

Millions Unable to Pay for Housing Next Month, Rent Strike in NYC

Organizers Plan the Largest Rent Strike in Nearly a Century

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Global Research, May 01, 2020

[Defend Democracy Press](#) 25 April 2020

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

Want a grim picture of the state of American dissent during the coronavirus pandemic? Take an overview of media coverage from the last week. The press focused disproportionate attention on a [few hundred white reactionaries](#), in a small number of states, rallying against social distancing measures — buoyed, of course, by tweets from President Donald Trump. Meanwhile, some of the most radical and righteous acts of mass resistance this country has seen in decades — from a [wave](#) of labor strikes to an explosion of [mutual aid](#) networks — are earning but a fraction of the media focus accorded to fringe, right-wing protesters.

Based on mainstream news coverage alone, for instance, you'd likely never know that organizers and tenants in New York are preparing the largest coordinated [rent strike](#) in nearly a century, to begin on May 1.

At least 400 hundred families who live in buildings each containing over 1,500 rent units are coordinating building-wide rent strikes, according to Cea Weaver, campaign coordinator for Housing Justice For All, a New York-based coalition of tenants and housing activists. Additionally, over 5,000 people have committed, through an [online pledge](#), to refuse to pay rent in May.

Precise strike numbers will be impossible to track, but the number of commitments alone points to a historic revival of this tenant resistance tactic. Coordinated rent strikes of this size in New York City haven't been seen since the [1930s](#), when thousands of renters in Harlem and the Bronx successfully fought price gouging and landlord neglect by refusing to pay rent en masse.

The numbers committing to a rent strike might seem insignificant compared to the millions who don't frame nonpayment as a strike, but simply will not be able to pay rent in the coming month. By the first week of April, one-third of renters nationwide — approximately 13.4 million people — had [not paid rent](#); since then, 26 million workers have [joined](#) the ranks of the unemployed.

Meanwhile, government stimulus checks of \$1,200 are disorganized, overdue, and woefully inadequate. The median monthly [rent](#) for a one-bedroom apartment in New York City, for example, was \$2,980 last year. The federal government's pitiful offering is also, of course, unavailable to many immigrants. Since we can therefore expect nonpayment of May's rent to reach an unprecedented scale anyway, the idea of advocating for a rent strike might at first seem moot.

Organizers of the rent strike, however, make clear the action's relevance. The slogan of the rent strike campaign says it all: "Can't pay? Won't pay!" The reframing of nonpayment as a strike — an act of collective resistance — is a powerful rejection of the sort of capitalist ethic that accords moral failing to an individual's inability to pay a landlord.

"We don't need to organize a rent strike to be able to say that millions of New Yorkers will not pay their rent on May 1," Weaver told me.

The call to a rent strike thus poses a crucial question to tenants who can't afford rent, Weaver said:

"Do you want to do that alone? Or do you want to do that connected to a movement of people who are also in your situation and are calling for a deep and transformative policy solution. It's better if we can do this together."

For tenant organizers on the front lines of New York's housing crisis, which far [predated the pandemic](#), the answer is clear.

"The rent strike is a cry for dignity: We are all deserving of a home, no matter the color of our skin, financial status, or culture," said Donnette Letford, an undocumented immigrant from Jamaica and a member of the group New York Communities for Change.

Until a month ago, Letford had worked as a home health care attendant. Her employer of over 10 years passed away, having contracted Covid-19. She is now jobless and mourning in quarantine, having cared for her employer until her death.

"Under any circumstances, a loss like that is hard to bear, but during a pandemic it's devastating," Letford, a mother of one, noted in an email, urging others to join the rent strike. "The Covid-19 crisis is making clear what many tenants have known for a long time: We are all just one life event — the loss of a job, a medical emergency — away from losing our homes."

Organizers are asking those who are able to pay May's rent to refuse to do so in solidarity with those who can't. The move is aimed at pressuring city and state leadership to respond in the only way appropriate to the exacerbated housing crisis: by canceling rent.

Before housing rights advocates in New York escalated calls for a mass rent strike, they had been calling, along with a small number of lawmakers, for a temporary rent suspension. And while New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo [introduced](#) a crucial eviction moratorium, without also canceling rent during this time, back pay will accrue and the threat of future evictions looms over millions of renters who have lost all sources of income. The rent strike is an unambiguous escalation to demand robust action from Albany.

