

EUROPEAN TENANT ORGANISER EXCHANGE



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This is a report derived from the experiences of the Tenants Exchange that happened in Barcelona in May 2019. It is part minutes, part toolkit, and does not attempt to reproduce everything that was shared at the meetings. Instead, it aims to accessibly outline some of the debates held there on different forms of tenants' organisation, and offer an insight into the issues organisers are facing across Europe, and their solutions to them. It reports on the statements of those organisers present, rather than being a fully researched comparative study. For full minutes, or to discuss anything it contains, please contact tenantsexchange@gmail.com.

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Editor: Jacob Wills

Graphic design by Matt Bonner revoltdesign.org

Photography by Cristian Pinto, Neil Harvey (p9) and Chris Moses (p10).

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Press conference held by the Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval during the BarcelonaVsBlackstone campaign.

1.

INTRODUCTION

LIVING RENT (LR) - SCOTLAND

Living Rent is a national, membership-based tenants' union in Scotland, organising with renters across all sectors (private, social, council). There is an elected National Committee, and branches in different cities. Significantly, local branches have now been established in several working-class communities across Glasgow, and building this local power is now the main focus of the union, as well as expanding the knowledge, capacity and skills of our membership. We also fight campaigns around illegal letting agent fees, homelessness and winter evictions, holiday lets, and rent controls.

Victories - have won lots of cases against landlords and agencies by taking direct action; fought a major campaign against SERCO's evictions of asylum seekers and refugees in Glasgow, mobilising thousands of people and building alliances; local branch in Wyndford forced energy giant SSE to the negotiating table over heating charges; establishing local branches in areas with an absence of any tenant organisation for decades.

ACORN - ENGLAND

ACORN is an international organisation that started in the UK five years ago. It has 7 branches across the UK, with a couple of national paid organisers and a national board that decides the strategy, city branches and also local groups. We try to recruit people locally who aren't already involved in political life. Acorn is not just about the private rented sector, but it is the issue that comes up the most.

Victories - We won landlord licensing in Bristol, Sheffield and Newcastle, and we forced Bristol City council to drop a £4m council tax rise for the poorest. ACORN is part of a coalition of groups that campaigned against banks with mortgage agreements that prevent people on benefits renting the houses. After a direct

action campaign with LRU and other organisations, the banks have all changed their mortgage agreements. ACORN and LRU also worked together to end no-fault evictions. In the UK, private renters can be kicked out for no reason with 2 months notice - the government has now promised to end this.

HABITA! - PORTUGAL

Habita! is not yet a tenants union, but is in a research process about how to set one up. The organisation started in 2005, working primarily with migrants in informal settlements facing demolition, and with families occupying empty houses. More and more we are now working with tenants, though not yet as a membership organisation. We organise across Lisbon with assemblies in some neighbourhoods. We range from direct action to working on policy and legal frameworks to mass mobilisations to trainings. We do a lot of eviction resistance, and try to create collective resistance to 'individual' problems.

Victories - We have successfully used a range of tactics to pressure the municipality to stop evictions. We have changed some laws for the better, and we are in a big alliance-building process around housing issues.

LONDON RENTERS UNION (LRU)

LRU is a London-wide tenants union which launched around 18 months ago, primarily for private tenants. We have 3 branches, and are on the way to building more. We do a lot of outreach and 'member solidarity' (supporting one another) - we are trying to combine deep organising on the local level with mass mobilisation across the city and country. We are building a community of solidarity between renters because with people power we can force transformational change.

Victories - We are part of the campaign to end no-fault evictions for private renters - more security can help renters build longer-term relationships and more power. We have been winning on plenty of members' cases around disrepair, evictions, and temporary accommodation. The Newham branch is primarily migrant families who were not politically active before. We've got a good public profile, and recently met with the Mayor of London who has come out in favour of rent controls.

WARSAW TENANTS ASSOCIATION (WSL)

WSL was started in 2007 by local activists to represent tenants from privatised housing. After WW2 housing was nationalised, and for the last few years these houses are being returned to their 'legal' owners. The association works with people being evicted by these 'owners'. Jola Brzeska, one of the people who established organisation, was killed by the developers a few years ago. We are fighting on issues of standards in housing, heating etc.

