

Renters Fighting Back

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SPEAKERS

Ghazal Haqani, Owen Polley, Amina Gichinga, Harriet Protheroe-Soltani

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 00:15

Hi everyone and welcome to TWT 2020, and the talk: The Rent is Too High. My name is Harriet, and I've got the pleasure of moderating tonight's session. So I'm one of Momentum's vice-chairs, based in Cardiff. I'm a trade union organiser and I'm active in my local Acorn branch, and also - I'm a private renter. And I'm very interested to open up a discussion tonight about how we can organise tenants to resist the upcoming evictions crisis that we're all probably worrying about at the moment. And so just before I introduce the session and then the speakers, I've just got a few announcements I'm going to run through. So firstly to make the session accessible we'll be using a live transcription service called Otter. Attendees using Otter will have to follow a link and open the transcript as a separate window. The link will be shared in the chat box by the tech volunteer in a couple of seconds. If you're having any difficulties, please message the tech volunteer on the chat. And secondly, as I'm sure many of you are aware, TWT is free for all. But it's only made possible by the contributions of our supporters. So if you're able, please consider supporting us at theworldtransformed.org/support to help us sustain our work all year round. And lastly, a few chat principles: we want everyone to feel welcome in these spaces and for everyone's voices to be heard, so please bear that in mind when you're engaging in the chat, and please don't use inappropriate, rude, or unkind language, and please don't spam. Particip - parti - I can't even say the word! Participants who violate these principles will be prevented from further posting in the chat or comment box. But if you do have a question or comment for one of our speakers please do fire away and we can include them in the Q&A at the end. I stumbled on a lot of that, I apologise! But now on to the session.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 02:15

So, just to frame this I guess; so this is hosted by Momentum and I just want to start talking about why we've brought everyone here. As many of you will know, Momentum has elected a new NCG, and we aim to get Momentum into communities and campaign on the issues that members are most affected by - so that's one of our key strategies as an NCG going forward. And this is why we wanted to direct our focus towards the housing and eviction crisis. So very, very briefly, I'm just going to run through what Momentum want to do, and why we're here today. So firstly, if you're a Momentum member we want to be, number one, encouraging members to join and get active in their tenants' unions. And that's why we've invited the tenants' unions along today to speak about their work. Secondly, we want

Momentum members to take motions to their CLPs, to lobby their MPs their MSPs and their MSes to stop evictions in their constituencies. And thirdly, we want to run CLP education sessions on how people can join the eviction resistance. So those are the key three things that Momentum are going to be doing. Anyway, that was a really brief run through of the campaign - but now I want to move on to our speakers, so I'm just going to introduce our speakers!

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 03:29

So, we have Owen Polley from Acorn. Owen is the co-chair of the Bristol branch of Acorn, a fast growing community union at the forefront of the fight for tenants' rights. He has worked in housing, homelessness, and welfare rights for the last 13 years. Secondly, we have Amina Gichinga from London Renters' Union. Amina has been a paid organiser with the London Renters' Union since January 2018, building locally with members in the Newham and ...Leytonstone? branch. Sorry, London boroughs are not my forte - I'm from the valleys! But I got it - Leytonstone. Then we also have Ghazal Haqani from the London Renters' Union, and Ghazal has been a member of the London Renters' Union for two years. She is also a textile artist and community researcher. So first of all thank you to all our speakers for coming today. But I'm going to hand over to our first speaker, who is Owen from Acorn.

Owen Polley 04:26

Thank you very much Harriet, and thanks very much for having me here today. I must say, this is probably the most nervous I've ever been in my own living room. But yeah, so, I'm Owen! I'm co-chair of the Bristol branch of Acorn Community Union, and I'm going to speak at length about the union shortly. But first I just want to focus on the challenges that lay ahead for renters in the UK. So as it stands, on the 20th of September, the eviction ban ends. A quarter of a million people have fallen into rent arrears since the start of the pandemic, and they're now at risk of eviction. People are going to be forced out of their homes when many of them have lost income, or lost their right to claim benefits, through no fault of their own - simply as a result of the pandemic and its knock on effects. Many of those who will lose their homes are shielding due to ill health, or will be forced to move in with others whose health is vulnerable. We're going to see the numbers of people rough sleeping rise, and many families and individuals being placed in poor quality and overcrowded temporary accommodation. And we'll see people taking desperate measures to avoid eviction that will put themselves and others at risk.

Owen Polley 05:30

There's no doubt that the lifting of the eviction ban is going to hit lower income people hardest, it's exacerbated by the fact it coincides with the ending of the financial assistance schemes like the furlough scheme, and also the ending of easements on benefit claimants. And the disparity is even more amplified when we see that the ban on repossessions for homeowners has been extended until the end of October, alongside a guaranteed mortgage holiday for the same period. Renters have not been afforded the same extended protection from eviction, and no equivalent waiver of their rent. We cannot rely on the Tory government to make the sensible decision and implement the long term extension on the moratorium evictions - we can't rely on them to make any sensible decisions! We cannot rely on the courts to protect tenants whose landlords seek to evict them, and even Labour led local authorities are failing to extend the ban for their own council tenants while, somewhat hypocritically, their mayors lobby the government to extend the national ban.

Owen Polley 06:23

So that's why we as unions need to act radically and creatively to use collective action to stop evictions in our communities, while we're still very much in the midst of the pandemic. So to tell you a little bit about Acorn - who we are. So Acorn stands for The Association of Community Organisations for Reform Now, but I won't expect you to remember that because most of our members don't. But we are a community union, not specifically for renters, but a lot of our work has focused on tenants' rights because that's what's come up most for the people we're working with. So internationally speaking, Acorn was founded in the US in 1970 as a collective of community organisations that advocated for low and middle income households, and campaigned around issues such as affordable housing, neighbourhood safety, and health care, as well as organising huge voter registration drives in poorer communities. At its peak, Acorn had half a million members across 100 cities in the US. Over in the UK, Acorn was founded here in 2014 when three friends, trained in community organising, started knocking on doors to speak to people about the issues in their neighbourhoods. They called a community meeting which was attended by about 100 people, and the number one issue raised at that meeting, by some way, was tenants' rights and the poor deal renters were getting across the city.

Owen Polley 07:45

So after a couple of months of knocking on doors and signing up members we developed an Ethical Lettings Charter, and this is when I started getting involved in Acorn. We had a Halloween Horror housing protest when we ran around dressed in fancy dress to load of estate agents around the city, and it was really great fun. I thought, wow, this is activism that's really positive, really fun, really inclusive - it was just a really breath of fresh air. The Ethical Lettings Charter was, through our lobbying, endorsed by the mayor and adopted by the City Council and some housing associations, letting agents, and landlords. We also started taking direct action against slum landlords who were mistreating their tenants or failing to live up to their obligations and responsibilities. So we built on these humble beginnings to massively expand our scope and the geographical areas in which we work as well.

