up camp immediately outside their *foyer* and lived on site for the next four months. The eviction created a dislocation and an obvious weakening of collective life and daily survival; tenants faced nervous exhaustion even as they were exposed to the elements and the tensions of living out of a backpack and bivouac. At precisely this opportune moment, SONACOTRA and the government began to offer a series of bad faith negotiations – after years of refusing to negotiate. The terms of the negotiation would have meant reneging on the CC's core demands, especially regarding SONACOTRA's proposed rate of rent, in addition to expected sums of tenant backpay.

None of this discouraged the movement. The atmosphere of the encampment was described as a 'Larzac in the middle of the Paris suburbs'.[106] This was a reference to the rural struggle against a new military development in central France that came to symbolise the new social movements in 1970s France. As such, the struggle also exposed existing tensions within the left, with the Communist mayor of Garges taking a contradictory and inconsistent position on the expulsions. By contrast, the Socialist Party (PS) – which had taken a relatively hands-off approach in the first years of the struggle – was now entering the scene

to give its support. Mitterrand himself would make a high-profile visit to Garges.[107] The PS was now offering its active support, including an unambiguous recognition of the CC (in contrast to the waffling of the PCF).[108] All of this would foreshadow what came to be known as the 'bulldozer affair', when a Communist mayor in Vitry accompanied a group of vigilantes who stormed a Malian *foyer* and used a bulldozer to blockade the entrance.

In the run-up to the 1981 presidential elections, the French Communist Party underwent a 'dramatic' shift in its position on immigration.[109] Many party members, including Étienne Balibar, left the party over the question of the PCF's lack of support for immigrants (specifically relating to the Vitry bulldozer affair, but also to the drug dealer affair in Montigny-lès-Cormeilles, Val-d'Oise). In the latter incident the Communist mayor publicly campaigned against Moroccans living in the city as 'dealers'.[110] This shift was by no means limited to the PCF. For its part, the CFDT also retreated from its pro-immigrant positions taken in the early and mid-1970s. When Mitterrand was elected in the 1980s, the CFDT helped to dissuade the President from recognising political rights for immigrants. As Pierre Cours-Salies puts it critically, paraphrasing CFDT leadership, 'the time was not ripe'.[111]

Some thought the election of Mitterrand and the left would be a positive development for migrant communities in France. In 1981 Michel Foucault wrote that:

> The Socialists seem to have been the only ones to grasp the reality of these problems and take them up. Neither on the death penalty nor on the immigration question do [their] choices follow the most commonly held opinion.[112]

Foucault's position was not completely unfounded, as suggested by the PS's recognition of the CC as a legitimate representative body and negotiating partner. In reality, however, one of the first confrontations of the new Socialist government was with striking immigrant workers in the car manufacturing sector, as Stathis Kouvelakis recalls from his time as a young member of the PCF.[113] Striking immigrant workers were accused of 'holding the car industry hostage'. The analogy was somewhat ironic, given the hostage-like constraints placed on the freedoms of migrant workers ever since the Marcellin-Fontanet decrees of 1972 (the law that ensured immediate deportation for an immigrant who was fired or laid off, or who was not able to secure stable housing).[114] The mainstream media and business press gradually decided on a strategy

of cultural scapegoating and ostracisation, characterising the strikes as a 'Muslim revolt'.[115]

Conclusion: victory or defeat?

While the hostel strike grew into an autonomous movement with its own force and momentum, it also emerged within a wider context. Despite its autonomy, the tenants' movement did not exist in a vacuum. In affirmative terms, this wider milieu included anti-racist struggles within workplaces, wider housing movements in every large and medium-sized city, and a wave of non-immigrant rent strikes across France. What rent strikes, anti-racist struggles and job actions shared was their conjunctural interdependence: success or failure was linked to wider developments in the French and international struggle. The success of these independent movements 'still depends on the echo it will have outside', to quote one writer reporting on a rent strike near Lille in 1975.[116]

Yet the tenants' movement inside the hostels grew in strength precisely at a moment when wider trends within French society and culture were closing down, reversing the minimal but hard-won gains of the post-war era. For a period tenants had increasingly taken control of their housing. Some observers even described 'autogestion' in immigrant workers' hostels.[117] Yet these precarious gains would soon be reversed and dismantled by the French state. By the end of the decade, the French government launched a counter-reaction against democratic control in immigrant housing – and not only at Garges.[118] In doing so they were increasingly accompanied by the main parties and trade unions of the left.

For the strikers to have come out with a clear win, they arrived at the wrong moment in history. With each step forward in the construction of a genuine autonomous movement, the French state and wider French society were moving in exactly the opposing direction; at each moment of deepening organisational power and migrant worker militancy, the state sought to disorganise and dismantle the movement through deportations, scapegoating and co-optation. By the late 1970s, as the strike peaked, France entered a period of deep crisis and escalating xenophobia.

Politicians such as Jacques Chirac argued that the employment crisis could simply be solved by deporting 'excess' labourers (i.e. the racialised immigrants who had been brought to France to build the post-war boom). However, retrospective accounts of the employment crisis have occasionally provided overly economistic interpretations of the crisis.

Such interpretations need to be countered with a focus on the deeply *political* nature of the crisis. The France of the late 1970s was marked by a profound crisis of social control on the part of an embattled bourgeois state, combined with an array of subjective factors including a French fixation on post-colonial revenge on the part of 'French' (i.e. white) France. All of these aspects of the crisis were succinctly captured by Jean-Louis Hurst in an article for *Libération* on the rent strike:

> The real motive for the racist Bonnet-Stoléru laws is not economic but political. The government wants to ward off as quickly as possible the danger represented by the new resistance of immigrant workers and, above all, by the beginning of their autonomous organisation.[119]

Beyond a straightforward economic crisis, the late 1970s were also marked by a profound political crisis for the left; former class unity fragmented along lines of race and racialised class composition. In some accounts, the rent strike is referred to as a failure. On a few scores this is undeniably true: the CC never gained official recognition or negotiation status, one of its core demands from the beginning. Nor were rents frozen, and *foyer* residents never won legal recognition as *locataires*. On the other hand, the movement forced a radical change in the management of the hostels. In his recently published memoirs Alain Badiou – whose organisation the UCFml (*Union des communistes de France marxiste-léniniste*) played an active role in supporting the rent strike – addressed the question of loss or victory in this way:

> The question of drawing up a balance sheet for the movement is complex. The end of the strike and the disappearance of the CC obviously marked a sort of tactical failure in the face of the State. But in reality this whole sequence produced a radical change in the concrete situation in the *foyers*. Residents organised themselves and created their own resident committees. The onerous internal regulations (*règlement intérieur*) are no longer applied. The managers are isolated. Meetings and visits take place 'open door'. The movement put an end to several decades of 'prison housing' (*foyers-prisons*). The residents, after five years of mobilisation and ongoing contacts with Maoist militants, have become accustomed to deciding their own fate in open meetings. They have transformed the *foyers* into places of living and collective organisation that suit them, and which are sometimes ahead of many other modes of housing.[120]

This dialectical sentiment of victory and defeat was echoed by Assane Ba, who has also pointed to the complex nature of what he describes as micro-victories. Ba was especially emphatic about shifts in the repressive environment of the *foyers*, previously run by the authoritarian *gérants* and slowly giving way to an easing of restrictions on tenant conduct and daily life.

> We were able to resolve many local demands: right of visitation, right of assembly, etc. No manager (*gérant*) could imagine banning a meeting any more: we brought in whoever we wanted, it was open doors. People from the neighbourhood came. Everything started from the site of the *foyer*.[121]

In addition to these above changes, we could add the numerous victories during the strike itself – including the reversal of the deportation of strike leaders, the sporadic legal defeat of the state's wage garnishing strategy (and numerous other 'lawsuit' tactics that allowed the prolongation of the strike) and SONACOTRA's commitment to invest in the renovation of the oldest and least-maintained buildings. In short, it would be misleading and incomplete to characterise the rent strike as a political failure. Perhaps more than any other struggle of the period, it gave real content to the Maoist slogan *Oser lutter, oser vaincre* ('dare to struggle, dare to win').

Notes

1 Ba 2002, 12.
2 Parti Socialiste Unifié 1976, 199. Note that all translations in this chapter are by the author unless otherwise indicated.
3 Some of these organisations include ADEF (Association pour le développement des foyers); AFRP (Association des foyers de la région Parisienne); AFTAM (Association pour l'accueil et la formation des travailleurs migrants). Each of these had between 30 and 50 buildings, compared with the roughly 275 buildings run by SONACOTRA.
4 Benoit 1980.
5 For 'interiority' see Lazarus 2016, 107–30; Badiou 2005; Michel 2020, 13, 115–27, 189–95.
6 A book was published by Marie-France Moulin in 1976, after the first wave of the struggle but well before its subsequent phases and ultimate denouement in 1979–80. See Moulin 1976.
7 Autogestion, sometimes translated as 'self-management', was a popular movement in 1970s France that attempted to build democratic socialism in all areas of social life, from the factory to the neighbourhood. Taking its first concrete form in factory and workplace occupations during the general strike of May 1968, the movement soon became associated with a unique attempt at constructing twentieth-century socialism beyond the confines of both Stalinism and social democracy. For a comprehensive introduction see Georgi 2003; see also *Autogestion: L'encyclopédie internationale* 2020.
8 Vigna 2007, 115.

9 By the end of the 1970s Algeria still remained by far the largest source of non-European immigration to France, but other African countries (especially Morocco) came to play an increasingly significant role. In addition, both the sub-Saharan African region and the Asian continent tripled their number of immigrants to France in the period between 1968 and 1982, see INSEE 2011.
10 Ki-Zerbo 1977, 65–82; Clegg 1971; see also Harbi 2022.
11 Comité d'action maghrébin 1968, 84–5; Bracke 2009, 115–30. On the silence of May '68 with regard to immigrant struggles, see Prévost and Kadri 2008, 425–38.
12 See also Chapter 5 by Jacob Zumoff in this volume on rent strikes in Panama in 1925 and 1932.
13 Clegg 1971.
14 Harbi 2010, 253–7.
15 See Pablo 1967, 91–168.
16 Front de Libération Nationale 1967; cited in Clegg 1971, 46.
17 Clegg 1971, 48.
18 Foucault once talked about the boomerang effect of colonialism, in which colonial powers return from distant provincial territories to recolonise their own internal population. This was in turn mirrored by those who resisted the colonial project, following empire back from periphery to core. For the boomerang effect see Foucault 2003, 103; Gueye 2006, 225–42.
19 Mury 1970, 10.
20 Contributors to Dependency Theory and the 'world system' at this time included André Gunder Frank, Walter Rodney, Paul A. Baran, Paul Sweezy and others. For Algeria, see Amin 1970.
21 This analysis fails to consider the ways in which an exclusive emphasis on workplace demands displaces the position of other demands. See Pitti 2001, 465–76.
22 I am indebted for my analysis here to the group Théorie Communiste, in particular a special issue of their journal on race and class composition: 'Le kaléidoscope du prolétariat: De la segmentation raciale dans le mode production capitaliste' (*Théorie Communiste* 2018).
23 I would also point to a detailed sociological study conducted at the time by R. D. Grillo. This study contains a full chapter on the different usages of *immigré* versus *étranger* in French discourse at the time. Grillo 1985.
24 'Until 1971 the struggles of immigrant workers remained essentially centred on the problem of housing or the reaction to racist aggressions'. Editorial 1974, 18.
25 Zancarini-Fournel 2002, 3–7.
26 Editorial 1971, 6.
27 Editorial 1971, 6.
28 See Galano 2002, 48–52.
29 On the Palestine Committees and their central importance to the emergence of an autonomous immigrant rights movement in the early half of the 1970s, see Hajjat 2011, 109–21.
30 Cheran 1979, 2.
31 Prévost and Kadri 2008, 432.
32 Gordon 2012, 133.
33 Gordon 2012, 133–4.
34 Unattributed, 'Comment des femmes' 1971, 8.
35 See Mury 1970, 10.
36 The term 'French Imperial nation-state' is drawn from Gary Wilder, see Wilder 2005; see also Alliez and Lazzarato 2016.
37 De Barros 2012.
38 On 10 July 1970 the French government passed the 'Loi Vivien', which aimed to replace all slums within two years. Towards the end of the decade the total number of transitional units was roughly 15,000, two-thirds having been constructed after 1970. See Cohen and David 2012.
39 For a more comprehensive list of *foyer* associations see note 3 above.
40 Gallou 2005, 23–48.
41 Rudder-Paurd 1974, 115.
42 Castells, Cherki, Godard and Mehl 1978.
43 Discussed above. For another brief discussion of events at Oyonaax see Prévost and Kadri 2008, 425–38.

44 On some of these initial events, see Zancarini-Fournel 2008, 405–43.
45 Hmed 2007, 59.
46 'There have been no improvements in the condition of our housing … instead we are witnessing rent increases imposed without any valid basis.' Strikers from Romain-Rolland hostel in 1975, cited in Comité de coordination des foyers en lutte, July 1979, 21.
47 Viet 1998, 15.
48 GISTI 1988.
49 Comité de coordination des foyers en lutte, December 1975.
50 Hendrickson 2022, 153. *Decolonizing 1968* is a very impressive, stimulating and compelling work.
51 See time-chart published in Hmed 2007, 60.
52 Khiari 2009, 90; Deslhiat 1976, 16–17.
53 Hmed 2007, 61–2. This renaming of the CC is somewhat murky, insofar as there were numerous usages of Comité de coordination des foyers en lutte at the beginning. See, for example, Comité de coordination des foyers en lutte, December 1975. Nonetheless, in the first months of 1978 a large number of non-SONACOTRA *foyers* joined the struggle, including buildings managed by ADEF, AFRP and AFTAM. This would be consistent with a decision to rename as the Comité de coordination des foyers en lutte.
54 Cited in Gordon 2012, 195.
55 Cited in Gordon 2012, 195.
56 Comité de coordination des foyers en lutte, July 1979, 1.
57 Deslhiat 1976, 16.
58 Gordon 2012, 196.
59 Comité de coordination des foyers en lutte, July 1979, 2. The rent strikes were an exception and a riposte to the strong gravitation towards negotiation and formalised channels of compromise in this period across Europe. For the case of Sweden, see Chapter 6 by Hannes Rolf in this volume.
60 Groupe d'information et de soutien des immigrés 1979.
61 Deslhiat 1976, 16. It should be pointed out that the demand for legal recognition was not simply a case of fighting for better living conditions and tenancy rights; it also held implications for the calculation of rents. Price per square footage was significantly higher in SONACOTRA buildings compared to that in HLM buildings because tenancy was not calculated according to standard practices for *locataires*. Also see Unattributed, 'Sonacotra' 1979.
62 The comités d'action were an experimental form of organisation that first emerged in May–June 1968. See Ross 2002, 76, 143–4.
63 Ba 2002.
64 See Porhel 2013, 211–21.
65 'The term "*impulseur*" refers to small rocket engines used to make adjustments in the flight path.' Reid 2018, 398–401.
66 Ba 2002, 4–14.
67 See Duplan 2020, 128–31.
68 Pogure 1979, 9.
69 Galano (n.d.), 4.
70 Cohen and David 2012, 4; for the relationship between the Algerian War and French colonial modernisation (including Gaullist welfare state measures in response to Algerian unrest), see Davis 2015.
71 A French planner cited in Bernardot 2008, 70.
72 Fanon 2004, 64.
73 Fanon 2004, 67.
74 Gallou 2005, 41.
75 Parti Socialiste Unifié 1976, 195–6.
76 Ba 2002, 10.
77 Hmed 2007, 55–81.
78 Cited in Grillo 1985, 60.
79 From other sources it seems likely that this was Mustapha Cherchari, one of the public leaders of the strike and an early proponent of the creation of an autonomous CC. See Ba 2002.
80 Hmed 2007, 65.

81 Hmed 2007, 65.
82 Eff 2005, 90–1.
83 Mbodj-Pouye 2016, 51.
84 Ba 2002, 6.
85 For Sylla's engagement with Maoism see Dedieu and Mbodj-Pouye 2018, 1172–1208.
86 For the engagement of UCFml with the rent strike, see in particular Groupe pour la fondation de l'Union des communistes de France marxiste-léniniste 1981; Badiou 2023, 335–43; Michel 2020, 189–95.
87 Ba 2002, 8.
88 Ba 2002, 8.
89 Badiou 2023, 335.
90 See Bernardot 2008.
91 Circular of 19 April 1972, see Cohen and David 2012, 7.
92 See a parallel discussion in Fourcaut 2003, 585–95.
93 Groupe pour la fondation de l'Union des communistes de France marxistes-léninistes 1981, 9.
94 Cited in Grillo 1985, 55.
95 Ba 2002, 4–14.
96 Chalandon speaking to the National Assembly on 11 April 1973, cited in Giard 1974, 17.
97 SONACOTRA 1977.
98 Reid 2018, 9.
99 Forestier 1979.
100 Comité de coordination des foyers en lutte, June 1979.
101 Comité de coordination des foyers en lutte, July 1979.
102 Comité de coordination des foyers en lutte, July 1979, 18.
103 Cheran 1979, 2–4.
104 Brunetti 1979.
105 Ba 2002.
106 Hurst 1979.
107 Unattributed, 'M. François Mitterrand s'est rendu à Garges-lès-Gonesse', 1979.
108 Meillon and Lenglin 1979; Huchet 1979; unattributed, 'Conflit PC-PS à Garges', 1979.
109 Grillo 1985, 79.
110 Balibar 1981, 56–60.
111 Cours-Salies 2008, 175.
112 Foucault 1981, cited in Eribon 1991, 296.
113 Kouvelakis and Badiou 202l.
114 Beaufils 1983, 46–51.
115 Beaufils 1983, 46.
116 Lemahieu 1975, 16; see also Grelle 1975, 16–17.
117 See Grillo 1985, 55.
118 In 1978 new rules were passed for the election of administrative councils within HLM housing across France. These rules included the non-eligibility of immigrants to run for elected office. See Loarec 1978, 3.
119 Hurst 1979.
120 Badiou 2023, 343.
121 Ba 2002, 11.

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8

The Leiden rent strikes of the 1970s: national politics, Middletown Maoism and the rise of the Socialist Party in the Netherlands

Bart van der Steen

The 1970s were a turning point in the history of Dutch cities. Dutch national and local governments co-ordinated urban renewal policies to tackle the double crisis of poor housing quality and housing shortage.[1] In part, these policies were designed to respond to housing protests at both local and national levels. As these protests continued, they significantly influenced urban renewal and housing policies. Furthermore, housing protests in various Dutch cities allowed new political actors to mobilise and build a support base. This chapter investigates how conflicts over urban renewal and rent increases in the Dutch city of Leiden provided political space for the Maoist Socialist Party (SP) to mobilise renters and pressure authorities, and how these actions subsequently influenced the politics and activism of the SP.

In Leiden (100,000 inhabitants, 40 km from Amsterdam), all of the above-mentioned developments coincided to spark a rent strike movement that influenced both local and national politics and paved the way for the SP to become a significant political actor – first locally and later on a national level. After a national measure in 1970 resulted in rent increases for poor-quality pre-war housing, Leiden renters mobilised and set up a rent strike campaign. Backed by the SP, the movement soon gained support from renters and the city government; it ultimately caused the national government to yield, annul two annual rent increases and allocate sizeable sums for Leiden's urban renewal projects.[2]

Leiden Maoists played an important role in the rent strike movement, but the latter also influenced the former. Successful rent activism led Leiden Maoists to downplay their radical roots and militant

anticapitalism in favour of more issue-focused community organising. References to the Cultural Revolution and a violent overthrow of capitalism were shelved; instead the Maoist slogan 'serve the people' was translated into neighbourhood activism. This switch from hard-line Maoism to a more pragmatic politics of 'soft' Maoism took place in the 1970s, particularly in medium-sized cities where the SP's community organising campaigns were most successful.[3] Because their development proved crucial for the SP's ultimate success, they are here referred to as 'Middletown Maoists'.

Leiden rent activism and its influence have received little attention from scholars, as is also the case for the development of the SP.[4] Moreover, most of the existing literature has a local focus and has not yet become part of international historiographical debates, for example, on urban renewal conflicts, rent strikes or Western Maoism (i.e. Maoism in industrialised, liberal democratic countries, in Western Europe and North America). This chapter is based on the extensive archive of the Leiden SP, interviews with party activists and a systematic review of news reports on rent activism in the 1970s from digitised Leiden newspapers.[5]

A short history of rent strikes in the Netherlands

During the 1970s Leiden members of the SP played an important role in the city's rent strike movement. They set up the local chapter of the BHW (*Bond van Huurders en Woningzoekenden*, League of Renters and Home Seekers), which at its height consisted of about 1,000 members in a dozen neighbourhood committees. The BHW organised various actions, but the most spectacular – and effective – were their rent strike campaigns. During these campaigns households collectively refused to pay rent increases and demanded rent freezes and the realisation of overdue repair and renovation works.

Although the dynamics and outcomes of these conflicts were heavily influenced by their local context, the Leiden rent strike movement did not unfold in a vacuum. Instead it built on a longer history of rent activism in the Netherlands – a history characterised by a continuous interaction between local protests and national governmental policy. A brief historical overview highlights similarities between the 1970s rent activism and earlier rent campaigns.

Throughout the twentieth century governmental rent policy was influenced by local protests. In 1917 rising prices and shortages caused by the First World War became the catalyst for fierce working-class protests

in various cities. In Amsterdam, protests against the shipping of potatoes to army bases – rather than distributing them among city dwellers – led to days of rioting. The government responded with various initiatives, including rent control laws and subsidies for local social housing corporations.[6] Rent increases were one of the major problems facing working-class families, and Leiden had witnessed protests and even rent strikes in the years before 1917.[7] As in other cities, many housing corporations in Leiden – inspired by social democratic, catholic, protestant or social liberal thought – used national funds to build affordable housing for working families.[8]

However, in the 1920s the liberal-conservative national government cut back on rent control and housing subsidies until both were completely abolished by 1927. Construction of social housing came to a standstill and housing shortages and rising rents coincided with an economic crisis, leading to a new wave of local rent activism. This wave peaked in 1932–3 when hundreds of households in cities such as Rotterdam and Amsterdam refused to pay rent increases, or even the entire rent.[9] Although these rent conflicts were caused by failing national policies the responses were local, and rent strikes unfolded mainly in large cities with a strong communist presence. The Communist Party could to some degree co-ordinate actions by sharing information through its cadre and party press, but it was never able to spark a national wave of rent strikes. The responses to the rent strikes were mainly local as well, with private owners in Amsterdam co-ordinating with the local government to counter the rent strikes. Leiden did not witness any rent strikes, although they did occur in the nearby village of Noordwijk.[10]

The most spectacular rent strike of 1933 unfolded in Amsterdam West. It took place in a neighbourhood of newly built houses intended for working families, but infamous for high rents and poor-quality housing. No less than 650 renters were involved, but they were ultimately defeated through a combination of evictions and the seizing of the solidarity fund by the authorities and judges, enabling owners to claim rent directly from salaries or benefits.[11] The following ebb of rent activism lasted for almost 40 years. The Second World War and the subsequent housing shortage and political conformism brought about by the Cold War left little political space for rent activism.

The other side of the coin, however, was that the national government retook the lead in housing policy, co-ordinating the construction of two million houses between 1950 and 1971.[12] Housing corporations built the majority of them and ended up controlling one-third of the entire national housing stock. The resulting Dutch housing system

equalled that of Sweden;[13] in other nearby countries housing corporations rarely managed more than one-fifth of the housing stock.[14] As a result, the national housing minister announced in 1964 that the quantitative housing crisis had largely been resolved and that the focus should shift to improving housing quality. However, this was not the case for Leiden. While surrounding villages had largely overcome the quantitative housing shortage, Leiden's particular situation as an industrial city with a bad housing stock and a large percentage of low-income families caused it to face a 'double crisis': housing shortage and poor-quality housing.[15]

Despite the significant time gap, the similarities between the rent strikes of the 1930s and 1970s are remarkable. In both eras, rent conflicts were concentrated in old, nineteenth-century, working-class boroughs, where renters decried rent increases for deprecated houses, and new estates, where renters protested against high rents for poor-quality housing; in fact rent *decreases* were often demanded. Furthermore, rent activists in the 1970s followed the same method as their 1930s counterparts: organising renters in housing blocks or neighbourhoods, stimulating them to strike and collecting the withheld sums in solidarity funds. The last served as a safety measure in case rent strikes were lost, but they could also be used to co-ordinate activism. Finally, rent activists in both eras were political outsiders, facing established social democrats as their main opponents. While social democrats headed municipal governments and presided over an array of local housing corporations, 1930s communists and 1970s rent activists had no direct access to such political bodies. This situation both enabled *and* necessitated them to commit to contentious actions such as rent strikes in order to build up a support base and compete for political influence. To a certain extent, both actors appreciated their excluded position; when local rent activists started to organise nationally in 1972–3, thus gaining access to national funding and representation at the Ministry of Housing, the BHW insisted on remaining a 'non-co-opted', direct-action grass-roots organisation.[16] Like the Communist Party of the 1930s, the BHW had its national organisation. However, in reality it acted as a 'federation of local chapters'; it could co-ordinate actions across cities, but not inspire or drive national campaigns.

A link between the two eras may even have been the SP's communist origins. Founded by dissident communists in the 1960s, the SP cadre may have been able to tap into the collective memory of the communist involvement in 1930s rent strikes. However, there were also major differences. The most important of these was that by the 1970s the

(socialist-led) national government had become far more responsive to the demands of social movements.

The Leiden rent strikes in a global context

In Chapter 1, the Introduction to this volume, Poy and Rolf show that rent strikes historically came in two waves. The first occurred around the First World War and the second in the 1960s and 1970s, when 'a new period of increased collective action among tenants began'. In Chapter 14, the Conclusion to this volume, Poy and Rolf describe how the Leiden wave of 1970s rent activism, just as in other countries, was:

> interwoven with broader layers of activism and resistance, in the context of the emergence of the 'new left', radical student movements, anti-war protests and anti-colonial movements.

In Chapter 9, which discusses housing activism in Berlin, Vollmer explains the increased rent activism that arose in the 1970s as a result of the crisis of Fordist urbanism. This crisis came to a head in the 1970s, when pre-war housing stock suffered from decay and dilapidation, while newly built projects proved too expensive for many working-class families. As Rolf shows in Chapter 6, a similar situation developed in Sweden. Here older housing stock was in need of renovation and improvement, while newly built projects proved beyond the reach of many and suffered from inadequate services. This caused the government and housing corporations to re-orient themselves and to draw up urban renewal plans and individual housing subsidies. However, as Vollmer has argued, such 'periods of transition are also phases of increased social movement activity'. As will be shown later, the Netherlands in general, and Leiden in particular, seem to fit this international model – not least because protests were strongest in rental houses that were owned by (semi-) governmental organisations.

Moreover, rent strikes in the Netherlands and Leiden shared the characteristics of rent strikes elsewhere. Their repertoire focused on refusing to pay rent increases or withholding part of the rent and they emphasised the moral economy of paying a 'just' rent: activists demanded repairs and maintenance, while denouncing 'profiteering' by housing corporations and emphasising the importance of a 'fair' rent price. Furthermore, they petitioned governments and organised public demonstrations, thus positioning rent activism in a broader array of

leftist activism. After all, for the SP activists, the rent strikes were part of a grander anticapitalist strategy.

When it came to the social composition of the rent strike movement, some interesting features stand out. Poy and Rolf justly state that 'women, and often also children, have played a crucial role' in rent strikes and rent activism. This was also true in Leiden – but it did not mean per se that all men and women were given an equal role within the rent strike movement. For example, the BHW was mainly active in impoverished working-class boroughs, where traditional ideas about family and gender roles prevailed. On the one hand, this meant that women often played a central role in rent strikes, since they were the homemakers and in charge of the family budget. However, their role in the strike movement did not automatically place them on an equal footing with their male partners, who were often still seen (not least in legal terms) as the 'head of the family'. SP-activists, who often moved into working-class neighbourhoods, tried to copy what they considered to be working-class behaviour – in speech, attitude and ways of working – instead of challenging, for example, outdated gender roles.

When it comes to the ethnic composition of the Leiden rent strike movement, the image differs from metropolitan Berlin, as studied by Vollmer in Chapter 9, where people with local and migrant backgrounds joined in the same struggle. Although Leiden was home to a few hundred migrant workers from Morocco and Turkey, who generally suffered from poor housing conditions and occasionally challenged these conditions through activism, these actions rarely intersected with the rent strike movement, which was overall an affair of local city dwellers. In Leiden working-class participation dominated; a colourful coalition of 'the poorer working class, otherwise marginalised groups, and the middle class seeking alternative lifestyles', as in Berlin, did not come to life. Yet this did not mean that antiracism was not important for the rent strike activists, nor for the SP. Indeed, the SP protested not only against apartheid in South Africa, but also against the violent eviction of Moroccan rent strikers, as well as the planned governmental expulsion of migrant workers in the late 1970s.

Leiden and the double housing crisis of the 1970s

By 1970 Leiden was experiencing a double housing crisis, a large housing shortage going hand in hand with the poor quality of the available stock. In 1970 as much as 13.6 per cent of Leiden's population was registered as

being in need of housing. Most of them were young families who worked in Leiden and were often forced to live with their parents. In 1977 the waiting time for affordable rented housing distributed by the municipality could be as long as four years.[17]

Affordable houses in Leiden's inner city were of poor quality. In 1962 a Dutch newspaper dubbed the city the 'second slum champion of the country' because of the 3,000 or so run-down houses in its centre. In 1968 the municipality determined that one-quarter of the 29,000 houses in Leiden were of inferior quality.[18] Hundreds of houses were officially declared uninhabitable, but were nevertheless still rented out. When a journalist researched the housing conditions in the working-class district of Leiden-Noord, she came across families with four children or more living in 'small four-room houses, the living room included'.[19] Most of these houses were not yet connected to modern-day sewage systems, instead discharging their waste into the city's numerous canals.

As dramatic as this sounds, Leiden's situation did not differ greatly from that of nearby cities. When Cor Smit – later to write the history of Leiden's housing corporations – moved in 1972 from Schiedam to Leiden for his studies, he saw that Leiden's inner city was 'a mess' – but not much more of a mess than his native city of Schiedam. A fellow student, who came from Delft, had a similar impression. However, Leiden's city government was slow to improve the situation. When a civil servant came from nearby Haarlem to Leiden in 1969, he noticed that the latter had done much less to resolve the housing crisis, and that the situation was far worse than in his own city.[20]

The city government, tasked with resolving the housing crisis, was seen by many as incompetent.[21] Declining population numbers had forced the city to reduce its civil service, undermining its effectiveness, while the city's aldermen consisted of a group of elder statesmen, some of whom had held their positions for 20 years. Facing an urban crisis and shrinking funds, and unwilling to relinquish autonomy by requesting additional funding from central government, they proved unable to plot a new way forward. Instead, the city opted for a politics of delayed urban renewal. Working-class neighbourhoods were designated for redevelopment, with houses dispossessed and demolished one at a time. In a process that took years, living quality declined; rows of houses started to resemble 'neglected sets of teeth, where one rotting tooth would infect another and start to fall out one at a time'.[22] The situation was especially dramatic in the north of Leiden, where one borough, according to an eyewitness, looked like 'a bomb had exploded. It was clear that the city was failing its citizens.'[23]

Next to the city government, local housing corporations were important actors – although they, too, were often seen as incapable of dealing with the housing crisis. Leiden's social housing sector comprised seven housing corporations, managing in total about one-third of Leiden's housing stock. Most of these corporations had been founded in the 1910s and traced their origins to the socialist, protestant or catholic labour movement, although one of them had been founded by the municipality and two had been founded by social-liberal philanthropist societies.[24] While these organisations were strictly bound to national and local governments by laws and policy directives, they were nominally independent. In addition, they were governed by unpaid volunteers who had neither the means nor the know-how to take on large-scale renovation works.

Meanwhile, smaller issues could lead to major conflicts. In December 1972 a journalist asked one of the corporation governors about shoddy repair works that had left an elderly woman with a gas pipe running straight through her living room. The governor denied the incident had occurred, whereupon the journalist showed him photos – only to have the governor blame the entire incident on the elderly woman.[25] In such circumstances, conflicts between renters and housing corporations could easily escalate.

In 1969 a housing conflict provided the spark that lit the fuse of urban protest.[26] Two artists had squatted a house in a dilapidated inner-city borough, but the following day municipal workers started demolition works, assuming that the house had been abandoned. Neighbours and residents mobilised spontaneously, convincing the demolition workers to cease their activities. They then founded a neighbourhood committee, marched to the mayor's residence and organised a protest meeting. When the mayor and the city's aldermen visited the borough a few days later they were horrified by the dilapidated state of the area, but could offer no easy solutions. This motivated the residents to organise on a city-wide scale. They embarked upon a series of rent strikes that would continue far into the 1970s and would have far-reaching consequences.

The Leiden rent strike movement of the 1970s

In 1971 SP members founded the BHW as a vehicle to connect with renters and to campaign with them against rent increases and in favour of renovations and affordable new developments. The SP had

been founded in 1964 as a Leninist cadre party that only accepted members willing to spend large amounts of their free time on party work and adhere (or submit) to the party line. This high bar left the Leiden SP with 20 to 25 highly motivated activists. The BHW functioned as a nominally independent organisation, although SP members held leading positions in it. The BHW had a clear purpose and less demanding membership, making it attractive to large numbers of working-class members and activists. To organise the BHW, SP members went door to door to sell the organisation's newspaper, talk with renters about their issues and set up campaigns together. Soon the BHW organised about 1,000 members, representing more than half of the city's rent activists.

Critics denounced the SP for using renters' problems for their own political gains. They argued that the SP controlled the BHW from behind the scenes, claiming that the SP had no real intention of tackling housing issues truly and constructively. The city's alderman responsible for housing summed up these views in a statement in 1973:

> I don't trust the BHW, because it is a Maoist organisation that often uses people's distress for their own purposes.[27]

In 1971 a renters' committee severed its ties with the BHW because they had found out 'that the BHW is a front for the SP party'.[28] Later in the 1970s a rent activist commented that 'Once you marry the BHW, you will inherit the SP as a headstrong mother-in-law'.[29] Yet at the same time the BHW's combative attitude and radical action repertoire also inspired renters. In a short time the BHW had grown into one of Leiden's strongest renters' unions.[30]

The BHW's actions resonated – especially in Leiden, where the housing situation was dire. In 1972 the central government announced that pre-war rental houses would receive an additional annual rent increase, in order to synchronise their rents with those of newly constructed houses and apartments.[31] Given the appalling state of many pre-war rental houses in Leiden's inner city, this measure inspired fierce protests. One renters' organisation called the rent harmonisation measure 'a sweet-sounding word for a terribly unjust decision'.[32] The BHW and other activists started a campaign and organised renters to refuse the rent increase collectively. This was legally allowed if a renter had previously reported defects to the housing corporation that had not yet been fixed. In its newspaper, the BHW explained how they set up their rent strike:

> Each month, we went door to door to collect the postal cheques with the increased rent and swapped them for blank cheques, with which renters could pay the original rent. This way, people could pay the old rents and everybody would know how much support there was for the action.[33]

The BHW focused its organising and campaigning activities on housing corporations. They managed about one-third of Leiden's housing stock and provided a key service to the SP's target group. Furthermore, although formally independent, these corporations were factually an extension of local and national governments, which made fighting the corporations a way to turn social strife into political conflict. As corporation renters lived next to each other in blocks or neighbourhoods, they were also relatively easy to organise.

The BHW effectively made use of the legal and political opportunities for protest, for example by collectively organising renters around their individual right to oppose rent increases. The BHW also mobilised renters to protest during annual public meetings of housing corporations – who were not enthusiastic about the rent increases either, but had no way to counter them. Similarly, the BHW challenged local government, which was in a similar position as the housing corporations. Finally, the BHW used its position as a political outsider to challenge established political actors such as social democrats. Although the social democratic party criticised the rent increases in the city parliament, many housing corporations were governed by prominent local social democrats and trade union leaders, with close contacts to the city government. Calling them out proved an effective way to pressure local government and gain local legitimacy.

The BHW's main competitor was the LHC (*Leids Huurderscomité*, Leiden Renters' Committee), which also organised collective rent strikes. While the BHW was linked to the SP, the LHC had close ties to the left-socialist PSP (*Pacifistisch-Socialistische Partij*, Pacifist Socialist Party). Both competed against the mainstream social democratic party and both aspired to be local, grass-roots organisations, focused on direct action. Neither was interested in joining newly established national renters' organisations with a seat at the table of the Ministry of Housing. As in other cities, rent activism and renters' advocacy were thus divided into two camps, with one aiming for negotiations with policy-makers, and the other striving to confront them.

At first the BHW and LHC fought over local dominance, but in time they found ways of working alongside one another. As one SP member explains:

> In the north of Leiden we sort of divided the territory: the BHW focused on organising renters from the Gemeentewoningen housing corporation, while the LHC tasked itself with organising renters from the Ons Belang corporation. We never discussed this, it just happened.[34]

Eventually, the rent strike gained such broad support that a junior central government minister felt forced to visit the city and defend his policies. According to a local newspaper, he inspected 18 houses 'and was told by 18 families that they were not going to pay any rent increase because the houses were not worth it'.[35] In response, the junior minister explained that renters could individually object to the increase, but even the local government found this to be too bureaucratic. In 1974 he gave in to pressure from both rent activists and local government, annulling the rent increases for all Leiden pre-war inner-city houses for 1972 and 1973.[36] This was seen as a major victory by rent activists – a sign that local activism could even yield concessions from national governments. As annual rent increases were set to start again from 1974 onwards, however, rent strikes continued throughout the 1970s.

