

Philadelphia Tenants Union's COVID-19 Organizing Guide



Philly is in crisis. We are in not just a public health crisis but also a deep political and economic crisis. Many of us can't make our rent. The government is unwilling to take the drastic measures needed to keep people in their homes. The landlords and housing market profit off of our suffering and are giving no leniency.

But take a deep breath. There are many organizational tools that will give you the ability to work with your friends, neighbors, and fellow tenants to leverage the power of numbers against landlords. This is a guide for new organizers during the COVID-19 crisis.

The best way to get further resources and support from us is to [join](#) the Philly Tenants Union!

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Documents

1. [Sample demand letter to your landlord](#)
2. [Sample leaflet to fellow tenants](#)
3. [Sample rent negotiation letter with your landlord \(individual\)](#)

Who Are Your People?

- **Find your fellow tenants.** Who are the other tenants who need to be on your side against your landlord? In some cases this might be easy: if you are in a building you know where to look. For tenants whose landlords have properties spread in single family homes across the city, this might take more work.
- **Search databases.** You can use <https://property.phila.gov> to:
 - Search for your landlord's name and determine what other properties they own
 - Your landlord's name might be recorded differently than you'd expect on the website. In that case, you can first search your address, which shows the owner's name. Then you can use that name to find your landlord's other properties.
 - The PTU also has private (hidden from landlords) tools for this. [Join up with us.](#)
- **Be wary of the social media shortcut.** While social media is one tool to look for fellow tenants of your landlord, keep in mind that the people who respond to a post in a community facebook group will be a small fraction of the fellow tenants you will need on board for successful collective action.
- **Talk to tenants.**
 - Doorknocking and face to face conversations are the most effective. Right now as people are avoiding contact, it might be better to leave a leaflet under the door or in the door handle, and information to contact you. If you feel comfortable, leave your personal number rather than a Google voice number, and leave your name with it.
 - If you decide to knock on your neighbors doors, ensure that you follow guidelines of keeping a 6ft distance for conversations, and make sure to bring hand sanitizer and gloves.
- **Plan a one-on-one.** When you make contact, you can move into a one-on-one conversation. These meetings are best in person, but given social distancing, can also be done over the phone, Zoom or Google Hangouts.

One-on-one Conversations

- **One-on-ones are the heart of an organizing campaign.** They are an organizer's main tool for changing someone's motivations and bringing them onboard the campaign. They are vulnerable conversations where you discover someone's issue, make them face the reality of it, and get them to realize their issue is the result of a system (ie. a landlord) and that collective action has the power to change it despite the risks. **Without one-on-ones, you cannot get solid commitments from people.**

One-on-ones are NOT	One-on-ones ARE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● A conversation over text, email, or facebook.	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You talking most of the time • Transactional, just getting someone to sign onto or agree with something • “Fishing” for issues (“Don’t you think we should go on rent strike? Don’t you think the landlord is a jerk?”). In other words, don’t ask leading questions and assume that they must already have a certain problem that you obviously have the answer to already. You must LISTEN and DISCOVER their issues first, or else you are effectively putting words in their mouth and failing to discover the issues they actually care about. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A face-to-face conversation. Best in person, but can also be done on the phone or video chat. • Mostly asking questions - listening 80% of the time and talking 20% of the time • Being empathetic • Agitating someone and getting them angry about the issue • Always a little uncomfortable. You are probably asking someone to do something outside their comfort zone. You must be comfortable with silence if the other person does not have an immediate response to your question, and be comfortable waiting until they give you one. • Asking someone to both seriously consider the risks involved, and what will happen if they don’t take action. Only that way can you get authentic, lasting commitments.
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- **There is a process to one-on-ones:** see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) for what it looks like!
- **Practice helps.** If you haven’t done one before, try practicing with a friend or fellow organizer! No one starts out being good at one-on-ones. It is a skill to learn and it takes practice.
- Whether the conversation goes well, or less than well, always ensure you have their contact information. You can try to get them on board again in the future, but you’ll never get another chance if you don’t have their number.