Victories - We have stopped the privatisations, and made them a subject of public debate. We have also won battles getting particular buildings heating.

BOND PRECAIRE WOONVOREN (BPW) - THE NETHERLANDS

BPW is a union for people living in precarious housing situations. Squatting is now prohibited in The Netherlands so more forms of precarious housing have started to emerge. The union has grown and is now asking people to become members - our members are all sorts of low-income people. We meet every two months nationally. We are setting up local branches in 4 cities. We fight the evictions that happen when people lose their welfare.

Victories - We have really got politicians to notice us, partially by putting pressure on them through social media. Landlords don't like conflict with us because we are unpredictable! Though we've had some success defending individuals with the help of lawyers, we don't feel that creates systemic change. We have recently stopped a number of evictions, and our strength is organizing from below and making the stories of marginalised renters visible.

SINDICAT DE LLOGATERS (SLL) - CATALONIA

Created in 2017, the SLL is a new organisation but it has over 1500 affiliates and has handled hundreds of cases in the last 2 years. We meet every week, and are expanding fast through Catalonia (with 8 other branches besides the Barcelona one). There are other recently created organisations like ours in several Spanish cities too.

Our core focus at the moment is handling cases of uncontrolled rent increase and non-renewal of contracts through the EnsQuedem ("we stay") campaign, although the activity of the union ranges from case work and street action to pushing political actors to include favorable rental (and housing) policies in their platforms.

Victories - During its first year, the Sindicat helped to create legislation to enforce the construction of new public housing in Barcelona. Since the EnsQuedem campaign was launched, we have stopped many cases of rent increases or non-renewal, including successful resistances by entire buildings owned by a single landlord.

MIETENWAHNSINN - BERLIN

The Berlin group is not one of the city's unions but an alliance called Rent Insanity. Rent is rising very fast in Berlin after a long period of low rents since it transitioned to a fully capitalist city. The alliance is a mixture of groups, some housing groups and some political groups, with diverse histories. We organise horizontally, and people organise themselves locally. The groups exchange info at the network meetings so

they can support each other. There are renters associations in Berlin, but they are primarily big service organisations connected to political parties, apart from one radical one which produces a monthly paper.

Victories - We held a big protest against “Rent Insanity” and for self empowerment of tenants, which 25,000 people came to in 2018. This year the main campaigns are against landlords, rather than the politicians. Another alliance of tenants and activists in Berlin is running a big campaign to expropriate the houses of all companies that own more than 3,000 flats, which is going well. Together we created a demonstration this April, which was supported by 40,000 people.

DUBLIN TENANTS ASSOCIATION (DTA)

DTA started in 2015 researching problems – sub-standard accommodation, no-fault evictions, homelessness rates. We are still very small but affiliated with other organisations. We are a tenant group for supporting one another and making our voice heard. We recently took direct action with some other groups on the issue of empty homes, which got a lot of coverage. We are working on legislation, though there currently are laws that aren’t enforced. We are in conversation with other groups about starting a membership tenants union.

Successes: We have won lots of cases with tenants, and have a high profile in the media and among politicians. We campaign well with social media, and are producing a podcast; it’s important to inform people as many people don’t understand how bad the situation is.

CHALLENGES

How do we avoid service provision, empowering members to take charge of their own situation, and retain members after their struggle has ended? (LR, LRU, DTA, SLL)

How do we grow the membership, activate new members, and work as an accessible core group within a fast-growing organisation? (LR, ACORN, Habita!, LRU, and BPW).

How do those of us with geographical branch structures support the creation of new branches where there is enthusiasm for them, while supporting these branches to reproduce the DNA of the organisation effectively? (LR, ACORN, LRU, BPW).

How do we support volunteer organisers to build capacity and not burn out (LR, LRU)

How do we balance organising as tenants with organising around other housing or local issues? How do we maintain an analysis of the whole housing system while focusing on tenant organising? (ACORN, Habita!, WTA)



LRU demonstration on joint day of action against Natwest benefit discrimination



Living Rent Glasgow demonstration against Serco evictions of asylum seekers.

2.

