

# **Striking from Below: Tenant Organizing as Insurgent Planning**

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## ABSTRACT

This Major Paper examines tenant organizing in Toronto in the context of two overlapping crises: an affordable housing crisis and a crisis in landlord-tenant governance. This research introduces the concept of 'tenant insurgency', which describes the process by which working class tenants challenge landlords outside of entrenched institutions and laws that govern the landlord-tenant relationship. This research applies theories of insurgent planning, insurgent citizenship, and feminist care ethics to discuss how tenant organizing represents a strategic, bottom-up response to the systemic failures of governmental and legal institutions in safeguarding tenants' rights.

Using a mixed-methods qualitative research design consisting of semi-structured interviews and document and media analysis, this research investigates the history, motivations, limitations, and opportunities of tenant organizing in Toronto. Key findings suggest that the insurgent planning practices and strategies undertaken by tenants stem from a distrust in the legal system, prioritize collective action, and create new tenant infrastructures of care beyond the traditional legal system. Findings also reveal the fragmented landscape of tenant organizing, shaped by variegated goals, political motivations, and strategies of tenant organizing groups.

This research argues that tenant insurgency not only addresses immediate rental housing struggles but also calls for a re-imagining of landlord-tenant governance and political participation, shifting the scales in power to the end of working class tenants. This research contributes to counter-hegemonic scholarship on insurgent planning and citizenship, landlord-tenant governance, and housing justice, offering practical insights to scholars, planning and urban policy practitioners, and social movement organizers in cities of the Global North.

## FOREWORD

In 2016, while living in Vancouver, I witnessed the city's Chinatown community fight back against a development application at 105 Keefer Street. The development application proposed a nine-storey mixed-use condominium building adjacent to the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Garden, the Chinese Cultural Centre, and the Chinatown Memorial Monument. Witnessing this event sparked my interest in understanding how processes of development and gentrification impact working-class communities. Additionally, it revealed to me the power of collective action taken by self-organized communities to be heard and participate in municipal planning and development processes. Throughout my years living in Vancouver and the Greater Toronto Area, I have become more attuned to the mechanisms driving the housing crisis and I have gained a deeper appreciation for the important work of community activists and organizers in resisting socio-spatial injustices and displacement. During my time in the Master of Environmental Studies (MES) program, I was able to merge my personal, academic, and professional interests. This Major Paper reflects the intersection of these interests.

This Major Paper is the culmination of the knowledge I acquired to meet the requirements of the Master of Environmental Studies (MES) program and obtain the skills necessary to meet the program requirements of the Canadian Institute of Planners and Ontario Professional Planners Institute for Candidate membership. Throughout my research for this Major Paper, experiential learning, and completion of MES coursework, I have sought to learn about the practices and strategies carried out in community planning as well as the history and application of housing policy through a critical urban justice lens. This research aligns with my Plan of Study's area of concentration and its learning components. The three learning components of my Plan of Study include: understanding the history and application of housing

policy within the context of addressing housing needs through the delivery of affordable and accessible housing, understanding how formal and informal processes shape community planning decisions and practices, and exploring urban justice as it relates to the neoliberal and hegemonic power dynamics that dictate participation, access, and rights in planning processes in cities. This Major Paper directly engages with all three areas of my Plan of Study as it engages with questions of urban governance, political participation, and how spatial justice is viewed and negotiated by tenants experiencing housing precarity and insecurity.

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Table 1: Details of Ongoing Rent Strikes in Toronto.

## I. Introduction

Sonia Israel and her two daughters are among the more than 100 tenants of a housing complex in Toronto's Thorncliffe Park neighbourhood who have been on a rent strike since May, withholding payment in an effort to pressure landlords to stop the process of increasing rents massively.

The landlords – Starlight Investments and the Public Sector Pension and Investment Board (PSP) – are seeking what is known as above guideline rent increases (AGI) of cumulatively almost 10 percent – rent hikes that Israel and other tenants say are designed to push them out of their apartments. (Rockwell, 2023)

On May 1, 2023, over one hundred tenants at 71, 75, and 79 Thorncliffe Park Drive in Toronto began a collective rent strike to protest above the guideline rent increases (AGIs) imposed by their landlord (PSP Displaces Tenants, n.d.; Rockwell, 2023; Thorncliffe Park Tenants, 2023). The excerpt above is from a news article from Al Jazeera, representing just one of many news outlets reporting on rent strikes taking place in Toronto. Rockwell's (2023) piece centers tenants voices and provides important context to Thorncliffe Park, highlighting the disproportionate impact that AGIs have on predominantly racialized communities in Toronto. The ongoing rent strike is part of a two-year organizing effort by the tenants to resist unaffordable AGIs and demand their landlord address poor building conditions and neglect of maintenance issues including leaky pipes, mould, bedbugs and mice, and disruptive water shutoffs. The tenants are unable to afford the 4.2% rent increase for 2022 and up to 5.5% in 2023 and as a result, fear being priced out and displaced from their community (PSP Displaces Tenants, n.d.). These AGIs exceed the provincial government's permitted guidelines for 1.2 percent in 2022 and 2.5 percent increase in 2023 (Rockwell, 2023).

Since February 2022, Thorncliffe Park tenants have employed various strategies to directly confront their landlord to demand the withdrawal of the AGIs and improve building

conditions including signing letters, attending rallies, holding meetings in the buildings' lobbies and visiting the homes, company offices or events frequented or sponsored by executives of the buildings' landlords (Rockwell, 2023). Their landlord Public Sector Pension and Investment Board (PSP), is a Canadian Crown corporation that manages pension funds for federal public service workers and others. PSP owns the buildings through its partner Starlight Investments, one of Canada's largest landlords, with over 54,000 units under management across the country (PSP Displaces Tenants, n.d.; Rockwell, 2023). If tenants are successfully forced out of their homes, PSP Investments will be able to raise the rents for new incoming tenants "at more than three times" the rent that current Thorncliffe Park tenants pay (Rockwell, 2023).

### **Tenant Insurgency**

The rent strike taking place at Thorncliffe Park is reflective of the current crises in rental unaffordability and landlord-tenant governance in Ontario. Renters in Ontario are often told by legal clinics and lawyers to rely on legal recourse, be informed of their rights under the *Residential Tenancies Act* (RTA), and wait for their Landlord and Tenant Board (LTB) hearing. However, the efficacy of this legal process has come under scrutiny by tenants as will be shortly discussed in Section III of this Major Paper. Questioning the utility of the LTB naturally raises questions about the options and resources available to tenants when they are seeking to rectify their housing situation. If the LTB is an untrustworthy system for tenants seeking justice, tenants are forced to pursue alternative strategies.

Despite tenants' well-documented struggles with housing instability under threat of eviction, financial stress, and inhumane living conditions, tenant organizers in Toronto have had success organizing and fighting back against their landlords. Self-organized tenants collectivize their struggles and mobilize themselves as an act of community resistance against financialized

and corporate landlords (August & Webber, 2019; Fields, 2015). As of May 2024, hundreds of Toronto tenants have been on rent strike for over a year across seven rental apartment buildings (see Figure 1 and Table 1) in Toronto’s York South-Weston Ward 5 (York South-Weston Tenants’ Union, n.d.) and Thorncliffe Park (Rockwell, 2023). The tenants are in protest and opposition to above guideline rent increases (Zigman & August, 2021), poor building conditions, and dehumanizing landlord behaviour.

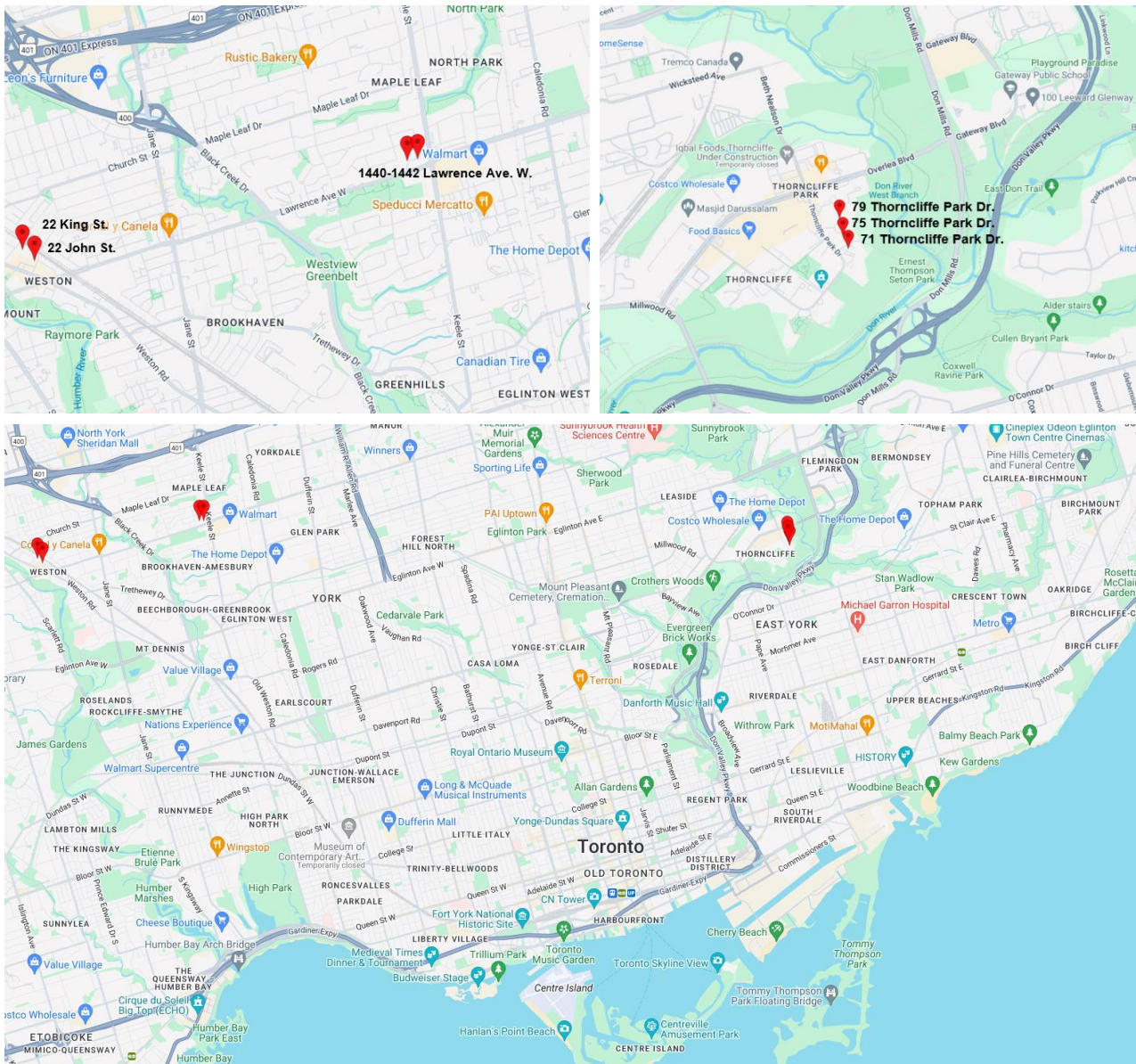


Figure 1: Map of Ongoing Rent Strikes in Toronto.

**Table 1***Details of Ongoing Rent Strikes in Toronto.*

Address	Neighbourhood	Start Date of Rent Strike	Landlord(s)	Estimated Number of Tenants Involved	Tenant Group
71, 75, 79 Thorncliffe Park Drive	Thorncliffe Park	May 1, 2023	PSP Investments and Starlight Investments	100+	Thorncliffe Park Tenants
33 King Street	Weston	June 1, 2023	Dream Unlimited	300+	YSW Tenants' Union
22 John Street	Weston	July 1, 2023	Dream Unlimited	100+	YSW Tenants' Union
1440, 1442 Lawrence Avenue West	North York	October 1, 2023	Barney River Investments	100+	YSW Tenants' Union

*Note.* Sourced from Eschner (2024), PSP Displaces Tenants (n.d.), and YSW Tenants' Union (2023).

The tenants participating in the rent strikes represent long-term and predominantly racialized residents of two inner suburbs Weston and Thorncliffe Park. This collective action highlights the disproportionate impact housing instability has on racialized tenants in Toronto. Weston is a neighbourhood located in the northwest part of Toronto. Its northern boundary is Highway 401, with the Humber River to the west, Eglinton Avenue to the south, and Jane Street to the east. Based on the City of Toronto's 2016 Neighbourhood Profile, nearly half (49.1%) of Weston's residents are immigrants with a significant majority (60.8%) of residents being racialized (City of Toronto, 2016). Similarly, Thorncliffe Park is an inner suburb neighbourhood located northeast of the Downtown core, west of the Don River Valleys and Ravine. Thorncliffe Park is considered an “arrival city,” which refers to neighbourhoods located on the edges of cities and providing “spaces of transition” for new migrants (TCAT, 2015). It follows that 95% of tenants residing at 71, 75, and 79 Thorncliffe Park Drive are people of colour, the majority of which have migrated from Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) and South Asia (Rockwell, 2023). The demographic composition of tenants matters because racialized

communities are highly overrepresented in eviction statistics in Toronto. Dr. Nemoy Lewis, a professor at Toronto Metropolitan University, researches the impacts of financialized landlord behaviour on the physical infrastructures and urban social geography of disenfranchised communities. Lewis' (2022b) research demonstrates the experiences at Thorncliffe Park align with the larger trend in Toronto. The trend is financialized landlords target racialized neighbourhoods to evict as many tenants as possible to “reposition” neighbourhoods (Rockwell, 2023), displacing racialized tenants to encourage new tenant turnover. Increased rents attract new tenants who are often wealthier, predominantly white or upwardly mobile people of colour, displacing the original tenants that were displaced. Thus, the occurrence of these rent strikes highlights the logics of white supremacy that compound systemic inequities faced by racialized communities in Toronto's rental housing market.

This research project investigates how tenant organizers in Toronto mobilize for collective action to improve their housing conditions, resist eviction and displacement, combat exploitative landlord treatment, and oppose rent increases. Given the breadth of the topic, this research does not attempt to provide a rigorous or comprehensive account of the work of tenant organizers, as has already been well-documented and researched (August, 2016; Purdy, 2004; Webber & Doherty, 2021; Webber & Zigman, 2023). Rather, I examine the housing justice movement as providing a “*more hopeful politics of scale*” (Russell, 2019, p. 1007) amid the current housing affordability crisis. In other words, I argue that tenant organizing not only brings communities together to defend tenants' rights, but also leverages strategic opportunities presented at the local level to drive change within the housing system.

In this Major Paper, I argue that tenant organizing re-imagines landlord-tenant relations, shifting the scales in power to the end of ordinary working class tenants. This shift serves as a

form of defence and preservation of existing affordable rental housing in Toronto, and thus can be framed as subject of insurgent planning. I introduce a framework of tenant insurgency – which occurs when working class renters challenge landlords outside of entrenched institutions and laws that govern the landlord-tenant relationship. Tenant organizing, as part of the housing justice movement, more broadly represents the class struggle under a capitalist system wherein landlords wield excessive power over tenants to extract increasingly higher profits via rent increases. Financialized landlords' explicit business model views housing as an investment, meaning they operate in the best interest of shareholders and owners with no regard for the well-being of the tenants. Urban governance institutions, like the LTB, and legal regulations, like the RTA and *Tenant Protection Act*, entrench such unjustified power imbalances by promising and continuously failing to hold landlords accountable for their actions.