Leadership Identification

- A strong organizing campaign is full of leaders, and not driven by a small heroic group of individuals. **It is essential (and democratic) to identify new leaders in a campaign, and bring them onboard the campaign first.** Often, they may not have had any prior organizing experience before.
- [A leader is someone who has followers.](#) They most easily convince others to take action when this person asks -- sign a demand letter, join the rent strike. **Leaders are not necessarily whoever is the most talkative / loud / “woke”, rather they are the**

people others turn to for advice. They are the people who get things done. You don't always need to be the leader, but you'll want to have the leaders on board when you make a suggestion.

- Across a landlord's properties, or even between floors of a building, **tenants already have the people they trust and it is often not you.** Communities have their own natural leaders.
- Leaders can be found by asking questions like "who around here is someone you go to for advice or help? who around here is reliable?" Crucially, a leader must be able to follow up on a task. For example, at the end of a one-on-one, if you ask someone "can you get petition signatures from each of the tenants on this floor?" and they come back a couple days later with barely any, you don't have a leader.
- Help leaders learn. Leaders are people who can get things done, but that doesn't mean they already have all the organizing skills. If someone seems interested, work on tasks alongside them until they can do it by themselves. Delegate tasks and follow up with them.
- **If you try to do everything yourself, people will not be invested in the campaign.** Delegating tasks and letting people take ownership of tasks is key to organizing, even if you think you would do it better or you like your idea more.
- As a rule of thumb, there should be around one leader per 10 tenants. In practice that might mean a leader per floor of tenants in a building, a leader per small property, or a leader per block.

Tenant Mapping

- Drawing physical maps of tenants and where they live is an extremely helpful exercise. Seriously. Use the map to visualize who you have support from, who you still need to convince, the connections/relationships between each tenant, and the main leader of each grouping.
- People are already organized. Expand the map to include each tenants' own social networks, churches, workplaces, and other communities. You want to find and build on the organization that is already there. For example, a tenant may be deeply connected to their church, and it could be wise to bring in the pastor's help as another leader in the campaign.

Connecting Tenants and Hosting a Meeting

- **Communication channels should be whatever most people can communicate on.** While it can be tempting to recruit people to your favorite encrypted app, the most powerful group is one where the most number of people can communicate.
- **Host a meeting.** Usually the best method to determine problems and demands is a group meeting, as people can get overwhelmed by text threads. Since that might not be possible right now, consider having a virtual meeting on Zoom, Google hangouts, a

conference call, or any other virtual method. People trust each other more when they have seen each others faces and heard their voices -- it's hard to go into a scary fight with strangers.

- **Reach out to literally everyone multiple times to remind them about the meeting!** *Organizing is 90% follow up.* It can be tempting to take shortcuts through mass texts or emails, but many people will not attend if not individually invited and reminded to. Organizing happens through relationships, and you are building a relationship of trust between you and this tenant.
- **Plan a simple agenda.** Ask people to share a little about themselves: who they are, maybe how they are coping with the pandemic. Look for opportunities for mutual aid to build trust. Encourage people to share as well how the pandemic is impacting their housing -- are they struggling to make rent? Is it forcing them to confront the shitty conditions in their house they were otherwise avoiding? While you want to be wary of time, it's important to make space for people to vent and agitate themselves over this situation. Then plan to discuss what people's biggest **collective** issues are, and what demands they want to make.

Organizing Tenants Democratically

- You might know right from the start you want a strike. And that's awesome -- **but if your agenda isn't the same as others, you may fail to get the numbers you need for support.**
- Democratic organizing isn't just about voting on actions, it's about letting tenant's voices be heard. Voting can sometimes hide people's real concerns because of peer pressure or shyness. People's concerns and feelings must be brought to the table when decisions are made and, ideally, found out and worked through with one-on-ones.
- People whose input was included during the planning stages of an action are more likely to participate in or even take leadership in the action. **Don't expect to plan an action and then have everyone "just show up."**
- Escalating actions help. **Many tenants who are hesitant about an action that is "too radical" may be radicalized when the group decides to settle on a less scary step first, and find it doesn't meet their needs.** It happens when someone thought their landlord was "just doing his job and would 'probably understand'" but when confronted with a phone call, the landlord yells at them and claims not to care and ignores their issues. Sometimes it can be frustrating settling for a step you don't feel like will do anything, but it serves important needs. It helps train the group in doing collective action together, empowers them, and agitates them against their landlord when the landlord responds poorly. They may then be ready for more dramatic steps. **Tenants who don't yet feel ready to withhold rent can be encouraged through "baby step" collective action to get there** -- such as everyone simultaneously paying rent late on the same day. It's a show of power of the union and tells the landlord -- we can strike at any time.