Owen Polley 08:35

So, as a community union, we're a member led organisation of mainly low income people, with members paying dues at one hour's wage per month. We grow the union by knocking on doors, speaking to people about their concerns and by publicising and celebrating our wins. We build power in our communities by carrying out effective well organised and creative collective action against those who traditionally hold the power, whether that's landlords, businesses, local authorities or politicians. We're growing rapidly and we've now got over 1000 members in Bristol, alone with branches and groups in 22 towns and cities in the UK - which in six years is such amazing growth, we're so proud of what we've achieved in that regard. And we achieved countless wins both locally and nationally, so - we get direct results for our members, to just halting evictions, getting repairs done, getting compensation from landlords paid out, as well as securing emergency accommodation for survivors and other vulnerable people when they've otherwise been refused. On a campaign level we stopped the cutting of council tax benefit in Bristol, made banks drop mortgage clauses discriminating against benefit claimants, and have been a key voice in the campaign to ban agency fees and end Section 21 evictions. There's loads more, have a look at our website - there's tonnes of things and not all of them about renting, we've stopped power stations being built by schools and all kinds of things.

Owen Polley 09:50

So, personally, I was elected in January as co-chair for the Bristol branch, after having been involved for a few years, and I was ready to organise to take buses under public control, and campaign against developers not putting in affordable housing, and then boom! Coronavirus hit, and everything we were doing was just turned on its head. So we had to adapt, and we adapted quickly. So across our branches throughout the country we developed community support networks, with an army of volunteers flyering neighbourhoods to offer assistance, and then delivering shopping and medication, and providing social support to those vulnerable and shielding. In Bristol alone we've assisted over 1000 households, many of those on multiple occasions.

Owen Polley 10:30

Nationally, we also launched our Housing Is Health campaign. So this campaign is based on the notion that safe and secure housing for all is the first protection against the spread of coronavirus. When staying at home is the best thing we can do to stop the spread of the virus, we think it's pretty damn important everyone has a home to stay in. So the campaign has six demands. One, is actually one the government has already promised but failed to deliver, which is a permanent end to no-fault Section 21 evictions. Outside of the ban times, Section 21 evictions are still the biggest cause of homelessness. So the government's still to deliver on that. Secondly, a rent waiver for the duration of the crisis. This is really important; it means that any rent arrears accrued as a result of the crisis can't be expected or included any future grounds for eviction. You know, you can keep kicking the can down the road and pushing the eviction ban back but ultimately the arrears situation is going to be the same. We want a waiver of those arrears.

Owen Polley 11:27

Three, to scrap current evictions - so your landlord should have to start the process for any paused evictions from scratch once the ban on court proceedings is lifted. Four - protect mortgage holders. So, a government legislated mortgage and interest payments freeze during the crisis, with protection from repossessions. It's not just renters, we also do lobby for homeowners as well. Five, equality for lodgers! This is really important - protection against eviction, we think, has to be extended to lodgers. Lodgers basically have no legal protection. We were seeing in the midst of the pandemic, the worst bit of it, NHS workers who are already enduring an incredibly tough time at work, pushed to their limits, being made to leave their homes with no notice at all. They need some sort of protection, particularly this time. And an extension of the eviction ban. So want that ban extended for as long as it's needed to protect the public health from coronavirus, and September the 20th - 10 days away - that is just not enough. Cases are rapidly rising again, it needs to be extended much further.

Owen Polley 12:26

So, we've held two national days of action to publicise our campaign. Most recently before the last eviction ban end date on August 23rd where 18 branches took to county courts where eviction warrants will be granted across the country to protest the end of the ban. So, given the end of the eviction ban is fast approaching. We're also now busy training community protection teams around the country. So these teams are mobilising to protect their neighbours from the Covid 19 crisis through direct action - and that's principally by resisting evictions, whether illegal or legal. There's going to be a lot of illegal evictions, a lot of legal evictions, either way they're immoral and not in the interest of public health at

this time, so we will be resisting all of them. So we wouldn't draw on just our membership but from the large number of volunteers made our coronavirus support network, and from the mutual aid groups that have arisen throughout the pandemic. So our community support work was great, it was really fluffy, it was very nice. We were delivering shopping, groceries to pensioners and stuff, and it was very fluffy compared to our usual sort of campaign work, but actually it was great because it's given us a framework for our community protection teams as well.

Owen Polley 13:39

So the community protection training is taking place both in person and online. It's gonna be raising people's confidence, building knowledge of possession proceedings, and we're using role play to simulate the various scenarios that may happen during an attempted eviction. The eviction resistances themselves are going to be well organised with alerts going out to local teams and the team members taking on a range of specified roles to ensure that we have the edge over landlords and bailiffs. We've already learned a great deal from previous eviction resistances, and we'll continue to build on each resistance to make sure the next one is even more successful. It's so amazing when you help your fellow community members not get evicted, it's so rewarding for members, it's obviously hugely beneficial for the person who you're protecting. On Saturday the 19th of September, we're going to be running community protection training in loads of towns in the UK throughout the day, so we've got several sessions. We're gonna have simulated evictions taking place outside members houses with the role play that I mentioned before. So if you're around - and you don't have to be a member - if you're around, get in touch with your local Acorn branch, and get involved and get trained up. Finally, last couple of things just to say is, please sign our Housing Is Health petition - we'll share the link to our website in the end, and the link to that. And also, basically, if you want to be part of a union that effectively fights for its communities, wins for its members, and has a lot of fun doing it, then join Acorn. Thank you.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 15:17

That was a great way to end, thanks Owen! I think you mentioned that like Acorn felt like a breath of fresh air for you, and I definitely can say that many other comrades on the left felt the same - that tenants' union organising at the moment really does feel like the direct action that we need in our communities. And so thank you for that, we can come to that a bit more later in the questions. So I'm just going to hand over to Amina from London Renters' Union now.

Amina Gichinga 15:47

Hello, everybody! Hey. And thanks for having us - me and Ghazal - tonight. Yeah, I mean, where to start with renters' rights? It's just like - I think this is a really big moment for for us all to think about the fact that many, many people are going to be in a very tough situation - already are in a tough situation - with their finances, and it means that we could have a bigger base to organise with, and it's really important for us to have those conversations on the streets. I was just listening to Owen then, all the incredible work that Acorn's been doing, and it just reminds me that like community is all we have. And during this pandemic that has been really exemplified even further.

