



Living Rent: Campaigning and Unionising to improve Housing in Scotland

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Last week, Living Rent's organiser, Joan¹, walked into Scott's flat in the North of Edinburgh (Scotland). After a two minute chat at the door, he invited her in. Several of his electricity sockets are falling off the walls due to damp, mould has permanently damaged his personal goods, and after an hour of staying inside Joan was coughing. Scott has been living in his house for six months, paying his rent and getting ill from the damp – his children suffer from asthma. After the house visit, Joan and Scott sat together to draft a letter to Scott's landlord. They planned an action to drop it off with fellow residents and elaborated a strategy for what to do in the case of a negative answer or lack of one.

Along such individual support, Living Rent, Scotland's tenants' union, has been collectivising similar housing issues throughout Edinburgh and Glasgow. Whilst members join because of a concrete problem - such as mould, mushrooms, lack of repairs, evictions, stolen deposits, illegal letting agency fees or rising rents - the union highlights how such issues are part of a wider relationship of inequality and exploitation and how only collective action and a mass-based organisation can tackle such larger questions. This strategy has paid off over the last year: Living rent won concrete victories for members often through collective action, has seen its membership double, and has run campaigns to improve housing laws across Scotland

The origins of Living Rent

Living Rent began as a result of a campaign around a consultation organised by the Scottish Parliament in 2014 over the new Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Bill. This bill at first was a standard revision to Scottish private tenancy laws. We turned it into a political battle for flexible, quality and affordable homes. People from different backgrounds and groups came together to campaign as all recognised the need to channel the growing frustration with the state of housing in Scotland into coordinated action on a national level. Before, I describe our campaign, I briefly describe the context of private renting in the UK and Scotland (housing being a devolved matter).

Indeed, until 1993 the Private Rented Sector tenants represented 7 percent of the Scottish population and living in the private sector was

typically seen as a temporary step before home ownership or social housing. Despite this 'temporary' status, between 1915 and 1989, the private sector was regulated through different forms of rent control². This situation — a regulated and small private sector — dramatically shifted after the introduction of short tenancy agreements in 1985 which generalised insecure six-months or one-year leases, the revocation of rent controls by the 1988 Housing Act, and the demise of social housing, notably through the Right-to-Buy from 1989 and housing 'stock transfer' from Council Housing to Housing Associations. Yet, by contrast with many European countries with larger private rented sectors, the British legal system features few protections for private tenants, even though the number of private tenants has doubled and has seen a dramatic increase in the cost of renting. Before 2017 in Scotland, tenants could be evicted for no reason (the 'No fault' ground), were offered incredibly low quality homes and yet saw rents increase year after year — in Glasgow and Edinburgh, rents increased on average by 5% between 2010 and 2016. Bentley (2015: 11) argues that "rent now costs private sector tenants on average 40 percent of their household income", in contrast to owner occupiers who spend 20% of their income on their mortgage. Between 1989 and 2014, escalating rents have contributed to the doubling of the housing benefit bill - forecast to reach 10 billion by 2018/19 — and catch an increasing number of young people and families in a 'rent trap' with nothing left to save towards a deposit on a home.

Tenants' lack of power is brought into stark relief when one considers the relationship between a tenant and their landlord. Of course, the *economic* and income disparity is glaring. But what's perhaps less obvious is the amount of *political* inequality: the views of landlords and councils occupy the political stage when it comes to housing. Landlords organise into prominent and vocal bodies to represent their interests. Councils, pushed by cuts and competition, increasingly concentrate on the interests of investors and developers. In 2014, no representative independent organisation with any political weight or campaigning goals existed exclusively for tenants in Scotland. Activists, in part inspired by the hotbed of radical ideas which the Referendum initiative

² These were a direct legal result of the 1915 Rent Strikes organised notably in Glasgow when thousands of women refused to pay exorbitant rents and challenged landlords aiming to profit from the war and the absence of the [male] "head of the household".

¹ All names used are pseudonyms.

had prompted throughout Scotland, aimed to rectify this situation. For two years, we held street stalls, sent out petitions, participated in stunts and marches, gathered the support of organisations representing more than 1 million people and directed media attention to the need for affordable, flexible and quality homes. In March 2016, we stood proudly in front of the Scottish Parliament as Members of Scottish Parliament agreed upon the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) 2016 Act which scrapped the no-fault eviction ground, introduced more specific grounds for evictions, allowed a more flexible tenancy agreement and re-introduced the word 'rent control' in public discourse³.

Forming the union

Yet, we soon realised that whilst this victory was key – prior to the law, organising tenants was doomed to failure with such easy and threatening eviction powers in the hands of landlords - it was not enough. Getting real rent controls in place would take more than a law and more than a campaigning group. Inspired by the workers' movement, we decided to form as a union, with dues enabling the hiring of an organiser. By July 2016, we launched Living Rent as a tenants' union. As our current mission statement has it, we are 'a union for tenants in Scotland, fighting for tenants' rights and decent and affordable housing for all'. We fight for more power and rights for renters. Currently this goal boils down to three key aims: for the power imbalance between tenant and landlord to be redressed; for houses to be seen first and foremost as homes, not as investment opportunities; and for everyone in Scotland to have access to decent and affordable housing. These aims are underwritten by our core principles:

- 1) We are a democratic organisation led by and for tenants.
- 2) We adopt a range of tactics to achieve our goals. We seek to act as a bridge between concrete issues and political battle, direct action, campaigning, and lobbying from the local to the national scale.
- 3) We are independent and unaffiliated to political parties and work with all who share our concerns and goals.

Since January 2017, when we recruited an organiser, people have been supported to resist unfair eviction, win crucial repairs, challenge illegal fees, and claim deposits back. Membership has grown from 70 to 270 members, with new members joining every month. Whilst the union set out with private tenants in mind, social tenants, notably in Glasgow, have joined and won significant rent decreases in housing associations –

³ The actual provision for rent controls are weak and potentially ineffective but just bringing this word back on to the political agenda is a victory.

up to 25% in one association and tenants elsewhere are now reaching out to replicate this success. Every month, tenants throughout Scotland contact us, highlighting similar issues and asking for support. However, crucially, we don't want to become only a service union; political campaigns thus stay high up our agenda. Over the last months, members have pushed Edinburgh and Glasgow councils to consider implementing the Rent Pressure Zones and campaigned for a WinterBreak of eviction - the suspension of all eviction enforcements during winter months – and pressured for tighter regulation around short-term lets which are threatening to completely gentrify city centres.

Lessons learned

There is a blatant housing crisis in Britain. As people are unable to climb the housing ladder or access social housing, private tenants become a crucial source of income for landlords, a situation which further reproduces class and generational inequalities. This is prompting groups around the UK to organise around housing; we feel it is important to channel such growing anger into democratic and member-based organisation, or unions. For us, this is part of reclaiming working-class history and methods and learning together how to form a grassroots counter-power organisation. It is about making situations fairer for our members at the individual and collective level. Further, as workers enter a more precarious job market and sectors with fewer active unions, organising through people's homes might provide an interesting way of reaching out to younger and unorganised workers. We believe that challenging inequality cannot happen without challenging the housing "market" and the idea that housing is an investment. To achieve this, we feel that a large, counter-power and democratic organisation is key, or a tenants' union. In the meantime, we will get Scott's damp issue sorted.

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