Remember, going into an action with the most amount of people on board is the best way to success.

Relationships are Key to Organizing

- **Trust is key.** People will only take collective action that puts their livelihood at risk with people they really, truly trust. It is necessary to build strong personal relationships with the people you are organizing.
- **Meet people where they are at.** Not everyone will come to the table from the beginning with radical politics or prepared to strike on command. We can't walk into a community and beat them over the head with our values. Listen to and respect their opinions and concerns. Through agitation, organization, working together and relationship building, people come to share some of the same values.
- **Management will try to retaliate.** Unstable relationships will lead to people backing down fast, and being willing to take individual meetings with landlords to negotiate instead of collective bargaining. The more undeveloped relationships there are among tenants when the landlord begins retaliating (which can be sooner than you expect), the worse off your campaign. Everyone is weaker as an individual and stronger as a collective. They need to trust that your collective has their best interests in mind to not cave.

Achieving Demands

- **What exactly do you want?** A winnable demand might be a repayment plan with no evictions or reduced rent for two months. Maybe the biggest complaint is something other than rent altogether -- maybe people are upset that essential maintenance is frozen.
 - Good demands are:
 - Specific
 - Given with a timeline
 - Widely shared among the group
 - **Achievable.** *What your landlord gives up is roughly equivalent to the damage your collective action is doing.* Landlords operate logically (...more or less). If your collective actions are doing equivalent or more damage to the landlord because a demand isn't being met, then it is in the landlord's interest to agree to the demand. If your collective action does not meet this threshold, then it is extremely unlikely the demand will be won.
 - A demand does not need to "go for the gold" right off the bat. In fact, demands often fail if they do because there is usually not enough collective power built in the beginning to achieve the highest demand. Smaller demands that can initially be won more easily, such as simply getting a video chat with your landlord when

they wouldn't previously, can build up the collective confidence in order to eventually lead to calling for the highest demand.

- **Who has the power to fix the problem?** For smaller companies, this might be easy: the landlord whose name is on all your rent checks. For larger developers, it may be less clear. Identify a person in management who has the ability to either fix the problem or make the call, and whose pockets would be hurt by collective action.
- **Which tactics can work?** Tactics can leverage social, political, and/or financial pressure on a landlord. Social pressure means impacting a landlord's personal relationships in their community, or impacting their sense of power over tenants. Political pressure means leveraging media, city officials, and legislative means to influence a landlord. Financial pressure means hurting a landlord's profits. Typically, financial pressure with some political pressure is the most effective in achieving a demand.
- It deserves special mention that **a demand on your landlord for rent suspension with no back pay owed would be extraordinarily difficult to achieve**. The actions tenants can possibly take against a landlord can't match up to the financial losses the landlord would take by agreeing to this demand. Strongly consider a different demand -- winning something is better than winning nothing. Demanding this of *the state* is another matter though, and one we can fight for (see section on Looking Ahead).

Escalating Actions

Here is a toolkit of ideas for escalating against your landlord under COVID-19. Your path might look different depending on your members, your landlord and your demands.

When choosing a tactic, ask:

- Will this increase the pressure and push the landlord to cave in to demands?
- Is it visible -- to your landlord, or to people who your landlord cares about?
- Are enough people ready to do it?
- How will others react? Will it unify people?
- How will management react? How can we prepare people for retaliation?
- Does it look like a bunch of fun?

