



Bridging Buildings, Building Bridges

Getting to a Citywide Tenants Movement

Stomp Out Slumlords
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Towards Citywide Organizing

A movement beyond DSA

In the past two years, Stomp Out Slumlords has established a durable foundation for DSA tenant organizing in Washington, DC. We've done so on multiple fronts. Our canvassers have spoken with thousands of tenants at the door or at Landlord-Tenant Court, helping them to resist eviction by connecting them with legal resources and explaining their legal rights. These conversations were not isolated acts of charity. Instead, they turned into gateways to organizing, generating leads to hot buildings and helping us make contact with tenant leaders. Since our last update, we've worked with leaders in a half-dozen complexes around the city to organize their own buildings, and we've made efforts to maintain ties with them and bring them into organizing work elsewhere in the city. As a program for building power, SOS has been a success.

Yet the very maturity of our project now forces us to confront problems we'd once been able to defer. In past updates, we've written about the basic demographic limitation on our work—the fact that we're mostly white, 20- and 30-something college-educated professionals who live in gentrifying neighborhoods in DC, while the buildings and communities we work in are overwhelmingly black and poor. In DC, gentrification and displacement have been targeted so directly at the city's black population that they have come to be colloquially known as “The Plan”—a decades-old plot to drive working-class black residents out of the city and replace them with affluent white professionals. Historical experience and the logic of material interest both suggest that in the long run, SOS can't be a legitimate weapon for tenant struggles in DC if we're not accountable to people of color or working to support organic radical formations—as opposed to collaborationist NGOs—in its most exploited neighborhoods. Our predecessor organizations in Washington (like TENAC or the CityWide Housing Coalition) withered or collapsed after the cross-racial organizing that sustained them broke down; will SOS suffer the same fate?

Our relationship to DSA poses another dilemma. Our February update came in for some [criticism](#)—quoted in the New Left Review, of all places!—because of our resistance to recruiting tenants into the organization. Although our general line of thinking has not changed, we think these critiques are worth engaging. If we're not filling DSA's membership rolls, how does our project help to build socialism on a larger scale?

In this update, we'll talk about the best way we've found to deal with these contradictions: taking an active role in creating and supporting a new DC Tenants Union. But first, we'll outline the state of the project and the other, smaller-scale lessons we've learned by working in different buildings, each of which has brought new challenges and opportunities—as has Garden Terrace, our original case study, where the struggle has evolved in ways we had not predicted last year.

The SOS Model Today

We've already given a detailed breakdown of our current organizing strategy in [our February update](#), but a review might be useful. When we began, SOS was focused on disrupting landlords' hold on the court system by encouraging tenants facing eviction to show up to court. We were motivated by a theory of "[disruptive dissensus](#)" that emphasized fomenting diffuse counter-systemic action by loosely organized poor people as opposed to the Sisyphean task of building durable, membership-based organizing structures. In this case, our theory was that by massively increasing tenant turnout, we could impede the court's ability to process eviction cases and eventually strip landlord attorneys of the ability to evict tenants en masse with default judgments (which are handed down when the defendant does not appear at a hearing). We were not successful in achieving large-scale change in the court system: the number of eviction cases filed in DC each week far outstrips SOS's capacity, and we have not been able to speak to enough tenants or encourage enough of them to come to court to meaningfully undermine the eviction apparatus. As a result, we have shifted to a different type of organizing, albeit one that remains informed by the disruptive dissensus model.

Our current focus is on identifying, supporting, and connecting tenant leaders on the level of individual buildings—but now across the city as well. (By "buildings," we mean housing complexes which may incorporate dozens of structures or a single larger one; some include hundreds of individual units, others are smaller.) Currently, our organizers are active in eight properties around the District, and we are hoping to bring a new crop of projects online in the new year. As we're always careful to emphasize, *we* aren't the leaders, the tenants are; we may help with organizing but the power belongs to them. In other words, we don't show up at a building, create a tenant association, and canvass the residents to join it. Instead, we start by looking for buildings where there are already grievances we can organize around, usually maintenance or security problems (rent hikes or evictions alone rarely seem to be enough).

We often find that there are already tenants either taking action or trying to rally their neighbors to do so. Some of them have prior community organizing experience, have led tenant associations in the past, or have contacts with local government officials; others are just fed-up residents. Our task is to bring leaders in the same building together, help them coalesce around formal or informal structures, and offer ongoing support with reminder calls, flyers, and outside resources. To the extent

“Our anti-eviction canvassing infrastructure is still fundamental to SOS, even if court-flooding is no longer our principal tactic.”

that we can draw on experiences in other buildings, we can offer leaders choices about how to approach their fight or what forms of pressure to bring to bear, from petitions to rent strikes. But the organizing ultimately belongs to the tenants. We try to avoid blaming ourselves when things are going badly (as long as we haven't dropped the ball in some concrete way) and especially overcompensating for lack of tenant enthusiasm with frenetic organizer activity.

Our anti-eviction canvassing infrastructure is still fundamental to SOS, even if court-flooding is no longer our principal tactic. Unlike regular door-to-door canvassing, it gives us something material to offer tenants—a way to get past the door in buildings whose residents are understandably suspicious of outsiders with clipboards. Data we compiled in 2017 suggests that tenants we spoke to were less likely to be evicted, a statistically significant correlation. The initial conversations that we have with tenants facing eviction often leads directly to information that we can use to organize, whether it's other grievances with the landlord or the wider network in the building.

