

Demanding the Right to the City and the Right to Housing (R2C/R2H): *Best Practices for Supporting Community Organizing*

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December 2019

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About This Report

The goal of this report was to examine how to promote the Right to the City (R2C) and the Right to Housing (R2H) through strategic legal and organizing activities that mobilize against displacement. This report fulfills the goal to prepare a co-authored research paper and tools for evaluating community organizing. It focuses on relationships between agencies (including legal clinics) and organizers in three cities.

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Support for the report was provided by Maytree.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This research report explores how progressive social agencies and non-profits (including legal clinics) can support community organizing pursuing the aims of the Right to the City (R2C) and Right to Housing (R2H) agendas. R2C/R2H theories and movements seek transformative social change to achieve urban social justice, emphasizing that cities and housing should be built for people, and not for profit.

In Toronto, Ottawa, and Hamilton, community organizers have recently adopted high-profile radical activities to fight displacement. While these organizers do not always use the language of R2C/R2H, they embody the aims of these agendas by fighting for housing rights and justice. Meanwhile, many progressive social organizations support R2C/R2H principles, but may not support (and may even oppose) the more radical actions undertaken by community organizers. This report draws on an evaluation of community organizing to argue that agencies dedicated to R2C/R2H agendas should support community organizing.

The outline of the report is as follows: (1) Part 1 discusses varied interpretations of R2C/R2H goals and agendas; (2) Part 2 ‘evaluates’ community organizing by learning from organizers in Toronto’s Parkdale, Ottawa’s Herongate, and Hamilton’s Stoney Creek neighborhoods; (3) Part 3 examines the relationship between agencies and organizers, and gives recommendations for how to support organizing.

1. The Right to the City and the Right to Housing (R2C/R2H): Uniting Activism and Agencies

R2C and R2H are concepts that have united activists, academics, and agencies pursuing urban social justice and housing rights agendas.

R2C has intellectual foundations in the Marxist scholarship of Henri Lefevbre. R2C was imagined as a ‘rallying cry’ around which the oppressed would demand cities built for people and not for profit. R2C has inspired activist social movements fighting for transformative social change. It has also been adopted by non-governmental organizations that have progressive agendas, but sometimes less radical approaches and ambitions.

Advocates for R2H claim that all people have the right to safe, adequate, affordable housing. Radical R2H agendas draw on the concept to expose limits of existing systems in delivering housing justice, in pursuit of transformative system change. By contrast, a more mainstream R2H agenda proposes recognition of a R2H in legislative and policy frameworks.

2. Community Organizing for R2C/R2H: Learning from Parkdale, Herongate, and Hamilton

This section ‘evaluates’ organizing by three groups adopting more radical approaches aligned with R2C/R2H agendas. Our approach to evaluation draws on organizers’ own insights into their goals, successes, and limitations.

Case Study Communities

Hamilton: Hamilton Tenant’s Solidarity Network (HTSN): This volunteer, grassroots-run group of tenants launched a four-building rent strike against InterRent REIT in four buildings in 2018. The groups politics are broadly anti-capitalist and their goal is to build working class power. Their actions involve direct engagement with landlords to fight displacement.

Toronto: Parkdale Organize (PO): PO is a membership-based group of working-class people who organize to build working class power in Parkdale. The group’s main wins include struggles against Swedish-based landlord Akelius (2014-2015), supporting unionization and labour rights at the Ontario Food Terminal (2016-2017), a 12-building three-month rent strike against landlord MetCap Living in 2017, and subsequent rent strikes and anti-eviction activism (2018-present).

Ottawa: Herongate Tenant’s Coalition (HTC): HTC was formed to build power and solidarity among working class people responding to the acquisition of their homes by Timbercreek Asset Management in 2012. Timbercreek has launched mass evictions and the demolition of Herongate to make way for a luxury condo development.

Evaluating Community Organizing: Goals, Successes, and Limitations

Community organizers in these sites got involved to fight displacement, rent increases, evictions and a sense of generalized injustice in their buildings and neighborhoods. Many felt they had no choice not to fight for what they know is right.

Organizers had many **goals for organizing**, with the most pragmatic being to stop evictions and displacement. A second common goal was to strengthen a community’s ability to defend itself by building community power, educating people about their rights, and watching out for one another. In addition, most organizers spoke to lofty goals for systemic transformational change, challenging structures that reproduce systemic class-based and racial inequality.

Successes: Achievements of Community Organizing

Participants identified five types of success associated with their organizing activities.

1. *Winning Demands:* These included successful rent strikes, eviction defenses, fighting rent increases, and mobilizing for needed maintenance and repairs.

2. *Being Organized*: Building independent, working-class organizations was viewed as a success, creating stronger foundations from which to fight for R2C/R2H goals.

3. *Sense of Community, Friendships, and Supportive Networks*: Organizing created a sense of community and pride, fostered friendships and supportive networks.

4. *Empowerment*: Communities were emboldened by organizing, learning their rights, and working together, and felt empowered to independently fight for their goals.

5. *Support from 'Outside Groups'*: Outside groups that supported organizing contributed to success, including PCLS in Toronto and university actors in Ottawa.