FROM INDIVIDUAL TO COLLECTIVE HOUSING STRUGGLES

MEMBER DEFENCE AND CAMPAIGNS: CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDIES

BARCELONA - SINDICAT DE LLOGATERES

A year after its creation, the Sindicat de Llogateres launched the #EnsQuedem campaign. “Ens quedem” (*we stay*) is a civil disobedience campaign aimed at tackling cases in which the existing rent contract (now generally 5-7 years long) expires and the landlord either wants to abusively increase the rent or decides not to renew the contract. *Ens Quedem* was designed by the activists and lawyers of the union to enforce the (limited but existing) tenant rights and delay the evictions as much as possible while forcing landlords to negotiate. The union instructs the members that are facing a non-renewal or an abusive rise of their rent to follow these **basic points**:

- Keep paying the same rent. Nobody can kick us out of our home, except for a judge. If we keep paying the rent (even when our contract is over), the legal process against us is difficult and long enough to give us time to force the landlords to negotiate.
- Investigate the property. Is our landlord a person or a bank? Do they have more properties? Answering these questions is key to set a strategy of negotiation, and we can investigate by looking in the public records (cadastre/land registry, public trading registries, etc)
- Are other tenants facing the same problems with this landlord? Reach out to other tenants in the same situation and organize. This is an important way to collectivise; we also work with other grassroots local organisations, so that the victory belongs to the neighbourhood.
- Open a negotiation channel through the union. By sending a nice email to the owners, the union will make them understand that this tenant is not alone. And she's going nowhere.

The core of the Ens Quedem campaign (and the Sindicat's activity) is the assembly that takes place every week. It is a space of empowerment where the status of each case is shared and discussed, and new actions are collectively proposed.

How does it work?

When someone reaches the Sindicat for the first time, they participate in a “punt de benvinguda” (welcome point), which is the space for newcomers to explain the details of their issues. In this meeting (which they will only join once), they receive an introductory explanation about the Union and their rights, as well as the basic points aforementioned.

From that point on, and if they decide to fight to stay, they will begin participating in the weekly assembly. In the assembly space, they will not only share and discuss the status of their case, but they will be able to take part in the deliberations for other people's cases. The assembly is open to everyone, but we encourage tenants to become members of our union. Whenever we have to give specific legal advice or organize a campaign, we usually make sure they are members of the organization.

The facilitation and moderation of the assembly and the welcome point rotate every week (2 people), as well as other support roles (*a note taker, two meeting facilitators, someone in charge of controlling the time and turns, a person to make an intro for newcomers, and someone to manage a creche for children*).

The assemblies are usually on Fridays, and their length depends on how many people are there. People present their case in turn, and everyone discusses the case. The activists ensure to delegate to everyone so that it doesn't seem like they have all the answers.

One of the keys of the EnsQuedem campaign is the participation of lawyers in both the assemblies and in direct case work. These lawyers have a service agreement with the union, by which they provide legal counseling and provide one-to-one support to members.

SCOTLAND - LIVING RENT

The private rented sector in Scotland is extremely atomised, with lots of small scale landlords. Classic organising is very geographical, organising one block against the same landlord, as in Barcelona. This isn't always possible when everyone on the same street has a different landlord, so we've had to develop different systems. We also have had many legal advances in the last few years in Scotland, which have given us some new tools we can use.

Member Defence is driven by two things: we will never have the capacity to help every tenant in Scotland, and even if we did, that wouldn't be the best way to work.

Our goal is for, at the end of every case, the position of either the tenant, the union, or both, to be stronger. Tenants are often worried about being public about their case – but if they aren't willing to be public then to be honest, they're maybe best to go somewhere else, as we often don't have enough resources to deal with cases like that.

Landlords and letting agents want to portray these disputes as a private argument between two parties. We need to draw attention to the fact that these problems are structural.

We always have a public presence whenever meeting landlords or letting agents, for example by flyering the public and posting about it on social media. The goal here is to generalise the problems - turn them from a private dispute to a bigger political dispute.

By doing casework we find issues we didn't know existed; legal mechanisms that the union weren't aware of turn out to be obstacles. Landlords often know these loopholes. For example, casework on individual cases drew attention to the lack of regulation on holiday lets - we built a campaign around this, and now it looks like the legislation on holiday lets will be changed.

When a member comes to the union with a case, the principles we use to approach it are:

Speed – it's really important to move fast and act quickly. It can be easy for the tenant's energy to fizzle out otherwise.