Why We Still Do Anti-Eviction Canvassing

- *It materially benefits tenants and builds trust*
- *We can recruit new organizers by testing them on the doors*
- *It creates campaign involvement beyond organizing*
- *A regular, scheduled action allows us to constantly build awareness and membership*

Canvassing is also important from the perspective of SOS as an organization. It's a low-stakes and low-commitment way to get involved in the project, get to know DC's economic geography on the ground, and meet other comrades. Accompanying new volunteers on relatively easy, low-stakes outreach gives more experienced members a chance to evaluate and recruit people to longer-term organizing projects. In general, the fact that SOS needs people to organize canvasses, collect data for the address team, and make post-canvass phone calls ensures that the campaign has a broad spectrum of roles. We've tried to ensure that people don't feel like organizing a building is the only way to fully participate in the campaign; not everyone has the time or inclination to invest 2-5 hours every week or feels comfortable with sustained in-person organizing. And finally, as a regular, scheduled action, an anti-eviction canvass demon-

strates the campaign's ongoing activity and an easy hook to advertise within Metro DC DSA and in outside conversations.

At the same time, we recognize the limits of know-your-rights canvassing in reaching a broader cross-section of tenants. Not everyone is at regular risk of losing their home, and we don't always want people in buildings to associate our presence or our literature with evictions. Both canvassing and building organizing are key to the project and will be for a long time to come, but our tactics are always evolving.

Finally, we have also been working to develop an SOS-specific political education and training program focusing on housing in general, the political economy of housing in DC, and the history of past tenant organizing movements in the city. While currently we are limited to an occasional reading group or organizer training session, our plan has long been to introduce a structured, regularized curriculum. The demographic balance of the reading groups has, on the whole, been far more skewed towards white men than that of the project at large, which has a more even gender split and is less white-dominated. Our tenant organizer training, on the other hand, has been quite diverse along gender and racial lines. We hope to improve these conditions and to create a more welcoming space for introducing SOS organizers to the historical, political, and theoretical context of our work.

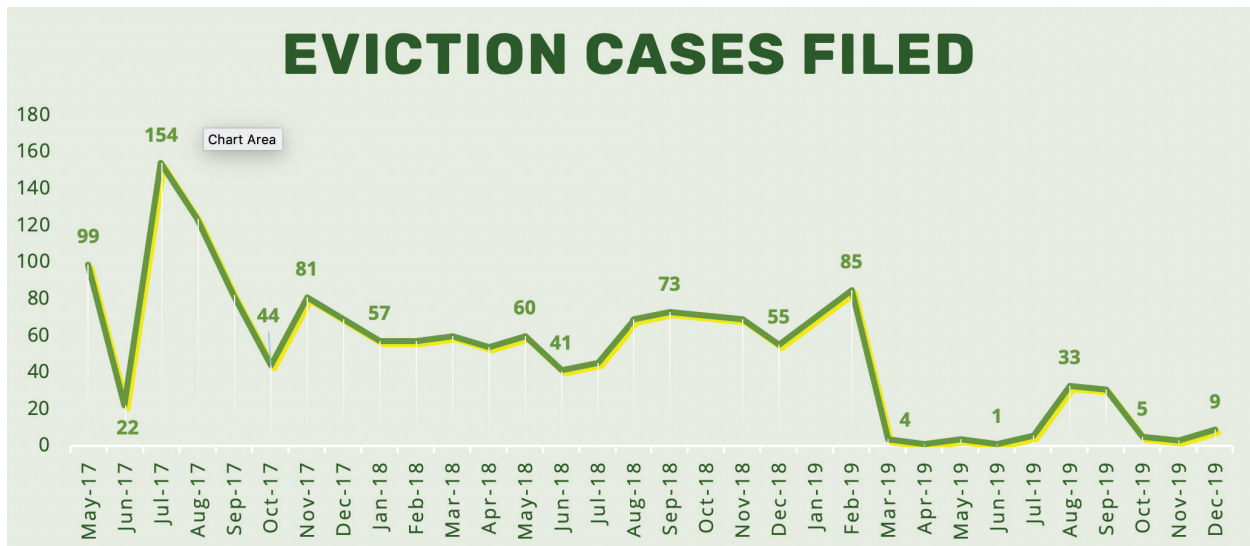
Cultivating Garden Terrace

Steps forward, steps back in our first building

In Garden Terrace, the building where we launched our first major campaign and got our first major win, we've had a good case study for how an organizing campaign should operate—and several ways in which it can go awry. Events there have not been as clear-cut as we might have hoped, and the campaign has in many ways gone two steps forward, one step back. We're on an upswing again, but things were looking quite bleak in midsummer, when a disastrously planned meeting led the entire core group of tenants we'd been working with to step back. The main issues have been what they've always been: conflict between this group of tenants and the conciliatory tenant association, interpersonal conflict between tenants, uneven distribution of labor and burnout, and distrust of outside organizers, particularly white ones working in a majority-black building. Plus, organizer mistakes which we've made before but which happened all at once this time: insufficient check-ins with tenant leads, strategic missteps, and inadequate on-boarding.

First, a refresher on where we stand with this building. As of our last update in February, organized tenants successfully pushed the landlord to fire the building's management company, but the ad-hoc arrangement that has replaced it is in some ways less appealing than the previous setup. In particular, the landlord has contracted a former employee of the old management company to serve as property manager—

one who is deeply unpopular and retaliatory towards tenants. Additionally, in an effort to save a few more bucks, the landlord hired unprofessional, abusive security guards who have harassed and physically assaulted tenants, while maintenance in common areas had noticeably declined.