Amina Gichinga 16:49

So, my name is Amina. I'm an organiser with the London Renters' Union. I organise in my local community, which is Newham, and I've lived here like my whole life. And my community has been impacted by a lot of things, like we had the Olympics 2012, which was put in Stratford, and that's where I've lived - and it's just meant that the house prices and the rent in the area have really really skyrocketed. And my area is one of the most 'deprived' places in the country. And so, I'm a teacher as well. I'm a music teacher, so when I went to school and taught kids, I could see that people, the children I was teaching, were being moved out of borough, and socially cleansed and these tended to be black and brown working class children. And so yeah I decided to get involved in organising. It's been a rocky, rocky ride over the last six months or whatever for everybody I guess, but our membership has increased by 50%. So we've got over 4000 members now. And during the pandemic members have been protecting each other (and renters who aren't in the union as well) by creating resources, so that everybody knows their rights during a pandemic, and also creating template letters which people can use to ask their landlords for rent forgiveness. And we've been calling for the government to cancel rent debt, to end evictions, to introduce rent controls, to end Section 21 - you know, all of the things that Acorn has been calling for, and others across the housing movement. And obviously we've got a Tory government, so they're going to try any which way to hold on to their landlords rights.

Amina Gichinga 19:03

So, we have a campaign called the Can't Pay Won't Pay campaign, in which we are collectivising renters who are in rent debt and are potentially facing eviction. And I guess what we learned from that is that we're not going to have a mass rent strike in this city when people are feeling very very unsafe, very precarious, and we're still in a pandemic. So for me, it's teaching me and others that there are no shortcuts in this, we have to build up the grassroots, we have to get out onto the streets, we have to make the links with our local organisations who are doing the most right now, and keeping everyone alive. You know, mutual aid, all of that jazz - we only have each other. We have been running stalls across the city. We've got three branches at the moment but we've also got new groups that are popping up. So we have Hackney, Lewisham, and my borough Newham and Leytonstone. So we've been running stalls, we've been doing days of action as well. And the fact that the government has lengthened the notice on evictions is substantial, actually - it's gonna keep people in their homes bit longer - but just to say a bit about what we're seeing in the union. We're seeing landlords who had previously negotiated a rent reduction with the tenant come back to the tenant now and say, 'hey, I want that rent', even though they'd said they could have 20% or 50% off their rent. They're coming back and saying, mmm, I think I want to evict you now, if you don't give me that rent.

Amina Gichinga 20:57

So the government really has to do something about the rent debt. But obviously what we're saying is that as landlords have an asset, it shouldn't be the tenants that have to pay for that for that debt. There's an inherent power imbalance here, and it needs... I don't know, when I think about the Labour Party, I think that really that needs to be addressed. That, okay, people are saying that landlords are suffering or whatever, and it's like okay but they have an asset that they can sell. We have renters that are saying can you refer me to the local food bank because I'm choosing between food and rent so they're two very very different scenarios. And so I think that as a union, we're really trying to make the case that an end to landlordism is what we need, and we need to build on the smaller steps to that.

Because in order for housing to be seen not as a commodity but as a human right, and a basic need that everybody should have fulfilled, it's like, yeah, like, it's just awful that we have to pay for housing in the first place, right?

Amina Gichinga 22:20

But anyway, I digress. So, we've also been having quite a few members who have been illegally evicted during the pandemic, which has been really really shocking - and some of these evictions have been very violent as well, and they've been aided by the police. So I think it's really worth thinking about, especially in a place like Newham when you've got many black and brown people, or other ethnic minority groups, that in this fight you also have the police who are there protecting property, and protecting landlords, and so where does that leave us. Where does that leave tenants in our communities? So yeah, we're also doing eviction resistance training a bit like Acorn, training up hundreds of renters to be able to know their rights, and also resist evictions before it gets to the stage where it's at the court level or the bailiffs are coming around. What can we do prior to that, to stop the eviction from happening?

Amina Gichinga 23:33

Recently we had a landlord in Lewisham who wanted to evict a member, and 10 members came. It was really really last minute, it was the night before - we got this warning and 10 members went outside the person's home, stood there and linked arms together, and sent a picture to the estate agent that was threatening to change the locks on the door that day, and that estate agent backed down. So those are the kinds of actions that we all can be doing, those are those are the things that we need to normalise in our communities and visiblise. And they're also the experiences that really transform people's thinking around what we can do together in communities - because there's an inertia, right? There's a deep inertia because we're living in this capitalist system that that has permeated everyone, this disempowerment, and so really what we want is mass participation, and the way that we do that is we get people into meetings but we also take action. We look at what people think needs to be done about something, and enable people to have the agency - or think that they have the agency - to do something about a problem that seems so overwhelming when we look at it from an individual point of view. But when we look at it from a collective point of view, and actually have the wins, then it feels like something that can be accomplished.

Amina Gichinga 25:14

I guess I've gone on a bit of a tangent, I feel like my talk's been a bit all over the shop. But I guess, as an organiser, I'm thinking really deeply about what participation looks like because when our unions have mass participation and spaces where people can feel joyful, can feel like this is something I want to do with my time because it meets my interests and my needs for human connection, or whatever, this is a way I can be in the struggle. And that's how we need to be thinking about building and organising, that's what we're trying to do in LRU. So please, if you're in London, please join LRU, you can sign up online. You can come to our Get Active training, where you learn more about the union and how you can get involved. You can come to eviction resistance trainings and get really stuck in to being part of this solidarity movement of gorgeous, wonderful people making stuff happen across our city. Thanks guys.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 26:25

Thanks Amina. I think you raised something that's like, it makes me want to cry, it's so beautiful - the idea that people that might not come from, say, a trade union family, or had experience of workplace organising and knowing that solidarity that can be built for them, being thrown into a terrible situation then suddenly having 10 people outside the door trying to support them. Oh, it's so beautiful! The work you guys do is, yeah. Anyway, I'm gonna upset.

Amina Gichinga 26:52

Have a little cry Harriet! You know I do it all the time, it's fine! [Both laughing]

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 26:58

Okay, I'm gonna pass on to Ghazal now, thank you so much Amina.

Ghazal Haqani 27:13

Hi. Can you hear me now?

Ghazal Haqani 27:17

I'm Ghazal, I am from London Renter's Union as well. And I am a member, I've been with London Renters' Union for about two years. From the beginning of 2018. So, this has been said many times over, that the pandemic has brought in sharp focus the gross inequalities that exist. And among those inequalities housing is a big one. It's the centre of our existence, our well being. Again, as Amina had said, I also live in Newham and 40% of our residents were born outside the UK, including myself. Now, if I told you, this is a borough with the highest household debt, and all its wards are consistently among the most deprived areas in the country. It has the second highest Covid related death rate, and 63% of the residents are of a black and ethnic minority background. Would it surprise you? I don't think so, because we all can connect the dots between poverty, precarious work, insecure unsafe overcrowded housing, and people of colour. The hostile environment for migrants isn't new. And housing is very much a part of it. Denying people a safety net, even when they need it the most is very much a part of it. Those on no recourse to public funds and, of course, undocumented migrants have been worst affected.