Shortly afterwards the BHW even organised a rent *decrease* campaign. This focused upon the Merenwijk, a new development of flats on the northern outskirts of Leiden. Because the rents in the Merenwijk were twice as expensive as pre-war inner-city houses, the BHW was scandalised that working families were forced to 'choose between living in unaffordable apartments or perish in affordable hovels'.[37] Those who moved to the Merenwijk were dissatisfied with the lack of amenities; roads, bus stops and supermarkets still needed to be constructed, for example.[38] In February 1974 renters decided to lower their rents unilaterally by *f* 75. The campaign lasted for about 18 months. At its height the BHW claimed that 277 of the 800 families living in the Merenwijk had joined the campaign. This time the junior minister did not yield, however, instead calling the campaign illegal. When the corporation brought the rent activists to court, a judge agreed. The campaign subsequently fizzled out, without the renters realising any of their demands.[39]

Other actions also ultimately failed. In 1973 members of the BHW were voted into the board of one of the housing corporations; they gained a majority on the board and proceeded to decrease the rents for all the houses under the corporation's management. However, the city – responsible for the rent collection for all corporation houses – refused to implement the rent decrease and the central Ministry of Housing

threatened to dissolve the corporation. The board subsequently relented and the BHW members were voted off.[40]

Despite this setback, the BHW also established smaller actions, often with surprising results. In 1973 BHW activists set up tents in front of the city hall, distributed flyers and collected signatures in support of three young working-class families who had squatted houses and were threatened with eviction. At the end of the day the alderman informed them that the families could stay or would get replacement housing.[41] Following this, BHW activists later occupied the offices of the *Bureau Huisvesting*, charged with assigning houses to renters; the activists successfully demanded appropriate housing be offered to two large families (the first living with five children in a one-room apartment; the other living with eight children in a three-room apartment).[42] In 1974 the BHW sided with a group of renters who demanded a playground and safer traffic; they threatened destroy a street if the local government did not respond. A few months later it was announced that the playground would be built and that several streets would be closed off to cars.[43]

These actions and results gave SP/BHW members a sense of accomplishment. The community organising model through which SP members connected with renters, set up campaigns and achieved tangible results seemed to work. One SP/BHW activist remembers:

> I was cycling through Leiden in the spring of 1973. We had been working with the BHW for two years by then, and everywhere I saw streets and places where we were doing actions and organising campaigns. It gave me a powerful feeling.[44]

As a fellow activist told a local newspaper, 'There is almost no neighbourhood where we have not done an action or campaign, and they clearly resonate.'[45]

The BHW had proved to be a successful vehicle for mobilising renters and achieving results. At the same time, the BHW also influenced the SP. Successful neighbourhood activism encouraged the SP to focus more than ever on community activism. In 1970 the SP had decided that all members were to start working in factories and organise the workers there. But in Leiden the SP soon acknowledged that 'the BHW is an important part of our success', and after 18 months labour issues were moved to the side in favour of neighbourhood activism.[46] When SP activists realised that Maoist imagery and Leninist slogans led to criticism and were counter-productive in their community organising efforts, they swiftly decided to downplay their Maoist roots. Slowly but

surely, community activism translated into political power. In 1982, after 12 years of community activism, the SP gained its first seat in Leiden's city parliament.[47]

Middletown Maoists: the strange case of the Socialist Party

What kind of party was the SP and how did it become such a prominent voice in the city's rent activism? The answer is that the SP holds a special place in Dutch political history and in the history of Western Maoism. In the Netherlands it was the first political party after 1945 to establish an extensive local support base before making a breakthrough into national politics. At the national elections of 1994 the SP won two parliamentary seats (gaining 1.32 per cent of the vote) – but by that time the party already counted 17,000 members (making it the fifth largest party, despite its long-time absence of national representation), 56 party chapters and 126 seats in local parliaments.[48] In the years that followed, in a development similar to that of the German party *Die Linke*, the SP grew into the main left-wing challenger of the social democratic Labour Party (alongside the Greens). In the wake of the 2011 financial crisis it even threatened to outgrow it, before entering a protracted phase of electoral and political decline.

In the history of Western Maoism, i.e. Maoism in industrialised and liberal democratic countries, the SP also stands out.[49] Maoists formed a vocal, at times influential, minority within the student and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In the Netherlands, the official Moscow-oriented Communist Party mobilised thousands of young people, while Maoists organised hundreds and Trotskyists dozens.[50] In most surrounding countries, the proportions were the same. However, of all the Maoist groups and parties founded in Western Europe and the US during the 1960s and 1970s, the SP was one of the few to survive the 1970s and 1980s. It was also the only one to evolve independently, developing from a political fringe group or sect into a well-established party with national parliamentary representation.

The party that in 1972 would become the SP was in fact founded in 1964. Its early members were communists who turned against Khrushchev and supported Mao's Cultural Revolution, then were expelled from the Moscow-oriented Communist Party.[51] After a few years the SP took solid shape by focusing on community organising and ombudsman politics. It organised itself to be the voice of under-represented inhabitants of

working-class boroughs, mobilising them to demand lower rents, better housing quality and the removal of polluting industries from residential areas; they also established campaigns for more speedbumps and better street lighting. This specific form of pragmatic-practical politics went hand in hand with a gradual downplaying of the party's radicalism and Maoist roots. Together, these two factors set the SP apart from most Maoist parties, and were responsible for the party's survival, growth and breakthrough.

Dutch political scientists Voerman and Beekers have attempted to assess to what extent the SP was a typical or an atypical Western Maoist party.[52] According to them, both the development and success of the SP were logical outflows of its Maoist politics. Both Voerman and Beekers assert that Mao's thought centred around three key elements: 1) the imperative to fight capitalism without reservation, 2) to counter bourgeois attitudes individually and collectively, and 3) always to serve the people. Although these three notions were intended to balance each other, the Western Maoist movement started to splinter and grow apart during the 1970s, leading to different currents emphasising different aspects of Maoist thought. Groups that emphasised the need to fight capitalism aggressively formed underground armed groups; both the Italian Red Brigades and the West German Red Army Faction, for example, were inspired by Maoism. Groups that emphasised the need to 'kill the inner bourgeois' formed sex-pol communes focusing on sexual liberation and new forms of living together.

The SP, on the other hand, emphasised the imperative to 'serve the people'. Inspired by the Cultural Revolution in China and guerrilla warfare in Vietnam, SP members decided early on that the best way to mobilise the working class against capitalism in the Netherlands was by going door to door, conducting surveys and organising campaigns around issues such as housing, environment and healthcare. Soon, however, SP members learned that many members of their target group were more interested in practical matters such as rent increases and electricity bills than they were in 'capitalism' and 'revolution'.

This caused the SP to downplay Maoism since this hindered its ability to mobilise people. As an SP member explained:

> We need to start out from the people's viewpoints, so not talk about revolution. Many don't understand that. We need to be very practical.[53]

As the SP became an explicitly practical and pragmatic party, Voerman and Beekers explain this development as a kind of Mao-inspired

de-Maoisation of the SP. In this form, it could develop into a left-wing challenger of the politically moderate social democratic party.

The extent to which the SP really set itself apart within the world of Western Maoism seems to be reflected even in its historiography. While many histories of Western Maoist parties focus on political, ideological and organisational developments – in short, on what activists thought and believed – histories of the Dutch SP focus instead on local campaigns and their effects – i.e. on what activists *did*.[54] A second remarkable difference is that most literature focuses on Maoist activism in metropolitan areas, where protest movements soon merged with urban youth subcultures to focus on politicised issues such as educational reform, labour rights, international solidarity and anti-repression. Literature on the SP, on the other hand, zooms in on activism in medium-sized cities and small towns, where protests were more practical and pragmatic.

Schmidt-Lauber has stated that these mid-sized towns and cities represent 'a specific type of urbanity' characterised by 'a far greater degree of overview/manageability, more direct communication and binding ties, and a smaller sense of openness and anonymity'.[55] A political campaign in a small place will often bring protesters out in direct opposition to the mayor, an alderman or an urban authority figure; it will easily become an issue that involves the entire local polity. In a metropolis, by contrast, a neighbourhood campaign is not so easily elevated into a city-wide issue; to do this often requires more general demands. The difference in urban scale thus significantly influences (the effects of) local protest behaviour.

This assessment caused Schmidt-Lauber to conclude that Middletown protests were not simply smaller, more moderate or less radical, but rather that they assumed a specific form. This notion resonates strongly with the history of the SP. The party's focus on community organising was especially successful in small towns and mid-sized cities, where they could elevate neighbourhood actions into local political issues. On the other hand, their attempts to transform neighbourhood actions in Amsterdam and Rotterdam into local political power proved far less successful.

The SP flourished in mid-sized cities and towns, where it managed to carve out a niche through its Middletown activism. Yet at the same time the SP was heavily influenced by these local experiences, which led to its deradicalisation. The extent to which this made the SP an atypical Maoist party remains unclear, since much of the historiography of Western Maoism asks different questions and follows different approaches. Although we have evidence that Maoists in Sweden also

mobilised rent strikes in Middletown contexts,[56] more information is needed concerning the actual activism of Maoists in the US, West Germany and Italy, to name just a few examples, in order to compare their trajectories.

Such a focus on the practical activism of Maoists could provide a counterpoint to many historical accounts that emphasise the 'lunacy' of Western Maoists.[57] In *Global Maoism*, Lovell struggles to understand the 'Mao fever' that swept Western Europe and the US during the 1960s and 1970s; she zooms in on those groups that ultimately took to forming communes or armed underground groups – in reality, fringe groups within Western Maoism. Steffen argues that in West Germany the Maoist scene consisted of a small ultra-left, a far larger mainstream and another (again much smaller) conservative current.[58] In his study on Maoists in the United States, Elbaum does focus upon such mainstream Maoists, but mainly on their politics and organisation.[59] The history of the SP may provide an incentive to students of Western Maoism to investigate mainstream Maoist currents, and especially the kinds of politics and activism that they inspired. Although the story of the Leiden SP provides only one case study of Middletown Maoism in action, it offers an opportunity to push the boundaries of scholarship and to ask different questions about the history of Western Maoism.

Outcomes and debates

Actions such as occupying the town hall square or *Bureau Huisvesting* forced the local government to make concessions. However, larger conflicts such as a city-wide rent strike movement even forced the central government of the Netherlands to intervene. The annulment of two rent increases is just one example. In 1973 a left-liberal national government came into office and allocated sizeable resources to urban renewal. The city of Leiden profited from this development, especially because Leiden civil servants had good contacts with the Ministry of Housing in The Hague. Rent strikes and other forms of rent activism worked in favour of the Leiden civil servants because they showed the Ministry just how serious the situation in Leiden had become.[60]

The combination of new governmental policy, connections between Leiden and The Hague and continued rent activism ensured that, from 1977 onwards, Leiden could apply for special funding initially reserved for urban renewal projects in the four main Dutch cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. Through this programme the central

government fully reimbursed cities for large urban renewal projects. According to one historian, Leiden was especially successful with funding applications:

> every time a junior minister offered a possibility to apply for funding, Leiden would submit its plans no later than the following day.

In the end, Leiden managed to extract 130 million guilders from the fund, proportionately much more than the other cities.[61]

The funding brought about a turning point for Leiden, which could now thoroughly renovate and renew its inner-city infrastructure and housing blocks. Between 1977 and 1984 as many as '50 bridges, 9 kilometres of quay walls, 75 kilometres of sewage pipe and 2,000 kilometres of pavement' were renovated and renewed. Furthermore, 2,800 houses were built and 5,300 houses were renovated.[62] A large part of Leiden's inner-city housing was connected to modern sewage. In 1993 a group of urban historians in Leiden stated that it had 'overcome a phase of dilapidation and pauperisation and instead has become a city pearl'. This was not only due to newly appointed competent aldermen, 'but just as much – and maybe more – to the protest movement of the 1970s'.[63]

The campaign in the Merenwijk also had consequences in the long run. Even though the city government disagreed with the protesters' choice of action, it did accept that 'rents were too high' and contacted the Ministry of Housing. Influenced among others by similar actions in Amsterdam, as well as other protests and debates, the ministry started to look for ways to align rents and income more successfully. This resulted in the development of rent subsidies, which in the decades that followed became an important mechanism of governmental housing and income policy.[64]

These long-term effects should, of course, not be over-estimated. Nor can they be wholly explained as having resulted from local activism or the actions of the BHW. Urban renewal in Leiden was a lengthy and arduous process. It took more than 15 years, and when its first phase ended in the mid-1980s nobody would have dared to say that Leiden was out of the woods. In fact, the housing shortage remained an important issue; renovations still escalated into rent conflicts and deindustrialisation had caused unemployment to rise up to 15 per cent – significantly above the national average.[65] The positive effects of urban renewal politics only became clear later, in the 1990s and after. In a similar way the BHW managed to achieve small results, but its overall

aim – renovations guided by the wishes of the renters and not leading to any rent increase – was not fulfilled. In the larger context of urban renewal, they were one factor among many that helped to push the process in the right direction.

All of this explains, finally, how the rent strike movement in Leiden slowly fizzled out from the mid-1970s onwards. It had managed to push the local government out of its passive state and to convince central government to annul two rent increases, as well as to make more funds available for urban renewal. However, as authorities started energetically to take up the task of urban renewal, the political and legal opportunities for collective rent action grew smaller. From the mid-1970s onwards SP members refocused their activism from housing to environmental and health issues.

Of course, from the central government's perspective, Leiden was not the Netherlands' most important city. Metropolises such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam could apply for more funding, and protests in these cities had greater effects on political debates and decision-making. From the SP's perspective, too, Leiden was not the most important or successful party chapter. In smaller cities in the country's periphery (Nijmegen, Oss, Heerlen), SP chapters were more successful in mobilising members and voters.[66]

What the case study of SP rent activism in Leiden shows, however, is the practical activism of the SP, the dynamics that this set in motion and its potential to realise smaller (direct) and larger (indirect, long-term) successes. This provided the SP with local legitimacy and political influence. It also motivated SP members to continue their activism throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, when most Maoist groups in Western Europe and North America disbanded or shrank to minor groups or sects.

Conclusion

A case study of rent activism in Leiden during the 1970s fits a global history of rent strikes and challenges the historiography of Western Maoism. As in many other times and places, the Leiden rent strike movement occurred at a moment of great change – a point at which a politics of *laissez-faire* with regards to the dilapidation and deterioration of rental houses gave way to a far more pro-active governmental politics of urban renewal, renovation and redevelopment. The grey period between these two eras created legal and political opportunities

for new political actors, as long as they managed to mobilise renters and challenge established parties and organisations through innovative action repertoires. This was exactly what the Leiden SP did, under the banner of the BHW. When new housing policies were firmly established, the rent strike fizzled out – but not before it had pressured local and central government to yield to some of its demands, for example those concerning rents, rent subsidies and waiting lists.

The case study of Leiden rent activism challenges historiography because it highlights the practical activism of mainstream or Middletown Maoists. They managed to form a sizeable but often overlooked current within the world of Western Maoism. This focus on practical activism has the potential to show what activists *did* (rather than which politics they adhered to, and what organisations they formed). Furthermore, it has the potential to explain why the SP kept on going strong while many other Maoist groups and parties declined.

As journalist and former SP member Jos Palm remembers, authorities in small towns and cities were more easily pressured when residents mobilised than metropolitan ones. He remembers an occasion when the local director of a housing corporation telephoned him with a request to moderate demands. It was this kind of experience that gave Middletown Maoists a sense of power.[67] At the same time, when Maoists failed to achieve tangible results they lost traction. In 1980, when squatter conflict escalated in Amsterdam, it stimulated a young Maoist to abandon the 'splinter organisation' to which he belonged. After a night of building barricades and fighting heavy-duty police, his comrades

> called the following day, asking why I had not been at their meeting in Rotterdam; they did not even know that barricades were being built in Amsterdam.[68]

While the squatters' movement offered an opportunity to transform ideals into political power, the unnamed Maoist splinter party had lost that ability. An open question remains whether the SP was as unique within the Western Maoist landscape as has been claimed.

Another question left open is the extent to which global developments and transnational connections influenced the Leiden rent strike movement. Although it has been acknowledged that the emergence of the SP was driven by the 1960s youth revolt, and by the split between Moscow and Beijing, the party's history has mainly been researched from a local or national perspective. We know that young people who joined the SP took inspiration from the Cultural Revolution in China

and the war in Vietnam, that the SP had contacts with like-minded parties and groups abroad, and that it reported on activism in other countries in its monthly newspaper. At the same time, however, there is little evidence to suggest, for example, that the Merenwijk campaign was inspired by the *autoriduzione* (self-reduction) actions of Italian rent activists.[69] Still, much suggests that the Leiden rent strike movement and the development of the SP formed far more of a connected history than has often been assumed. Here, too, there is space for more research and theoretical conceptualisation.

Notes

1 De Liagre Bohl 2012.
2 Van der Steen 2018; 2019.
3 Slager 2009.
4 For Leiden rent activism, see De Liagre Böhl 2012; Smit 2006; Van Oosten 2017. On the history of the SP, see Slager 2009; Kagie 2004; Voerman 1986; Beekers 2005.
5 For more information on specific use of sources and source criticism, see Van der Steen 2019, 18–19.
6 Wietsma and Nijssen 1989; 2000; Simons 2000.
7 Smit 2006, 39–40.
8 Smit 2006, 49–59.
9 Wietsma and Nijssen 2000, 127–33.
10 Wietsma and Nijssen 2000, 118.
11 Wietsma and Nijssen 2000, 132–3.
12 Pflug 2015.
13 See Chapter 6 by Hannes Rolf in this volume.
14 Beekers 2012, 17.
15 Smit 2006, 146.
16 Cüsters 2015.
17 Smit 2006, 127, 146. 'Lezers schrijven'; Smit 1989, 17–28.
18 Smit 2006, 127, 146. All quotations have been translated from Dutch to English by the author.
19 '"M'n huis is net een oude overall"'.
20 Interview with Cor Smit, 15 July 2021; Interview with Laurens Beijen, 26 November 2021; Interview with Dirk Halfwerk, 30 September 2020.
21 Van Oosten 2017, 15–29.
22 Smit 2006, 130.
23 Interview with Leendert Jonker, 13 January 2021.
24 Smit 2006.
25 '"M'n huis is net een oude overall"'.
26 Slangen 1989; '"De onrust komt uit de hoek van de sociaal zwakkeren"'.
27 'Ham: "KVP en prot. chr. groep moéten op één lijst"'.
28 'Ook Transvaalbuurt laat Huurdersbond vallen'.
29 'Merenwijkers blijven huur inhouden'.
30 De Liagre Böhl 2012.
31 Information brochure, 'Huurharmonisatie voor woningen van gemeenten en woningcorporaties', 1972; Archive SP Leiden, folder 11; BHW, Eerste acties in Noord en Kooi. The archive is held at Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken.
32 '"De onrust komt uit de hoek van de sociaal zwakkeren"'.
33 'Voordat de BHW er was zat je maar te kankeren'.
34 Interview with Cor Vergeer.
35 'Van Dam: Verenigingen en gemeente moeten het met elkaar eens worden'.

36 'Huren oude huizen niet hoger'.
37 'Hoge huren vernielen gezinsleven'. In 1974 rents of newly built apartments in the Merenwijk could be as high as *f* 375 per month, while pre-war inner city houses often cost no more than *f* 150 per month. Smit 2006, 164.
38 Korteweg 2008.
39 Van der Steen 2019, 65–7.
40 Van der Steen 2019, 61–3, 68–70.
41 'Een grote tent'.
42 '"Ik blijf hier zitten tot ik een behoorlijk huis heb"'; 'Grote gezinnen kregen toch leefbare huizen'; 'Bezetting leidt tot overwinning'.
43 'Staalwijk wil speelplaatsen'; 'Voorlichting over staalwijk'.
44 Interviews with Cor and Fenna Vergeer, October 2014 to February 2015.
45 '"Wij blijven een actiepartij en worden geen praatpartij"'.
46 Archive SP Leiden; folder 1; KEN, KPN, Verslagen afd. Leiden, notulen KEN-Leiden, 8 November 1971.
47 Van der Steen 2019, 112–34.
48 Van der Steen 2019, 130–4; Van der Steen 1995.
49 Alexander 2001.
50 Verbij 2005.
51 Slager 2009; Voerman 1986; Beekers 2005.
52 Voerman 1986; Beekers 2005.
53 Beekers 2005, 57.
54 An encyclopaedic overview of Western Maoism can be found in Alexander 2001. Studies on Maoism in West Germany include Kühn 2005; Gehrig 2008; Koenen 2012. For Maoism in the USA and France, see Fields 1988; Elbaum 2002.
55 Schmidt-Lauber 2010.
56 Rolf 2023.
57 Lovell 2019, 268–71.
58 Steffen 2002.
59 Elbaum 2002.
60 Van Oosten 2017, 45–6.
61 Van Oosten 2017, 45–6.
62 De Liagre Böhl 2012.
63 *Leiden zoals het was*, vol. 4, 95.
64 'Weth. Ham wil met Merenwijkers naar staatssecretaris'; 'Huurgewenningsbijdrage voor deel Merenwijk; Smit 2006, 163–4.
65 Smit 2006, 176–7.
66 Van der Steen 1995.
67 Palm 2003.
68 Duivenvoorden 1997, chapter 4.
69 Around the same time Italian guest workers and rent activists played an important role in a Frankfurt rent strike movement. See Karakayali 2005 and chapters 7 and 10 by Crompton (7) and Novaro and Crosetti (10) in this volume.

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9

West Berlin's tenants' movement and the crisis of the Fordist city in the 1970s

Lisa Vollmer

In the 1970s West Berlin's pre-war housing stock suffered from decay and dilapidation. In her first-hand account 'Mieter stören' ('Tenants disturb')[1] Eva Schindele – a student worker reaching out to tenants for the union-based housing company Neue Heimat, which was responsible for implementing an urban renewal programme – vividly describes her experience of this decay:

> There is a musty smell in the corridors. The stucco is caked with decades of dirt, the paint on the walls is peeling and there is dry rot here and there. Rungs are missing from the lathed banisters, and some of the brass bells have been violently torn off. One or two of the staircase windows have been nailed shut with cardboard. It's time to renovate here, says Neue Heimat. It's time to renovate here, says the Senate, says the district authority.[2]

The modernisation of a once-bourgeois neighbourhood in Berlin Charlottenburg seemed inevitable in Berlin in the early 1970s. However, the tenants who suffered from this dilapidation protested against modernisation and physically exercised their right to stay put:

> The tenants' only leverage is their flat. This is the experience of the tenants' initiative, and the tenants know it too. The preparatory work cannot begin as long as the tenants refuse the architects and timber surveyors access to their flats. No one can start the demolition or modernisation work until the tenants move out.[3]

What was happening? Why had the old, grandiose housing stock fallen into such disrepair? And why did tenants protest against modernisation? Why did they have to defend their right to stay put?

Social movements emerge in concentrated form in times of crisis, as they are both the cause and the catalyst of societal conflict. In the 1960s and 1970s the Fordist city was in such a crisis; many conflicts were articulated and a wave of what were retrospectively called 'new social movements' emerged – including a new cycle of the tenants' movement.

What distinguished this cycle of social movements[4] from earlier or later cycles? To answer this question, this chapter introduces a theoretical framework that combines social movement studies and regulation theory and explains why the housing question and Berlin's tenants' movement make a good case study to exemplify this theory.[5] The chapter then goes on to characterise Fordist urbanism and housing politics in general and its manifestations in Berlin in particular.

When Fordist urbanism came into crisis in the 1960s and 1970s, state and real estate actors tried to mediate in a particular way. In this chapter I explain how the specificity of West German Fordist urbanism, i.e. the functional separation of the city and the state-subsidised provision of mass housing, both as homes for tenants *and* as investment opportunities for housing companies, led to the conflict; I also consider what action repertoire and strategies tenant protests employed to confront it. Following the regulation approach, I argue that the latter can only be understood due to the former. The development of the housing regime before the emergence of the tenant movement cycle is therefore examined in detail. I also describe how Berlin's tenants' movement of the 1970s, its demands and its collectivity were incorporated into another response to the crisis of Fordist capitalism in the 1980s and 1990s, that is, neoliberal urbanism, and how the neoliberal city took shape in the governance of new urban social movements. These steps make it possible to distinguish tenant mobilisation of the 1970s and 1980s from earlier movement cycles in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as from the current movement cycle.

Regulation theory in social movement studies

To differentiate between different phases or cycles of tenant mobilisation, I employ the theoretical framework of the regulation approach. This was developed by a group of French Marxist social scientists in the 1970s and has been refined in different academic communities up to the

present day.[6] The neo-Marxist regulation approach aims to explain why capitalist societies experience phases of relative stability, albeit being riddled with contradictions. In these phases a specific accumulation regime, a specific way of organising capital accumulation, dominates. Stability is attributed to specific modes of regulation that dominate in a given country for a certain period of time. Regulation refers not only to political institutions (as in neo-institutionalism), but also to the relationship of all social relations, actors, norms and ideologies to macro-economic developments.[7] Regulation is defined as a complex process of co-ordination within capitalist societies in order to keep the economy growing.[8] A well-functioning mode of regulation leads to stability – but it also, given the inherent contradictions of any accumulation regime, produces its own crises. When these crises can no longer be mediated by the mode of regulation, the transition to a new phase begins. However, the regulation approach does not fall into the trap of economic determinism. Both accumulation regimes and modes of regulation are conceptualised by regulation theorists not as given entities, but rather as outcomes of the co-ordination of different interests, power relations and social conflicts.

Given their contingent nature, accumulation regimes change over time. The regulation approach was formulated by describing the accumulation regime of Fordism and its mode of regulation, the welfare state, roughly from the 1920s to the 1970s. The preceding phase has been described as Manchester or *laissez-faire* capitalism, with liberalism as the mode of regulation. The following period has been described as post-Fordism or financialised capitalism with neoliberalism as the mode of regulation. While most of the literature in the tradition of the regulation approach focuses on the relationship between capital and labour, the monetary system or the extent of state regulation to distinguish different modes of regulation, some authors have pointed out that each phase is also associated with its own form of spatial regulation, its own urbanism.[9] Some even argue that it is precisely the struggles over urban conflicts that crystallise the crisis of a mode of regulation.[10]

How does this theory relate to social movements?[11] Looking at the phases and the periods of transition between them, the 1920s and the 1960s/1970s, it is clear that these periods of transition are also phases of increased social movement activity. Social movements are both the product and the motor of these periods of crisis. Social movements shape their practices, organisations and demands according to – and in opposition to – the specific mode of regulation they encounter. That is, social movements respond, consciously or unconsciously, to the

specificities of a mode of regulation, particularly to the contradictions and exclusions it produces. They may or may not articulate a sophisticated ideological critique of the regulative regime. However, their practices are shaped by these contradictions and their expressions in everyday life.

In general, and in different national contexts, the housing movement, or more specifically the tenants' movement,[12] is a good case study to illustrate this theoretical approach. The reasons for this are both empirical and conceptual. Empirically, significant tenant mobilisations have taken place in different time periods and can therefore be studied diachronically. Conceptually, the underlying contradiction, the 'housing question', as already described by Engels,[13] has remained stable throughout the history of capitalist urban development. The general nature of the contradiction between housing as real estate, as a commodity, on the one hand, and housing as a home, as a basic need, on the other,[14] has not changed significantly in the last 150 years. The drive of capital to capture the value of the built environment has always stood in the way of providing affordable housing for low-income households. The resulting conflict has been mediated differently at different times with diverse modes of regulation, but the underlying contradiction has remained the same. This stability allows us to look at the specificity of the modes of regulation of housing provision and explain why the character of the tenants' movement has changed over time.

Three phases of heightened mobilisation of tenant protest with particular sets of practices and demands can be distinguished in different national contexts. These correspond to the three phases of modes of capital accumulation and their corresponding urbanisms.[15] First there is *laissez-faire* urbanism: its crisis since the end of the nineteenth century led to an agonistic tenants' movement, often addressing the person of the landlord as its direct enemy. Second is Fordist urbanism; its crisis from the 1960s onwards led to a tenants' movement using autonomous and identitarian practices against normalising state intervention. Third is neoliberal urbanism; its crisis from the 2000s led to a tenants' movement reclaiming state institutions for social purposes and demanding democratisation. Given the regulation approach's emphasis on the specific political and social regulation of policy fields to explain the characteristics of social movement cycles, this chapter also focuses on analysing the Fordist housing provision itself before going on to describe tenants' protests in response to the Fordist crisis.

Geographically and temporally, this chapter focuses on West Berlin in the 1960s and 1970s to explain how the particularities of

Fordist urbanism have shaped the tenants' movement. While the general mechanisms of anti-Fordist urban movements could be studied elsewhere – and are examined in this volume by van der Steen for Leiden (Chapter 8) and by Novaro and Crosetti for Harlem and Magliana (Chapter 10) – West Berlin[16] provides a prominent example of tenants' protest due to its high proportion of renters and its long tradition of tenant activism.[17] West Berlin is sometimes considered as a very special case within West Germany or Europe due to its status as an 'island' within the GDR. This status certainly influenced the regulation of housing provision in the city. For example, post-war rent control was in place longer than elsewhere, suburbanisation was not an option and the system of subsidies for social housing construction was particularly favourable to private investors, in order to attract investment in an uncertain environment. However, the overall mode of regulation of housing provision was by and large determined by national policy decisions and Fordist urbanism dominant in West Germany. West Berlin's tenants' movement can therefore be seen as representative of West Germany's tenants' movement of the time, albeit with slight variations.

Fordist urbanism and Fordist housing politics in West Berlin

The tradition of Berlin's tenants' movement goes back to the second half of the nineteenth century. Before the Second World War the movement established 'the tenant' as a political actor, formed an antagonistic political collectivity against the landlord as a person, founded institutions such as tenants' unions and associations, organised rent strikes and tenants' councils and succeeded in integrating the housing question as a political field into the developing welfare state.[18]

In West Germany, this integration was fully implemented after the Second World War. The class compromise of the Fordist mode of regulation included a Fordist urbanism that provided mass housing, as noted above, both as homes for tenants and as investment opportunities for (private and public) housing companies. Standardised mass social housing was built in functionally segregated modernist housing estates tied to traditional gender roles and a normalised nuclear family lifestyle.[19] The construction of housing was introduced not only as a social policy, but also as an economic policy to boost the construction and financial sectors and to generate jobs. In this way, post-war housing in West Germany was set up as a classic Fordist model: the promotion

of the economy through measures such as direct or indirect financing, legal frameworks, etc., advanced the standardised mass production of a consumer good (as housing was defined), while at the same time granting access to this good to a certain social group. The general logic of housing as a commodity was not challenged, while state intervention was seen as legitimate only in addressing immediate crises.

In what follows, this chapter will describe firstly the particularities of Fordist mass housing and how it was tied to the interests of certain parts of the real estate industry (1), then secondly how this Fordist housing provision went into crisis because the valorisation mechanism no longer worked and because its outcome – segregation – became an increasing problem for city governments (2). Finally it considers how the real estate sector and the state attempted to mediate this crisis through urban renewal policies, and how this attempted mediation led to tenant protest (3).

Phase 1

In the conservative corporatist welfare regime of West Germany, the construction of social housing was intended to serve a 'broad spectrum of society' (1st Housing Act) in a context of mass destruction caused by bombing during the Second World War and mass immigration following territorial losses of Germany. Social housing was realised by public, private and collective actors, such as the trade union-based housing company Neue Heimat. Some of these actors were bound to limited profits and reinvestment in housing by the legal framework of '*Wohnungsgemeinnützigkeit*' ('housing for the common good'); others operated on a for-profit basis. For all of these housing companies, social housing was designed to be a lucrative investment opportunity. The state provided huge subsidies and in return required only temporary use as social housing by defining eligible groups and setting maximum rents. After the initial subsidies had been paid back (usually after 30 years), owners were free to rent out the flats at market prices. The layouts of social housing units were designed to accommodate the nuclear family, with no social arrangements beyond this normalised lifestyle. The conservative governments of post-war West Germany were ideologically committed to promoting and subsidising home ownership. However, due to the lack of private capital from citizens and the illiquidity of the financial markets, the available subsidies were not tapped into and social housing remained the dominant housing model.

Social housing construction was complemented by rent control measures for the existing housing stock. Fixed rent limits were set at

pre-war levels and the termination of rental leases became very difficult. However, the quality of newly constructed social housing was much higher than that of the pre-war housing stock. Separate bathrooms and modern layouts made the new buildings more attractive than the old housing stock, even though rents were higher. Mass social housing thus became the province of the middle class, while lower-income groups remained in the old housing stock. This was possible because both lower- and middle-income groups were eligible for social housing, and the housing companies were given the freedom to opt for the middle class.[20] In West Berlin social mass housing was built on the city's outskirts – due to the nature of the divided city, these outskirts partly lay in the heart of the city and its old housing stock. Social mass housing in Berlin was thus built both on vacant land and on demolished existing urban structures.

Phase 2

This Fordist provision of social housing worked well for a time and for certain social groups. The real estate sector and the construction industry were both guaranteed profit, the middle classes found new and good homes in social housing and the poorer classes did not face major affordability problems – although they suffered from poor living conditions in the dilapidated old housing stock, which sometimes lacked basic amenities. However, by the early 1960s the regime was in crisis, both from the point of view of the real estate sector involved in the provision of social housing and from the perspective of local government.

For the real estate industry, the profit-generating role of social housing was threatened by a decline in demand. There were simply not enough people willing or financially able to move into social housing, even though the quantitative housing crisis was not over. The demand from the middle class was being met.

At the same time, cities faced their own negative consequences of the Fordist housing regime: increasing segregation. While the middle classes were concentrated in the social housing estates and in suburban single-family homes (albeit to a lesser extent in the 'island' of West Berlin), lower-income groups remained in the rent-regulated old housing stock. This old housing stock suffered from under-investment, with private owners neither forced nor incentivised to renovate their housing. It was also where the growing migrant population from Italy, Turkey and other countries, known as 'guest workers', found a place to live. Segregation was thus a direct result of the workings of the Fordist housing regime, rather than a deliberate choice by migrants. Migrants

were not eligible for social housing until the late 1970s and, due to racist practices by landlords, it was often only in the most dilapidated housing stock that they could find a home.[21] The increasing social and ethnic segregation became a problem for cities because of the eroding tax base and because of real or anticipated social conflicts.

Phase 3

To tackle the lack of demand for social housing, housing companies organised bus tours to persuade potential tenants, with little success.[22] The central state tried to mediate the problem in various ways. It increased the group able to move into social housing by introducing demand-side subsidies to help individual tenants pay rent ('*Wohngeld*', 1963). In addition, subsidies for new social housing units were reduced from the 1960s onwards,[23] ultimately leading to a decline in the social housing stock due to its 'social interim-use' nature.[24]

Cities responded to the problem of segregation by developing an urban renewal regime. The regulation of the old housing stock was gradually reduced from 1960 onwards, making it more attractive for private owners to invest in their inner-city properties. The urban renewal policy was developed as a new strategy to bring together real estate and local government interests. In Berlin, the term '*Kahlschlagsanierung*' ('demolition redevelopment') was coined to describe the targeting of entire neighbourhoods as redevelopment areas.[25] In the years or even decades between the declaration of redevelopment areas and the actual start, private landlords encouraged further disinvestment. This led to high vacancy rates at a time when the quantitative housing problem was still unresolved and many people desperately needed a home.

The policy also encouraged further segregation. Anyone financially able left the crumbling housing stock and landlords were eager to overcrowd their flats – preferably with migrant tenants who had no other choice – to encourage the further deterioration of their buildings. In West Berlin rent control measures for the old housing stock existed longer than in other West German cities, and it was thus far more lucrative to destroy existing structures and build new housing estates. The explicit aim of the redevelopment policy was to 'improve' the social structure of the neighbourhoods, i.e. to drive out low-income groups and attract middle-income groups and to create a less dense, modernist urban structure – with fewer flats than had been destroyed.[26] Displacement and rising rents were the – intended – urban renewal consequences of the social mixing approach.

In this context, a new cycle of tenants' protest emerged in Berlin in the late 1960s and 1970s. The contradictions of the Fordist housing regime and the attempts to mediate its crisis sparked protest from tenants, carried out by those excluded from this class compromise in housing: low-income groups, groups excluded on the grounds of racism and members of the middle class who did not want to conform to the rigid lifestyles imposed by post-war society and Fordist urbanism, the 'social and cultural uniformisation processes of housing and lifestyles'.[27]

Tenant protest in Fordist West Berlin

While there were protests in the newly built mass social housing about the lack of social infrastructure and rent increases, most protests by tenants in Berlin in the 1970s took place in areas undergoing urban renewal. In areas targeted for rehabilitation, or rather demolition, poor living conditions and fears of rising rents after urban renewal led to protests and the formation of various initiatives by tenants. These initiatives were founded both in neighbourhoods in the city centre of West Berlin, such as Charlottenburg, and in peripheral neighbourhoods on West Berlin's outskirts, such as Wedding or Kreuzberg.[28]

In the Klausenerplatz redevelopment area in Charlottenburg, a neighbourhood near City West, the Senate appointed Neue Heimat Berlin, the non-profit housing developer of the trade unions, as the redevelopment agency. Neue Heimat began systematically to buy up houses from private owners. The redevelopment aimed to change the 'defective social structure'. The proportion of workers was too high; in contrast, the 'middle-class population' and 'West German workers' were to be attracted.[29] The first redevelopment measures began at the end of the 1960s. Areas slated for redevelopment led to worsening living conditions in the neighbourhood: many people moved away and the houses fell into disrepair. In her first-hand account quoted above, Eva Schindele describes her experiences during the social plan survey she carried out as a student worker for Neue Heimat:

> Many living situations […] are similar. They are based on age, frailty and financial hardship. Often also on the attempt to cope with both as well as possible. Neighbours play an important role in this, as does the social security provided by the familiar environment.[30]

In early 1973, due to the first redevelopment measures that pressured tenants to move out, the first protest groups formed. Students of architecture and urban planning at the nearby Technical University of Berlin, most of whom lived in the Klausenerplatz neighbourhood, formed a neighbourhood group;[31] they used their expertise to politicise other tenants by organising a series of events and publishing a newspaper. At the same time the Young Socialists (Jusos), the youth organisation of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), founded a group called 'Action Renovation for All' to support the residents and to push through their positions within the SPD and the administration.[32] The two groups joined forces and in June 1973 organised a well-attended street party, after which the Klausenerplatz Tenants' Initiative was founded as a registered association. In its statutes, the purpose of the association was described as follows:

> The tenants of the Klausener Platz neighbourhood affected by the redevelopment have joined forces in the association to represent their interests. The association considers the preservation of the existing social structure to be a central interest. The tenants in the association oppose the Senate's policy of relocating those affected by the redevelopment to housing estates on the outskirts of the city […]. Rather, it is in the tenants' interest that the substance of the existing housing be preserved and renovated in such a way that only the increase in value is passed on to the tenants, while rent control and tenant protection are maintained.[33]

Ruth Schöneich, a tenant, described the atmosphere at the association's meetings:

> The whole situation in the area was discussed in detail. Each of us gave our two cents, and it turned out that we tenants were completely in the dark about what those responsible for the redevelopment were planning to do with us. […] We quickly realised that the redevelopment could not take place without the participation of those affected. […] We agreed that we could only achieve something together.[34]

Following the cross-class composition of the movement, the action repertoire of the tenants' initiative was diverse. To make tenants realise that their fate was not individual but structural, the initiative published a series of leaflets entitled 'Neighbourhood Fates' to share redevelopment

experiences; it was also present at the local weekly market.[35] There they set up a 'pillory' where tenants could describe the lack of maintenance in their homes, while numerous banners adorned the balconies of houses slated for demolition. More confrontational actions were also part of the repertoire. For example, the entrance to Neue Heimat was walled up in revenge for the walling up of neighbours' flats. Tenants also resisted eviction by refusing to leave their flats and preventing demolition work. This strategy to fight for the right to stay put required a high level of organisation in the buildings to support the tenants in their resistance.

