Learning From Los Angeles: An Interview with LA Tenants Union Co-Founder, Tracy Rosenthal

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Abstract

Interview with writer, journalist, and organizer Tracy J. Rosenthal about their new book *Abolish Rent: How Tenants Can End the Housing Crisis*. In it, we talked about their experience co-founding the LA Tenants Union, the history of working class movements in LA, and the synergies between environmental and tenant activism in light of the LA wildfires. The conversation was motivated by a central puzzle: Los Angeles takes up a large role in urban theory, especially the neo-Marxist school of the 1970s, and those descriptions of the city are deeply cynical. Classic accounts emphasize policing, elite "pleasure domes," and hostility to working-class people and their movements. At the same time, it is the locus of Rosenthal's efforts, and the largest tenants' union in the country. We spoke in depth about the opportunities and challenges of organizing in this geography, and how place affected Rosenthal's and their comrades' strategies.

Keywords

social movements; tenant organizing; collective action; urban ecology; LA Tenants Union

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Learning From Los Angeles

I first got introduced to Tracy Rosenthal on the picket line. I was an undergraduate student in New York City at the height of the COVID pandemic, and the union for graduate student workers there–GSOC-UAW Local 2110–was on strike. While the University raked in billions of dollars by way of elite donations and its ever-growing real estate portfolio, the people it employed received starvation wages and bare-bones benefits that locked in their precarity. As I marched in solidarity with the striking workers next to the police and hired guards that kept a watchful eye on us, Rosenthal took a megaphone and gave us all a lesson in 21st-century urbanism that has stuck with me today: it is no accident that our corporate, capitalist cities are miniature police states. In fact, the capitalist city, undemocratic by design, relies on the police to maintain its delicate stasis, and without them, its cruel logics of inequality and injustice would be unable to persist. I have followed their work ever since.

Rosenthal is a true writer-organizer in a way that many attempt and few achieve, using Marxist theory to inform their involvement in class struggle and vice-versa. I sat down with them to discuss their new book, co-written by Leonardo Vichis, *Abolish Rent*, an account of the rent crisis from the ground up and of their involvement in the largest tenant union in the United States, the LA Tenants Union. While the theme of how policing and the legal system are used to subdue mass movements is a throughline in this story, the focus of our conversation was housing—the setting of one's most intimate moments and relationships and, as we will find, a contested terrain of class struggle.

An easy distillation of the story of the Los Angeles Tenants Union is perhaps this: marginalized and vulnerable working class renters aligned themselves in a striking display of solidarity against their exploitation, against their precarity, toward a new vision of urban life. From the margins of Los Angeles another world was born. "Rent drives millions into debt, despair, and onto the streets," writes Rosenthal and Vilchis. As the crisis walks up the socioeconomic scale, it has become the task of politicians and organizers across the country to answer an increasingly complicated question: what is to be done? With that debate dominated by policy-wonk-professionals who want to engineer us out of the crisis from above, Rosenthal's answers come as a fresh breeze.

The Interview

RL: You write, "The housing crisis is not a problem to be solved; it is a class struggle to be fought and won." A major task of Abolish Rent is to "demystify" the American housing system from a Marxist perspective. While landlords present themselves as "housing providers," you assert the feudal lineage of the term, showing them as stealing working people's wages and

profiting off of what should be a human right. Can you give a quick overview about what rent means socially and economically?

TR: To situate the book's intervention, specifically about rent, we wanted to do two things. One is to present rent as a power relationship that seems natural, but is, in fact, anything but—to demonstrate that this system is held in place specifically to enrich elites through state-sanctioned violence. To de-naturalize the discourse of rent is also to explore, in an idiom that hopefully people can understand: when we pay rent, what is it that we're paying for? I, a human being, have to have housing. It is a human need to have shelter. So what is rent? It is a fine for having a human need.

How do our landlords come to own the places that we pay to live in? They don't own them because they're better than us, smarter than us, or more deserving than us. They own them because at some point, they or their parents had the resources to take money and buy up land, buy up housing, hoarding the places where human beings can live, and they charge us to access that resource. So what is rent? It is a tribute to those with more money than us, those who hoard the places where we can live.

We don't just pay rent because we have to have housing. We pay rent because, if we don't, the agents of state violence can be deputized by our landlords to evict us at gunpoint from our homes. And if we find ourselves outside, we can be criminalized simply for the crime of not paying rent. So what is rent? It is a tribute extracted from us at the barrel of a gun.