In this Major Paper, I posit tenant organizing as an insurgent planning practice (Holston, 1995; Miraftab, 2009; Sandercock, 1995) with the potential to subvert and disrupt the top-down status quo of traditional landlord-tenant relations. Insurgent planning practices refer to how ordinary people organize in grassroots movements identifying “hegemonic system’s political openings to make counter-hegemonic moves” (Miraftab, 2009, p. 35). As insurgent planners, tenants implement insurgent practices in their organizing work to challenge and influence *neoliberal* and *hegemonic* (Purcell, 2009) landlord-tenant relations and governance as witnessed in Ontario. By engaging in direct action, self-organization, constant negotiation and contestation, organized tenants seek out insurgent forms of citizenship (Holston, 2008). These practices also establish a new system of justice and care (Fields et al., 2023; Power & Mee, 2020; Tronto, 2013) designed by tenants, for tenants, supporting their survival and ultimately aiming to

transform their living conditions. It is through these processes that tenants reclaim their urban citizenship, and “their entitlement to the city and to urban livelihood” (Miraftab, 2009, p. 35).

I also argue that the provincial and municipal governments remain complicit in the “organized abandonment” (Gilmore, 2007; Walcott, 2021) of tenants. Abolitionist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s concept of “organized abandonment” (2007) refers to the deliberate disinvestment or neglect of public resources, services, and support systems by the state, capital, and other institutions. This process leads to the gradual loss of safe housing, stable employment, clean water, healthy food, and a social safety net. Consequently, it creates opportunities for privatized social services, redevelopment, and increased police presence, surveillance and criminalization to address the already compromised social infrastructure and maintain hegemonic social order (Gilmore, 2007). In Ontario, this process is well underway. In relation to rental housing, the governance of landlord-tenant relations is skewed to benefit landlords as well as rationalizes, sanctions, and enforces the eviction and displacement of tenants altogether. Despite this, tenant insurgency emerges to center collective struggles and solidarity, offering tenants a tangible avenue to reclaim solutions to their housing challenges, to demand rights, and to uphold their ability to access and maintain rental housing in Toronto.

This research seeks to offer a critical analysis to academic audiences, planning and urban policy practitioners, and social movement organizers through establishing links to lessons for planning. Additionally, this research supports the view that tenant insurgency can be a pathway to achieving housing justice for renters. As such, this research is guided by the following specific questions:

1. What is the history of tenant organizing in Toronto? What motivates it? What have been the limitations and opportunities for organizers?

2. In what ways does tenant organizing influence landlords' ability to raise rents in Toronto?
3. Are there any other desirable goals for the movements, such as stabilizing tenure, preventing evictions, or strengthening collective organizing?
4. How should power be built to sustain tenant organizing and more broadly, to resist the financialization and its effects on rental housing?

### **Tenant Movements**

While the financialization of housing, or “finance form of capitalism” (Harvey, 1974), is a relatively contemporary crisis and contradiction of capital accumulation, global histories of tenant mobilization have been documented from the twentieth century onwards—reflecting the universal and unchanging nature of uneven landlord-tenant relations. Literature on tenant movements is unevenly covered across the world. Research predominantly focuses on Europe (Flesher Fominaya, 2015; Hamann & Turkmen, 2020; Martinez, 2019; Polanska & Richard, 2021) and North America (Baranski, 2007; Crosby, 2020; Heskin, 1981; Marcuse, 1980; Mironova, 2019; Tranjan, 2023) with fewer studies on the Global South (Poy, 2021; Wood & Baer; 2006). Comparative studies of tenant movements have also been conducted to assess and evaluate trends that shaped working class resistance across different urban contexts (Card, 2022; Poy, 2021). Others frame tenant collective action as a class struggle between working class tenants and landlords as concealing the underlying struggle between capital and labour (Harvey, 1976, p. 289 as cited in Risager, 2021; Kaika & Ruggiero, 2015).

As Madden & Marcuse (2016) describe, “the housing crisis is global in scope” and therefore the struggle for housing rights is global as well (p. 2). The history of tenant movements and collective action spans time and geography. Tenant movements consist of groups of tenants,

typically in large numbers, organizing to advance their own tenancy rights. Card (2022) defines tenant movement organizations as made-up of ordinary people “systematically challenging elites and forms of entrenched power” (p. 4).

Wood & Baer (2006) document urban rent strike histories in the Americas (New York City, Buenos Aires, Mexico City and Veracruz, Santiago and Valparaíso, and Panama City) from 1904 to 1925. By the end of the nineteenth century, cities globally were experiencing processes of rapid expansion and growth. The turn of the twentieth century gave rise to waves of immigration to North and South America as well as relocation from the countryside to cities (Wood & Baer, 2006, 864-865). The influx of newcomers to dense urban centers resulted in crowded living conditions, increasing rents, and deteriorating conditions for tenants living in the cities (Wood & Baer, 2006, p. 865). The rapid changes set the stage for tenants to self-organize their shared housing experiences.

Research on this topic examines the types of collective action working class people have taken to improve their living conditions, ranging from formal petitions to direct actions and confrontations. One prominent tactic that has been historically utilized by tenant movements are rent strikes, which are defined as the concerted withholding of rents by tenants (Lawson, 1984). For example, in New York City, the earliest documented rent strike was in 1904 (Lawson, 1984). By 1900, at least half of residents living New York City’s Manhattan neighbourhood lived in rental housing (Wood & Baer, 2006). By 1904, New York City saw its first tenant rent strike conducted by tenants living in tenements (Lawson, 1984). The arrival of new city dwellers contributed to the crowding of neighbourhoods and put pressure on local housing markets leading to landlords increasing rents and deteriorating housing conditions (Wood & Baer, 2006, 865) resulting in overcrowded, poorly lit and unventilated homes (Gould, 1900). These

worsening conditions of rental housing coupled with a shift towards democratic governance, provided ripe conditions for tenants to make their grievances known collectively to their landlords.

In Canada, tenants have and continue to mobilize to improve the conditions in which they live. Contemporary tenant movements are often marked by mass organization, rent strikes, confrontations over evictions, and political action and litigation (Heskin, 1981, p. 186). In his recent book on the Canadian landlord-tenant relationship, Ricardo Tranjan (2023) identifies a few Canadian cases of tenant organizing on Prince Edward Island in the 1860s (Robertson, 1996), Nova Scotia (Cahill, 2018), Montreal (Nettling, 2022) and Vancouver (Yorke, 2012; Jon, 2020). In Ontario, some high-profile case studies include Parkdale Organize's 2017 rent strike against corporate landlords in Toronto (Webber & Doherty, 2021), the Hamilton Tenant's Solidarity Network's (HTSN) 2018 rent strike against InterRent REIT (Risager, 2021), and also in 2018, the Herongate Tenant Coalition's (HTC) fight in Ottawa against evictions which primarily targeted racialized residents in the Herongate community (Crosby, 2020). There remains a gap in research and literature produced in close connection or collaboration with tenant activists.

## **Methodology**

This research utilizes a mixed-methods qualitative research design comprised of semi-structured interviews and document and media analysis. The use of qualitative data is crucial in centering the experiences and voices of tenant organizers. It presents a more nuanced narrative of how landlord-tenant relations are experienced at the neighbourhood-level in Toronto. I conducted eight interviews between January and May 2024. Five of the eight interviews were with tenant organizers from different tenant groups including No Demovictions,

RenovictionsTO, York South-Weston Tenants' Union, Parkdale Organize, and the Keele Area Tenant Committee—representing voices of tenants from different neighbourhoods in Toronto. The three remaining interviews were with individuals representing multiple perspectives outside of the tenant organizing community including an employee at Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario (ACTO), a VP at a social enterprise called the Learning Enrichment Foundation located in Mount Dennis, and a housing and urban planning professor at Toronto Metropolitan University (see Appendix A). Almost all participants consented to the use of their names for this research. Participants who wished to remain anonymous will be indicated by a pseudonym and their organization in brackets. I reached out to interviewee participants via email or direct message on social media. All interviews were either audio in-person or video recorded over Zoom and later transcribed. Five interviews were conducted over Zoom and three were conducted in-person. This was decided by the participant based on their preference and availability. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis.

The interviews were guided by an interview guide of approximately ten questions and were open-ended and carried out in a conversational style. When required, I corresponded over email with interviewees to clarify findings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted conversationally and fluidly allowing for interviewees to elaborate on their responses to questions. In these discussions, participants were able to explain the complexities and contradictions of their experiences (Bryman, 1988) and raise issues and perspectives that may have not been previously accounted for (Silverman, 1993). Furthermore, this qualitative technique allowed for a deeper exploration of different perspectives of the different actors and organizations that are involved in tenant organizing. As a result, semi-structured interviews

produce a multi-layered understanding of tenant organizing and offer insight into different perspectives that may be lacking in the current body of research.

I had initially hoped to speak to tenant organizers from larger and more established tenant organizations such as ACORN Toronto and Federation Of Metro Tenants' Associations (FMTA), but when I reached out to them they both responded with having little to no capacity. In place of an interview, ACORN Toronto provided written responses to the interview questions via email correspondence. This further exemplifies the laborious and demanding nature of tenant organizing and community activism work, as it is often entirely volunteer-based, often by tenants whose housing is at stake.

In addition to interviews, I conducted document and media analysis of relevant reports, news articles, blog posts, and provincial documents. Document and media analysis supplements the data I collected from interviews through triangulation which refers to “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon” (Denzin, 1970, p. 291). In utilizing triangulation, I provide additional contextual analysis to the issues in Ontario landlord-tenant governance, rental housing affordability crisis, and experiences shared in interviews by tenant organizers. I utilized content and thematic analysis to analyze documents and media. I examined documents and reports published by the Office of the Ombudsman of Ontario, Tribunals Ontario, ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) Canada, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, community legal clinics such as Parkdale Community Legal Services and ACTO, tenant organizers and scholar activists, and federal government bodies such as the Office of the Federal Housing Advocate. Additionally, I analyzed blog posts and news articles to further contextualize tenant organizing experiences that were shared by organizers in the interviews I conducted. Blog posts and news articles often are published closer to the date of

the events and include photos and interviews with tenants and other stakeholders, providing timely and relevant perspectives.

Recognizing my positionality as a researcher located outside of the tenant organizing community, I hoped that this methodology would help validate the experiences of participants by having the opportunity to express their experiences and perspectives. Drawing from Tuck's (2009) desire-based research framework, I have aimed to co-construct knowledge with tenant organizers and activists in this research. By analyzing tenant insights, I hope to amplify the efforts and work of tenant organizing taking place in Toronto and to connect their experiences to larger structural issues of unjust treatment from landlords. The findings of this research contribute to counter-hegemonic knowledge, political imaginaries, and subversive and radical action. As Sandercock (1999) discusses in regards to insurgent planning, "theory needs to develop in tandem with practice and stories of change" (as cited in Friendly, 2022, p. 116). The insights and stories shared by tenant organizers, presented in Section IV, not only inform this research but also hold it accountable, improving the quality of the theoretical framework presented in this research. Lastly, this approach connects real-life experiences at a micro-level to the macro-level systemic factors, contributing to a more holistic understanding of housing injustice and the pathways for addressing it.

## **Chapter Organization**

The findings of this research are organized into six sections including this introduction which has briefly introduced tenant organizing in Toronto, the research project, and methodology. Next, Section II presents the theoretical framework for this Major Paper, positing tenant organizing as an insurgent planning and caring practice. Section III presents the current crises in rental housing affordability and landlord-tenant governance in Ontario, explaining the

need for tenant organizing in Toronto. Section IV presents the findings of this research. Here, I briefly explain how the COVID-19 pandemic has set the conditions for the recent surge in tenant organizing. Then, I introduce interview data and the perspectives of various tenant organizers in Toronto. Section V looks to the future and reflects on the opportunities and limitations of tenant organizing. Finally, Section VI reflects on the implications this research has for scholars, planners, and practitioners as well as providing future research directions.

## **II. Theoretical Framework**

This Major Paper employs a theoretical framework drawing on insurgent planning (Holston, 1995; Miraftab, 2009; Sandercock, 1995) and feminist care ethics (Fields et al., 2023; Tronto, 2013) scholarship. Insurgent planning and citizenship provide a framework for understanding how disenfranchised working class tenants reclaim their right to the city and reshape their urban environments. This theory emphasizes the role of non-state actors and grassroots social movements in challenging undemocratic and neoliberal regimes. In addition, feminist care ethics emphasizes the importance of relational, collective responsibilities in contrast to individualized approaches traditionally observed in landlord-tenant relations. In this section, I examine how these two theoretical lenses inform tenant organizing practices. This serves to critique existing neoliberal housing systems and envision alternative sociopolitical housing futures that prioritize care, solidarity, and collective action.

### **Insurgent Citizenship and Planning**

The concepts of insurgent citizenship and insurgent urbanism gained traction in planning literature in the mid-1990s, particularly by Holston (1995) and Sandercock (1995). Alternative and radical planning theories emerged around ideas of insurgency (Friedmann, 2002; Miraftab, 2009; Sandercock, 1995) in resistance to technocrat and state-centric modes of planning within contexts of neoliberal governance. The concept of “insurgent citizenship” is presented by James Holston (1995, 2008) and his work as an urban anthropologist in the 1980s in Brasilia, Brazil. To Holston (2008), modernist society is typically state-directed producing “differentiated” types of citizenship offering “equal rights to equal people and, correspondingly, unequal rights to unequal people” (Miraftab, 2009, p. 35). “Unequal people” are denied political rights and property ownership and subjected to segregation and discrimination. Conversely, insurgent citizenship

refers to new and other sources of legitimacy that create new narratives about “belonging to and participating in society” (Holston, 1995, p. 48).

Insurgent citizenship and planning practices are articulated by mobilized working class people. In his research on the urban peripheries of Brazil, Holston (2008) examines the self-mobilization and autoconstruction of the working poor in their success in urbanizing the hinterlands and improving their living conditions. Holston (2008) conceptualizes Brazil’s informal settlements as sites of insurgent citizenship because of the ways that the working poor claim their entitlement to the city and their urban livelihoods. These sites of insurgent citizenship, Holston (1995) argues, “embody possible alternative futures” (p. 37) where new and/or other sources of legitimate citizenship are developed outside of the modernist state. Contrary to state-directed futures, insurgent citizenship can be found in organized grassroots mobilizations and through everyday practices which, “in different ways, empower, parody, derail, or subvert state agendas.” (Holston, 1995, p. 44). Just as citizenship is never static, so too does insurgent citizenship evolve as members advance their claims, opposing new forms of violence and segregation (Holston, 1995, p. 44). Theories of insurgent planning look to expand the scope of planning beyond formal state activities, instead emphasizing the role of non-state actors in challenging undemocratic and neoliberal regimes and envisioning alternative social imaginations.