 <p>Escalating “heat” in a campaign</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Celebrate victory! ● Collectively paid rent late ● Car protest circling landlord’s house ● Spoke to the media ● Flyered outside the landlord’s house ● Collective meeting with landlord on zoom ● Sent complaint letters to the charities the landlord works with and to their church ● Mass call-in to the landlord’s office / cell ● Reported landlord’s violations to L&I ● Circulate an online petition ● Shamed the landlord on social media ● Set up a facebook page for your campaign ● Delivered a letter to the landlord’s doorstep ● Gathered signatures on a demand letter ● Defined demands: 3 month reduced rent ● Met as a small group <p style="text-align: center;">Actions</p>
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Rent Strikes

Before you call for a rent strike, has your group...

- Attempted collective negotiation with your landlord?
- Attempted a one-on-one with every tenant under the landlord?
 - If you live in a large building, then just the tenants in building are enough
 - If you live in a small property, then you will need to reach out to the landlord’s other properties
 - If you live in a landlord’s only property, then unfortunately it is extremely unlikely a rent strike will work and negotiation is the best bet
- Clearly formulated collective demands to your landlord that haven’t been met yet?
- Gotten commitments from a supermajority (i.e. >75%) of tenants under the landlord?
- Organized a collective backup plan if the rent strike fails?

It is essential to build trust among all tenants of your group before attempting. Collective actions prior to a rent strike build the confidence of the group you are working with to ensure that they see others are also on their side. If a tenant doesn’t trust the members of the group

and isn't convinced collective action will work, it isn't guaranteed they will participate and they might quietly pay their rent.

If you have no income to pay rent, then a "rent strike" is an immediately attractive action. But that is not so much a rent strike as it is non-payment of rent. A rent strike means building deep organizing roots among all tenants and collectively withholding rent *even when people have the means to in order to meet a demand*. Non-payment of rent means...you have no income, and thus cannot pay rent. **A rent strike is a demonstration of collective power, while mass non-payment of rent is collective desperation**. It goes without saying that many landlords do not care if you are desperate, and neither does eviction court. If your goal is a "rent strike" *but you have no income to begin with, then you have no financial pressure to leverage*.

A rent strike is a tool, not a demand. A rent strike is a tool that may be used to achieve a demand that you believe can be met by withholding rent payments to your landlord and forcing them to address the issue because it affects their bottom line. Like with labor strikes, it is the tool of last resort, delivering the most damaging impact to your landlord but also carrying the biggest risks (i.e. eviction). **In a situation where the demand is "stop collecting rent from me", it's questionable how effective a rent strike would be**. To put it another way, how does withholding rent pressure a landlord to suspend rent? Whether they suspend rent or not, the situation is the same for the landlord (no profits). If they don't agree to suspend, they reserve the right to evict the tenant when the court reopens, while if they do agree to suspend, they get nothing. **In this case, it would be wiser to instead leverage social or political pressure on a landlord -- for example, pushing the landlord and the city to support a rent and mortgage moratorium**.

Rent strikes can be powerful. Hitting a landlord's pockets obviously hurts them the most, and a rent strike successfully carried out can force them to cave to pressure on demands. For a situation such as lack of repairs being done or other collective complaints, a rent strike is a strong tool when all else fails. But the rent strike is the means to the end, not the end itself. **Think about what your demands are, and what tactics can best get you there**.

Looking Ahead

The city and its people are in crisis as our entire economy is spiraling towards a deep recession. **By many estimates, the COVID-19 crisis is going to last for months**. That means, of course, we need to organize. Given the urgency of the situation, **it's tempting to take shortcuts** -- only reaching out to your immediate circle, or individually trying to communicate with your landlord, or trying to gather as many petition signatures as possible without thorough conversations, or trying to organize everything on your own, or pushing ahead with drastic actions and demands without commitment from others.

But as the Tenants Union has learned from (many, painful) past failures, **there are no shortcuts**. Building strong, durable organization among tenants where there is an abundance of leaders and widespread trust yields the most successful and lasting results. **It takes time using the strategies we describe here**. Looking ahead we face mass evictions and continued unemployment when the immediate danger of COVID-19 passes. The state will intervene, as it already has, but it will most likely intervene in favor of bailing out landlords and the housing market rather than tenants. To have a fighting chance with the state, tenants will need to be organized on a mass scale that is not there currently. **Taking shortcuts now means losing crucial time we have to build the organization we'll need in the near future to confront all that lies ahead.**