We want to put it quite plainly, what is this relationship that we're trapped in? Rent captures, in many cases, the majority of our wages. There are 600,000 people in Los Angeles who pay 90% of their income in rent. And of course, we know that more than 75,000 already live outdoors. But when we think about the power and the resources that tenants have to fight back against the system, rent actually becomes something else. Our rent checks are actually a mechanism through which we can claim and create power for ourselves. Thinking about a rent strike as one of the tools in a tenant association's and a tenant union's arsenal helps us understand rent not only as a part of a relationship of exploitation and domination, but also as a source of our power.

RL: I think we could both agree that some amount of the housing crisis, or what you would call the rent crisis, has to do with a shortage of units. Can you talk a bit about your criticisms of private developer-led projects and the ideal form of housing production you would like to see?

TR: It's a particularly good day to have this discussion, because yesterday, one of the featured agents of *Selling Sunset* from the Oppenheimer group, took to Twitter to denounce price gouging in the rental market in Los Angeles. Now, why is this real estate agent denouncing

price gouging at this moment? Well, in the context of the LA fires, landlords have been listing available places at up to 300% what they had been listed before. This is because 12,000 structures have burned. 100,000 people have been displaced. People are finding themselves desperate for a place to live in a context where there is already a shortage of affordable places to be. And what have the landlords done in this instance? They've seized on this moment to jack up prices.

However, this is not just a condition of this particular disaster. This particular disaster only exacerbated and revealed the dynamics that are at play in our housing market all the time. That desperate people who need a place to live are set upon by landlords who have the means to speculate on housing to the extent that they wish and extract whatever the so-called market and not tenants can bear. And in this moment, Comrade Oppenheimer has discovered a conscience, but he's discovered it only in this moment of emergency, when that emergency has been permanent. The crisis is permanent for poor and working class people. To define the question of housing as a question of shortage is to ignore the fundamental power relationships that shape that shortage in the first place. We know that developers collude to preserve shortages. We know that when they report their annual statements, that is one of the things that they praise themselves for continuing. Where does the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program come from? It was a line in Reagan's tax cuts. The fact that a line in Reagan's tax cuts has now been normalized as the dominant mode of answering the social and political question of shelter is abominable. But it does not have to be that way. What we think of as natural and inevitable is not so; this is a human made problem and it can be therefore unmade.

The supply side argument would be deregulation and unleashing the power of the market, and focus specifically on zoning reform. What has that done? We have a really excellent example in California where those policies have, to a large extent, been won, but the results that we see are a continued overproduction of luxury development. So the tools that people seem to fetishize when promoting building housing as a strategy don't actually get us there. The fantasy that developers will work for tenants rather than collude with landlords is just that—a fantasy. So what other powers does the state have? It has the power of eminent domain, it has the power of production, and it has the power of regulation. These are the state powers that any anti-capitalist strategy for building housing would rely on. Rather than deregulation, rather than market incentives, it would rely on producing social housing. It would rely on taking housing out of speculative markets and regulating the housing that we have.

RL: I also think the *Selling Sunset* real estate person was reacting to the fact that a lot of very high value properties were burned in the fires.

TR: I think that's really true. This is something that I've said elsewhere: a crisis is what happens when something that was true for the poor and working classes spreads to the middle and upper middle class.

RL: To put a finer point on our discussion of LA and January's wildfires, we witnessed tens of thousands of people displaced, if not more, extensive property damage, untold numbers of deaths, scores of missing people. The conditions of this crisis were shaped and exacerbated by climate change. In a city like LA that's increasingly vulnerable to natural disasters, do you see any opportunities for the LA tenants union to mitigate climate changes' worst effects, and how so?

TR: We should add that the primary victims of the disasters are not its only victims. Everyone who lives outside and is suffering the debris and the fire retardants that are sent into the air is a victim of this fire. Everyone who lost work in domestic labor, as service labor, as gardeners in these neighborhoods, are also victims of these fires. And whereas unhoused people are not going to benefit from federal funding and the outpouring of public support, they too have suffered the loss of a home.

Absolutely, the tenant union has a responsibility to orient our politics around the most vulnerable in this moment, and to demand that, while our governor is slashing red tape such that people can rebuild private homes in a fire line for the sake of the super tourist event of the Olympics, that the way the way to rebuild Los Angeles must be climate sensitive. We should really articulate the ways that the system of private home ownership as the means of providing social support has utterly failed, and the extent of people's precarity in this moment has to do with our over reliance on that system to deliver social safety and to deliver individual safety. That system has to be rethought and redesigned.