Parallel to the protests, urban planner Hardt-Waltherr Hämer developed an alternative model of 'urban renewal without displacement' for part of the redevelopment area[36] – later to become important in the formulation of a new urban renewal policy in the context of the International Building Exhibition in Berlin in the 1980s. Hämer's office and the tenants' initiative joined forces. They were able to push through their demands in one block where they were active in the mid-1970s: the rent was limited to an affordable level after modernisation and compensation was paid for relocation costs and the increased heating costs due to vacancies.

Similar protest practices were employed in another area targeted for urban renewal, the neighbourhoods around Kottbusser Tor in Kreuzberg. These were divided into different planning units and targeted for demolition and redevelopment, one after the other.[37] As in Charlottenburg, students of architecture and urban planning protested against redevelopment from an early stage. In 1968 several students joined forces in the Office for Urban Planning and Social Work. They no longer saw their political convictions being realised in theoretical discussions at the university, but rather in the neighbourhood with those 'affected' by the eradicating urban renewal policy.[38]

Believing in the politics of the first person, the students themselves moved to Kreuzberg, still a classic working-class neighbourhood at the end of the 1960s. However, they could not build on an existing protest by tenants against redevelopment. Leaflets, street theatre and tenant counselling did not lead to the 'spontaneous mass protest' that had been envisaged.[39] At the same time the Office for Urban Planning and Social Work tried its hand at counter-planning against the redevelopment plans, producing detailed studies of the residential and commercial structure of the neighbourhood around Oranienplatz. Only gradually, as more and more nonconformists moved in and the consequences of redevelopment became apparent in the first planning units, did resistance to demolition and rent increases begin to emerge.

The tenants' protest eventually paid off: as the planning units progressed, the old building fabric was increasingly preserved and tenants' participation in the planning process was steadily expanded. In 1978, for example, four community workers were given their own shop in Dresdener Straße, from where they organised the election of a tenants' representative body. Their demands were clear and cogent:

> Immediate stop of demolition and wrecking! Renovation of empty and occupied houses! Use of vacant, refurbished flats for interim occupancy! Winter proofing of the houses and reimbursement via heating subsidy![40]

As urban renewal led to an obscene simultaneity of housing shortage and empty homes on a massive scale in the late 1970s, tenants' initiatives were accompanied by attempts of *Instandbesetzen* ('homesteading squatters').[41] These practices of self-help and renovating dilapidated vacant buildings were carried out by both middle-class activists and marginalised groups. In the neighbourhood around Klausenerplatz, described above as an example of protest against urban renewal, squatters appeared in the early 1980s. The so-called 'active housing procurement measures' were accompanied by the tenants' initiative. Tenants helped to resolve potential conflicts with neighbours, who benefited from the political pressure of the occupations:

> Neue Heimat suddenly has cheap replacement flats, several houses are taken out of the renovation programme, and repair funds are approved.[42]

In Kreuzberg, the citizen initiative SO36 (the neighbourhood's old postcode) mobilised around the vacancies at a municipal housing company; the first squat was organised in 1979. Numerous others followed, also in close co-operation with the tenants' shop in Dresdener Straße.

The history of Berlin's squatting movement also includes several migrant squats.[43] Turkish and Kurdish women in particular occupied various buildings, reached agreements with public landlords and set up the first bilingual day-care centres. In contrast to the immigrant-led protests in Brazil and France described in Chapters 7 and 11 of this volume, this type of squat did not make up the majority in Berlin; it rather speaks to the diverse nature of the phenomenon. Without the tenants' protests of the 1970s, the squatting that took place around

1980 would not have been possible. The tenants' protests politicised and radicalised many people. For many, the state had long been

> the guarantor of the inviolability of this private space [one's own home]. […] The fact that the state itself is invading this private sphere and offering it up for marketisation shakes faith in society and democracy.[44]

This shaken faith was the basis for the widespread support of the more radical squats.

The neighbourhood-based tenant groups in Berlin were concerned about displacement, the resulting loss of social networks, rising rents and, in the more middle-class groups, the preservation of the heritage of old building structures. They formed a particular political collectivity that can be understood as a counter-reaction to Fordist urbanism. While a more class-based rhetoric and practice initially dominated the tenant movement, a territorially defined local identity became increasingly prominent in tenants' groups fighting for their neighbourhoods.[45] A local identity was the only thing that could unite the diverse populations in the affected neighbourhoods: namely the poorer working class, otherwise marginalised groups and the middle class seeking alternative lifestyles. A common local identity had to be defended against attacks from outside:

> The commonality of this group is defined by the contempt and disregard, that the 'normal', integrated citizen holds for them and by the sword of Damocles of rehabilitation.[46]

It was only at this time that people began to think of themselves as residents of a particular neighbourhood, a feeling that was expressed for the first time in the naming of these neighbourhoods.[47]

Alongside the construction of local identities, and linked to it, tenants demanded the democratisation of planning processes. Given the involvement of public and third-sector institutions in the urban restructuring, self-determination and autonomy became important claims against the normalising state. The demand for inclusion and co-determination of those affected by urban renewal linked the tenants' movement to the demands of other social movements of the time, fighting other injustices produced by the Fordist welfare regime in other policy fields.

This characteristic of the tenants' movement of the 1970s as a new social movement, with an emphasis on local identity and self-determination, is also evident in its relationship to civil society

institutions that emerged from the previous cycle of the tenants' movement in the nineteenth century to the Second World War. The tenants' unions founded in the second half of the nineteenth century were integrated into the corporatist welfare regime of West Germany; they lost their former oppositional function and were mostly reduced to legal service providers. Contemporaries of the tenant movement in the 1970s criticised this co-optation[48] and new, repoliticised local tenants' unions were founded.[49] Similarly Neue Heimat, the largest housing company in Fordist West Germany, is an example of a civil society organisation from the old tenants' movement that came under scrutiny by the new generation. This company, owned and managed by the labour union federation, was in many cases the contractor of the urban renewal programme, and thus the institution responsible for the destruction of affordable housing. As such, it became the direct target of tenants' protests in the 1970s.

The incorporation of tenants' protest and the development of neoliberal urbanism

The tenants' protest had a lasting impact on the principles of urban renewal in Berlin; both tenants' and squatting movements were able to force a change in urban renewal politics.[50] Instead of demolishing the old urban fabric, the model of *behutsame Stadterneuerung* ('cautious urban renewal') was invented: cautious towards the building fabric, which was to be preserved and slowly modernised; cautious towards the established social structure of the neighbourhoods; cautious also in the process of urban planning, i.e. through the engaged participation of those affected in decisions. This policy was developed by planners and architects in close co-operation with tenants' initiatives. In 1979 Hardt-Waltherr Hämer, the architect who worked with the tenants' initiative at Klausenerplatz, was appointed director of the International Building Exhibition (IBA), which implemented cautious urban renewal.[51] This strategy was heavily subsidised – possible only because of the exceptional circumstance of West Berlin receiving a lot of public funds, as compensation for its island and frontier status during the Cold War.

At the same time, the tenants' movement and the changes in urban renewal were incorporated into a new form of urban governance. The urban renewal areas, the protests within them and the International Building Exhibition became the testing ground for new techniques of participation and co-optation of social movements. Contemporaries

were critical of the shift in focus from social politics to the preservation of local identity,[52] and the fact that the International Building Exhibition

> dismantled the 'crying injustice' in Kreuzberg into a cosmos of individual projects and procedures, pushed the protest movement into self-help therapy and promoted a system of 'the professionalised affected'.[53]

Similarly, the homesteaders and squatters were integrated into a new form of governance that legitimised the withdrawal of the state: '[i]n this process, self-help was transformed from an oppositional practice into a state-organised norm of organisation and control'.[54] Beyond the local level, in 1971 a federal urban development law made it mandatory for the first time to involve citizens in urban planning through participatory processes. However, the way in which this participation was carried out encouraged protest rather than settling it, and proved inadequate to meeting the demands of tenants' protest for a democratisation of planning. People were merely informed, not given a say.

The development of participatory procedures in the area of rehabilitation in Kreuzberg is a good example of how a political conflict was mediated and dissolved. Following the demands for more participation by the protests against urban renewal, the administration established the 'Working Group Renewal Commission' Arbeitsgruppe Erneuerungskommission, or AEK). This brought together representatives from administrative authorities and affected tenants with the aim of resolving conflicts between tenants, landlords, authorities and the private urban planning companies carrying out the renewal. Berlin's Senate, led by the Christian-conservative party CDU, viewed this procedure as 'the only opportunity to pacify Kreuzberg'.[55]

The AEK did give *individual* representatives of tenants the opportunity to raise their voices, distracting tenants from collectivising their demands. Advice to affected tenants was paid for through the IBA from now on, equally decollectivising the tenants. The IBA thereby split up the protest movement 'into an incomprehensible cosmos of single projects […] and mercilessly promoted a system of the "professionalised affected"'.[56] Such professionalisation of the representation of those affected by urban renewal also led to the dissolution of the cross-class character of the movement, because representatives only came from the middle class.[57] The consequence of this is illustrated in a report on a session of the AEK: despite the majority of the present

tenants, most of them with Turkish migration history, arguing in favour of expanding a kindergarten, the proposal was denied by the representatives because of the intervention into the building fabric.[58]

The 'familiarities' between the movement's political collectivity and the emerging ideology of the neoliberal project enabled the co-optation of the movement and its groups, as well as its integration into the formerly public social services provision through self-responsibilisation.[59] The neoliberal project transformed local identities and demands for local democracy into techniques of 'governing through community';[60] it also legitimised the rescaling of the state and the localisation of politics.[61] The demand for participation in urban planning, and the concepts of advocacy and counter-planning that had emerged from the tenants' struggles, were transformed into participatory planning practices that sought to resolve any conflict of interest into consensus and to negate power relations.[62] Autonomous spaces created by squatters become integrated into the city's marketing of 'alternative lifestyles'.[63] Through this transformation and co-optation, the 1970s tenants' movement in Berlin, with its associated demands for redistribution and democratisation, fell victim to another response to the crisis of Fordism: neoliberal urbanism. The new model of 'cautious urban renewal' was therefore only a brief transitional phase between Fordist and post-Fordist urban renewal.

Conclusion

The post-war period saw a Fordist housing regime established that benefited the middle classes and parts of the real estate sector. However, the construction of the Fordist housing regime incorporated its own limitations, which led to a crisis both for real estate and for local government. The measures taken to mediate this crisis caused tenant mobilisation. The tenants' movement of the 1970s, including its practices and its political collectivity, can only be understood as a specific reaction to Fordist urbanism. Tenants' protests in Fordist West Berlin form part of the cycle of new social movements.[64] The tenants' movement was concerned with collective consumption, a territorially defined identity and political self-determination, as scholars of new social movements have argued.[65] It was composed of a coalition of the working class and the 'new' middle class, as other scholars have observed regarding new social movements.[66] Despite its attention to questions of self-determination, the

tenants' movement was by no means post-material, as some scholars have argued in relation to new social movements.[67] At its core was the very material need for housing and a home – and thus a sometimes implicit, sometimes overt critique of capitalism and capitalist urban development.

Despite this critique of capitalist urban development, the tenants' movement of the 1970s became the testing ground for the development of this kind of urbanism and a new mode of regulation:[68] the neoliberal city. This project was able to integrate the cultural demands of the tenants' movement – local identity, heritage conservation, limited forms of local participation and ideas of self-help – while at the same time rejecting its social demands – affordable rents for low- and middle-income groups and real co-determination in urban planning and housing institutions. Arguing with the regulation approach, this appropriation and co-optation of a social movement, part of the process of developing a new mode of regulation, 'created' the very topical contradictions of the neoliberal city against which the 'current cycle of the tenant movement has formed'.

Notes

1 The German title 'Mieter stören' is deliberately ambiguous as it refers both to tenants' physical obstruction of urban renewal and to their protesting against the implementation of urban renewal policies.
2 Schindele 1980, 25, translated by the author.
3 Schindele 1980, 111, translated by the author.
4 Tarrow 1994.
5 This chapter is based on a study of secondary literature, partly academic and partly published by those involved in the urban struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. It was part of my PhD thesis in sociology (Vollmer 2019), which focused on the contemporary tenants' movements in Berlin and New York and their specific political collectivity, and contrasted them with earlier cycles of tenants' movements in the two cities. The empirical descriptions are based on the published dissertation.
6 For example, Aglietta 2000 [1976]; Lipietz 1985; Hirsch/Roth 1986; Atzmüller et al. 2013.
7 Sablowski 2013, 88.
8 Simonis 2007, 213.
9 Prigge 1987; Amin 2003.
10 Esser/Hirsch 1987, 40.
11 For an overview of how the regulation approach is used in social movement studies, see Vollmer 2024.
12 The more general term 'housing movement' can also refer to the mobilisation of homeowners or the homeless. In the case of the tenants' movement, exploitation takes place in a more direct way.
13 Engels 1976 [1872–3].
14 Harloe 1995; Madden/Marcuse 2016.
15 For a comprehensive overview of all three phases for Germany, see Vollmer 2020.
16 The chapter is limited to an examination of the western part of the city. While there are similarities in the development of urban design and mass housing construction in West Germany and the GDR, housing provision in the GDR was not organised in a capitalist way.

It was therefore not integrated into an accumulation regime, making the application of a regulation approach inappropriate. This is not to say that there were no housing grievances or tenants' protests in the GDR (see, for example, Nowak 2018; Wolf 2018); however, these did not revolve around issues of affordability but rather around issues of accessibility and the quality of available housing.

17 Mattern 2018.
18 Vollmer 2019, 47ff.
19 Häußermann/Läpple/Siebel 2008, 135ff.
20 Schildt 1998, 172f.
21 Münch 2010.
22 Schindele 1980, 41.
23 Egner 2014, 15.
24 Donner 2000, 200.
25 Bodenschatz/Heise/Korfmacher 1983.
26 Schindele 1980, 21.
27 Mayer 1990, 13, translated by the author.
28 Bodenschatz/Heise/Korfmacher 1983.
29 Schindele 1980, 21, translated by the author.
30 Schindele 1980, 26.
31 Bodenschatz/Heise/Korfmacher 1983, 67.
32 Bodenschatz/Heise/Korfmacher 1983, 67f.
33 Quoted in Schindele 1980, 78, translated by the author.
34 Quoted in Schindele 1980, 77, translated by the author.
35 Schindele 1980, 85.
36 Hämer/Roseman 1976.
37 Bodenschatz/Heise/Korfmacher 1983.
38 Fassbinder 1983.
39 Fassbinder 1983, 351, translated by the author.
40 Quoted in Bodenschatz/Heise/Korfmacher 1983, 106f, translated by the author.
41 Kreis 2017; Holm/Kuhn 2011.
42 Bodenschatz/Heise/Korfmacher 1983, 77, translated by the author.
43 Gürsel/Schubenz 2016.
44 Eichstädt-Bohlig 1981, 222, translated by the author.
45 Flecken 1999.
46 Eichstädt-Bohlig 1981, 210, own translation.
47 For a similar development in New York, see Osman 2011.
48 Ott 1984.
49 Nelles/Wanders 1981.
50 Holm/Kuhn 2011.
51 Sack 2002.
52 Homuth 1984; Eichstädt 1982.
53 Eichstädt 1982, 55, translated by the author.
54 Katz/Mayer 1985, 33.
55 Bodenschatz/Heise/Korfmacher 1983, 111, translated by the author.
56 Eichstädt 1982, cited in Bodenschatz/Heise/Korfmacher 1983, 112, translated by the author.
57 Homuth 1984, 103.
58 Homuth 1984, 194.
59 Kuhn 2014.
60 Rose 1996.
61 Brenner 2004.
62 Purcell 2009.
63 Uitermark 2004.
64 Grottian/Nelles 1983; *Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen* 1990.
65 Castells 1983.
66 Offe 1985.
67 Kriesi 1987; Inglehart 1990.
68 Mayer 1986.

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10

Women's experiences of housing struggles in Harlem and Magliana through autobiographical narratives

Giulia Novaro and Eugenia Crosetti

Introduction

It has long been known that women throughout the world and across various historical periods have broadly participated in, and had a great impact on, tenant activism. In the twentieth century in particular, urban struggles for housing provided fertile ground for women's political activation and action. These struggles touched upon the places where a large part of women's productive and reproductive work was done: namely the house, the neighbourhood and the community. They were often at the forefront of episodes of tenant mobilisation against poor housing conditions, unaffordable rents, the risk of eviction or displacement and the lack of access to private and public housing. Mainly activated spontaneously, women helped to organise buildings for collective actions of rent withholding, self-reductions, picket lines and other acts of grass-roots mobilisation, ranging from the distribution of leaflets to angry protests at rent offices. Their patterns of participation differed significantly from those of men for several reasons. These included the sexist division of labour within tenants' movements, the impact of gender, race and class in shaping the life trajectories of participants and the possibility of negotiating some space for agency and self-determination in societies where struggles for better housing did not necessarily lead to a re-evaluation of strict gender roles.

Several contributions to this volume provide examples of women's pivotal role and various trajectories of participation in initiatives of tenant mobilisation. Chapter 4 by Poy and Belkin, for instance, highlights the role played by women in the 1907 tenants' strike in Buenos Aires; their presence was a recurring feature of meetings, rallies and direct

actions associated with the strike. Particularly poignant is the image of the '*marcha de las escobas*' ('broom parade') led by women and children – a peculiar form of struggle devised to achieve greater visibility by occupying public space. Interestingly, their contribution also outlines the tensions created by this massive female presence among the ranks of male-dominated trade unions and left-wing political currents – something that determined the unwillingness of the unions to intervene decisively in the tenants' movement at large.

Also in this volume, Chapter 3 by Potamianos mentions women's participation in tenants' battles too. As the primary caretakers of the management of households, women were involved in food riots and protests against high prices of foodstuffs and rents during the mobilisation of tenants in Athens during the first half of the twentieth century. Potamianos also underlines that such participation of women often conflicted with the views of male-dominated trade unions and other professional associations. In Chapter 5 Zumoff argues that rent strikes contributed to the rise of the women's movement in Panama: activists spoke publicly about the importance of women and the Tenants' League even advocated women's suffrage. Chapter 9 by Vollmer, in stressing the migrant component of Berlin's squatting movement, highlights that it was mainly Turkish and Kurdish women who occupied buildings in protest, reaching agreements with public landlords and setting up the first bilingual day-care centres in the 1970s.

As clearly emerges from the present volume, women's participation in tenant mobilisation has a long history. It can be framed as a global phenomenon that takes specific features and paths depending on the cultural, political, urban and, of course, historical context. This is why a transnational and comparative perspective, spanning different historical periods, is essential to bring out similarities and differences. Such a perspective, a standpoint of our contribution, mirrors that of the entire volume.

Literature about tenant activism in New York and Rome, the two urban spaces of interest for this chapter, has often failed to acknowledge the distinctive features of women's participation patterns and involvement. Such works have mainly relied on male sources and perspectives, which did not properly consider or shape women's experiences in the mobilisations. Tenant activism in New York began in the late nineteenth century, with the rise of the industrial city, and it has been examined extensively.[1] Ronald Lawson's work, *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904–1984*, is probably the most comprehensive reconstruction of New York's rich tradition of tenant

mobilisation during the twentieth century. More specifically, urban historian Robert Fogelson writes about the conflicts between landlords and tenants that took place in New York between 1917 and 1929.[2] His analysis underlines the heated debates over landlord–tenant law and rent control in the context of the post-war housing shortage, housing policy and the role of judges and politicians. However, it gives little space to women's involvement in the struggles. Roberta Gold analyses New York's tenant activism after the Second World War, when tenant activists challenged the newly dominant ideal of 'homeownership' in racially segregated suburbs.[3] Drawing on archival research and oral history, Gold emphasises the centrality of housing to the racial and class reorganisation of the city after the war; she stresses the prominent role played by women – and, more specifically, racialised women – in the protests. However, women's stories of tenant activism are again embedded in a broader analysis of both the tenants' movement and the history of urban struggle in the city. The specific workings of women's mobilisation thus need further investigation – especially if we consider that, for women, tenant activism intersected with other spheres of life, particularly productive and reproductive work.

Historiographical accounts of rent strikes and tenant mobilisation in Rome are more fragmented. In these the absence of an in-depth discussion of women's participation patterns is even more evident. A comprehensive account of the fight for housing in Rome can be found in the works of Aldo Tozzetti and, more recently, Luciano Villani.[4] Other scholars have written about the struggle for housing in Magliana, the peripheral area forming the stage for the urban battle that we discuss in this chapter.[5] Again, women's participation is always mentioned as crucial for the mobilisation, but at the same time it is framed as marginal in the general historiographical discussion. Contributions focus instead on the activities of various groups and social movements or on urban planning, the real estate market and the widespread need for affordable housing and rent. Only a few books on the Roman feminist movement and the extra-parliamentary groups of the New Left have highlighted women's protagonism in tenant activism, seeing the housing struggle as an opportunity for women to reclaim space.[6]

In this chapter, we try to expand the understanding of women's involvement in tenant activism not only to see how their participation shaped its trajectories in two different urban contexts, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to outline how such activism shaped women's life trajectories and their participation in the public space. A gendered perspective on the struggle for housing, which blurred the boundaries

between domestic and public spheres, allows us to see these struggles as moments of rupture for women.

This chapter focuses on two case studies that, drawing on autobiographical and (inter)subjective sources, are analysed through women's perspectives. The first is that of the Harlem rent strike of 1963–4, examined through the diary of a Puerto Rican woman, Inocencia Flores. Published by the *New York Herald Tribune* in February 1964 under the title 'Diary of a Rent Striker – Life amid Rats and Junkies', it deals with the substandard living conditions in Harlem and the writer's daily difficulties in trying to balance the desire to participate in the strike with the need to look after her four children. Similar considerations can be found in interviews with women in the peripheral district of Magliana in Rome, where intense protests by tenants against high rents and poor living conditions took place between 1971 and 1974. The testimonies of participants helped to shed light on their lives and involvement in the struggles, revealing the connection between gender, migration, social class and political activation.

The analysis of the case studies of Harlem and Magliana – which may appear to differ from each other in terms of urban environment, social and political composition, activation modalities and broader political contexts – does not seek to conduct a systematic historical comparison between the events. Our focus is rather to stress the potential of autobiographical documents as historical sources to highlight women's voices, providing space for female representation (and self-representation) in the historical reconstruction of events that too often have been told from a male perspective despite women's central role in them. The diary and the interviews analysed in this chapter illuminate women's position at the shifting boundary between private and public spheres and their experiences not only as tenant protesters but also, and primarily, as (house)wives, workers, mothers and individuals with their own issues, expectations and hopes.

We will analyse the two contexts by interrogating our sources with similar questions, not only to frame women's experiences in tenant activism but also to illuminate the intersection between tenant activism and women's roles (as primary caregivers), common routines, social spaces and practices. Where did the impulse for participation come from? What role did emotional relationships and care for children play in initiating – and shaping – such politicisation processes? How could women juggle work shifts, domestic work and childcare to engage actively in the struggles? How did they move from the domestic to the public sphere, and then back again? What significance, if any, did they

give to their trajectories of tenant mobilisation? What kind of self-awareness could emerge from these periods of spontaneous political engagement? Our intention here is to shift the focus from the broader urban contexts and struggles to the specific characteristics of our selected sources. In so doing we observe that they too create a useful critical tool for understanding women's patterns of involvement in (and exclusion from) the struggle for housing.

We have chosen two case studies because of the limited space available here. Ideally, however, more (and more diverse) autobiographical accounts of women's tenant mobilisation could have revealed other aspects of their experiences as activists. In our contribution, however, a larger number of case studies would have limited the space for the first-person accounts taken from our sources. It was essential for us to provide enough space for women's voices, with their deeply expressive power. At the same time, concentrating on only a single case study would have returned the image of a specific context, rather than the series of issues that women's participation and protagonism in tenant mobilisations poses (such as specificities in activation trajectories and mobilisation practices, in the ways in which private and family issues met the public arena or in how women dealt with the factual and representative subalternity to the male component of the strikes). The case studies we selected appeared to be of particular interest for our specific expertise, not least because they constitute, in their broader historical and cultural contexts, very famous examples of tenant mobilisation.

Much has been written about Harlem and Magliana. However, women's direct voices might, we argue, suggest paths for getting a clearer, more detailed and broader understanding of women's experiences in these episodes of tenant mobilisation, and indeed in other episodes. From the most renowned to the lesser-known cases, we explore how these events served to reframe women's roles through the testimonies of the participants themselves. In this respect, the collective and comparative character of the present volume might encourage further research on, for instance, the other contexts examined in its chapters. By employing the approach we suggest, we may ask ourselves what new insights into those episodes of tenant mobilisation could be gained by framing them through women's autobiographical sources.

Methodologically, we draw on microhistory[7] and oral history[8] – both of which, with their preference for small-scale investigation, have reframed what we consider to be historical facts or events. In so doing they challenge the elitist character of traditional historical research, which has always left out certain events and social subjects. By using oral sources, the

'excluded' from history can be given a central role; their lives, subjectivities and even apparently insignificant daily events are considered important in the economy of 'history from below'. As Luisa Passerini has noted:

> We ought to investigate human beings in the past not only in relation to the political power, the economic structures or the social organisations of a given context. But we also need to look at the (inter-)personal relations, the psychological and cognitive mechanisms, the interests, the ideas, the images and representations in people's minds.[9]

The selected source material has allowed us to delve into the worlds of certain women, their life experiences and personal interpretations of the events they narrate. Inocencia Flores's diary, despite not being an oral source, shares a strongly autobiographical and 'daily' character with the interviews conducted with the Magliana women. The diary, published during the Harlem rent strike of 1964, had an introduction by the journalist Francis J. Sugrue. In a few lines Sugrue gives the reader some valuable context:

> Inocencia Flores, 39, lives on 117th Street, in apartment 971, and is one of the striking tenants. She was born in Puerto Rico, where she attended high school and then the University of Puerto Rico for almost a year before coming to the United States in 1944. She has worked in the garment industry, trimming and making clothes. She has four children: Carmen (12), Louisa (11), Miriam (6) and Tom (2).[10]

Sugrue must have been in direct contact with Inocencia, since the information he uses to introduce the diary is not contained within it; he may also have edited the diary himself. However, its writing style and language are very different from Sugrue's introduction; they consist of short sentences, almost in the form of notes, with many vernacular expressions, while subjects and verbs are often omitted. It is therefore likely that the editing focused mainly on the form and grammar of the diary entries, rather than making significant changes in the overall tone and content. We found the diary in the Congressional Record of 17 February 1964, in the form of a document presented by William Fitts Ryan, a representative from New York in the United States House of Representatives from 1961 until 1972. It had been submitted as evidence of the gravity of the housing situation in Harlem.

The interviews with the Magliana women constitute a different type of source material. They were conducted among tenant protesters by the Magliana Neighbourhood Committee, shortly after an explosive mobilisation of tenants in the area in May 1971. The Committee's aim was not only to reconstruct its own history and development, but also to share its experience of neighbourhood mobilisation and struggles in the hope of inspiring similar actions throughout the Roman peripheries. The interviews were carried out in two different periods. The first set of interviews took place in February 1973, with a focus on the mobilisation of families, their patterns of participation and their life trajectories, which gave space to autobiographical narratives and the intersubjective construction of meaning. The second set of interviews was conducted in the winter of 1974, at a time when higher living costs were threatening what the women had achieved through rent self-reduction. The transcribed interviews are available for public consultation in the new Magliana Neighbourhood Committee's archive in Rome. Moreover, some of the interviews were published in a book edited by the Committee; it also includes an account of the tenants' mobilisation that features comments, reflections and internal discussions among the Committee's members.[11]

The selected source materials are of course different in content, style and characteristics; each has advantages and disadvantages connected to its use that demand critical discussion. Both the diary and the transcribed interviews are isolated documents, produced in specific contexts that, unlike other historical sources, do not allow us fully to verify the information they provide via a comparison with other sources. However, autobiographical and oral source material is mainly used to analyse processes of signification and representation in which even distortions and mistakes can be extremely useful; they tell us something about the personal interpretation and meaning given to relevant events. Our source material, therefore – despite not having been produced directly by us, and thus lacking all that extra-textual apparatus composed of gestures, non-verbal expressions and other information typical of the production of the oral source – allowed us to use the tools of oral history in our work of analysis for its personal, inter-subjective character.

Furthermore, since the diary and the interviews were produced almost at the same time as the events they narrate, 'action' and 'narration' are almost simultaneous; the women's representation/interpretation of reality can thus be closely observed. The lack of information about the editing of the diary and the way in which interviews were conducted leaves us with 'imperfect knowledge' of our sources. Nevertheless, we

had enough context to reconstruct women's specific patterns of tenant activism and struggle, and to see how such activism found a place in their life trajectories. The autobiographical nature of the source material, together with its 'public dimension', enabled us to link their personal, individual experiences to elements of social and collective identity. In other words, both the diary and the interviews allowed us to catch a glimpse of what it meant to be a woman and a tenant protester in Harlem and Magliana during times of rent strikes and housing struggles.

The Harlem rent strikes of 1963–1964

At the beginning of the twentieth century New York City experienced unprecedented social, economic and demographic development. With the rise of large-scale trade and the parallel massive growth of New York's main industries, the city became one of the main hubs in the United States, attracting hundreds of thousands of immigrants who came looking for employment. Most of the city's growth occurred in the first three decades of the century, with New York's population rising from 3.4 million in 1900 to 6.9 million in 1930.[12] The city then continued to grow owing to migration from the south and from Puerto Rico; by 1950 it had reached 7.9 million inhabitants. Most of the newcomers lived in overcrowded tenements, caught between a congested housing market – especially in areas such as the Lower East Side and Harlem – and landlords determined to take advantage of the situation by constantly raising rents.[13]

New York's contested urban spaces need to be placed within this frame. As the flow of people in need of housing populated the city, the real estate industry developed into a profitable venture and lobby, with rapacious landlordism turning into a common practice. This is one of the reasons why tenants began to express their anger with 'spontaneous outbursts' of rent withholding and protests in various neighbourhoods.[14] The 'rent wars' of 1904 and 1907–8 are considered the first episodes of tenant activism in the city, with women already playing a central role in organising these early rent strikes.[15] Relying on informal neighbourhood ties and on relations with local institutions, including synagogues (the first rent strikes in the city were predominantly organised by Jewish networks), trade unions and mutual aid and benefit societies, they exerted pressure at multiple levels, using the neighbourhood as a staging ground for their anti-landlord protests.

Although it is not possible here to revisit the overall development of New York's tenants' movement, with its various phases, setbacks,

achievements and disillusionments, we can affirm that, over time, it developed a complex structure at three different levels: building organisations, neighbourhood organisations and city- or statewide federations.[16] The tenants' movement, a battlefield where different actors and interests met and sometimes clashed, has been a major force in shaping New York's housing market. The movement tried to influence the city's housing policy, offering legislative programmes and new court practices; it even engaged in the construction, tenant ownership and fostering of public housing.[17]

The ethnic, gender and class composition of New York's tenant activism in different periods, and the reasons behind various mobilisation strategies and participation patterns, were linked to the specific historical moment and urban environment in which each protest took place. As a result, we cannot fully understand the Harlem rent strike of 1963–4 without considering, on the one hand, the displacement and removal of people activated by New York's post-war 'urban renewal' and, on the other hand, the specific instances and vindications of Harlemites, linked to the fight for political and social visibility of the civil rights movement during those years.

With the Housing Act of 1949, huge federal funds were set aside for Title I, New York City's redevelopment programme, which became synonymous with Robert Moses, 'New York's public works czar',[18] and a reckless liberal administration that destroyed entire neighbourhoods and scattered their residents. Title I was billed as an answer to long-standing calls by tenants and leftist groups for 'slum clearance', that is, the development of affordable modern housing to replace decrepit tenements. However, the programme did nothing to improve low-income housing. Instead, many working-class neighbourhoods were demolished and replaced by highways, middle-class housing unaffordable to poor families and elite cultural facilities such as the Lincoln Center.[19] As many as 500,000 New Yorkers were displaced, and, as a result of the massive dislocation of African Americans and racialised immigrants, critics dubbed the programme 'Negro removal'.

In a situation where Black people were systematically displaced, removed, left homeless and discriminated against in public housing programmes, Harlem stood at the very intersection of the historical relationship between race, the housing market and the state. Major urban developments in the 1920s and 1930s had reconfigured the neighbourhood according to the principles of gentrification and ethnic urban segregation. As white upper- and middle-class citizens moved from all sections of Manhattan to other residential areas, such as the Bronx,

Brooklyn and Queens, African Americans and other ethnic groups, especially Puerto Ricans, moved into the flats vacated by their former Italian and Jewish tenants in Harlem. This meant that most of the housing was old and obtained from older homes that had been subdivided by the owners to maximise profits. Rents skyrocketed in response to the unprecedented demand for housing created by immigration and urban segregation.[20] According to social surveys of the time, Harlemites spent roughly 33 per cent of their income on rent, while an Urban League study of 2,160 Harlem families demonstrated that almost half spent 40 per cent or more of their earnings on it. Over time Harlem became a 'profitable slum' for landlords, who took advantage of New York's 1950s pro-owner policies and of the desperate situation of people who had been displaced by renewal initiatives.

However, while mayor Robert F. Wagner, a Democrat, appealed to the state for more public housing funds, claiming that 'no slum could be torn down until the 200,000 "slum dwellers" on the public housing waiting list had someplace to go',[21] tenant activism was being organised throughout Harlem. As noted by Mandi Isaacs Jackson, although the Harlem rent strike is often remembered as part of the racial unrest leading to the summer riots of 1964, the strike actually began in 1958–9 when a handful of cold, angry tenants, with the help of a community organisation called the Lower Harlem Tenant Council, demanded that the city should restore heat and hot water. The tenants eventually co-ordinated the withholding of rent in 15 of Harlem's worst tenement buildings.[22] This early strike waned in the spring, but the Lower Harlem Tenant Council continued to provide support and legal advice for low-income tenants throughout Harlem.

One of the strike leaders, Jesse Gray, gained great visibility and media attention in those years. An American Labour Party radical, Gray had been organising tenants and local protest groups in Harlem since the early 1950s, turning the neighbourhood's collective anger and exasperation into rallies, picketing and withholdings of rent. When he became head of the Lower Harlem Tenant Council, Gray's role as the public face of the rent strike's organisational leadership was established to such an extent that for some time, the 1963–4 rent strike was remembered as the 'Jesse Gray rent strike'.[23] Nevertheless, while community leaders such as Gray were pivotal in directing the strike at the institutional and public level, it is also true that the late 1950s and early 1960s were moments of large-scale politicisation and active political engagement. In the months leading up to the winter of 1963, the tenants' movement gained momentum in the wake of widely publicised civil rights actions across

the country, including the August march on Washington, the boycotts of buses and national restaurants and hotel chains, and repeated public pledges by the Democratic Wagner administration to end discrimination. This transformed tenants' protests in Harlem (and other New York neighbourhoods) from isolated, mostly passive rent strikes into a participative social movement made up of people filled with rage and the desire to take active measures against landlords.

Finally, the powerful influence of the civil rights movement brought tenants on to the streets and enabled the rent strike.[24] Although the public leader of the movement was a man, the ranks of the rent strike organisers were primarily made up of young mothers; they co-ordinated buildings across the neighbourhood and acted in a network of informal community ties to spread participation. Thus, when reading Ronald Lawson's words that in 1959 'Jesse Gray led his Harlem Tenants Council to organise housewives in the six-story walk-ups on nearby 116th Street',[25] we must be careful not to over-personalise a rent strike that has overshadowed women's active involvement, agency and even leadership. The words of one of these leaders, Inocencia Flores, who has – to some extent – been silenced by traditional accounts of the rent strikes, as well as those of women who, like her, did not necessarily need male spokespersons to voice their private and collective rage, will be useful to explain women's role and involvement in the Harlem rent strike and tenants' protests in the winter of 1963–4. Inocencia's diary will be analysed together with interviews with women from the Magliana district; their social, political and urban composition will be outlined in the next section.

The rent strikes in Magliana in the early 1970s

Massive urban growth and migration in Italy followed different patterns to those of New York. After the unification of Italy and the establishment of Rome as its capital in 1870, people from the rural south migrated to the city in search of employment opportunities, especially in the construction sector and the public administration of the newborn state.[26] However, the rapid increase in the urban population triggered a housing crisis that quickly became chronic in the capital, prompting the state to take over the emergency. A landmark year for reform was 1903, which saw the advent of the liberal government led by Giovanni Giolitti. One of its noteworthy accomplishments was the founding of the public housing agency, the *Istituto autonomo per le case popolare* (IACP), headed by finance minister Luigi Luzzatti.[27] Its main aim was

to provide lower-class workers with public and subsidised housing (for rent or for sale), but several factors complicated its interventions: the uncontrollable population growth, lobbying pressures from landowners and builders, endemic corruption and a permanent imbalance of powers between the municipal administration and the central government. With the outbreak of the First World War the general impoverishment of the poorer classes combined with the effects of inflation, causing a further rise in living costs and rents, to ignite the fury of Rome's tenants.

During the war the state had tried actively to intervene in the housing crisis by blocking rent increases, especially to protect the war industry workers and soldiers' families, but after the end of the conflict rent regulation was gradually abrogated. Consequently a wave of tenant protests swept through the capital from January 1919, reaching the peak of conflict in the summers of 1919 and 1920; they included the creation of neighbourhood or city-based tenants' organisations, collective actions of rent withholding and the squatting of buildings.[28] However, several differences in social class and political affiliation, combined with lack of support by trade union forces and the Socialist Party, prevented tenants from mobilising in a cohesive and effective manner.