Empathy - laying on the empathy thick is a powerful way to show not just that we're on their side, but that we're their peers. We are not experts and are not sorting it out FOR them.

Rile Up – we are not therapists. The point is not that they have a good moan and then feel better - they should leave us more angry than they came.

Signposting – some cases are not the best for our organisation, may require legal expertise or specialist training. It's important not to drag people along in cases like this - just send them to the people who can best help.

Advice - If you don't know, get advice! Don't just bluff it!

Member-first - don't get carried away with an exciting action; remember that it's the tenant's money or home that's on the line, not yours. Make sure you bring them with you and they're always at the forefront of anything that happens.

For example, in one action we had against a particular letting agent, we collected signatures on a massive amounts of postcards and then posted them through the door.

We kept calling the office and wasting their time. During this we were taking them to court. Other organisations would take it to court and leave it at that, our escalation made it a question of all their tenants rather than just the one member.

Sometimes we find ourselves just enforcing already existing legislation, which is quite a moderate demand. In Glasgow, the union worked up a collective agreement that went further. The agent was then negotiating with the tenants through the union. The experience of members and the dynamic of the struggle built power. Even if something is easy to win through one phone-call – it's important to make it visible, bring members into the planning and action of it, build power for the union.

If a tenant just wants to take something to court, they can do that - but it probably isn't going to build power for the union. It's important to do public actions alongside taking them to court.

Having won lots of cases, more people are coming to the union with problems. We need to be more aware of our capacity and prioritise the right cases, to make sure we don't slip into a service model.

We sit down with people face-to-face straight away and explain why we want to be public and confrontational with the case, and talk them through our conception of power and why we think that's the right way.

Sometimes taking on a case that is easy to win and make public is worth it, even if the person doesn't become an active member or has only just joined; it's good for the profile of the organisation.

Most member defence cases come through people reaching out to the union on Facebook or through email. A small group will go to meet the person and liaise with each other, it's usually only at the action when a much bigger group of members involved.

Not discussing political questions has allowed the union to grow, but it's a lot of pressure to purely focus on casework.

LONDON - LONDON RENTERS UNION

Since the inception of LRU in early 2018, the approach to member solidarity has combined taking action together to improve members' housing situations and build the power of the union. There is also an emphasis on emotional and practical support even when there is not a clear victory, to build and consolidate the union as a community of care and mutual aid. Our bread and butter member solidarity has covered disputes with small landlords and lettings agents around evictions (legal and illegal), rent rises, stolen deposits, harassment, and disrepair.

More recently, local campaigns have been growing around temporary accommodation provision by municipal authorities for people who have lost their homes. This branch-led campaigning, arising from local members struggles with landlords and unaccountable municipal authorities, is not directly connected with union-wide campaigning around ending no-fault evictions and for rent control, which went directly to the city-wide level. The Yes DSS campaign around ending

discrimination against claimants of state subsidies for unaffordable rents is an example of a campaign derived from members' experiences, being taken up at the branch level, and then becoming a union-wide campaign making significant gains. There are ongoing strategic discussions about which struggles the union can and should be fighting with members, and how they link to existing campaign focuses.

Evaluation - towards solidarity not charity

Some issues became apparent over the first year. Support quickly started to mimic a service provision dynamic, with a few activists and also paid staff coordinating most of the letter writing, research, and action planning. For several months, a weekly 1-2 hour call would be organised through the union-wide working group to discuss all cases, with tendencies towards knowledge sharing but also centralisation and burnout. Member support also often departed from strategic, political priorities of building tenants' collective power, with complicated individual cases often taken on without much of a question about whether they should be or why.

Consequently, an evaluation was undertaken through workshops in early 2019. Steps are now underway to shift towards a collective culture of solidarity not charity, and members taking a lead on their own housing struggles. This shift includes a recognition of the toll this work can take on the mental health of members supporting each other. Towards decentralisation, local 'teams' have been established within branches, with more recently activated members who have received training and in some cases have come to the union through their own housing dispute responsible for coordinating branch-level member solidarity with logistical support from the union-wide working group. The working group is responsible for oversight across the branches, correspondence with lawyers, producing know your rights guides and translating them, coordinating know your rights trainings, and is developing action planning and eviction resistance training to give members the tools to lead on their own housing disputes.