One major success of our organizing efforts, though, is that evictions have been cut by more than 70%. Fewer eviction cases were filed in the last six months total than were typically filed in a single week before the defeat of the management company. As of October, eviction filings are back up, but hardly at the level of the 100+ we were seeing at the beginning of our organizing. Thanks to our ongoing relationships with legal workers, we're hoping to connect all interested tenants with representation. We're going to take this success as a partial vindication of our theory that significantly raising the cost of eviction and flooding the courts with tenants does work, at least at the level of a single building.

A Watery Win

The landlord has also been getting heat from the office of the attorney general (OAG) which has been investigating Garden Terrace's suspicious water bills. One of our tenant leaders reached out to the OAG to coordinate a February meeting at which tenants could ask questions and submit evidence, which was very well-attended (40+ tenants). While the OAG definitely made tenants feel like the city government was finally paying attention to them, they were very clear about the limits of their investigation: they could only levy punitive fines and restore money to tenants that they shouldn't have paid, and could not fix the building going forward. It was a rare chance for tenants to hear the limits of legal avenues from the horse's mouth, and a good contrast to what tenant leads for the meeting made clear: if you want to fix things for the future, and faster than the pondering timeline of a lawsuit, tenant organizing is your best bet.

“BIG WIN: Tenants will be repaid the \$450,000+ in water bills that Garden Terrace's owner wrongfully charged.”

In the end though, the OAG also proved another point: if you do want to pursue a legal suit, get the city to do it for you. In the spring the developer began giving tenants utility offsets, which they definitely weren't getting before the OAG was investigating or we were organizing there. And then at the end of November, less than 10 months after the investigation opened, the OAG announced a \$450,000+ settlement agreement against the owners of Garden Terrace for wrongfully bill-

ing 470 past and present tenants for water. Garden Terrace's owners will also have to fork over \$200,000 to cover the cost of the investigation. In their press release—which generated even more negative reporting on Garden Terrace, including from local TV news—the OAG mentioned that it had been getting tenant complaints since 2014. Though we can't know for sure, the quick turnaround from tenant organizing in the fall of 2018 to a government investigation in the spring of 2019 leads us to believe that in this case, tenant organizing is what got the goods.

Intra-Tenant Conflict Comes to a Head

That spring was also something of the climax for the antagonism with the tenants' association, especially the president. He attended the OAG's February meeting, and in addition to his run-of-the-mill habit of blaming tenants for management's failures, he also asked five (!) security guards to surveil the beginning of the meeting (they left eventually), and afterwards distributed a flyer claiming credit for concessions granted by the landlord and advocating that management fine tenants who hadn't yet had their units exterminated on a poorly-planned schedule. The president had also been using his position as president of the tenant's association to pull strings with the owner—his rent was in arrears, but he was on a special, reduced payment plan. He'd also abused his position to hit on women. Tenant leads were planning a meeting with the tenant association to discuss this issue, which ultimately turned out to be unnecessary because the rest of the tenant association voted to dissolve once they found out about his behavior. The dethroned president is still a thorn in our side, and continues to disrupt meetings and side with management, but can no longer claim to be speaking for tenants—and can no longer be used as evidence by the landlord for “tenant support” of dubious management decisions.

The dissolution of the formal tenant association didn't exactly make all interpersonal conflict go away, however. We're still seeing the same kind of issues we've seen from the beginning: tenants blaming other tenants, whether it's voucher holders, young people, people with kids, people with dogs, or people they just don't like. This spring, though, we saw something of a repeat of the interpersonal conflict within our core organizing group that we saw last spring: one tenant with ideological and personal

differences within the group, butting heads with everyone else. The tenant in question (we'll call her Tenant R) is a variation on a tenant archetype we've seen before: extremely driven, personally frustrated, and politically on-board with the project—but also confrontational to a sometimes unhelpful degree, with both management and occasionally other tenants. Tenant R's passion initially inspired the other organizers, but over the course of the spring we saw them pull back more and more from the project—partially for personal reasons, and partially because R alienated them and other tenants. It also didn't help that she and another one of the tenant leads, Tenant A, initially got on very well, and eventually had an ugly falling-out that we have tried to mitigate the fall-out from, with varying degrees of success.

Our Failure to Check In

Unfortunately, our organizing was a little less robust than we thought at the time. Although we'd had a few successes since the February meeting, we were slow to capture the energy of that meeting. We tried to recruit new tenants to work on a Memorandum of Understanding—an idea that came from within the tenant leadership group—with the landlord to keep him to the promises he'd made after our October demand letter, but of the dozen who volunteered, only one or two have continued to organize with us (and in a limited capacity). We also tried to circulate another petition against management—with the dual goal of evaluating tenant energy for a rent strike—but the logistics of this were complicated by the interpersonal conflicts of the core tenant group, as well as too little canvassing spread between too few canvassers.

As we've written in previous reports, we've recalibrated our involvement a few times, and this time swung the pendulum too far in the hands-off direction. After the dissolution of the formal tenant association, the tenants we'd been working with most closely expressed interest in forming a new one. As we've said before, we don't believe a formal TA structure is necessary to create change—and, as the example of the last TA at Garden Terrace shows, can impede change—but we were worried about tenant burnout, and figured that a formal TA with agreed-upon responsibilities would lessen the burden. So, we met with the core group of tenants and a new recruit, Tenant Z—whose commitment and availability to doing work, it turns out, hadn't been properly vetted—and made a plan. They devised a slate for the tenant association (which we'd failed to do last time) and came up with a plan to broaden the workload by bringing more people into leadership roles. Tenants generated a list of a dozen potential “floor captains,” two or three per floor, who could serve as points of contact for the tenants on their floor as well as canvassing leaders.