Ghazal Haqani 29:03

Now, some of us console ourselves by thinking that at least our children will do better, they won't have to face the situations that we have, but as a mother of two amazingly resilient children I can tell you, that's not true. Long term insecure housing affects their mental health and manifests in different ways. I am also a parenting facilitator and I have seen that, I've seen how it worries parents across the board. I joined London Renters' Union in early 2018, as I mentioned, and I must mention here that it was because of Corbyn that I felt inspired and hopeful enough to come out and connect with others in my community. I felt change was possible. And it has to be through grassroots movements like ours, like London Renters' Union. I joined because I was tired of landlordism, the broken housing system where we're paying 70% of our earnings in rent. And I feel now, more than ever, ever, we are stronger. We are stronger when we have been successful in pushing the government to make U-turns. They have been extremely, um... the mind boggles the kind of mistakes and the kind of decisions - horrendous

decisions - they've been taking. The four weeks! It just is a joke that there was an extension of four weeks, but nevertheless, there was something.

Ghazal Haqani 30:53

But we need more radical changes. And I think for that we must connect, and have those conversations. There is, as the speakers before have mentioned, a great shame attached to not being able to provide a secure roof for our children, for ourselves, but this shame and sense of failure is quite powerful. And we always interpret it as individual failure, even when in reality it is an indictment of the society that we live in. It's extremely difficult to shake it off, and look at it from the outside and analyse it that way, when you're still living through the challenges of insecure housing. But it's different when you're part of the union, you immediately know you're not alone. You have this amazing sense of solidarity where you are meeting people, supporting people, accepting help and giving help, and knowing that we all have a stake in this. And so I would ask you to have those conversations, because I think a lot of people find it very difficult to speak about this, and sometimes a small conversation can be quite powerful. And I also urge you to join a tenants' union - join London Renters' Union and be a part of the movement to have something better. Because the housing system that we have is not fit for purpose, and we can all imagine something better that works for all of us. So, yes, that's all I have to say. Thank you.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 33:12

Thank you, Ghazal, I think it was really important what you just shared with us. And really important that you talked about that element of sometimes people feeling shame. And I just want to say that anyone that's watching this and feels that shame, it is not your fault. And if you ever need the help of a tenant's union we will be there - me Ghazal, Amina, Owen - we will be there, we'll be on the front doorstep and we'll be protecting you.

Ghazal Haqani 33:35

Absolutely.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 33:36

We've got your back.

Ghazal Haqani 33:37

Yes, yes.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 33:39

I'm just gonna move on to some wider questions for everyone - just for the tech team to know. Um, so the first question that I'm gonna ask everyone, I'll just wait until you come on the stream... perfect... is I want to know how your organisations came to be, like, what's the what's the history of them? Just come in when you want, so there's there's no pressure to speak, but yeah if you want to come in, then please do.

Amina Gichinga 34:14

Shall I go?

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 34:15

Yeah, go for it.

Amina Gichinga 34:19

So, the LRU was formed in 2017 and initially it started as a project called Renters' Power Project, and it consisted of - it was like a coalition basically - of groups who had been campaigning and fighting in different ways for renters' rights for a long time, and also anti gentrification as well. I was in one of the groups called Take Back the City. But there was also Radical Housing Network, Hackney Digs, Peach - who have had an amazing win in Newham really recently, and had the council buy back over 200 homes from Mears, which is an awful housing provider. And also Rent Strike as well. So these groups came together and thought, we need to build a bigger London wide membership based organisation, in order to build power, and win on a large scale. So yeah, that's it.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 35:29

Um -

Owen Polley 35:29

Um - oh sorry.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 35:30

No go on, go on.

Owen Polley 35:33

I think I sort of covered in my opener how Acorn came to be, but I guess a little bit about how we've grown and how do we gain traction? I guess really it's about finding issues that resonate with the broad community. You know, we start with people and the issues come from there, rather than us having a predetermined idea of what we should campaign about. And I'll say, we started on small issues - small issues that we can win -and show our power. An example of this is, as Amina mentioned, there's such a power imbalance between landlords and tenants. Usually the landlord holds all the power - you know, you have a situation where you have a landlord who is harassing their tenant, isn't doing like vital repairs that need doing, then that tenant without a union just feels powerless, often. Suddenly when you turn up at their house, the tenant, with five people in red T-shirts and a video camera, alongside them, it is amazing how quickly you can shift that balance of power around. When you say, 'if you don't sort this out, we're going to come back with five times as many people, and we're going to flyer all your neighbours to tell them what a slum landlord you are' - that is amazing how quickly that turns around. And then you get that win, and then the community see that when they come together you can hold power to account, and you can get change. And then you can go for bigger targets. And so I think that's how we start, we grow, and also our actions are winnable and they're fun. You want people to have a good time and you want to have a sense of achievement and an ownership of what's happened. So yeah, I think that's how we grow. And also like door knocking is such a major thing for us - we're lucky to have quite a lot of staff organisers now because we've got so many members, and our staff organisers are out knocking doors like four hours a day, speaking to people in their own homes about the issues that matter to them so I think that's how we've managed to grow.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 37:31

Thanks. Amina, did you want to come back in with a little story?

Amina Gichinga 37:36

Yeah, I was just thinking, listening to Owen, it made me think back to 2018, because when I started with LRU, we obviously didn't have a membership, right? So I had to like, sell the dream a little bit. And whoever decided that that was a good idea to do in January, I could have killed them, I'm telling you, because we were out in the storms... anyway. So we started having these little meetings, what we called ward meetings, locally. And like 10 people would show up at a meeting, and there weren't many of us but we were just talking about housing and what people's experiences of it are. And, and we wanted to take action but we had no member solidarity model, we had no way of supporting each other, we had no process. But we were like, we need to do an action. We need to just do one action that shows that when we come together we're powerful. So this guy, this amazing man Nana, came to a meeting, and his ceiling was gonna fall in because the landlord wasn't fixing the plumbing repairs that needed to be done. And he also had an infestation, and lived with his young daughter. And he said, yeah I'm up for taking action, barely a membership there, you know I'm saying, so it was exciting. So we went down to this estate agent - we went to deliver a letter, and we had a banner we'd taken photos outside, and they were like, oh, come in - you know. And we had this impromptu meeting with them. And within four hours they had someone round to do the repairs. And it was just like, wow, it works! You know what I mean. So, yeah, thinking back to that, just go back to basics, like doing that door knocking is so important. Being out, being physical, and making connections with local organisations and showing your wins. And Acorn - you show your wins! Do you know what I mean, like you're really good at communicating them, and I think that's what we need to do to flex our muscles a little bit, you know.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 39:45

Amina, you make me laugh man. Your energy's brilliant, like.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 39:52

So for people watching, just to clarify that we're going to go through a couple of questions from from Momentum and then we're going to go into the questions from the floor, so don't worry we're going to store them up. And so the second one I want to ask you guys is a little bit more political. I'm wondering, how have you found your Local Authorities? Like, have you found the local authorities helpful or not? Because we're all from different parts of the UK so I think it would be good to hear what local councils are doing in this, and most of you have Labour councils, so I'm wondering, you know, how have they worked with you?