How branches organise member solidarity

Except in some exceptional cases (for example where there is an access issue), new LRU members are asked to attend their nearest local branch meeting to start the process of member solidarity through the union. As the sorts of issues in the sector are incredibly varied, cases are discussed in small groups rather than across the assembly. There, they will get a buddy, and also take part in a break out of 30-45 minutes where they can discuss their situation with several other members. These are for collecting information, planning next steps, and setting up a WhatsApp group. More recently, to decrease the amount of time spent by individuals researching and planning outside of meetings and to make sure things are contained, accountable, member-led, and happening face to face, additional 2 hour meetings have been introduced two weeks after the main branch meeting, to focus specifically on writing letters and planning actions in more detail.

Branches are now where most bread and butter disputes are handled, and there have been numerous victories. Collectively handing in letters from the union

and member, typically with anything from 5 to 20 members accompanying, have been effective against landlords and agents, around reclaiming stolen money, preventing harassment, negotiating rent rises, and ensuring repairs are done. More experienced members have also accompanied new members to court proceedings and appointments with municipal authorities, stopping evictions through the court and holding public officials to account around provision of temporary accommodation. Larger protests at municipal authorities in cases where they have systematically ignored the needs of members have also been effective in bringing about negotiations. Threatening legal action against landlords has been effective in preventing illegal evictions, while physical eviction resistance has also slowed eviction processes to grant members have more time to arrange alternative shelter. More systematic and creative disruption has also been used, for instance phone blockades and negative online reviews, as well as distributed organising techniques, including callouts across the city for eviction resistance, protests, and pickets through our membership and organisational allies.

BERLIN - MIETENWAHNSIN

In Berlin it feels like there's almost no choice for people not to fight for their homes. The first examples of winning against landlords were by activists, which set the precedent. In terms of campaigning, we have legal leverage because in some areas the district has to allow sales of houses and sometimes inform the inhabitants. Then house communities and neighbourhoods can organize before struggle comes; a key thing to build is trust. There is now a high level of public knowledge, with tenants knowing not to sign things from the landlords, to talk to neighbours, and also that it's important to seek legal advice. It's still really important for us to keep educating people about their rights and how to organise. The difficulty is finding the commonality between different marginalized communities, partially by keeping demands broad.

One of the reasons so many people are mobilising is because it's a non-sectarian movement, and people feel more empowered to be part of movement that isn't to do with politicians. Berlin also has a long history of these struggles. Building a big campaign against Deutsche Wohnen, one of the biggest landlords, raised people's consciousness, and this helped building the foundations for the mass demonstration.

As Mietenwahnsinn is a network of local assemblies, it plays the role of collectivising the local struggles. Casework doesn't happen at this level, as it is more about connecting the neighbourhoods for the broad political goals and actions.

OTHER GROUPS

There are interesting divergences between groups about when cases are taken on or not. Both the Dutch and Polish groups agreed with Living Rent that they only take

on cases that will build their power, and potentially not the more complicated cases or ones they can't solve - these are signposted if there other organisations better placed to support. The Warsaw Tenants Association has found it much easier to sustain cases that fit into existing campaign focuses - for example around heating or temporary contracts in public housing. This can mean that young people with more precarious housing can't be part of the campaign. The London Renters Union attempts to provide some form of support to members whether or not cases seem immediately winnable; in a sense this points to slightly different conceptions of membership and what it entails within the different organisations [see the next section on Membership].

The relationship to lawyers was an interesting question that needed more time for discussion. The legal framework varies drastically between countries, but legal aid is often available for some cases. Were renters unions as large-scale as their trade union counterparts, they might well have in-house legal teams; as some unions grow they have to decide whether and how to collectivise around members' issues while providing complicated legal support. Some unions have specific funds for reimbursing lawyers they work with, or paying court costs for tenants, whereas others build relationships with solicitors to work on particular cases where needed. Though the law is an important tool in supporting private renters, the fact is that many of the lawyers that unions work with see renter unionism as the solution to the oppressive legal frameworks they work within.

CAMPAIGN TARGETS

In Berlin, the focus this year has been on property meetings, as many people feel betrayed by the politicians - the Left in government sold the properties belonging to the municipality. People equate property owners with capitalism, and people want to fight capitalism, and also keep their political autonomy and neutrality. However people have also been working at the local level on pressurising municipalities to strengthen powers against corporate landlords.