The *biennio rosso* urban struggles in Rome were definitively extinguished with the rise of fascism in the early 1920s, when major interventions of urban planning and renewal were implemented. In fact, during the fascist era, which lasted from 1922 to 1944, the state adopted the expulsion of poor and unwanted inhabitants to the periphery of the city as official practice. One of Mussolini's objectives was to restore Rome to her ancient physical and political grandeur – a project that required the displacement of residents and the clearing of the slums that had grown up in the vicinity of many of the city's most famous and elegant neighbourhoods. With fascism, the *borgate romane* were pushed to the city's outskirts. Here they grew hastily, isolated, lacking services and without regulation.[29]

The Second World War further worsened Rome's overcrowding and housing crisis. In addition to the destruction caused in the city by the bombings of 1943–4, flows of people from the south migrated to the capital in an attempt to flee the extreme poverty of rural areas. Internal south–north migration was one of the main characteristics of post-war Italy, with the migration flows becoming particularly intense between the late 1950s and early 1960s. Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s labour migration to the main industrial cities had resulted in a widespread and unprecedented demand for housing, which – for a variety of reasons – could not be satisfied. On the one hand, supply and

demand could not be met because of the lack of housing for low-income tenants; the supply mainly tended to target upper- and middle-class citizens. At the same time city administrations and national legislation privileged private speculation, while public and state intervention was subordinated to private interests and the real estate sector. This policy led to a widespread shortage of affordable housing in the main industrial cities, exacerbated by an imbalance between rental costs and low wages. Moreover, when public housing was built, the projects resulted in large complexes designed as self-sufficient neighbourhoods, often built in low-cost rural areas far from the urban fabric.

Despite the good intentions of city officers and urban planners, these complexes became symbols of urban segregation and marginalisation. Some examples include the ZEN district in Palermo, the Vele housing estate in Scampia (Naples), the Corviale in Rome and the Rozzol Melara in Trieste. These public housing projects, as well as the shanty towns described and analysed in several studies of the time,[30] the attics and the basements of the city centre, overcrowded with people living in substandard conditions, were the site of a decade of tenant activism and protests.

The city of Rome was no exception. A consistent flow of immigrants came to the capital from the rural areas of Lazio, southern Italy and the nearby regions of Abruzzo, Molise and Campania between the mid-1950s and late 1960s. From 1962 to 1968 an average of 78,000 people reached the capital every year.[31] The city's population skyrocketed, increasing from 1.7 million in 1951 to 2.8 million in 1971.[32] The newcomers did not spread equally throughout Rome's neighbourhoods, but settled mainly in the city's peripheral industrial areas.

Following dynamics and mechanisms that can be linked to New York's urban transformations, the emptying of Rome's city centre and the parallel growth of its outskirts and working-class districts were the result of urban policies aimed at expelling old residents and targeting new, more appealing, upper- and middle-class inhabitants. While the processes of displacement and gentrification had transformed the inner neighbourhoods, the peripheries were obliged to absorb most of the city's demographic growth, with the arrival of workers from outside the city and Roman residents moving from districts where they could no longer afford to live. Consequently, the city expanded rapidly and in a completely uncontrolled manner, without a coherent plan for urban regulation.[33]

Unauthorised building and the public housing market, characterised by endemic corruption, recommendations and illicit transfer, made

the situation even more complex.[34] In fact, according to research carried out in 1968 by the *Centro cittadino delle consulte popolari* (an organisation aimed at encouraging the active participation of people living in substandard conditions in Rome's working-class suburbs and shanty towns), as many as 600,000 people were living in shanty towns on the outskirts of the city. Unauthorised buildings made up 28 per cent of the city's territory – a figure that is even more impressive when compared to the old town (20 per cent), the real estate town (40 per cent) and the public town (12 per cent).[35] However, unauthorised buildings were not only inhabited by the poorest and working-class families. They became a normalised feature of Rome's urban development, even when demographic growth slowed down and the middle-class demand for housing increased. The city of Rome, especially the outer districts, expanded as a conglomeration of disconnected neighbourhoods without the necessary infrastructure: roads, parks, sewage systems and essential basic services such as schools and health facilities.[36]

Although, as we have underlined, the tradition of urban struggles for fair housing, either spontaneous or organised, dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century in the capital, something changed between 1968 and 1969. Just as the civil rights movements strengthened tenants' activism and spread tenants' political activism in New York and Harlem at the beginning of the 1960s, 1968 proved crucial in sparking social and political action in Italy, especially among the working class. The problem of housing was placed firmly on the political agenda. While urban struggles had been a prerogative of the traditional left until the 1960s, after 1968 the Roman outskirts and shanty towns began to attract parts of the student movement, the extra-parliamentary groups of the New Left, members of trade unions and also groups of volunteers, progressive and dissident Catholics, worker-priests and feminist collectives. In the words of Luciano Villani,

> [i]mmigrants, the disposed and shanty town dwellers all being part of the 'proletariat', in this view were instinctively drawn to social rebellion that could be easily channelled to satisfy their immediate unfulfilled needs.[37]

Many of the characteristics of Rome's urban environment and dynamics described so far can be found in the urban spaces of Magliana and Prato Rotondo, respectively a south-western suburb of Rome and one of the city's shanty towns. The destinies of the two areas converged in May 1971. Prato Rotondo had become a spontaneous shanty town between

the 1920s and 1930s;[38] by the late 1960s it was mostly inhabited by construction workers, district market workers and peddlers. However, since 1966 different actors, from university students and teachers to trade unionists, political activists and militants, had also moved there – not only to pursue various activities, such as after-school clubs for children and adults, but also to organise protests against the substandard living conditions and to mobilise people to demand better housing. In particular, a group led by Gerard Lutte,[39] a Belgian priest who had moved there to undertake pastoral duties, proved quite successful in producing strong and durable actions, and in undertaking fervent political education. Volunteers and inhabitants began asking for housing at affordable rents (2,500 *liras* per room) in the same neighbourhood, to avoid breaking up the existing community. After a wave of demonstrations, the municipality authorised the purchase of several homes in the Magliana district to be rented to 380 families from Prato Rotondo; they eventually moved there on 24 May 1971.[40] This, together with the arrival of other former shanty town dwellers from other districts, was the catalyst for the fury of the Magliana residents.

Magliana was a neighbourhood that had expanded rapidly in the late 1960s. Built by various real estate speculators with total disregard for urban and building regulations,[41] it was situated 7 metres below the level of the River Tiber's embankment; as a consequence, it was constantly at risk of flooding. Magliana had an excessively high residential density and an evident lack of basic services. The sewage system was inadequate and there were no social, educational or health facilities. The neighbourhood presented serious hygiene and epidemiological problems; cases of viral hepatitis and TB infections occurred frequently, especially among children.[42] People mostly lived in private buildings and the resident population of about 40,000 was heterogeneous, made up of clerks and workers. Moreover, many of the district's private residents had the same social extraction as the newcomers. They had initially moved there with the help of rent discounts and benefits, but ended up struggling to cover their living expenses.

The conflict that broke out was mainly about the rents, which were considered too high for such poor living conditions. One of the reasons for the discontent of the residents of Magliana was that the social rent paid by families from the Prato Rotondo shanty town was significantly lower than the rent they paid as private tenants. Tempted by the possibility of equalising the rents in the neighbourhood, about 1,200 families in privately rented accommodation adopted the practice of self-reduction in order to match that of social rent. Housing campaign groups

with elected representatives were formed for each property agency involved. Evictions were resisted with picket lines and the participation of hundreds of people, including women and children. According to the Magliana Neighbourhood Committee's reconstruction of the events, it was precisely a group of women from buildings owned by Prato and Lisbona real estate agencies who had first discussed rent self-reduction among private tenants – a strategy previously considered too risky – and who protested in front of the Rent Office:

> [A] group of mothers, poisoned and exasperated by the situations, literally assaults the Rent Office.[43]

In the words of a Magliana resident, Agata Lombardi:

> all women that morning … all women, not a single man. We went there, we even broke through the gates! The Rent Office was right here, where they gave the houses to Prato Rotondo people.[44]

Their housing campaign initiatives were highly versatile. On the one hand, they were able to broaden the struggle for fair housing to include general demands to improve living conditions in Magliana, asking for streets, parks, schools and essential health facilities.[45] However, they also gathered information and documents on the origin and legal status of the neighbourhood, making it possible to conduct a judicial investigation that eventually led to the indictment of 140 people, including planners, builders and public administrators.[46] In February 1973 and during the winter of 1974 the Magliana Neighbourhood Committee gathered several testimonies in the form of interviews in order to record and raise awareness of the residents' experiences and struggle for housing. Ideally these documents were to be taken as a model for other similar protests. In this chapter, some of the interviews have been selected to shed light on women's participation in that season of housing struggles, and to link the battle to the story of Inocencia Flores and other women tenants who protested in Harlem during the early 1960s.

Women's narratives of tenant activism in Harlem and Magliana

Inocencia Flores was a 39-year-old college-educated mother of four from Puerto Rico who had been abandoned by her husband. Previously

employed in the garment industry, she was then forced to live on state benefits. At the beginning of the winter of 1963, Inocencia and her children were living at 16 East 117th Street, one of the first buildings to join the Harlem rent strikes. In her diary she recorded the substandard living conditions in her neighbourhood to raise awareness of the housing problem and publicly denounce that situation. Her words, like those of other women and mothers who sent multiple letters of complaint to both the white and the Black press in the months before the strike, offer a unique perspective on the practices of activist women tenants and on the sexual division of labour within the movement.

Similarly, we used the Magliana Neighbourhood Committee's interviews to frame women's participation patterns in tenant activism there. As mentioned above, the interviews were carried out in Magliana by the neighbourhood committee itself to record the struggle for a rent ceiling and better housing conditions. A total of 10 families were interviewed from the group of activists; from these we selected three women – Agata, Aurora and Rosaria[47] – whose interviews were most representative of the diverse social positionings among the group and of the different typologies of interviews conducted. Agata's interview takes the form of a long conversation with other tenant activists (a man and a woman); Aurora was interviewed in her husband's presence; Rosaria's account of events is an almost uninterrupted autobiographical monologue. The wide range of sources has thus allowed us to link critical considerations about their content with a textual analysis of their form, modes and purposes of production and reproduction.

We have considered the similarities and differences between Inocencia Flores's diary and the testimonies of the Magliana women. For example, the two sources are radically different in terms of 'authorship'. In the first case, we have a diary written by the leader of a movement who wanted publicly to denounce degrading living conditions and injustice towards the neighbourhood's tenants; in the second case, common women's stories were put at the service of a neighbourhood committee to represent itself and its political struggle.

An intersectional critical perspective allows us to recognise the workings of gender and class in shaping the life trajectories of Inocencia Flores and the Magliana women. A first transversal theme in their life stories is their experience of migration, and the consequent residential segregation and difficulties in accessing decent housing. In the case of Inocencia, this was also determined by the processes of racialisation and structural discrimination due to her origins. She was among the hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans who left the island for the United

States, especially between the 1950s and 1960s, turning New York's East Harlem into the so-called 'Spanish Harlem' or 'El Barrio'. Inocencia moved to New York in 1944 to work in the garment industry, a major area of employment for African American and Latin American women, as were housework and the industrial laundry sector.[48] When she wrote her diary, she was separated from her husband and living on benefits. However, it was not uncommon for racialised women to deny or omit the fact of being on welfare for fear of being seen as 'parasites'. Gladys Jackson, a mother of six who was 'put out on the street' in October 1961, wrote a letter to the *Amsterdam News* a month later:

> I am a citizen. I vote every year. I take good care of my children. I am not on welfare. I am employed by the city in the Department of Hospitals, so therefore, you know I pay my taxes.[49]

The social marginalisation of Inocencia and the Harlem women was materialised in the decrepit buildings in which they lived. They were substandard citizens living in substandard conditions, in old buildings with dark and littered hallways, crumbling ceilings, broken windows and a lack of heat and hot water – significantly, rent strikes often erupted in the winter precisely because the cold hit harder then. The inhumane living conditions of her building form the core of Inocencia's testimony:

> Tuesday, February 11: This morning was too cold in the house that I had to light the oven and heat hot water. […] This is terrible situation. Living the way I live in this slum house is miserable. […] no steam, no hot water, ceiling falling on you, running water from the ceiling, to go to the bathroom you have to use an umbrella, rats everywhere.[50]

> Thursday, February 13: I couldn't get up this morning. The house was so cold that I came out of bed at 7:15 […] Later on, the inspector came. […] I think even the inspectors are afraid of this slum conditions, that's why they didn't dare to come inside. I didn't blame them. They don't want to take a rat or any bug to their houses, or get dirty in this filthy houses.[51]

The life stories of Agata, Aurora and Rosaria are also characterised by migration, which resulted in exclusion and poor housing conditions. Agata came to Rome with her parents from the province of Catania. They had to share their first apartment with three families:

> My hometown, just at the foot of Etna, was clean, but there, near the Pantheon, there were bugs and lice, it seemed strange to me that in a modern city like that, with all those lights, you could find such houses filled with bugs and lice. I remember we did the cleaning with petroleum.[52]

Agata moved lodgings many times, not only while living with her parents but also after she married. She and her husband chose to move to Magliana, attracted by the benefits of the first months of rent, but they subsequently struggled to keep up with the actual rental costs. Aurora, in contrast, came from a small town near Cagliari on Sardinia; she left the island and moved to Rome after she got married, because 'life there was impossible'. Raffaele, her husband, found a job at the market and the couple found accommodation in the shanty town at Buon Pastore:

> You had light there, but no water: we had to ask in shops to cook and drink. For washing, we took water from a well. We had no toilet there, so Raffaele made one.[53]

They decided to move to Magliana because life in the shanty town was beginning to make them ill; Raffaele even got arthritis.

The third interviewee, Rosaria, came from a working-class district of Rome:

> We were five siblings, we stayed in a warehouse on the ground floor. Seven people in the same room, with the toilet covered by a curtain […] with three beds that when they were down, you didn't even have room to walk, with two or even three people on each bed.[54]

For Agata, Aurora and Rosaria, Magliana represented an improvement of their housing conditions. However, it was still not a satisfactory solution, given the problems of the neighbourhood discussed above and the high living costs. Inocencia Flores and the women from Magliana all entered tenants' protests after years of severe housing deprivation; they were aware of the importance of fighting for housing because they had always had to, albeit within the limits of personal experience. Moreover, their testimonies also shed light on the complex dynamics between public and private housing among low-income tenants in each urban context. While in Harlem such dynamics became proof of discriminatory tenant selection practices and policies, leading to protests, in Magliana they were also the cause of complaints and tenant activism.

Mandi Isaacs Jackson has argued that the Harlem rent strikes were too often framed as an isolated slum struggle and thus removed from the national discourse on housing desegregation. She found that a core goal of the Harlem rent strikes was to increase the availability of low-income housing, dominated by the New York City Housing Authority's attempts to 'whiten' public housing even as the need to house non-white families increased. A clear indication of this policy was the 1959 'Open Occupancy' programme. It systematically discriminated against Black and racialised applicants for public housing by prioritising white applicants in one-third of the city's low-income units. This happened at a time when hundreds of thousands of Black and immigrant families had been displaced by renewal plans and were in search of a place to stay.[55] Therefore, Jackson argues:

> [w]hen the rent strike is recorded and remembered as strictly a battle against the slumlords, it is intellectually amputated from its role in the larger social movement for housing access and civil rights.[56]

This fact must be taken into consideration to understand the extent to which Inocencia's diary is more than an isolated, personal account of her battle against her landlord. Rather, it gave voice to the broader contestation over residential space that the Harlem rent strike was:

> Wednesday, February 12. […] I know that to get a project, you must have somebody prominent to back you up. Many people got to the project and don't even need them. I have been feeling applications, I don't know when. This year I feel another one.[57]

While Inocencia tried to get access to public housing, the residents of Magliana, between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, saw the arrival of people from Rome's shanty towns, such as Prato Rotondo and other districts. They were then assigned public housing at lower rents, prompting disquiet. Agata describes the 'word of mouth' that ran between women in the inner courtyards as they hung out the laundry:

> I looked out of the window, here is one whole courtyard, here are all the women hanging out their laundry, and then we, hanging out our laundry, said 'You know, *signo*', what's going on? All the people from the shanties coming here?' And this woman from floor 2 [said] 'look, this is bad business'. I must say, this is what was being

said. I must admit, it was also the kind of thing I said. It's not like I discriminated against anyone, but I thought, I was furious that I paid 54,000 *liras* for my apartment to stay in the same place.[58]

Because of the difference between social rent prices and those paid by private tenants, the shanty town newcomers were frowned upon by the rest of the residents. However, it was precisely this difference that pushed Magliana's residents to start a struggle together, with the main aim of reducing the high rents.

> Agata: When the first truck arrived in the morning with the people carrying the stuff, there was a riot, like this, you know, popular … something unbelievable! We went downstairs and we saw this truck … I remember Teresa, very well, me, two or three people from this scala here, Natalina … all these people here, we all joined in and said 'What the …! Let's go there, let's go and make a mess at the office, are they crazy or what!' […] Within not even half an hour the whole of Lisbona and Prato buildings was in turmoil.[59]

> Aurora: The fight began before Sabrina was born. I participated in the struggle from the very beginning, I was the first to break through the gates that morning when people were coming here from the shanties. There were so many of us: it was something sudden, just like that, see? Spontaneous. We told them – how is it that theirs is social housing and ours isn't? Why do we have to pay such high rents?[60]

The testimony of Aurora is also interesting for the ways in which it shapes a new chronology, individual and private, but is also, at the same time, extremely representative of her personal trajectory of tenant activation. Aurora comments that 'The fight began before Sabrina was born'; her pregnancy suggests a condition of renewed financial difficulties due to the loss of her salary, and thus the impossibility of bearing the cost of rent, only a few months after abandoning the shack where she, her husband and their four children had lived for the last few years:

> [a necessary service] for me would be the kindergarten. I don't know why they started building it but never finished it. There is something elsewhere, here there is nothing. If I could put Pippi (Sabrina) in the kindergarten I would work, but I can't like this […] In the beginning it wasn't too bad here, we spent a little less on

> food. Between what I was getting and what he [the husband] was getting, it was fine. But as soon as I stopped, things went down a bit, because with his work only you can't go on, it's too little. We can eat lunch, and then there's nothing for dinner.[61]

Again, an intersectional perspective is useful to underline the impact of race, gender and class in determining modes of collective tenant activism and response. First, women's participation patterns, differing as they do from those of men, were framed by the negotiations between productive and reproductive work, which unfolded between the home, the workplace and community sites.

This is not insignificant; while men, liberated from housework, could dedicate themselves to the struggle, women had to juggle childcare, housekeeping and long shifts at work. Inocencia Flores, who was on benefits at the time of writing her diary, did not separate the struggle for decent housing from the difficulties of caring for her four children alone in such conditions:

> Wednesday, February 5. I got up at 6:45 […] I make the breakfast for the three children who go to school. I give them orange juice, oatmeal, scrambled eggs and Ovaltine. […] The children go to school and I clean the house and empty the pan in the bathroom that catches the water dripping from pipe in the big hole in the ceiling. […] I go to the laundry place this afternoon and I wash again on Saturday because I change my kids' clothes every day because I don't want them dirty to attract the rats. After I go out to a rent strike meeting at night.[62]

Participation is possible, but only after the children's meals have been prepared, the house cleaned, the clothes washed and the groceries done. At the same time, as the Magliana women said in their interviews, sometimes female tenants could engage in activism precisely because the men were absent, usually at work, while women's productive and reproductive routines took place in the same environment as the tenants' protests.

Productive work characterised the lives of Agata, Aurora and Rosaria; it was only interrupted by the lack of social assistance for childcare, especially kindergartens. Their interviews shed light on the peculiarities and difficulties of women's work, such as the extremely low wages, the challenges of reconciling productive and domestic life, the highly exploitative nature of the cottage industry, the absence of

guarantees and sexual harassment at work. Thanks either to workplace networks or informal neighbourhood ties facilitated by sites of reproductive life such as schools and markets, women – whether employed outside the home or not – were much more likely to form a network of social ties within buildings and neighbourhoods.[63]

In periods of tenant activism, the informal ties and networks underwent processes of politicisation that were at the very basis of grass-roots organisation. It is possible to trace this both in Inocencia's diary, where all the tenants she mentions are women, and in the interviews of the Magliana women. Their testimonies all include word-of-mouth information, informal meetings and acts of community building such as eating together or trying to do repairs:

> I come home and the women tell me that five policemen came and broke down the door of the vacant apartment of the ground floor where we have meetings for the tenants in our building. I went later downstairs and I met one of the tenants. She was telling me to go picketing downtown because they had Mr Gray in jail. When I came back a tenant called me and asked me what was new in the building because she works daytimes.[64]

Similarly, in Magliana, women met and spontaneously spread information around the neighbourhood:

> So, when I went to the market, or when I walked the children to school, we spoke a bit … so, with the women at the market, mainly these women from the Lisbona building, we met them, about seven or eight of them, speaking about doing something, right? And we said, what if we can also do a rent self-reduction? How can we do that? […] so around mid-January I, together with an old lady living in front of me, we all went around the building like that, autonomously, to ask people if they were up for rent self-reduction.[65]

Luisa Passerini argues that, in the history of women's forms of knowledge and expression, consciousness-raising can be interpreted as a 'rejuvenated' political version of age-old practices of social control and personal expression, all in the field of orality (such as gossip, chat, confidential conversation). Women meeting and chatting at the market, at the communal washhouse or washing trough was a daily situation in the context of peasant culture. In urban settings, the places for such informal exchanges would be not only the landing areas of staircases or

the courtyards of larger buildings in working areas, but also workplaces, street markets, schools and other places of their children's sociality. In Passerini's words,

> Such oral forms of communication were crucial for exchanging information, establishing links and alliances, controlling the social setting (gossip, for instance, was a way of controlling behaviour in the community), as well as for enjoying moments of solidarity and friendship. […] Consciousness-raising revisited all these practices, and at the same time it translated them into new ones, giving them their full political sense by moving the boundary between public and private as well as changing the traditional allocation of space, physical and symbolic, to the two spheres and the two sexes. New discursive spaces were created by consciousness-raising, on the basis of new relationships established among women.[66]

Interestingly, such patterns are common to women's participation in popular struggles in several settings, both in urban and rural areas – bread riots, strikes, popular political mobilisation around neighbourhood issues such as access to clean water, sanitation, education, public transport. Common trajectories of women's activation through consciousness-raising can be found in many examples of social mobilisation.

Women's activation, as mentioned, blurred the lines between the private and the public. Their traditional roles in managing household economies and their family responsibilities were not separate from, but rather connected to, the development of a sense of injustice and a drive for political action. The decision to challenge the existing socio-political order grew out of a sense of duty that they felt toward the wellbeing of their families. This idea is central to many studies of women's history, which explore how the attachment to family and domestic duties can be deeply political. It is thus unsurprising that women's participation in protests was often closely related to practical concerns regarding household management.

> Agata: Then it happened that I was always, as usual, a bit behind with the rent, instead of paying it on the 1st, I paid it on the 10th, 15th or 20th because I didn't have the money, so finding myself a bit in the wrong I thought: 'Well, I might join this movement.' I was alone, I said: 'They'll send me the eviction notice and I'll have to go away, it's not possible.' And I calmed down a little, but the talk of this self-reduction, of organising or whatever, it was always in

> the air and at the market, in front of the school, we Lisbona people knew each other, didn't we? And we talked as we could. […] Yes, we knew each other like that, on a level … I don't know, either … because we lived here and whoever took the kids to school was the same person who lived here … there she went … down here there was nothing, we all went to the same two shops.[67]

If women's participation and roles are clearly visible in the early grass-roots phases of the rent strikes, which see them mobilising people and spreading tenants' activism, the same cannot be said for later moments of the mobilisation, when male leadership attracted much media attention and gained political relevance.

> Agata: I had big contradictions with Nicola, because Nicola would come home at 1 a.m. in the night, so … after going to these public assemblies in the buildings, then after talking to all these delegates … he organised. And at first, I said: 'It's fine, we need to go ahead, to do something,' because it was my intention to fight. But then, at a later stage, seeing me so sidelined, seeing that I couldn't go there … Nicola, as I repeat, he's not much of a talker, and he didn't even tell me what was going on.[68]

This can be explained by the existence of a patriarchal social structure that appointed men to leadership positions, given also that they could draw upon relevant skills and networks from previous experiences in the activities of organisations and political parties, other than having easier access to institutions.[69] In the case of Harlem, Jesse Gray became the public face and charismatic leader of the rent strike, an idol and symbol of tenant activism that was not resisted by the women: 'I love what Mr Gray is doing because he likes to struggle for people and rights.'[70] Moreover, for men, the pursuit of leadership positions within the tenants' movement was often a step towards future career goals, frequently in politics. Gray ran for several offices before being elected to the state assembly as the 'Harlem Rent Strike Leader' nine years after the event.[71]

The participation patterns of female tenants thus depended on the negotiations with male public figures such as Gray and the *capiscala* (building leaders), who were appointed in Magliana to collect signatures, organise collective actions and send letters to landlords and real estate agencies. They also depended on the attitude of male private figures, mainly husbands. It is no coincidence that single mothers such as Inocencia or unmarried women such as Rosaria had more freedom

of movement and political action, as they were not subject to control by men. As Agata said:

> In that specific phase it was better that men took charge, because these *capiscala* are all men, right? And we as women had brought forward that great wave, and then we withdrew a bit, at least in my case, right?[72]

When Agata was asked about later phases in the rent strikes, she replied:

> I don't know, maybe it is better if Nicola gives this testimony because at that moment I … I went through a phase a little … I withdrew a bit because, as I said, unfortunately with my lifestyle as it was then, I had always let Nicola do such things, in everything I saw him more […] we were all women with children. A woman could not bear these troubles, was not free to act as a man was free to act […] I didn't go to the meetings, you know. I didn't attend mainly because I had the children, and I thought that maybe they could disturb the meeting, with the children crying, I was like – why would I go there? […] and then Nicola was ashamed if I went there with Francesca …with him … it seemed that I wanted to control him […] and when I went, I was quiet, I listened, I could not even imagine speaking into the microphone, it seemed something incredible to me.[73]

Rosaria's situation was different. Being unmarried, she was able to become the referent for her building:

> I am lucky, in part, because living with my mother, who helps me, I can look after my daughter in the evening and participate in the committee's battle. […] It happened almost by chance, nobody wanted to do it. […] From that moment I was always *caposcala*. […] I went to the meetings but could not understand a word, they gave speeches and I never took the floor. But every evening, coming home from those meetings, I began to think differently. So I felt I needed to go there every Friday, first because they were discussing housing, and then because they were talking about things I had never thought of before.[74]

Although we should avoid romanticising the trajectories of women's political self-awareness through their involvement in rent strikes and

tenants' protests, it is undeniable that such experiences represented meaningful moments of community building and a space for self-determination and struggle for their rights.[75] It is true, on the one hand, that their mobilisation and activism was primarily motivated by their main sphere of influence, the home, being threatened – just as it is true that external and internalised patriarchal values led partially to a failed liberation and their 'return' to the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, their life experiences were now enriched by meaningful community connections and relations, in addition to a new political self-awareness and sense of self-determination. As Inocencia said:

> I love this struggle for our rights. We have to fight. We have right in this country. We have freedom if we do it in order […] But I got my rights. I fight for them.[76]

Likewise, Rosaria made the following observation:

> This is maturity in the struggle. If before you were told 'the rent has to be paid', that was the most important thing, [and] maybe you gave up on eating to be able to pay the rent. But today is different. I won't pay the rent, if necessary, but I need to eat, I have the right to eat, and I shouldn't allow those who make me live like this to eat.[77]

Conclusion

Using women's autobiographical narratives and personal accounts of their experiences as rent strikers as source material has allowed us to shed light on their involvement in the housing struggle in Harlem and Magliana during years crucial for tenant activism and demands for tenants' rights. By reflecting on their experiences of migration and social exclusion, always accompanied by lifelong housing and residential marginalisation, we have described their activism through their own words, focusing on aspects of their urban struggles and rent strikes neglected in male accounts. In this way, we have been able to highlight how women's involvement in tenants' struggles differed from that of men.

First, our sources have underlined women's constant negotiation between productive and reproductive work, and the importance of gender roles in shaping women's participation patterns in the struggles. While mobilising for decent housing and lower rents, women never

stopped being daughters, wives or mothers: they continued to carry out domestic and care work in the same sites of their struggles, with tenant activism unsettling their productive and reproductive routines. Moreover, Inocencia's diary and the Magliana interviews show that women had constantly to challenge the male presence in order to claim their right to participate in tenant activism in both private and public spaces. Not only mobilisation and building leaders, but also husbands often limited women's freedom of movement and political action. It is no coincidence that single mothers such as Inocencia or unmarried women such as Rosaria could play central roles in the mobilisations.

Finally, our source material has allowed us to reconstruct women's specific participation patterns and modes of activism; word of mouth, informal meetings, acts of community building such as eating together or doing repairs sparked women's activation in ways that differed from men's tenant mobilisation. These patterns require further analysis. Women's personal networks, unfolding in the sites of productive and reproductive life (i.e. schools, markets, backyards, buildings) shed light on their organisations and trajectories of involvement in tenants' activism. We argue that such individual features should be considered in any context of tenant activism in order to understand and frame it from a gendered perspective.

Our source material, which is highly personal and intersubjective, provided us with contextual knowledge about facts and dynamics that we tend to observe from a male standpoint – usually taken as neutral and valid for all, especially in academic knowledge production. This applies not only to women's activism and participation in rent strikes, but also to the reflection on and judgement of the results of the urban struggles in which they were involved. It has been argued that the New York City rent strikes of 1963–4 'failed', both as a mass movement and as an influence on housing policy,[78] because the tangible results they helped to bring about were considered too few. Similarly, housing campaigns in Rome's periphery have been labelled as too fragmented and disconnected to have produced any long-term structural change in the way that the city deals with housing. Nevertheless, we argue that women's perspectives on urban struggles in Harlem and the Magliana district offer different and broader understandings of what 'success' means.

Through this chapter, we have pointed out that women's tenant activism was not only activated; it also contributed to activating, formal and informal ties and community relations that became a source of self-awareness for many women. Rent strikes and tenant activism represented a possibility for self-determination and agency at the

intersection of 'the domestic' and 'the public', 'the private' and 'the collective', in material spaces of urban contestation that opened up discursive spaces for women's personal and political awareness.

We do not seek to promote a mythologising narrative of women's liberation from gender and domestic roles through their involvement in the struggle for housing. Nor do we imply that such liberation was the suppressed dream of most women. On the contrary, we argue that women had constantly to negotiate between productive and reproductive work, and that their patterns of tenant mobilisation did not automatically translate into processes of empowerment and emancipation from the domestic sphere. However, for most women, rent strikes and tenant activism came to represent meaningful life experiences that were a source of political self-awareness not only in the exceptional times of the housing struggle, but also beyond. The rent strikes gave female participants a new framework for seeing their struggles with migration and mobility, the workplace, the family and the surrounding public and urban space not as episodic and contingent, but rather as structurally determined by their social class, gender and race.

> Agata: Ever since I was born, I have always had to fight. I have had to stand up first to my parents, who maybe wanted different things for me … then at work, then in my own family life, right? When I got here slowly, little by little, all these experiences added up to one another, [and] I also thought, maybe, if I came here earlier, in my first years of marriage, maybe I wouldn't have acted this way, maybe I would have been more scared…[79]

Notes

1 Piven and Cloward 1977; Lubove 1962; Lawson and Barton 1980.
2 Fogelson 2013.
3 Gold 2014.
4 Tozzetti 1989; Villani 2013.
5 Zitelli Conti 2019; Spada 1976.
6 Stelliferi 2015; Voli 2006.
7 Ginzburg 1994; Gribaudi 1987; Levi 1981.
8 Triulzi 1978; Passerini 1988; Portelli 2007; Bermani 2000; Bonomo 2013.
9 Passerini 1988, 33.
10 Inocencia Flores, 'Diary of a rent striker: Life amid rats and junkies', *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 February 1964, 28.
11 Comitato di Quartiere 1977.
12 NYC Department of City Planning 2013, 9.
13 Lawson 1986, chapter 1.
14 Lawson 1986, chapter 1.

15 Lawson and Barton 1980, 232.
16 Lawson and Barton 1980, 231.
17 Lawson 1986.
18 Gold 2009, 390.
19 Gold 2009, 390.
20 Osofsky 1965, 338.
21 Jackson 2006, 57.
22 Jackson 2006, 60.
23 Lawson and Barton 1980, 233.
24 Lawson 1986, chapter 4.
25 Lawson 1986.
26 See Seronde Babonaux 1983; Benevolo 1992; Insolera 1993; Vidotto 2002.
27 Krumholz 1992.
28 Ficacci 2014.
29 Farina and Villani 2017; Clementi and Perego 1983.
30 Berlinguer and Della Seta 1960; Ferrarotti 1970 and 1974; Alasia and Montaldi 1960; Braghin 1973. Other than articles and investigations, there are many documentaries of that period, either on the shanty towns, such as *La canta delle marane* (Mangini 1961) and *Terzo Mondo sotto casa* (Ferrara 1971), or on the Magliana district, such as *La casa è un diritto non un privilegio* (Videobase 1970), *La nostra lotta è l'autoriduzione, la nostra lotta è l'organizzazione* (Videobase 1972) and *Il fitto dei padroni non lo paghiamo* più (Videobase 1972), which are available on the website of the audiovisual archive of the Democratic and Labour Movement (www.aamod.it)
31 Seronde Babonaux 1983, 239–41.
32 Seronde Babonaux 1983, 239.
33 Urban renewal and gentrification strategies of urban planners, especially in 1960s and 1970s, are themes that cut across the essays of this volume. See, for example, Chapter 8 (van der Steen), Chapter 9 (Vollmer) and Chapter 12 (Chisholm) in this volume.
34 Villani 2018, 140.
35 Insolera 1993, 318. It should be noted that unauthorised building has characterised the expansion of the main urban areas of southern Europe. In the 1980s up to 50 per cent of the population in the main cities of Portugal, Spain, southern Italy, Greece and Turkey lived in illegal buildings. See De Rosa 2000, XI.
36 Bonomo 2007, 19.
37 Villani 2017, 327.
38 See Bonomo 2003, 77–99.
39 Lutte 1981; Veca 2021.
40 Villani 2017, 328.
41 For a historical record, see Zitelli Conti 2019; Bonomo 2003.
42 Istituto romano per la storia d'Italia dal fascismo alla Resistenza (IRSIFAR), fond Memoria di carta, subfond Raspini Lipparini, busta 112, series Collettivi di quartiere, *Quartieri in lotta contro l'uso capitalistico del territorio*, november 1973.
43 Interview with Renato Palazzo. In Zitelli Conti 2019, 64.
44 Archivio Nuovo comitato quartiere Magliana (AcqM), Typed interviews, 1974. Interview with Agata Lombardi. The interviews were conducted in Italian, with strong regional dialects, and translated by the authors of this chapter.
45 Zitelli Conti 2019, 66.
46 IRSIFAR, fond Memoria di carta, subfond Raspini Lipparini, series 112, fascicolo Collettivi di quartiere, *Quartieri in lotta contro l'uso capitalistico del territorio*, November 1973.
47 These are not their original names, but pseudonyms chosen by the Magliana Neighbourhood Committee for publication.
48 Osofsky 1965, 339.
49 *New York Amsterdam News*, 4 November 1961.
50 Flores 1964.
51 Flores 1964.
52 AcqM 1974, interview with Agata Lombardi.
53 AcqM 1974, interview with Aurora Atzeri.
54 AcqM 1974, interview with Rosaria Palma.

55 Jackson 2006, 57.
56 Jackson 2006, 55.
57 Flores 1964.
58 AcqM 1974, interview with Agata Lombardi.
59 AcqM 1974, interview with Agata Lombardi.
60 AcqM 1974, interview with Aurora Atzeri.
61 AcqM 1974, interview with Aurora Atzeri.
62 Flores 1964.
63 See also the reflections on the role of patios as 'crucial spaces' in Chapter 4 (Poy and Belkin) in this volume.
64 Flores 1964.
65 AcqM 1974, interview with Agata Lombardi.
66 Passerini 1994, 236.
67 AcqM 1974, interview with Agata Lombardi.
68 AcqM 1974, interview with Agata Lombardi.
69 Lawson and Barton 1980, 241.
70 Flores 1964.
71 Flores 1964, 242.
72 AcqM 1974, interview with Agata Lombardi.
73 AcqM 1974, interview with Agata Lombardi.
74 AcqM 1974, interview with Rosaria Palma.
75 There is no space here to discuss the interactions between women's tenant activism and second-wave feminist action in working-class neighbourhoods in New York and Rome. However, it would be interesting to explore further the feminist trajectories of politicisation within tenants' protests.
76 Flores 1964.
77 AcqM 1974, interview with Rosaria Palma.
78 Schwartz 1983, 545.
79 AcqM 1974, interview with Agata Lombardi.

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11

‘Watch out sharks!’ Mobilisations against rental market in the favelas of Belo Horizonte (Brazil) in the early 1960s

Samuel Oliveira and Philippe Urvoy

Introduction

In the early 1960s the slogan ‘Don’t pay rent’ was the motto of a campaign launched by the Favela Workers’ Federation of Belo Horizonte (FTFBH).[1] It urged residents across all the city’s favelas to suspend rental payments in protest against abusive landlords. This episode was not the only case of a political campaign or public mobilisation about housing in the favelas of large Brazilian cities.[2] From the 1950s onwards favela dwellers’ movements played an explicit role in denouncing the injustices of housing markets.

The FTFBH’s campaign against the local rental market highlights a tension that runs through the history of urban informality in Brazil. The favelas initially provided free access to housing for families in need, while at the same time allowing an informal and lucrative property market to develop. Such forms of urban informality are commonly understood as a territory that lacks ownership or law. Yet, contrary to this common sense, the evolution of Brazilian favelas over the past century has been marked by local agreements that have made land and houses in these favelas available to rent. For this reason, the right to housing in these urban areas has historically been at variance with the commercial relations of a complex ‘informal rental housing’ market.