Insurgency expands the professionalized borders of planning and the role of a planner and re-envisioning how participation takes place in neoliberal governance. This body of radical planning scholarship responds to the growing prominence of civil society organizations in communities, cities, and regions. Moreover, insurgency literature documents how community and urban development is carried out in the everyday practices of historically excluded people

including squatters, poor women, undocumented immigrants, and other disfranchised individuals (Beard, 2003; Friedmann, 1988; Irazábel, 2008; Miraftab, 2005; Sandercock, 1998b as cited in Miraftab, 2009, p. 42). In turn, these self-organized bottom-up movements can also implement practices of “deep democracy” amongst themselves (Appadurai, 2001). Insurgent planners are guided by the principles of participatory democracy where citizenship is constructed from below through “direct action for the development of their self-determined political community.” (Miraftab, 2017, p. 279)

The demands of insurgent planning practices and insurgent citizenship go beyond mere material resources and constitute a call for alternative ways of life that include access to socio-spatial centrality and active participation in shaping the city via public democratic debate (Lefebvre, 1968). An essential feature of claiming the right to the city is its belief in the transformative power of space, challenging current spatial injustices. Spatial imbalances fundamentally require action on geography for social transformation, as these imbalances are not passive outcomes but actively maintained power differentials (Freitas, 2019). Planning, as a mediator in the process of capital-driven urbanization (Foglesong, 1986), plays a crucial role in shaping the defined form of the claimed city through upholding and legitimizing differentiated forms of citizenship. In the face of capitalist-driven urbanization, Harvey (2008) argues that the right to the city is not just individual access to urban resources but rather a collective right to transform the processes of urbanization. Harvey (2008) frames the right to the city as a demand to democratize urbanization and surplus production by addressing systemic issues of capitalism and social inequality. The current formulation of the right to the city is too narrowly confined, as it primarily benefits the few political and economic elite (Harvey, 2008). To address the urban crisis and prioritize the needs of the dispossessed, a global struggle especially against finance

capital is required. The right to the city then becomes a “working slogan and political ideal” for mobilizing social movements (Harvey, 2008), which serves as a rallying cry for everyday people to re-imagine an alternative to a capitalist city and the right to collectively produce it.

While this material reality is more clearly observed in the Global South, Miraftab (2009) calls for a new consciousness in Western planning to learn from insights from the Global South. Principles guiding insurgent planning are transgression, counter-hegemony, and imagination, which respectively involve transgressing time, place and action; destabilizing relations of power and dominance to seek inclusion and redistribution; and offering hope toward new alternatives of justice (Miraftab, 2009, p. 46). Huq (2020) builds on insurgent planning principles laid-out by Miraftab (2009). Huq (2020) distinguishes three distinctive features of insurgent planning practices which respectively are: insurgent planning is located in political society, insurgent planning is theorized from the agency and epistemic privilege of marginalized groups, and insurgent planning takes practices as its unit of analysis to contest and transform urbanisms (p. 375). Insurgent planning practices are often characterized by direct action, self-organization, autonomous politics, constant negotiation, and contestation to obtain material access and gain (Huq, 2020). More recent literature on insurgent planning highlights the role and methods through which mobilized communities act as planners for themselves. In the Global North, there is a growing focus on the increasing prevalence of citizens’ direct action in Western European and North American cities, “which are now experiencing the neoliberal unsettling of welfare capitalism and joining the rest of the world in takeovers of urban space” demonstrated through Occupy movements (Miraftab, 2017, p. 278). While insurgent planning theories and practices primarily originate from the cases in the Global South, these concepts and principles have become increasingly relevant to the Global North amidst neoliberal challenges. This presents an

opportunity to include contexts in the Global North within this body of scholarship and translocal learning/solidarity across state borders.

### **Tenant Organizing as Insurgent Planning**

In applying this theory of insurgent planning, I am interested in extending the scholarly conversation to the Global North where perspectives remain focused on debates of “radical planning” (Friedmann, 1987) with less emphasis on insurgency. Insurgent planning theory views the social mobilization and political participation of people with lived experience, who are often not seen as the “experts” or formal planners, as engaging in insurgent practices (Miraftab, 2009).

The concept of differentiated citizenship, originally formulated in the context of urban informality in the Global South, has become increasingly relevant in the Global North due to conditions of settler colonialism, neoliberalism, and rising inequality. I argue that in Canada, tenants experience differentiated citizenship due to the pervasive narrative that homeownership is the preferred housing tenure. Evans and Wikander (2023) explain that financialization, suburbanization, and policy decisions favouring low taxes over welfare spending have led to a homeownership “lock-in” in Canada, freezing affordable housing supply and increasing housing vulnerability for many households (p. 11). This “lock-in” highlights Canada’s shift towards a liberal housing market regime beginning in the 1980s, which evolved further into neoliberalism over the following three decades. Consequently, these policies and market mechanisms of supply and demand favour property-owners and homeowners but not renters. This economic and political emphasis reproduces a culture and ideology centered around homeownership. This in part, lends to a type of “mortgaged citizenship” where attaining homeownership becomes synonymous with becoming a “good citizen” (Di Feliciano, 2017, p. 44). Achieving homeownership thus becomes a hallmark of success and citizenship for many Canadians.

As a result of homeowner culture and promotion, those who rent are viewed as “second-class” citizens in Canada (Tranjan, 2023). Tenants are stigmatized due to narratives informed by class-based prejudice where rentership is viewed as a transitional phase and stepping stone before homeownership. Yet, the reality is that many renters do not aspire to become homeowners and face compounded forms of discrimination compared to homeowners. Tenants experience different housing circumstances compared to homeowners. These experiences often include housing insecurity and precarity due to exploitative landlord practices and are subject to an increasingly unaffordable rental housing market. This homeowner aspirational culture is necessary to understand the reasons why renters are discriminated against and stigmatized in the Canadian housing system. Within this framework, tenants can be viewed as differentiated citizens, experiencing “unequal rights” as “unequal people” (Miraftab, 2009, p. 35) because they lack the property rights and homeownership status enjoyed by their counterparts. Tenants also disproportionately represent working class, racialized, and vulnerated groups. This homeowner-centric culture reinforces tenants' status as differentiated citizens in Canada, underscoring the need for tenants to self-advocate for their housing rights and urban citizenship in the city.

I argue that tenants who organize in Toronto engage in insurgent planning practices because they disrupt the traditional power imbalance between landlords and tenants where the property-owning landlords extract as much rent (profit) as possible from working class tenants. Moreover, tenant organizers also challenge the capitalist antagonism between the use-value and exchange-value of housing where the exchange value of housing has been deemed greater than the use-value—a result of the neoliberal market logic that undergirds the commodification of housing observed in present-day (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). A housing system predicated on the commodification of housing means that investment and real estate take precedence over

ensuring all residents are housed adequately. Tenants as insurgent planners have the potential to disrupt “the dominant production of space (Lefebvre, 2015) through upsetting the capital accumulation dynamics driving urbanization (Harvey, 1978; 1985)” (as cited in Garcia-Lamarca, 2017, p. 39). When tenants negotiate their rights to rental housing and mobilize amongst themselves to fight against large, well-resourced corporate landlords, they interrupt the status quo of landlord-tenant relations and demand the use value of their housing be prioritized.

Landlord-tenant governance in Ontario is a site that produces hegemonic neoliberal governance and relations wherein landlords benefit by exploiting tenants through extracting as much rent as possible. This presents an opportunity for counter-hegemonic movements (Purcell, 2009), including housing justice movements, to emerge and destabilize the current hegemony. Tenant organizing can be characterized as a counter-hegemonic movement where tenants resist neoliberal notions of property rights; to instead, reclaim rights to inhabit urban space, maximize the use-value of housing rather than exchange value, and play a central role in decision-making (Purcell, 2008 as cited in Purcell, 2009, p. 160). As insurgent planners, tenants challenge inequities through direct action, seeking justice through their self-organized means rather than relying on a legal system that fails to uphold justice and fairness to tenants and landlords alike. By organizing and collectivizing their grievances, tenants engage in insurgent planning practices and assert their rights as insurgent citizens. As insurgent citizens, tenant organizers seek to reclaim their right to the city, defend their right to live as renters, and reject exploitative treatment by their landlords. They collectively seek justice and make demands of their landlords, as well as municipal and provincial government institutions. It is through this insurgency, that tenants legitimize their own insurgent citizenship, creating new narratives about their belonging and participation in the city (Holston, 1995). This theoretical framework underscores the

potential for transformative change embedded in the very fabric of urban spaces and the planning processes that shape them; ultimately calling for more radical, creative, and insurgent ways to theorize and do planning.

### **Care Ethics and Housing**

Moreover, tenants create infrastructures of care within rental buildings and across neighbourhood(s), contributing to a new system of how tenants can support each other without relying on ‘experts’ including lawyers, legal clinics, planners, and politicians. In their symposium, Fields et al. (2023) explore the role and place of care within housing movements. They argue that care permeates the ethics, practices, and politics of housing and tenant movements, which ultimately intervene and seek to transform “the structural violence of capitalist housing systems” (Fields et al., p. 2). Drawing from Fisher and Tronto’s definition of care (as cited in Fields et al., 2023, p. 2), care is:

...a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Fisher and Tronto 1990, p. 40)

Fields et al. (2023) and other scholars (Tronto, 2013; Bachour, 2024; Power & Mee, 2020; Binet et al., 2023; Smith, 2005) have connected care as a practice and form of labour, to urban infrastructures, like housing, as site of care work. Care ethics originate from feminist scholarship. Joan Tronto (2013), a prominent scholar on feminist care ethics, argues that care must be at the forefront of a new political pathway forward where politics becomes “more responsive to the everyday life of the people” and made more meaningful (Kussy et al., 2023, p. 2038). When care and caring responsibilities are unequally allocated in society, Tronto (2013) argues that it is necessary to question how care can be redistributed democratically and

equitably. This question signals a key societal deficit in democracy and care and also within our housing systems.

Asking where care has a place in housing systems is an inherently political question. Current landlord-tenant relations are governed by financialization and capital. These relations exist within a greater web of housing systems in North America marked by structural violence which manifests in housing commodification, unaffordability, substandard housing conditions, illegal and violent evictions, and homelessness. In this research, I argue tenant organizing radically disrupts the status quo of the current housing system, and instead centers collective struggle and solidarity towards “radically different, just, and caring housing futures” (Thompson 2022, p. 17), thus creating an infrastructure of care (Power & Mee, 2020).

Power and Mee (2020) pose the question to housing researchers, asking, “Is this a housing system that cares?” (p. 501). In the face of a distinctly uncaring housing system; I respond that tenant organizing as a form of insurgent planning practice establishes antihegemonic systems of housing predicated on care and dignity for working class tenant communities. Through practices of collective action and solidarity, tenant organizers actively cultivate new frameworks of care within the current unequal landlord-tenant relationship. Identifying insurgency and ethics of care within tenant organizing practices also offers hope amidst forms of housing violence stemming from crises in housing affordability and landlord-tenant governance as discussed in the next section.

### III. Crises in Rental Housing and Landlord-Tenant Governance

In this section, I highlight some key consequences of the ‘histories of housing violence’ as termed by Reyes et al. (2021). Their work appears in an editorial for the *Radical Housing Journal* on the topics of tenant organizing, scholar activism, and global south perspectives as alternative infrastructures of knowledge production. The framing of ‘histories of violence’ is essential to understanding how the rental housing system often has violent implications for its residents. This violence manifests itself in various ways: slow violence, “a temporal process that takes its toll through the everyday worries of how to make ends meet and usually results in [intimate and invisibilized] forms of psychological stress and anxiety” (Reyes et al., 2021, p. 3); structural violence, through processes of housing displacement and racial banishment (Roy, 2017; Rutland, 2018; Lewis, 2022a), which have a disproportionate impact on immigrants (Murdie, 2010), racialized groups (Mensah & Tucker-Simmons, 2021), transgender and gender-diverse communities (Ecker et al., 2019; Fenster, 2005; Massey, 1994), unhoused and urban poor communities (Rady & Sotomayor, 2024); and ongoing violence of settler colonialism and Indigenous land dispossession, which is embedded in all urbanization and planning practices (Coulthard, 2014; Tomiak, 2017).

Renters experience multiple forms of violence and ‘urban trauma’ (Pain, 2019) most often through state abandonment, housing precarity, and displacement. One of the greatest failures of Canadian government policies and decision-making has been the neoliberalization and privatization of housing and social services (Suttor, 2016), which has resulted in the disinvestment and austerity measures of social housing and housing supports (Hackworth & Moriah, 2005). Consequently, renters experience increased housing precarity through debt, absence of rent control, rent arrears, repossession and displacement (Slater, 2021). Another

consequence of neoliberal governance is the continued loss of existing affordable housing stock at rates faster than a new supply of affordable housing can be generated (ACTO, 2023a). Factors that have contributed to the loss of affordable housing stock include lack of investment in a new supply of affordable rentals, vacancy decontrol, the financialization of housing, and conversions of affordable units to more costly rentals or luxury condominium units (ACTO, 2023a, p. 4).

Housing is also linked to the system of capitalism, the setting within which capital accumulation and development take place. David Harvey (2008) argues that urbanization is intricately linked to the development of capitalism and a class phenomenon where surplus is extracted from somewhere and someone. At the core of this is the process of accumulation by dispossession referring to the “capture of valuable land from low-income populations” manifesting in processes such as gentrification and the displacement of marginalized communities (Harvey, 2008). Such processes also replicate settler-colonial mechanisms that have been foundational to urbanization processes in Canada (Cowen, 2020). What emerges from this process of capital accumulation is another form of housing violence manifested in the crisis of social reproduction (Bhattacharya, 2017). This concept of social reproduction refers to the essential precondition of capitalist production: the reproduction of the wage-labourer (Marx, 1867). Housing is a site for processes of social reproduction (Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Kipfer & Sotomayor, 2024), wherein the ability to access and maintain housing is deeply entwined with the ability to fulfill one’s social needs and secure a sense of safety and stability and reproduce their work/labour day-to-day in their lives. Housing provides people with a place to call home, shelter from weather, and a space to sleep, prepare and consume food, to take care of children or members of a household. Without access to housing, individuals are unable to organize their “citizenship, work, identities, solidarities, and politics.” (Madden & Marcuse, 2016, p. 6)

## **The Rental Housing Affordability Crisis**

The housing crisis in Canada has spelled shortages of affordable and adequate housing for its residents. Individuals living in Toronto, much like many other cities in Canada and across the globe, continue to experience severe unmet housing needs. Since the 1980s and 1990s, Canadian federal disinvestment in affordable housing, social and health services and benefits, as well as structural shifts in the economy (including declining wages, the decline in fulltime, permanent, well-paying jobs) have contributed to an explosion of homelessness as an ever-increasing experience (Gaetz et al., 2014; 2016). Present-day, government austerity at the federal, provincial and municipal level is reflected in the dire state and occupancy of emergency shelter services in Toronto. In May 2024, City of Toronto emergency shelter services were at occupancy levels ranging from 99.4% to 100% (City of Toronto, 2024).

