



HAMILTON TENANT

A NEWSLETTER BY AND FOR TENANTS IN HAMILTON

published by the Hamilton Tenants Solidarity Network

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Welcome to the first issue of *Hamilton Tenant: A newsletter by and for tenants in Hamilton*. The goal of this newsletter is to share the stories of working-class tenants in Hamilton and inspire each other in our collective struggle for better conditions in our homes and our lives. This issue will focus on tenant struggles in East Hamilton. As of September 2018, tenants from the Stoney Creek Towers are entering the fifth month of their rent strike against landlord Inter-Rent REIT and property manager CLV Group, fighting against a big rent hike and for repairs.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this issue by writing articles, participating in interviews, drawing illustrations, and helping with design, printing, and distribution. Thank you to the Centre for Community-Engaged Narrative Arts (CCENA) at McMaster University for financial support. We invite anyone interested in helping with future issues to attend our next editorial meeting on Monday, September 24, 2018 at 6pm at the Riverdale Community Centre (150 Violet Drive, Hamilton). You could write an article, talk about your experiences in an interview, submit artwork or photographs, etc. For now, happy reading! We hope you enjoy this first issue of the newsletter and find it useful.



Jolly with her children, Noel and Annmaria, in their apartment.

FEATURE INTERVIEWS: VOICES OF THE EAST HAMILTON RENT STRIKE

Jolly Augusthy, Sareth Var, and Linda Habibi are members of the Stoney Creek Towers Tenant Committee and organizers in their buildings. As rent strike captains, they have spent many hours talking with their neighbours about working together to fight back against their landlord – knocking on doors, making phone calls, handing out flyers, attending weekly lobby meetings, etc. Jolly has lived at 40 Grandville Avenue for four years. Sareth has lived at 50 Violet Drive for ten years. Linda has lived at 77 Delawana Drive for one and half years.

Hamilton Tenant: Why did you decide to join the rent strike?

Jolly: I thought it is a good idea to be together with other tenants and respond to the landlord's misbehaviours because they are not showing respect to the tenants and they are harassing them sometimes. They are not taking care of the repairs properly and they made the Above Guideline Increase very high, so we have to respond to it. So that's why I decided to join the rent strike, to respond to the landlord's actions.

Sareth: The landlord wants 4.8% [total rent increase for 2018] but the guideline is only 1.8% [2018 annual rent increase guideline set by the Province of Ontario] so that's different. That's why we are not happy to pay more than the guideline increase. We have to rent strike to the end.

Linda: I'm on rent strike to help the 'legacy' tenants fight the Above Guideline rent Increase, which I now realize I'm going to probably get as well in the next couple of years, so we need to stop that from happening. We need to control rent everywhere, actually, not just here. This is part of something bigger.

Hamilton Tenant: Why do you think it's important that more neighbours join the tenant committee?

Jolly: If more people come on board to support the rent strike, that makes us more strong and helps us to win. Because then the landlord recognizes that "Oh, tenants are all together fighting to us." They will feel bad about it, but we feel really great about it! So we have to work on that and make the people come on board, that is why.

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Hamilton Tenant: Why do you think it's important that more neighbours join the tenant committee?

Sareth: Yes, it's very important for neighbours to join with us, for tenants to join together for the rent strike. The neighbour must join with us because not for me, not for you, but for to keep the law for our children and for the next generation, that's very important.



Sareth outside his apartment building.

Linda: First of all, there's a great sense of community here. Within four months of living here, I had an issue with CLV already, I was a brand new tenant. One of my daughters said, "Why don't you just move?" and I said, "I can't. I already know so many of my neighbours and I've only been here a few months, and I really like it here because there really is a sense of community." The more people who join the tenant committee and come out to the meetings, the more they'll get the sense that this really is a community. That's the most important thing because in that way we can all help each other – whether it's helping someone from their car with their groceries, opening the door for someone who's pushing a stroller, or whatever. When you get to know people then those things just happen naturally.

In terms of the rent increase, this is something that matters for everybody. If new tenants think, like I did, that it isn't going to affect them, they're wrong. It will affect them. And it doesn't matter if they stay here or move somewhere else because the exact same thing is going to happen. All you have to do is look at rent prices in the city: they've gone up exponentially. They haven't gone up by a little bit, they've gone up by a lot. Everywhere. So, imagine, if we had every single unit on rent strike, do you not think that

CLV would have already spoken to us? They would have gone, "Whoa, that's over half a million dollars in one month of no money coming in!" They would have sat down and talked to us. So, if everyone had joined the rent strike right from the beginning, this would already have been over. But it's not too late. It's never too late! Until we have them at the table, it's never too late! You can still join in September, you can still come out to the rallies, you can still support the Rent Strike Defense Fund. There's so many ways to support.

Hamilton Tenant: Why is it important for you to stay in this neighbourhood?

Jolly: Because this is a very good and very nice neighbourhood to live. Quiet place, and the location is very great to access everything, like groceries or mall and everything. The neighbourhood is for a long time a very good neighbourhood so that's why I would like to stay. And we were actually working for the [HSR] bus to come to the Riverdale neighbourhood. It's a success now so which is really important to stay for the neighbourhood because I worked for that, and I'm excited to work for this too.