This local market was not regulated by state law. Instead, it was controlled by agreements between favela residents and landlords, as well as other private or public actors involved in controlling space and transferring land ownership.[3] The first legislation concerning favelas

in Belo Horizonte, published in the 1950s, thus made explicit reference to the phenomenon of 'rent exploitation'.[4] Despite the formation of this informal market, favelas have nevertheless allowed some of the poorest city dwellers to, as Brazilian social movements have long put it, 'free themselves from rent'.[5]

Although several studies have addressed the correlation between social inequalities regarding access to housing and the historical formation of favelas in Brazil,[6] few have explored the political actions of favela dwellers and their critiques of the real estate market. Brazilian historiography has not offered an extensive discussion or systematic analysis of collective mobilisations questioning the tenancy system. Outside of Brazil, collective actions by tenants against injustices in the housing market have developed different tactics, from squatting to rent strikes.[7] The latter have been analysed by some authors as a 'mode of collective action'[8] that tenants employ against their landlords. It is a specific 'form of contention'[9] that, according to the existing literature, has primarily appeared in North America and Europe. Despite important historical cases across Latin America,[10] the topic has seldom figured in the region's historiography and is almost entirely absent from Brazilian literature. Most references on the subject focus on the formal housing market; they rarely address the challenges and specificity of tenants' collective action in the context of informal and precarious neighbourhoods such as favelas.

This chapter examines favela dwellers' political debates and actions regarding the rental market in Brazil, focusing on the case of the Favela's Workers Federation of Belo Horizonte (FTFBH) and its actions concerning the right to housing. Created in 1959, and active until its suppression by the military regime in 1964, the FTFBH gathered dozens of slum organisations to represent publicly the rights of its inhabitants. This chapter explores the following questions: in the context of the specific land tenure regime that characterises the favela, how did the FTFBH's action challenge the rental and ownership of urban land? How did this movement develop specific political tactics aimed at allowing a collective mobilisation of tenants in the context of an informal tenancy system? How did their collective actions formulate both concrete proposals for urban reform and a moral economy of tenancy in informal areas?

Within the historiography that analyses the formation of the working class in Brazil, the concept of 'moral economy', developed initially by E. P. Thompson, has been used here to understand numerous processes of political mobilisation from the 1940s to the 1960s related to the *carestia* – an expression that refers to the rising cost of living.[11]

In the present volume several scholars use the concept to analyse tenant mobilisations and strikes in distinct historical contexts, ranging from contemporary southern Europe to South America.[12] As we shall see in this chapter, the political discourse of favela workers' struggles is related to this history of the formation of the Brazilian working class.

This chapter draws on a variety of primary sources such as mainstream and independent press articles and interviews. It is also based on existing historical research on the subject, including the authors' previously published research. The first part of the chapter examines the context that precedes the formation of the favela workers' movement in the city of Belo Horizonte. Drawing on a dialogue between the existing literature and primary sources, we reflect on the formation of the first favelas in Belo Horizonte and in Brazil. We frame the favela as an urban space that initially contested the rules of the formal housing market, but subsequently generated its own informal rental system. The second part of the chapter analyses favela dwellers' political mobilisations regarding rent and property by focusing on the specific case of Belo Horizonte's Favelas Workers Federation. We then address the scaling-up of these mobilisations, gradually including other types of action that asserted their demands, until the suppression of the FTFBH by the military regime that followed the 1964 coup.

Beyond the formal housing market: the formation of favelas in Belo Horizonte and Brazil

From the end of the nineteenth century, at least, conflicts related to unequal access to housing were a recurring feature of Brazilian urban history. During the two centuries following independence in 1822 and the end of the colonial era, political mobilisations and debates concerning inequalities in access to land and housing had a strong impact on both society and public policies. A broad look at Brazilian modern history shows how successive changes in political regimes had direct effects on the housing situation of the poorest populations – from the publication of the first Land Law in the mid-nineteenth century to the Tenancy Law published during the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas (1937–45), followed some decades later by the slum-clearance policies of the military dictatorship of 1964–85.

Following the abolition of slavery, in 1888, social discrimination against the poorest parts of the population – mostly Black people or people of mixed race – gave rise to informal dynamics of occupation of

urban space, the best-known form of which is summarised by the term 'favela'. In this way the Brazilian urban environment came to reflect inherited colonial land conflicts and contradictions. During the colonial regime informal appropriation of land by the poorest people – often runaway slaves settled in *quilombos* or smallholders – was already considered a transgression of land regulation.[13] The Land Law, instituted in 1850, made it compulsory for land ownership to be officialised and regularised by means of a property title; vacant lands with no declared owner could only be obtained by purchasing them from the government. This law served the interests of the emerging financial bourgeoisie in urban centres. They pressured the authorities in order to turn property – once handed down as inheritance within powerful families in the colony – into a marketable asset. Property became a possible object for speculation and business.[14]

The Land Law legally defined the distinction between the *posseiro* and the landlord. Brazilian law defines the *posseiro* as the cultivator or inhabitant of an area who does not have legal ownership of it, exercising possession (*posse*) of the soil through continuous use of it. In contrast, a landlord holds legal ownership of the area without necessarily occupying it.[15] Besides creating the conditions for land and real estate speculation in Brazilian cities, the new law excluded most of the *posseiros* and poorer populations from access to property. In the last decades of the nineteenth century the main housing option for these populations was the informal rental market, which offered cramped housing in often unsanitary conditions.[16]

Due to precarious housing conditions and the unaffordable cost of rent, especially in central urban areas, occupation of land became an alternative for the poorest part of the population. In that way, areas unsuitable for construction – unstable lands, hillsides, riverbanks – were historically the places in Brazilian cities where poorer classes settled. Starting at the end of the nineteenth century, the first favelas emerged in the centre of Rio de Janeiro, such as Morro da Providência or Morro do Santo Antônio. Favelas also emerged in the centres of other cities, for example Favela do Leitão in Belo Horizonte. Meanwhile the term 'favela' was progressively popularised as a collective representation that established stigmas for these informal areas, reiterating an urban regime marked by exclusion.[17]

In the post-abolition period, the formation of the first favelas was a result of structural social inequality in urban Brazil. Yet it also demonstrates a lack of popular consensus concerning the rules of the housing market at that time. By allowing pioneer residents to build and inhabit

their own homes without the burden of renting in central and valued urban areas,[18] the existence of favelas can also be seen as the fruit of a shared dissent against rent among the poorer parts of the population.

Beyond the formation of slums, other forms of transgression allowed some of these cities' poorest residents to be exempt, at least temporarily, from paying rent in the city centre. Among these transgressions, press coverage at the time reported on the informal occupation of abandoned properties or the non-payment of sums due to landlords after staying in rented rooms.[19] At the same time, within the emerging workers' movement in the big cities, influenced by socialist and anarchist ideas, some were advocating rent strikes as a means of taking action against landlords. The following lines appear in the opening scene of a popular play, written in 1907 in Rio de Janeiro:[20]

> The rents are so high, don't pay them! […] Houses are for people who live in them! No more parasites! No more landlords! Are they the ones who built them? No! It was us, the workers. These houses weigh on our shoulders. They were built with our sweat.[21]

As this play illustrates, the rent strike organised in Buenos Aires that same year, analysed by Poy and Belkin in Chapter 4 of this volume, left its mark on working-class circles in Brazil. The political language against rent injustices, and in favour of the struggle for urban housing, was then disseminated in socialist or anarchist newspapers such as *A Batalha*. It showed how the workers' movement of the First Republic was already becoming aware of housing issues and politicising them. However, this political repertoire linked to the left and the class struggle did not lead to the organisation of civil associations or of specific protests.

Nor was the issue confined to trade union circles. The language of struggle also described popular tactics of occupation and the use of urban space to solve the housing question. Echoing the various forms of transgression or reticence that existed among the poorest populations with regard to the rental market, the construction of the first favelas on disused land was also a way to avoid paying rent while remaining in the inner city. The systematic occupation of publicly owned areas can be interpreted as a deliberate strategy, a way to pressure the government and to avoid later rent collection by a landlord. This aspect is pointed out by the statement of one of the pioneers of Morro da Babilônia, in Rio de Janeiro:

> Rent, eh well? We don't pay anything: the hill belongs to the government. Down there, yes, an Englishman rents it, but up

here […] we arrive, choose our place, plant the poles, fill with clay and stay living.[22]

This testimony also recalls the fact that the favelas have, since the first decades of the twentieth century, experienced the development of a local and informal estate market for selling and renting that became predominant after the second or third generation of residents. This occurred not only in Rio de Janeiro, but also in other urban centres such as Belo Horizonte.

The city of Belo Horizonte was planned in the late nineteenth century to become the new capital of the state of Minas Gerais. Inaugurated in 1897, the city was projected and designed according to an urban plan that was meant to express the efficiency, rationalism and modernity of the nascent Brazilian Republic.[23] In the initial urban project designs, no space was provided to house the poor workers who came to work on the construction sites of the new capital. To acquire their first permanent dwellings in the city, these workers and their families occupied vacant areas in the central region.

In the 1900s the city government was already taking repressive measures to remove these informal, self-built neighbourhoods. This was the first episode of a socio-spatial dispute in which the municipal authorities and the elites tried repeatedly, without ever being entirely successful, to expel the favelas from the inner city. This created a dynamic that would become the rule in most of the large Brazilian cities over the last century.[24] In this same period the strong concentration of available lots in the central region in the hands of a few families stimulated a speculative dynamic, with rapid transformation and valorisation of urban soil.[25] The growth of the city was thus marked, in the following decades, by a strong inequality between the peri-urban areas and the central region. The former was characterised by higher housing quality and greater real estate value. The removal of the first slums resulted in the formation of new favelas in central and peri-urban areas from the 1920s onwards. These urban inequalities inspired the mobilisation of residents from the poorer classes, a mobilisation that would appear more significant after the 1950s.

In 1949 favelas' dwellers started to organise themselves, based on the formation of local residents' associations named the Unions for Collective Defense (*Uniões de Defesa Coletiva*, UDCs). These associations were initially created to respond to a series of eviction orders that threatened their neighbourhoods. At this time urban growth, along with the expansion and structuring of local industry in the Belo Horizonte

region, generated a heating-up of the real estate market, in search of new areas in which to build and invest. This increased pressure for the removal of many favelas and informally occupied areas, specifically those around the central region. Based on a strong political action against evictions and for the rights of the residents throughout the 1950s, the first nine UDCs merged together in 1959 to create the Favela Workers' Federation (FTFBH). This further stimulated the creation of new UDCs.[26]

Five years after its creation, the FTFBH was suppressed by the military authorities following the 1964 coup. However, during these five years, the FTFBH had gathered more than 50 associations of slum dwellers in the city and had developed a diversified 'repertoire of collective action'[27] in defence of slum-dwellers' rights. It anchored these actions in a broad and fierce denunciation of the injustices of the housing market.

The Favela Workers' Federation and the campaign against the 'sharks in sandals'

> DON'T PAY RENT
>
> The Favela Workers Federation of Belo Horizonte is engaged in a campaign to end the odious exploitation of charging rent for rooms and shacks in favelas. Favelas are for people who need to live, not for sharks to do business.
>
> We have support from the Working-Class Areas Department, the Inspection Department and the Legal Aid Public Office.
>
> Comrade: STOP PAYING RENT AND CONTACT US IMMEDIATELY.[28]

In 1962 the above call was published in the first issue of *O Barraco*, an independent newspaper edited by the Favelas Workers Federation (FTFBH) between 1962 and 1964. Published in the years of the progressive government of João Goulart (1961–4), the newspaper was committed to the struggle for housing rights and urban reform. *O Barraco* was one of many actors that promoted the expansion of citizenship for workers through structural reforms of the economy. Several 'base reforms' were seen as necessary to promote national development and social equality. The agenda for implementing the 'base reforms' advocated by the

Goulart government was to reverse systemic social injustices in Brazilian society. Such an agenda included land and urban reform, with the aim of guaranteeing access to land in the countryside and housing for all urban citizens.

As well as becoming involved in political disputes alongside left-wing parties and reformist campaigns, the FTFBH and its periodical waged campaigns against the 'slum landlords', whom they stereotyped as 'sharks'. This expression was used to qualify real estate market players who operated in the urban space of the slums. 'Sharks' had a broad and malleable meaning. It not only qualified those who charged rent and built 'shacks' and rooms in informal and irregular areas of the city's hillsides and peripheries, but also served to designate political leaders or informal authorities that tried to establish control over who could, or could not, build housing. The first category was often designated by the FTFBH as 'sharks in sandals',[29] an expression used by the movement to refer to modestly resourced yet greedy landlords established in the favelas.

These campaigns of the favela workers' movement highlight two important aspects of the urban expansion of the slums in Belo Horizonte and of the urban informality in Brazil. First, contrary to the myths of houses being built 'overnight' by migrants and poor inhabitants, spontaneously and without social controls, this expansion occurred through social agents acting in an informal real estate market. These agents sought to control access to land and 'shacks', as well as the formation of the informal urban fabric. As underlined by Fischer,[30] urban informality was constituted in Brazil and in Latin America through political and economic structures that reproduced social and racial hierarchies in the production of urban space and the segregation of the right to the city. Second, these campaigns show that residents' advocacy politicised the action of these 'exploiters' through a political discourse of the social injustice and the right to housing. In the left-wing ethos of this social movement, the slum was initially understood as a place of housing for the poor and needy workers 'to live'.

We can here identify a continuity between the demands of the favela movement and the discourse circulating within the workers' organisations since the beginning of the century, mentioned earlier in the chapter, that associated landlords with 'parasites' who grew rich from houses they did not build.[31] We can also identify a strong circulation between leaders of favela associations and trade union campaigns for basic reforms in the 1950s and 1960s – a classic theme of left-wing political parties and trade union struggles in Latin America that wanted

forms of social development and to combat injustice. During this period many favela workers' leaders had political backgrounds in the labour, socialist, communist or Catholic left, joining political parties and labour movements that questioned capitalism and demanding social 'reforms' or 'revolution'.[32]

From the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the federation of slum associations was formed, there were reports of campaigns against rent exploitation: memos, speeches in newspapers and several demands to authorities claiming control over the informal real estate market in the slums of Belo Horizonte. In these reports, the municipal authorities responsible for urban policies were expected to intervene on behalf of the residents and for social justice. The call reproduced above thus mentions the Department of Working-Class Areas, the Department of Oversight and the Legal Aid Public Office. These were political and administrative structures that emerged from internal reforms within the Belo Horizonte municipal administration in the 1950s, with the task of controlling urban expansion in one of the country's fastest-growing cities.

The insistent campaign of the slum workers' movement shows that, beyond their technical and legal criteria, the actions of these institutions were mediated by political relations and disputes formed during Brazilian mass democracy in the period after the Second World War. It also shows that the attempt at metropolitan urban planning, in light of the already outdated city plan constituted in the 1890s, took place through the departmental administrative structures of the City Hall and the plan of the Society of Graphical and Mechanical Analysis applied to Social Complexes (SAGMACS);[33] this took place during the administrations of Celso Melo Azevedo (1954–9) and Amintas de Barros (1959–63). The 1950s saw a lot of discussions about the need for a new urban planning programme for Belo Horizonte – a demand to which municipal management had tried to respond in different ways. These efforts took place amidst intense political disputes over the control of urban expansion and real estate agents, who were attempting to speculate on urban land.[34] In this local political context, marked by the strong influence of private-sector players on urban policies and progressive campaigns for urban reform, the favela movements sought to pressure the municipal administration in order to guarantee the right to the city.

The struggle against exploitative slum landlords was linked to workers' expectations that the government would regulate rents in the face of rising inflation. The first rent control legislation was enacted in 1942, at the initiative of president Getúlio Vargas, against a background

of high cost of living due to the economic restrictions experienced by the country. It represented an attempt by the government to intervene against rising rents and to restrict the freedom of the real estate market by establishing guarantees for tenants against property owners.

The legislation emerged in the midst of an urban expansion that intensified in the 1940s and was particularly important in influencing access to housing in the cities. According to Nabil Bonduki,[35] the Tenancy Law had the effect of reducing the supply of rental housing, since real estate agents and the construction industry retracted their initiatives. On the one hand, this expanded the ideology of 'home ownership' through the sale of plots and self-construction on the outskirts of the cities. However, it also resulted in the first national public policies for social housing.

The Tenancy Law can also be explained by economic factors. Since the 1930s the trajectory of industrialisation and urbanisation had been accompanied by high inflation that affected the lives of workers by reducing the purchasing power of their wages. Employers benefited from the reduction of the cost of labour. However, since wage increases did not keep up with inflation, workers protested against the *carestia* – high cost of living – and the worsening of living conditions in the big cities.[36] The Tenancy Law was a response to constant protests against this *carestia*, a central theme of the urban social movements of the 1940s and 1960s. In the struggle against the rising cost of living, the worker was often presented as a political actor opposing the 'sharks', who increased the price of basic items of food, housing and transport. Access to these goods was seen as a fundamental aspect of workers' citizenship.

The *carestia*, or insecurity regarding living conditions, was a central topic in Brazilian urban-industrial development. Its impact on workers depended on the city in which they lived and on their status in the hierarchy of production that determined distinct salaries for different categories. However, it served to unite several social categories and became a constant topic in public opinion. Tomas C. Garcia used data published by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) to show the inflation of basic foodstuffs in six key regional capitals, including Belo Horizonte, where basic foodstuff prices increased more than 12 times between 1948 and 1962.[37] In the major Brazilian cities a significant demographic increase related to migration and urban-industrial expansion after the Second World War was accompanied by high inflation, reflecting an urban structure whose food supply and storage capacities were not adapted to growing demand.

In Belo Horizonte, for example, the prices of basic foodstuffs, between the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1960s, rose 16 times. The increase in food prices was related to supply problems in the cities, which lacked investment in infrastructure to match population growth and the dynamic economic expansion of the urban fabric. Yet this inflation was also the result of 'intermediaries' (or 'sharks') – economic actors who operated in various segments of urban trades, building capital and expanding business networks in the city. The protests against high prices from the 1940s through to the 1960s focused their agenda on food, a critical point in the daily lives of workers. However, they also focused on other essential items for the reproduction of labour power, including transport, rent and other important necessities.[38]

The high rents increased the demand for affordable housing. This demand in turn stimulated rent inflation, and consequently also eviction orders against tenants unable to keep up with rising prices. As an article published in the daily newspaper *Diário de Minas* observed, in reference to the housing situation in Belo Horizonte:

> The number of eviction proceedings has increased considerably, highlighting the social drama of the housing problem in the urban area, especially in the capital cities where the great mass of the rural population, badly assisted, converges […] This concentration has created desperate conditions of survival, making the demand for real estate several times greater than the supply, which the owners take advantage of to raise the rent prices that the tenants cannot afford.[39]

One key aspect of rents in the city's favelas is worthy of note: the informal relationships established in these spaces were not regulated by the Tenancy Law. Rental agreements for rooms and 'shacks' were forged by the residents outside the rental norms created by the state, in territories considered to be of irregular property. Furthermore, the legal and urban status of the favelas at the end of the 1930s and in the mid-1950s prohibited the trade, sale, rent and construction of improvements or any kind of reform in the houses built in this informal territory.[40]

The rental situation in favelas was quite ambivalent. Gonçalves highlights that informal rent receipts and contracts were often the only safeguards for favela residents to prove their housing rights and avoid evictions authorised by the public authorities.[41] In such conditions, a refusal by residents to pay rent, and the reinforcement of measures

prohibiting the rental of houses, would result in greater insecurity for the residents. Nevertheless, this did not prevent a growing politicisation and action against favela 'exploiters', which contributed to the consolidation of demands encouraging limits to rent collection in informal areas. Echoing the public calls from the favela movement to stop paying unfair rents, the newspaper *O Barraco* published caricatures of the 'shark' as the representation of the 'exploiters' in favelas.[42] This anti-capitalist iconography was in clear dialogue with the protests against *carestia*, which represented the bourgeois landlord as a predatory actor building profits on the exploitation of the working class.

Scaling up the mobilisations against rent seekers in the favelas

In the early 1960s the FTFBH managed to establish itself as an important social movement on the public scene in Belo Horizonte. This was the result of various factors. One of them was its role in the organisation of the First Congress of Favela Workers, which claimed that a societal reform allowing an egalitarian distribution of urban land was urgent and necessary. At the time the FTFBH had contacts and relations with several left-wing organisations, including students' and workers' unions in Belo Horizonte.

In response to the rise of the social movement, the mayor Amintas de Barros (Brazilian Labour Party) appointed a military officer, Colonel Roberto Gonçalves, to advise him about the relationship and negotiations with the favela workers' movement. In a meeting with the advisor for the favelas, the social movement presented the tactics to avoid the 'rent seekers':

> The slum dwellers, together with the FTF [Federation of Favela Workers], have adopted tactics for the struggle against these exploiters, such as: (a) the tenant suspends the payment of the rents and proposes to purchase the house for a fair value, in one or more instalment payments, by means of monthly amortisation receipts; (b) if the landlord does not accept the agreement, the tenant does not pay and seeks the Legal Aid Public Office of the Law School […]; (c) if the judge decrees the eviction of the tenant, at the same moment that the property becomes empty, the Inspection Department knocks down the shack. Some landlords have been intimidated by these tactics […].[43]

The association's tactic was to take the collection of rents in the favelas to court. There was hope that the rent seeker, instead of collecting rent for a property built in an illegal area, would accept a payment of fair instalments, negotiated with the tenant to secure the lot and shed. The strategy contained the implicit notion that the resident who paid rent and occupied the place was the real owner of the place and had rights over the lot and the shed, since he was often responsible for its construction and maintenance. The idea was to build an alliance with the city hall against the 'rent seekers' in two senses: first, by carrying out the intent to repress the exploiters; second, by guaranteeing assistance to the families of favela dwellers who were in conflict with these agents.

The idea that working families in favelas should seek justice to claim their housing rights was a strategy of the association. It was supported both by left-wing jurists who supported the movement, the so-called 'favela lawyers', and by the alliance established with the student movement. It was then common to see protests organised by favela workers, in which women occupied the streets or central spaces of the city holding their children, symbolising the families of workers who had suffered injustices in the struggles for housing. Most of them were black mothers, accompanied by their children. This strong presence of women in the mobilisations was also visible in other demonstrations linked to the high cost of living, or *carestia*, in Brazil, for instance the so-called *panela vazia* ('empty pot') demonstrations from the 1950s onwards. The significant role played by women is observed in several movements in Latin America, as highlighted elsewhere in this volume in Chapter 4 by Poy and Belkin and Chapter 5 by Zumoff. As Poy and Belkin observe, for many of these working-class women in Latin American cities, 'the home was not only the place where reproductive work was taken care of, but also the site for market-oriented work activities'. This comment highlights the links between housing and labour informality, particularly recurrent in large Brazilian cities throughout the twentieth century and into the present.

Despite a strong and recurring presence of women in the frontline of actions carried out by favela residents' movements, official leadership roles in their associations were mostly taken by male workers, who identified themselves as black and brown. This situation reflected a patriarchal structure present in almost all Brazilian left-wing organisations at that time.

However, favela residents and leaders also recognised the serious risk they ran in this type of direct or legal confrontation. The abovementioned report made clear that the 'rent seekers' were also establishing

tactics to confront the association, and the possibility of judicialisation of the right to collect rents in favelas. Thus the newspaper also highlighted the tactics of the 'rent seekers':

1) They do not provide a receipt, aiming to nullify any rights of the exploited.
2) They get police protection because, in addition to cases of corruption, they allege in the police districts that the tenant is a troublemaker, disrespectful, marginal, etc., or that, in the case of women, they are prostitutes.
3) They get police protection because, as a rule, the exploiters are electoral agents of councillors and deputies.
4) They obtain administrative assistance by seeking to embargo the activities of the Federation's defence unions, so that the tenants remain uninformed.
5) They exert tremendous physical pressure (through henchmen and thugs) on any element that claims to fight against exploitation.[44]

These strategies of slum rent-seekers deserve detailed analysis. In urban historiography, little attention has been paid to the multiplicity of political and economic agents that regulated the favelas through several strategies, inside and outside the territory.[45] The favela 'owners' kept an important part of the workers' families dependent on them, in a situation of negotiation and conflict of rent contracts. The violence exercised by the landlords – qualified in the report as 'physical pressure' – was practised recurrently in the context of the informal tenancy. It appeared as practices of bad faith, threats or aggression in the various complaints made by tenants and published in the press.[46] This violence is a testament to the vulnerability of tenants in the context of informal housing markets.

In resisting an attempt to take the rent conflict to court, the owners of shacks in favelas could stop providing their 'receipts'. These documents provided evidence of the informal contract with the favela dweller and were used as evidence to prove the right of possession. The 1916 Civil Code instituted usucaption, which guaranteed property ownership to the possessor who could prove possession for a period of time exceeding 20 years. In the case of the favelas, the right to possession of land situated in the informal land registry system was not guaranteed to the landlord of the property, but to the tenant who actually lived there and occupied the place. These receipts could also be used to justify negotiations with the landlord, both to force the sale of the property through judicial proceedings (as suggested by the tactics of the residents' association and

'favela lawyers'), and to prove that improvements on the property had not been built by the landlord.

A second aspect highlighted by the report is the use of police force. Landlords declared that residents were members of dangerous classes – often labelling the men as 'marginal', 'disrespectful' or 'disorderly' and the women as 'prostitutes' – in order to incite the repressive action of the state. Here, once again, we are dealing with stereotypes connected to juridical and criminal categories present in Brazilian society. According to the Criminal Code of 1940, an individual who committed the crime of loitering or prostitution could be detained in a mental institution or a detention institution for the purpose of learning a profession and being disciplined to work.

Drawing on a broad and vague qualification of 'loitering' and 'prostitution' to label workers in informal situations, the landlords could require the use of police action against residents. In post-abolition Brazil vagrancy was classified as a crime by the Penal Code of 1890. This legislation was aimed at restricting the freedom of the workforce after the end of slavery. The racist patterns of colonial society thus persisted. While, on the one hand, the formal labour market was open mainly to white people, non-whites (black, indigenous, mixed-race) were seen by public authorities as potential troublemakers who needed to be watched out for. Reinforcing the importance of the racial factor in relations between landlords and tenants, we can also find several eviction requests in the local press justified by the practice of 'witchcraft'.[47] This was a term then used to designate Afro-Brazilian religious practices that were also regulated by the Brazilian Republican Penal Code since 1890.[48] The Penal Code of 1940 was instituted along with the labour legislation of the 1930s, but it did not abolish the racist bias that associated black citizens with the stereotype of vagrancy, witchcraft or rascality.[49] The crime of prostitution was also a definition of the legislators of the Code of 1890 that remained in 1940. According to recent research, this law affected mainly single women working in informal and precarious situations. It also had a racial bias and was aimed at former slaves who sought to live in freedom and from their own work in the post-abolition period.[50]

Rent seekers were ready to use the stereotypes of rascality and promiscuity, since the workers and families in the favelas often did not fit the patriarchal pattern (frequently having women as head of the family) and the lifestyle expectations of Brazilian middle-class families. In the discourse of the FTFBH, the insistence on representations of the 'favela worker' as head of the family had the clear intention of disputing a social and juridical rhetoric that affected their daily lives and the regulation

of their routines. In this case the 'seekers' of rents, despite acting in a field beyond legality and classified as illegal by the law, knew how to use the public authorities to satisfy their interests of perpetuating the domination and control of the shack properties they rented.

A third aspect of the strategies of favela rental operators, reported by favela associations and lawyers, was their alliance with public authorities and politicians. Shack owners often had connections with politicians ('city councillors' and 'deputies'), acting as electoral agents and requesting protection from public authorities for their favela businesses. In this sense, the activities of the residents' associations in the political arena, also patronising the public authorities, made them competitors. For this reason the FTFBH and its leaders were especially persecuted by these local landlords.

An article published by the newspaper *Diário da Tarde* mentioned the FTFBH's appeal to the authorities for their support in regulating the informal rental market in the favelas:

> Favelados appeal to the authorities to put an end to the exploiters, who are often assisted by unscrupulous lawyers and politicians of the same calibre. A list of shack owners in favelas Pedreira [Prado Lopes] and Senhor dos Passos has been compiled, but the list is not complete. Only the names of the main ones appear in the list.[51]

In the campaign against 'rent seekers', indicating the names of people who were accused of acting as 'sharks' was a way to pressure the municipality of Belo Horizonte to act. In the specific context of the informal housing market, in which there was no official record of any tenancy agreements, publicly identifying and naming shed owners represented a crucial step in building tenants' mobilisation. The comment indicating that the 'list is not complete' highlighted the difficulty of naming the exploiters, since they established relationships of patronage with local authorities and with the inhabitants, creating bonds of dependence that were difficult to break. Furthermore, not all favelas had the same problem with shack exploitation. Pedreira Prado Lopes and Senhor dos Passos were traditional favelas. They had been established since the beginning of the twentieth century, where there was a consolidated occupation of the territory, quite populated and with shack tenants in conflict with the residents. However, there are several indications that both old and new favelas experienced the problem of rent exploitation.

Despite the difficulty of identifying and fighting against the tenants of shacks and rooms, the situation of the 'rent seekers' was constantly

politicised. Such attacks on the 'sharks' were a constant in the associations' marches and public demonstrations. In 1961, in a big demonstration against collective evictions in the favelas, held in front of the city hall, the photojournalist of *Diário da Tarde* highlighted some of the posters in the middle of the crowd. They featured slogans such as '*Favelados* Demand Social Justice', 'Violence Generates Violence, WATCH OUT SHARK$' and 'Down with the Evictors'.

Legal action taken by the favela movement was based on Law 572 from 1955. This law stipulated not only the illegal status of favelas in Belo Horizonte, but also the illegal status of rent exploitation in these areas. The favela movement thus had an ambiguous relationship with this legislation. On the one hand, the law could be used by the social movement to repress the 'sharks' in an attempt to control the rental price, and eventually to guarantee a negotiation that could allow the dweller the informal purchase of the location. The law functioned as a legal and moral argument to make assessments on politicians such as the mayor Celso Melo Azevedo and Amintas de Barros, as well as city councillors. These public authorities were required to protect the worker and to crack down on rent collection in the favelas at a time when workers were experiencing the high cost of living.

On the other hand, most of the social movement's actions were aimed at the legal statute that framed the favela territory. This municipal rule consolidated the favelas' image as an illegal territory, undeserving of urban improvements from public authorities, nor of having its houses repaired. The favela workers' movement sought exactly the opposite, trying to extend the construction of waterspouts, health posts or staircases based on the initiative of public authorities and the collective effort of the residents in areas that were seen as transitory by the legislation. They thus tried to consolidate the expectation that the favelas could be a space to guarantee the right to the city and to housing for workers' families, in an ethical contrast to exploitation and real estate speculation.

The ambivalence with regard to Law 572 evidenced a moral economy of renting, based on a reinterpretation of the legal status of the favela. E. P. Thompson used the category of 'moral economy' to propose a reinterpretation of popular mobilisations usually considered by Marxist orthodoxy as apolitical and lacking class consciousness, for being supposedly linked to a request for political patronage from an authority.[52] While Thompson employed this concept to analyse 'food riots' in Britain, several Brazilian historians used the concept to understand the action of rural and urban workers in social movements,

who faced both inflation and a paternalistic attitude on the part of the state.[53] According to Thompson, the notion of moral economy refers to:

> a traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor.[54]

Moral economy as a concept helps us to understand protests over the high rents in Brazil in the period after the Second World War. Tenants' social movements are less researched because they are often seen as secondary in trade union politics and less important in class conflicts. However, they were central in the urban protests of workers from the 1940s to the 1960s.[55] Through unions and civil associations, such as the FTFBH and the UDCs, workers used the political alliances made possible by the rise of mass politics to expand the notion of social rights based on their daily life and a certain 'class experience'.[56]

Within the scope of its discourse in favour of greater social justice and the right to housing for all, the FTFBH also questioned the concentration of vast amounts of urban land in the hands of a few owners, pointing out the necessary redistribution of these 'urban latifundia'. In the campaign against the 'sharks', this discourse denounced the real estate speculation and urban spoliation practised by landlords. These were stated as some of the reasons for the lack of affordable housing for the poor.

After 1963, searching for new forms of action, the FTFBH supported the occupation of vacant urban lands belonging to a powerful landowner. Through self-construction and self-organisation, these occupations led to the formation of four new, self-built, informal districts. Although presented by the occupiers as a concrete means of 'getting rid of rent',[57] these actions were also aimed at exerting pressure to achieve the application of a municipal decree passed in 1963. This decree, which promised the expropriation of urban land with no 'social function' in favour of the construction of popular housing, can also be seen as an effect of the FTFBH's mobilisations on municipal policies.[58]

From the campaign against the 'sharks in sandals' to the re-appropriation of 'urban latifundia', the discourses and the action repertoire of FTFBH were articulated within a broad critique of the concentration of property for speculative purposes at different scales – spanning from the local and informal favela market to the municipal and metropolitan dimension. The political language developed by FTFBH

included insurgent discourses and spatial practices[59] that challenged the structural roots of socio-spatial injustice in the Brazilian city, while seeking to formulate short- and long-term solutions to remedy them.[60]

We argue that the FTFBH's actions marked a turning point in the public debate in one of Brazil's largest cities by incarnating a collective 'capture of speech'[61] regarding the 'housing violence' suffered daily by the favela population. This form of violence is defined by Rannila as multifaceted, as it associates:

> direct violence (e.g. a spectacular eviction) […] structural violence (e.g. lack of affordable housing) and cultural violence (e.g. feeling of injustice) as something that persists unchanged for a long time.[62]

Conclusion

By the end of the nineteenth century, favelas emerged in Brazilian cities as an alternative to the formal housing market for the poorest populations, but they quickly developed their own informal rental markets. From the 1950s onwards residents' movements such as the FTFBH mobilised to denounce the socio-spatial injustices that were produced and reproduced inside the favelas. By developing and disseminating certain discursive categories – such as 'sharks in sandals' and 'urban latifundia' – and a certain repertoire of action, the FTFBH was able to project the theme of the contradictory relationship between real estate speculation, the housing market and the right to housing for all.

Through the FTFBH's mobilisations against 'rent seekers', we can identify the specificities and difficulties of this type of mobilisation in an informal tenant market. Since there were no formal contracts between landlord and tenants, the simple fact of publicly naming the owners, who were numerous and discreet, and of taking legal action against the injustices suffered by the tenants were important steps towards political mobilisation. This represents an important distinction from rent strikes in other countries, where tenants united against the same, publicly known owner. In this respect the FTFBH case analysed here is similar to other movements in Latin America carried out by residents in the context of informal tenancy – for example, in Argentina and Mexico during the first decades of the twentieth century.[63]

In the decades following the extinction of the FTFBH, there were collective mobilisations of residents against the collection of rent in favelas in other Brazilian cities. However, this was not a recurrent

practice, due to the difficulties of organising this type of mobilisation in the context of the informal market and the violent power relations that this same market could mobilise.[64] On the other hand, social movements maintained the practice of collective occupation of vacant urban lands to defend the right to housing. In Belo Horizonte, in particular, the initial experiences supported by the FTFBH in the early 1960s were expanded by later generations of residents and activists.

Over the last 10 years the urban land occupation movement has acquired an important degree of organisation in Belo Horizonte. A central tenet of its political mission is the idea that poor people should not be dependent 'on paying rent' to access 'decent housing'.[65] According to a 2020 report by the Pastoral Land Commission of Minas Gerais, '119 urban land occupations' had been carried out in the previous 13 years. After years of mobilisation, these occupations were recognised by the city hall 'as settlements of social interest', in which the residents themselves had built '30,000 brick houses'. According to the report, the '30,000 families' achieved through their collective struggle liberation 'from the heavy burden of rent'.[66]

In these occupations, as well as in the favelas monitored by the FTFBH in the early 1960s, the regulation of the local informal market remains a central issue. In most of the recent urban occupations organised by social movements, a tacit rule is that the houses built can, in theory, be sold eventually for their construction cost but not rented out; they are destined to be acquired as a home by the first occupants and their families. The appropriation of several houses or lots by the same person is also prohibited. These agreements should, in theory, prevent a dynamic of local real estate speculation. However, the perpetuation of these rules over time presents a major challenge for both residents and the social movements themselves, as they suffer permanent pressure from certain actors of the informal market.

In 2015 Manoel Bahia, resident and prominent figure of the Vitória occupation – located in Santa Lúzia, in the metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte – was brutally murdered. He was killed by groups linked to drug trafficking while he was trying to prevent land-grabbing and the creation of a local speculative market in the occupied land. This tragic episode shows us the extent to which the issue of rent collection and speculation in informal housing areas continues to be an object of tension and political dispute in Belo Horizonte, as in other large Brazilian cities. In this respect, the tactics of popular organisations aimed at removing dependence on the rental market have evolved in different ways, adapting to the specific tenancy regime of the informal urban areas that are the favelas.

Notes

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2 Oliveira 2010, 139; Gonçalves 2012, 127; Davi de Oliveira 2010, 32.
3 Abramo 2005; Scheba and Turok 2020.
4 Câmara municipal de Belo Horizonte, Lei nº 572, 12/09/1956.
5 Noronha 2018; Comissão Pastoral da Terra MG, 'Relatório das Ocupações Urbanas e Camponesas e Comunidades Tradicionais em conflitos socioambientais ameaçadas de despejo em Minas Gerais', 09/22/2020.
6 Gonçalves 2013; Whitaker Ferreira 2005.
7 Gray 2018; Vasudevan 2017.
8 Hmed 2007.
9 Guzmán and Ill-Raga 2022.
10 In this volume, see Chapter 4 by Poy and Belkin on the 1907 Buenos Aires tenants' strike, and Chapter 5 by Zumoff on the Panama rent strikes in the 1920s and the 1930s. An important tenants' strike that occurred in Veracruz, Mexico in 1923 was studied in Behrens 2000.
11 Thompson 1998, 204. About the relation between *carestia* and the concept of 'moral economy' see Leal 2011; Ioris 2012; Garcia 2013; Amaral 2014.
12 The concept is used in this volume in order to analyse popular conceptions linked to the rental market in very different contexts. It is employed by Potamianos to analyse shopkeepers strikes in early twentieth-century Athens, while Poy and Belkin mention it to evoke the participation of women in housing-related mobilisations in Buenos Aires during the same period. The concept is also used by Ill-Raga and Bonshoms-Guzmán to reflect on recent rent strikes in Spain.
13 Campos 2011, 22.
14 Rolnik 1997, 23.
15 Gassen 1994, 176.
16 Chalhoub 1996, 29. When consulting the press of that time, in a city such as Rio de Janeiro, we find records of successive complaints about the 'very high sums' charged by landlords to tenants in the central region, for residential or commercial rent, and about the 'very poor hygienic conditions' of many houses. (See, for instance, *Correio da Manhã*, 22 November 1901; 14 January 1902; 22 July 1902.)
17 According to Valladares (2000) the term was initially brought to Rio de Janeiro by some occupants of the first slums who had been mobilised as soldiers in the war of Canudos (1896–7). Canudos designates a campaign led by the Brazilian government against a revolt of millenarian inspiration, in the state of Bahia, formed by small peasants who rejected the authority of the Brazilian republic. The insurgents created, in the small town of Canudos, a community governed by its own laws. One of the main hills of Canudos was called *favela* because of the name popularly given to a plant that grew there.
18 Gonçalves 2012; Urvoy 2020, 67; Oliveira 2020.
19 *Correio da Manhã*, 4 August 1901 and 14 September 1901. See also Ribeiro 1994.
20 All quotations throughout the text were originally in Portuguese. They have been translated into English by the authors of the chapter.
21 'Greve de inquilinos', written in 1907 by the trade union activist Neno Vasco in Rio de Janeiro and published by *A Batalha* in 1923. The play was republished in 2018 by Entremares (São Paulo), see pp. 11–12.
22 Gonçalves 2012.
23 Guimarães 1991, 1.
24 Chalhoub 1996, 26.
25 Guimarães 1991, 81.
26 Oliveira 2010, 15.
27 Tilly 1984, 89.
28 *O Barraco*, January 1962. *Arquivo Público Mineiro*. Fundo DOPS. Pasta 0119.
29 'Tubarões de tamanco nas favelas, exploração de favelados agrava problemas de favelas da Capital', *O Barraco* in *Binômio*, Caderno 2, p.6, 9 September 1963.