Limitations: Challenges Facing Community Organizing

Participants spoke to three main factors that limited their organizing potential

1. *Structural Inequality*: Organizers recognize that power dynamics were not often in their favour, and spoke to be the underdog in "David vs. Goliath" struggles. As lower-income, working-class, racially marginalized tenants, participants face real challenges when fighting connected, powerful elites. Legal and political regimes often are weighted against them.

2. *Fear of Retribution*: Many avoid radical community organizing because they fear retribution from their landlord. Indeed, active tenant organizers are often targeted for eviction.

3. *Lack of Support from Potential Allies*: In describing relationships with progressive social actors, organizers identified frustrating dynamics. Potential allies often fail to support or even undermine organizers' efforts, or press them to 'be something other than what we are.'

Best Practices for Community Organizing

While there is no 'recipe' for organizing, Parkdale Organize identified five principles guiding their actions. Many of these principles also guided HTC and HTSN.

1. Direct Engagement

This approach directly targets adversaries whose practices may harm or exploit working class tenants, and avoids engaging with mainstream legal channels for dispute resolution, such as the Landlord and Tenant Board (LTB), which is seen as weighted against tenants.

2. District-Based Scale

All three groups capitalize on the density of people, connections, and institutions in dense urban neighborhoods, and are not poised to 'scale up' activities to a wider geography.

3. Struggles for Daily Life

PO is not a single-issue (housing) group, but recognizes that working class people face myriad struggles (related, for example, to labour or education). Members drive organizing priorities.

4. Independent Organizing

Independence from agencies, state actors, and others enables community organizers to follow member priorities and use extra-legal approaches that get results, without interference.

3. The Role of Non-Profits and Social Agencies: Supporting Community Organizing for R2C/R2H

In this section we evaluate how well social agencies support community organizing, which is critical to their higher-level goals to pursue R2C/R2H agendas. Since the 1980s, social agencies in Canada and the US have increasingly taken on social welfare functions of the state. This shift has been associated with a reduction in political activities, along with 'advocacy chill', as organizations avoid upsetting government and private foundation funders. Legal clinics have also shifted energy towards 'casework' and away from 'systemic advocacy' functions.

The Value of Supporting Community Organizing

Representatives from progressive social organizations often believe that social change can only be achieved in a context where radical organizing influences society-wide thinking and applies pressure to *status quo* institutions. Radical organizing is therefore essential to achieve even the incremental and consensus-oriented R2C/R2H agendas of more mainstream organizations.

Challenges Agencies face in Supporting Community Organizing.

Despite the importance of community organizing for R2C/R2H goals, there are four points of tension that can deter agencies from supporting this work.

- 1. Fear of Upsetting Funders:* Agencies may lose funding or other forms of political retribution if they upset government or foundation funders.
- 2. Agency Obligations to Follow Rules and Regulations:* Agencies may be bound by frameworks that community organizers do not have to follow.
- 3. Fear that Community Organizing Will Fail:* Risk-averse agencies may decide that an organizing win is unlikely, and fear raising expectations amongst participants who have a slim chance of 'winning.'

4. *Different Theories of Change*: Agencies and other actors may choose to oppose organizing if the methods run counter to what they deem acceptable.

Ways Forward: Recommendations for Agencies to Support Community Organizing

The following six recommendations draw from the principles of community organizers, and from the remaining findings in this report. We hope agencies and non-profits are empowered by these recommendations to support organizing going forward, in line with their own mandates to pursue R2C/R2H agendas.

1. Respecting Direct Engagement Approaches

Agencies are encouraged to refrain from imposing their perspectives on appropriate tactics onto organizers, and to support the approach of organizers even if it goes beyond the agency's normal toolbox for actions.

2. Respect for District-Based Scale and Organizer Priorities

Similarly, agencies and other groups (non-profits, academics, advocacy organizations) are encouraged to refrain from imposing their own priorities and ideologies of social change onto organizers. This includes branded campaigns, single-issue agendas, and demands to 'scale up' organizing. Organizers are winning big gains with their approach and ask others to respect it.

3. Independent Organizing

Respecting the independence and autonomy of organizing not only allows organizers freedom to pursue their radical R2C/R2H goals, it offers agencies distance from extra-legal practices they might find too controversial to directly engage with. At the same time, agencies should commit to conveying public support for the work of community organizers *in principle*, and commit to never denounce their activities.

4. Direct Material Support for Community Organizing

While agencies should refrain from directing organizers in terms of their scale of operations, choice of tactics, and focus for their activities, they should not leave organizers without support. Material support includes employing people who do community development and organizing work, providing honoraria for organizers, providing space, printing, training, supplies, meeting food, research support, workshops, and agency services to organizers.

Introduction

This research project explores how non-profits (and legal clinics in particular) can support concrete community-organizing pursuing the aims of “Right to the City” and “Right to Housing” (R2C/R2H) theories and movements. Succinctly put, R2C/R2H movements seek transformative change for urban social justice, emphasizing that cities should be built for people and not profit, and that all people deserve safe, affordable housing in strong, inclusive communities.

Recently in several Canadian communities, community organizers adopting radical practices have public captured attention for launching high-profile struggles against displacement, and for using ‘extra-legal’ tactics like rent strikes. In Toronto’s Parkdale neighborhood, members of *Parkdale Organize (PO)* won a 3-month rent strike against corporate landlords in 2017, among other successes. In Hamilton’s Stoney Creek, the *Hamilton Tenant’s Solidarity Network (HTSN)* launched a rent strike against InterRent REIT in 2018, and recently in Ottawa, the *Herongate Tenant Coalition (HTC)* fought against mass evictions targeting the largely racialized residents in the Herongate community.