In addition to our hope that a deeper base of organizers would ease the workload, we hoped to insulate against the danger of leadership turnover that plagues organizing of all kinds. The SOS organizers role-played conversations with these tenants to brainstorm answers to the inevitable question of how this tenant association would be different from the last one. Tenant organizers had good answers—bottom-up decision-making, community-led, non-dictatorial—and made commitments to have

one-on-one conversations with these tenants to bring them in. If those potential floor captains were on board, they'd be brought in to canvass more broadly for an election. A separate group of tenants, including a local neighborhood representative, would facilitate the election and count votes. It was a good plan, but ultimately one that was not executed well at all.

A big part of the blame lies with us, for failing to adequately check in with tenant leaders. They assured us that they had managed to talk with all of the tenants they wanted as floor captains, but we didn't probe for details. We also didn't push back against the flyer they asked us to create for them, which mystifyingly, didn't include that they were running as a slate on the flier. Ultimately the lack of transparency made other tenants think there was some kind of secret, rigged election going on.

Three Things You Can Do to Avoid Our Mistakes:

- *one-on-ones*
- *1-on-1s*
- *did we mention one-on-ones?*
- *OK, do them.*

We thought the plan for this election meeting was great (and it was!). But things did not go as planned. Turnout was surprisingly poor, and most of the people we had hoped to recruit as floor captains failed to show up. The tenant who facilitated the meeting didn't explain the process adequately, and many of the attendees were confused and felt like the election had been rigged, especially since the slate of candidates had never openly announced their intention to run together. The meeting ended with tenants voting to postpone the election, and with some core tenants alienated and angry. The election still has not happened, and a few of tenants who had been key organizers were turned off from organizing for several months.

This was a hard lesson for our organizers, and for the tenants we've been working with. We all assumed a lot: we assumed that they were more prepared to do intensive one-on-one outreach than they were, and they assumed that the election would be an easy win, given their record of running meetings and getting concessions from the landlord. We also assumed that tenant leaders were sharing work equally, when the vast majority of it was falling on two women who've been involved for over a year—Tenants A and B. In one-on-ones of varying success in its aftermath, tenant leaders admitted they'd thought both the meeting and the election would be a slam dunk. Could we have avoided this outcome? Perhaps: we could have checked in more frequently and thoroughly on tenant outreach. Maybe if we'd done some canvassing ourselves, we could have diagnosed the problem earlier. Tenant B herself said, afterwards, that she should have put the brakes on a meeting after she saw the first signs of how little the rest of the slate was working.

Less Media, More Organizing

In the wake of this, Tenant R brought in a separate community organization, whom we'll call "Rise" and with whom SOS has a cordial relationship—and, despite a rocky start, this has actually brought our organizing back to a level pretty close to what we saw at the beginning of this year. There were initial tensions—this time, interpersonal conflict between Tenant R and our remaining SOS organizer—but the SOS organizer's relationships and credibility among other tenants (including among R's own confidantes) was strong enough to convince her, we think, to work with us. What also helped was that the owner of the building decided to hold a meeting at the building to address claims that he was a racist, and nothing brings people together like a common enemy.

This meeting was important for a couple reasons, the biggest of which is that we saw tenants from pretty much every faction in the building—the old tenant association, the initial core group of tenants, Tenant R, and tenants who had been at the fringe of our organizing since the beginning—present in the same room and arguing with the landlord, not each other. With the exception of the old TA president, who tried and failed to pick a successful fight, everyone was crystal clear in their opinion that the number one cause for problems in the building is poor management and the landlord's indifference. Everyone—even Tenants A and B who had pulled back—came with receipts and a long memory of the ways in which the landlord had made and broken promises in the past.

In the wake of this meeting, an informal group of interested and organized tenants has come together to work with both SOS and Rise in order fight back against the landlord. Like last autumn, he's made some cosmetic fixes that cost a few thousand dollars but has yet to commit to maintaining his new purchases: the carpets installed last year, for instance, have become grimy again because they haven't been cleaned, and the same is bound to happen this go around with the new couches. But the pressure is on, and tenants are pushing new spins on previous strategies: a social media shaming campaign led by a group instead of one individual (who could be pressured into stopping), a survey on top of the autumn petition we circulated, etc.

Next Year's Goals:

- *a return to direct action*
- *more involvement from more tenants*
- *rent strike?*

One thing that Rise has emphasized in these meetings as well is the need for community-building. The forms this will ultimately take are still being discussed—and raises some questions, like, does hosting tenant-led hallway-painting or courtyard-cleaning events let the landlord off the hook for his responsibilities?—but the first one was a community cookout, paid for

by the landlord under pressure from tenants, that was attended by over 100 tenants.

We've seen some increased media attention on this particular building, both before and after the OAG settlement announcement, which has drawn the attention of the checked-out councilmember. We're interested to see where that goes, though so far all that's happened is that councilmember has rubberstamped the developer's account of things being fixed (they're not). We've also been disappointed to see that, as our SOS organizer has taken a bit of a backseat role in response to Tenant R's antagonism, the community organizers at Rise have shifted the focus of the work. Tenants are still attending meetings in similar numbers to the ones we've seen before, but the focus has shifted to petitioning the government and drawing media attention. As some of us have written elsewhere, we are concerned that traditional forms of community organizing don't flex working people's latent class power and struggle to wield much influence.