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 40:28

Who wants to go first?

Ghazal Haqani 40:32

Can I answer this?

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 40:34

Yeah, yeah, go for it.

Ghazal Haqani 40:36

So I felt really disappointed actually with what our councils are doing, and I think... I mean, to be fair, they are quite overwhelmed. I understand, but I don't see that solidarity, and making those statements which need to be made, and giving that support, where it's needed out there. So it's not really been as we would have expected. I mean I do want to add to it - I mean recently we've been really disappointed with some of the things that have happened. We were expecting a meeting and then at the last moment they just turned around and said that oh, well, we aren't sure you're supposed to have the meeting that you had asked for - even though there were several emails and, you know, several confirmations back and forth. So yeah.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 41:48

Wild. I'm going to be asking my local labour councillors to meet with with us as Acorn, as the Acorn branch. And if they don't, they'll be having some strongly worded emails in the upcoming elections, that's all I'm saying! There goes that invitation rescinded, well done Harriet! Um, Owen - and so I know that you're from Bristol, you've also got a Labour council in Bristol haven't you and I was wondering...

Owen Polley 42:16

Yeah... We consider ourselves to have no permanent friends, no permanent enemies. You know, this council have been supportive about things, and we've been supportive of things they've done in the opposite, in in some respects. The council in Bristol at the moment is really good on building council housing and that kind of thing, but at the same time we almost caused a mutiny in their ranks amongst the council's decision to reduce council tax benefit. And in the end we managed to campaign to get that overturned. But around COVID-19 I've got to say I feel a bit similar to Ghazal around this, because we've been a bit disappointed with how they have been. I mean we lobbied them to say, look, yes, the eviction ban is coming to an end, but why can't you as a council say, well let's at least protect our own council tenants and extend the eviction ban. And they said, yeah, they initially agreed - our head of housing was like, not only that, we'll go to the other core cities, and we'll try and get everyone on board to speak out and say the eviction ban is ending too soon. And then in the end they completely reneged on it, came back and did nothing. And then the government themselves extended it for four weeks. So yeah, we were pretty disappointed around that really, and think that that could have actually been really strong if those core cities came together and said, we are not - for at least our own council tenants that we have control over - we are not going to evict them, because it's not in the interest of public health, and renters and everything you know. And they didn't. And I think that was a real disappointment.

Owen Polley 43:12

Yeah for sure. Does anyone else want to come back in before I move on to the next one?

Amina Gichinga 44:02

I think that councillors and councils need to be doing more to get information out to tenants about what their rights are. But also, I think that some politicians need to speak out about the power imbalance between landlords and tenants, because I think what we're facing sometimes when we're in meetings

with certain politicians, it's like, 'well the landlords are struggling too', 'the landlord's are in a pandemic too'. And it's like, please can you listen to the experiences of tenants who are literally often choosing between food and paying the rent. Sorry - I've got like midges, I don't know why. And so, it's just like that power imbalance still isn't there, it's like tenants and landlords are like this. And we recently found out that our council has met with the landlords' local, like, hubbub - whatever you want to call it - sorry, I don't know the name, I don't ever know! But before us and it's like, why? Why do you do that? Why do you do that, don't do that - we've got so much poverty in our borough. And that is because of the rigged housing system that favours investors and developers and landlords, so we need change. Please, like, can you put out a public statement? Can you write about how it's impacting people? Even if you don't have the powers of central government, you can be calling for more.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 45:51

Yeah, for sure. And I think it's really important actually that we speak confidently about the power imbalance that you've just described, because it is one of the biggest comebacks that we get. And I just want to rep John McDonnell who's been a good politician who speaks out about this a lot - so I just want to rep him there. But also the Landlords' Association meets with the Welsh Government quite regularly. A Labour government. Moving on swiftly! So, question three. This is also a really political one that I want to ask as well, because this is TWT. So I want you guys to imagine you're going into a meeting with Keir Starmer tomorrow, and what is going to be the first thing that you ask of the Labour leader?

Ghazal Haqani 46:38

To speak out. To say something! To... yes. [Laughing] Yeah, I mean - maybe flip the back of his membership card and see what the party is about. Who is it for? What is the idea? What are the core ideas of it, and stand for it. You know, stop the silence. So yes, that's really what I have to say.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 47:18

Ghazal, I would not want to mess with you.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 47:23

Anyone else wanna come in, what would you say? What's your thing?

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 47:32

You're muted Owen.

Owen Polley 47:35

Thank you. Thank you, sorry. Just to build on what Ghazal said, where is his voice? We heard about the eviction ban, he piped up a couple of days before, to say oh yeah the eviction ban, but what we heard from him since? It hasn't been in PMQs, it's not come up. Is it going to come up in the next week, is he going to pipe up a couple of days before? It's not enough. You need to start listening to renters' unions like the Labour Party listens to trade unions because we're only growing, and our voice is really important. And, yeah, he needs to do a lot more, he needs to speak out. Get behind tenants and not be worried about all these Labour MPs who are also landlords -

Ghazal Haqani 48:12

Yes!

Owen Polley 48:13

You know, he needs to actually stand up behind renters.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 48:21

Beautiful. Amina, go on.

Amina Gichinga 48:25

I mean, trash, utter trash. I'm sorry! This guy, I can't with this guy. I can't deal with him. I don't know what to say to him. Like, there's just so much, beyond housing as well. It's like Ghazal said, the man is silent. It's like we didn't have a housing crisis before this whole pandemic kicked off anyway. And now it's even worse, but you're nowhere to be seen, and the landlordism within the party is a huge issue. We've got bare councillors - I'm sorry, I'm getting street - but we've got loads of councillors in our borough who are landlords, so how are they ever going to fight for tenants' interests when tenants are obviously gonna be poorer than landlords? I've nothing to say to the guy because I don't think... I think he should just defect to the Lib Dems or something because that's where he belongs.

Ghazal Haqani 49:26

[Laughing]

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 49:27

Oh Ghazal's off! So the fourth question. I'm just wondering in terms of movement building - so people will be watching from different parts of the country - and I was wondering how much you as different unions speak to one another. And is there collaboration working across the unions?

Owen Polley 49:47

Yeah, so we have worked with you, the London Renters' Union, on quite a few things now. I think the ending of Section 21, and the renters' vote in 2017, and 2019, and that's really important for us, because we we haven't got a branch in London at the moment. And you guys are smashing it down there, so because we haven't got that presence there it's really important that we're representing the whole country's tenants between us, and I think yeah - we have been working together and will continue to do so. I mean, you guys are just - they're super inspiring and yeah definitely gonna keep working together.