While these activist groups do not always use the vocabulary of ‘R2C/R2H’ in their work, they are putting the aims of these movements into concrete practice, by fighting for tenants’ rights, working class power, and transformative social change more broadly.

Non-profits and social agencies in Canada, including community legal clinics, increasingly support R2C/R2H principles, in line with their own organizational goals to promote human rights, social justice, and equality. Even so, many organizations align themselves less with the transformative interpretations of R2C/R2H concepts, such as those promoting anti-capitalist politics or radical organizing tactics. This can lead to challenges in the relationships between radically-oriented community groups (like PO, HTSN, and HTC), and social agencies (including non-profits and advocacy groups). The result is often that social agencies support the principles of R2H/R2C pursued by community organizers in theory, but do not support (and may even oppose) the efforts of organizers in practice.

This report draws on the timely emergence of several radical community organizations in Canada to explore this relationship, to evaluate community organizing and share best practices, and to recommend strategies for non-profits and social agencies to support R2C/R2H activism undertaken by community organizers, while respecting their own organizational mandates.

Report Outline

(1) This report begins by discussing the concepts of the Right to the City (R2C) and the Right to Housing (R2H), and the ways these concepts are interpreted and mobilized differently by academics, activists, and non-profit organizations.

(2) Second, the report seeks to 'evaluate' community organizing, learning from Toronto's Parkdale Organize, the Hamilton Tenants' Solidarity Network, and Ottawa's Herongate Tenant Coalition. Our approach to evaluation does not use externally-determined criteria. Instead, we asked group members to articulate their own goals for organizing, and to reflect on their successes and limitations as a learning exercise. From this exercise, we present a 'best practice' guide to organizing. This guide acknowledges that organizing is not a 'recipe,' in which tactics used in one place can be transferred, as-is, to another. Instead, we discuss *shared principles* that guide decision making in these groups. We hope this will serve as a resource to other organizers, tenants, social agencies facing similar struggles in their own communities.

(3) Third and finally, we discuss the relationship between community organizers and social agencies, exploring how agencies can both support and/or limit the strength of community organizing in pursuing R2C/R2H agendas via radical means. We 'evaluate' how well social agencies and related groups have supported community organizing, and where there are opportunities to strengthen that support.

We argue that radically-oriented organizing practices are essential to achieving R2C/R2H agendas. Drawing on the principles of organizers, we offer recommendations for how non-profits can support R2C/R2H activism undertaken by community-level organizers.

The Right to the City and the Right to Housing (R2C/R2H)

Uniting Activism and Agencies

R2C and R2H are concepts that have inspired activists, scholars, and social organizations pursuing social justice, tenant rights, and related goals. This section describes these concepts, and how they can be deployed in radical (and less radical ways) to pursue social justice in cities.

The Right to the City

Intellectual Foundations of the Right to the City

The “right to the city” movement has intellectual foundations in the work of Marxist theorist Henri Lefebvre in his 1968 essay, *Le droit a la Ville*. Lefebvre saw the city as a collectively-produced work of art (an *oeuvre*), emerging from the daily contributions of urban people. He was critical of how capitalist city-building had prioritized profits over people, and saw how dominant groups had power in cities, while others were alienated, oppressed, and marginalized.

Lefebvre envisioned that a better city could be arrived at through struggle. He envisioned the right to the city as a “cry and demand” around which every day people – workers, women, students, immigrants, the oppressed – could organize. Demanding a R2C would drive movements for equitable cities and just forms of urban life.

In his work, the “right to the city” was not a literal demand for a legal entitlement, but would serve as a rallying cry by groups imagining an alternative to the capitalist city, and insisting on their right to collectively produce it (Harvey, 2005; Mitchell, 2004; Madden and Marcuse, 2016). In short, the R2C is based on radical anti-capitalist aspirations to remake cities for the needs of humans and not capital.

Social Movements and the Right to the City

Activists have also mobilized around the R2C concept, taking an abstract ideal and making concrete demands for social, political, and economic rights (Aalbers and Gibb, 2014). In Brazil, for example, social movements in the 1990s coalesced around this idea, and succeeded in incorporating a ‘right to the city’ into national law (Friendly, 2013). This law formalized rights to democratic participation and codified that property has a “social” function (Ibid.). R2C has also inspired organizers in other places struggling for climate justice, anti-racism, LGBTQ rights, Indigenous sovereignty and rights, anti-displacement activism, and labour rights (Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer, 2011).

In 2007, grassroots organizers in the United States formed the Right to the City (RTTC) Alliance to take back cities from “coalitions of affluence.” The alliance includes forty core and allied

member groups, and a goal to “build a national urban movement for housing, education, health, racial justice, and democracy” (Leavitt, Samara, Brady, 2009).

Non-Profits and the Right to the City

The language of R2C has also been adopted by international, national, and local non-profit and advocacy groups. The United Nations (UN) Habitat program developed a World Charter for the Human Right to the City (2004) and UN Habitat is working with UNESCO and other international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to build a consensus among cities to pursue sustainable, just, democratic cities (Mayer, 2009). According to Mayer, the uptake of R2C language by such organizations tends to “dilute some of the radical demands of transformative movements” (p. 369). In short, when the UN refers to the R2C, they may not be calling for the same radical, anti-capitalist demands that Lefevbre intended, and which many activists associate with the concept.