Tenants are particularly impacted by the housing crisis. In Ontario, 31.4% of residents rent their homes and nearly 4 in 10 of these renter households pay unaffordable rents (ACTO, 2023a). Based on Canadian Census Data, average rents in Toronto increased from \$878 in 2001, to \$1264 in 2016, and to \$1618 in 2021 (ACTO, 2023a). In addition, asking rents (rents charged for available units) are steeply increasing. In May 2024, the average asking rent for a one-bedroom unit was \$2459 in Toronto (Urbanation & Rentals.ca, 2024). To comfortably afford a one-bedroom unit, a renter must earn \$98,000 per year (Singh et al., 2023). However, incomes are not increasing with the cost of rent. According to 2021 Canadian Census data shows that the median total income of renter households in Toronto was \$65,500. The CMHC defines housing as affordable when shelter costs do not exceed 30% of one's gross income. Yet, Ontario renters are paying well beyond 30% of their gross income towards rent and are simply not earning enough to afford their rent. Asking rents have only increased further in the COVID-19 recovery

period, seeing yearly increases of up to 21% in Toronto and are anticipated to increase further as demand for rentals surges with rising interest rates (ACTO, 2023a).

Tenants are increasingly put into a vulnerable position should they face a loss in income or employment. The financial pressure to pay rent each month impacts low-income, racialized, and disabled renters the most (ACTO, 2023a). Almost two-thirds (65%) of low-income tenants reported they would not be able to pay their rent over the next three months without going into debt if they lost their income. Over two-thirds of Black renters (72%) and 68% of disabled renters reported they would not be able to pay their rent over the next three months if they lost their income. As a result, tenants often fear falling into arrears or being evicted as a result of losing income or employment which in turn, could impact their credit scores and future ability to move into another rental unit (ACTO, 2023a).

### **Landlord-Tenant Governance in Ontario**

In Ontario, the *Residential Tenancies Act, 2006* is the law that governs the landlord-tenant relationship. It consists of 189 pages which define the roles, responsibilities, and rights of landlords and tenants, as well as tenancy agreements, repairs and maintenance, eviction and tenancy termination, rent and utility costs, care homes, mobile home parks, and land lease communities. The RTA also governs the administration and enforcement of the law and offences of landlords and tenants. Most tenants in Ontario are private-market tenants and are covered under the RTA. Private-market tenants are usually considered tenants who rent from an individual landlord or a business corporation landlord (FMTA, n.d.). If tenants pay rent to a landlord, regardless of having a written agreement and the type of housing, tenants are likely protected under the RTA (FMTA, n.d.).

The RTA also founded the Landlord and Tenant Board in 2007. In Ontario, the LTB is one of thirteen tribunals operated by Tribunals Ontario. Tribunals Ontario reports to the Ministry of the Attorney General which is responsible for administering the justice system in Ontario. The LTB itself is Ontario's busiest tribunal, receiving approximately 80,000 applications each year (Dubé, 2023). The intention for establishing the LTB was to provide a more efficient and less formal landlord-tenant dispute resolution service existing outside the court system (Dubé, 2023, p. 4). In addition, the RTA defines the role and function of the LTB as the exclusive legal body responsible for determining how the RTA must be applied. If tenants have concerns about their landlord or their tenancy, they can file an application with the LTB. Likewise, if landlords want to evict tenants, they must also file an application with the LTB.

Despite the RTA and LTB, tenants in Ontario and Canada more broadly, overwhelmingly report that their rights to adequate and affordable housing are being compromised. Renters continue to experience disrepair and maintenance issues that remain unresolved for years as a result of landlord neglect and also report experiencing abusive landlord harassment, cold temperatures in rental units during the winter season, renovictions (Webber & Zigman, 2023), illegal deposits or charges collected by landlords, illegal/unenforceable leases, back-to-back AGIs, and general rent increases (for rental units occupied after 2018) (ACORN Canada, 2022; Parkdale Community Legal Services, n.d.). Tenants often put up with these issues out of fear of being able to find another unit to rent and feelings of helplessness against well-resourced and powerful landlords who lack accountability to any government (ACORN Canada, 2022). For many tenants, the RTA and LTB are not viable pathways to improve their housing situation and resolve their problems with their landlords. The following discussion unpacks some of the reasons why the LTB fails to protect renters in Ontario.

Before 2018, the LTB system was described as being mostly operational for over twenty years because it could efficiently manage a busy caseload (ACTO, 2023b). According to a 2010 to 2011 Tribunals Ontario annual report, the LTB received 77,393 applications and resolved 75,420, leaving a backlog of 1,973 cases (Social Justice Tribunals Ontario, 2011). Eleven years later, according to the 2022 to 2023 annual report, the LTB received 73,208 cases and resolved 52,986 cases, leaving a whopping backlog of 53,057 at year-end (Tribunals Ontario, 2023).

## **“It’s a Nightmare”: Just How Bad is the Landlord and Tenant Board Backlog?**

Ontario’s Landlord and Tenant Board is facing a backlog of up to eight months, leaving landlords and tenants to seek alternative remediation.

By [Zakiya Kassam](#) November 01, 2022 05:23 am

*Figure 2: Screenshot of STOREYS news article headline on the LTB backlog (Kassam, 2022).*

Of the 73,208 applications filed from 2022 to 2023, 64,450 cases were filed by landlords, with the top two types of cases consisting of eviction applications: L1 applications for termination and eviction for non-payment of rent (37,690 cases), and L2 applications for termination and eviction for other reasons (15,354 cases). Of the 73,208 cases, 8,455 cases were filed by tenants with the most common (2,874 cases) application type being T2 applications that deal with tenants’ rights. The LTB’s colossal and increasing backlog of unresolved cases (Figure 2) means tenants continue to be unable to rely on the Board in their attempts to seek justice in their housing situation whereby landlords may be neglecting their landlord responsibilities and duties and/or may be evicting tenants in bad faith or by extralegal means. Furthermore, the prevalence of application type illustrates how landlords disproportionately seek to evict tenants, with fewer tenants filing applications against their landlords to make needed repairs or cease

abusive conduct. The data clearly demonstrates how the LTB primarily serves as a body for landlords seeking to evict tenants (Webber, 2023).

Each application filed, either by the landlord or tenant, has direct and profound implications for the daily lives of numerous tenants across the province. It is important to recognize that each case represents real individuals (both landlords and tenants alike) with livelihoods and homes. Behind each L1 and L2 application, is a renter household that is facing an extremely precarious housing situation where, as aforementioned, if ruled in the favour of the landlord, could cause the tenant to be displaced and forced to relocate elsewhere or even worse, have nowhere else to move to simply because they cannot afford rent elsewhere.

In May 2023, Paul Dubé of the Office of the Ombudsman of Ontario published the results of an investigation of the Landlord and Tenant Board in a report titled *Administrative Justice Delayed, Fairness Denied*. The report further investigates the state of severe backlogged cases and increasing landlord and tenant complaints about delays in scheduling hearings and issuing orders at the LTB. In 2018 and 2019, the LTB scheduled a hearing within its goal of 25 business days in 35% of its applications; 15% in 2019/2020; and in 2020/2021, only 1% of applications met their stated goal (ACTO, 2023b, p. 3). The implications of these delays impact tenants the most as they are forced to wait for their hearing anywhere upwards of eight months to even six years whilst enduring harassment, unsafe living conditions and illegal attempts by the landlord to force them out of their homes (Dubé, 2023, p. 4, 38). Small landlords who rent out their homes also reported experiencing tenant abuse, criminal conduct, financial loss, and health harm due to prolonged delays (Dubé, 2023, p. 4).

Dubé traces the beginning of the LTB's deterioration back to 2018 when the provincial election brought Doug Ford's Progressive Conservative government into power. By October

2019, the backlog of cases increased to 19,000 (Dubé, 2023, p. 13). For the first time in fifteen years, the provincial government changed and as a result, the LTB was negatively impacted as the new Conservative government significantly reduced the number of LTB members to adjudicate applications and conduct hearings, all of which were conducted in-person (Dubé, 2023, p. 24). However, these conditions were only exacerbated with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The global health crisis introduced new measures to close the LTB’s physical offices, move to telephone and later virtual hearings, and a moratorium on evictions (Dubé, 2023, p. 4). In the fall of 2020, the LTB introduced its Digital First strategy which removed all in-person services and pivoted to a remote service model which the Board permanently transitioned to in 2021 (ACTO, 2023b, p. 3; Dubé, 2023). Dubé’s investigation found that the LTB’s pre-existing technology was outdated and contributed to its inability to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic—leading to further delays and a growing backlog of cases. The LTB’s transition to the “digital first” system, increased backlogged cases (see Figure 3) from 14,726 in March 2019 to 32,800 in March 2022, to 53,000 unresolved cases in March 2023 (ACTO, 2023b; Tribunals Ontario, 2023).

Fiscal Year	Applications Received	Applications Resolved	Applications Outstanding
2018/19	82,095	79,476	14,276
2019/20	80,874	72,064	22,803
2020/21	48,422	35,983	34,731
2021/22	61,586	61,868	32,800
2022/23	73,208	52,986	53,507

*Figure 3: Backlog of LTB applications (Tribunal Watch Ontario, 2024).*

The Ombudsman Report also details numerous negative and harmful experiences tenants faced while they were in queue waiting to have their case adjudicated by the LTB. Renters who needed repairs on their rental unit or were being threatened with eviction from their landlord

“were left in limbo pending the Board’s decisions” (Dubé, 2023, p. 11). Some other landlord and tenant experiences include:

- A tenant who complained of criminal harassment by her landlord in September 2020 was denied an expedited hearing. The hearing was set for November 2021, then adjourned to February 2022.
- A 74-year-old landlord applied in December 2019 to evict a tenant who assaulted him and damaged property; an order wasn’t issued until January 2021.
- A woman who rented out the upper half of her home and lived in the basement sought to evict the tenants in December 2021 because she was dying of cancer. In March 2022, she was told to start the process over again because of an error in her application, but she died two months later.
- Two tenants on disability support who are legally blind and suffered in an unsafe, vermin-infested apartment for years sought an expedited hearing in November 2020. They were denied and told they filed the wrong form. They had moved before the matter was finally heard in June 2021. (Ombudsman Ontario, 2023)

Given that most of the applications affected by the Board’s delays were filed by landlords, there is an overrepresentation of landlord experiences. By on large, the experiences documented in the report were largely from small-scale landlords, which refers to individual landlords owning one rental property or renting out space in their own home. Dubé states that 84% of all complaints received about the Board were from landlords while around 12% were from tenants, and the remaining 4% were from stakeholders such as MPPs and interest groups (2023, p. 12). Other stakeholders expressed concern to the Ombudsman Office that the RTA and LTB delays further serve the interests of larger landlords, like large corporate leasing companies, to the detriment of tenants (Dubé, 2023).

The Ombudsman Ontario investigation lays out other problems of the LTB including a “shortage of qualified adjudicators, compounded by a lengthy, cumbersome appointment and training process; a complex application process that sometimes forced applicants to start over for errors; antiquated systems that could not triage or expedite urgent cases or track adjudicators’

orders, caseloads and term expiry dates; and a lack of French-speaking adjudicators.”

(Ombudsman Ontario, 2023). As a result of Dubé’s investigation on the Landlord and Tenant Board, the Ontario government announced an investment of \$6.5 million in 2023 to 2024 to hire 40 more adjudicators and five new staff at the Board (Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2023). In addition, Tribunals Ontario and the Ministry of the Attorney General pledged to report back to the Ombudsman on their progress in implementing Dubé’s 61 recommendations (Ombudsman Ontario, 2023).

Ombudsman Ontario’s 61 recommendations may address the LTB’s internal capacity to tackle its surmounting backlog of cases; however, such a discussion would be incomplete without critically examining the utility and role of the current landlord-tenant governance system in place. Webber (2023) argues that the focus on the backlog of LTB cases simply obfuscates the Landlord and Tenant Board’s “fundamental role in sanctioning and enforcing evictions” in Ontario (Figure 4). While Dubé traces the LTB’s problems back to 2018, Webber (2023) goes further back to 1997, when the Mike Harris Conservative government enacted the *Tenant Protection Act* (TPA), an act that eliminated rent control on vacant units in between when tenants moved out and new tenants moved in—a process known as vacancy decontrol. Former Ontario Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Al Leach promised that the TPA would encourage private market investment in the rental real estate market, thus stimulating the creation of a supply of rental housing in Ontario (Mahoney, 2001). Mahoney (2001) finds that instead, “the legislating of vacancy decontrols finally gave landlords the opportunity to charge maximum rents to their in situ tenants, without fear their tenants could move to cheaper apartments as an alternative.” (p. 266) The TPA put tenants in an increasingly powerless situation because

landlords now had the power and incentive to evict their tenants and increase rents to their desired rate.

## A More ‘Efficient’ Landlord And Tenant Board Will Mainly Hurt Renters

The claim that landlords and tenants stand to gain from fixing the LTB obfuscates its crucial role in sanctioning and enforcing evictions.

*Figure 4: Screenshot of the Maple article (Webber, 2023).*

The *Tenant Protection Act* also meant tenants lost access to a judicial process at the courts. For twenty-five years prior to the Act, landlord-tenant disputes were in the jurisdiction of federally appointed courts but the TPA established a new Tribunal, the Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal (ORHT), with a different set of procedures and practices removed from the court system (Mahoney, 2021). This new landlord-tenant Tribunal was promised to be more efficient and maintain fairness to all parties, but instead it “discriminated against tenants in the handling of applications and the scheduling of hearings on tenant applications, and hence its procedures could not be called ‘fair.’” (Mahoney, 2001, p. 270). For example, Mahoney’s statistical analysis in 1999 for the month of July shows:

- The Tribunal processed tenant default orders more slowly than landlord default orders.
- Landlord applications were heard sooner than tenant applications.
- Landlords waited an average of 31.56 working days for a hearing on a non-arrears eviction application, while tenants experiencing harassment, threats, or suspension of vital services waited an average of 35.2 working days for a hearing.
- Tenants waited 11.8 working days for their orders, while landlords waited less than 7 days. (2001, p. 270)

Similar to the tenant experiences detailed in Dubé's 2023 report on the LTB, tenants in 1999 also suffered the most from Tribunal delays as landlord applications were prioritized over tenant cases (Mahoney, 2001, p. 271). Moreover, landlord cases made-up the majority of the Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal's workload while tenant cases accounted for only 8% of the Tribunal's workload (Mahoney, 2001, p. 271). The new Tribunal coupled with the TPA also threatened housing security for many tenants in Ontario. The introduction of vacancy decontrol provided landlords with a new financial incentive to maximize profits from increasing rent in tenant turnover, achieved by evicting tenants. As a result, the ORHT saw an annual increase of 24% in eviction applications filed by landlords since the TPA came into effect (Mahoney, 2001, p. 274).

The delays in hearing tenant cases at the Tribunal then are not a result of the LTB being understaffed and under-resourced, but instead indicate the problem lies within the very institution and processes of the Tribunal itself. The problems reported in Dubé's 2023 Ombudsman Report have been reported since the very inception of the Tribunal system through the former Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal in the late 1990s. As Webber (2023) argues, the emphasis on the backlog of cases at the LTB obfuscates the founding political history of the Tribunal system as one that rationalizes, sanctions, and enforces the eviction of tenants altogether. The disproportionate applications submitted by landlords at the LTB and the former ORHT exemplify that the landlord-tenant Tribunal system has never served justice fairly for tenants and instead has favoured the interests of landlords in evicting tenants in pursuit of extracting increased rents from a new tenant. This context sheds light on the reasons why tenants organize and seek action outside of the legal system set out by the RTA and LTB.