Sareth: For me, I stand for the rent strike because I like to stand for the social community, because I know a lot of people here have low income. That's why I want to help with the community. I love the community. My neighbours, tenants, yeah I like all of them. That's why I need all of the four buildings of tenants to join together. Don't be scared of the landlord because the landlord can't do nothing to the tenants.

Linda: I know everybody. I like everybody. I go out at night for a walk with my dog and I feel safe. You know, it's funny, I've lived in a lot of places, and this is truly the first place that I feel at home.



Linda outside her apartment building.

LESSONS FROM HISTORY: RENT STRIKES AROUND THE WORLD

Rent Strikes are kicking off everywhere – from Stoney Creek in Hamilton, to Flemingdon Park in Toronto, to Westlake in Los Angeles tenants are withholding rent to communicate in the only language that landlords seem to understand: money. Rent strikes have a long history as a tactic used by working-class tenants fighting for affordable, safe homes. Here's a brief survey of some of the more significant ones.

Glasgow, Scotland (1915)

Thousands of tenants – especially women whose husbands were away fighting in World War I – refused to pay a rent increase. Tenant meetings were often held at different women's homes around the kitchen table. At rallies and protests, men, women, and children held signs that said:

- *Rent strike against increases. We are not removing!*
- *Defending our homes against landlord tyranny. We want justice.*
- *While my father is fighting in Germany the landlord is attacking our home.*
- *Less rent means more milk.*
- *No surrender. God help the sheriff officer who enters here.*



1915 Glasgow rent strike protest.

Landlords filed for evictions and called sheriff officers to carry them out, but that didn't scare the tenants. Whenever a sheriff was spotted entering the neighbourhood, one woman would ring a bell to alert everyone else. Other women would throw flour bombs, rotting food, and wet clothes at the sheriff from their apartments, forcing him to run away. At the peak of the rent strike, 30,000 tenants had joined. When 18 tenants were taken to small claims court, 10,000 supporters showed up and threatened with a general strike (meaning tenants would withhold rent and workers would withhold their labour, not showing up for work). The charges were dropped and the authorities agreed to fix rents at the pre-war level. As a result of this working-class organizing for affordable housing, rent control laws were introduced and thousands of new public housing units were built.



1964 New York rent strike protest.

New York, United States (1958-64)

Many Black and Hispanic tenants were excluded from public housing (due to a racist selection process) and ended up in some of the worst apartments in Harlem and the Lower East Side, the poorest neighbourhoods in New York. When landlords, property managers, and city officials ignored their requests for heat, electricity, plumbing, extermination of “rats as big as cats”, and other basic repairs, many tenants fought back through a series of rent strikes in the 1950s and '60s. Tenants demanded repairs, affordable rents, and the construction of more public housing. When the tenants were taken to court over non-payment of rent, they smuggled dead rats into the courtroom to prove their point! In response, local politicians criticized the bad behaviour of slumlords and launched a “Million Dollar War on Rats” program. This was an effort to divert attention away from the fact that it was the government's racist selection process for public housing and failure to build enough public housing that drove Black and Hispanic tenants into these slum apartments in the first place.

Parkdale, Toronto, Canada (2017-18)

In the past year, Parkdale tenants won two rent strikes against two corporate landlords. Like Stoney Creek Towers tenants, Parkdale tenants decided to strike to demand repairs and fight Above Guideline Increases in rent. In 2017, 300 tenants decided to withhold their rent to fight the AGI proposed by their corporate landlord, MetCap. After three months, MetCap agreed to negotiate. Tenants won a big reduction to the AGI, protections for low-income tenants, and a schedule of repairs. This year, facing a similar situation, another group of Parkdale tenants took on their landlord, Nuspor. This landlord gave up after only two months of struggle and cancelled the AGI altogether! Neighbours who met each other when fighting for their homes have since worked together to fight for better conditions at their workplaces and their children's schools. Parkdale residents who work at the Ontario Food Terminal went on strike and won a wage increase, paid sick days, and job security. Parkdale residents have started a community after-school tutoring program, and teachers have begun organizing for improvements at the local public school.

CAMPAIGN UPDATES: THE EAST HAMILTON RENT STRIKE SO FAR

Since May 1, 2018, more than 100 households from the Stoney Creek Towers in East Hamilton have been participating in a rent strike. Tenants have been withholding rent to protest their landlord's application for an Above Guideline Increase (AGI) in rent and to demand repairs to their units. When combined with the annual guideline rent increases permitted by the Ontario government, the total rent hike would amount to nearly 10% over two years. Tenants understand that this is the first of many AGI applications their landlord is likely to seek, and that if they do not fight back now, they will soon be priced out of their homes.