RL: That paired with research that shows that neighborhoods that are more deeply connected—where people know their neighbors, where social ties are stronger—are more resilient to climate change related disasters shows that organizations like tenants union, which coalesce people around a common cause and make them aware of their shared condition, are vital.

TR: It shows us what tools tenants have to fight back against capitalist exploitation and real estate domination. We have our rent checks, we have our bodies, and we have each other. Those relationships and the political organization are infrastructures of survival. In this moment, we see that more clearly than ever. We recognize those systems at the building level, at the neighborhood level, and citywide; they produce those forms of solidarity, they prevent people's isolation, they keep people safe.

We saw this in the moment of the pandemic where the Los Angeles Tenant Union was, as I understand, the first union in the country to call for a rent strike on April 1, under the banner of “Food, Not Rent.” That people should save their rent money and use it to feed themselves, to feed their families, to take care of each other, rather than to line their landlords' pockets. Moving people from that isolation and the fear and the shame that a loss of work under COVID inaugurated was part of the work that the Union did again and again, showing us the power of an infrastructure like a tenant union to meet these immediate disasters, whether from pandemics or climate change, and to meet the disaster that is the American housing system.

RL: In light of the theme of the publication, it seems like the seemingly small organization of marginalized tenants coming together can be one of the most powerful mitigation tools against the global climate change crisis.

TR: We can think about the ripple effects that even one rent strike can have across the board. That's not only in depriving a landlord of our wages to make our buildings livable, but it's depriving them of the resources that they would use to purchase more homes and repeat the process. I think of the organizing that's happening in New York across Pinnacle’s portfolio, which is using their tenants' rents and investing them in Israel bonds. Those rents are being used to support the ongoing genocide in Gaza. So tenants that are withholding their rent from that system are not just taking a step that makes their lives better. They are improving the conditions for people on the ground in Gaza.

RL: Los Angeles takes up a very large role in urban theory and especially the neo-Marxist school of the 1970s. Those descriptions of the city are deeply cynical. It’s shown as this place where policing and surveillance, elite “pleasure domes,” and labor exploitation reign—you get the sense that it was intentionally built to be hostile to working people and their social movements. *Abolish Rent* also touches on these themes of how evil Los Angeles can seem. At the same time, it is the locus of your organizing efforts, and the largest tenant-led organization in the country. Can you speak a bit about the opportunities and challenges of organizing in this geography, and how place affected your and your comrades’ strategies?

TR: That's a question for many books. About the dynamics that make Los Angeles, the particular tinder box, to use a complicated metaphor for the moment, I think that there is a reason why leftists in California have always thought more intensely and specifically about the role of prisons and policing, and that has to do with the legacy of Black-led and Chicano-led organizing in Los Angeles. The Union itself is in many ways a union of immigrants. The specific cultures, whether it’s the Oaxacan immigrants who live in Oaxaca Town and participate in the Koreatown Local, or the Mexican immigrants who have lived in Boyle Heights and shaped the East Side Local, or the new wave of undocumented Colombian immigrants who have won the

highest amount of back rent received in a rent strike—close to $600,000 over the summer that they denied their landlord because they were living a family to a bedroom. Those communities really shape the union and what it is for. It is fully bilingual, majority Spanish-speaking in fact.

There are many ways that the Union has shaped itself around the city. For one, we realized very quickly that we could not have one single meeting of the LATU when it takes an hour and a half to drive across town. Starting local chapters allowed neighborhoods themselves to meet their own specific needs. That has been a way to get more people involved locally, and, also, to orient around specific conditions. Where our Downtown Local supports the extremely vulnerable people who are living in some of the city's last high-rise SROs, in the Northeast, people are living in backhouses in single-family homes. They have different needs and strategies, and the Union exists to produce solidarity between them. That's one way specifically that our union has been shaped by Los Angeles, and been plastic enough to meet people's needs.

The majority of people that live in Los Angeles do not speak English at home. Thinking about what sort of organization can produce solidarity across a multi-racial, multi-lingual working class has been a large part of our efforts.