#### **IV. Tenant Organizing in Toronto**

They keep passing new laws to fight against renovictions to fight against this stuff, but if they're not enforced, it doesn't matter. There's no institution that enforces any of this stuff...[Renovictions are] already illegal. They're already bad faith. They're already not supposed to do it. But they do it anyway and there's no consequences to it at all...So the consequence should be: we show up, we organize, we help you, the building being organized and you get disrupted because of it. (Interview, Flynn Daunt, May 5, 2024)

This quote from Flynn Daunt, a tenant organizer with the Keele Area Tenant Committee, represents the spirit motivating tenant organizing efforts in Toronto. This section discusses various experiences of tenant organizing in Toronto as examples of insurgent planning practices. These practices have emerged in response to the spatial injustices tenants experience, ranging from exploitative landlord behaviour to a lack of renter-specific protection and care at the municipal and provincial government levels. First, I will provide a brief overview of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as the recent context in which tenant organizing has escalated in frequency and prevalence across Toronto. Then, I will discuss insights and stories shared from semi-structured interviews conducted with five Toronto-based tenant organizers. One tenant organizer from ACORN Toronto declined a request for an interview and instead offered written responses to the interview questions via email correspondence. These tenants represent six different tenant groups and organizations including RenovictionsTO, No Demovictions, ACORN Toronto, York South-Weston Tenant Union, Parkdale Organize, and the Keele Area Tenant Committee. These organizations represent tenants who live in Toronto neighbourhoods like Parkdale, Weston, Midtown, and North York. Following thematic analysis, three key themes were identified: distrust in the legal system, collective action, and tenant infrastructures of care. These themes reflect the realities of tenant organizing in Toronto as of May 2024.

## **COVID-19 Pandemic Context**

Martine August, a scholar who researches the financialization of housing in Canada, defines financialization as the “increased dominance of finance in the workings of capitalism, such that financial logics and practices come to shape decision-making in formerly nonfinancial sectors and areas of life.” (2021, p. 290). The financialization of housing refers to the capitalist tension between the exchange-value and use-value of housing. Housing is increasingly treated as a financial asset where its exchange-value as an investment product for finance capital outweighs its use-value, which refers to housing as providing security and quality of life for residents (August, 2021, p. 290). As a result, private equity funds, financial asset management corporations, and real estate investment trusts (REITs)—or what August and Walks (2018) refer to as ‘financialized landlords’—seek to consolidate capital through the form of real estate development and properties (Aalbers, 2017; Fainstein, 2016). The trend of the financialization of multifamily rental housing was further exacerbated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to 2021 (August, 2021). In the process of attempting to accumulate financial capital, financialized and corporate landlords alike employ various strategies to displace and evict tenants living in multi-family rental units in order to charge more expensive rents to new tenants (August & Walks, 2018; August & Webber, 2019; Crosby, 2020; Risager, 2021). Financial-driven tactics such as “squeezing” and “gentrification-by-upgrading” (August & Walks, 2018) contribute to the power imbalance between landlords and tenants resulting in the exploitation and increased housing precarity for renters (Elliot-Cooper et al., 2020; Fields & Uffer, 2014; Wachsmuth et al., 2023).

Pandemic conditions in 2020 and 2021 introduced a new set of fears and precarity amongst renters across Canada further compounding processes of the financialization of rental

housing. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted vulnerated and equity-seeking groups the most (August, 2021). The economic and health impacts of the pandemic meant that tenants who became sick or lost employment and income due to COVID-19 were also made more vulnerable to eviction due to non-payment of rent (August, 2021). It is estimated that 5% of Canadian renters fell behind on rent during the first year of the pandemic, putting more than 270,000 households at risk of eviction (CMHC, 2023; Tranjan, 2021 as cited in Brown et al., 2023, p, 746). Cole Webber, a community legal worker at the Parkdale Community Legal Services (PCLS) and tenant organizer with Parkdale Organize, reflects on these pandemic conditions and shares how tenants responded:

And so you had tenants around the city, new groups of tenants forming to try to defend each other against evictions under the pandemic conditions. So I think there was sort of an expansion of organizing in the city during the pandemic... that sort of carried on since then, obviously, in the last couple of years...I think the ongoing increasing rents, the ongoing corporate and financial consolidation of the existing rental units is really putting a lot of pressure on people. And so people are responding to that. And I think people are also learning from each other's organizing, like people see what's happened in Parkdale and then they try and apply some of those lessons to their situations.” (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024).

How some tenants responded during the pandemic was by organizing and defending one another against unfair evictions, which has since increased in frequency and importance in the years since 2020.

### ***Keep Your Rent Toronto***

One example of tenant organizing that emerged in Toronto during the pandemic was the ‘Keep Your Rent’ campaign created by Parkdale Organize, “a membership-based group of working class people who organize to build neighbourhood power in Parkdale...independent of politicians and social service providers.” (Parkdale Organize, n.d.) This rent strike consisted of tenants across the city refusing to pay rent beginning April 1, 2020 (Figure 5). It emerged

because many renters were disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 public health crisis with the provincial government offering neither rent relief nor financial support to tenants at the time. When tenants lost income, organizing collectively and participating in the Keep Your Rent campaign allowed tenants to afford basic necessities including “groceries, medicine, [and] disinfectant supplies.” (Parkdale Organize, 2020) To support this organizing, a Facebook organizing group called “Keep Your Rent Toronto” was created to connect tenants across neighbourhoods and buildings who participated in collectively withholding rent from landlords. An excerpt from a Keep Your Rent poster reads:

Sure, it’s against the rules. The rules say that when the calendar says the 1st, the landlord gets paid. Not this time. We’re keeping our rent. We will not be forced to go without because those with so much say we should. We know what we should do. We should support each other, we should defend each other, and we should provide for each other. (Parkdale Organize, 2020)

The excerpt from the Keep Your Rent poster emphasizes participating in the rent strike is out of survival. It posits that tenants, despite facing the economic pressure of paying rent during a global public health crisis, can defy traditional rent payment rules to support and defend each other against displacement imposed by wealthier landlords.



*Figure 5: Banner photo from Parkdale Organize posted on March 20, 2020 (Parkdale Organize, 2020).*

Following the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, conditions of housing precarity and unaffordability have continued to persist. Even with the Ontario Landlord and

Tenant Board instating three temporary bans on eviction enforcement over the course of 2020 to 2021, Brown et al. (2023) found that all three bans ultimately were insufficient in eliminating eviction filings altogether (p. 752). The first ban began on March 19, 2020, and was lifted on September 14, 2020. This ban consisted of the LTB's suspension of all hearings related to eviction applications, however, all eviction hearings resumed virtually after the ban was lifted (Tribunals Ontario, 2020). Unlike the first ban, the second and third eviction bans permitted eviction hearings to take place virtually. Brown et al. (2023) conclude that these attempts to halt housing insecurity in the face of an international public health crisis were unsuccessful and, "can unintentionally spur longer-term issues, such as backlogs of potential eviction cases." (p. 752) as witnessed in the ever-growing backlog of applications at the LTB. Despite temporary eviction bans, housing precarity for tenants persisted, highlighting the need for sustained tenant organizing and advocacy to combat the ongoing financialization and its impacts on rental housing.

The financialization of multifamily rental housing, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, led to increased housing precarity as financialized landlords employed strategies to displace tenants and maximize profits (August, 2021). In response, tenant organizing efforts like the 'Keep Your Rent' campaign emerged, allowing tenants to support each other and resist evictions, despite insufficient governmental and policy measures to address rental housing insecurity.

### **Distrust in the Legal System**

A key theme mentioned by tenant organizers was the widespread distrust tenants had in the legal system governing the landlord-tenant relationship in Ontario. As discussed in Section III, current landlord-tenant governance fails to protect tenants. Two subthemes that emerged

from interviews were structural issues with the legal system and process as well as tenants receiving ‘bad’ legal advice on how to address their landlord and rental housing issues.

### *The Legal System*

Should tenants choose to report their rapacious landlord behaviour through the legal system, a tenant can submit a “T2 application – Application About Tenant Rights” (Figure 6) to the Landlord and Tenant Board.

**SECTION A** When to use this application

You can use this application to apply to have the Landlord and Tenant Board (the LTB) determine whether the **landlord, the landlord's agent or the superintendent**:

- entered your rental unit illegally,
- changed the locking system without giving you replacement keys,
- seriously interfered with the reasonable enjoyment of the rental unit or the complex by you or a member of your household,
- withheld or interfered with vital services, care services, or meals,
- harassed, interfered with, obstructed, coerced or threatened you.

You can also use this application to apply to have the LTB determine whether the **landlord**:

- did not give you 72 hours to get your property after the Sheriff evicted you or, the landlord sold, kept or disposed of your property during this 72 hour period.
- did not give you a written copy of your tenancy agreement for your care home or, the tenancy agreement did not include information about the care services and meals and/or the charges that you and the landlord agreed to.

*Figure 6: Section A of the Form T2 – Application About Tenant Rights (Tribunals Ontario, 2022).*

Webber explains that a tenant choosing to submit a T2 Application to the LTB, would be “banging [their] head against the wall” because tenant applications “receive the lowest priority in terms of scheduling at the Landlord and Tenant Board.” (Interview, January 19, 2024). This is reflected in the backlogged case numbers at the LTB which cause delays in the scheduling of case hearings. As a result, a tenant may have an LTB hearing approximately 18 months later. Moreover, Webber explains that, even if a tenant attends their T2 application hearing, the LTB “has very little power to actually make the landlord do anything to rectify the situation. So landlords in general aren't too concerned about tenants filing tenant applications at the Board.”

(Interview, January 19, 2024). Tenants who justifiably put their trust in the LTB, are met with a limbo-like waiting period of over a year and even if the Tribunal eventually rules in favour of the tenant, the landlord may not be appropriately held accountable to their roles and responsibilities as provided by the RTA. As a result, tenants have little reason and evidence to have faith in an institution that does not adequately protect or uphold justice for tenants.

Moreover, the case-by-case approach at the majority of legal clinics can contribute to reproducing uneven landlord-tenant relations where landlords are guaranteed to receive rent payments while tenants remain vulnerable to the systemic inequities of the current legal framework. Most legal clinics employ a case-by-case system when helping individual tenants seeking legal aid (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024). The individualized nature of this legal approach inherently reproduces the conditions for uneven landlord-tenant relations. This approach reinforces the belief that tenants need to take personal responsibility for their living situation thereby isolating tenants in their experiences and discouraging tenants from mobilizing and taking collective action. Webber's critique extends beyond the case-by-case approach to the broader legal system. Webber states that the “narrow boundaries” of the current legal system (the LTB, RTA, and tenant protection legislature) are “designed to extract rent from tenants and maintains that power imbalance that's inherent to the landlord-tenant relationship.” (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024). For example, Webber explains that there is little legal defence available for tenants should they face eviction due to falling into arrears as a result of a loss in employment, income, or sudden life circumstance (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024). In such cases, tenant advocates and tenant lawyers might assist the tenant in making a repayment agreement with the landlord, and assist the tenant access financial assistance to pay off the arrears (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024). This type of legal aid approach ensures “that

landlords get their money.” (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024). Therefore, this individualized legal aid approach reproduces the uneven power imbalance between landlords and tenants, ensuring that landlords receive rent payments while tenants remain vulnerable to inequities within the current legal framework.

To combat this reproduction of relations, community legal clinics such as the Parkdale Community Legal Services have an expanded scope of work to “help tenants to challenge landlords on a sort of broader basis” (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024). In Webber’s role as a community legal worker, he provides “legal information and education to tenants about their tenant rights” on an individual basis as well on a proactive outreach basis:

So we actually go out to the apartment buildings, knock on doors, meet with tenants, go to their lobbies, help tenants form organizations for their buildings and that kind of thing. So where tenants have grievances around rent increases, evictions...we help them organize to actually challenge the landlord's ability to do this. Because the law is obviously set up in such a way as to allow landlords to raise rents and evict people...A lot of the more effective ways that tenants can challenge these things is by organizing both sides of the legal process. (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024)

This outreach taps “into the experiences people already have,” such as previous experiences of organizing at their workplace or in anti-colonial or anti-imperialist political struggles, and the “expertise they already bring to the table...encouraging them to put that into practice in the context of the struggle at their building against their landlord.” (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024). From his experience in supporting tenants to self-organize, Webber states that “when tenants confront the landlord collectively, it starts to change the dynamic” (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024). This shift in dynamic helps combat the powerlessness tenants may experience in typical landlord-tenant relations, disrupting the status quo upheld by other legal clinics.

### ***'Bad' Legal Advice***

Tenants who experience evictions in bad faith or unfair landlord treatment, continue to be advised by tenant lawyers, legal clinics, and tenant advocates that they should rely on the legal system. A tenant organizer from RenovictionsTO shares that in most cases, tenants facing eviction seek advice from legal clinics. However, “some legal clinics give good advice, some legal clinics give bad advice” and even the “people who present themselves as tenant advocates give bad advice.” (Interview, Tenant Organizer 1, January 26, 2024). Although the legal system is an avenue for expressing grievances and despite the RTA outlining tenant rights and landlord responsibilities, experienced tenant organizers recognize that advising tenants to rely on the legal system is considered ‘bad’ advice for tenants seeking justice. One piece of 'bad' legal advice given by a tenant lawyer advised tenants to "talk to your landlord, wait for your hearing, fight it out at the hearing." (Interview, Tenant Organizer 1, January 26, 2024). By encouraging tenants to rely on the current legal process at the LTB, tenants often do not consider or believe there are other alternative courses of action to rectify their situation such as organizing outside of the legal system. As such, this type of advice poses "an obstacle to tenant organizing" (Interview, Tenant Organizer 1, January 26, 2024). The individualized nature of cases at the LTB and legal clinics can silo and further isolate tenants, making them believe they are alone in their grievances and experiences with their landlords. The tenant organizer’s perspective demonstrates wariness about receiving advice from ‘experts’, namely lawyers and legal clinics, to put their efforts and beliefs into seeing through a legal process at the LTB. In addition, the reliance on the legal system is often seen as an obstacle to effective tenant organizing by experienced organizers.

## ***2419 Keele Street***

This type of legal advice is given to tenants struggling to fight their landlords' renoviction attempts. A renoviction is a landlord strategy where "a landlord tries to push a tenant out of their home by claiming they will renovate the unit" in an attempt to "permanently displace tenants from rental units based on the claim they will renovate empty units." (Zigman & Webber, 2023, p. 5). Landlords often issue N13 eviction notices without having filed an eviction application at the LTB. Tenants often move out when they receive a N13 notice from their landlord or when their landlord tells them they need to move-out of the unit due to renovations. However, tenants are not legally required to move unless the Landlord and Tenant Board issues an eviction order. Moreover, in Toronto, a landlord is required to have a building permit from the City of Toronto if they are seeking to do renovations that require their tenant(s) to vacate (RenovictionsTO, n.d.-c). If the landlord has not applied for a building permit at the City of Toronto or if the renovation work in the permit does not require a tenant to vacate the unit, the LTB will not approve the landlord's N13 eviction application (RenovictionsTO, n.d.-c).