Amina Gichinga 50:28

That's good to hear innit? No, it's true Owen - it's been really good. Like we've co-written letters to the government, we've done actions on the same day or over the same weekend, outside the courts and stuff, and to know that that is happening across the country because - don't get it twisted, I am one of those people that it's like once I get out of the M25 I don't know where I am - but I know that Acorn is out there doing the most so it fills us with so much hope that we've got this coordinated... that we've got demands that are mostly the same, and that is really really important to have that strong voice across the country. Yeah.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 51:14

You can tell I rarely come to London because I couldn't even say Leytonstone earlier! [Laughing]

Amina Gichinga 51:19

[Laughing] Leytonstone, mate, Leytonstone!

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 51:20

I struggled to get the word out, I apologise. Um, so the last question I'm going to ask before we open it up for questions from the floor is - I kind of want to end on a little bit of a high. So, obviously, this is a terrible situation and a terrible low for us in the housing movement at the moment. I'm wondering if you can see any hope from this moment to try and build in those radical ideas into the way our economy functions, because so many people are going to suffer, that hopefully they won't stand for this again. So I'm wondering whether you think it is a high, or could be a high?

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 51:55

Who wants to go first? Owen?

Owen Polley 52:02

Sure. Yeah, I think this is an absolutely massive opportunity for us to grow and build power, like we've seen since the start of the corona crisis our membership shoot up much more than it has before, and as the recession kicks in and people face even greater issues, we have to take it as - it's a horrible time - but we have to take it as an opportunity to grow. So, yeah, I think there is a lot of hope, and it's amazing what you can see communities do in the worst possible times. The way communities came together during the height of the crisis, of the coronavirus, was absolutely amazing. It was so inspiring. And just brought communities together in ways that I have never felt before - I now know everyone on my street, we have a WhatsApp, we share food all the time it's absolutely incredible. Like, we have to build on that, and we will.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 53:03

Amazing.

Ghazal Haqani 53:04

Yeah. I just think that, although it's called radical, but yes these are ideas that I think their time has come. And we need to convince people and we need to get people to join us and speak together with us, so that we can bring the changes that have been long overdue.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 53:33

For sure. Amina do you want to come in?

Amina Gichinga 53:37

Yeah, of course. We have to practice hope, you know what I mean, you have to practice being hopeful. I don't know who said that but it wasn't me - I've nicked that from someone, I can't remember who. But you have to practice it, because my Lord, the way everything that's been going on, whether it's black

lives matter, the pandemic, everything has been very very overwhelming. But like Owen said, it's been really inspiring to see people just really link up in these times, and offer solidarity to each other. I think we need to take this opportunity though to think about how we engage with people who aren't already politically active. So, what is, what is the impact of the language you are using, when you are engaging with someone who is very sceptical? Yeah. How do we skill each other up to be able to have someone step into their agency? And we can all be responsible for that. I don't know if that makes sense, like... the way that we describe the union, you know. Oh, 'the union' is doing this, it's a big organisation - but it's like renters are supporting other renters, to do these amazing things. You need to be a part of it for us to be stronger, and that will help you. So really, I think there's an opportunity but I also think we need to be politicised with it or political with it. But in a way that we're not ramming ideology down people's throats, because that sure does turn me off. You know, I'm hopeful but I want to get skilful as well - you get me?

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 55:33

That's a great line. Love it. I'm going to jump to the questions from the floor now. So this is the first one - what impact on the ban on six people plus have on eviction resistance direct action? And I'll open it up to you.

Owen Polley 55:54

Alright if I start speaking to that? Yeah, it's something we really need to consider, it's not going to stop us. Obviously we took a long time out of doing direct actions when Corona and the lockdown was at its strictest, and we have started doing actions again now. At every action we have social distancing coordinators to make sure people are socially distanced, and everyone wears masks and we're really hot on it. Ultimately these eviction resistances are going to need to have more than six people, and that's going to happen, so we will take it into consideration. But it's not going to stop us resisting evictions because it's too important. And you know six people is, you know, sometimes it's not going to be enough.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 56:47

Does anyone else want to come in on that?

Amina Gichinga 56:52

I guess, Ghazal, I feel that we're quite in a similar position right? If my neighbour or if anyone in the union was facing eviction I'd be outside on their doorstep, because that is really really important, but obviously we need to try and figure out some safer ways to do things. I don't know - a bit of rope between us? Who knows - we need to get creative for sure. So, yeah, not all of these answers have been figured out and things are changing all the time. This government is moving mad - they're shifting things all the time so we don't know what the future is, but I'm a bit worried about the police you know. I'm worried about their powers are increasing with COVID as the excuse, or whatever. So I think we need to really think about our protest rights, and how we can fight for them.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 57:51

Ohhh. Really good point. Ghazal did you want to come in?

Ghazal Haqani 57:55

Um, not really, but I think like we have done before, you know, we had some people at one place and a few others at other places, not really always together so we have found creative ways of doing things, and we can find more.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 58:19

Yeah, definitely. That's going to be the order of the day I guess isn't it. So the next question I've got in the chat is from Arthur, and they say - I just joined Acorn 10 minutes ago in York! Big up Arthur! That's great to hear. Well done. And so, the question is on the screen as you can see - what sort of elementary practices would you say to someone who's just joined? And how has being part of a union affected other areas of your life?

Owen Polley 58:47

Well, welcome to the union, first of all! Our newest member, that's absolutely wicked. Well, have you got a branch in York? That's the first thing I'd ask, and I don't know the answer to that because I don't know where all the branches are... But get in touch with your local branch, like your most local branch and get along to their actions, whether that's in York or whether that's in Leeds, where we have got a branch, or Sheffield where we have got a branch. I don't know. But get along to their actions, and really if you haven't got a branch where you are, then we can help you build. So we have now national organisers who will come out to your city and town, and we'll train a group of you, we'll set that initial committee where we have democratically elected chair and general secretary and stuff for that branch, and set that group up. So having that initial community organising training is the first step on that path. And, yeah, if you want to start a branch where you are, brilliant, because we want branches in every town and city across the UK. And so yeah, I think that's why I'd say to you Arthur, thank you. In terms of like how Acorn has impacted on other areas of my life... I have a bit of a tricky line to tread because I actually do work for my local authority as well. And I work in homelessness prevention in my legal authority as a Welfare Rights advisor, so I have to tread carefully. So it has affected it. So I'm actually - I do homelessness prevention for my day job and then I sort of... yeah an activist for Acorn as well. So it does impact on it, but it's time really well spent as far as I'm concerned.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 1:00:36

Yeah, definitely. Does anyone else want to come in on what you would say to a new member and how they can get involved, and the effects on your life?