The Right to Housing

The Right to Housing is similar to the R2C, but more focused a concrete demand. R2H is based on the recognition that housing is essential to meaningful urban life and social participation. Without a secure place to call home, one will struggle to make a livelihood, build social relationships, and engage in democratic participation. For this reason, former UN Special Rapporteur Raquel Rolnik (2014) argued that the R2H is a “gateway to other rights;” a foundation for the pursuit of R2C and human rights in general (p. 295). Munoz (2018) agrees that without housing, “there is no right to the city,” and argues that any struggle for social justice must begin “at the scale of the house and home” (p. 198).

There is widespread support in society for the idea that everyone deserves a home (Hartman, 2006). Internationally, the UN recognizes that all people have the right to adequate housing, in the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, both of which have been ratified by Canada. According to the UN, the R2H should be interpreted broadly, as “the right to live somewhere in security, peace, and dignity,” with protection against forced eviction and arbitrary interference, and freedom to choose one’s residence; along with entitlements to security of tenure, equal and non-discriminatory access, and participation in decision-making (p. 3). Internationally, the constitutions of 69 countries include language recognizing the state responsibility to provide adequate housing (Madden and Marcuse, 2016, p. 37). In Ontario, the Human Rights Code recognizes, the “right to equal treatment with respect to the occupancy of accommodation,” which can be interpreted as a “right to adequate housing without discrimination” (OHRC, 2008, p. 8).

In Canada, there has been a growing movement by non-profits and advocacy groups, and others to enshrine a R2H in law. In 2010, Toronto-based social justice lawyers filed a R2H constitutional challenge against the Canadian and Ontario governments (Faraday, Heffernan, and Luu, 2019). While unsuccessful, the case succeeded in supporting ongoing community

organizing and building a campaign beyond the courts to advocate for housing needs. This case laid the groundwork for the 2017 launch of Canada's National Housing Strategy, and legislation of a 'right to housing' in the Act related to that strategy (Ibid.). Advocates for a legal R2H argue that it may lead to housing entitlements, provide the basis for legal challenges related to housing rights, and can push opinion in society in favour of housing justice.

The Radical Right to Housing

In their 2016 book, *In Defense of Housing*, authors David Madden and Peter Marcuse argue that R2H activism should go beyond fighting for formal recognition of legislated rights. Like others, they critique the value of human rights frameworks for achieving social justice (D'Souza, 2018, cited in Faraday et al., 2019). In fighting for justice within existing frameworks, 'rights' activism is seen by some as less transformative than radical demands for housing justice. Critics argue that even if achieved, enshrined rights often lack teeth and function as vague mission statements. Pursuing rights-based litigation also "has the potential to deplete resources that can be used for movement building and can depoliticize a movement" (Faraday et al., 2019, p. 46).

Madden and Marcuse argue for a radical R2H, which "acknowledges the limits of formal rights to housing under the current legal and political system, while at the same time pressing for a sufficiently broad, activist conception of those rights" (2016, p. 194). By pushing for more than just formal rights, demanding for a radical R2H can expose the incompatibility of existing systems with the true realization of housing rights, and points in the direction of more meaningful transformative change. They argue that a radical R2H prioritizes people over profits, and defends the value of housing as a home and not as real estate (Ibid., p. 11).

R2C/R2H: Uniting movements for progressive social change?

The combined goals for R2C/R2H have the potential to unite progressive theorists, radical activists and organizers, and progressive non-profit and advocacy groups – all of which seek a more equitable society. Both concepts, however, can mean different things to different people. Activists and organizers may rally around the anti-capitalist, transformative interpretation of these ideals, hoping to destabilize and reform a society in which oppressive structures and systems generate persistent inequality with racialized, gendered, and class-based impacts. Meanwhile, non-profits, NGOs, and progressive elected officials may share a more mainstream hope that R2C/R2H ideals can chart a path towards progressive change within existing legal and policy frameworks, while altering frameworks over time to create more equitable cities.

In this report, we observe that organizers are pursuing the more radical version of an R2C/R2H agenda. We suggest that social agencies, which may be more conservative in their R2C/R2H goals, therefore have reason to support organizing, because it is performing an important function in the broader fight for a more just society. We discuss how social agencies can reconcile differences between their own organizational mandates (which may stop short of endorsing radical approaches) and their broader goals of pursuing R2C/R2H.

Community Organizing for R2C/R2H: Learning from Parkdale, Herongate, and Hamilton

In this section, we focus on the efforts of organized community members by Toronto's Parkdale Organize (PO), Ottawa's Herongate Tenants Coalition (HTC), and the Hamilton Tenants' Solidarity Network (HTSN). In these three cases, community organizing has united residents to press for social change, providing examples of best practices for organizers. We find that the goals of organizers align with those transformative visions associated with R2C/R2H agendas. In addition, we find that these cases offer new opportunity for other organizations (such as non-profits and advocacy groups) to engage productively with radical approaches to organizing, in line with their shared interests in pursuing R2C/R2H.