In our view, working class people really only have leverage to get what they want by threatening the economic status quo of their target—whether that's through an organized rent strike, the threat of which tenants used previously to get improvements, or by sabotaging management's attempts to lease out new units or develop new properties, or by connecting the struggle in this building to others in the developer's portfolio. In the new year, we'd like to see a return to direct action—and more direct involvement from our organizers.

Branching Out

New buildings, new challenges

Bankruptcy and NGOs Tangle at Woodland Court/The Meadows

These lessons have been even more important in Woodland Manor/The Meadows, a set of buildings we've begun to organize this year. Owned by a notorious DC slumlord, Woodland Manor and The Meadows are two neighboring (and rival) housing complexes totaling some 400 units and managed by a single company. The properties are funded by a site-based Section 8 grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, meaning that most of the residents pay significantly below market-rate rent. After decades of neglect, the buildings are in an extreme state of disrepair, to the point of causing noticeable health problems for residents; until recently, the landlord has relied on manipulating federal and local inspections to prevent the complex from being condemned and to escape being on the hook for more than patchwork maintenance work. (Residents are forced to acquiesce to this arrangement because there has not been enough public funding available either to repair the buildings or to relocate tenants.)

The potential for organizing at these buildings seemed substantial, but initial efforts did not bear fruit. Although we had identified a handful of potential leaders at each building via canvassing, our first efforts to hold meetings were unsuccessful: despite apparent enthusiasm, our tenant contacts tended to back out of planned events at the last minute and did not appear to have extensive social networks within the buildings. A spate of shootings and other instances of violence at Woodland Manor further complicated our efforts. When nobody showed up to a meeting with legal services lawyers we had planned for several weeks, we noticed that the normally lively courtyards and public spaces of the building were nearly deserted and concluded that no amount of preparatory calling and flyering would compensate for residents' concerns about their own safety.

Everything changed in March when we learned that the management company that owns both buildings was going bankrupt and hence selling the buildings to an as yet undetermined buyer. The assessed value of the properties was vastly greater than the company's debts, suggesting that the bankruptcy was a tactical move designed, on the one hand, to avoid maintenance liabilities related to legal action from the D.C. Attorney General, and on the other, to prevent the building's tenants from being able to exercise their right to buy the property when it is put up for sale. (Washington, DC has a law called the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, won by a previous generation of housing organizers, that gives tenants the preferential right to buy out their buildings when they go on sale; usually purchases require the assistance of an NGO.) With the imminent prospect of a new owner coming in to take possession of the buildings, the need to rapidly build an organization to protect their rights became clear to many tenants; door-to-door canvassing yielded a very enthusiastic response.

“With the imminent prospect of a new owner coming in to take possession of the buildings, the need to rapidly build an organization to protect their rights became clear to many tenants; door-to-door canvassing yielded a very enthusiastic response.”

Quickly, different organizing dilemmas became clear to both of the SOS teams working in each of their corresponding properties. At Woodland Manor, we partnered with an on-site NGO operating a community childcare tutoring center. Because it enjoys broad trust and credibility in the community, as well as being the only space available for meetings, the NGO was able to dictate the terms of our collaboration

despite our divergent priorities. The NGO, which was motivated to protect its lease, quickly pulled in a number of local politicians, lawyers, and nonprofits. Both the politicians and the (white professional) leadership staff of the NGO saw us as outsiders seeking to leverage this crisis for our own ideological ends; their own priority was tamping down conflict with the landlord and discouraging tenants from striking to preserve their own positions. We thus faced the task of establishing our bona fides with both the tenants and with our partners, without becoming pawns of the latter. By May, we had formed deeper and lasting connections with the community while the politicians dematerialized, forcing the NGO to acknowledge us and our role as organizers. Having the NGO's grudging support, meanwhile, increased our credibility with tenants, and one of its longtime tenant employees became the president of our new tenant association.

At The Meadows, our organizers faced the opposite problem. Lacking deep-rooted local partners or a dedicated meeting space, it was difficult to overcome the initial skepticism of tenants. Their suspicions had been raised by a joint meeting of the two complexes organized at Woodland Manor by local politicians, each of whom tried to use the opportunity to garner publicity for himself; attendees' frustrations boiled over into an angry confrontation that was altogether unproductive. In subsequent months tenants would repeatedly refer to this meeting as a reason to be skeptical of any organizing activities. The NGO has a lot of support at Woodland Manor, where it is able to maintain conversations and support organizing activity on an ongoing basis, but the unintended consequences of its activity here show the dangers of collaborating with an institution we can't influence. Other factors also caused difficulties at The Meadows: our early tenant leaders were relative newcomers to the complex, and older building residents recalled bad experiences with a prior tenant association, which had failed to build enough trust in the community and ultimately collapsed. In its early stages, the new tenant organization we helped build in The Meadows threatened to go down the same road, with a dedicated but self-selecting group of leaders who emphasized punitive security-oriented demands and made little effort to develop ties with neighbors outside

Opposite Problems, Similar Outcomes:

- *Woodland Manor's connection to an NGO provided space, but their suspicion slowed our relationship-building with tenants*
- *The Meadows lack of space and a community partner made it hard to overcome tenants' initial skepticism*

of their closed and pre-existing network. Yet this association has also pursued other, more broadly popular demands, like a new community space for The Meadows and a comprehensive maintenance program. These ambitious projects currently seem to be the most promising route for building trust among The Meadows tenants and demonstrating the viability of organizing.

