

Building power for better housing



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by John Petit, managing attorney

In my childhood, I can remember my Dad talking about being part of a union. He was a tire builder at Firestone and a member of the United Rubber Workers as they sought to protect workers rights. These were the early years of the labor organizing movement in Akron. Work conditions were dangerous, dealing with management was difficult and benefits were minimal. . Over time, as the union grew in successes and ranks, conversations about fair wages and safety led to more sophisticated bargaining goals like insurance, leave time and seniority protections.

This ingrained in me from early on the simple underlying concept of unions: many people speaking together have significantly more power than any number of people speaking individually. Organizing shifts power imbalances created by wealth and position.

Those lessons hold true today into my practice as a legal aid attorney focused on low-income housing issues. Housing, perhaps more than any other facet of American life, draws a clear line of demarcation between poor and not.

Somewhere along the way, we as a society accepted that it's reasonable to expect that the amount of money you have will dictate whether you have a safe place to lay your head at the end of the day. This is clear in both the quality and quantity of housing available for low-income Americans.

The power in landlord-tenant issues in Ohio has always been skewed toward landlords, especially when it comes to low-income housing. There just isn't enough affordable housing stock to meet the need, especially when you're looking for quality, safe affordable housing. After all, property owner rights are paramount in our society.

It's not a stretch, then, to draw a parallel between the housing inequity for renters and the rise of labor unions during the industrial revolution, which developed in response to poor working conditions, scant benefits and unfair treatment by management. Just like labor unions were designed to collectively bargain for and enforce workers' rights as far back as the 1800s, tenant unions of today can empower renters to enforce their right to safe and secure housing and bargain for change.

Consider this: One renter complains about her heat not working. For weeks or even months, the issue goes unresolved. Fed up, this renter threatens to follow the proper legal steps to escrow her rent with the court, in an effort to force her landlord to fix the problem. But as one of a hundred renters in her complex, her \$500 rent isn't missed by the large investment company who manages the property. And so the weeks go by, and the problem persists, and our renter gets tired of the process and decides to leave but where will she go? Did she do everything right in the process? Because if not, she may lose her housing and any subsidy that she may be

receiving. The demand for affordable housing far exceeds the supply. So she stocks up on blankets and relies on dangerous space heaters to keep herself and her family warm in Ohio's coldest months, all the while her mental and physical health declines from the stress of her situation.

Now, consider this scenario: Our renter above is one of dozens or more renters who escrow their rent. And suddenly, our landlord is missing a significant chunk of their monthly income -- a situation that will perpetuate until they fix the problem.

This is the power of organized tenant unions.

Our hope is that this model of supporting groups of tenants brings about real, lasting, structural change. If it becomes the norm for tenants to mobilize and exercise their rights as renters collectively, that changes the tone of the conversation around landlord-tenant issues, and it shifts the power dynamic to a more equitable place.

We at Community Legal Aid, along with other community agencies, currently are working with tenant groups in three different counties. Over and over again in these conversations, we hear our fellow Ohioans ask for the same things -- things I'd bet any of us would want and expect in our own homes:

- Functioning heat and running water
- Living conditions free of mold and pest/rodent infestation
- Structural integrity and doors/windows that close and lock
- Appropriate waste disposal

- A safe and secure living environment with outside lighting and security
- Non-threatening interactions with the people they're paying for their homes

In the legal field, we call these bullets a list of "demands." And as Frederick Douglass famously said, "Power concedes nothing without demands."

But as I think back to those conversations with my Dad as a child, I think we could use another word to describe what our tenants are asking for: Dignity.

This article is part of Legal Aid's ["Big Ideas" series](#).

Last updated on October 14, 2021.

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