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Abolish Rent

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For a Communist

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Tenants' Movement

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Julian Francis Park

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An Annotated Bibliography of Rent Abolitionist Tactics

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If you would like to stay in touch, email me at
julianfrancispark@gmail.com or find me on twitter at @jfpark3

take—particularly rent strikes and squatting. So-called de commodification in most instances shows no prospect for abolishing rent. But, performed unsystematically, nor do rent strikes and squatting in a permanent way. But the demand to abolish rent, unlike that to de commodify housing, is a slogan immediately relevant to every organized tenants fight. And without organized tenants at the helm of social housing, there is no hope that social housing will be anti-capitalist.

Some Communist Theses for the Tenants' Movement

1.

For Marxists, tenants are not a class. Classes are differentiated by source of income—wages, profits, rent. Both capitalists and proletarians use land owned by landlords. Not all tenants pay rent, even though landlords and capitalist property law considers many non-rent-paying tenants—unhoused people, squatters—unlawful possessors. Rent, like wages to labor contracts, validates a rental contract. While number of people politically identifying with their social status as a tenant does seem to be growing in the United States, this does not mean that all tenants have the same interests—there is a class division of interest between capitalist and proletarian tenants.

2.

Housing Justice Movement, Tenants' Rights Movement, Tenants' Movement, despite their more or less synonymous use, do not refer to the same thing. Housing Justice and Tenants' Rights refer to movement objectives and Tenants' refers to social composition. We should be writing and speaking about the Tenants' Movement because it focuses on those in the struggle and the conditions they struggle in, and it does not proscribe objectives. If our question regarding the tenants'

movement is “where is it going?” then we should answer this by studying the movement itself, asking, how are proletarian tenants’ waging struggle, to what multifarious ends, within what conditions, against what multifarious obstacles—slogans and stated objective are only one part of the answer.

3.

At best, Housing Justice and Tenants Rights’ are transitional objectives for the socialist Tenants’ Movement. At worst, Housing Justice and Tenants’ Rights are petty bourgeois objectives for the Tenants’ Movement. The ruling ideology in a given movement tends to be the ideology of those classes which rule within that movement. While it is not of necessity that the bourgeoisie rule the tenants’ movement through petty bourgeois social movement managers (not to mention politicians), except in moments in which the course and intensity of proletarian struggle overturn this, this set of affairs is the tendency. Recently we have seen petty bourgeois social movement managers and politicians attempt to co-opt the radical slogan, Abolish ICE, to more or less ridiculous results. At a given moment in a given place, some slogans are more easily, and some less easily, co-opted.

4.

In capitalist society, there is no such thing as decommodifying housing. It is not necessary for a commodity to be sold at a

improvement is neglected, and the cost is borne by those tenants who have no choice but to rent more affordable but less habitable housing. Even social housing, of whatever form. Even if a tenant pays no direct rent out of a direct wage, their rent payment is a social rent out of their social wage, which the social landlord requires in order to pay—or neglect to pay—the costs of the reproduction of housing.

Many of the specific demands under the heading “decommodify housing” are referred to as such because the slogan sounds anti-capitalist—though the demands may not be. There’s nothing inherently anti-capitalist about a social landlord. For the demand for social housing to be anti-capitalist in practice and not just in ideology, it must deal with the capitalist problems that persist for social housing. Cooperation Jackson is one of relatively few socialist organizations dealing with this, in their Sustainable Communities Initiative, which seeks to reduce costs through a chain of interlocking cooperatives forming an ecovillage.

In the case of housing, it is a mistake for the tenants’ movement to fixate on the commodity form. For proletarian tenants, the immediate question is the reduction and abolition of rent, which is the form which their relation with landlords takes (as wages, even informal, are the form with bosses). This is obvious in the forms of direct action that tenants habitually

Abolish Rent, a note

I seek to provoke those in the tenants' movement to substitute a fundamental demand, "Decommodify Housing," with another, "Abolish Rent."

The demand to "Decommodify Housing" is made because, it's said, the crisis for proletarian tenants is caused by housing being a source of profit, often through speculation. If only, so it continues, housing didn't circulate as a commodity, then it couldn't be a source of profit and couldn't be speculated upon, so its price couldn't be competitively inflated. Then tenants could be housed affordably. Therefore, says the conclusion, we must remove housing from markets. We should limit profit with rent control and speculation with taxes. We should establish social housing of various forms—through ownership by the state, by a cooperative, by land trusts.

Under capitalism—including its socialist variants—there can be no decommodifying housing. Housing is not only circulated as something that must be rented, whether or not at a profit to its landlord; it is also produced, at a cost, by the investment of capital in labor power and raw materials, and thus, going through a capitalist production process, is a commodity. Alternately, and unfortunately extremely commonly, capital

profit for it to be a commodity, so distancing housing rentals and sales from profit calculations, including speculative profit calculations, whether through state or (non-profit, cooperative, etc.) corporate collective ownership, cannot stop capitalism from pressurizing and/or forcing neglect to housing conditions, it just redistributes the site at which the costs of housing are calculated. This led Engels in the pamphlet on the Housing Question not to be interested in housing struggles. But Engels was a productivist, and was organizing amid a vibrant workers movement; the communism that many of us care about today is not productivist, and the workers movement is not coming back.

5.

Contrary to the fixation upon speculation as the social ill that takes away and keeps people out of homes, the housing crisis is not caused only by the excesses of monetary capital. On the one hand, housing crisis precedes racial capitalist social relations, and on the other speculation is but a feature of contemporary capitalism. Today's housing crises are but one aspect of the general crisis which is the general law of accumulation of capital, which is the production and reproduction of surplus capital alongside surplus populations.

6.

Today, we should make the abolition of rent the communist objective for the Tenants' Movement. The ongoing and historic role of (state-)capitalist landed property relations, mediated by rental contracts, in colonizing and dispossessing indigenous peoples, peasants, and in tethering formerly-enslaved and other racialized peoples to debt peonage and wage-dependence, as well as the fact that housing is a primary site of social reproduction and gendered struggles thereof, make naming this objective particularly important for our ability to propagandize communist struggle. To compose a communist movement deep and broad enough to be able to liberate territory from racial capitalist society we need slogans that are deep and broad, and that, for that matter, directly concern removing racial capitalism from everywhere we live. "Abolish rent" is a decolonial, race and gender abolitionist, demand, as any genuinely communist demand must be.

7.

In collective/cooperative housing, land reclamation/squatting, and rent strikes, among other tactics, we see glimmers of the abolition of rent, but unless these tactics become components to social reproduction strategies outside capitalist social reproduction, then they tend to be subordinated to and defeated by capitalists and landlords through debt, evictions, and collective bargaining agreements. Today, the abolishing

rent means not only not paying landlords for the use of land, not private landlords, not public landlords (the state), not non-profit landlords (community land trusts), not ourselves collectively as landlords (cooperatives), but finding ways to leverage the non-payment of rent and the free use of land into the abolition of all other racial capitalist social relations.