The RTA also provides that tenants have the right to exercise "right of first refusal" which refers to the right for tenants to return to the rental unit once the landlord completes renovations. However, in practice, there is no precedent of a tenant that has successfully exercised the "right of first refusal" and there is no legal recourse in the current legal system for renovicted tenants to regain occupancy of a unit once the landlord has already rented the unit to another tenant (Zigman & Webber, 2023, p. 11). Even when landlords employ shady strategies to displace tenants from their homes, tenants are repeatedly told to rely on the legal system, a system that demonstrably does not protect tenants nor keep landlords accountable.

Flynn Daunt, a tenant organizer and member of the Keele Area Tenant Committee, experienced firsthand the challenges of fighting a renoviction. In 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Daunt and his neighbours at 2419 Keele Street received a renoviction notice (N13 eviction notice) from their landlord. Daunt had been living at 2419 Keele Street for approximately ten years when their new landlord, Brendan Riley of Riley Real Estate Ventures Inc., purchased the building and shortly thereafter, issued three-month N13 eviction notices to the building's tenants (Interview, Flynn Daunt, May 5, 2024) Daunt describes the process of how his former landlord employed the renoviction strategy:

He had a business card that just said...the word, "Brendan" on it. Didn't say any information about who he was. He didn't even present himself as the owner. He presented himself as a representative of the owners and he basically came into some of the homes and got them to sign documents that they weren't even really aware of what was happening. And basically saying like, "So we're gonna ask you to leave within 90 days. You'll get some compensation but don't expect too much." And people didn't know what was happening. (Interview, Flynn Daunt, May 5, 2024)

Daunt and other tenants were afraid and uncertain of what would happen to them as they found themselves in a new state of housing insecurity. In search of answers, Daunt sought out legal advice from local legal clinics in Toronto and they told him, "There's nothing we can do. Come back to us when it goes to the Landlord and Tenant Board'." (Interview, Flynn Daunt, May 5, 2024).

In the case of 2419 Keele Street, it was not until the tenants connected with more experienced tenant organizers, that they learned how to fight their landlord's renoviction strategy. After getting connected with Cole Webber and RenovictionsTO, Daunt and his building's tenants met with the tenant organizers to receive legal information and advice for what they could do:

[They] basically explained what was going on, answered our questions legally about what they can do and let us know...we can't be removed within 90 days that we can only be removed if it goes to a Landlord and Tenant Board hearing. They basically explained to us that our situation wasn't unique. In fact, it's been happening all over Toronto and that it's in our best interest to deal with it before it gets to the Landlord and Tenant Board because once it gets to the Landlord and Tenant Board...it's kind of in someone else's hands. (Interview, Flynn Daunt, May 5, 2024)

More experienced tenant organizers were able to provide the tenants of 2419 Keele Street with information and advice about how to confront their landlord before the matter was ruled in favour of the landlord at the LTB. As will be further discussed in the next theme, the success at 2419 Keele Street demonstrates that when tenants are equipped with the right knowledge and supported by other tenant organizers, they can effectively resist unjust eviction tactics and secure more favourable outcomes outside the formal legal system.

### **Collective Action**

In contrast to the individualized nature of the formal legal process, tenant organizing prioritizes collective action. Tenants across Toronto organize for a variety of reasons: to fight AGIs, to improve maintenance issues, to prevent illegal or bad faith evictions (landlords own-use (N12), purchasers own-use (N12) or renovictions (N13)), to prevent harassment or intimidation by the landlord, and to support each other. More often than not, individual tenants are not alone in their housing experiences and there are other tenants also experiencing the same issues. Chiara Padovani of York South-Weston Tenants' Union speaks to the shared nature of tenant experiences in the city:

I always like to reinforce that that issue is not yours alone. The same thing is happening to your neighbour next door, the same thing is happening to your neighbour down the hall, down the streets, across the city. Those challenges are collective challenges. And sometimes it can feel like the weight of the world is on your shoulders when you're a tenant and you're worried about coming up with the rent in time or like you know the leak has started again or whatever and it just feels like you're all by yourself. But I always like

to remind and reinforce that actually, you're not alone. That's why we're all here working together. Because you're not alone. These issues are shared by all of us. (Interview, Chiara Padovani, February 23, 2024)

No matter the personal reason or experience, it is clear that tenant organizers across buildings and neighbourhoods have a shared understanding that their grievances and rental housing troubles are shared amongst their neighbours.

Inexperienced and experienced tenant organizers from different tenant groups alike recognize how tenants coming together within their building and/or across their neighbourhood can shift the scales of power in tenants' favour. Often individual tenants do not have the financial or legal resources to take on large landlord corporations or management companies; however, tenants who band together can pool together greater resources and support. When asked about some key lessons or insights tenant organizers gained from their organizing, ACORN Toronto responded that tenant organizing "is the most effective solution" to the "massive power imbalance between corporate landlords and tenants" and through "acting with one voice...speaking and acting collectively is how ACORN and other unions have made changes gains for the people." (ACORN Toronto, personal communication, February 15, 2024).

Similarly, Padovani shares:

For lessons and insights, what I always say is never underestimate the power of tenant organizing, and the power of tenants, just everyday people...And there's a tendency to really rely heavily on experts, right? Policy experts, urban planners, lawyers, especially lawyers, right? Whenever there's a problem with our landlords, we think we have to have a lawyer in order to deal with it, in order to get the best possible resolution for us there needs to be a lawyer involved or professionals involved somehow. We believe in the power of tenants...there is a real power when tenants come together and organize ourselves. (Interview, Chiara Padovani, February 23, 2024)

The motivating principle for different tenant organizing groups is that everyday working class tenants can drive change when they unite. Contrary to the prescribed over-reliance on lawyers

and experts, tenant organizing demonstrates an inherent belief in the power of a tenant collective.

When tenants unify their voices, expertise, and knowledge, they can generate far greater power and leverage in making their demands heard and responded to by landlords. This stands in juxtaposition to the traditional approach of an individual tenant reporting bad landlord behaviour to the Landlord and Tenant Board. Webber shares more about why the organizing approach is more effective than the legal process:

But if instead, you take the approach, the organizing approach, and put pressure on the landlord outside the legal process, you can get other tenants from your building involved, you could go as a group to your landlord's office to raise the issue collectively, you could make it difficult for the landlord to not address it going forward, and that tends to be a lot more effective...I've learned that trying to bring people together to collectivize, those individual grievances is generally productive, both in terms of getting a response from the powers that be, but also in terms of building people's confidence and capacity to do things. (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024)

By collectively organizing, tenants not only increase their ability to effect change but also build a stronger sense of empowerment and confidence.

### ***Tenant Associations***

Tenants can unify their voices and participate in collective action by forming tenants' associations, groups, organizations, and/or unions. A tenants' association is generally defined as a structured group to organize tenants' concerns and issues in the place where they live. The Federation of Metro Tenant's Associations defines a tenant association as a "group of tenants who have come together to improve their situation as tenants. It is protected under the law and can be incorporated, but it does not have to be." (FMTA, 2016, p. 4) The RTA legally protects tenants' right to organize a tenants' association. Sections 83 and 233 of the RTA provide that a landlord cannot interfere with any tenant who is organizing or joining a tenant association. Under

Section 233 of the Act, it is an offence to “harass, hinder, obstruct or interfere with a tenant in the exercise of participating in a tenants’ association or attempting to organize a tenants’ association”. Thus, tenants have the legal right to organize and landlords legally cannot interfere with any tenant organizing or participating in a tenants' association.

The following subsections highlight experiences shared by tenant organizers who engaged in different collective action strategies to achieve the collective goals of tenants in Toronto.

### ***No Demovictions***

When tenants form ties of solidarity and support with one another, it encourages tenants to become knowledgeable and proactive concerning their rights, responsibilities, and rental housing issues. This is observed in the origin story of a tenant organizing group called No Demovictions. Megan Kee, a tenant organizer from No Demovictions, shares her experience of the ongoing demoviction process at her apartment building, 55 Brownlow Avenue, a mid-rise residential building located near Mount Pleasant Road and Eglinton Avenue East. In late 2022, tenants of 55 Brownlow Avenue received an N13 eviction notice to demolish (repair or convert), a process termed ‘demoviction’ (Figure 7), from their new landlord Menkes Development Ltd., a “fully integrated, multidisciplinary real estate development company.” (Menkes Development Ltd., n.d.) In response, another tenant at the building reached out to the FMTA to receive support in organizing a tenants’ association for the building, which was formed on January 23, 2023. Kee stayed connected with the FMTA staff member who came to speak with her building and was also able to connect with other tenants experiencing demoviction at 25 St. Mary and 145 St. George. No Demovictions “started meeting as a group of people being demovicted, and realized that there was a lot of benefit in learning through each other's process.” (Interview, Megan Kee,

March 15, 2024). The group of tenants, “used it as an opportunity to start to organize with one another” and organized their first collective action, a march between 25 St. Mary and 145 St. George on April 1, 2023 (Interview, Megan Kee, March 15, 2024). Kee and other tenants experiencing demoviction have since formed No Demovictions consisting of tenants from 12 to 15 rental buildings across Toronto. Through self-organization, Kee along with others in her building’s tenants’ association had the opportunity to form connections with tenants across the city also experiencing demoviction at their building. This created an opportunity for knowledge transfer given the different stages the different tenants were in the demoviction process, as well as created an impetus to organize a series of ongoing actions to achieve their group’s goal of stopping demovictions.

### **Longtime midtown Toronto tenants fear proposed condos will price them out of their neighbourhood**

3-tower condo complex could be coming to Yonge and Eglinton area



Michael Smee · CBC News · Posted: Feb 24, 2023 5:00 AM EST | Last Updated: February 24, 2023



Megan Kee says the building is home to many seniors and lower income tenants who simply can't afford to move if the building at 55 Brownlow Ave. is demolished. (Mike Smee/CBC)

*Figure 7: Screenshot of CBC News article (Smee, 2023).*

### ***Keele Area Tenant Committee***

Similar tenant organizing experiences have occurred across different neighbourhoods in Toronto. When tenants form ties of solidarity and support with one another, it enables the group

of tenants to make collective demands of their landlord and eliminates the need for tenants to seek out the Landlord and Tenant Board entirely. This occurred in North York at 2419 Keele Street where Flynn Daunt and other tenants successfully beat their landlord's renovation attempt in 2021. After connecting with more experienced tenant organizers and with their support, the tenants of 2419 Keele Street chose to self-organize and fight back against their landlord (Figure 8) through collective action over the course of a year:

...we protested in front of Brendan Riley's home in front of his business multiple times, had an internet campaign because he was on social media, got press involved... We put enough pressure on it to the point where he and his partners sold the building... by putting that pressure on him, his business, his family's business (because his wife had a business as well). And doing that, eventually 2419 got sold to a not-for-profit landlord, which has its own issues but at the very least did not result in the renovation plan. (Interview, Flynn Daunt, May 5, 2024)



Figure 8: Screenshot from CityNews Broadcast (CityNews, 2021).

In addition to these strategies, the tenants at 2419 Keele Street demanded to negotiate with their landlord collectively:

One of the very basic things was when we were talking to Brendan Riley said, "If you want to negotiate with us, you have to negotiate with us as a whole"... He would not accept that, as almost all landlords won't, because he wanted to make small deals with

different people and turn us against each other in some way. (Interview, Flynn Daunt, May 5, 2024)

Together, the tenants at 2419 Keele Street put financial, social, and political pressure on their landlord and were successfully in disrupting their landlord's attempt at renoviction outside of the legal process. Moreover, Daunt states that their efforts likely, "made the building just too much of a headache" with "too much bad media and bad press and probably a loss in terms of the ability to resell it that I think they just sold it to who they can get just to buy it." (Interview, Flynn Daunt, May 5, 2024). In collectivizing their grievances and power, tenants disrupted the typical imbalanced power dynamics of the landlord-tenant relationship and successfully increased the power they had over their landlord. The tenants became well-informed of their rights which equipped them when negotiating with their landlord. This experience has led Daunt and other tenants at the building to form the Keele Area Tenant Committee to continue tenant organizing within their neighbourhood because they recognize that, "it's not just that one building, it's many buildings throughout the area." (Interview, Flynn Daunt, May 5, 2024).

### ***14 Wadsworth Boulevard***

Another example of collective tenant action took place at 14 Wadsworth Boulevard, a residential building located in the Weston neighbourhood. In the fall of 2020, tenants at 14 Wadsworth received renoviction notices from their landlord 3Gen Development Inc. (Figure 9). After getting connected to RenovictionsTO, tenants self-organized, held a meeting amongst themselves and decided to deliver their demand letter to the landlord's home. The tenant organizer from RenovictionsTO shared the impact of this strategy:

I think demand letter deliveries to the landlord's homes...leave a strong impression because these people are terrorizing tenants in their homes and they're creating so much insecurity in their homes...But I think does have a strong impact on tenants, I think, because it's like, "Oh, shit, this is something we could do." And it also like, "Oh, this

person doing this to me, it's an actual person”, or if it's a company, then it's a person behind the company. And I think it often has a strong impact on landlords too, not always but has some impact. (Interview, Tenant Organizer 1, January 26, 2024)

After the demand letter delivery, tenants engaged in a series of escalating actions including a phone zap. The renoviction notices were withdrawn soon after.



Figure 9: Screenshot of Toronto Star article (Gibson, 2020).

These stories decisively show how Toronto tenants unite and self-organize themselves against evictions and landlord harassment. Tenant organizing fundamentally challenges the power imbalance between tenants and landlords, making tenants' demands more compelling and effective. Tenant collective action can achieve more favourable outcomes rather than relying on legal processes or expert advice alone. Stories from tenant organizing groups like No Demovictions, the Keele Area Tenant Committee, and the tenants at 14 Wadsworth demonstrate how organized tenant groups can successfully generate and apply social, financial, and political pressure on their landlords outside of the LTB. This approach aligns with theories of insurgent

planning because it emphasizes the power of everyday people’s social mobilization and political participation. By engaging in insurgent planning practices, tenants disrupt traditional landlord-tenant relations and governance, challenging broader systemic inequities and rental housing injustice. These efforts prove that tenant solidarity and organizing are essential to improving living conditions and preserving their access to affordable rental housing.

### **Tenant Infrastructures of Care**

Care ethics are extremely relevant to insurgent planning practices because they provide scaffolding for new political imaginaries of housing. Tenant organizers, as insurgent planners, challenge the individualized nature of the landlord-tenant relationship and instead emphasize care and solidarity for one another. In prioritizing collective responsibility, tenants in Toronto seek to foster trust and solidarity within their buildings and across neighbourhoods. Practices of tenant insurgency contribute to the building of an infrastructure of care (Power & Mee, 2020) for tenants—providing support and solidarity for tenants to continue to mobilize, sustain their efforts, and challenge systemic injustices effectively.