I think we can think about this in relation to the relationships of solidarity and care that exist in unhoused people's encampments. That is a paradigm for thinking about organizing under extreme abandonment. And nonetheless, people share resources, create networks of safety and support, to keep each other safe and to survive. Organizing alongside the unhoused tenants who are living in Echo Park, that was the thing that struck me. Despite the hostility and abandonment of the state, people will come together and help each other survive.

RL: You and Vichis write about the Boyle Heights neighborhood of L.A. and the union's efforts there. Can you give an overview of the neighborhood and the rent strike that LATU organized?

TR: We describe this rent strike in part because it won the first collective bargaining agreement between tenants and the landlords in our city's history. It was among the first rent strikes to lead the way in this resurgent tenant's movement that we're seeing now. This was a strike of the Mariachi Tenant's Association. A 26-unit apartment building two blocks away from Mariachi Plaza, where one-third of the building's residents were Mariachi musicians. Many lived there for over two decades, and all of them wanted to stay.

And yet, when their building was sold and re-listed on Craigslist as "Mariachi Crossing" with rents up to more than $800 per month, there was nothing, legally, the tenants could do besides move. These were not eviction notices, but they were tantamount to eviction notices. The tenants collectively decided that they wanted to remain, have access to their workplace, they wanted their kids to get to stay in school. They started a 3-year process of organizing that

began very simply. They just wanted to meet the landlord, the person that wanted to throw them out on the street. The landlord refused. They responded to being ignored by getting louder. They held protests, they brought in the press, and, still, none of that worked.

Eventually they thought, if our protests aren't affecting him, maybe an impact on his pocketbook would. They set on a course of organizing, both the people who got the rent increases and those who did not, to withhold all of their rent in solidarity with each other. This launched a year-long rent strike that, in combination with campouts on the landlord's lawn and support from the entire union, succeeded in bringing the landlord to the negotiating table, and winning a collective bargaining agreement. This is basically the equivalent of a rent stabilization, because it includes the right to negotiate hereafter.

The story demonstrates the principle that, in James Boggs' words, "Rights are what you make and what you take." Though according to politicians and legal advisors there was nothing that the tenants could do, the tenants were able to change the conditions of governance in their building. What can the union do with that principle at scale? How can we create the crises for landlords, for real estate developers, for the state, to change the conditions that govern our homes? Such that we have more control over where we live, such that we have the right to stay put.

RL: You write about how "community improvement" initiatives have been deployed in modern cities primarily to displace working class people, and create urban conditions that are suitable for luxury commercial development. How has the tenants union been leveraged to create a non-commodified version of community improvement that makes urban spaces more sustainable and beautiful, without driving up the cost of living?

TR: The joke, right, is "The tree grows in time for gentrification." What that joke points to is the idea that resources are brought into communities not to benefit people living there, but to benefit from the process of displacement and replacement of the poor for profit. What the Boyle Heights Local did and continues to do is take charge of the process of "community improvement" by figuring out their own needs, responding to their needs with their own resources, and then making demands of state resources when their own aren't enough. I think that dynamic between building their own authority and then making demands of the state is a really different relationship than what we think of as "community improvement."

In the case of the alleys, there was a case where a tenant was attacked in an alleyway. The way that the community responded to this crisis was to first think about the conditions of the space where this attack had occurred. It had been used as a dump. There was trash; it was dark. The person could not see his attacker because they were hiding in piles and there were not any

lights. The community's work was organizing themselves to transform the meaning of the space. Through a long, diligent effort, they were able to claim and inhabit the space in a different way. What was a dump became a community space, a public yard. They held movie nights, markets, and meetings there. What does the community have now? A reclaimed public space, a bench that they built at a bus stop, and a crosswalk that is only there because they organized massive demonstrations. They painted the crosswalk themselves before it was painted by the city. What that reveals is that dynamic between appointing ourselves as the authority of what needs to happen in our cities, and when we need more resources, to demand them.

It also demonstrates how Tenant's Unions are not simply about campaigns against landlords. It is an infrastructure that can take control over the places that we live—beyond our apartments, to our blocks and our neighborhood.

RL: You mention that gang members who lived there ended up attending the movies.

TR: Yes, and running security. They blocked traffic such that people could remain where they were. That is a process in dealing with the interpersonal violence in our neighborhoods that should be taken seriously. To call the book *Abolish Rent* is to participate in a long tradition that is thinking very seriously about how to get rid of institutions of state violence that decimate communities and rip apart social fabrics, and how we can build alternative forms of safety that aren't incarceration and police violence.

