



# The Tenants Will Win: TANC Pandemic Organizing Guide

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*March 22, 2020*

*To see TANC's call for rent suspensions, and for our tenant interest form, [click here](#).*

## Table of Contents:

<b>1. Some Basic Principles</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2. Strategy: The Big Picture</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3. How To Organize (quick)</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4. How To Organize (detailed)</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5. Resources: Forms, Letters, Links</b>	<b>9</b>



## *1. Some Basic Principles*

1. **Tenants are stronger when they act together.** Confronting a landlord as an individual is daunting. But when we do it as a group, we can become more confident. No matter what, that's why you want to build a tenant council.
2. **COVID-19 is not only a health crisis, but an economic and political crisis too.** The current crisis is largely due to government negligence and the inability for capitalism to meet our basic needs. We need our needs met first and foremost.
3. **For long-term power.** The COVID-19 crisis is part of a long pattern of mistreatment of the working class. Serious change needs to happen. To do this, we have to get organized and stay organized over the long haul.
4. **Against the housing market.** The housing market, with its high rents, dilapidated rentals, and homelessness, benefits the rich at our expense. Landlords, speculators and venture capitalists benefit from the housing market while the rest of us suffer. Let's change that.
5. **Against separation.** We are divided by long histories of oppression and violence on the basis of ability, gender, language, nationality, race, sexuality, and other social differences. As we organize to meet basic needs, we must overcome these divisions. The rich and powerful will always try to pit us against one another.
6. **Building working class organization.** Our enemies—landlords, politicians, speculators, bosses—have their own political organizations that they use to get what they want. TANC is an organization of the working class, which includes anyone who is told to “work or die” because they lack meaningful ownership. TANC intends to become strong enough to take on the rich and powerful. Together, we can win.
7. **Keeping ourselves and others safe and healthy.** While organizing during the pandemic it's important to take precautions so that you don't endanger yourself or others. If you are not informed, please read how to [prevent the coronavirus disease](#).



## 2. Strategy: The Big Picture

### “Got Your Back Pledge” AKA “Strike Pledge”

- ❑ The basic idea: You plus any number of other tenants can't or won't pay rent. You get your fellow tenants to sign onto a “Got Your Back Pledge” letter that is then sent to the landlord. The letter notifies that landlord of the following:
  - There is now an established tenants council;
  - All issues relevant to COVID will take place through the tenant council, as a collective, rather than as individuals;
  - Certain tenants cannot pay rent during the COVID-19 crisis;
  - Tenants who cannot pay are asking for rent suspension due to COVID-19 crisis;
  - If the landlord retaliates, the tenants council is prepared to defend their colleagues;
  - The *maximum* tactic on the table is a rent strike, though other actions may be taken. Remember that a full-on rent strike can be risky. You want to know the risks before actually engaging in it.
- ★ Why we recommend this plan:
  - It automatically gives you some legal protection against retaliation by forming a tenants council;
  - It produces solidarity with those who cannot/will not pay without asking immediate action;
  - It forces the landlord to go on the record about their position in this difficult time;
  - It opens up new possible actions later on, and puts tenants in a better position for the long term.



### 3. How To Organize (quick)

<b>Step 0</b>	<i>Join TANC.</i> Optional, but as part of the tenants union, we'll help you through this process. Even more important, as a mass organization we will build the power necessary to challenge and transform the capitalist housing market.
<b>Step 1</b>	<i>Plan and prepare.</i> Gather outreach materials. Assess your situation and ask yourself if anyone in your building might be willing to help you. <u>Know proper health precautions before you communicate with others. Please see the "Stay Healthy" section, located in Step One below.</u> Let's stay safe!
<b>Step 2</b>	<i>Connect and build.</i> Talk to neighbors in your building, and get their contact information. Ask lots of questions about their situation, it's likely they have issues but it might take some talking to bring them out. Be upfront about your situation and where you are coming from, but make sure to do a lot of listening. <u>We recommend doing all organizing through non-face to face methods during the pandemic crisis.</u> Read detailed steps below for more information.
<b>Step 3</b>	<i>Build a communication method and then have a tenants meeting.</i> Set up a system for tenants to stay in communication. (If the pandemic gets worse, communication could become even more necessary.) Use the line of communication to promote a tenants meeting to discuss sending the landlord a demand letter, and to touch base on anyone's needs during the pandemic crisis.
<b>Step 4</b>	<i>Notify the landlord and wait.</i> Send the landlord an email/letter stating that (a) tenants have formed a tenants council, (b) some tenants cannot pay, (c) they demand rent forgiveness for the duration of the pandemic, and (d) the tenants council will defend these tenants if retaliation happens. Stay healthy and remain in touch!

In the next section, we give details for the above organizing steps. Remember that if you join TANC you'll have a community to lean on as you go forward. And you'll have the opportunity to help others after you've learned the ropes. Anyone can organize to defend themselves. And all of us are more powerful when we are organized together.

Let's get the goods.