Over the summer, the bankruptcy court awarded the right to purchase the two complexes to an out-of-town affordable housing developer that is promising a comprehensive renovation of the property. While the Woodland Manor-based NGO largely took their promises at face value, we have been agitating for a binding agreement between the buyer and the tenants associations that would offer legally enforceable guarantees. While the new developer has made some concessions—like agreeing to replace the widely despised management company they originally planned to retain—they have not agreed to participate in meaningful collective bargaining, and this has become one of our major goals for the property.

As the bankruptcy and sale process has worn on, our tenant associations have worked hard to join forces, despite a bitter and sometimes violent legacy of rivalry between Woodland Manor and The Meadows. While we've found leaders within both properties, problems with turning out tenants to meetings and court dates have been issues at The Meadows. Advancing the capabilities of the current leadership from just gathering signatures and spreading news to being able to drive turnout of tenants to these events has become a priority. Expanding active membership in the TAs beyond the current circle of leaders will be key to ensuring that there is continued participation and thus continued pressure on the buyer. Despite neighborhood differences, joint meetings of the TA leaderships have begun to coordinate a common strategy for building a critical mass of tenant support and for dealing with the buyer.

“Organizers and tenant leaders in both properties are working to expand the rent strike to a dozen or more tenants by the beginning of 2020.”

The next step at Woodland Manor and The Meadows will be a rent strike, driven by the continued failure of the building's owner to make needed repairs to apartments and common spaces. Organizers and tenant leaders in both properties are working to expand the strike to a dozen or more tenants by the beginning of 2020. While almost all tenants there are either subsidized partially or completely, depriving the rent strike of some of its economic punch, the landlord seems desperate for cash

as evident by his willingness to cut deals during eviction suits. Organizing a strike also helps demonstrate the power of the tenant associations, providing the new owner with visible proof that failure to meet their obligations will be punished with economic resistance. And in the end, one of the most appealing arguments for taking part in a rent strike is that you shouldn't keep what you don't get: even if the current

owner won't make repairs, we can help put some money back into tenants' pockets.

While much has been said of the pitfalls of working with nonprofits and politicians, this experience so far has shown a clear difference in the effectiveness of allies (including NGOs) who believe in organizing versus those who only see success as the product of working with the courts, owners, and government regulatory bodies. A similar difference was whether allies were able to recognize the importance of material interest when choosing to believe the owner or not. Legal aid organizations that have been active in the tenants' rights crisis were more cognizant of this reality and have been helpful in representing tenants. The politicians and remaining nonprofits, on the other hand, were far more inclined to believe that their aims could be accomplished simply by working through the system--trusting the new buyer to provide reliable information and fulfil handshake agreements, for instance. They failed to realize what tenants already know: existing legal and economic systems are designed to benefit those who build, own, and manage housing and not those who live within it.

When the Landlord is a Nonprofit: Manor View

Yet tenant organizing is not just about fighting for-profit landlords and developers. Nonprofit developers and management companies exploit tenants in similar ways. Like for-profits, they must extract rent from tenants and face similar incentives to skimp on maintenance and security. While they may be more sympathetic to poor people and justify their actions in terms of a moral mission, anyone who has tried to organize a union in a nonprofit workplace knows that such rhetoric means little when material interests are at stake. At Manor View, SOS stepped in to help a group of tenants already organizing against their management, in a complex owned by an organization affiliated with the Catholic Church. The building started as a great place to live (tenants describe it as "like a hotel" and full of wholesome activities and amenities), but roughly four years ago something changed abruptly and the building was stripped of public furniture, amenities were removed, and the building quickly began to fall into disrepair. While we don't know exactly what happened at the management company, events at the building quickly showed that even if nonprofit owners are good, and doing good, this state of being is insecure without tenant power.

At first, integrating into this campaign was challenging: the tenants were eager to organize meetings on their own and it was not always clear what SOS's role in the building would be. As our support work in the building continued, we began to learn that tenants in the building were being actively retaliated against. Spurious eviction cases were filed against some of the main organizers, and one of them was even framed for stealing a master key, though no evidence was ever produced. SOS was a crucial source of outside support and advice for the organizers, and we earned their trust as a result: they've come to our events, offered to support our organizing at Garden Terrace, and have taken a leading role in the new DC Tenants Union. Manor View has helped us to see the diversity of tenant organizing possibilities in DC and has taught us to mistrust the NGO infrastructure, even if in many cases it is the best

immediately-available alternative to for-profit slumlords and neoliberal politicians bent on expelling the poor from valuable parcels of public land (though Manor View itself is on land owned by the church). We can also claim some practical achievements: after presenting a petition signed by a majority of the property's residents, the non-profit developer agreed to fire the management company. Now we are pushing them to include the tenant association in the selection of a new company and hope to bargain more comprehensively about how the property is run.

Organizing Our Own: Walnut Grove

Another especially promising new development is the push among some SOS organizers to organize their own apartment buildings. One such effort is at Walnut Grove. The Grove is a two-building complex of around 209 units in a gentrifying DC neighborhood home to many DSA members. The complex's demographics are a mix of older black residents, Latino families, and single, young, primarily white gentrifiers.

The SOS organizer along with a couple of their acquaintances form the core of the organizing committee at the moment. With assistance from SOS, they created a flyer to announce a meeting to discuss forming a tenant association. The organizers flyered the complex and held a meeting outside one of the buildings on a weeknight evening. Around 30 tenants showed up to the meeting. The main problems raised by the tenants were lack of 24-hour security and maintenance staff, the absence of any areas for tenant socializing, and an unresponsive building manager. Some tenants also said the manager racially discriminates against the building's black tenants. Older residents reported there was an effort to start a tenant association around three years ago, but the effort petered out.

