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## SETTING UP A LONDON RENTERS UNION

Private renters in London get a raw deal, and this government isn't about to help them.



**Greens will help set up a London Renters Union so they can help themselves, organising to rein in rents, expose rogue letting agents and launch a Londonwide Landlord Register.**

All 2.3 million Londoners living in privately rented homes would automatically become members. We will provide core funding and office space to the union, which will quickly become independent of City Hall. This funding will come from the People's Housing Company, the proposed finance for which Greens on the London Assembly outlined in a budget amendment this week.<sup>1</sup>

## WHY LONDON RENTERS NEED A UNION

There are an estimated 950,000 households renting privately in London.

Private renters are at the sharp end of London's housing crisis. For example:

- Average rents have risen 11 per cent since 2012, while average pay has risen just 1 per cent.
- The end of a tenancy is now the leading cause of homelessness, accounting for four in 10 cases across London.
- One third of private renters stay in their home for less than one year, compared to 4 per cent of owner occupiers and 6 per cent of social renters.

**#DECENTHOMES**



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Private renters need the government to bring in root-and-branch reforms to address these and other problems. But Greens in City Hall won't just sit and wait for those reforms. We will help renters to help themselves now.

## **GREEN PARTY ACTION**

Nationally, the Green Party would replace Assured Shorthold Tenancies with contracts allowing renters to stay in their home for up to five years during which rents couldn't rise above inflation, and then allow them to extend their contracts with a newly agreed rent unless the landlord sells the home or moves in.

In London our candidate for Mayor, Sian Berry, has tried to gain support from other candidates and MPs to give the Mayor of London the power to introduce such regulations, and Caroline Lucas MP recently tried to amend the Housing Bill to establish a Living Rent Commission to explore these.

In the absence of changes to the law and regulations, the Green Party will still find ways to improve the lot of private renters. The Green London Assembly Members have proposed a budget amendment for 2016/17 that would create a People's Housing Company, which would help fund the London Renters Union.<sup>1</sup>

The current Mayor, Boris Johnson, has tried to improve the situation by asking landlords and letting agents to sign up to the voluntary London Rental Standard, which in essence requires that they comply with the law.

So far only 15,000 landlords and 360 letting agents have signed up, well short of the Mayor's manifesto promise of 100,000. City Hall estimates that 137,000 properties are managed by an accredited agent, representing just 14 per cent of all private rented properties. These are likely to be among the best landlords and agents, leaving the harmful amateur and rogue landlords entirely unscathed.

## **RENTERS ALREADY TAKING STEPS**

London has seen a growing movement of renters' groups winning fairer rents and stronger rights on their own. Students at University College London recently won £400,000 in compensation for poor living conditions including noise and rat infestations.

Renters living in the New Era estate in Hackney kicked up such a fuss when a US investor bought their homes and threatened to evict them that the new owner then sold them to charity Dolphin Living, who introduced rents based on their ability to pay.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/green\\_party\\_group\\_budget\\_amendment\\_2016-17\\_0.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/green_party_group_budget_amendment_2016-17_0.pdf)

These groups follow in the footsteps of renters' movements that have won many of the major improvements to housing in modern British history.

In 1915, 30,000 Glasgow residents united in a rent strike against profiteering landlords, forcing the government to pass the Rent Restriction Act 1915 which froze rents for the duration of the First World War. This was intended to be a temporary measure, but the pressure of people standing together kept rent control as a key factor in UK housing policy well into the 1980s.

Those organisations of renters acting together campaigned for the first council housing to be built. They organised their communities to force successive governments to improve housing quality and deal with squalor and homelessness. They took radical action – such as mass squatting and rent strikes – and forced housing onto the agenda when politicians preferred not to deal with the issue.

In Derry, Northern Ireland, the city's squatting movement is believed to have housed more people in 1968 than the local authority. The actions of residents and renters, working together, are directly responsible for a host of government laws to alleviate poor housing, including the Homeless Persons Act 1977.

## WHAT WOULD THE RENTERS UNION DO?

**The principle behind a renters' union is that collective actions focused on specific renters' issues will be more effective in achieving change than individual renters attempting to solve their problems.**

**Renters' unions seek to make renters more aware of their ability to join forces, participate and challenge the decisions of their landlords.**

Greens in City Hall want to kick the property speculators and investor landlords out, and bring ordinary Londoners inside. But we won't prescribe exactly what the Renters Union will do. That should be decided by the union members themselves.

We expect that the union would consider the following activities:

- Provide advice and support to individual renters, or signpost them to agencies which may be able to help them such as Shelter and Citizens Advice.
- Support renters taking legal action against private landlords.
- Give private renters a stronger voice, able to feed into and lobby for policies developed by London's boroughs and the Mayor of London.

- Establish and support local groups of private renters, for example around universities or boroughs. Many of these already exist.
- Develop advice and rights guides for tenants with the Mayor's office.
- Organise local groups to expose wrongdoing and prompt local authority enforcement action, for example undertaking 'secret shopping' exercises to find letting agents not complying with laws relating to fees, or uncovering racial discrimination against BAME tenants.
- Launch a voluntary London Landlord Register and work with accreditation schemes, borough licensing schemes and renters' groups to establish a large database of landlords, and campaign for their mandatory licensing. The database could include a blacklist of rogue landlords.

The union would need to work closely with other renters' groups already active in London.

For example, Shelter provides advice services, Renters' Rights London provides information and tools for renters, Generation Rent is organising local renters' groups, groups such as Waltham Forest Renters have already led secret shopping exercises, and students at University College London along with activists in the Radical Housing Network are actively discussing establishing a renters' union.

## Examples of renters' organisations around the world

**ACORN** is a community organising movement with strong housing campaigns that started in the USA and is now established in the UK, including in Bristol and Newham <http://www.acorncommunities.org.uk>

**NUS Scotland** has been encouraging students to form tenants' unions based around their universities <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/nus-scotland/articles/how-to-set-up-a-tenants-union>

**University of Illinois Tenants Union** provides advice and conflict resolution, but doesn't provide formal legal advice <http://www.tenantunion.illinois.edu/>

**Tenants Union of Victoria** offers free advice services to tenants, and it runs a policy and public affairs team to lobby decision-makers on behalf of tenants <http://www.tuv.org.au/about/what-we-do/>

**San Francisco Tenants' Union** provides advice and advocacy, as well as campaigning around local policy and laws <https://www.sftu.org/>