## 4. How To Organize (detailed)

### Step 0: Join TANC.

TANC—Tenant And Neighborhood Councils—is a tenant’s union operating in the Bay Area. We think you should join because together we can build the power necessary to win. We also think struggling against landlords and preventing eviction is best when we are all together. Here are some quick features:

- ❑ For and by tenants.
  - ↳ TANC is a member-run organization, with neighborhood chapters (current chapters are: West Oakland, East of Lake Merritt, North Oakland, Berkeley).
- ❑ Organizing support.
  - ↳ If you are a TANC member, we’ll more easily help you move through this organizing guide. We have an organizer committee, and a COVID-19 working group. Both will be helpful and accessible through our WhatsApp chat.
- ❑ Join! It’s Free for the unemployed and houseless.
  - ↳ Joining will take about 3 minutes: <https://baytanc.com/signup/>
  - ↳ Either way, please contact us with any questions as you move through the organizing guide: [onboarding@baytanc.com](mailto:onboarding@baytanc.com)

### Step 1: Plan and Prepare.

To know the best way to begin, you need to have a clear idea of what your situation is. Your situation will determine the kind of organizing you need to do

- ❑ Consider who you already know.
  - ↳ If you have a good friend or a solid contact in your building, you’ll want to start with them. If they get on board, you’ll have extra help out the door. It’s great to go into things with an ally.

*Sample text message: “Hey, hope you’re feeling alright. So, I don’t think I can pay rent this month because of the pandemic. I’m going to tell the landlord that I will not be paying this month, but I want to have support from other tenants before I do. Have time to talk about this?”*

- ❑ Gather outreach materials.
  - ↳ Download [this generic flyer](#) for sending to other tenants. It’s best to text or email these to people, since COVID-19 can be transmitted through paper materials.



- ↳ Print these [building signs](#) and [these agitational flyers](#) to tape up in common spaces, like entryways or mailrooms.
- ↳ If you don't have a printer, ask in the TANC WhatsApp chat if you can get some and we'll make a delivery.
- ↳ Prepare sign up sheet, or google form link (your choice)

Stay healthy.

- ↳ Use precautions as you move forward. COVID-19 is highly contagious and can be transmitted through touch and close proximity. We recommend doing all organizing through non-face to face methods during the pandemic crisis. If you must leave the house, stay at least six feet apart from tenants. Wear gloves and a mask. Wash your hands before and after you leave. Use the telephone or other similar forms of communication if that is an option. **This is an evolving situation—follow all public health recommendations. See: [California Department of Public Health Updates.](#)**
- ↳ If you're sick, don't leave the house. Reach out to TANC (if you are a member ask in the Whatsapp chat, if not [email us](#)) and we will see about doing the physical outreach work for you.

## Step 2: Connect and Build.

When a landlord's tenants are organized to act together, they are in a more powerful position than when they act alone.

Building contacts.

- ↳ The first step is to get organized into a tenant council with other renters.
- ↳ Wear gloves and a mask. Keep a distance from the door, so the tenant knows you care about them not getting sick.
- ↳ Prepare a signup sheet to collect contact information.
- ↳ Start with your building. You may already know your neighbors, or at least recognize them.
- ↳ Travel to the other buildings, or contact them if you already have a phone number or email address.

Connect with other tenants and **get contact information.**

- ↳ When meeting a tenant for the first time, introduce yourself, and ask questions to try to understand how they've been affected by the COVID crisis, or what their experience is with the landlord more broadly.

*Example questions: "I know the housing market is wild right now. Have you had any issues with the landlord? Overdue repairs? Having any trouble paying rent? Are there any tenants in the building you're concerned for?"*



- ↳ Let the conversation flow, ask questions, and try to let them do most of the talking, if possible. You've got to understand what they care about and what their concerns are. If they seem very antagonistic, politely end the conversation, and move on.
- ↳ Talk about your own experience and why you think organizing is necessary. Talk about how the issues everyone's experiencing can best be addressed collectively, as a tenant council.
- ↳ **No matter what, collect their contact information.** Getting people's contact information is the most essential thing you can do. Phone numbers are the most important. Even if someone appears indifferent, try to get their contact. An indifferent tenant can become enthusiastic overnight. Things can change, especially today, so always ask!
- ↳ If you don't think they seem ready the first time, that's ok. You can always give them a call later or come back again.

*Getting contact info from anyone: "Either way, I think it's important for us to be able to stay in touch, especially with the pandemic. It's good to build some community and have each other's backs, you never know what will happen. Think I can get your email and phone number?"*

- ❑ Keep track of who you can't reach and circle back.
  - ↳ If someone isn't available, try them again later.
  - ↳ If someone speaks a language you don't speak, find a friend who does or let TANC know and we may be able to help.

### **Step 3: Building a Communication Method and Scheduling a Meeting.**

Meetings are useful only inasmuch as there is a purpose for them. Remember what your purpose is (see strategy section above).