'Vertically Accountable' Evaluation: Learning and not Judgement

One goal for this report is to evaluate the successes and limitations of community organizing in promoting and achieving goals associated with R2C/R2H. In order to perform this evaluation, we've used an approach in which organizers 'evaluate' their own successes. This approach draws on organizers' own perspectives, rather than criteria determined by outside actors such as the authors of this report. As such, this research 'evaluates' organizing by asking participants what their goals for organizing are, what limits they see, and the degree to which they are satisfied with the success of their organizing activities.

Evaluation is often required by organizations seeking to determine the success of initiatives, and by funders eager to know the impact of their investments. Recent research on best practices for evaluating community organizing and community development work, however, suggests that these activities are best judged by engaging with those "closest to the work," rather than by applying externally-derived criteria (Paradis, 2016; cf. Murray, 2015; Naughton and Kelpin, 2015). Paradis (2016) notes that in this type of community-oriented work, accountability must not only be considered in the 'upward' direction, to show value-for-money to funders. Instead, organizations are 'vertically accountable,' both upward to funders but also "downwardly" accountable to members, beneficiaries, and their communities (Ibid., p. 5).

Drawing on this, we argue that agencies are wise to take seriously the concept of 'downward' accountability to clients and members, drawing on community-determined evaluations. In addition, they can be 'upwardly' accountable to funders by reporting these findings (which are often qualitative) as a formal evaluation. In addition, Paradis (2016) notes that the International Council on Human Rights Policy (ICHRP, 2012, p. 13) advises that evaluation work on 'advocacy, human rights, and community development' should move away from judgment to learning. In this spirit, our evaluation seeks to learn from organizers.

Hamilton: The Hamilton Tenant’s Solidarity Network (HTSN)

The HTSN is a volunteer, grassroots-run group of tenants based in Hamilton, Ontario. In May 2018, HTSN joined with affected tenants and supporters to launch a rent strike in the Stoney Creek Towers – four buildings owned by *‘financialized’ landlord* InterRent REIT. After acquiring the rental housing towers, InterRent was seeking to renovate and raise rents on vacant suites, while neglecting maintenance for long-standing tenants. Residents in these buildings were feeling pressures to move out, and chose to fight back against InterRent to resist displacement and finance-driven gentrification in their community.

HTSN’s goal is to “build independent working class power, with a focus on densely populated neighborhoods that have a large concentration of renters” (Power and Risager, 2019). While “people of all stripes” are involved, the group’s politics are “broadly anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian.” Notably, HTSN organizers recommend against pursuing their goals through mainstream channels, like policy reform, non-profit initiatives, or legal reform. According to organizers: “we encourage tenants faced with common struggles to take matters into their own hands, rather than putting their faith in courts, or deferring to social agencies or politicians to act on their behalf” (Ibid.). The group emphasizes “direct action, mutual aid, and solidarity.”

“We emphasize direct action, mutual aid, and solidarity” (Power & Risager, 2019)

By HTSN’s own account, the rent strike was a failure, as they did not meet their main demand – which was for InterRent to drop the AGI (HTSN, 2018). However, the group did compel InterRent to carry out needed repairs, and has more broadly built organizing power in Stoney Creek and beyond.

Financialized Landlord

This term refers to building ownership by financial vehicles, such as private equity funds, Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs), pension funds, insurance companies, and asset management firms.

Research has shown a rise in ‘financialized’ ownership of apartment housing in Canada since 1997. Financialized landlords manage buildings as assets for investors, with a goal to deliver financial returns. This often leads to aggressive efforts to extract more value from buildings, via rent increases, displacement, and gentrification in buildings bought by these players (August, 2020; August and Walks, 2018; Fields, 2014).

Parkdale, Toronto: Parkdale Organize (PO)

Parkdale Organize is a “membership-based group of working class people who organize to build neighborhood power in Parkdale” (Parkdaleorganize.ca). PO was launched formally in 2014, but grew out of the area’s long history of neighborhood activism.

Fighting Financial Landlords: Akelius Campaign (2014-2015)

PO’s first phase of activity involved a series of campaigns against Akelius, a Swedish-based company that bought several buildings in Parkdale in 2012-2013, and began to displace tenants, upgrade units, and raise rents. One of the tenants, Betty Talbot, took the lead in organizing to fight Akelius, knocking on doors and handing out flyers in the neighborhood. With the support of Community Legal Workers (CLWs) from PCLS, Talbot and others organized building-level committees, and held meetings in lobbies to share information and divide-up tasks. Organizing ramped up when tenants from 188 Jameson Avenue rejected the conciliatory messaging at a Town Hall held by the ward councillor, and called for direct conflict with Akelius. Akelius tenants organized a series of actions that led to improvements in building maintenance and the reduction in a planned rent increase.

Worker Strikes at the Ontario Food Terminal (2016-2017)

Tenants from 188 Jameson, along with many other Parkdale residents (mainly Tibetan men) applied the lessons of the Akelius organizing to the workplace. At the Ontario Food Terminal, workers at two companies, Fresh Taste and Ippolito, were seeking to unionize with the Teamsters Union. Parkdale Organize took on strike support activities, blocking deliveries to the Food Terminal at regular intervals. This critical support helped the workers win union recognition, wage increases, and improvements to scheduling.



Parkdale Organize supports Food Terminal workers' victory (Photo: parkdaleorganize.ca)

The Parkdale Rent Strike (2017)

The veterans of the Akelius struggle continued meeting under the name Parkdale Organize. They distributed a newsletter about their wins against Akelius, and began to receive calls and emails from tenants facing similar struggles, and assisted neighbours in door knocking, one-on-one conversations, and lobby meetings. Their focus was to build the capacity of working-class people to take up their own struggles.