#### ***York South-Weston Tenants’ Union: 1414 and 1442 Lawrence Avenue West***

In Ward 5 - York South-Weston, the YSW Tenants’ Union believes in the power of tenants joining together. Padovani shares that a guiding principle of the tenant union is, “when we fight together, we win together”, which she reiterates whenever the group organizes a new building or new members join (Interview, Chiara Padovani, February 23, 2024). Since October 1, 2023, tenants at two buildings, 1414 and 1442 Lawrence Avenue West, have been on a rent strike against the AGIs filed by their corporate landlord, Barney River Investments. Padovani also shares some of the negligent behaviour of their landlord reflected in the buildings’ lack of maintenance:

We call them a slumlord, because the conditions in those buildings are abysmal. It got so bad that the building hasn't had Canada Post delivered to them for years because of the pest infestation is so bad in there that they said it's unsafe to go into buildings. (Interview, Chiara Padovani, February 23, 2024)

Amid their rent strike, a recent example of tenant solidarity and care was a collective action carried out by the tenants' union in December 2023. Padovani received a phone call from a tenant living in one of the buildings. The tenant had been illegally locked-out and evicted from her apartment unit by police sheriffs on behalf of Barney River Investments. The tenant was told by the police and property management that she was being evicted for arrears (an N4 eviction) by the landlord without having received a Notice of Hearing from the Landlord and Tenant Board. In response to the illegal lockout and eviction made by the property manager and police on behalf of the landlord, hundreds of tenants from the tenant union decided to occupy the property management office until the landlord agreed to reinstate the tenant's tenancy. Through a 74-hour occupation of their landlord's property management office, tenant organizers from the YSW Tenants' Union demonstrated a radical act of community solidarity and care that challenged the power of their landlord, the police, and the legal system:

...we did not leave for 74 hours until they agreed to reinstate her tenancy. But it was a pretty clear demonstration of how organized tenants can fight back and win even when the police aren't on your side. Even when the sheriff comes to change the locks, even when obviously the landlord isn't on your side and all those things, organized tenants outside of the formal process at the LTB can force a landlord to backstep...So for us, it was an example of how tenant organizing can win even outside of the even when the legal system has failed us. (Interview, Chiara Padovani, February 23, 2024)

Refusing to leave the property manager's office forced the hand of the landlord coupled with media attention, drew light to the landlord's illegal eviction attempt (Figure 10). Members of the YSW Tenants' Union demonstrated solidarity and care ethics through their occupation of the property management office in support of an individual tenant who had been illegally evicted.

This collective action strategy not only reinstated the tenant's tenancy but also highlighted the power of organized tenant solidarity to challenge systemic injustices and build a supportive infrastructure of care within their community.



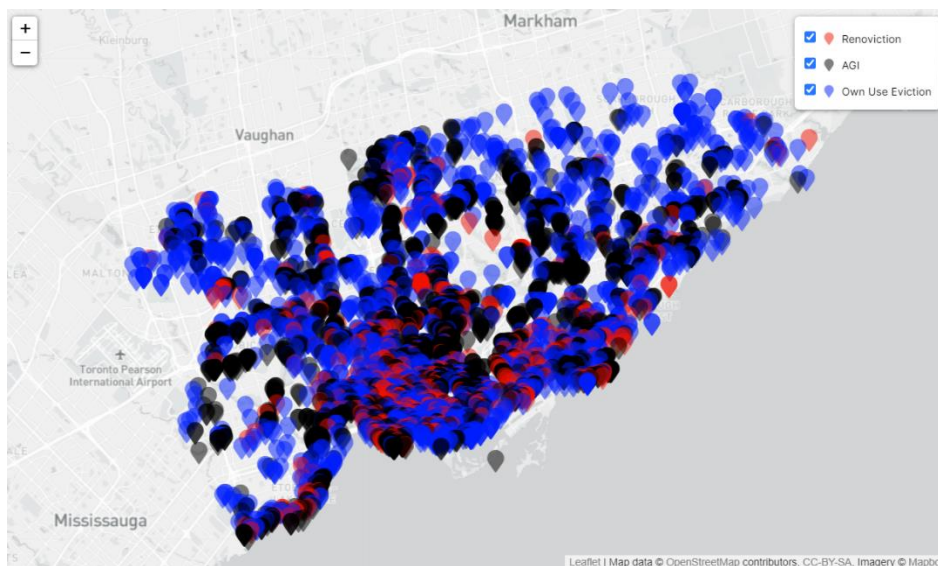
Figure 10: Screenshot of Toronto Star article (Tahir & Rankin, 2023).

### ***RenovictionsTO***

Similar ethics of care motivate tenants and advocates in Toronto to support tenant insurgency by way of providing important resources, data, documentation, and networks of support. RenovictionsTO, a volunteer-run project launched in late 2019, primarily “seeks to document renovictions, own use evictions, and AGIs in Toronto and to support tenants as they organize and fight back” (RenovictionsTO, n.d.-a). RenovictionsTO offers two publicly available data visualization tools on their website: a map of Toronto (see Figure 11) and a tracker tool. The data visualized in both tools include “tenant-submitted reports, data on AGI applications filed,

and eviction applications filed on N12 and N13 notices,” including previous cases where “tenants successfully challenged evictions and AGIs” (RenovictionsTO, n.d.-b).

This platform allows tenants to report rental housing and landlord issues in real-time, contact individuals other than the LTB or a legal clinic, and disseminate information about landlords engaged in these practices (Zigman & Webber, 2021). After a tenant submits a report to RenovictionsTO, volunteers reach out to tenants to discuss organizing possibilities with the goal to “facilitate action to come out of that.” (Interview, Tenant Organizer 1, January 26, 2024). RenovictionsTO's primary goal is to encourage tenants to self-organize and resist through connecting them with other tenants who can share experiences and offer support (Zigman & Webber, 2021). By providing resources on tenant rights, legal information, and data on tenant struggles, RenovictionsTO fosters connections and solidarity among tenants who wish to organize across Toronto. The project's organizational efforts and ethos promote ethics of care, solidarity, and support, empowering tenants to resist unjust landlord practices through tenant insurgency. .



*Figure 11: Screenshot of RenovictionsTO map displaying above guideline rent increase (AGI) applications, renovations, and own use evictions in Toronto (RenovictionsTO, n.d.-b).*

Just as tenant organizing offers renters an alternative course of action to the legal process at the Landlord and Tenant Board, care ethics also offers a countercultural and transgressive alternative approach to typical neoliberal landlord-tenant relations (Power & Bergan, 2019; Williams, 2017). When the advice of lawyers, politicians, and 'experts' fails to protect and preserve their rights and their homes, tenants organizing as an insurgent practice demands the prioritization of care. Rather than individualizing tenant struggles and experiences, organizing practices driven by care facilitates and necessitates interdependence and relationality between tenants (Whitzman & Desroches, 2022; Fields et al., 2023). Relational care is embedded and embodied in tenant organizing where caring with other tenants is a relational “practice of communal solidarity” (Power 2019, p. 766 as cited in Fields et al., p. 8), emphasizing collective concerns over individual ones—forming the logic that unpins tenant organizing efforts as seen in Toronto.

In conclusion, tenant organizing in Toronto demonstrates the potential of tenant insurgency and care ethics in reshaping the city’s urban rental housing landscape. The insurgent praxis of tenant organizing, grounded in principles of solidarity and collective action, represents a counter-hegemonic response to neoliberal approaches to tenant rights and rental housing. The experiences shared by tenant organizers from the York South-Weston Tenants' Union and RenovictionsTO demonstrate how mobilized working class tenants can effectively challenge immediate rental housing injustices and help construct a relational infrastructure of care beyond the traditional legal framework defining the landlord-tenant relationship. By prioritizing collective tenant concerns over individual interests, tenant organizing groups foster a new political imaginary that reconceptualizes housing as a site of shared struggle and mutual support. As such, tenant organizing offers opportunities to look forward and reimagine urban governance

and citizen participation in the face of an increasingly financialized and precarious housing system.

## **V. Towards Activist Futures**

As I have argued, tenant organizing holds the potential to contest the neoliberal and hegemonic nature of landlord-tenant governance and relations. This potential can be understood within the framing of Erik Olin Wright's concept of "real utopias" (2013). Wright proposes that by embodying emancipatory alternatives to entrenched capitalist institutions and social structures, "real utopias" can transform power relations within the economy in ways that deepen and broaden the possibility of meaningful democracy (2013, p. 2). Applied to the context of tenant organizing, tenant insurgency prefigures more equitable and just housing futures through the cultivation of democratic practices of self-organization, collective action, and care amongst tenant communities. This represents a radical disruption of the status quo capitalist logic that underpins the current housing crisis, moving towards a system that prioritizes the collective well-being of tenants over the profit-driven motives of landlords and finance capital.

In this section, I present the hopes and future directions of tenant organizing shared by the interviewed tenant organizers. Tenant organizers reflected on future opportunities, limitations, and their desires for tenant organizing as well as provided insights on how to sustain the momentum of tenant organizing in Toronto.

### **Sustaining Tenant Organizing**

An element that was reflected on in the work of tenant organizing is the sustainability of organizing efforts, both in terms of temporality and geographical scale. The question of how tenant organizing can sustain its momentum is relevant to tenant organizers. Daunt notes that even tenant organizing successes, including beating renoviction attempts, result in "just a return to a kind of status quo" where the tenants can stay in their homes, but also simultaneously are "trapped" living at their building due to the unaffordable rents found elsewhere in Toronto

(Interview, Flynn Daunt, May 5, 2024). Daunt's observation that tenants remain "trapped" in their homes points to the limited efficacy of tenant organizing efforts. His insight suggests that while tenant organizing successes are important, they often do not lead to substantial enough changes in the larger housing system driven by capital and finance. This scenario highlights a cyclical problem where tenants continuously fight battles to stay in their homes with the issues of housing affordability, lack of governmental and social services support, and process of financialization remaining unchallenged and unresolved.

Moreover, tenant organizing often emerges as a reactionary response. Daunt notes that tenant organizing sometimes “feels like we're plugging holes in a dam” where tenant organizers try to “find places where people are being really, really exploited and making sure it doesn't happen.” (Interview, Flynn Daunt, May 5, 2024). This suggests that currently, tenant organizers often respond to immediate tenant crises rather than proactively addressing systemic issues. While this reactive, case-by-case approach is crucial in protecting tenants' rights and homes, it may inadvertently limit the ability to create long-term structural change. However, this is not to say that the responsibility or burden of challenging the housing system falls solely on tenant organizers. Rather, this is a cautionary note that tenant organizing currently has limited power to influence the broader crises in rental housing unaffordability and landlord-tenant governance. These systemic issues require more comprehensive contestations and interventions beyond the scope of tenant organizing alone. This highlights a key tension of tenant organizing where immediate tenant needs must be balanced with the pursuit of larger-scale housing justice.

### ***Local and National Scale***

Some tenant organizers reflect hopefully on sustaining the momentum of tenant organizing. For example, ACORN Toronto emphasizes their principle of “being a multi-issue

organization”, allowing the organization to “win one thing” and move on to “what’s next” (ACORN Toronto, personal communication, February 15, 2024). Concerning scalability, ACORN Toronto also speaks to their organization’s principle of coordinated autonomy referring to the approach of “local fights” as well as a nationally coordinated approach (ACORN Toronto, personal communication, February 15, 2024). Considering the local and national scale is possible with groups such as ACORN Toronto because it represents just one neighbourhood chapter of ACORN Canada. The parent organization ACORN Canada consists of “177,000 members organized into 30 neighbourhood chapters in 10 regions across 6 provinces” in Canada (ACORN Canada, n.d.). For smaller-sized tenant groups, the national infrastructure of ACORN Canada is aspirational. Kee, a tenant organizer with No Demovictions, speaks about her hopes for tenants to be “collectively organized” through a countrywide structure consisting of tenants’ unions across provinces and cities “bringing all tenants together and [to] use our collective power to be able to get the things that we want and to try to stand up against the financialization of housing.” (Interview, Megan Kee, March 15, 2024). These perspectives showcase a desire that some tenant groups and organizations wish to connect tenant organizing efforts locally and nationally.

### ***Resources, Partnerships, and Political Solidarities***

Other tenant organizing groups believe tenant organizing needs to be sustained by additional resources and forming partnerships with other working class movements. For example, the York South-Weston Tenants’ Union sees the importance of having “more resources and more funding” especially within the context of sustaining the four rent strikes currently taking place within the group’s neighbourhood area (Interview, Chiara Padovani, February 23, 2024). Padovani also highlights that a key opportunity to leverage and further sustain tenant

organizing for the YSW Tenants' Union is through forming partnerships with the labour movement:

...we've had a number of really successful actions in coordination with labour unions. CUPE Ontario, OPSEU, Library Workers Union, has been top-notch for us since the very beginning...And labour unions especially understand it, because they see every gain they make at the bargaining table in terms of wages, getting sucked up by rent increases. (Interview, Chiara Padovani, February 23, 2024).

Some examples of successful actions include labour unions participating in actions, donating to YSW Tenants' Union rent strike fund, issuing solidarity statements, and "withholding their business from a landlord or a real estate investment company that we're on strike against" (Interview, Chiara Padovani, February 23, 2024). Similarly, No Demovictions also shares desires to collaborate with labour unions, Kee explains how tenants and workers "have the same interests":

We want better rights, we want a better quality of life. And we want a fair share in this constant power dynamic between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. And so I think that's one of the groups that we need to be more aligned with, as tenant organizing groups. (Megan Kee, Interview, March 15, 2024)

Tenant organizing groups like YSW Tenants' Union and No Demovictions recognize that labour organizers have similar goals to tenant organizers in that working class individuals have shared challenges and wish to promote better living conditions for all renters and workers. To these groups, these political partnerships present opportunities to align tenant organizing efforts with the labour movement thereby also further sustaining and expanding efforts of tenant organizing beyond its current scope.

### ***Increasing Working Class Capacity***

However, as opposed to seeking political partnerships, other tenant organizing groups believe independently increasing working class capacity-building at the neighbourhood-level is key to sustaining tenant organizing. Webber, also a tenant organizer with Parkdale Organize,

states that while he hopes there will be “a steady line and escalation” of direct action like rent strikes, in the meantime, he believes in the importance of working class people developing “their political outlook and their organizational capacities” (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024). To him, when working class individuals gain organizing experience, they “are able to then share those experiences with others, go into other buildings and other neighbourhoods, and assist people in doing similar things.” (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024). It is through this process that

...people learn, by actually....doing these things. And it's the process of organizing collectively, and then collectively confronting...people in institutions who hold power over your life, that is the transformative part of it. It's not something that I think can be taught in a classroom setting. (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024)

This perspective focuses on the importance of increasing working class capacity and experiential learning opportunities in fostering sustainable tenant organizing. Learnt through practice, tenant insurgency embodies an ethos of 'deep democracy'. Deep democracy refers to a more meaningful and transformative approach to political participation that moves beyond traditional participatory democratic frameworks (Barcinas & Fleener, 2023; Vick, 2015). In developing the working class capacity, everyday people grow their political wisdom and skills to “deploy their pragmatic political capabilities” through “situated” experiences with observable effects (Fung & Wright, 2001, pp. 27-29). For example, when tenant organizers directly confront their landlords, they exercise their political capacity and learn how to make decisions that directly influence their housing outcomes. This pedagogy of learning and organizing is deeply connected to “anticipatory futures perspectives” (Barcinas & Fleener, 2023), equipping tenants with the confidence and commitment to face unknown and unanticipated futures of the working class struggle. By empowering individuals to begin learning and organizing within their

neighbourhoods, this tenant organizing approach aims to cultivate self-sustaining and independent organizing capable of effectively addressing local challenges.