The situation in Lisbon is directly opposite to that of Berlin. They always fight the government because they own much of the property. They negotiate with the municipality, and they occupy public buildings for evicted people. But they also pressure the government around private tenants who are facing evictions, to offer alternative accommodation, and to change the law to stop evictions. Focusing on landlords is difficult because property ownership is very dispersed.

The Dublin Tenants Association works primarily through legal regulatory systems in order to support tenants, and maintains a discursive intervention aimed at strengthening these laws.

In both the Netherlands and the UK, groups are attempting to build grassroots power and use this as a basis to pressurise local and national government, engaging with them where useful and shaming them publicly at other points. Similarly, in Barcelona the daily struggle is stopping the landlords from performing evictions, but the union also brings

different actors together to pressurise the government to change the laws. Living Rent in Scotland has pressurised government on new laws coming in, but much of its action focuses around targeting a landlord or director of a housing corporation at their home.

Many of the similarly constituted and more structured organisations combine a focus on supporting tenants against their landlords (often through direct action) with pressurising at a municipal and governmental level for wider change. The three more flat or anti-hierarchical structures, in Berlin, Lisbon, and Dublin, all primarily focus on either property owners or the government, but not both in parallel, even if they do shift from one to the other at points. A number of factors influence the targets groups focus on, and their ability or desire to target multiple forms of power at once. The broader movement ecology of the city may be one in which organisations take on different roles that complement each other, but this is dependent both on the size of the city, the existence and influence of more reformist housing NGOs, and their relationship with tenant organisations, who may have decided that they need to self-represent. These factors are all predicated to some degree on the prevailing forms nationally of the relationship between civil society and the state, which varies greatly between the countries represented, including the extent of devolved powers on housing to municipalities. Lastly, differences in focus also relate to who is actually in power and their perception amongst organisers and tenants. Despite all these factors, the more structured organisations seems to be able to sustain contention with both landlords and policy-makers better than more fluid organisations. It seems that the desires of some fledgling unions attempting to build a grassroots power base and also to ‘institutionalise’, self-representing without another mediating organisation between them and political power, are being realised.

EUROPEAN TENANT ORGANISER EXCHANGE



Photo caption?



3.

MEMBERSHIP

HOW DO WE ACTIVATE AND ENGAGE OUR MEMBERS?

The tenants organisations present at the meeting have many ways of engaging their members. Core organisers activating members is a core political process for most or all organisations, one debated just as strategically as the relationship between the organisation and political power. Within this activation process is the question of leadership development, and who is taking on core roles in the organisations.

Here are some suggestions from all the groups:

- Weekly meetings for new members, and parallel welcome meetings for newcomers at the main assemblies.
- Welcome trainings for new members every couple of months.
- Don't invite new people to an organising meeting, invite them to a Know Your Rights session!
- Giving people something to do the first time they come - they have to work on their case too, so they don't feel it is a service they don't have to engage with.
- Regular local meetings near where members live!
- Coming to assemblies where other people's cases are discussed and decided on is a big learning experience!
- Having many ways to be involved, so that people have different options on participation
- Ongoing training for the different working groups so people can be more active
- Supporting members to form new branches within their community.
- Ringrounds to talk to people, welcome them to the union, and ask what they would be interested to do, whether they want to meet for a coffee to get involved.
- Databases where we track active membership, and check in with people we haven't seen for a while to see if they want to meet up or come to a meeting.

- Two people at meetings specifically responsible for new members.
- New members having a badge/visual marker at their first meeting, so they can see who else is new, and so others know to make them feel welcome.
- Socialising, and going to the pub, or a non-alcoholic space, is really important!
- Organising cultural events together - music, film, comedy.
- 1-2-1s, a relationship-building meeting where organisers find out the motivations of members, agree together what they might do in the organisation, and get their commitment for plans. Crowdfunding – become a member and you get a tshirt
- Building a community of solidarity, people looking out for each other. People come because they identify with the community, not just because of the politics!
- Building a shared identity as renters, creating a new political subject.