"We're still calling to #CancelRent and reclaim our homes — that is the demand of the rent strike," Weaver said. "So far, our cries for help have been ignored in Albany. In fact, they've done the opposite of ignore us. Gov. Cuomo [rammed](#) through an austerity budget that harms low-income tenants and

homeless New Yorkers. In the face of sustained unemployment and a never-before-seen eviction crisis, they are offering nearly nothing.”

Like the historic rent strikes of the 20th century, which led to some of the [first](#) rent control laws in New York, the coming strike makes specific demands. According to a [petition](#) from Housing Justice For All, strikers want a statewide rent cancellation for four months, “or for the duration of the public health crisis — whichever is longer”; a rent freeze and the assurance that every tenant is given the right to renew their lease at the same price; and that the government “urgently and permanently rehouse all New Yorkers experiencing homelessness and invest in public and social housing across our state.”

As Weaver put it,

“One way or another, we are looking at some form of government intervention.” She added, “But we need to make sure that government intervention happens on our terms. We are escalating to collective non-compliance with rent in order to force a crisis.”

Concerns in response to calls for rent cancellations and strikes are as predictable as they are unfounded. Most common among them is the claim that small landlords, who survive and pay mortgages through collecting rent, will face ruination. Yet it is well within the government’s capacity to provide relief and support for landlords in these situations: Mortgage payments should be canceled too.

Some of the nation’s better lawmakers are trying to pass bills that combine rent and mortgage cancellations on a national level. On Wednesday, Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn., [introduced](#) the [Rent and Mortgage Cancellation Act](#), which would provide rent and mortgage forgiveness while also providing relief to landlords to assist with lost payments.

Passing such legislation in Washington is perhaps a Sisyphean task, but it’s more feasible on a state level. The problem is the political will: If Cuomo, for instance, were truly the “[crisis daddy](#)” he’s been nauseatingly hailed to be, he could make it a swift reality in New York. Meanwhile, it should go without saying that [large real estate corporations](#) and [powerful landlords](#) can take the hit of a few months’ canceled rent and deserve no less, after years upon decades of exploitative and extractive capital accumulation at the expense of tenants.

Prior to the pandemic — and thanks to the tireless work of tenants’ unions, activists, and a few progressive Democrats elected in New York in 2018 — a number of pro-tenant legislative reforms were [passed](#) last year. These laws, while welcome, were but a small step in the right direction to undo the decades of unchallenged complicity between New York’s politicians and the mighty real estate lobby. For rent strike organizers, the ideal is by no means a return to a pre-crisis status quo. As Weaver put it, “We’re demanding that we not return to the world we lived in pre-Covid — a world with 92,000 homeless New Yorkers and millions of people living just one paycheck away from an eviction.”

Phara Souffrant Forrest, a nurse and a tenant rights activist who is currently campaigning to become a New York State Assembly member, asked voters in her Brooklyn district of Crown Heights to sign a petition for rent cancellation.

“We received a huge amount of support for it, but then it was as if we were talking to ourselves, we weren’t getting any response,” she told me, decrying the lack of action from sitting lawmakers.

She noted that 44 percent of her district was already “rent burdened” before the pandemic, meaning that over one-third of their paychecks went to rent and utilities. Four in 10 of the entire country’s 43 million renters are in the same position.

Souffrant Forrest is organizing alongside rent strikers in the explicit recognition that the power structures by which housing is organized need to be toppled — now and long after the coronavirus crisis has passed. “We need to support candidates who believe that housing is a human right,” she said. In the knowledge that all too few such politicians currently exist, the nurse and organizer has been calling up her neighbors and telling them about the rent strike.

“Housing is a human right” has long been the cry of tenant organizers and social-justice fighters. What would it mean, though, to have a system in which housing were in fact treated as a universal human right? You wouldn’t have to pay to access those rights, for one. A rent strike is not a request for the human right to housing to be recognized; it’s instead an immediate and embodied claiming of that right. The strike makes demands, yes, but also provides an end in itself.

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