

Milwaukee Autonomous Tenants Union

HOW TO BUILD A TENANT'S COUNCIL

WHAT A TENANT COUNCIL IS

- ★ A council is a group of tenants/neighbors who join together despite any differences they have in order to organize over shared issues to improve their homes.
- ★ They use their collective power against their landlord to get their demands met.
- ★ Tenant councils can exist in apartment buildings and complexes and neighborhoods

YOU ARE PROTECTED BY LAW FROM RETALIATION WHEN FORMING A TENANT'S COUNCIL

ATCP 134.09 (5) in Wisconsin law states “no landlord shall terminate a tenancy or give notice preventing the automatic renewal of a lease, or constructively evict a tenant by any means including the termination or substantial reduction of heat, water or electricity to the dwelling unit, in retaliation against a tenant because the tenant has:

- (A) Reported a violation of this chapter or a building or housing code to any governmental authority, or filed suit alleging such violation.
- (B) Joined or attempted to organize a tenant's union or association; or
- (C) Asserted, or attempted to assert any right specifically accorded to tenants under state or local law.

THE PROCESS OF FORMING A TENANT'S COUNCIL IS EASY

- 1) **Go door to door in your building or neighborhood** and pass out this flier in order to convince your neighbors of the necessity of a tenant's council. You could hold a gathering in a commons area or outside to allow your neighbors to ask questions, express their thoughts, and vote on the formation of a council.
- 2) **Write & sign a declaration of incorporation** if there is support for the formation of a tenant's council, even among a few of your neighbors. The Milwaukee Autonomous Tenants Union can help you write a declaration, which will only be about half a page or so. You will also want to pick a name for your council, and MATU can design a logo for it.
- 3) **Inform your landlord of your council's formation** after it is incorporated! This is required because you can only be protected against retaliation if you can prove that the landlord knew of the council's existence! You could deliver a copy of the declaration directly to the landlord or send it via certified mail. **You must be able to provide evidence that the landlord received notification of the council's formation!!!**
- 4) **Hold regular meetings** (monthly or bi-monthly) that can be attended by any resident of the building or neighborhood provided they are a renter. Talk about what you want to see happen, what changes could be made, and what does the landlord need to do in order to make your life better? As the tenant's council develops a list of demands and takes action to make those demands a reality, the council will grow in numbers and power.

THE BENEFITS OF FORMING A TENANT'S COUNCIL

- 1) **Collective security:** The tenants united can stand up to the landlord when the rights of one tenant are being violated, so the landlord knows he will have to deal with everyone, not just a single tenant.
- 2) **Unity to demand change:** A unified demand from the majority of tenants in a building can pressure a landlord to make necessary repairs, respond more quickly to maintenance requests, provide additional services, and change their business practices.
- 3) **Lower chance of eviction:** Across the country, tenants who have formed councils and joined tenant's unions have a lower likelihood of being evicted. Wisconsin state law specifically protects tenants from retaliation for the formation of tenant unions and councils. Forming a tenant's council increases the strength of a retaliation argument in an eviction hearing.
- 4) **Ability to shift the balance of power:** Landlords traditionally hold all the power in the tenant-landlord relationship, but this is only the case because the landlord is able to deal with tenants individually. The balance of power shifts to the tenants when they are **organized and unified**.

The Milwaukee Autonomous Tenants Union (MATU) guides tenants along the process, providing resources, typing up documents, designing logos or membership cards, and proctoring tenant council meetings. The tenant's council can choose to officially affiliate with MATU or remain an independent council.

MATU is part of a larger network of tenant unions nationwide, the Autonomous Tenants Union Network (ATUN), which represents dozens of tenant councils and hundreds of tenants across the country. MATU and any tenant's council in Milwaukee can draw from the knowledge and resources that ATUN provides.

The most effective way to protect your rights as a tenant is to form a tenant's council in your building or neighborhood!!! Fighting back against landlords individually is much harder and much less likely to be successful than fighting back collectively!!!

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