30 Fischer 2023.
31 'Greve de inquilinos'.
32 Oliveira 2010.
33 The SAGMACS was created by the Dominican priest Louis-Joseph Lebret in 1947 and offered metropolitan plans for cities in Brazil. It was an important moment of urbanism in the 1950s, when the question of the management of urban informality informal city was debated by several social actors.
34 Oliveira 2015b.
35 Bonduki 2004.
36 Duarte 2018.
37 Garcia 2013.
38 Many analysts of the workers' movements in Brazil observe in these protests the way in which the class alliance in the Brazilian developmentalist economy kept the living conditions of workers subordinated to the interests of capital. According to them, constant inflationary pressure on the cost of living and the conditions of reproduction of the workforce were among these forms of oppression and heteronomy of the worker in the Brazilian social structure (Weffort 2003).
39 *Diário de Minas*, 5 October 1963.
40 Gonçalves 2013; Oliveira 2014; Oliveira 2022a.
41 Gonçalves 2012.
42 *O Barraco*, in *Binômio,* Belo Horizonte, 20 August 1962, Caderno 3, p.3.
43 'Chuva adiou luta de favelados contra os seus exploradores', *Diário da Tarde*, Belo Horizonte, 18 November 1961, 2.
44 'Chuva adiou luta de favelados contra os seus exploradores'.
45 Machado da Silva 1993.
46 According to our research carried out in the newspaper *Diário de Minas* for the years 1963 and 1964.
47 *Diário de Minas* (10 May 1963 and 12 September 1963).
48 Campos et al. 2020.
49 Fischer 2008.
50 Cruz 2020.
51 *Diário da Tarde* (18 November 1961).
52 Thompson 1998, 204.
53 Leal 2011; Ioris 2012; Garcia 2013; Amaral 2014
54 Thompson 1998, 152. This notion has been used by several authors to consider conflicts between tenants and landlords. See Dunne 2000, and Potamianos' chapter in this volume.
55 Leal 2011; Ioris 2012 Garcia 2013; Amaral 2014.
56 Thompson 2004.
57 Interview with José do Carmo, Cabana do Pai Tomás district, Belo Horizonte, 2016. Realised by Marcus Vieira and Eustáquio Almeida. Provided to the authors by the interviewers.
58 Prefeitura de Belo Horizonte, Decreto nº 1.105, 1963.
59 Carli & Frediani 2016.
60 Oliveira 2014; Oliveira 2022b.
61 De Certeau 2008.
62 Rannila 2022.
63 Silva 2017.
64 Davi de Oliveira 2010, 32.
65 MLB Brasil, Entrevista com Poliana Souza, da coordenação nacional do MLB, 10 July 2017.
66 Comissão Pastoral da Terra – MG, 'Relatório das Ocupações Urbanas e Camponesas e Comunidades Tradicionais em conflitos socioambientais ameaçadas de despejo em Minas Gerais', 22 September 2020.

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12

A century of renter activism in Aotearoa New Zealand

Elinor Chisholm

Introduction

Aotearoa New Zealand's rental sector is characterised by cold, damp housing, insecure tenancies and high rents relative to income.[1] This description, relevant today, would have been familiar to tenants throughout the past century, and this chapter provides an overview of the tenant activism that developed in response to these conditions. Tenants' organisations have not had an easy time operating in a society where homeownership has been heavily promoted by the state, and where renting has been correspondingly ignored by governments and stigmatised by the public. Indeed, it would be easy to assume that tenant activism has not existed. After all, it is not covered in any detail in New Zealand's history books, even those that focus on housing or celebrate activism.[2] Yet tenant activism has recurred in New Zealand for over a century; this chapter describes its history and considers its achievements and challenges. In common with other histories of tenant activism, it seeks to challenge existing narratives and provide an alternative narrative to those that focus on the role of the state in housing development and policy.[3] In fact, tenant activism has played an important role in improving New Zealand's housing conditions.

Tenant activism in New Zealand has often emerged concurrently with that of other countries, responding to comparable political and economic conditions. New Zealand's first tenant activism developed during the First World War, in the same period as tenant mobilisation, including rent strikes, in a number of countries such as Greece, the United Kingdom and the United States.[4] Participation in the war was important to creating the conditions that sparked tenant protest in New

Zealand. As in other countries, not only did the conflict contribute to housing shortages: it also increased sympathy for evicted tenants who had fought in the war and the political palatability of state involvement in the housing market.[5] During the Depression many people became radicalised, and eviction resistance occurred in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom – supported by the local Unemployed Workers Movement (UWM) branch or the Communist Party, just as it was in New Zealand.[6] In the 1970s, when a variety of radical groups organised around the issue of renting in New Zealand, similar activism took place in several countries, including Australia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.[7] As noted in the context of the United States, this was often 'in conjunction with, and to some extent symbolic of, broader issues of economic, political and social justice'.[8]

In the 1990s, as New Zealand's public housing tenants organised against market rents, council housing tenants in the United Kingdom mobilised against the transfer of council housing to housing associations.[9] New Zealand public housing tenants' struggles against redevelopment in the early 2010s echo campaigns against similar redevelopment – what critical scholars call 'state-led' gentrification – in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States.[10] Finally, in the late 2010s and early 2020s, as Renters United organised market tenants in New Zealand, similar activism occurred in other countries[11] – a development described by one observer as 'the re-emergence of the renter as a political subject'.[12]

This chapter is based on doctoral research that, due to the absence of published studies on tenants' activism, drew upon a variety of archival materials. These included contemporaneous newspaper accounts, published memoirs and oral histories, newspapers, press releases, notes and pamphlets produced by the organisations, housed in New Zealand's National Archives and the Auckland University archives.[13] The chapter proceeds as follows. To begin, it provides background to the study by briefly describing the history of New Zealand and its housing. The first section offers an account of the rentpayers' organisations of Wellington that existed during the First World War and the early 1920s. The second section describes unemployed activism during the 1930s Depression, which, on occasion, centred upon resistance to eviction. The third section covers tenant organising after the Second World War, focusing on the radical tenants' organisations that peaked during the 1970s. The fourth section outlines the protests of public housing tenants against income-related rents in the 1990s, while the fifth section chronicles

activism against the redevelopment of public housing communities during the 2010s and 2020s. The sixth section introduces Renters United – a membership organisation founded in Wellington in 2015, which expanded to other cities in the early 2020s. The final section places the history of tenant activism into an international context. It discusses the achievements and challenges of tenants' organisations and reflects on the future of tenant activism in New Zealand.

Context: New Zealand's history, housing and population

To establish the context, there follows a brief note on New Zealand's history, housing and population. New Zealand was first settled by Māori approximately 800 years ago; Europeans began to settle there in the nineteenth century. In 1840 representatives of the British Crown and the leaders of some Māori tribes signed the Treaty of Waitangi. The English-language version of the Treaty declared British sovereignty, while the Māori-language version guaranteed chiefly authority over their land while enabling British government. Subsequent decades saw a series of conflicts between the colonial government and certain Māori tribes, the establishment and growth of urban settlements, a mass expansion of European immigration and the alienation and confiscation of large amounts of Māori land.[14] In the twentieth century New Zealand participated in both World Wars and other conflicts alongside Britain; the country gained full statutory independence in 1947.[15] The period since the 1960s has seen an increase in immigration from the Pacific Islands and Asia, along with the urbanisation of most Māori. In 2023, the date of the most recent census, 69 per cent of the population of 5.2 million identified with European ethnicities and 18 per cent were Māori; 17 per cent were Asian, and 9 per cent were Pacific Island people (note that people can identify with multiple ethnicities).[16]

As of 2023, around one-third of New Zealand households rented their accommodation (565, 974 households). A minority of these (15 per cent) were living in public housing, where most households pay a maximum of 25 per cent of household income in rent.[17] New Zealand's housing policy has been characterised by the promotion of homeownership, with governments of both stripes supporting generous tax and loan provisions.[18] However, homeownership rates declined from a peak of 74 per cent in the early 1990s to 66 per cent in 2023, as property prices rose; the proportion of households that are renting has increased accordingly. Reflecting the legacy of colonial land alienation, racism and

lower levels of education and income, rates for Māori and Pacific home-ownership are lower than the rest of the population and are dropping more quickly.[19]

New Zealand housing has historically been characterised by standalone (detached) dwellings. While the proportion of multi-unit dwellings has increased somewhat in recent decades, this type of dwelling still dominates, making up 81 per cent of the total.[20] It is therefore relatively rare for tenants to be clustered together and to share the same landlord. Due to poor regulation of the building and tenancy sectors and climatic conditions, New Zealand housing is often cold, damp and hazardous. For example, one-fifth of people report that their home is so cold that they can see their breath inside. Conditions are worse in the rental sector, which houses disproportionately high numbers of Māori and Pacific people.[21]

Poor housing conditions are harmful to people's health. It has been estimated recently that illnesses attributable to household crowding accounted for 806 nights in hospital annually; cold homes accounted for 1,834 hospital nights and the presence of dampness and mould for 36,649 hospital nights. Home injury hazards resulted in 115,555 annual accident claims.[22] There is also high mobility in the private-rental sector, partly due to the lack of tenancy protections: the average tenancy currently lasts just 28 months.[23]

Tenant activism: the beginnings to 1922

The first known appearance of tenant activism in New Zealand's historical record occurred in Wellington in 1916. Nationwide, there was a significant housing shortage at this time (exacerbated by wartime labour and materials shortages): rents were high and houses were crowded and dilapidated. In Wellington 64 per cent of the population of 73,000 rented. In May 1916 the Wellington branch of the Social Democratic Party (soon to merge with the Labour Party) agreed to press for housing reforms and to form a 'rentpayers' protection association'. Soon after, the organisation was founded at a meeting at Wellington's Trades Hall in 1916. Those present agreed on the need for reform and for a meeting with the Prime Minister.[24] This organisation, along with debates spurred by a Labour Party Members' Bill, was credited with introducing rent controls that same year.[25] The organisation disappeared from the historical record after this point, perhaps because its central demand had been met – or perhaps, as

one activist later intimated, because members failed to contribute to running costs.[26]

However, rent control was largely ineffective and unenforced, and the housing situation worsened. Rents went up, housing construction slowed down and overcrowding increased. The Labour Party, the union movement and women's organisations continued to advocate for renters. In May 1920, at a housing demonstration organised by trade unions in Wellington, participants discussed founding a renters' organisation; this occurred the following month. Newspapers reported on the ideas raised for what the organisation would do. Ideas included valuing dwellings to fix rents; blacklisting the homes of landlords who evicted tenants; negotiating rents, individually or collectively; receiving rents, which it would hold until the landlord effected repairs, or alternatively would pay the landlord a certain amount and use the remainder to renovate; advocating political change; providing information and advocacy to tenants; and resisting evictions through large-scale direct action. By July the organisation had 600 members, with one report noting that 187 people had sought the organisation's advice in a 10-day period.[27] No information on the social composition of either this or the 1916 renters' organisation is available, but names mentioned in newspaper articles about the renters' association are all male and European. This may reflect the fact that Māori were largely a rural population during this time; the 1926 census states that only 16 per cent were then living in urban areas.

A few months later, in July 1920, a crowd of 2,000 or 3,000 people marched on Parliament to demand several reforms, including the extension of rent controls, to which the government agreed. In subsequent months some members advocated attending an eviction resistance. Others arranged an information bureau where they assisted tenants and advocated for political change, including increasing housing supply, banning evictions, reforming rent restrictions, licensing tenement houses, limiting capital gains and delaying eviction in special circumstances. Yet, while the government passed laws intended to ameliorate the housing shortage, nothing occurred to improve conditions in the rental market.

In 1922 the Secretary of the rentpayers' association noted that the housing conditions in New Zealand were worse than before the organisation was formed nearly two years earlier. In January 1922 the organisation was mentioned in the newspapers for the final time. Its disappearance may be linked to having achieved and retained one of its key demands – rent control legislation – but it may also result from a lack of membership or financial resources. Due to the close involvement

of Labour Party politicians, it could also be associated with the shift of Labour's priorities towards supporting 'houses for all' rather than specifically promoting the cause of tenants. This policy shift coincided with the increasing number of workers – Labour's support base – who owned state homeownership loans.[28]

Tenant activism in the Great Depression of the 1930s

From the late 1920s New Zealand entered an economic depression. This contributed to the organisation of the unemployed around a number of issues, including poor housing conditions. Wages fell, and up to 20 per cent of the working population became unemployed. The proportion of rented dwellings increased from 30 per cent to 38 per cent between 1926 and 1936, as people could not afford to pay the mortgages they had taken on. The lack of materials, contraction of the building industry and declining incomes contributed to worsening housing conditions by the late 1930s, when one-quarter of houses were below standard due to their physical condition or lack of basic services. Sustenance payments and relief work were insufficient for many. While rents fell alongside incomes – by between 15 and 20 per cent in Auckland in 1931 alone – people struggled to pay rent. Many moved in with family or friends to save on costs. By the late 1930s 13 per cent of Aucklanders lived in overcrowded housing.[29]

The Labour Party and the union movement kept up their voice for the urban workers throughout the Depression. On the issue of evictions, they made deputations to the government, proposed legislation, and supported and advocated for tenants. However, it was a new organisation – the Unemployed Workers Movement (UWM), which involved both the Labour Party and Communist Party members – that brought particular attention to the issues facing renters. The UWM included many women activists and called for equality between Māori and New Zealand Europeans. Māori were largely absent from the organisation, however, preferring advocacy for Māori unemployed centred in *mana motuhake* ('regeneration through autonomy').[30]

The UWM found new ways of organising the unemployed. They saw housing action as a crucial way to politicise the unemployed:

> Greater attention should be paid to winning the unemployed to struggle through smaller issues, such as better job conditions, i.e. shelters, travelling time etc., against evictions and victimisation.

> The success of these smaller struggles will smooth the road for larger struggles.[31]

In the media and deputations to the government, the UWM called for the withdrawal or reform of legislation that allowed tenants to be evicted. Among their demands were the prevention of evictions in winter, the reduction of rents, the increase of relief payments to allow workers to afford rents, the retention of electricity and gas in homes where people could not pay bills, and a mass state house building programme. The UWM also supported tenants who faced eviction. Their 'anti-eviction committees' aimed 'to prevent evictions, to find homes for the destitute unemployed, and [to facilitate] the transfer of the unemployed from slum dwellings to more habitable quarters'.[32] The national UWM newspaper, the *Unemployed Leader*, instructed readers faced with eviction to contact their local UWM.

The support given to tenants varied. In Gisborne a UWM member recalled managing properties on behalf of landlords for tenants who could not pay the rent to ensure these were not damaged; in Wellington, UWM member Freda Cooke advocated to officials on behalf of an unemployed man to prevent his eviction for rent arrears.[33] However, regarding tenants' organisation, the UWM is best remembered for its involvement in eviction resistance. The most famous case occurred at 21 Norfolk Street, in Ponsonby, Auckland, where a woman and her five children were given notice for being 11 weeks in rent arrears. The local UWM attempted to negotiate with the landlord, offering a rent they claimed had been recommended by an arbitration court judge. This offer was refused. Subsequently UWM members – up to 40 people at a time – occupied the house for five days before the eviction date. Members hoisted a red flag from the roof and hung banners saying 'Anti-Eviction Vigilance Committee', 'Stop the Eviction' and 'No Work, No Rent' from the veranda. When the bailiffs arrived to carry out the eviction, they were supported by policemen. The bailiffs and policemen were refused admittance and 15 men barricaded the door. However, the door was eventually broken down and the occupants were arrested. A crowd of about 500 had gathered, cheering the tenant as she left the home. The crowd donated money for the family and offered the woman a temporary home. Subsequently 13 people were convicted of 'procuring lawlessness' and imprisoned for between one and three months.[34]

Resistance such as this was not always the appropriate response to the threat of eviction. One UWM member recalled an unemployed man who:

> would not allow the anti-eviction committee of the relief workers to help him as he was sensitive about publicity for his wife and children.[35]

In total, there are 17 cases of eviction resistance in the historical record (that is, in newspapers and memoirs). More are likely to have occurred and remained undocumented. Eviction resistance sometimes enabled tenancies to be sustained or rent arrears to be negotiated; they also provided an opportunity for organisations, public figures or neighbours to donate money or to find accommodation for the affected household. While eviction resistance was supported and encouraged by the UWM, it also occurred independent of the organised unemployed, when people rallied to support friends and neighbours at risk of eviction.[36]

For several reasons – state repression, the reaction against riots in several cities in 1932 and the improvement of the economy – the UWM faded in numbers and influence. This was especially the case after the election of a Labour government in 1935, arguably because:

> the unemployed had faith in the Labour Government to improve their living conditions without their having to resort to protest organisation.[37]

Unemployed discontent during the Depression, including the direct action organised by the UWM, contributed not only to Labour's victory but also to the Labour government's progressive legislation regarding health, social welfare, rent regulation and investment into subsidising homeownership and building public housing. As a former Communist Party leader reflected:

> The efforts of the anti-eviction movement did contribute to the passing of legislation which gave a larger measure of protection to unfortunate people.[38]

In Labour's 14 years of government 32,000 state homes were built. The proportion of homeowners increased from 50.2 per cent in 1936 to 61.2 per cent in 1951, due to generous loan provisions.[39]

Organising for renters, 1950s to the 1970s

The post-war period is often considered a period of prosperity for New Zealand.[40] It also saw a change in the urban population. From the late 1950s Pacific Island people began to emigrate to New Zealand, drawn by work opportunities in the manufacturing sector. The post-war years also saw the urbanisation of many Māori men, drawn by employment prospects in the cities; from the 1960s Māori families were also encouraged by government policies to move to the cities. As a result the Māori urban population increased from 26 per cent in 1945 to 80 per cent in 1986.[41]

Pacific people and Māori in the cities tended to be housed in rented accommodation. Issues remained in this sector, however, with continuing problems of insecure housing, high rents and, for Pacific and Māori people, discrimination. There were long waiting lists for public housing; private sector rents were twice as high as those in public housing and too high for the poorest to pay.[42] Poor housing conditions were common. In 1953, for example, an investigation by the School Medical Officer at the Department of Health of 'unwashed' children who attended school in Freemans Bay, Auckland, showed that the 73 families lived in 68 houses, most of them rented; half of the properties had leaky roofs, half had no bath and one-quarter had no kitchen sink.[43]

Despite the problems in the rental sector, no renters' organisations formed. Instead, welfare organisations and unions advocated on several issues, including those relevant to renters. For example, the Māori Women's Welfare League, funded by the Department of Māori Affairs, was a strong advocate for improving Māori housing conditions, tackling rental housing discrimination and lobbying for Māori to gain access to public housing.[44] The Freemans Bay Residents Welfare Association was founded in 1952 in response to the council designating the area a slum. It aimed to improve housing conditions and to keep the community intact, organised around class rather than tenure. The Association drew on eviction resistance tactics learned during the Depression, refusing to allow the eviction to be carried out until alternative accommodation was found. In 1974 the Association achieved its goal of removing the slum clearance order. However, the community dispersed. Freemans Bay began to gentrify and working-class tenants moved away. Many Māori and Pacific people moved to new public housing suburbs.[45]

From the late 1960s on, radical groups centred on the newly expanded universities were founded. These activists did not identify with

existing progressive options; instead they saw the potential for radical change not in the working class but in 'third world peasants, students, ethnic minorities and other groups marginalised by "the system"'.[46] One such group was tenants. For example, the Wellington Progressive Youth Movement told people to join them:

> if you are tired of: low wages and high profits, high rents and high prices, apprenticeships, unequal pay for women, low social security benefits, hypocritical politicians, the NZ education.[47]

Meanwhile, in Auckland, the Ponsonby People's Union, alongside other community activities, encouraged and supported rent strikes and eviction resistance.[48] The Polynesian Panthers, led by Pacific people and also centred in Ponsonby, carried out a range of community activities. These included setting up the Tenants' Aid Brigade to confront exploitative landlords, support tenants in resisting eviction, educate people about their rights and help people find homes.[49]

Independent tenants' organisations were founded nationwide.[50] One member of the Wellington Tenants' Protection Association (WTPA), which later became the Wellington Tenants' Union, recalled its founders as:

> basically a group of university radicals who were confronted with the glaring excesses of tenant housing in places like Newtown [in Wellington].[51]

The founders of the Auckland Tenants' Protection Association included Betty Wark, a Māori woman politicised by slum clearance in Freemans Bay, and Paul O'Halloran (formerly of the WTPA), whom Wark describes as 'an angry, political young man [who] got a lot of things moving'.[52] National conferences of tenants' groups in 1976 and 1979 included tenants' unions or associations from Auckland, Porirua, Hamilton, Christchurch, Wellington, Manawatu, Dunedin and Rotorua; despite several attempts, however, they did not form a national organisation.[53] As is clear women, as well as Māori and Pacific people, played important roles in the tenants' movement in some places. As a result of a long-lasting rent strike in Wellington, one activist reflected that:

> a bond has been established which had cut across class and race differences. The [W]TPA is no longer a small group of privileged middle-class Pakehas [New Zealand Europeans].[54]

Tenants' organisations engaged in political advocacy and support for renters; for some, direct action was a means of sending a political message and of helping individuals. They spoke to the media, describing poor housing conditions and harsh treatment of tenants. They also published newspapers themselves, summarising recent protest success stories, advocating for change, informing tenants of their rights and encouraging other tenants to join them. The organisations met with ministers, wrote to the City Council to request the inspection of houses and asked the Labour Department to investigate breaches in tenancy law. They also pointed out the difficulty tenants had in enforcing their rights to quality housing and fair rent when they were at risk of eviction. They also assisted tenants in preventing evictions, negotiating with landlords to improve conditions or taking landlords to court. Tenants' groups saw this work as a way of supporting renters and a possible means of recruiting new members. However, they also noted that assisting tenants with legal remedies was exhausting and took up much of activists' time.[55]

Direct action was a way both of finding a resolution to a group of tenants' problems and of making a political point. Tenants' organisations picketed landlords' or land agents' workplaces, detailing illegal behaviour on banners and leaflets to shame them into acceding to demands. Sometimes tenants' protest groups threatened to blacklist certain properties, or the properties of landlords who had treated their tenants badly. Through their publications and flyers, such groups tried to warn prospective tenants against certain landlords or property agents. There is no evidence that blacklisting and picketing were effective in putting tenants off certain properties, but they may well have served an effective purpose by publicly disgracing particular landlords.[56]

Tenants' organisations encouraged people to withhold rent until necessary repairs were undertaken, or to use those funds to make repairs themselves. However, withholding rent was, and remains, illegal in New Zealand. One Freemans Bay household refused to pay rent when their washing machine broke down. However, members of tenants' organisations were aware that striking was not possible for everyone:

> There are risks in this sort of action, so it is important that the tenant is angry and strong enough to carry this right through.[57]

The longest rent strike occurred in Lower Hutt in 1972. Soon after the WTPA formed and opened a telephone service, it received complaints from tenants in Lower Hutt who lived in houses owned by the same

landlord. The WTPA brought the tenants together in a meeting where 42 households decided to withhold half of their rents to persuade the landlord to negotiate for housing improvements, fair rents, bond receipts, tenancy agreements and a guarantee that rents would be collected at a reasonable time of day. Demonstrations and public meetings were held and there were several confrontations between the bailiffs and the WTPA. Members picketed houses owned by the landlord that were advertised as available for rent in the hope of putting off prospective tenants and inviting new tenants to join the strike. However, one by one households moved out or began to pay the full rent. Many of the flats were re-let at lower rents or redecorated after tenants moved out; following meetings involving the WTPA, rents were lowered in one block by an average of 20 per cent. In mid-1973, 65 weeks after the rent strike began, the landlord made significant concessions to the one household that remained on rent strike.[58]

There were several cases where tenants' organisations encouraged tenants to resist eviction. As one tenants' newspaper put it:

> the only way this rotten law [allowing no-cause eviction] will be changed is for tenants to unite and refuse to leave when unjust attempts are made to evict them.[59]

In one case in Auckland, a group reported that eviction resistance enabled the tenants to stay for another six months.[60] In another case, the WTPA supported tenants who had been given notice so that the landlord could renovate. The tenants agreed to resist eviction and advocate for compensation and alternative accommodation. However, as the eviction date grew nearer, many tenants simply moved out:

> some because they couldn't stand the strain of waiting, others because they felt their careers might be affected by their participation, but most because they found somewhere suitable they could afford, and took it.[61]

Finally, tenants' protest groups engaged in direct action by squatting in empty, government-owned houses. Through this action they aimed to draw attention to the housing shortage and to settle families who could not find houses or lived in poor-quality rental accommodation. Tenants' protest groups shared information on the best and most effective squatting methods. In one example of a squatting action Donald Glasgow, an 'unemployed invalid' living with his wife and four children,

contacted WTPA regarding their rental home's poor conditions and high rent. WTPA moved them into a vacant Ministry of Works house that they cleaned up; they were later placed in a state house.[62] One student journalist, contrasting activists with politicians and academics, concluded that:

> The squatters … have been the only people to produce an immediate solution to the housing shortage all year.[63]

From the late 1970s onwards tenants' organisations faded from the political scene. Volunteers were exhausted by the support they gave to tenants, unable to form lasting alliances with unions and disappointed by the small numbers that joined their organisations. In one example, a member noted that the Wellington Tenants' Union was founded as a political organisation with 'aims of ultimately removing the landlord system and replacing it with a state-owned system of accommodation', but over time this had changed; by 1978, its 'practical role [had] in fact predominantly been that of consumer protection'.[64] Organisations ended, or transformed from member-run activist organisations, with strong political messages, into social service organisations with employees paid from government grants.[65]

Tenants' organisations not only improved the situation of the many tenants they supported through casework or direct action, but also contributed to the passing of the Fair Rents Act 1972 and the Residential Tenancies Act 1986. Both these acts strengthened tenants' rights and provided a means of adjudicating disputes, the latter establishing a Tenancy Tribunal that remains today. These contributions were both direct, such as providing input into the legislation, and indirect, as protests and advocacy on behalf of tenants drew attention to the problems in the rental sector.[66] As Tigalau Ness, a member of the Polynesian Panthers, recalled:

> What we first started as a group of 16- to 18-year-olds [the Tenants' Aid Brigade] led to the formation of the Tenancy Tribunal.[67]

Public housing tenant activism in the 1980s and 1990s

From the late 1970s on New Zealanders were challenged by high prices due to the oil crisis and rapid inflation. Changes to the New

Zealand economy and legislation in the 1980s and 1990s led to an increase in unemployment, a reduction in the security of employment, a decline in wages and benefits and a weakening of the bargaining power of unions.[68] Problems of poor housing conditions, high rents and difficulty in enforcing tenants' rights remained widespread.[69] However, people united around being unemployed, rather than being renters.[70] This altered somewhat in the late 1980s in response to changes in how the government treated public housing. In 1987 the Labour government changed the rent-setting policy such that tenants who could afford to do so paid market rents.[71]

In Porirua public housing tenants went on rent strike in response to the introduction of the new rents; they subsequently had to pay back the arrears. A more radical rent-setting policy and a more dramatic response from tenants came in 1991 under the new National government. The public housing provider was legislated to become a business – Housing New Zealand – that was to turn a profit. Under this scheme public housing would be sold to tenants and others, while state tenant rents would increase to market level over a period of several years; rents had previously been limited to 25 per cent of the tenants' income.[72]

Rents increased rapidly and, even with a new housing benefit, more than one-third of public housing tenants were soon paying more than half of their incomes in rent. High rents forced people into substandard, overcrowded, temporary and/or unaffordable dwellings. Public housing tenants, who had previously held relatively secure tenancies, began to move more frequently in search of affordable housing; by 1999 one-quarter had lived in state housing for less than a year. Non-governmental organisations and opposition parties strongly advocated against the reforms through lobbying, research and demonstrations. They also supported two legal challenges by public housing tenants against the government. One resulted in compensation for some tenants, while the other led to a judge noting the conflicting nature of Housing New Zealand's commercial and social objectives.[73]

In addition, public housing tenants and their supporters participated in protests and direct action against the reforms. This was encouraged by a new organisation, the State Housing Action Coalition (SHAC), founded in early 1992 by Communist Party activists. They distributed pamphlets that detailed the reforms to public housing communities and organised meetings for public housing tenants and supportive groups.[74] Membership included about 150 public housing tenants in Auckland; the social composition of the group is unclear from the archives.[75] SHAC aimed to prevent the sale of state houses, to oppose market rents in

state houses and to increase the supply of state houses. They planned to achieve this through rent strikes and eviction resistance. For example, in 1992 SHAC helped to organise a picket for a family threatened with eviction for rent arrears.[76]

SHAC called for public housing tenants to cut their rental payments to 25 per cent of their incomes from September 1993 (before the new market rent policy, as noted above, public housing rents had been limited to 25 per cent of tenants' income). It is unclear how many people participated in the partial rent strike.[77] SHAC activists gave numbers of between 50 and several hundred, while Housing New Zealand said that 14 people had begun the rent strike in 1993, of whom nine had remained on strike over subsequent years. The discrepancies in numbers might result from different interpretations of what constitutes a 'rent strike'. Some people may have paid partial rent as a political action, while others fell behind on their new rents.[78] One SHAC member noted that tenants did not always publicise the fact that they were on strike:

> a lot of people informed us that they were on it, a lot of people just went on it anyway, on the basis there was this movement there that they could fall back on if they got into trouble.[79]

Regardless of whether a tenant chose not to pay rent as a political action or simply could not afford to do so, SHAC believed that publicising the non-payment of rent was an important action to be taken against the policy reforms:

> If the tenant's rent was unaffordable, the eviction was inevitable anyway, and the rent strike would assist in publicising resistance to the new regime.[80]

SHAC organised pickets to support tenants as they were evicted for non-payment of rent. According to the Communist Party newspaper, these had some success in helping tenants negotiate ways to stay in the home. The Asi eviction and resistance is the best-chronicled direct action of the era. The Asi family were not SHAC members and had not paid any rent in some time. SHAC members locked themselves into the house with the family. Police in riot gear broke down the door and occupied the house. SHAC members and the family camped on the lawn, which helped to draw media attention. In response, government ministers intervened and reinstated the family the next day.[81] As a result of the

outcry, Housing New Zealand was directed to avoid 'evictions that might draw political attention'.[82]

SHAC opposed the sale of public housing, drawing attention to the issue by disrupting state house auctions. On one occasion, on 13 July 1994, between 80 and 100 people picketed the St Helier's Bay Yacht Club, where an auction to sell four state homes was being held. Protestors chanted 'Shame!' and 'Hands off our homes!' and made false bids. The auction was called off. Protestors occupied one of the houses for a day and a night. Police evicted the occupiers at midnight and the properties were later sold by tender.[83]

By 1997 the number of striking tenants had fallen to about 20 as tenants died, shifted houses or negotiated with Housing New Zealand. The rent strike culminated in May 1999 when Len Parker, a SHAC activist and partial rent striker, received an eviction notice. Along with two other SHAC activists, he barricaded himself into his Auckland home for two weeks, conducting interviews through bars in a window, with up to 100 supporters gathered outside. Eventually the barricades were broken down and Parker was evicted. Charges against the occupiers were eventually dropped. The eviction resistance received significant media attention, which SHAC saw as key to getting public housing in the news and crucial to the upcoming election.[84]

Throughout its time in opposition, the Labour Party reiterated promises that if it returned to government, it would bring back income-related rents and end the sale of public housing. Soon after Labour entered government in 1999, it did this. SHAC activists viewed their actions as having slowed down the selling of houses;[85] about 500 houses had been sold each year from 1995 to 1999.[86] The SHAC also saw its work as slowing the introduction of market rents and encouraging Labour to prioritise the reintroduction of income-related rents. After the election SHAC ceased to operate, according to some members, because its demands had been met.[87]

Public housing tenant protest against neighbourhood redevelopment, 2010s

Public housing activism returned to centre-stage in 2011, in response to the redevelopment of public housing neighbourhoods under the National government (2008–17). The government argued that redevelopment was necessary to improve the quality of the housing, to increase the housing stock and to improve the socio-economic mix of the area.[88]

In Pomare, Wellington, Housing New Zealand moved tenants out of the community and began a process of demolishing 89 houses to clear the land for redevelopment into a mixed-tenure community. People met at the demolition site to protest and later camped out for three weeks; they surrounded the camp with crosses and headstones proclaiming the names of families and the length of time they had lived in the community. In Glen Innes, Auckland, 156 houses were removed or demolished. In Pomare, there were more houses in the subsequent development but fewer public housing units.[89]

Public housing tenants and their supporters protested against the development by gathering when houses were removed – sometimes peacefully and sometimes blocking house removal with cars or their bodies. While most tenants moved when asked, others resisted eviction for several years; in particular, protestors gathered at the home of Niki Rauti to support her and erect a fence to ward off the bailiff.[90] In Maraenui, Hawkes Bay, another public housing tenants' group formed in response to the number of vacant homes in their community, which made the community unsafe and which they argued (correctly, as it turned out) pre-empted redevelopment.[91] Spokespeople and many members of the groups were Māori women.[92]

The public housing activists of Pomare, Maraenui and Glen Innes celebrated the strength of their communities. They noted how they and their families had contributed to the building of these communities, and in some case to the building of their country through participation in the Second World War. They pointed out the negative impacts that their displacement and dispersal would have and drew attention to the fact that redevelopment particularly affected Māori. Alienated from their ancestral land, they had moved to the city only to be displaced again, this time by gentrification, from inner-city locations such as Freemans Bay. After several generations in the same public housing community, they had become closely connected to the land and its people.[93]

In each of these communities tenant activists protested and met politicians and media to demand not only a better redevelopment process, but also reform of new public housing policies. These policies included promoting stock transfer to community housing providers, stricter criteria for entering public housing and reviewable tenancies, which meant public housing tenants would be encouraged to move out if their circumstances improved. The three tenant groups gathered for a march to Parliament in Wellington in 2012. They presented a petition which demanded, among other things, a halt to the redevelopment schemes, withdrawal of eviction notices, a return to previous criteria for

entering public housing, the letting of vacant state houses to families, the reopening of Housing New Zealand offices and a public housebuilding programme.