In 2017, PO group organized an historic rent strike with hundreds of tenants participating in 12 separate MetCap Living buildings, some of which were co-owned by Alberta-based pension fund manager AIMCo (Alberta Investment Management Company). Tenants withheld their rent for three months, with more joining each month. Their demands were for MetCap to withdraw planned rent increases and to properly maintain people's homes.

The rent strike ended when fourteen rent striking tenants sat down and negotiated with top executives from MetCap and AIMCo – wealthy owners who had no obligation to sit down with tenants. In this historic meeting, tenants directly negotiated with their landlord (avoiding the LTB) and were happy with the outcome of the negotiation (the details of which are sealed). No one was evicted, the rent increases were reduced, MetCap promised to address outstanding maintenance issues, and launched a rent relief program for certain low-income renters.

More Rent Strikes, More Successes (2018-Present)

During the high point of the MetCap rent strike, tenants at 1251 King Street West received notice of an above-guideline-increase (AGI) to their rents. Residents there organized and 55 tenants went on strike in February 2018. In March, the landlord conceded to their demands. This big win has been followed up by a number of smaller-scale fights against evictions by tenants in smaller buildings, such as rooming houses, small blocks, and above storefronts. PO has been focused on creating conditions under which working class tenants have the confidence to refuse eviction.



Parkdale Organize fighting austerity in the community (Photo: parkdaleorganize.ca)

Herongate, Ottawa: Herongate Tenants Coalition (HTC)

The Herongate Tenant Coalition emerged in Ottawa's Herongate neighborhood in response to a mass eviction and demolition planned by Timbercreek Asset Management. Herongate is a community comprised of affordable low-rise townhomes and high-rise towers that are home to predominantly racialized tenants, including many Muslim families and Somali immigrants. For residents of Herongate, the area provides a supportive social and cultural community. In 2015, the Toronto-based financial firm Timbercreek launched plans to demolish and redevelop the entire property. Timbercreek's business model is to profit from multi-family real estate by displacing tenants, renovating properties, and charging higher rents to enrich investors. In Herongate, the company launched a plan to demolish all the low-rise housing in Herongate to make way for high-end luxury housing for a wealthier clientele.

HTC emerged in response to mass evictions and demolition of Herongate planned by Timbercreek. According to their website:

HERONGATE TENANT COALITION WAS FORMED TO BUILD POWER, STRENGTH AND SOLIDARITY AMONGST WORKING CLASS PEOPLE IN THE HERONGATE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF SOUTH OTTAWA. IT EXISTS NOW IN THIS MOMENT OF CRISIS SO WE CAN HAVE EACH OTHER'S BACKS, CARE FOR EACH OTHER AND DEFEND OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD FROM DEVELOPMENT, SPECULATIVE AND POLITICAL FORCES THAT WANT US OUT OF HERE. HTC IS ORGANIZED AND RUN ENTIRELY BY THE WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE OF HERONGATE.

It is organized and run by working class tenants (Crosby, 2019), who worked to organize people by building, holding meetings to learn about people's experiences, share information, and develop a strategy to fight back. HTC has engaged in demonstrations, social media campaigns, and carried out their own 'community census' to formally find out who lives in the community.

To date Timbercreek has evicted over 500 people from the community, according to the HTC website. While some remain to fight the next round of evictions, HTC is focusing at the moment on a litigation strategy. The group has launched five legal cases against Timbercreek, including a case at the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario asserting that the displacement of racialized tenants in Herongate constitutes a human rights violation.



Evaluating Community Organizing: Goals, Successes, and Limitations

In order to understand how organizers evaluated their own success, we began by asking people why they got involved in organizing, and what their goals for involvement were. We found that people become involved out of a desire to join with neighbours to fight injustice and push back against landlords.

Why Organize?

In Parkdale, Elsie (all names are pseudonyms) explained: “well the rent was going up and that encouraged me to take part.” Parkdale organizer Chris was afraid of being evicted, and got involved to feel a sense of control over his own fate. Another tenant, cited in the media, explained: “you’re protecting your neighbours who also live in the building – that’s why I joined” (Parkdale Villager, 2017a).

In Herongate, Anthony was motivated by anger at injustice: “I got involved because I was angry. After watching two rounds of eviction and knowing how Timbercreek operates in this neighbourhood, the way they treat staff and marginalized people – especially people with accents – that’s why I joined the movement.” Herongate tenant Lisa was initially afraid to get involved, but ultimately wanted to help her neighbours: “I want to support a community I care about, and that’s been taken advantage of.”

Some participants felt there was no choice but to get involved. In Ottawa Maya explained: “It’s kind of like breathing – I have to fight for my home, I *have* to do this ... it made no sense not to fight for people - that I see every day - to have a home.”

Anthony also equated organizing with breathing, but argued that injustice is choking people in the community. As he put it, residents do not self-identify as activists: “they are just people that want to do something about injustice, about the constant threat to their dignity. They breathe, you are choking them. And that’s why they did this in the first place. They cannot breathe.”