- ❑ Set up a communication channel for tenants.
  - ↳ Use what is comfortable for the largest number of tenants, everyone should be able to speak with each other. Communication method can be a mass text thread or email. [Google groups](#) works as an email list. [WhatsApp](#) can work well if everyone has the app or is willing to download it. [Signal](#) can work well if you are especially security minded. A Facebook group can work, too. A simple mass text thread will work if there are few tenants.
- ❑ Be multilingual if your group is multilingual.
  - ↳ If you speak multiple languages, make sure that everyone that is monolingual can understand the most important things people are saying.
  - ↳ If you are not multilingual, involve your friend or your TANC comrade who helped make the connection in the first place.
  - ↳ Practice this in everything, it may be hard or sometimes slow down conversation, but it keeps everyone together, and feels powerful to overcome this everyday barrier.
- ❑ Encourage participation individually.



↳ People who aren't sure about joining won't become more sure by getting an email or mass text. As much as you can, call and text people individually to check on how they are doing and encourage them to participate—because it's to theirs and your benefit. You'll know how to encourage them if you talk to them about what they want, need, and have to offer others. Organizing is relationship building toward collective action. If you have a large number of tenants to contact, the task can be daunting, so share this work, ideally with a fellow tenant, but any friend will do.

☐ Announce a tenants meeting to vote on the letter (if necessary)

↳ In-person meetings are not a good idea due to COVID-19. We suggest having the meeting over [Zoom](#). TANC has a Zoom account, and we can schedule the meeting for you and provide the login link. Ask in the TANC WhatsApp chat to schedule this or email [onboarding@baytanc.com](mailto:onboarding@baytanc.com). Google Hangouts is also readily available to most people because most people have Google accounts. Keep in mind not everyone is comfortable with computers, so don't use something that excludes people. Zoom can be called into, but old fashioned conference calls are good too.

↳ It may be that a meeting is not necessary. For example, if your building is small and you've already been able to build consensus around the Pledge and letter to the landlord.

☐ Have the meeting

↳ Remind everyone the day before and the day of about the meeting. Do it both en masse **and** individually. Don't feel weird about over-reminding. Not possible.

↳ Have a simple agenda. Example: (1) Introductions [name, how are you feeling?] (2) How is the Pandemic affecting you? (3) Joint letter about rent suspension/can't make rent/other demands.

↳ Have someone facilitate the meeting. Their job is to keep conversation on topic, include all participants in discussion, summarize agreements, and make sure every task has someone assigned to it.

↳ Have someone take notes. Their job is to write down at least the most important points, any decisions, and who commits to doing what. These help with knowing what happened as you move forward and with keeping people in the loop who missed a meeting.

#### **Step 4: Send the Letter, Expand.**

☐ Send the letter.

↳ Here's our generic letter from tenant council to landlord. ([link](#))

↳ Edit as you see fit. But the letter should announce that tenants are now operating as a tenant council, and it should list specific demands by the tenants that speak to the issues they've been having.





↳ Send the letter once you have a critical mass of tenants sign on. Telling tenants that you won't send it unless many others do too will encourage people to sign on.

↳ One example is for the landlord to suspend rent while people are out of work. The reason it's important to announce that you're a tenant council and put your demands in writing is that, in addition to the strength of collective activity, **this gives you better legal protections.** Going forward, if your landlord tries to respond with harassment, a sudden rent increase, or refuses to perform repairs, you can argue that this is retaliation against you exercising your right to organize, which is illegal, and your landlord can be subject to fines (California Civil Code 1942.5). If you never express your rights, or can't prove that you did, it's pretty difficult to claim your landlord is retaliating against you.

☐ Onward: Find out how many other properties your landlord owns.

↳ You'll want as many tenants on your side as possible. TANC can help you learn what other buildings your landlord owns and where they are, so you can talk to all the other tenants. To get that info, [fill out this form](#).



## 5. Resources: Forms, Letters, Links

### ★ Editable letters:

- Letter from tenant council to landlord. ([link](#))
- Outreach letter from tenant to other tenants. ([link](#))
- Outreach letter from tenant to other tenants in Spanish. ([link](#))
- “We Got Your Back” Pledge. ([link](#))
- Assortment of alternative sample letters. ([link](#))
- Letter barring realtor/inspections/walkthroughs/etc during pandemic ([link](#))

### ★ Forms:

- Landlord Information Request (for a list of their other properties). ([link](#))
- TANC membership form. ([link](#))

### ★ Flyers and posters:

- Generic flyer to send to neighbors, friends, co-workers, etc. ([link](#))
- Editable poster for apartment building common spaces. ([link](#))
- Posters for your window, laundromat, or for around the neighborhood. ([link](#))
- *Note: we can deliver printed flyers/posters if needed. Ask WhatsApp chat.*

### ★ Optional Reading:

- TANC Reader. ([link](#))
- TANC’s Rent Suspension Call. ([link](#))
- Oakland Tenant Rights Handbook. ([link](#))
- Philly Tenants Union’s Organizing Guide ([link](#))



[www.baytanc.com](http://www.baytanc.com)