In response, a select committee acknowledged the significant disruption. It found that consultation had been inadequate, but was confident that better consultation would be carried out in the future. Opposition parties added that:

> Tenants in redevelopment projects should be guaranteed a right of return to their communities, and the numbers of state and social housing units should not be reduced by those projects.[94]

The redevelopments continued; in some cases, activists participated in steering groups.[95] Protests declined in activity in the years following the redevelopments, with some activists joining efforts to improve and increase public housing stock through new organisations such as the State Housing Action Network and Public Housing Futures.[96]

During the period of the Labour government (2017–23), some of the demands of the tenants' groups were met. Stock transfer to community organisations ended, although community providers continued to grow, and the government did invest heavily in building new public housing (through a new entity that replaced Housing New Zealand, Kāinga Ora). The government also introduced a 'sustaining tenancies' initiative to reduce eviction for rent arrears or antisocial behaviour. Redevelopments of public housing communities continued at a much larger scale; however, they provided the same or greater amounts of public housing (alongside private housing) and included a right of return for affected tenants.[97] Despite similarities to the redevelopments of Pomare and Glen Innes, these redevelopments did not prompt similar action from tenants. One exception is Housing Action Porirua, a group of residents opposed to redevelopment there. This group has stood as a candidate for the city council, advocated the government and spoken to the media about problems in the redevelopment process.[98]

Since the National government came to power in 2023, several development projects have been halted and the sustaining tenancies policy has been terminated.[99] Activists now fear privatisation of, and underinvestment in, public housing. They are campaigning to increase the proportion of public housing to 20 per cent of the total housing stock, in order to accommodate the 'true waitlist' of people in housing need.[100]

Organising for private renters, 2015–23

Renters United was founded in Wellington in 2015 by a small group of private renters. The founding president, Robert Whitaker, noted the reason why:

> In the ongoing debate about housing, renters are conspicuous by their absence. Politicians and the media, comfortable in their first, second and third homes, tend to look on renting as a temporary circumstance. They view renting through rose-tinted glasses: three character-building years in a freezing, beer-soaked flat before getting on the property ladder. As such, all the problems of – and solutions to – the 'housing crisis' are about home ownership. Well, I think that we all know that is not the whole picture. It's time that renters got together and said so. This is what we want Renters United to be: a democratic union of renters campaigning to make renting better for all renters.[101]

Since its founding, Renters United has campaigned for fair rent, housing stability, safe and healthy homes and meaningful law enforcement. Throughout its existence, it has surveyed renters on their experiences, lobbied local body candidates and central government on improvements to regulation and legislation, provided voters with information on which election candidates would make renting better, provided a voice to the media on housing issues and organised events to draw attention to renters' concerns.[102] Activists report that they were motivated to join Renters United because of their personal experience of poor housing, the power imbalance between tenants and landlords, the lack of action by the government and the exclusion of renters from the political conversation on housing.[103]

Many of the initiatives Renters United has pushed for have come to pass. The Labour government (2017–23) passed the Healthy Homes Guarantee Act, which provides for regulation to ensure minimal standards of heating, insulation and draught prevention. It amended the Residential Tenancies Act to ban no-cause tenancy terminations, ban letting fees, limit rent increases to one per year and enable tenants to make minor changes, such as installing accessibility aids and devices intending to prevent furniture from falling over in earthquakes. That government also instigated a review of the residential property management system, gave tenant advocates a small amount of funding and enabled tenants (and landlords) to request their names be removed

from public Tenancy Tribunal records, so that potential landlords cannot use this as a resource to screen against 'activist' tenants. Versions of these initiatives were proposed in the Renters United 2018 document 'The Plan to Fix Renting'.[104] At the local level, Wellington City Council credited Renters United's championing of meaningful enforcement in announcing the piloting of a rental inspection service.[105] In addition, as part of the coalition *A City for People*, Renters United campaigned for the Wellington spatial plan. The plan passed, considerably increasing the capacity of the city to supply housing.[106]

Renters United's current campaigns seek to abolish a provision that allows landlords to vote in multiple local body elections, improve the proposed regulations on property managers and encourage local councils to use existing powers to investigate breaches to bylaws on housing quality.[107] A second branch, in Auckland, was established in 2020. Renters United has avoided some of the problems of its predecessors of the 1970s: rather than taking on the load of tenant casework themselves, it refers people to social service organisations. Yet even so, some key activists report feeling drained by the extent of their campaign work; some paid organiser roles were introduced in 2021.[108]

Aside from Renters United's campaign achievements – which have also coincided with a surge of advocacy by academics, political parties and non-governmental organisations for renters' rights[109] – its enduring impact may well be to change the conversation and broaden the idea of what is possible for housing in New Zealand. As the then-President (and now Wellington City Councillor) Geordie Rogers reflected:

> Over the past two years … we've seen a significant change in how [then Housing Minister Poto Williams] talks about renting. It used to be that she would say, this government's ambition is for every New Zealander to own their own home, but she doesn't even say that any more.[110]

Evidence for this change in the conversation can be seen in the progress on rent controls. This is a policy solution far removed from the usual proposals for housing solutions in New Zealand – yet, since Renters United started to campaign for rent control,[111] the Green Party said it would introduce these. The then government's housing minister said she was seeking advice on these. However, she subsequently retracted her comments.[112] In a society where homeownership and the interests of homeowners have dominated the political agenda for over a century, this is progress indeed.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of over a century of tenant activism in New Zealand. As we have seen, protest groups supported many tenants in improving their housing conditions, delaying or preventing their eviction and reducing their rents. However, this important work contributed to the decline of tenants' protest groups, as activists became overwhelmed by casework and struggled for funding. Legislation and policy initiatives that sought to improve the circumstances of tenants have often happened after a period of tenant activism. These include rent restrictions from 1916 to the early 1920s, the Fair Rents Act and the initiation of large-scale building of public housing in 1936, the Fair Rents Act 1972, the Residential Tenancies Act 1986, the return of income-related rents to public housing tenants in 1999, some improvements in how public housing tenants affected by redevelopment were treated in the 2010s and recent amendments to the Residential Tenancies Act. However, over the century there has often been insufficient public housing to meet the demand. Regulations intended to improve conditions in the private-rental sector have had limited impact because they have relied on tenants to report problems, even when doing so is risky for many tenants.[113]

New Zealand's history of tenant protest is discontinuous. Its rise has coincided with the motivation of committed activists to organise around poor housing conditions (1916–22, 1930s, 1970s, 2015) and with a 'suddenly imposed grievance'[114] (the instigation of market rents in the 1990s, redevelopment in the 2010s). Its decline has coincided with elections that promise to change renters' circumstances (in 1935 and 1999) and with activists' loss of energy and lack of funds (1916–22, 1970s) or their moving on to other roles (2010s). Protest groups have not been attached to any particular party, However, depending on the era, tenants have been organised by people involved in the Labour and Communist movements, or have worked closely with politicians in an attempt to make change.

New Zealand protest has tended to be smaller-scale and shorter-term than many protests in other countries, including those outlined in this chapter's introduction and in other chapters of this book. Part of this is explained by New Zealand's relatively small population: 1.1 million people at the time of the first tenant protest in 1916 and 5.1 million in 2022. With a smaller population but as many potential issues to organise on, there are fewer activists available to focus on renting. As noted in another context (on the absence of a left-wing think-tank), there

is a 'lack of critical mass in a small country, with parallel limitations in human expertise and capacity'.[115] Another challenge may be New Zealand's urban form. Tenants' protests in other countries have often been initiated by tenants living in close quarters, sharing apartment buildings and landlords, with many opportunities to meet and, often, a common landlord target for direct action.[116] In contrast, 81 per cent of New Zealand's total housing[117] stock is standalone (detached) housing and most landlords (82 per cent) own only one or two rental units; just 1 per cent own more than 10 units.[118] Even public housing tenants, who occupy under 3.8 per cent of the nation's housing stock and who share a landlord, are dispersed. Only 5 per cent of the public housing stock is on multi-unit sites[119] and few public housing tenants live in communities where they are the majority.[120]

Insecure occupancy presents a third challenge for tenant organising in New Zealand. 'No-cause' evictions were banned under the Labour government (2017–23), but this did not help tenants who must leave their home because their fixed-term tenancy came to an end, or whose landlords can claim that the house must be vacated for renovation to take place or for a family member to move in. 'No-cause' evictions were re-implemented under the National government (2023–present). These insecure tenancy conditions, often combined with low and insecure incomes, result in a reluctance to 'rock the boat' by reporting their landlords for breaches of the law; they are similarly likely to dissuade people from participating in collective action.[121] Finally, New Zealand is committed to subsidising and promoting homeownership, which works against tenant activism. As in the United States:

> the quest for home ownership is a factor limiting the organising potential of housing as an issue and dividing those with a stake in its resolution.[122]

Over the last century, renting in New Zealand, for many people, has meant living in insecure conditions, with high rent relative to income, in cold and mouldy housing. These poor conditions and the difficulty of improving mean that, to borrow the framework of Albert Hirschman,[123] some renters – and real or potential rental housing activists – 'exit' into homeownership rather than exercising the 'voice' that could improve the renting experience.[124]

Yet there are indications that conditions are changing, in ways that may encourage the development of tenant protest. The urban form is slowly changing, with zoning rules increasingly permissive of building

at greater density. More public and private housing, in which renters live in close quarters, sometimes with communal facilities, may encourage greater collective action. In addition, the ongoing high house prices, the development of companies committed to building rental units and the introduction of policies designed to encourage build-to-rent may contribute to a larger, more secure cohort of renters, many with common landlords. They can then work with other renters and organise together to improve renting.

Notes

1 The author would like to thank Professor Philippa Howden-Chapman and Geoff Fougere, the supervisors of the doctoral research on which this chapter is based.
2 Ferguson 1994; Hagar 2021; Schrader 2005; Sinclair 1980.
3 Jacobs 2001.
4 See Chapter 2 by Robbins and Chapter 3 by Potamianos in this volume.
5 Bradley 1997; Englander 1981; Melling 1983; Spencer 1986.
6 Dreier 1984; Fox and Scates 1988; Marcuse 1999; McIntyre 2008; Naison 1986; Piven and Cloward 1979; Wheatley 1980; Wheatley and Cottle 1999.
7 Glynn 2005; Marcuse 1999; Tenants' Union of Victoria n.d. See also in this volume Chapter 7 by Crompton, Chapter 10 by Novaro and Crosetti, Chapter 6 by Rolf, Chapter 8 by van der Steen and Chapter 9 by Vollmer.
8 Marcuse 1999, 69.
9 Mooney and Poole 2005.
10 Darcy and Rogers 2014; Glynn 2008; Goetz 2012; Lees 2013; Right to the City Alliance 2010.
11 Conlin 2021; Gray 2018; Kasakove 2019; Renters United 2020.
12 Wilde 2019, 64.
13 Chisholm 2016; see also other historical articles about historical tenant activism in New Zealand that are based on this doctoral work: Chisholm et al. 2016; Chisholm 2021; Chisholm 2022. Each of these primary sources can be subject to criticism. In the case of newspaper articles, the political views of the journalist or editor can shape what is considered newsworthy and the way in which a story is told (Howell and Prevenier 2001). The documents produced by protest groups are also subject to bias, as participants may have exaggerated their successes, or the conditions they worked against, in order to encourage new members to join or to turn the public mood against harmful housing, laws and landlords (Schwartz 1986). This study draws on both types of sources, subjecting them to equal scepticism, to support a more accurate account.
14 Walker 2004.
15 Sinclair 1980.
16 Statistics New Zealand 2024a.
17 Statistics New Zealand 2024b.
18 Ferguson 1994.
19 Goodyear, Bentley, White et al. 2021.
20 Bryson and Allen 2017.
21 Goodyear, Bentley, White et al. 2021.
22 Riggs, Keall, Howden-Chapman and Baker 2021.
23 Bell 2022.
24 Chisholm 2021, 32–3.
25 Ferguson 1994.
26 Chisholm 2016, 98.
27 *Evening Post*, 8 July 1920, 8.
28 Chisholm 2021, 34.

29 Chisholm 2021, 34.
30 Locke 2001, referring to Greenland 1984.
31 National Executive of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement 1934, 5.
32 Unemployed Workers Movement 1932.
33 Chisholm 2021, 39.
34 Chisholm 2021, 42.
35 Quoted in Bierre 2007, 126.
36 Chisholm 2021, 37–8.
37 Locke 2000, 136.
38 Scott 1950, 63.
39 Chisholm 2021.
40 Sinclair 1980.
41 Williams 2015.
42 Ferguson 1994.
43 Locke 2017.
44 Williams 2015.
45 Locke 2017.
46 Boraman 2002, 197.
47 Wellington Progressive Youth Movement n.d.
48 Carlyon and Morrow 2008.
49 Anae 2020.
50 Chisholm 2022, 3.
51 Wellington Tenants' Union n.d.
52 Connor 2006, 224.
53 Chisholm 2022, 9.
54 Russell 1974.
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13

Lockdown tenants: household resistance against rentier capital during the 2020 rent strike in Spain

Marta Ill-Raga and Jordi Bonshoms-Guzmán

Introduction

2020 will be remembered as the year when the Covid-19 pandemic triggered an unexpected socio-economic crisis worldwide. During this pandemic most governments decreed a state-enforced lockdown. This forced citizens to isolate themselves for extended periods via stay-at-home orders, restricted their travel movements and enforced business shutdowns. The stay-at-home policy became the most coherent strategy to contain the spread of the virus. However, homes turned into insecure places for tenants who had lost their incomes and struggled to pay rent. Housing was put to work by state priority as use-value, while its exchange-value was increasingly becoming a source of conflict. The Covid-19 outbreak prompted a crisis of care that exacerbated the contradiction between social reproduction and rentier capitalism.[1] In response to this contradiction, tenants' movements around the globe organised collective actions to defend the right to housing in the pandemic conjuncture, while simultaneously profiting from such political opportunity to impose their agenda on housing decommodification in national politics.

In Spain the tenants' movement organised a rent strike to politicise the wave of rent non-payments due to the pandemic-led income loss. This chapter analyses the organisation and tactics of the rent strike, arguing that it was a conscious collective effort by tenant organisers to politicise households against rentier capital. Tenant organising in Spain is one of the most prominent features of housing contention following the 2008 financial crisis which saw the rise of local tenants' unions (*Sindicatos de Inquilinas*).[2] The infrastructure of the existing tenants' movement allowed a quick organisational response when the Covid-19

pandemic emerged. Here we consider how the outbreak of the pandemic prompted a shift in the repertoire of housing contention, moving from a 'stay put' campaign against rent hikes towards a 'cancel rents' campaign; this in turn led to a rent strike organised through digital activism. The rent strike was aimed at politically activating tenant households and raising awareness of massive payment defaults, thereby normalising a hitherto unattainable radical demand: the lowering or total cancellation of rent payments. In this chapter we address the following question: what were the context, the causes and the consequences of this shift towards a rent strike?

As noted in this volume's introduction, the history of tenant resistance has often been sidelined in the study of working-class history. Class struggles in industrial and wage-labour relations have generally gathered more analytical and political attention than struggles at the point of reproduction, that is, at the home.[3] Examining a rent strike such as the one addressed in this chapter allows us to connect domesticity with class struggle, and to place the private sphere of social reproduction – home and home-making – as a crucial political object of study. To do so, we build on social reproduction theory (SRT), as it provides a framework to understand the emergence of housing struggles against rentier capital.

Mohandesi and Teitelman have defined 'social reproduction' as 'the totality of activities, waged or unwaged, required to create, maintain, and restore the commodity labour power'.[4] SRT challenges the conventional belief that capital releases all control over workers when they leave the workplace, contending instead that exploitation and oppression persist in the reproductive sphere.[5] The household and its material infrastructure – the home – have played pivotal roles in the reproduction of labour and 'capitalist relations as a whole'.[6] They have not only provided the foundation for reproducing labour power in material, relational and emotional terms, but have also compelled households, through rent or mortgage payments, to become intertwined with rent extraction and accumulation circuits.

In the new cycle of housing financialisation inaugurated by the 2008 financial crisis and deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic, households have become the quintessential site of exploitation – yet they also provide a strategic space for organising contention against rentier capital. As noted in Poy and Rolf's introduction to this volume, the rise of housing speculation in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis has led to a new wave of tenant organising. This chapter illustrates one tenants' campaign as a response to the housing and care crisis within this cycle of tenant mobilisation, exploring how it transforms the contradiction

between rent and social reproduction into a critical issue for political mobilisation.

In the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak, scholars have increasingly considered the link between social reproduction and housing.[7] Yet the convergence between the crises of care and social reproduction, and the critical role of residential space – not only for basic safety and health, but also for contentious politics – remains under-explored. This chapter empirically contributes to the development of this perspective by analysing transgressive collective action *at point zero*, to borrow Silvia Federici's term.[8]

This research draws on qualitative data obtained through ethnographic fieldwork in Barcelona carried out between March and July 2020. The authors have been both academics and tenant organisers in the *Sindicat de Llogateres de Barcelona* (Tenants' Union of Barcelona, TUB) since 2017, providing a privileged entry point to explore both the pandemic's impact on tenants and housing activism during the Covid-19 lockdown period. We draw on participant observation of online tenants' union meetings with activists and aggrieved tenants, as well as on our daily activist involvement in the union. During the period under examination in this chapter, however, fieldwork and note-taking were interwoven with active engagement in the organisation of tenant resistance amidst the lockdown.

At the onset of the Covid-19 lockdown, we were compelled partially to interrupt our fieldwork and data collection routines, shifting to a nearly full-time focus on activism during the first two weeks. This shift had a noticeable impact on the ethnographic fieldwork diary, which became less detailed during the initial weeks but later grew more consistent as we recorded memories of recent developments related to the rent strike. Furthermore, other forms of documentation, such as meeting minutes and internal materials (including guides on how to organise a strike committee, leaflets and documents prepared to call for specific actions, and collective data gathered to monitor the progress of the strike), were instrumental in completing the ethnographic account of the fieldwork period, particularly as the rent strike unfolded and reached its peak.

We have had access to over 3,000 emails sent by tenants between 13 and 30 March 2020 to the rent strike mail inbox. Of these, we have analysed a sample of 100 emails to understand how rent payments affected tenant households during Covid-19. In the emails analysed in our random sample, tenants expressed their need for help and their anxiety about being unable to pay the rent; some also give details about

their situation, such as employment status, household composition, relationship with the landlord and more. The quotes from fieldwork notes and the emails cited in this chapter have been translated from Catalan and Spanish by the authors. We also draw upon newspaper articles to strengthen the information collected during fieldwork.[9] The online organisation that emerged in response to the Covid-19 lockdown allowed us to reach tenant households beyond Barcelona, hitherto our main geographical location of activism, and contributed to developing a tenants' movement across the country.

This chapter proceeds as follows. The next section provides a historical overview to explain the formation of the rent-divide in Spain's post-homeownership society following the 2008 financial crisis, the subsequent rise of tenant unions and the 'stay put' campaign. The third section considers tenant organising through online activism in response to the Covid-19 lockdown, which led to the 'cancel rent' campaign. The fourth section empirically analyses two related dynamics of tenant household suffering. The fifth section examines the organisation of the rent strike amid the Covid-19 lockdown, and is followed by a conclusion.

Spain's post-homeownership society and the rise of twenty-first-century tenant struggles

The historical formation of the rent divide in post-homeownership Spain

Tenant struggles in twenty-first-century Spain emerged against an unusual backdrop: a homeownership society in retreat. The recent expansion of the private-rental sector in Spain is a symptom of what has been called a 'post-homeownership' society, characterised by a growing wealth gap between those who own real estate properties and those who do not – namely the expanding so-called 'generation rent'.[10] To understand the context and political implications of the 2020 rent strike, it is essential to explain the origins and ongoing deterioration of the political, economic and social projects of a homeownership society.

In Spain, the pioneering project of a homeownership society (*sociedad de propietarios*) became the flagship policy of the technocratic phase of the Francoist regime (from the late 1950s). It was posited as both a political solution and a solution to housing provisioning. The key aspect of the policy was to introduce, via state subsidies, widespread

homeownership as the material basis to reshape society's working-class values into a defence of private property. As the Francoist housing minister famously stated:

> We don't want a Spain of proletarians, but a Spain of homeowners. […] Only then will we be able to say that we have come to reverse the course that was pushing us towards the communist abyss.[11]

The so-called 'Spanish model' has been analysed as a form of 'neoliberalism's prehistory'[12] or 'Thatcherism *avant la lettre*'.[13] It inaugurated a historical process which gradually transformed working-class households into asset holders, with residential real estate becoming the primary form of personal wealth. This trend was deepened after the transition into democracy, due to the integration of Spain's national market into global financial circuits. The country's economy relied on increasing real estate values.[14] Mortgage credit allowed the inclusion of working-class households, including the poorest, into homeownership.[15] Combined with skyrocketing real estate values, easy access to credit animated household consumption, generating the so-called 'wealth effects' – which were transformed into 'poverty effects' after the collapse of the mortgage system in 2008.[16]

The 2008 financial crisis marked a turning point in Spain's history of housing provision. A downward owner-occupation trend started for the first time since 1960 and the number of tenants increased. The bursting of the mortgage-backed financial bubble in 2008 set in motion two different but internally linked dynamics. On the one hand, it expelled the most vulnerable mortgage holders from homeownership through a wave of mortgage foreclosures and evictions, while credit restrictions refrained from incorporating new generations of homeowners. On the other hand, state policies restructured the housing/financial complex, igniting the private-rental sector as a field of speculation to prevent the devaluation of patrimonial values.[17]

In the post-crisis period, Spain's private-rental sector has grown at the expense of homeownership. Hundreds of thousands of mortgage lenders defaulted, and the underlying properties of the mortgage foreclosure were transferred to banks, which grouped properties into portfolios to sell them off to institutional investors.[18] Thousands of foreclosed properties changed their tenure status into private-rental units. On the other hand, it was harder for new households to obtain mortgage finance, given the heightened credit restrictions that emerged in the aftermath of the crash. If we add to the picture the historically low

figures of public housing in Spain, it is possible to see how the private-rental sector became the only alternative form of accommodation.[19]

In this context, the Spanish government implemented two crucial housing policies to lure yield-seeking capital into the distressed housing market.[20] First, the government introduced a well-known investment vehicle in 2009: the real estate investment trust (REIT, known in Spanish as SOCIMIs). However, REITs in Spain did not take off until an amendment was made in 2012 that reduced the corporation tax rate from 19 to 0 per cent. Second, just a year after this tax amendment, in 2013, the government modified the Urban Leases Act, shortening the duration of lease contracts from 5- to 3-year tenancy cycles, which allowed landlords to increase rents in shorter tenancy periods.[21] Inaugurating a new cycle of housing financialisaton,[22] this new housing policy package secured growing investment in the private-rental sector.

The new socio-economic scenario pointed towards a widening wealth accumulation gap between a growing and variegated class of landlords – ranging from private to corporate landlords – and an expanding generation of tenants. Private-rental housing is subject to a process of hyper-commodification, in which landlords implement diverse strategies to extract higher rent yields.[23] As a result, grievances and discontent have intensified, as high rent overburden rates and tenancy insecurity became the most prominent problems among tenant households.[24]

In short, Spain's 'post-homeownership' scenario is marked by a growing social polarisation, expressed along real estate property lines. While the reproduction of the homeownership model rested on crucial state intervention that enabled access to home purchase and to rise and maintain real estate values, the grounds for societal reproduction in the post-homeowning scenario, with the antagonism between a rising power of landlordism and an expanding tenant population, are disputed.

The rise of tenants' unions and the 'stay put' campaign

Newly created tenants' organisations became central to articulating the growing antagonism between tenants and landlords. While the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (Platform of People Affected by Mortgages, PAH) was established in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, as the conflict ceased being one of radical exclusion from homeownership and predatory indebtedness and became more oriented towards tenant exclusion and rising rents, tenants' organisations began to emerge. Tenants' unions in Spain were first created in

Barcelona and Madrid in 2017, and the model was later replicated in other major cities.

The formal launching of the TUB took place on 12 May 2017 at a public meeting in Barcelona.[25] It emerged from a series of informal meetings through which movement organisers and activists linked up with experts in different fields (researchers, lawyers, policy-makers, etc.). Different city-level organisations (including the PAH), activists and experts were involved in these meetings, sharing the perspective that an organisation of tenants was needed to contest soaring rental prices and staggeringly high eviction numbers in the private-rental sector. The public launch of the TUB attracted an unexpectedly large crowd, leaving many spectators standing outside. On that day it became clear that the housing crisis in the private-rental sector was a city-wide issue. Those affected ranged from youngsters and older people living alone to tenants in working-class and middle-class neighbourhoods.[26]

Since 2017 most tenant households attending the TUB's assemblies shared a widespread problem: their lease was about to expire and the landlord had given them the 'sign the lease or get out' ultimatum. This left tenants having to accept a rent increase in the next contract lease or to leave the property. The TUB labelled this situation a '*desnonament invisible*' (literally an 'invisible eviction'), referring to the situation of being forced to move houses in what appears as a 'voluntary move' – to avoid what in other countries is known as no-cause or no-ground eviction (United Kingdom) or no-fault eviction (United States). The TUB knew that the rate of eviction from rental non-payment continued to wreak havoc in the city, and it aimed to reveal the untracked number of forced displacements that did not undergo a judicial procedure. In other words, a massive number of tenant households were forced to move out because of unaffordable rent hikes – yet these did not appear in official records. In the absence of rent control, the city's housing shortage and the pressure on private accommodation gave landlords the upper hand; they were free to increase rents above average. With the threat of eviction hanging over their heads, many tenants either accepted rent increases to renew the tenancy lease or left the property to find a cheaper property.[27]

This situation prompted the emergence of the 'stay put' campaign (*Ens quedem*) in the city of Barcelona – a campaign that is hardly new in the history of tenants' movements.[28] The TUB aimed to frame the rental housing crisis in political terms, in contrast with hegemonic explanations which had hitherto presented it as a natural phenomenon produced by a mismatch between housing demand and supply, according to an orthodox economic understanding of housing markets. Instead, the TUB

uncovered the power relationship that underpinned the structure of the private-rental sector. The interpretive frame must be changed: tenants were not leaving their homes at will, but were being forcefully displaced due to landlords' rent hikes. In response to such massive numbers of invisible evictions, the TUB encouraged tenants to refuse landlords' rent increases and to stay put in their homes, continuing to pay the same amount of rent regardless of the expiration of the lease.

Launched in February 2018, the 'stay put' campaign built a grievance machinery under a collective bargaining agreement between the TUB and the landlords. The aim was to stop the upward spiral of rent increases that either displaced tenants or ate away a greater proportion of their income. The campaign involved a sustained challenge to landlords as it meant refusing to pay the rent increase while remaining outside the contract lease. Yet this challenge was carried out collectively, with collective casework in the weekly tenant assemblies.[29]

Tenant organisational response to the COVID-19 lockdown: the 'cancel rent' campaign

The 'stay put' campaign became the primary strategy to contest rent increases and 'invisible evictions' that characterised the post-2008 cycle of housing financialisation. The campaign was not only a form of political disobedience and mutual aid shield to protect the immediate material needs of tenants, but also a way to confront, discursively and ideologically, the idea that rents could endlessly rise. However, as the situation for tenant households abruptly worsened on Friday 13 March 2020, when the Spanish government enforced a nationwide lockdown, tenant organisers realised the need to change gears. They had to adapt their strategy of political disobedience to an unprecedented socio-economic and sanitary crisis.

As soon as the lockdown was enforced, the decline in business activity translated into pandemic-related workforce adjustments, mostly temporary or permanent workforce reductions, which threw vast swathes of the population into economic insecurity. If rent prices and rent overburden were already high before the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis, the almost complete halt of productive activity and drop in income could potentially lead to massive rental payment defaults.[30] There was thus an urgent need to articulate a co-ordinated response to the emergency. The fieldwork diary entry for 13 March 2020, written by one of the authors of this chapter, summarises the urgency as follows:

> Temporary and permanent lay-offs are increasing massively. We have requested the cancellation of rents, mortgage payments and evictions. It seems that non-urgent evictions have been suspended. We have started a campaign to co-ordinate rent arrears. I will oversee the email; I can keep track of tenants who write to the union and their problems. The political objective is to cancel rents, mortgages and utility payments.[31]

These diary notes were quickly jotted down to register the critical first events and steps undertaken during lockdown. Nothing was written in the following three weeks, during which research halted to organise a response to the crisis. Almost three weeks later the following diary entry, on 30 March 2020, summarised the previous weeks:

> I'm just starting to count the days I've been confined. It seems impossible that I've been here for 17 days already; time is going by so fast, completely opposite to what I had expected.
>
> I also remember the last union meeting before the lockdown, on 13 March. Large meetings had just been banned, and they had closed the space where we usually hold the tenant assemblies. We called off the assembly, but some of us – the TUB's most active militants – decided to wait in front of 66 Calabria Street (Barcelona) in case some people came for the first time. I arrived a few minutes late – I decided to walk instead of taking the metro – but apparently, as some comrades told me, a couple of people showed up. They sent them home. When we had got enough militants of the TUB, we started discussing what to do. It was clear that we had to get ready to act during the lockdown, to reach out and help tenants who would not pay the rent in April due to the drop in income. The temporary or permanent lay-offs (supported by the main trade unions) were already starting, not to mention self-employed workers, for example, people from the world of the performing arts, etc., who would see all their orders and performances suspended… A drop in income would manifest itself two months later in these cases. None of the militants present in the meeting that we improvised in Mistral Avenue could miss the fact that the state of emergency was just hastening a process that had been latent way before – that tenants, especially those made redundant, could not bear the pressure of high rental prices. There was already talk of the judicial suspension of evictions due to a halt on court activities. There would be no better context in

> which to stop paying. We were, and are, rushing into an economic crisis, which we could not let become a social crisis. For this reason, apart from giving shape to the campaign of 'cancel rents' (which would eventually become a rent strike), we promoted, with other social organisations, such as the alternative trade unions and social movements, the 'social shock plan'.[32]

While the lockdown forced families into atomisation and isolation, tenant organisers – already involved at the TUB or at other housing-rights associations and platforms – shifted the organisation's priorities and tactics to adapt union action to the new reality. On the same day state-wide online organising started. An emergency email account was created. This later evolved into a campaigning website called '*Suspensión de alquileres*' ('cancel rents'). The website included a form designed to reach out to tenants experiencing problems with rent payments; they would later be contacted via email and phone by a union member and invited to attend online counselling assemblies. The campaign's main goal was to reach as many aggrieved tenants as possible and help to reduce feelings of isolation and anxiety. In the first two weeks the campaign received 3,005 emails; as soon as the web form was available, 9,583 tenants filled it in before 1 April.

The geographical distribution of the people who joined and sought help from the campaign was also indicative of both the prior organisational density of each territory and the degree of tenant exploitation in these localities. As expected, by far the most prominent concentration of cases were found in the metropolitan areas of Barcelona (4,439) and Madrid (1,762), followed by the provinces of large and medium-sized cities on the Mediterranean coastline (Málaga, 303; Girona, 252; Valencia, 231; Alicante, 176; Tarragona, 175; Sevilla, 126; Granada, 112; Murcia, 94; Cádiz, 82), as well as the archipelagos of the Balearic Islands (569) and the Canary Islands (Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 107; Las Palmas, 118). Other provinces with a significant number of people who adhered to the campaign were on the Atlantic coast, the province of A Coruña in Galicia (98) and the provinces of Bizkaia (87) and Gipuzkoa (88) in the Basque Country, followed by the province of Zaragoza (79). The campaign's outreach was uneven but general in the Spanish territory, with cases recorded in all provinces. The mapping of the cases also reveals a strong presence of cases in the coastal provinces with large tourist industries.[33] As shown in the next section, the combination of seasonal, unstable jobs with tourist pressures on housing markets also proved crucial in triggering rent stress in these areas.

The 'cancel rent' campaign aimed to politicise tenants' rent stress and transform it into a civil disobedience mobilisation; this in turn would pressure the Spanish government to cancel rent and mortgage payments. Moreover, the campaign to cancel rents, which admittedly emerged autonomously, quickly became embedded into a broader campaign to promote a 'social shock plan'. This plan articulated other structural demands, including the urgent implementation of a universal basic income, the cancellation of all temporary and permanent lay-offs, the halt of all non-essential productive activities and the nationalisation of all essential services that had been externalised and privatised.[34]

Tenants' suffering amidst the lockdown

As the stay-at-home policy unfolded, tenant households became trapped in an economic crisis due to partial or complete income loss; this in turn translated into rental overburden or directly into rent arrears. Because the tenants' movement launched the 'cancel rent' campaign, several patterns of the suffering in tenant households could be perceived, given the number of emails, phone calls and meetings with aggrieved tenants. Two interconnected dynamics of tenant household suffering emerged during the first few weeks of the lockdown. First, labour instability and loss of income led to high rates of rent overburden. Second, a contradiction emerged between rent stress and the expected functions of housing as a central unit of care.

Labour and housing precarity

Informal and seasonal labourers (particularly in the leisure, hospitality, restaurant and tourism sectors) endured significant hardship due to the abrupt cessation of economic activity, resulting in unexpected income loss.[35] The curtailing of their prospects of forthcoming seasonal earnings amplified the burden of uncertain rent payments. A comparable predicament befell individuals engaged in informal occupations, such as migrant women predominantly in the informal external caretaking sector. They lacked regular employment contracts and found themselves suspended from their jobs and wages with no assurance of when they might be paid.[36] As the following data shows, the unanticipated suspension of their economic activities had profound consequences on their immediate material living conditions, leading to heightened rental distress and overnight housing insecurity.

The following email, written by a woman, encapsulates the numerous challenges experienced by tenants who not only grappled with a sudden reduction in income, but also faced a power imbalance when confronted by landlords' unyielding insistence on elevated rental charges. The landlords' failure to acknowledge the prevailing state of emergency evoked moral outrage in the writer; it also instilled fear for her family's wellbeing amid acute housing instability.

> Good afternoon,
>
> I am writing to explain my situation and see if you can help me. I live in a rented flat owned by a construction company. I have been living here for nine years […]. I have always paid on the 5th of each month, and that is why they have continued renting me their flat. Faced with this situation of a state of alarm, my husband has been temporarily laid off. I work part-time, taking care of a lady, and I am a non-professional carer for my son, given his intellectual disability. On 31 March my 3-year rental contract will expire, and in February the landlord told me to either hand over the keys or accept a rent increase of €110 to renew the rental contract. Back then, I accepted, but now, faced with this emergency situation, I wrote to them again to negotiate new terms.
>
> However, they are not making things easier: either I leave the flat or I sign the rent increase. They don't want to negotiate anything […]. I am outraged with this treatment. Now that times are hard, and we must show solidarity, I find myself in front of an inhuman reaction, even after knowing me for a long time and being aware of my family situation. Please, I need someone to guide me. What should I do? I want to comply, as I have always done, but I don't want to harm my family.
>
> Thank you very much.[37]

The global pandemic increased the precarity of those who live without reliable and adequate income or papers and those with limited or unstable access to the institutions and communities best able to provide social welfare. The following fragments of emails exemplify such labour precarity and work insecurity:

> I am unemployed (before Covid-19) and I have only a couple of months of benefits left. I think the economic crisis after that will make it harder for me to find a job. I would like to know what options I have to lessen the impact of the rent.[38]

> Those above us should think about the people who, like me, have worked without a contract for years and work on a day-to-day basis to put food on the table … We are human, too … Thank you very much.[39]
>
> I work for a temporary employment agency; since 20 February, I have stopped working entirely and have no savings left. I have no money left, 270 euros, and bills to pay. Moreover, I returned the electricity bill yesterday … I have no way to pay the rent [€600], […] I had never been late in paying my rent before. With the lockdown, being alone … makes me feel more suffocated, I don't know! I try to cope as best I can, but it is hard …[40]

Covid-19 posed an additional problem to the precariat, to borrow Standing's concept.[41] Those with precarious and insecure jobs could not prove that the pandemic was the cause of their current vulnerability and were thus excluded from any government relief measures. As a result, the emotional tonality frequently expressed by aggrieved tenants in emails was fear and desperation, reinforcing a feeling of hopelessness about improving their economic situation. Such pervasive uncertainty regarding a better future triggered a triad of concerns. First, the absence of prospects for securing a stable income or employment. Second, the looming anxiety of amassing debt stemming from overdue rent payments. Finally, the ever-present fear of housing loss or eviction due to the factors mentioned above.

Rent burden against care needs

Rent overburden under lockdown also contradicted the role of housing as a safe refuge from the virus. In the context of the Covid-19 outbreak, housing acquired a societal centrality as a fundamental care – and even as a health infrastructure. The stay-at-home policy enforced by governments around the globe put housing at the centre of the collective response to the virus. Housing was revealed as the basic unit of care, a refuge in which to protect oneself from the infection.[42] Nevertheless, the role of housing as an infrastructure of care contradicted the role of rent. The pressure of rent payment emerged as antagonistic to care, further burdening households in rent arrears. Residence was made unbearable for those who feared rent overburden or not being able to pay the rent – and who, above all, feared eviction.

Tenants' emails to the 'cancel rent' campaign contained narratives illustrating how financial pressures related to rent hindered their

ability to pursue reproductive strategies. This challenge was especially acute in households with complex compositions, in which tenants were responsible for taking care of older people, children or persons with disabilities. Furthermore, rent stress was frequently associated with the inability to cover basic needs such as paying electricity bills or even buying food:

> I need some guidance, please. I am desperate; we are a married couple with two young daughters. I was at home in charge of my daughters. My husband was fired yesterday, and I do not know how, amid this difficult situation, we will be able to pay for the electricity, water and rent. I ask you to please guide me and let me know if there will be a moratorium on rental payments while this situation lasts.[43]
>
> Hi, I am a divorced woman with a daughter […] On 15 March, I was supposed to start my seasonal job in the hotel sector, but, because of Covid, on 14 March my boss could not open her business! […] I still have unemployment benefits until May, but I only get €258.16 and pay €350 rent + water, electricity, telephone, food …[44]
>
> We are a family from Seville with an almost three-year-old little girl. Unfortunately, because of this situation, like many other people, my partner has been fired without the temporary lay-off subsidy, so the income we have left is minimal. From my side, I was already unemployed and I had no right to unemployment benefits, and what we have left is not even half of the rent we have to pay; we would need help from our relatives to eat. We require the government to help us with the rent. How can they expect us to pay €450 rent plus electricity for the pittance we have left?[45]

Several fundamental dynamics can be highlighted. First, a symbiotic relationship exists between a precarious position on the labour market and residential insecurity, often manifested as rent arrears that evolve into debt and, consequently, the looming threat of eviction. Second, this precariousness materialises as an intensification of challenges for households responsible for caring for vulnerable persons. Third, these contradictions are most acutely experienced by those at the periphery of the productive hierarchy – that is, those who suffer from the racial and patriarchal division of labour under capitalist production. This predominantly affects women and migrants, who bear the brunt of these effects.

At this stage, it is crucial to foreground the ambivalent role of the household. While it is undeniable that households are the basic unit for reproducing and reinforcing capitalist relations of exploitation and oppression, they also harbour the potential of emancipation. Households have traditionally served as hubs for mutual aid, income sharing and the 'accumulation of vital reserves',[46] laying the foundation for resistance against capitalist domination. In other words, household care relationships are shaped by capitalist (re)production, but they need not be confined to it. As Marxist feminism has shown, the ethical and mutual aid components of care possess the potential to resist commodification.[47]

This duality in the role of households is also manifest in its connection to rent. Rent pressures push households into wage and debt relationships, depleting their capacity for care and resources. Simultaneously, these pressures spur households into action as organising hubs in class struggles, as historically observed in tenants' movements.[48] This dynamic has given a particularly salient political role to women as leaders in tenant struggles and rent strikes throughout history. The issue has been evidenced elsewhere in this volume by historical examples provided in Chapter 10 by Novaro and Crosetti (1960s in New York and 1970s in Rome), Chapter 3 by Potamianos (early twentieth-century Greece) and Chapter 4 by Poy and Belkin (1907 in Buenos Aires).

The resistance potential of households became even more apparent with the thousands of messages and calls for assistance to the 'cancel rent' campaign. Although the pandemic unveiled existing dynamics of exploitation and precarity, the crisis prompted tenants to assert their rights, demanding changes from landlords and state authorities.

The widespread frustration with unco-operative landlords, who refused to negotiate lease terms to alleviate rent burdens, was coupled with a call for governmental action. This mix of desperation and anger led to organised efforts to articulate these grievances as a political claim through a classic tactic of contention within the tenants' movement: the rent strike.

Organising the rent strike

The 'cancel rent' campaign quickly developed into the organisation of a rent strike to politicise rent arrears stemming from the pandemic-led income loss. In 2020, when the state-wide lockdown took effect, the TUB had been organising tenants for three years. This afforded an

organisational experience to anticipate the economic impact looming over low-income tenants. The network of tenants' unions and associations that launched the 'cancel rent' campaign set in motion a collective decision-making process to frame the uncontrolled wave of rental non-payments under a shared political front, which ultimately became the rent strike.