*“It’s kind of like breathing – I have to fight for my home, I have to do this” –
Maya, HTC*

Goals for organizing

The most concrete goals for organizing were to prevent displacement, keep people in their homes, and fight evictions. In Parkdale, Chris explained “our main focus is to keep people in their homes.” In Ottawa, Anthony said, “our goal is for people to come back to this community and to not be evicted. People should stay in their houses.” He also emphasized that Herongate

tenants wanted to resist the racially-unequal impacts of displacement, emphasizing: “this is our community, we want to keep the black and brown people.”

Another set of goals was to strengthen a community’s ability to defend itself, through education and the organization of connected neighbours. In Ottawa, Maya’s goal was for HTC was “to make sure people don’t feel threatened by [Timbercreek], to let them know they can stand up to this monolith, making sure they know their rights and can fight it.” In Parkdale, Elsie said “one of the goals of community organizing is having each other’s backs when it comes to dealing with landlords. Watching out for one another. Helping one another.”

Finally, organizers spoke to loftier long-term goals, in line with the transformative visions of radical R2C/R2H concepts. In Ottawa, Anthony’s goal was that “Timbercreek should place communities above commodities and marketization,” in line with R2C/R2H principles of prioritizing people over profits. Maya’s goals for HTC were linked with transformative social change. She framed organizing in the context of the societal rise of anti-black racism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia, and explained: “there is a need to bring socialism to everything that we do ... we need to have feminist, abolitionist principles at our core.”

In Parkdale, one organizer pointed to lofty goals: “our hope is to build so much community power that we have enough tenants that are empowered and working together and supporting each other, that we can protect this neighborhood from gentrification.” PO member Chris also linked anti-displacement efforts with a broader agenda. His goals included: “changing the power dynamics between landlords and tenants,” also, “some kind of revolution?” In Hamilton, rent strikers also paired concrete goals (‘drop the AGI,’ ‘do repairs’) with ambitions to slow the circulation of capital, and raise “working class consciousness” (Power and Risager, p. 99).

Successes: Achievements of Community Organizing

Participants were asked to evaluate the successes of organizing. Even when tenants felt they had lost key demands, they identified achievements from the organizing effort itself.

1. Winning Demands

Many tenants pointed to concrete achievement of their organizing goals, in terms of winning their key demands. In Parkdale, the series of high-profile wins was felt by tenants as a huge success, which built momentum, confidence, and enthusiasm for new and ongoing struggles. PO’s wins included the MetCap/AIMCo rent strike, and the 1251 King rent strike. They won anti-eviction struggles, beat back Akelius, and helped neighbours at the Food Terminal unionize.

In Hamilton, organizers were disappointed that InterRent REIT did not drop their planned AGI in response to HTSN’s demands. However, a significant win for tenants was that the landlord finally did outstanding repairs that were needed (Power & Risager, p. 98), and no one was displaced as a result of the rent strike.

2. Being organized

Another key success identified by organizers was the achievement of building working-class organizations. A PO organizer felt the biggest success might be emergence of Parkdale Organize itself as an independent organization, including a number of functional building-level committees, and the broader neighborhood-wide member-based group.

A member of PO reiterated this point: “organizing itself is a benefit,” he explained. “It’s a positive. Sometimes I feel tired and I wouldn’t like to deal with it, but it’s not just about the individual battles. It’s about being organized and being part of something bigger.”

Similarly, HTSN’s goals in Hamilton were to build a working-class community organization. In their published reflections, organizers Emily Power and Bjarke Risager describe that a win was “building tenant and working-class power in Stoney Creek” (2019, p. 91). They described how the strength of the organization grew over the strike, with tenants taking the lead and HTSN organizers taking a back seat. While they acknowledge that it’s “a learning curve for everyone and still a work in progress,” they viewed organizing as a “win in itself,” and pointed to a new organization - Eastgate Neighborhood Defense – which Stoney Creek tenants began to set up post-strike to support community members in their area (Power and Risager, 2019).

According to Maya, tenants in Ottawa “lost the battle – because people were evicted and their homes were torn down.” However, the organizing was still a success in terms of the structure that developed. “We saw rewards from it,” she explained, “in the sense that we now have a foundation.” Specifically, organizers now know what the community looks like (having done a census of Herongate), they are skilled in going door-to-door, they have translators ready, they can reach more people, more easily, and they “have status in the neighborhood.”

“It’s about being organized and being part of something bigger” – Chris, PO



3. Sense of Community, Friendships, and Supportive Networks

Many participants identified the emergence of a new sense of community, pride, social connections, and friendships as successes of organizing. A Parkdale rent striker explained “When you struggle in life, you can feel alone,” but, “getting together with other people to fight for our rights and well-being feels really good” (cited in Parkdale Villager, 2018). Chris also pointed to this good feeling, explaining that organizing “has led to community building and a sense of pride.”

Parkdale’s Elsie also pointed to this success: “I’ve met a lot of nice friends through this process. People I consider friends. It’s good to keep connected with what is going on in the area.” A CLW pointed to the supportive community that emerged through organizing: “the tenants know each other now. It’s awesome to know that if they elevator is out, you can text a neighbour to help with your groceries ... just seeing people taking care of each other in the building is so awesome.”

In Ottawa, Lisa said she knew more people and made friends. She explained: “I have personally gotten a lot out of this and it has meant a great deal to me.” She added: “the personal is not disconnected from broader things – because when you are more personally connected, you build a sense of community.”