Supported by HTSN, the Stoney Creek Towers Tenant Committee has been working hard to organize tenants – knocking on their neighbours' doors, making phone calls, translating

information, holding lobby meetings. Tenants have been carefully setting their money aside and are prepared to pay what they owe when the landlord meets their demands. Tenants are supported by lawyers from the Hamilton Community Legal Clinic and have raised over \$15,000 from community supporters in a Rent Strike Defense Fund to cover the cost of potential Landlord & Tenant Board filing fees. No one on rent strike has been evicted.

Here is a summary of the ways tenants have put pressure on their landlord, InterRent Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT), and in-house property management company, CLV Group, over the course of the rent strike campaign. Landlords might have lots of money but tenants are many. We have power when we work together. We can win!

MAY 1, 2018: Rent strike begins!

Tenants celebrated the launch of the rent strike by sharing a potluck meal at the local park, marching through the neighbourhood, making speeches, and dropping a large *RENT STRIKE!* banner from the top floor of one of the buildings.

MAY 15, 2018: Rent strikers deliver work order forms en masse

Tenants rallied outside the CLV office at 40 Grandville Ave. They delivered a large stack of work order forms, documenting a slew of longstanding maintenance issues in their apartments and demanding that they be addressed. Tenants are angry that they being asked to foot the \$3 million bill for cosmetic upgrades to the buildings (new landscaping, lobby renovations, etc.) through an AGI, while necessary repairs to their units are ignored by the landlord.

JUNE 9, 2018: Rent strikers disrupt landlord's open house to hold Tenant Open House

Rent striking tenants decided to hold their own open house to share the truth about the conditions of buildings and how the landlord treats its tenants. Tenants set up an information table outside the CLV office, dropped banners from their balconies, gave speeches, and provided tours of their units to the media. CLV staff cancelled the open house planned for the day and continue to have a hard time renting vacant units to new tenants.

JUNE 15, 2018: Rent strikers travel to Toronto to protest CI Financial, top investor in InterRent REIT

Rent strikes travelled to the financial district in Toronto to visit the office of CI Financial, the largest investor in InterRent REIT. As the main group of tenants caused a distraction by rallying on the sidewalk, a second group rode the elevator up to CI Financial's offices, and demanded to speak with the company president. Tenants demanded that CI Financial withdraw its investments from InterRent REIT.

JUNE 29, 2018: CLV tenants and supporters organize solidarity rallies in cities across Ontario and Quebec

Simultaneous visits were made to CLV site offices in Burlington, Guelph, London, and Montreal, as well as the CLV/InterRent head office in Ottawa in support of Stoney Creek tenants. Supporters who visited the head office in Ottawa reported that CEO Mike McGahan refused to meet with them or to accept a letter written by the rent strikers. He hid in his office and sent a staff member to retrieve it on his behalf.

JULY 3, 2018: Rent strikers disrupt Landlord & Tenant Board

Rather than acknowledge the collective nature of the rent strike and negotiate in good faith with the tenants, InterRent wants to pretend that non-payments of rent are individual cases of negligence and bring rent strikers to the LTB. The first group of tenants had hearings on July 3rd. Tenants and their supporters rallied in big numbers and then flooded into the hearing room to occupy the court and halt the proceedings. We chanted and played drums and forced the adjudicator from the room. The majority of cases were not processed and only a handful of tenants were given court orders to pay their rent.

JULY 28, 2018: Rent strikers gather for barbeque and Family Fun Day

Tenants shared a meal and gave speeches. Children had fun with crafts and games. For the final hurrah, they took turns hitting a piñata of Mike McGahan, CLV/InterRent CEO. McGahan has a personal wealth of over \$70 million. He is chiefly responsible for InterRent's strategy to make profits by displacing people from their homes, including families with children.

AUGUST 10, 2018: Rent strikers bring demands to landlord's doorstep in Ottawa

After months of being ignored by the landlord, tenants decided to hop on a school bus and travel to Ottawa to visit the head office of CLV/InterRent to deliver a letter and request a meeting with CEO Mike McGahan. Since McGahan refused to meet with the tenants at his office (even though he was clearly visible inside), the next day tenants went to his house, a \$2.5 million mansion. Tenants also visited the local golf course and yacht club to put up posters reminding McGahan's rich friends of how he makes his money: by kicking working-class people out of their homes.

Get involved! Join the rent strike!

Are you a tenant at the Stoney Creek Towers living at 11 Grandville Avenue, 40 Grandville Avenue, 50 Violet Drive, or 77 Delawana Drive? Come out the next Stoney Creek Towers Tenant Committee meeting to get involved. Meetings happen **every Monday at 7pm** in each of the four buildings' lobbies and once per month as a big group at the Riverdale Community Centre (150 Violet Drive). Talk to your neighbours! Find out who the strike captains in your building are and reach out to them for information. You can also contact the tenant committee by phone at **289-639-9833** or email at **SCT.Tenants@gmail.com**.

ABOUT THE HAMILTON TENANTS SOLIDARITY NETWORK

The Hamilton Tenants Solidarity Network is a volunteer, grassroots network linking tenants across Hamilton, Ontario to build working-class tenant power and fight against the forces of displacement in our city. Contact us at hamiltontenantssolidarity@gmail.com.