Ghazal Haqani 1:00:46

So, can I say something? So I think if you start looking at the community in a different way, well at least with London Renters' Union and I'm sure with Acorn as well. You can sense the solidarity and you know that you are in a safe space where you are supported. So you just automatically know that you can speak, and you can offer support, and also train. Now, on things like for instance with us in London Renters' Union - the rights on rent... what am I saying? Training about renters' rights. So, skilling each other. And also, I think it gives this sense of community which, especially when like for myself, I'm a migrant, I don't really have lots of family here, and this becomes this family which you can lead on. So that's, that's been amazing for me.

Ghazal Haqani 1:02:25

Amina do you wanna come in?

Amina Gichinga 1:02:27

Yeah. Oh, it's just - what does Arthur mean by elementary practices? What are the first things you should know? Yeah? So, I think it maybe can be quite overwhelming for the first time a member wants to come and get involved in something, because there's so many things to do. So, I think first come to a Get Active training, learn about the history of the union, how we how we are trying to build power, how we take action, the wins that we've had, what we've learned from it, and the groups and teams that you can get stuck into. Because once someone comes in, does a bit of that, scoping it out, building relationships, chatting to people, making food - if we ever have that moment where we have a meeting in a community centre again, I will cry because I really really missed that vibe - but you know, there's loads of things that people can do within it. We're doing a lot of member solidarity response team calls, so if someone gets in touch and they want to know what the next steps could be with the union for their housing issue, then we've got members who are trained to make those calls. That is a really really important role so we can definitely do have more people doing that stuff. Around eviction resistance as well, we're obviously like training people across the city to be able to do that, so we can do train the trainer stuff as well - if you want to become a trainer, you know there's loads to do. Absolutely loads. But just come in first and see what's going on.

Amina Gichinga 1:04:16

And in terms of how has been a part of a union affected other areas of my life - overall I just love the people that are in it. I feel really enriched by the relationships that I've built with people like Ghazal, and that feeling, that community vibe cannot be replaced. It's a huge part of my life, and I have a lot of love for people, and they give me a lot of love as well, so that's that's affected my life. And I think that it's just shifted how I... because I didn't do that much action before this, I did bits and bobs but I have learned a lot. I've learned a lot from from from people's ability to come and collectivise together.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 1:05:17

That's beautiful. Do you know what, when I heard about the really sad passing of Michael Brooks I didn't really know who Michael Brooks was, and I did some googling and went on YouTube and listened to some of his stuff - and it's something that you've just said then Amina about like the love for the people is where like our activism I feel often should come from, and gets missed. And so I'm trying to practice that myself, but yeah - no one wants to know about me! Dunno why I'm saying that, but anyway. Next question. So here we go on the screen - should councils be allowed to sell existing housing stock to social tenants?

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 1:05:56

Who wants to come in?

Owen Polley 1:06:01

I'm happy to give my opinion on that. So my answer is no. I think we need more social housing, not less. Yeah, the selling off of social housing stock has just been absolutely awful. And when you look at the housing list, the social housing list in places with like London and Bristol, there are people who are

in desperate need of housing who are just not going to get it because they're 'deemed' to be lower need and there's just no chance of them getting the social housing that they require. So we need to not sell off our social housing stock, we need to not expand that to housing associations as well. We need massive widespread building of social housing across the country. At the same time I don't bemoan any social housing tenants who want to buy their house. I'm not in any way placing the blame at the tenants' feet - like, I would want to do that, my parents did that with us where they were in a council house and they did. I don't bemoan that for one second, but we need a better system, whereby house prices should be lower because we haven't got landlords buying up huge amounts of stock to have, you know, slum landlords with hundreds of properties. There are things that we can do to get people on the housing ladder that doesn't involve buying social housing stock.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 1:07:23

Does anyone else wanna come in?

Amina Gichinga 1:07:31

Just, I agree with everything Owen said. And I think about my housing history, and the fact that when I was born, my family were in a council home and managed to buy it, and then sold it. And then from the age of three upwards I was, like, in a house. Right. And it was like, wow, it's because of that system that I'm able to like be more secure now. That's a privilege, but it shouldn't be this way. And we need to change it, the Right to Buy is trash.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 1:08:15

Brilliant. Um, next question - if I could just get a tech team to get it up on the screen because I've lost myself a little bit? Okay, perfect. Should people who have been given housing due to historical or current qualifying factors then be required to leave their social housing to those who need it more if their circumstances change? I'm really dyslexic so reading off the screen is not my strong point, if I mess it up then I apologise! But yeah, is that clear for everyone? Owen I can see you nodding, do you want to go first?

Owen Polley 1:08:51

Yeah, I think this kind of ties into the last question. I mean, no I don't think people should have to leave their housing - like I'm never gonna advocate people being evicted from their social housing. We need more social housing that's the answer. So I think it ties into the last question, we need to not sell off our social housing stock, we need to build much more social housing to accommodate everyone. Social housing at the moment, there's only enough social housing for people who are really in need, but we should have social housing across the board for anyone who wants or needs it. So, no I don't think the answer is to take possession action against existing social housing tenants. We have to have a better answer than that and I think the answer is in in much much more social housing built across the country.

Ghazal Haqani 1:09:42

Can I add something to it very quickly? So I just feel like it's an elephant in the room, yes we need to build social housing and that is the most important thing, but also the stigma that is attached to social housing will only be removed if we build more and better quality and not have huge discrimination and

inequality between the ones that are social housing and private, or the ones built by private developers. So yes, it needs a big overhaul and can I also just quickly say that, George Clarke's programmes - the one about Venice was amazing - and I don't know why we can't do that. I'm sure we can do that in the UK. Yeah.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 1:10:38

Thank you. And if I could just get the tech team to pull the next one up because I'm getting a bit confused. There we go - how public facing should people active in renters unions be? Is there a risk of repercussions from landlords? Really good question. Who wants to take it? Ghazal do you want to go?

Ghazal Haqani 1:11:00

I didn't understand the question - how public facing should people active in renters' unions be? Is there a risk of repercussions from landlords... So, I feel if you believe in it, if you know what you are signing up for, then I don't think there should be a problem in you expressing that - that is what I feel. And why should there be? There's nothing wrong - why is that considered to be anything wrong? I mean you're standing up for an idea that everyone has a right to safe housing, I don't see a problem and I don't see why they should face any kind of repercussions for that.

Owen Polley 1:12:04

Yeah, can I jump in after that? I don't think we need to be scared of landlords, we as a union are a lot more powerful than each individual landlord. Landlords are not organised and they're not going to be getting organised anytime soon. So I think we can be as public facing as each person wants to be. I don't think we've had a situation where we've had members subjected to repercussion by landlords, and ultimately they have more to lose than us. And so we shouldn't fear them, because, you know, as I said earlier, it's quite easy to turn the balance of power against them when we have strength in numbers and when the community comes together. Yeah.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 1:12:46

Yeah, totally. And so the next question we're going to come to is - what would you advise to students who are in the process of setting up a student renters union?

Amina Gichinga 1:13:03

Oh, I've just been put in the screen...okay!

