

Empowering Tenant Leaders to Shape Housing Policies and the Future of Their Communities

This spotlight is part of a [series](#) summarizing six “build & learn” pilots launched in 2024 to explore how field building could take shape in different settings and impact domains. Developed with trusted field partners, the pilots focused on bringing actors together to spur efforts that would have otherwise not emerged or been slow to develop. They were designed to catalyze meaningful impact while generating insight to inform a broader field-building strategy.

THE CHALLENGE

Rapidly rising rents and unchecked development put too many people at risk of housing insecurity, eviction, and displacement and leave tenants with little recourse or power to challenge systemic inequities. This profit-driven system not only exacerbates displacement but limits opportunities for alternative housing models that prioritize community well-being over financial gain.

Although organizations across the country are actively addressing the affordable housing crisis, many leaders of these efforts report that their work is not effectively coordinated. Within the affordable housing field, organizations prioritize differing goals and agendas and may find themselves in competition for scarce resources, undermining opportunities for collaboration and creating barriers to unified, tenant-centered solutions.

Too often, the perspectives and priorities of tenants are excluded from both local and national deliberations. This exclusion perpetuates housing policies that fail to address the needs of those most impacted by the crisis.

“ *Capitalism, underpinned by a profit motive, especially in real estate, is a fundamental barrier to achieving equitable housing.*

—Chris Schildt, Urban Habitat

“ *Tenants are not valued equally; during the foreclosure crisis, the nation was more willing to protect homeowners than tenants, who are seen as transient and unworthy.*

—Rasheedah Phillips, PolicyLink

THE GOAL

This build & learn pilot seeks to amplify the voices of tenants at local and national scales. It supports the early-stage work of the Tenant Union Federation to bring local tenant leaders into alignment with one another and begin engaging with labor union leaders to identify shared priorities. The steering committee members’ expertise, reputations, and relationships support the Tenant Union Federation’s engagement with established leaders and decisionmaking tables and accelerate its path toward influence and impact.

“ *There is a notable gap in the coordination between housing advocates and groups from other sectors like public health, criminal justice, and labor, impacting the effectiveness of the housing justice movement.*

—Suzanne Dershowitz, Public Advocates

THE FIRST STEP

The steering committee approved an initial investment of \$160,000 to help the newly created Tenant Union Federation accelerate its efforts to cultivate leadership within local tenant unions, conduct deep dives into tenant union methodologies, and organize convenings of tenant leaders with labor partners and policy experts. These efforts include the following:

- **create a network of tenant union leaders from different communities** to build power and foster the proliferation of best practices;

- **formalize and share methodologies and strategies for tenant organizing across unions**, including case studies and reports that summarize effective organizing practices and advocacy efforts; and
- **convene tenant and labor union leaders for an initial introduction and ongoing discovery** of shared interests and goals.

PARTNERS

The recently launched Tenant Union Federation is the lead partner for this pilot project. Its mission is to organize tenants to wield power as a political and economic class that cannot be ignored. Five local tenants' unions are founding members of the Federation:

- **KC Tenants** in Kansas City, Missouri
- **Connecticut Tenant Union**, a statewide union with 14 local chapters
- **Louisville Tenant Union** working in Louisville, Kentucky, and surrounding suburbs
- **Bozeman Tenants United** in Bozeman, Montana
- **Not Me We** organizing tenants in Chicago, Illinois

Marissa Guanaja (Common Future), Starsky Wilson (Children's Defense Fund), and Ellis Carr (Capital Impact Partners) shaped and stewarded this pilot. Jesús Guzmán (Urban Institute) provided planning and logistical support.

LESSONS LEARNED

This pilot aims to empower tenant leaders to influence housing policy at local, state, and federal levels, shifting power toward marginalized communities. It also seeks to help build strong connections among tenant unions, labor unions, and other key actors, creating collaborations across housing and other key policy domains critical to economic well-being, power, and dignity.

The Tenant Union Federation's recent rent strike campaign served as an opportunity to test organizational capacities, accountability measures, and innovative organizing methodologies. The following lessons emerged:

- **Deep dives, site visits, and replicable methodologies** for tenant union-building are important priorities for

expanding the voice and power of tenants within and across communities.

- Through its pending **road map to outline key elements of building tenant unions**, the Tenant Union Federation can offer a clear framework for union structure, dues, and strategies that local leaders can adapt and follow.
- **Intermediaries like the Mobility Alliance can provide critical support** for efforts to build tenants' voice and power, including research about nationwide housing dynamics, connections to key national partners, and insights on political strategy.

LOOKING AHEAD

As the Tenant Union Federation moves into the next phase of its work, it will focus on scaling its organizing methodology and building the institutional capacity needed to **convene and support a national network of tenant unions**. This includes finalizing the road map for building tenant unions, refining training programs, and continuing deep dives with union leaders to assess and improve organizing practices.

A key priority will be forming strategic partnerships with organized labor and research institutions to deepen the Federation's understanding of landlord power and develop targeted strategies. These partnerships will enhance the Tenant Union Federation's ability to conduct corporate research and support union members in challenging housing inequities at scale.

“ The long-term vision for the Tenant Union Federation is to build a powerful, national tenant voice that can't be ignored—by public or private institutions, at the local or national level. This is about more than just winning housing policies; it's about shifting power dynamics and creating systemic change through tenant-led organizing. It's a 50-year vision, but we are laying the groundwork now by bringing unions together and defining what tenant power can achieve.

—Tara Raghuvver, Tenant Union Federation