Our efforts here are just getting off the ground: there has been one meeting so far and another is planned soon, where the organizing committee will hopefully be expanded and the group will discuss writing a letter to management to demand they address the problems raised in the first meeting.

Our First Rent Strike: Hunter Court

Finally, our most recent effort is among our most promising projects yet. About three months ago, we started organizing at Howard Court, a rent-controlled 101-unit building in the heart of Columbia Heights, a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood in Northwest DC. This building is owned by Urban Investment Properties (UIP), a large and politically-connected developer whose business model is to buy occupied, rent-controlled buildings that have suffered from long-term neglect, push working class tenants out through neglect, harassment, and buy-outs, use loopholes in the rent control law to raise rents to market rate, and then renovate the properties to make them appealing to higher income tenants. UIP has done more than any other developer to exploit the vulnerabilities in DC's rent laws that the Reclaim Rent Control coalition (which DSA is participating in) is trying to fix. The building we are organizing is in the middle

of this process and tenants, most of whom are Central American immigrants who only speak Spanish, are living with mold, cockroaches, rats, inadequate heating and countless other housing code violations.

We began by knocking doors, inviting tenants to our first meeting where about 20 tenants came. By the third meeting, we had canvassed the entire building to better understand the issues people were having in each unit. With this information, a core group of six tenants wrote a formal list of demands. We knocked on doors, collected about 80 signatures to support the demands, and organized a delegation at UIP's corporate office; managers told the tenants they would fix as much as they could but that "these things take time" and "they can't afford everything".

Once the tenants saw that UIP continued to ignore their demands, our next step was to send a formal letter in November giving the management company until December 1st to make repairs or face a rent strike. Management clearly felt threatened by the letter and began making limited repairs. Talking to tenants we realized these repairs consisted mostly of painting and patching drywall, not structural fixes; there is still inadequate heat, infestations, and mold. Tenants are now withholding rent for December and more will be joining in January until UIP makes the necessary repairs in the first rent strike SOS has organized independently.

Unsurprisingly, organizing a rent strike presented major logistical challenges and we were less ready than we thought. One of the lessons we learned from talking to tenants about the rent strike is the importance of 1-on-1s. Over the course of three months, we saw a lot of engagement from tenants at meetings or signing the petition, but we lacked an understanding of the issues of individual tenants. When it was time for tenants to actually sign on to the rent-strike and place their rent in escrow, we struggled because we did not develop enough individual relationships through 1-on-1 conversations. Of course, we are not giving up on expanding the strike. In early December we organized a rally that brought more than 100 community members to rally at the building, and we believe this show of support is helping develop more buy-in. But critically, we are going to focus on more 1-on-1s and intensive follow-up with people who weren't ready to join in December. Unlike strikes in a workplace, rent strikes can start with a minority of tenants participating and gradually build over time, and we are optimistic about expanding the struggle. We plan to offer more details about the logistics of a rent strike in another publication in early 2020.

Socialists in the Tenants Union

Pushing the tenants movement left

The most significant SOS development in the last six months has been the launch of the DC Tenants Union on July 20, after months of preparatory meetings with tenants and organizers from across the city. The union is becoming the central venue for integrating our building-level work with citywide organizing of all kinds. Unlike SOS, the core of the union is largely composed of militant black and Latino tenant lead-

ers who began by fighting to organize their own buildings (sometimes with the help of SOS or other groups). Although NGOs play a significant role in it, the leaders are justly skeptical of nonprofit influence and of local politicians; they are determined to maintain their autonomy. While one significant function of the union will be fighting for legislation like rent control—which will mean taking on the risks of engagement with DC’s heinous political class—it is not purely a political instrument. It will also create structures for tenant leaders and organizers in different buildings to exchange skills and experiences, as well as to mobilize citywide support for rallies and rent strikes. This diversity of tactics makes the tenants union a potent weapon of working-class power.

The tenants union is led by a 15-member board with representatives from three geographically defined chapters, which all meet on a monthly basis. It mobilizes members to support a citywide campaign to strengthen DC’s rent control laws (as part of a coalition of which DSA is also a member) and supports building-level tenant associations. Two of our members were elected, along with two leaders in tenant associations we helped build. We are striving to gradually integrate our activity into the tenants union: we encourage our members to attend and speak up in union meetings and we push the tenants we organize to join. We are experimenting with strategies to get more rank-and-file tenants union members involved in canvasses and actions we organize—like co-branding canvasses—and we’re trying to convince union leaders to help out with new organizing projects. We are consciously working within the union to support more internal democracy and militant strategies. In the near future, we hope to launch a newsletter to advance our perspective to other tenant activists and broadcast the struggles taking place across the city to unorganized tenants who might want to jump in.

This is a major opportunity for Stomp Out Slumlords, but it also challenges some of the basic assumptions with which the campaign began, as well as some of the leading models of base-building that have recently emerged in DSA. A tenants union, after all, is a typical membership organization of the kind Piven and Cloward criticized—requiring large and ongoing investments of organizer effort, dependent on continuing growth in membership rolls, and vulnerable to capture by middle-class people with the time and resources to participate. It is also not an organization that has any organic connection to DSA (compared to, say, the Philly Tenants Union’s link to Philly Socialists), nor is DSA likely to become its dominant organizational force—which implies that the efforts we put in may be “wasted” from the point of view of building a socialist organization. These objections deserve to be taken seriously.