Groups had differing views of how they wanted to form their membership. For example:

1. Living Rent articulated a vision of an active membership based on political commitment, and which could therefore recognise that if their case wasn't strategic it might not be worked on. This can clearly allow for more agency within member defence, and a lower workload. An alternative to this is intentionally cultivating a larger pool of passive members who could become engaged either for campaigns, or at the point when they needed the union for support - this approach was supported by some within the London Renters Union.
2. The rationale for this 'pool of inactive members' framework is regarding mass membership. Within mass organisations that can mobilise large numbers of people, a large proportion of the membership will spend much of the time inactive or peripherally involved - this is the pool of people most readily mobilised.
3. Another benefit to a lower participation bar to members is about paying membership. The subscriptions of some online passive members can be used to pay organisers who, in turn, can actively search out more marginalised tenants to build face-to-face relationships and groups with. As the private rented sector is very broad, in most countries containing both young professionals and disenfranchised disabled people, people of colour etc, creating a internally-subsidising political alliance which takes its lead from the active, more marginalised members could be a politically palatable and financially sustainable framework.
4. There is a complicated intersection between the participation bar and how we make our unions accessible to marginalised renters. Though members facing multiple oppressions often have low wages and chaotic lives that can make sustained participation difficult, affinity to unionism and active engagement is also characteristic of those people with most to gain from strong unions. Rather than mandating engagement in inaccessible political spaces, organisations present all worked to allow for many forms of engagement, and ran daytime meetings for mothers, creches at meetings, and discussed broader questions of access.

MARGINALISATION

Our conversations about organising with marginalised renters began by discussing what it is to be marginalised, and how it happens to different groups in different contexts. We talked about the potential barriers to access in terms of language, gender, racialisation, sexuality, economic resources, mental health, migration status, and disability.

- We discussed the deliberate processes needed to overcome these:
- Create a multilingual organisation
- Have interpreters
- Organise language courses or work with other groups which do this
- Organise other kinds of activities around the assembly
- Always provide food
- Travel is difficult in big cities, so hold meetings in the neighborhoods
- Support financially people for the travel
- Employ staff from the community
- Organise creches so that parents, often women, can participate.
- Doorknock in areas with poor housing stock, don't just recruit online!

Other ways we can support people from marginalized groups to take leadership so they can model and organise in their communities:

- Benefit kitchen, or gathering things for the children's school, in order to show people they are important, and create a space of solidarity
- Rent a bus to go to actions!
- Give extra support to people from the community to become a contact organiser in their community
- We have to remember that we are not a charity! Sometimes people have so many issues that the movement can't solve them all, but we can signpost them to go to other organisations or services for support.



4. STRUCTURE

LEVELS OF STRUCTURE

Concerning organisation, groups range from structured, somewhat centralised organisations to ‘flat’ without any official structure, and somewhere in-between. This seems unrelated to size, as for example housing activists in Germany and Portugal are all part of growing, active movements despite having less tiered organisational structures.

There is a fairly clear correlation when comparing some groups in the same region. UK based organisations *Acorn*, *LRU* and *Living Rent* are all relatively organised, more hierarchical structures, with registered membership. These organisations all have branch structures, whether in different cities, or different neighbourhoods within a city, and coordination groups with representatives from branches (and in some cases from working groups too). The Dutch *Bond Precaire Woonvormen* has recently adopted a similar branch structure.

Catalonia’s *Sindicat de Llogateres* (and Lisbon’s *Habita!*) is based around an ‘assembly’ model that is a norm of the political culture, with more regular and longer meetings than in Northern Europe. Despite this, *SLL* is structured relatively similarly to the UK organisations, with committees (or working groups) covering different elements of the union’s work and a delegate from each of these on a Coordination Committee. What is slightly different is the responsibilities of the committees in question, in other words the division of union labour and how this is built into organising structures, in part following from different political and organising cultures. For instance, while both *Sindicat de Llogateres* and London Renters Union have committees (or working groups) covering both Solidarity Action and Communications respectively, the only other committee in the Barcelona context is Organisation and Extension, focusing on growing new branches and organisational relationships. In London, there are separate working groups for Democracy, Outreach, and Education, covering respectively the operation of union structures and processes, building alliances and reaching new renters, and training

new members in how the union works. Outreach is not a core process in Barcelona because people come to meetings without being asked to! In some sense, this more fragmented division of labour in London reflects a greater reliance on smaller meetings and specific tasks geared towards recruiting and activating new members in the absence of an assembly culture.