Amina Gichinga 1:13:07

I guess, be visible on your campus and get chatting, and more importantly listening to all of the students and their housing issues - so just asking you know, hey, what are you finding with the quality of your housing, like, are you happy? You just moved in. Do you think you're getting a good service for your money? Most probably they're gonna say no, and you'll be like, okay, can I take your name and number down please and can we go for a cup of tea? And can we have a one to one. So in community organising, there's a tool we use, which are one to ones. And it helps you to understand someone's perspective or someone's intentions and motivations for wanting to do something like being in a union, and then you can find out if you can work together or take action together. And then what you want to do moving forward. So I build really slowly and get some really good relationships going on, then build

up to a meeting, and then discuss what you want to change, and then keep doing that outreach, alongside that process. And build and build and build until you've got enough people, and then do a structure test of like, how many people pledging that they'd go on strike kinda ting. Do you know what I mean. Yeah, do it!

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 1:14:41

I love the peak organiser speak is coming out, I love it Amina - the structure test, the one to ones! Um, Owen I saw you unmute, did you want to come in?

Owen Polley 1:14:51

What Amina said, basically. And just start off with small actions against landlords and celebrate those wins - that is so important, celebrate those wins. When you get a landlord to do repairs, do compensation or whatever, you tell everyone about it! And then more people will want to come and join the union so that they can have their issues addressed.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 1:15:14

Ghazal did you wanna come in?

Ghazal Haqani 1:15:19

No, I think what Amina said was amazing and pretty complete.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 1:15:25

Wicked. And so, next question is - what is the direction we should take in rural areas? Most of what I have read about renters' unions and tenants' organising have been in big towns and cities. Good question. Who would like to run with that one?

Amina Gichinga 1:15:43

I feel like my reality is so far removed from people in rural areas, so I don't even know what to say at this point! But, like, where there are people there is power. So, find your common ting that you wanna to fight on, and discuss how you're gonna do that together. I think, you know, when I look at rural areas and how they fought against... what's the climate stuff that's going on... what do you call it?

Amina Gichinga 1:16:15

No, no, there's been like... what do you call it? The drilling in the ground...

Owen Polley 1:16:21

Fracking?

Amina Gichinga 1:16:22

Yes fracking! The way that rural communities have come out and fought against... and you can do it with housing as well I'm sure. But I don't know how, because I... yeah! But where there are people, there is power and when you have shared common interest, you can still do it. I believe that.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 1:16:41

Owen, do you wanna come in on rural?

Owen Polley 1:16:44

Yeah, I mean I think it's really important that you're not going in there with a predetermined agenda of what issues or whatever you want to push. It's about finding out what are the commonalities, what issues is it that drives people in those communities? And that is going to be really different to in urban areas, but it's all about listening. It really is, and ultimately you might find that some of the things are - I guess there's going to be different political elements to a lot of rural communities concerns, and that might not sit that comfortably. I don't know, but yeah it's all about listening really, and then finding out about the issues that resonate with people in those communities.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 1:17:31

I can even come in on this a little bit actually, so like rural poverty in Wales is a real big issue. And there are some protests coming up by an organisation called UNDOD - anyone from Wales check out UNDOD. They're protesting against the trade bill that's coming up, and what they're doing is - this is wicked - all the farmers are getting together to protest the lowering of standards on the meat that they're selling across the country, etc. And they're protesting by just putting their tractors through the main streets, it's going to be brilliant, and there's just going to be lines and lines of tractors across the country in a couple of weeks it's going to be sick, I can't wait. Anyway, I should not be answering the questions, I'm the chair! So, I'm going to move on. And the last one is... I'll wait for it to come up... there we go! Amina mentioned the police aiding landlords with illegal evictions, how did you get about... get about challenging this? (Sorry.)

Amina Gichinga 1:18:32

Erm...end the police! No, I'm sorry but the police are never gonna protect tenants, or working class people in general, and especially when you've got a community of black and brown people and ethnic minority people. So it's just like, challenging it has to be challenging the fact that the police are not accountable for their actions, in so many regards, but I think that with evictions - what was really illuminating for me is, we have one member, right, who is being harassed constantly by his landlord, over the last five years. And he called the police round, because the landlord came around again, and was behaving aggressively, and the police gave him false information on his rights. Which is quite serious when you think about it. He showed them his tenancy and it ended in 2014, but obviously you have a rolling contract innit, if you're an assured shorthold tenant. And they said, oh your contracts ended in 2014 so the landlord has the right to evict you. And! On top of that, there's a ban on evictions. So, even if you thought that was the case, there's a ban on evictions so the police won't won't ever protect us, so it's up to us. I think this is across, you know, when we look at Black Lives Matter as well. When we say Black Lives Matter - sorry I'm bringing it in - we're also talking about this stuff. We're talking about everybody, we're talking about how the police need to be accountable for their actions. And that extends to this as well.

Owen Polley 1:20:25

Just to add in a couple of bits there - we always have a dedicated police liaison officer who goes and deals with the police, who's trained and clued up and knows people's rights and what the law is about stuff. But also we video everything, we document everything. So we video, every action we do, we take

photographs, so that we can hold the - or at least attempt to hold - the police to account if they're not following the law themselves. And so I think that's really important because you're documenting that you're not the ones breaking the law there, and the landlord is. I mean, we document even if it's legal evictions because police still shouldn't enforce entry when it's a county court eviction, in no way.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 1:21:14

Exactly. I definitely want to be the police liaison person, I'd just play dumb and be like 'whaaaaat?' - in my thickest Valleys accent. What you say? Aaanyway. Right. Um, I'm gonna start to bring this to a close, folks, because we've been going for a while now, but I just want to say thank you to all the speakers tonight for coming along and sharing their work and their stories with us, and to remind everyone watching, if you're a member of Momentum, number one - please check your emails for your links where you can sign up to the eviction resistance campaign. And also, everyone - join a tenants' union! So we've already had one joiner in the chat, like why haven't we got 10 joiners in the chat? Come on folks, everyone join a tenants' union - join Acorn or London Renters' Union respectively.

Harriet Protheroe-Soltani 1:22:00

And just before we go a few last announcements. To continue the discussions, we have set up a dedicated space for our community forum. If you have already set up your account, you can click this link in the chat to find the relevant discussion to this event. So, the link will go in the chat in a second. If you're registered for the festival check your email for a sign up link to the form. If you're unable to find a signup link, please email info@theworldtransformed.org. And also remember there are loads of events at TWT20, and they're filling up quickly so be sure to register for any that you'd like to attend as quickly as possible, so make sure that you've registered for the festival at theworldtransformed.org/register and then go to the individual event you'd like to register for on the programme. And finally, if you've enjoyed this session and would like to help us sustain our work throughout the festival and beyond, please do consider supporting us at theworldtransformed.org/support. So thanks everyone, thanks to all the speakers, and good night.