Tenants Union as Connective Tissue

While we remain keenly aware of the risks involved in committing resources to a membership-based organization, we see this one as a way to overcome the inherent limitations of our current strategies. Canvassing alone proved unable to generate enough disruptive potential to seriously interfere with the workings of the eviction machine. The durable relationships with tenant leaders we’ve been able to form by

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turning to building organizing have not detracted from that goal; in fact, at Garden Terrace the number of evictions dropped dramatically with the new management introduced as a result of tenant resistance. Ever since we started supporting property-level tenant organizations, we have been interested in developing organic horizontal connections between them in addition to adding more building-level campaigns to our roster. Linking up struggles in different buildings is critical on a number of levels. Solidarity from the wider community can make tenant activists more confident, contact with other fights can give building-level leaders practical examples of strategies and tactics they can use, and uniting struggles in multiple buildings owned or managed by the same company can increase tenants’ leverage. Meanwhile, connecting campaigns in different properties helps politicize them: the experience of shared struggle helps members of the tenants union understand that they aren’t just representatives of tenants in one building dealing with a particularly bad landlord, but rather members of a broader class fighting one battle in a wider struggle against landlords as a class.

As, we have noted before, we have struggled to make SOS itself an effective hub for these struggles. Simply put, rank-and-file tenants do not see the DSA as an organization that belongs to or is designed for them, and we see no effective way to change this dynamic. Before the tenants union launched, our initial efforts to connect tenants from different buildings strained our own organizational capacity and raised uncomfortable questions about power relations. But the tenant leaders we've contacted have eagerly embraced the tenants union as their own project and they enthusiastically work to bring more people into it. Thus working in a tenants union framework can free us up to pursue organizing and canvassing projects with confidence that these efforts will become part of a greater whole—including projects in the buildings where we live, which have been comparatively neglected up until now in the SOS structure. Meanwhile, operating under the umbrella of the tenants union allows us to work alongside black and Latino working-class leaders as comrades and equals—after all, most of us are tenants too. All of this would be much more difficult in an organization where adherence to a political program, loyalty to certain politicians, and an unspoken set of cultural norms is a condition of participation.

SOS is not the only organization working within the tenants union. It includes tenant associations that have been organized and led by a number of nonprofit organizations from around the city, most of them with their own funding and professional staff. These nonprofits continue to devote staff time to help run the tenants union and routinely deploy these resources to ends that, from our perspective, are unproductive. But we believe working alongside these groups will be politically helpful. We hope that within the tenants union structure, SOS will have the ability to support militant tenants and help them grasp the power to determine how those resources are being used. And if the nonprofits refuse to follow the democratic directives of the union, it will be an opportunity to expose their fundamental class character. As one longtime tenant activist said in a meeting in May, “The existence of a union will hold nonprofits accountable.” It will also hold us accountable, since our current dynamic with tenant leaders is that we present them with choices but they rarely get any input into how we operate, especially outside of their own building.

Tenant Struggle is Class Struggle

In a group as institutionally and ideologically heterogeneous as this one, we will inevitably be one voice among many. This is a strength, not a weakness. Our experience has been that the language of socialism does not, in and of itself, generate much interest from people not already in or adjacent to the organized left. Our hope is that by demonstrating the meaning of socialist values in day-to-day struggle—and contrasting them with the managerial or class-conciliationist approaches of other forces in DC politics—we will build credibility for both SOS and DSA among the tenant leaders in the union. What tenants have said that they appreciate about SOS is that we show up, day after day, not in the service of a political career or a job but because we believe in organizing the working class. In the context of the tenants union, we think we have something to offer and that we have an opportunity to attract allies and organizers to our ranks. This doesn’t just mean building relationships; it means demonstrating the centrality of class struggle and the helplessness of the dominant ideology when it comes to understanding how conflicts work. Unlike liberal NGOs, we don’t think tenants, landlords, and developers can or should come together around shared interests, and we don’t shy away from direct action and disruptive protest. Debates about the direction of the tenants union can give us an opportunity to win working-class activists over to our politics by demonstrating the practical stakes of our analysis. We would be unlikely to catch such a wide net operating within a mere front group.

We think it is premature to see this fragile toehold primarily in terms of its ability to funnel people into DSA’s membership rolls. The value of making DSA a less white and less professional organization is evident to us, but it is harder for us to make that case to tenants, who have no particular reason to see DSA as substantially different from organizations like ONE DC or Empower DC which already compete for their membership dues (though these organizations are more diverse than DSA). If we’re correct that a multi-tendency socialist approach is a more effective way to deliver results for tenants in DC than traditional community organizing, it’s on us to prove

it—not on them to accept long-term promissory notes about what we'd eventually be able to do with a larger membership. In the long run, the victory or even the survival of socialism will depend on the skills and practices of militant working-class self-organization, not on the fortunes of DSA.

If anything, we expect to be the ones to learn something from the experience of working in an ideologically diverse tenants union framework. Already in the preparatory stage, we heard tenants working out the language in which they understand their fight—a language centered on the right to not be forced out, the role of slumlords on every level (who “can come from anywhere, even from your church,” as one tenant put it), the call for safe and well-maintained housing no matter who owns it. There are, of course, many ways in which this understanding overlaps with a socialist analysis, but it is not a vocabulary that comes readily to people skeptical of the language of rights and accustomed to centering capital as the primary opponent. We come to the union hoping, as always, to find our place in the real movement to abolish the present state of things.

“Through our work in the tenants union we hope to demonstrate the centrality of class struggle and the helplessness of the dominant ideology when it comes to understanding how conflicts work.”