Transforming individual non-payments into a rent strike was a genuinely political statement to eschew the capitalist ethos, which accords moral failing to an individual's ability to pay the rent to the landlord. In response to the social reproduction and care crisis deepened by the Covid-19 outbreak, the wager of the rent strike aimed at restoring class confidence while simultaneously reinserting a culture of mutual aid and consciousness-raising, which capital's attack on social reproduction has erased.[49]

Opportunities and challenges of an emergency online strike

Organising the rent strike marked a turning point in the repertoire of collective action of the tenants' movement in Spain. As explained, tenant activism in Barcelona and Madrid emerged with the 'stay put' campaign against rent increases and forced displacements. The 'moral economy' of tenant resistance rested on the belief that disproportionate rent hikes – unrelated to the overall growth in general consumer prices or any investments in housing improvements – were unfair. Originally forged by the historian E. P. Thompson to analyse the beliefs and attitudes of eighteenth-century English peasants during the revolts against the rising food costs in England's transition to a full market economy,[50] the concept of moral economy remains relevant today. As Chapter 3 by Potamianos and Chapter 11 by Oliveira and Urvoy in this volume argue, moral economy should be understood as the popular expression of the rejection of market laws and its unfair outcomes in times of rising costs of living. Rather than a fixed historical category, moral economy can be defined as the 'fields constituted by dynamic combinations of norms, meanings and practices' through which 'structural inequalities generated by particular forms of capital accumulation' are always metabolised.[51]

Landlords were thus framed as 'vultures' or greedy rentiers who wanted to extract unjust incremental rents from tenants. The campaign was consequently based on tenants refusing rent hikes, but maintaining current rent payments to landlords to ground their lawful behaviour morally and showcase their willingness to pay a fair rent. A tenant activist from the TUB neatly explains this shift:

> We started thinking of the rent strike when the Tenant Union of Barcelona was born, and the spokespersons had already mentioned the strike to strengthen collective action. But we never put it in motion, or maybe we did because refusing a rent increase may also be considered striking, but we didn't consider it as such – just as political disobedience to disobey the new terms while obeying the old rent. Morally speaking, to mass media and public opinion, we wanted to emphasise that tenants keep paying rent as the moral scaffolding that sustains the rest of our political disobedience: refusing a forced displacement due to a rent hike. This radically changes with the Covid-19 lockdown.[52]

As was the case when the mortgage and socio-economic crisis erupted in 2008, the unexpected pandemic forced a new moral economy in which the rentier system as such was questioned beyond the speculative strategies of landlords.[53] Previously, only rent increases or landlords with aggressive rent-extractive practices were questioned, as had been the case before. However, this was no longer the situation. The grave and exceptional circumstances made tenants' organisers deepen the radicality of their demands and question the fact that rents had to be paid at all. Given the switch in what was morally acceptable, as well as the fact that large swathes of tenants could not pay the rent, the rent strike became an obvious tactic of tenant contention.

The rent strike sought to transform moral outrage and fear of eviction into a political mobilisation of tenants. The aim was to turn individual feelings of loneliness and shame in isolation into a collective struggle. Printed banners of the rent strike campaign sent a clear message: 'Eat well, and if you don't have the money, don't pay rent.' While fear of losing their home draws people to prioritise rent payments over other basic needs,[54] rent strike organisers sought to provide legal coverage to strikers and to protect them from eviction. Collective mobilisation under the rent strike tactic made tenant homes safer for tenants on the one hand. In doing so, it facilitated the activation of tenant households, which emerged as political subjects to claim the cancellation of rents during the Covid-19 lockdown period, on the other.

To achieve these aims, the tenants' movement was organised in 88 local nodes and strike committees across the territory.[55] Each local committee provided legal advice about tenant casework, a toolkit of helpful information to use in negotiations with landlords and a manual with key steps for organising a committee. Local committees were linked through an online assembly, summoned periodically to discuss

strategic decisions. Beyond the local tenants' committees, the rent strike organised several working groups to deal with specific-purpose issues such as spokespersons, political communication, social media and website management and organisation.

To some extent, the first steps of the organisation of the rent strike were easy for three reasons. Firstly, the gravity of the pandemic was a tipping point to activate a critical mass of people who had an activist background and sympathised with the housing movement, although they had not been previously involved in it. Secondly, the obligation to stay at home and the halt or slowing down of productive activity made time for organising available, particularly for people with relatively few care responsibilities within the household. Lastly, online organising via video calls became the norm, allowing for a faster territorial spread of the campaign. Even international co-ordination of a 'global rent strike' was made possible.[56] Local tenant organisers had the chance to meet other tenant organisers virtually for the first time, creating a sense of a national and international community of struggle.

Challenges to maintain cohesion and organising momentum rapidly ensued. On the one hand, the rent strike campaign sought to overcome the former organisational structure of the housing movement, demanding that a diverse array of housing unions and platforms join forces to create autonomous strike committees separate from their housing organisations. Although some committees were formed autonomously, without pre-existing local tenant organisations, most were created by tenant and housing activists who had already participated in other housing organisations. Plenary meetings, therefore, also expressed tensions between different housing groups. There was opposition, for example, to the creation of ad-hoc committees beyond the pre-existing local assemblies. On the other hand, online activism had its limits. Having to resort to online actions – with very restricted options for physical actions and mobilisation, inspiring the agitation needed to maintain the rent strike – was compounded by difficulties in keeping track of the cases of striking tenants. These factors served to weaken the rent strike as months passed.

However, as challenging as online organising can be, online activism through social media has proven highly effective at drawing attention to a cause; it has now become a central space of contention for social movements. During the rent strike the tenants' movement scheduled several hashtag campaigns through social media (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram). Hashtag campaigns have become a social movement tactic and are part of a given repertoire of collective action.[57]

These campaigns were not only launched to reach out to tenants, but also to put pressure on state authorities and private landlordism. In particular, the tenants' movement launched a specific digital protest: a massive cyber attack aimed at flooding targeted the government's email inboxes, requesting the cancellation of rents. Cyber attacks were also directed against corporate landlords in order to claim rent reductions or rent cancellation. Simultaneously, the campaign launched an emergency crowdfunding to raise money for tenants on strike, which reached over €43,000 within a month.[58]

The rent strike was also an opportunity to build alliances between the productive sphere – labour organisations and specific economic sectors – and the reproductive sphere – household – as a space of struggle. While the rent strike aimed to withhold rent, it also sought to avoid indebtedness, namely the fact that households accumulated debt from rental non-payment. As such it was also a labour strike, as it refused to foreclose the income of future labour needed to keep up with rent arrears. As Wigger has instructively argued:

> Secondary exploitation is rooted in primary exploitation: interest-bearing debt, equally to consecutive rental payments, lays a claim to the appropriation of a portion of the production of future surplus value, and hence future labour.[59]

The rent strike tactic is a practical application of the theoretical perspective, which shows the interconnectedness between primary and secondary exploitation. This shows how rent, as an expression of exploitation in the sphere of reproduction, is internally connected with wages as a relation of exploitation at the point of production. The organisational response that directly addressed the link between wage labour and rent was the creation of specific employment-sector committees, such as the restaurant and bar workers' committees. Throughout the rent strike there were alliances between tenants' unions and trade unions such as the CGT (*Confederación General del Trabajo*, or 'General Confederation of Labour').[60] There was also a committee for retail rental establishments of small businesses unable to keep up with rental payments.

The politics of the rent strike

The political conjuncture of the country shaped how the organisation of the rent strike unfolded. The rent strike tactic has historically been adopted to challenge private landlords.[61] In Spain, the rent strike

organised during the pandemic was mainly directed against the state's disposition to protect landlords and rentier interests. Instead of being a strike against private landlordism or a building-based organisation against a specific landlord, the Spanish rent strike aimed to gain political leverage against state authorities. While the government acknowledged the hardships that tenants faced in meeting rents at the end of the month, they refused to cancel rents, as the tenants' movement demanded. However, there was a government response to the potential wave of massive non-payments among tenants. As a tenant activist explained:

> The rent strike started here: something must be done before the upcoming social emergency amid the Covid-19 lockdown and the wave of evictions for rent arrears. Waging quickly on the rent strike, thus opening a political context to force the Government to suspend rents, I think that was important as we [the TUB] achieved legal changes protecting tenants because of this collective struggle, even though we agree that those housing policies were insufficient and aimed at displacing the housing crisis rather than solving it.[62]

From January 2020 a left-wing coalition ruled the executive for the first time since the Civil War. It ruled under a pact uniting the centre-left Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE) and *Unidas Podemos*, the anti-establishment party with close ties to social movements that emerged after the *Indignados* Movement. The crisis management generated tensions between the partners of the coalition government, particularly concerning the housing emergency policies. While the left wing of the government pressed for cancelling rents according to the tenant campaign's demands, the PSOE campaigned for state-guaranteed loans for tenants who struggled to pay. A subheading from the newspaper *El Confidencial* on 30 March 2020 read:

> The tension within the Council of Ministers to approve a rental assistance plan has completely divided the government, which on Tuesday will have to choose between debt relief or loans.[63]

The principal fracture point was around the notion of 'weak landlords', namely landlords owning one or two properties whose income depends on the rent they extract. Although evidence was found that average landlord household earnings (€37,807 excluding rents) are substantially higher than those of tenant households (€23,160),[64] the Socialist Party focused upon these supposedly struggling landlords, framing them as vulnerable

victims of the pandemic, which ultimately masked the rentier economy they were buttressing. The reason why the wellbeing of landlords is equated with that of tenant families – even during a pandemic – is that landlords are seen as individuals, families and 'mom-and-pop' shops whose financial security depends on their rental income.[65] This frame depicted the landlord class as a homogeneous vulnerable group that also needed state protection, which led to debates on deservingness, namely where and how public resources should be used.

With the discourse on weak landlords and the pressure of the real estate lobby, the government eventually took sides with them to keep the flow of rent payments alive. As Dowling has argued:

> A care fix entails the management of the care crisis in ways that resolve nothing definitively but merely displace the crisis, thereby perpetuating the structural reflex of capitalist economies to offload the cost of care to unpaid sectors of society.[66]

By refusing to cancel rents, the government sent a clear message: even if the economy is plummeting and household income is slashed, rents must be paid at the same price, regardless of the increasing gap between income and household costs. Moreover, by sponsoring state-guaranteed loans, the government accepted that while tenants got indebted and public debt increased, the economic status of landlords was left unscathed.

As a result, the Spanish government managed the crisis by launching a plan of state-sponsored loans to pay rents while leaving private landlord–tenant relations to negotiate either a moratorium or a reduction in rent. The plan was launched through an emergency decree with emergency measures in the economic and social spheres, published on 1 April 2020.[67] Amidst a call for a rent strike that would take effect on 1 April, the governmental response was to include mechanisms to contain the escalation of the conflict. Tenancy-related measures occupied the first articles of the issued decree. The preamble stated:

> Firstly, measures aimed at supporting the rental of vulnerable individuals are adopted. In Spain, in 85 per cent of housing leases, the landlord is an individual, a small property owner. This particularity of the rental market in Spain makes it especially necessary for the measures adopted to facilitate agreements between parties to enable rent payments. Therefore proposals are established in this area aimed at providing necessary protection for the most

> vulnerable groups, who may see their ability to meet rent significantly affected, while ensuring a balance between parties that prevents the vulnerability of tenants from being transferred to landlords, especially those for whom rental income may be essential.[68]

In addition, the government approved an automatic six-month extension of tenancy contracts, in effect until June 2023. As the measures postponed the reproductive crisis, the rent strike force as a sizeable organising structure faded. However, had the rent strike not been organised, it remains unknown what sort of measures the government would have implemented. They would probably have been mild. In addition, we know that the rent strike strengthened the network of local tenants' unions in Spain, fostering tenant empowerment. This has become a social movement base for subsequent tenant struggles, such as the national Housing Law passed in May 2023.[69]

Conclusion

This chapter has explored tenant organising in response to the socio-economic crisis triggered by the Covid-19 lockdown in Spain. We analysed how the outbreak of the pandemic prompted a shift in the repertoire of housing contention, moving from a 'stay put' campaign against rent hikes and invisible evictions towards the 'cancel rent' campaign, which in turn led to the organisation of a rent strike through digital activism. This campaigning shift involved a tactical transformation in the repertoire of housing contention. The 'stay put' campaign encouraged tenants to refuse rent hikes, but to continue paying the same amount of rent regardless of the lease expiration, but the 'cancel rent' campaign and the rent strike encouraged tenants to withhold rents altogether. Employing the case of the Tenants' Union of Barcelona, three main arguments have been developed that contribute to the literature on urban contestation in the post-2008 cycle of housing financialisation.

First, when exceptional circumstances foster a crisis of social reproduction, the existing patterns of exploitation are deepened; rent extraction then plays a pivotal role in widening prevailing social divisions. In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, both precarious jobs and residential insecurity translated into a drop in income levels and an abrupt surge of rent pressures. However, while the pandemic inflicted a harsh blow upon individuals, the tenants' movement in Spain saw it as

an opportunity to deepen the underlying dynamics of tenants' struggles against rentier capital at the point of reproduction; for them the outcome was a political virtue. The political organisation of tenants sought to reveal patterns of rent extraction, making them central to the political debate in national politics.

Second, despite the window of opportunity provided by the crisis, the challenge faced by tenant organisers to deploy tenant mobilisation was significant, given Spain's strong, property-minded societal context. As we have analysed, the infrastructure of the established tenants' movement allowed the transformation of grievances into contentious collective action. The emergency context demanded a radicalisation of tenant action and discourse. The 'stay put' campaign had been a strategic response to contest rent hikes and forced displacements, but it became an unsuitable response to the challenges that confronted tenants during the Covid-19 crisis. What was at stake was rent payments themselves, as tenant households were increasingly hauled into a state of economic insecurity, and in this context the rent strike emerged as the most appropriate political response. Therefore, the rent strike and the Covid-19 emergency context prompted a critical discourse on the enduring wealth divide between those who own real estate assets (landlords) and those who do not (tenants).

Finally, the Covid-19 rent strike in Spain was organised against private landlordism, but with a clear aim to pressure state authorities. By organising tenant suffering and politically activating tenant households, rent strikers also called into question the state's role in reproducing the rentier-based societal model, which enhances the wealth of real estate owners while hindering tenants' welfare. In contrast with the tradition of rent strikes against large landlords, the Covid-19 strike was strategic; it questioned the structures of the state that underpinned rent extraction and tenant exploitation. Rent strikers targeted the state through specific demands, such as the cancellation of rent and the halt on evictions. The end of the crisis would have a different result, depending on the internalisation of the contradictions that the state proposed. Initial claims about emergency-specific measures later crystallised as claims, by the housing movement organisation, for structural changes in housing policies. Among these was the introduction of rent controls, which were finally included in the May 2023 Right to Housing Law.

Notes

1 As Nancy Fraser noted, the sense of urgency implied by the word 'crisis' exposes an underlying systemic dynamic of the contradiction between financial capitalism and social reproduction (Fraser 2017).
2 Bonshoms-Guzmán 2024a; 2024b.
3 Bonshoms-Guzmán and Ill-Raga 2022.
4 Mohandesi and Teitelman 2017.
5 Bhattacharya 2017, 123.
6 Mohandesi and Teitelman 2017.
7 Roberts 2013; Ribera-Almandoz 2019; Vincze 2020; Madden 2020; Byrne 2020.
8 Federici 2012.
9 The news articles used in this chapter are mainly from commercial newspapers. from Spanish, Catalan and Barcelona outreach (*Ara*, *Betevé*, *Cinco Días-El País*, *20 minutos*, *ElDiario.es*, *El Mundo*, *El Confidencial*), and were collected during the months of fieldwork. Tenant organisers were following and sharing the news to be informed about the government's movements and negotiations, as well as monitor the fluctuations of the housing market during the lockdown. Furthermore, alternative progressive outlets (*El Salto Diario*) covered the actions and organisation of the rent strike.
10 Ronald and Kadi 2018; Arundel and Ronald 2021.
11 Arrese 1959; all quotes from the original Spanish or Catalan have been translated by the authors.
12 Di Feliciantonio and Aalbers 2018.
13 López and Rodríguez 2011.
14 Naredo and Montiel 2011.
15 Palomera 2014.
16 López and Rodríguez 2010, 401.
17 Carmona 2022.
18 Bonshoms-Guzmán 2023; Gutiérrez and Vives-Miró 2018; Gutiérrez and Domènech 2020.
19 Naredo 2019.
20 Gil García and Martínez López 2021.
21 García-Lamarca 2021; Janoschka et al. 2019; Bonshoms-Guzmán 2023.
22 Gil García and Martínez López 2021.
23 Vives-Miró 2018.
24 In 2021 the overburden rate for Spain was 40.9 per cent, 20 points higher than the EU.27 average (20 per cent), and among the highest in the EU, according to Eurostat data. The number of evictions from rent arrears or lease expiration represented 84.9 per cent of total evictions in Barcelona, and 79.4 per cent in Madrid in 2017, according to the data of the General Council of the Judiciary.
25 Bonshoms-Guzmán 2024a.
26 Betevé 2017; Palomera 2018.
27 Palomera 2018.
28 For a historical analysis of the stay put campaign, and its emergence in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century, see Fogelson 2013.
29 Bonshoms-Guzmán 2024a and 2024b; Ill-Raga 2024.
30 Portillo 2019.
31 Fieldwork notes, 13 March 2020.
32 Fieldwork notes, 30 March 2020.
33 The data about the distribution of cases was retrieved from the website https://suspensionalquileres.org/. Accessed 20 August 2024.
34 *El Salto* 2020.
35 Arau 2020.
36 See report commissioned by the Spanish government: *El cuidado importa. Impacto de género en las cuidadoras/es de mayores y dependientes en tiempos de la Covid-19*. Accessed 8 December 2023. https://www.antropologia.urv.cat/media/upload/domain_1327/arxius/CUMADE/Informe%20Completo_Definitivo_14.12.21.pdf.
37 Email, Tuesday 24 March 2020 at 06:32:05 PM CET.
38 Email, Sunday 29 March 2020 at 01:26:57 PM CEST.

39 Email, Saturday 28 March 2020 at 07:24:54 PM CET.
40 Email, Friday 27 March 2020 at 03:08:52 PM CET.
41 Standing 2011.
42 Byrne 2020.
43 Email, Saturday 21 March 2020 at 09:56:59 AM CET.
44 Email, Saturday 28 March 2020 at 03:58:31 PM CET.
45 Email, Friday 20 March 2020 at 09:10:39 AM CET.
46 Mohandesi and Teitelman 2017.
47 Ferguson 2020.
48 Bonshoms-Guzmán and Ill-Raga 2022; Mohandesi and Teitelman 2017; Hughes and Wright 2018.
49 Bhattacharya 2017.
50 Thompson 1971.
51 Palomera and Vetta 2016, 2.
52 Tenant activist, 2022.
53 Sabaté 2016.
54 Literature analysing the preceding cycle of massive evictions and foreclosures due to the mortgage crisis also noticed a similar dynamic: mortgage payments were prioritised in domestic economies due to shame and fear of being evicted. It was precisely thanks to Housing Right's organisations and resistance movements that such fears were overcome and mortgage payments became re-signified as abusive in the context of unemployment crisis. See Garcia-Lamarca and Kaika 2016; Sabaté 2016; Colau and Alemany 2012.
55 The territorial distribution of the committees was similar to the geographical spread of the people who adhered to the online campaign. The map of the committees can be consulted here: https://suspensionalquileres.org/mapa-de-comites-de-huelga/. Accessed 23 February 2024.
56 Hall 2020.
57 Bonilla and Rosa 2015.
58 Goteo 2020.
59 Wigger 2021.
60 @hosteleriavaga 2023; @HuelgaLocales 2023.
61 Bonshoms-Guzmán and Ill-Raga 2022.
62 Tenant activist, 2022.
63 Ugalde 2020.
64 Delclós and Vidal 2020.
65 Pascual 2020; 20Minutos 2020a; eldiario.es 2020; 20Minutos 2020b.
66 Dowling 2021.
67 Royal Decree-Law 11/2020.
68 Royal Decree-Law 11/2020.
69 Law 12/2023.

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Conclusion

Lucas Poy and Hannes Rolf

The readers of *Rent Strikes* have been able to revisit more than 100 years of struggles for the right to decent and affordable housing, with informative and analytical case studies exploring more than a dozen episodes of housing activism in different regions and periods. From the rent strikes in the tenements of Buenos Aires in 1907 to the organisation of activists against evictions during the 2020 lockdowns in Barcelona, this volume presents a variety of actions and conflicts that enrich the historiography of tenant mobilisation. These include tenants' strikes in Panama, which evolved into widespread uprisings against American imperialism in the inter-war period, the organisation of Maghrebian immigrant workers against rent increases and the rampant racism shown by managers of the 'hostels' where they were forced to live in France in the 1970s and the struggles against landlord 'profiteering' – not only in New York and Athens after the First World War, but also in the *favelas* of Belo Horizonte several decades later. Other chapters reflect upon the politicisation of women in tenants' organisations in Harlem and Rome, the organising efforts of Maoists in the Netherlands during the 1960s and 1970s, the long-term negotiations and short-term conflicts that occurred over decades in New Zealand and Sweden, and the resourceful and radical mobilisations against urban redevelopment in 'Fordist' West Berlin.

These case studies, spanning more than a century, demonstrate that tenants have employed a diverse range of resources and organisational structures in seeking to improve their living conditions. They reveal the various tactics and strategies employed by ordinary people to challenge the power of private landlords, public corporations and the state: the withholding of rent, petitions to the authorities, public

demonstrations, resistance to evictions through both physical and legal action, political campaigns, organising in both public and private spaces and many more. The tenants' huge efforts, across geographies and periods, are a testimony to the power of popular and collective action that support the conviction – shared by the editors of this volume – that homes are a right and a use-value; they are not merely a source of profit and capital accumulation. While the case studies presented here are just a selection – and so necessarily limited – they serve to illustrate the diverse and widespread nature of housing conflicts throughout the twentieth century and beyond.

It is evident from each chapter of this volume that inadequate housing conditions played a significant role in the onset of each conflict, regardless of its scale, nature or ultimate outcome. Without exception, all the authors describe and provide evidence of problems such as overcrowding, inadequate sanitary and hygienic conditions, poor heating, harassment from landlords and other authorities and unaffordable costs. But the chapters also show that while these poor conditions – which we can summarise as a persistent shortage of affordable and comfortable housing – were a necessary component of each conflict, they do not appear to be sufficient to explain the *emergence* of tenant action.

In this concluding chapter, we would like briefly to examine the evidence presented in the previous chapters to identify potential triggers of tenant action. Based on our comparative and transnational volume, what particular factors emerge to explain why, in certain cases, these conditions gave way to tenant organisation and action, often including rent strikes? In other words, what insights might a comparative analysis of case studies in this book offer into the common conditions that led to tenant conflicts? Moreover, this conclusion offers insights that contribute to ongoing debates about the chronology of different waves of tenant conflict over the past 120 years.

Tenants' unity

In any episode of social protest, a crucial step in transforming frustration and anger into collective action is overcoming differences to form a cohesive organisation. This requires a degree of structural coherence and shared material interests – something that can be particularly challenging in the context of housing movements due to the 'complexity of structural positions within the housing system'.[1] The chapters in this volume testify to this complexity. They illustrate a wide range of housing

situations, from tenants renting from individual landlords in dispersed tenement houses to urban dwellers occupying land in favelas, and from more institutionalised tenants in public housing or private apartments under rent control to immigrant workers living in 'hostels' controlled by state authorities.

Whatever their differences, tenants and urban dwellers, in general, could only act collectively when they were able, at least temporarily, to overcome these and other differences and offer a united front in their struggle against a given adversary, be this one or several landlords, a public housing authority or the government. Unity could emerge from a common demand or a common adversary, thus overcoming other important material differences. An important example is shown in Potamianos's analysis of the shared struggle of urban dwellers and shopkeepers to demand the continuity of rent control measures enforced by the Greek authorities (Chapter 3). However, the book also shows that this unity could prove elusive and short-lived. One persistent challenge has been the spread of homeownership, which could seriously divide the tenants' collectives. Chapter 13, which discusses Barcelona in 2020, gives ground for some optimism here, revealing a potential for activism among indebted homeowners unable to afford their mortgage payments.

Structural aspects related to property regimes and the legal characteristics of lease contracts were not the only factors influencing the unity of tenant collectives, or the lack thereof. Following the suggestions outlined in the Introduction, individual chapters also delve into tenants' social and cultural backgrounds; several authors explore the role of ethnic divisions among urban dwellers. The scope of the chapters allows for an examination of these dynamics during the era of European mass emigration and during the period after the Second World War when immigrants from former colonies and the Global South participated in conflicts within metropolitan areas. While several chapters provide examples of how collective action helped to bridge ethnic differences – for instance through the distribution of multilingual leaflets to rally tenants – the volume also demonstrates that, on some occasions, these divisions persisted as a source of discord.

At times anti-racism has emerged as a powerful unifying force. This was notably the case during the South African 'rent boycotts' of the 1980s, which played a crucial role in the struggle against apartheid.[2] Chapter 7 by Crompton explores the immigrant rent strikes that occurred in French 'foyers' during the 1970s, where one of the demands was the expulsion of 'racist hostel managers'. In other cases, discrimination and even nativism served as a rallying point for certain sectors of tenants. Chapter 2 by

Robbins, for instance, highlights the presence of nativist sentiments in the struggle against foreign landlords. In Chapter 10 Novaro and Crosetti note that one of the catalysts for action among Magliana residents, in Rome, was a reaction to the arrival of former shanty town dwellers.

This tenant unity, however solid and enduring, always found some form of organisational expression. With very few exceptions, all the chapters in this volume show that there were organisations, albeit not always formalised, that existed before the onset of the conflict, that actively prepared for it and that united tenants to act together against a common adversary. These organisations varied widely in nature, structure and approach, but were linked in one way or another to other types of activist organisations such as left-wing parties, trade unions, anti-colonial organisers, student movements or the 'political machines' of more established parties. The case studies in this volume also confirm that tenants' organisations did not always manage to survive the conflicts.

Sparks

A shared material interest, a common adversary and some form of organisation to express this collective will were thus essential conditions for the emergence of tenant conflicts. What about the spark that ignited this dry wood? The chapters in this volume reveal that it was typically a significant *deterioration* of the housing conditions that provided the catalyst for conflicts. For instance, in Panama and Buenos Aires, the immediate trigger was a tax increase on real estate, which was passed on to tenants. This sudden rise in rent prices was often linked to a broader inflationary trend affecting the entire economy. Indeed, this volume underscores that inflation was a critical trigger for tenant activism across various geographies and contexts. Inflation politicised family budgets, in environments where concerns about the escalating 'cost of living' permeated working-class households and entered public discourse.

Another insight from the individual chapters is that, for this unity to result in action, a crucial collective process was required in which certain housing conditions were understood as profoundly *unfair*. It is therefore not surprising that several chapters use the concept of 'moral economy' to explain this sentiment about the unfairness of rent prices, and of certain rent increases in particular. This was connected to the idea that housing was not something from which people should make a profit. Robbins shows how a related concept, that of 'profiteering', also

became an instrumental element in tenant mobilisation. In Chapter 11 Oliveira and Urvoy also use the concept of moral economy; they describe the usage of the illustrative term 'sharks' to depict landlords and other actors who profited from the most precarious of tenants. Discussing campaigns in Spain in 2020, Bonshoms-Guzmán and Ill-Raga mention that homeowners were accused of being 'vultures', a term that conveys a similar meaning.

Closely related to this was the denunciation of 'unsafe' living conditions for women and children. This argument was shared by various movements and provided another important spark for tenants' conflicts. As Robbins explains in Chapter 2:

> Tenants often framed their activism as a broader effort to protect women and children from the physical and cultural dangers of a substandard, unsafe or unenriching household that did not meet their expectations as consumers.

As noted by Madden and Marcuse, housing movements 'politicise social reproduction and consumption' – a concept crucial to understanding the reasons for the significant agency of women in these conflicts.[3] The chapters in this volume show that these elements were present in different geographies and at different times, and provide ample evidence of female activism. In Chapter 4 Poy and Belkin discuss the role played by women in the Buenos Aires tenement strikes of 1907, observing how they took the lead in anti-eviction actions and shaped urban mobilisations; in Chapter 3 Potamianos explains how the rent disputes of inter-war Greece offered a way for women to enter the public arena. In Chapter 10 Novaro and Crosetti contribute a comparative case study of tenant actions in Rome and New York, focusing specifically on the role of women. Together, these chapters serve to highlight how socialisation in public and private spaces was key to politicisation and activation in the context of tenant organising. They also show the tension between women's grass-roots activism and male leadership.

Waves

Thus far we have discussed some general conditions that seem to be shared by housing conflicts explored in our comparative volume, as they emerge from the different case studies that comprise this book. What can this volume add to our knowledge about the *chronology* of housing

conflicts? To be sure, the chapters confirm the existence of at least two significant waves of tenant unrest during the twentieth century. The first took place a few years before, during and immediately after the First World War, continuing into the early 1930s, and the second happened in the 1960s and 1970s, with aftershocks still occurring in the 1980s. Indeed, previous research has highlighted the period during and immediately after the First World War as a crucial time for rent strikes, with the Glasgow rent strike of 1915 often cited as a significant episode. These years were marked by a profound social crisis, characterised by mass mobilisation and extreme repressive measures at the workplace, alongside rising inflation.

The fact that the population was drawn to the war made pressures on rent even more illegitimate. In a classic article Moorhouse et al. quoted a demand put forward in a rally of thousands of women protesting in Birkenhead's Town Hall:

> Father is fighting in Flanders. We are fighting the landlords here.[4]

Our volume provides additional examples and case studies that underscore the significance of this period. Chisholm analyses the spread of rent activism in New Zealand since 1916, Robbins examines tenant action in the immediate aftermath of the First World War in the United States and Potamianos surveys the rise of tenant unrest in Greece, which began during the conflict and continued into the inter-war years. Notable similarities emerge between these studies. During the war, increasing prices of food, clothing and housing frequently became subjects of public debate and mobilisation. The concept of 'profiteering' gained prominence and overall emerged as a process of 'politicisation of rent', to borrow Potamianos's term (Chapter 3). Another significant finding from the research presented in *Rent Strikes* is that state institutions were ready to address some of the tenant grievances during these years. This was due to several reasons and specific political contexts, but the strength of the tenants' movements was undoubtedly a crucial factor. The establishment of rent control was one of the most significant achievements of some of these movements.

Tenant activism continued into the inter-war period, as shown here by Potamianos, Chisholm and Zumoff (Chapters 3, 12 and 5 respectively). During the Depression actions by tenants often adopted a defensive stance, with a particular emphasis on eviction resistance. In the years after the Second World War, the scope of housing conflicts expanded significantly. This period saw the growth of social and public

housing, the further institutionalisation of bargaining mechanisms in some regions and the consolidation of rent control measures for existing housing stock.

Yet these welfare provisions were not without problems and tensions, as several chapters in this volume reveal. Tenants' movements now confronted a diverse range of actors, including private landlords, housing corporations and the state. Individual chapters provide insightful examples of this broader spectrum of adversaries and stakeholders. In Chapter 6 Rolf examines the features of the more institutionalised system in Sweden, where a triangular network of organisations emerged. In Chapter 9 Vollmer focuses on resistance to urban redevelopment projects in West Berlin, while in Chapter 8 Van der Steen explores the role of housing corporations in the Dutch housing system and the efforts of tenants and left-wing activists to reduce rents and demand improvements.

The 1960s and 1970s, in particular, emerge also in this volume as another critical period of tenant radicalisation and conflict. As discussed in previous research, this wave of tenant unrest was interwoven with broader layers of activism and resistance, in the context of the emergence of the 'new left', radical student movements, anti-war protests and anti-colonial movements. The chapters by Novaro and Crosetti, Chisholm, Crompton, Vollmer, Rolf and Van der Steen (10, 12, 7, 9, 6 and 8 respectively) analyse the connections between this new generation of radical activists and the housing movement. Several chapters of this volume convey the idea that there was a 'fading' of tenant movements in the 1980s, to borrow Chisholm's term.

But is this chronology universally applicable, or rather valid for Western countries? Although a majority of chapters focus on Europe and the United States, *Rent Strikes* provides elements to argue that broader and more global comparisons allow us to trace different chronologies. The massive 'rent boycotts' in South Africa in the 1980s seem to complicate the idea of an ebb of housing activism in this period. Chapter 5 by Zumoff conveys how the rent strike in Panama had a somewhat different chronology; it also became embedded in a much broader and radical conflict that challenged American imperialism in the area. As Manuel Castells has already pointed out in his classic book, in which he examined the massive rent conflict that occurred in Veracruz, Mexico, during the early 1920s, we need to take into account the fact that in 'dependent' (to use Castells' term) societies the main features of tenant conflict adopt different forms.[5] Zumoff's chapter shows the extent to which anti-imperialist struggles can be intertwined with tenant

activism. Chapter 7's focus upon immigrants in France also points to the connection with anti-colonial struggles. Here Crompton explains that many of the largely Maghrebian tenant activists engaged in their first political activities in post-colonial Algeria, deploying 'autogestion' initiatives with properties left behind by French settlers. Despite many other differences, the Buenos Aires rent conflict of 1907 shares with the Panamanian case the development of very violent confrontations with state authorities. In both instances these led to activists being killed, inspiring large protests during their funerals.

Oliveira and Urvoy, in Chapter 11, analyse the dynamic of tenant action in a favela. This has the peculiarity of being a type of urbanisation somewhat detached from the rest of the city in both physical and legal terms; a favela is 'beyond the formal housing market', as the authors observe. Favelas started as urban spaces that challenged the rules of the formal housing market, but eventually generated their own informal rental system. Chapter 11 analyses a situation that is widespread in the Global South, one that should be incorporated more thoroughly in further research seeking to tackle housing activism on a global scale. Oliveira and Urvoy's study shows not only the similarities of these actions with those deployed in other regions but also their very important differences, related to the role played by land occupation in the outskirts of the cities. The type of conflict analysed here might be the rule rather than the exception in many regions of the Global South absent from our volume.

The last 40 years are only partially analysed in *Rent Strikes*. It is therefore difficult to draw conclusions about the development of housing conflicts in the years that followed the large expansion of real estate as a crucial component of capital accumulation. Features of this period include the end of rent control, conservative campaigns such as 'right to buy', the increasing privatisation of public housing, etc. In a recent work Neil Gray has explained that

> What marks this particular post-2008 crisis moment out is how middle-class homeowners and investors have become subject to the crisis-laden vicissitudes of the housing market, and in relation to the previous section, the sheer extent of speculative capital liquidity operating in the housing market. […] The ideology of homeownership and its potential attainment appeared to be intact and secure pre-2008, but the bursting of the property bubble and resultant austerity policies has made homeownership unattainable for many in 'Generation Rent'.[6]

In our volume Chisholm discusses the organisation of private renters in this 'post-homeownership society', focusing on the last decade in New Zealand (Chapter 12). In Chapter 13 Bonshoms-Guzmán and Ill-Raga analyse the campaigns to organise both indebted homeowners, unable to afford mortgage payments, and the full-scale rent strikes against private landlords during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

Efficacy of tenant action

The research presented in this book demonstrates that tenant actions were crucial in securing improvements for renters. These improvements were of very different scope and nature, going from punctual concessions from individual landlords – withdrawing rent increases, agreeing to make infrastructural improvements, etc. – to legislation that restricted the free will of property owners in terms of what they could ask from tenants (rent control) or that promoted the construction of new housing stock ruled by co-operatives or the state. The chapters also show that when landlords' concessions were not enforced by state regulations, for example after the rent strikes of 1907 in Buenos Aires and New York, the achievements of these very radical and belligerent movements proved unsustainable in the long term. The conflicts that developed during and immediately after the First World War, and also in years after the Second World War, reveal more lasting impacts, with decisions to ameliorate the situation of tenants being incorporated into legislation and governmental policies.

To be sure, these successes of tenant activism did not mean that tenants' organisations became solid and permanent. The well-established Swedish organisations discussed by Rolf in Chapter 6, characterised by their institutionalised bargaining processes, appear to be more the exception than the rule – at least according to the findings presented in this book. The evidence shows numerous instances of tenants' associations that were effective in organising and managing conflicts but often fell into crisis; in some cases they even disbanded when the movement subsided. A wide range of factors need to be taken into consideration to explain the cycles of consolidation and crisis experienced by tenants' organisations; the chapters of this book show how local case studies are crucial to understanding their peculiarities. However, several common patterns do emerge, in particular the promotion of homeownership, a fundamental driving force to divide the tenants' movement.

Yet even when organisations did not survive, their memory did. As we know from the existing literature, confirmed by the chapters in this volume, it was also the *threat* of tenant actions, in particular in cases where rent strikes had already taken place, along with the broader context of social activism and mobilisation, that moved landlords to concede and state authorities to intervene. Past struggles not only played a role in making landlords and authorities concede to tenant demands; they also contributed to shaping the memory of the movement. The legacy of heroic movements, popular leaders and extraordinary rallies might sometimes seem forgotten. Yet it lives on, reappearing in different ways in new movements that develop, time and again, to struggle for the right to housing.

The editors and the contributors of the different chapters will be honoured if the analyses of past struggles contained in this book might make even a small contribution to enrich this legacy, and to strengthen the resources and confidence of future tenant strikers around the world. At the time of writing, the global housing and cost of living crisis continues to intensify; it has even been worsened by climate change and global politics. There is every reason for tenants yet again to organise and claim their right to a dignified life.

Notes

1 Madden and Marcuse 2016.
2 Chaskalson, Jochelson and Seekings 1987.
3 Madden and Marcuse 2016.
4 Moorhouse, Wilson and Chamberlain 1972, 135.
5 Castells 1983.
6 Gray 2018, xxviii.

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Notes are indicated by the use of 'n' after the page number.

Since the nineteenth century, working-class families have predominantly relied on tenements for housing, with rents often consuming a large portion of their household budgets. There is a long and contested history of tenants taking collective action across time and in many contexts, including their involvement in rent strikes, but international comparisons have been scarce. *Rent Strikes: A history of collective tenant actions across the world* is a collaborative effort by 16 contributors from diverse countries to identify common patterns and global trajectories in the rich history of tenants' strikes, spanning a period of almost 120 years from the early twentieth century to the Covid-19 pandemic. It brings together local, national and comparative case studies to illustrate the history of tenant mobilisation for the general public, connecting with existing scholarship and laying the groundwork for future research. Adopting a transnational perspective, it examines episodes of tenant struggles in North and Latin America, Northern and Southern Europe, and Oceania. In doing so, the book explores a range of actions, including petitions, demonstrations, boycotts and legal actions, and has a special focus on the part played by women in these movements. The contributors examine the role of ethnic, national and gender differences between tenants and landlords, while situating their studies within a broader historical context and addressing the larger questions posed in the first chapter.

Lucas Poy is a social and labour historian specialising in the history of social democracy and the labour movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He is Assistant Professor at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and a fellow at the International Institute of Social History.

Hannes Rolf is an urban, social and labour historian specialising in the history of the labour and cooperative movements and the history of housing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Urban History, Department of History, Stockholm University.

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