RL: You describe LATU's strategies in the book as "antagonistic and prefigurative." Can you say a bit about each of those two words?

TR: Another way to put that is defensive and offensive. The antagonistic function of the Union is to think about it as our vehicle for making class war against our enemies who would do away with us if it weren't for the fact that we could be exploited. The prefigurative function asks, how do we build the networks that are capable of making war? We have to do that through getting to trust each other, through sharing resources and risks. That is a process that gives us access to other kinds of relating to each other and other kinds of belonging to the places where we live. Those two in tandem are really what makes up a union. When you think about how the Mariachi rent strike was built—it was the network of solidarity, the ritual of weekly meetings, and the parties and celebrations and trust that was built that provided the grounds for that chapter to take that risk together. And what they found was another way of relating to the place that they live, which is not individual ownership, but a road to collective ownership. In not paying rent, we sometimes discover more ownership of our housing than we've ever had before. That dialectic is the engine of our struggle.

RL: You often talk about in the book this tension between not only the tenant movement and landlord and politicians captured by real estate interests (many of whom are landlords themselves), but also professionalized nonprofits who offer individualized forms of case management and stray away from “rocking the boat” by supporting larger-scale mobilizations and collectives. You often invoke this phrase, that professionals help working class people only to “negotiate the terms of their defeat.” What do you say to people with progressive ideals entering into the professions–planning, law, architecture, social work, etc.? Is there any role for a professional in the mass movement? In designing policies that materially benefit working people?

TR: As we should often do, we should turn to Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s work on nonprofits. As she reminds us: there is no perfect form. Neither is there a perfectly evil form. It’s important to begin the discussion by saying that it is not the nonprofit form itself that works to disorganize people, but historically the growth of nonprofits takes shape at the decline of state provision of resources, and the decimation of unions and all forms of community organizations. Situating it historically rather than to make a blanket declaration is important.

The central point that we try to make is that when tenants are instructed by nonprofits, service workers, and the legal system in our political process, they are encouraged to solve their problems alone. To solve them defensively, and to solve them alone. The fundamental intervention that a union makes is that there is power that can be built when people come together. There are resources that we can claim, not by ourselves, but only through our association and organizing. That is the basic insight that carries over as a criteria to judge all of that other work.

An organization like a union has a division of labor. I, as a writer, have a specific role to play in the division of labor of the union. Part of the work that I do is to record our struggles, to archive them, such that they can be reflected upon and shared. To name our practices so that they might spread. There are other roles. People who do interpretation at our meetings have a particular capacity that not everyone else has. They do the work to bring people together across languages. Solidarity is built where it could not have been built without them. It’s important to honor the fact that people come to a movement with different skills, but the purpose of deploying those skills is to build solidarity such that people are able to take calculated, strategic risks together that they could not take alone.

That is how I relate to that question, through a respect for a division of labor that should and inevitably will emerge in the context of organization, but that has to ultimately be in service of the work that we are doing. For us, as we try to make clear particularly in our last chapter, our politics are oriented around the most vulnerable people. Because only by solving the crisis for

our most vulnerable will we solve problems for everyone. Through that political orientation is where we found and how we develop the strategies that will work for everyone.

Conclusion

I spoke to Tracy at a particularly fraught juncture. As Los Angeles burned and a fledgling, soon to be broken, cease-fire formed between Hamas and Israel, Tracy anxiously smoked cigarettes out of their Brooklyn apartment window, their mind clearly somewhere else. Months later now as I reflect on the beautiful stories of immigrant, working class solidarities, forged in the "tinder box" of Los Angeles, I think about the transitory nature of junctures. Whether an extraordinary political moment is a "state of exception" to be seized upon by the authoritarian engines of the state or a moment of egalitarian possibility is a question only relevant in hindsight. The Los Angeles wildfires faded from the headlines, the rubble and the memory the only reminders. The January ceasefire did not hold, and the genocide of Gaza entered into a wretched third act of total blockade, starvation, and annihilation.

The LA Tenants Union reminds us that what remains in the shifting winds of contingency is organized struggle. For an organization to be successful it has to, in Tracy's words, be "plastic enough to meet people's needs." That not only means in different neighborhoods and demographics, but within different junctures and moments. How does an organization adapt to the isolation of a global pandemic? How do comrades support one another in a wildfire, that dystopian inferno? When masked agents of the state descend upon the city, addled on by white nationalist rage, what new formations will emerge?