Germany's *Mietenwahnsinn* is not an organisation as such, but an alliance of local, self-organised tenant groups, which has managed to mobilise very large demonstrations. Though this taps into an established culture of self-organisation, and the work of neighbourhood activists creating a base, it is instructive for unions in other countries to see the effects of focusing on movement-building and mobilisation, as loosely contrasted with institution-building and community organising. There is certainly a strategy from some groups to develop a growing representative organisation as a precursor to mass mobilisation; whether it will be necessary for other groups currently focusing on movement-building to formalise in order to maintain their mobilising force remains to be seen.

The flattest structures include the Warsaw Tenants Association, and potentially the smallest group, in Dublin, who organise most of their work through one regular organising meeting.

STAFF AND FUNDING

A clear denominator around which structures divide is in terms of staffing. Employing staff requires structures of oversight and management, and formal responsibilities to be recognised by volunteers and employees alike. Those organisations terming themselves unions (all those above with higher levels of structure) all employ staff, whereas the associations do not. The degree to which unions are member-led or staff-led varies in practice, though there was no clear delineation made, and all the unions function with democratic oversight. Staff in all the unions are primarily hired as union/community organisers, with some coordination work being paid as well. As such, the primary role of staff is to support members/tenants to become active within the organisation. All the organisations' work is overwhelming performed by volunteers, and despite (perhaps because of) the prevalence of conversations about activating members, the ratio of active to passive members is very high.

Although all the organisations present had different membership structures, many of them involved a two-tier system in which tenants become Supporters or Members. Living Rent and ACORN in the UK, and the Sindicat de Llogateres in Barcelona all require subscriptions to become a full Member, whereas other organisations allow for membership for free in some circumstances.

Funding streams differ for each organisation, but most of them rely to a significant degree on grant funding. Almost all the organisations at the meeting launched 2-5 years ago, and the large majority have been growing steadily throughout that period. Though membership income is currently growing as a proportion of income, as all

the unions present have aspirations to organise across their entire city/region, this growth will no doubt be accompanied by larger grant applications to sustain working in unorganised neighbourhoods. It is unlikely that any of the unions present has the staff capacity required to support all their existing members to the depth they would like, but nonetheless all want to furnish new members wanting to become active with opportunities to organise in their areas, and spread tenant organising throughout their terrain. Large-scale tenant unions are fully self-funding, but do not exist in most European cities - with enough institutional support at this critical time the new renter movement across Europe can get going and get growing, providing much-needed support for tenants, opportunities for empowerment and collectivisation, and a powerful force to tackle the root causes of exploitation.

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5. CONCLUSION

This report is based on the first meeting of some of the most active tenants organisations in Europe. The focus was primarily kept to unions, but there are many other forms of tenant organisation across the continent. Our hope is that this report can provide a sense of the process of creating political institutions for renters, and the challenges within this. There is clearly a real richness of experience in many new tenants organisations, with an accompanying clarity over praxis and model that is unusual in many movements. Social movements often lose this richness through a failure to reflect; organisations here are clearly both active and reflective, finessing processes to be able to train in their models of organising. International gatherings create another layer of reflection to these models, analysing similarities and differences in relation to both different contexts and different theories of change between organisations. For those not already organising tenants, this report may be too detailed, but we hope it becomes the start of an invaluable resource to tenant organisers keen to learn from their peers and reflect together.

Many questions were left unanswered in this weekend process, for example:

- What do the different groups organise around?
- How do groups pick issues to organise on?
- What are the theories of change inherent in each organisation?
- What is our long-term strategy?
- How can we intervene in the policy sphere while remaining accountable to our members?
- How do we build our communities? What role does culture play?
- How do we fight for social or public housing as private tenants? What is our engagement with other housing struggles, and campaigns around gentrification?

- What are the problems with some of the models of rent control and stabilisation we live in, and what would better systems look like?

Smaller exchanges are being planned between particular organisations, including with groups that are in the planning stages of setting up tenants unions.

The groups present plan to meet again in Spring 2020 - get in contact with **tenantsexchange@gmail.com** if your tenants group is interested in attending.



**EUROPEAN TENANT
ORGANISER EXCHANGE**

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