RenovictionsTO echoes the importance of encouraging tenants to stay involved in organizing within their neighbourhood after their personal struggles may be over:

I find often people who go through renovation are interested in helping others...they look up and down their street, and they see, "Oh, shit. Every other building is like this." So like, at the very least, people often want to spread information, share information with neighbours. They'd be willing to meet with neighbours or going through similar things. So then it's figuring out how to do that in a way...where it's being led by those people and not outside organizers...it's something that it takes a long time to develop that... (Interview, Tenant Organizer 1, January 26, 2024)

Tenant organizers recognize the value and necessity for newer and less experienced tenant organizers to take-on more responsibility to build confidence and experience. By fostering a sense of solidarity and shared struggle among neighbours, this organizing strategy has the potential to create more resilient communities that are better equipped to resist future housing struggles. RenovictionsTO shares the process to facilitate this type of capacity-building at the neighbourhood-level:

...let's say the fight's successful, great organizing, give people a few weeks to chill out, then maybe you propose you talk about if people are interested...Do we want to try to spread this information to neighbours maybe put out a newsletter? If other things come up in your neighbourhood? Would you be willing to meet with people in those buildings? (Interview, Tenant Organizer 1, January 26, 2024)

The approach described by RenovictionsTO demonstrates a strategic understanding of community organizing principles, particularly the importance of independent tenant-led organizing and leadership. By gradually involving more tenants in organizing efforts, capacity and leadership skills can be built over time. As tenants organize and become more involved, they become better equipped and develop the political capacity to not only address immediate struggles but also future struggles to come.

An example of this type of capacity-building is demonstrated through the creation of the Keele Area Tenant Committee. After tenants squashed renoviction attempts at 2419 Keele Street, Flynn Daunt shares that he and other tenants have remained involved in organizing within their neighbourhood and over time, have also adopted leadership roles in the tenant committee (Interview, Flynn Daunt, May 5, 2024). He describes that some tenants are, “super motivated” and “have the will and the volition and the courage to keep pushing” as reflected in the tenant committee’s organizing efforts (Interview, Flynn Daunt, May 5, 2024). This dedication and self-motivated involvement highlight the importance of developing working class capacity-building in creating a self-sustaining form of organizing in Toronto.

The approach, echoed by RenovictionsTO, emphasizes the importance of continued engagement and leadership development among tenants, even after their immediate struggles have been resolved. The story of tenants beating renoviction at 2419 Keele Street and later establishing the Keele Area Tenant Committee exemplifies this strategy, demonstrates how a successful organizing experience can foster long-term community organizing and leadership. This model of capacity-building not only addresses local challenges effectively but also ensures the sustained impact and growth of tenant movements.

All of the above briefly illustrates the variegated perspectives tenant organizing groups have on the question of how to sustain tenant organizing which greatly varies depending on the tenant organizing groups’ goals, political motivations, and approach.

### **Fragmentation of Tenant Organizing**

As demonstrated in the previous theme of tenant organizing sustainability, another major motif is the fragmented nature of tenant organizing in Toronto. Tenant organizing is not monolithic as tenant organizing groups are not created equal. A couple of tenant organizers

spoke to the various types of tenant organizing taking place in Toronto. The tenant organizer from RenovictionsTO shares that they do not see a “united” tenant movement in Toronto because while tenants may be facing similar struggles, like renovictions, “there are different groups, different tenants, different individuals who are doing different types of things in different parts of the city.” (Interview, Tenant Organizer 1, January 26, 2024). Depending on the group, their organizing goals, and principles, tenant groups may choose to engage in independent district-based organizing strategies, as witnessed in Toronto’s Parkdale Organize (Webber & Doherty, 2021), while others engage in political and electoral strategies such as ACORN and York South-Weston Tenants Union (Tranjan, 2023). Moreover, tenant groups differ in organizational structure and scale. Some tenant groups remain at a neighbourhood-level such as the Keele Area Tenant Committee and YSW Tenants’ Union, whereas others can be city-wide or nation-wide organizations and groups like ACORN Toronto which is a chapter of ACORN Canada.

Collapsing the different approaches and political ideologies of all tenants who organize would falsely represent the landscape of tenant organizing occurring in Toronto. For example, Cole Webber from Parkdale Organize speaks to the strengths of district-based organizing at the level of a working class neighbourhood where “people live in close proximity to each other” and

...all these different aspects of social life are existing within a small physical area, and overlapping and colliding with each other. And so, if you organize on that basis, then it gives people the opportunity to relate to each other over different types of struggles of the experience in their daily life...in the recognition that, working class people who live in the same district, share these types of experiences and struggles in common. (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024)

As opposed to separating issues of landlord-tenant relations and workplace/labour issues, district-based organizing aims to consolidate all working class social issues. Similarly, one of RenovictionsTO’s goals is “to support organizing and encourage people to organize at their buildings in their neighbourhood”, stressing that they would like to see “more people are

organizing independently” across the city (Interview, Tenant Organizer 1, January 26, 2024).

This highlights the diverse and localized nature of tenant organizing in Toronto, emphasizing the differences in approach and politics amongst tenant organizing groups.

Additionally, while the infrastructure of tenant groups and organizations may be formed on principles of political empowerment and redistribution, Fields (2015) states that such goals “stand at odds with neoliberal imperatives of market rule and competition, entrepreneurial governance, and individual responsibility” (p. 145). Webber further stresses the importance of organizing remaining independent from other stakeholders because once groups like non-profit organizations, politicians or representatives participate, they may have “money and power connected to the state or other business interests” and consequently, “any kind of working class organizing is then made to be in service to these other interests.” (Interview, Cole Webber, January 19, 2024). Political entanglements and collaborations may lead tenant groups to eventually adapt and become enmeshed into neoliberal state and market structures (DeFilippis, 2004).

In conclusion, the insights shared by tenant organizers reflect a variety of perspectives on sustaining and expanding tenant organizing efforts. These range from leveraging local and national scales, forming partnerships with other working class movements, to increasing working class peoples’ capacity at the neighborhood level. This research also reveals the fragmented landscape of tenant organizing, shaped by different goals, political motivations, and strategies. As stated by several of the tenant organizers, they do not see a tenant movement existing in Toronto. Despite varied politics and strategies, tenant groups typically share a common goal of combatting exploitative landlord practices and advocating for housing justice for renters. This diversity in perspectives and strategies within tenant organizing can be seen as a strength and a

potential weakness. While some groups are adaptable to local neighbourhood contexts and others form partnerships with non-tenant groups and stakeholders, the fragmented nature of these efforts may pose a barrier to the development of a cohesive city-wide or national housing justice agenda. Balancing localized action with broader systemic change emerges as a key challenge for the future of tenant organizing. The long-term sustainability of tenant organizing will likely depend on organizers' capacity to build solidarity, share best practices, and collectively challenge the broader housing system. Finding ways to maintain momentum while addressing systemic issues will be paramount to achieving lasting change in Toronto's rental landscape.

## VI. Conclusion

This research argues that tenant organizing in Toronto emerges as a result of the housing unaffordability crisis and crisis in landlord-tenant governance in Ontario. Tenant organizing is critical in challenging the inequities inherent in the landlord-tenant relationship, where traditional legal avenues often fail to provide timely and just solutions for tenants, making self-organization a necessary alternative course of action for tenants seeking housing justice. Additionally, this research highlights how the COVID-19 recovery period has exacerbated issues of rental housing unaffordability, financialization, and commodification, further laying bare the LTB's inability to protect tenants and hold landlords accountable.

By mobilizing collectively, tenants have and continue to resist exploitative landlord practices, combat displacement, and assert their rights against powerful financialized and corporate landlords. In situating analysis within the framework of insurgent planning (Friedmann, 1987; Holston, 1995; Huq, 2020; Miraftab 2009; Purcell, 2009) and care ethics (Fields et al., 2023; Kussy et al., 2023; Power & Mee, 2020; Tronto, 2013), I have argued that tenant organizing efforts actively reshape and re-imagine urban governance and rental housing dynamics. Through collective action and tenant solidarity, tenant organizers can transform their communities, creating systems of care and justice that challenge the neoliberal and hegemonic nature of the housing system. This research argues that tenant organizing is a form of “prefigurative politics” (Roth et al., 2023) and “politics of possibilities” (Di Feliciano, 2017)—providing a proactive vision for what landlord-tenant relations could look like where tenants can participate in organizing and challenge the basis of the landlord-tenant relationship. The findings of this research contribute to the academic, planning, and social movement discourse by highlighting the potential of local tenant advocacy and mobilization as a means of

realizing housing justice, offering valuable insights into the history, motivations, and strategies of tenant organizing in Toronto.

This research does not aim to romanticize tenant organizing and housing justice movements, instead, it seeks to highlight their potential to counteract hegemonic processes that drive the housing crisis. It is important to acknowledge that tenant organizing often emerges out of necessity and survival because, as discussed in Section III, tenants in Ontario often do not have available options or resources to turn to apart from the Landlord and Tenant Board. Rental housing affordability and conditions are worsening, intersecting with other crises such as climate change and environmental justice. One such example is the regulation of temperature within rental buildings and units. Amidst worsening heat waves as a result of climate change, there have been renewed calls from tenants to the City of Toronto to establish a maximum temperature by-law, requiring landlords to provide air-conditioning to keep temperatures below 26°C (Omstead, 2024). This is a matter of life-or-death for tenants, demonstrated in British Columbia's 2021 heat wave resulting in the death of 619 people who resided in homes with no or inadequate air conditioning (Omstead, 2024). As a result, tenant organizing efforts continue to expand. Since the beginning of 2024, two new tenant unions, the Toronto Centre Tenant Union and Toronto's Student Union were created by tenants living in the city. As housing challenges intensify, tenant organizing emerges both as a survival strategy and a potential catalyst for disrupting landlord-tenant power differentials.

Whether tenant organizing actions are considered 'successful', such as when tenants force landlords to withdraw AGIs or rescind evictions, or when tenants bravely persist in actions such as the over-a-year-long rent strikes taking place across seven apartment rental buildings in Toronto, bearing witness can provide a source of hope and comfort to other tenants. Daunt

comments that the Thorncliffe Park rent strike reminds tenants that their grievances and hardships with rental housing and their landlords are shared experiences and can inspire tenants to also participate in organizing:

...it's not just your building, it's many buildings in your neighbourhood and all across Toronto and all across Ontario. And that I think actually makes people feel better in a weird way because it's not just on them. It's everyone's dealing with this. And if everyone's dealing with this, then my feelings are not so small. It's actually, an issue that we can all participate in.” (Interview, Flynn Daunt, May 5, 2024).

This research does not ignore the grave consequences tenants face when they are successfully evicted or mistreated by their landlords. In Thorncliffe Park, despite hundreds of tenants from 71, 75, and 79 Thorncliffe Park Drive withholding rent, PSP Investments and Starlight Investments have issued eviction notices to striking tenants, with the LTB obliging their request to expedite hearings for their AGI applications (PSP Displaces Tenants, 2024). Sameer Beyan, a tenant at 79 Thorncliffe Park Drive, states, “The Landlord and Tenant Board has moved to break our rent strike... We are being punished for organizing public protests against the rent increases and bringing attention to how the rent increases impact our community.” (PSP Displaces Tenants, 2024). The Thorncliffe Park rent strike demonstrates the highly unequal power dynamics where landlords, sanctioned by the LTB, displace tenants who do not comply with paying unaffordable rents and refuse to accept the conditions of their rental housing.

In addition, this research highlights gaps in policy, legislation, and public intervention for planning professionals, politicians, policy-makers, and decision-makers. For example, even with the City of Toronto’s recent commitment to develop a renovations by-law modelled after the City of Hamilton’s Renovation Licence and Tenant Relocation By-law (City of Toronto City Council, 2024), if landlords do not face consequences nor are kept accountable at the municipal and provincial level, then tenants will continue to be taken advantage of by landlords and

experience displacement through rising rents and sordid landlord behaviour. Additionally, if affordable rental housing stock continues to be lost through lack of rent control, vacancy decontrol, demolition/demovictions, and renovictions then rental housing in Ontario will continue to be subject to increasingly unaffordable rents. If these realities of rental housing violence continue, tenant organizing will continue to increase in frequency and relevance in Toronto and cities across Canada. Specific policy measures, such as stricter rent control and protections against renovictions, are necessary to slow these processes of displacement and unaffordability within the housing system. Such measures directly challenge landlord class power, impeding speculative profits from housing, and create conditions for tenants to remain, build lasting communities, and organize collectively, potentially leading to more fundamental changes in housing structures and power dynamics (Appel et al., 2024). Urban planners, advocates, decision-makers, and policymakers must continue developing strategies to transform and challenge the housing system, prioritizing use-value over all else.

The findings of this research also raise questions for future research directions. This research does not adequately examine the role of actors adjacent to tenant organizing, such as non-profit organizations, academics, urban planners, and developers. For example, as briefly explored in this research, a closer examination of the political entanglements of labour and tenant organizing would provide a more nuanced understanding of tenant organizing as a social movement in Toronto. Future research should further explore the intersections of tenant organizing with other social movements and the potential for achieving larger systemic changes in the rental housing system. Another aspect that warrants a more fulsome discussion is the intersection of tenant organizing and racial justice. This includes investigating and collecting race-based data to examine processes of racial banishment (Roy, 2017) on Black, Indigenous,

and other racialized and disenfranchised renters. Moreover, a deeper investigation utilizing comparative methods to explore the mechanisms of tenant insurgency in Toronto, as Kenton Card (2022) examines in Los Angeles and Berlin, would also contribute to scholarly discussion in Canada. An additional line of inquiry is exploring the potential of tenant organizing in achieving the decommodification of land. Current forms of direct and collective action enable tenants to coexist with the current neoliberal conditions of the market. Tenant organizing groups have the potential to mobilize new municipalist strategies (Russell, 2019) to build more “formalized, durable, organized forms of contention” (Thompson, 2021, p. 325) that advance tenants’ collective demands and goals.

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## Appendix A

Table of Interview Participants

Name	Role	Group	Date Interviewed
Cole Webber	Community Legal Worker & Tenant Organizer	Parkdale Community Legal Services; Parkdale Organize	January 19, 2024
Research Assistant	Research Assistant	Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario (ACTO)	January 23, 2024
Tenant Organizer 1	Tenant Organizer	RenovictionsTO	January 26, 2024
Amina Yassin-Omar	VP, Community and Placemaking	The Learning Enrichment Foundation	February 5, 2024
Chiara Padovani	Tenant Organizer	York South-Weston Tenants Union	February 23, 2024
Dr. Nemoy Lewis	Assistant Professor	Toronto Metropolitan University	March 5, 2024
Megan Kee	Tenant Organizer	No Demovictions	March 15, 2024
Flynn Daunt	Tenant Organizer	Keele Area Tenant Committee	May 5, 2024