In Hamilton, Power and Risager (2019) reported that people had a “renewed sense of dignity and pride in their homes, know more neighbours, meet regularly to discuss common concerns and plans for action, and have established a strong basis of trust and solidarity” (p. 98).

4. Empowerment

Related to a sense of community, participants pointed to empowerment and strength that came from organizing. In Parkdale, Chris viewed it as a success that he felt “a sense of agency” from being involved in organizing. Elsie identified that her goal – “to have each other’s backs when it comes to dealing with landlords” – was met. She added that empowerment developed during rent strike has emboldened other tenants in Parkdale. “When we did the rent strike,” she said, “we were just getting motivated, just getting aware that we had a voice.” Meanwhile, tenants who later mobilized against Timbercreek in Parkdale’s West Lodge Towers were more outspoken: “Those tenants seem to be already aware they have a voice, and they were speaking up to the president of Timbercreek.”

In Ottawa, tenants felt empowered by organizing with HTC. Razia and Habon, interviewed with support from a translator, explained that “we felt helpless because they are a company and they have more power, it was like we couldn’t fight back.” After connecting with HTC and learning their rights, they felt better: “we were scared, but not as much anymore.” Habon reiterated: “I know my rights, so I am not scared.” Similarly, tenants in Hamilton were empowered by learning about their rights. According to Power and Risager (2019), that they had “a better

understanding of their legal rights, shared interests, and class position,” and learned about InterRent’s “predatory equity strategy” (p. 98).

Notably, organizers identified how this power was not dependent on the political whims of elected officials or the funding or campaigns of social services agencies and non-profits. In Parkdale, Chris noted that you don’t have to “depend on what party is in power, what has been funded, who has access to a good grant writer.” He continued: “If I were relying on an organization? ... I can’t count on that. What I can count on is people in my neighbourhood who will come out and go to my landlord’s house and I’ll go to theirs.” Importantly he explained, “it’s a relationship between equals.”

“What I can count on is people in my neighbourhood who will come out and go to my landlord’s house and I’ll go to theirs.” - Chris, Parkdale Organizer

This points to the power dynamic that exists between outside organizations, academics, politicians, and other groups that engage with community organizers fighting for social justice. A CLW at Parkdale echoed this comment, explaining: “particularly in Parkdale, tenants are used to organizations showing up and being like ‘we’re going to help you!’ and then totally disappear without much happening.”

5. Support from ‘outside groups’

In some cases, support from other groups contributed to success. In Herongate, organizers identified key academics from Carleton University and the OPIRG student group for providing funding support and student research initiatives designed to support the organizing initiatives. Anthony explained: “they just want to help us have a voice and they are clear about that.”

In Parkdale, participants described the importance of PCLS in supporting their organizing. PCLS employs CLWs whose role is to engage with communities and organize. The support of CLWs was identified repeatedly in interviews as critical in terms of bringing energy, expertise and skills, time, and resources needed for PO to succeed in its many campaigns. In addition, the legal case work done by the clinic was mentioned by several interviewees as an important resource. During the rent strike, a contract litigation and organizing lawyer offered legal advice and supported rent strikers in negotiations with their landlord.

Elsie from Parkdale said “we had great support from the media,” pointing to several news agencies that gave supportive coverage of the rent strike. The rent strikers were also featured in a feature-length documentary, PUSH (directed by Frederik Gertten). She felt proud to know that Parkdale rent strikers made gains against landlords, in what the film revealed to be a worldwide trend towards finance-driven gentrification.

Limitations – Challenges facing Community Organizing

1. Structural Inequality

While community organizers in this report are struggling for transformative change, they were frank in assessing the challenges related to achieving structural and wider-sweeping social change. Organizers understand that fighting against capitalism, racism, and other systems that oppress and generate inequality may seem idealistic or at times impossible. At the same time, they see no excuse not to fight for what they believe is right. As Anthony put it, “it’s like you’re fighting an uphill battle, you know what you are up against. But like my favourite writer says, Goliath is the one that has size and strength, but David is the one with a compelling story. So that is why we’ll keep on fighting.”

Indeed, many organizers didn’t see it as a failure when their goals were not met, in part because they have clear and reasonable expectations of what is possible and likely. At the same time, they spoke to a strong commitment to pushing the boundaries of the possible, and fighting for what is right based on theories of creating social change through collective action. This section describes a series of limitations identified by participants.

2. Fear of Retribution

Fear of retribution was consistently raised as a hurdle facing community organizing. Tenants are often afraid to get involved because they fear that they will face reprisals from their landlords. In Hamilton, tenants were afraid of being evicted for non-payment of rent. Even though organizers sought to “build trust and educate tenants about their collective power,” many would not take part (Power and Risager, 2019, 95).

In Ottawa, tenants described intense intimidation from Timbercreek. The landlord brought large bodyguards into the community, sent cease and desist letters to organizers, and nailed over the letter slot of one organizer who was collecting maintenance forms from other tenants (See Crosby, 2019). For the black and brown people in the community, Timbercreek’s intimidation was doubly threatening. The company called the police on organizers, and had the HTC twitter account suspended by claiming activists were terrorists – a move critiqued for its racist and Islamophobic overtones. One organizer described never using their real name and trying to keep a low profile, as their parent was afraid organizing would bring an eviction notice.

In Toronto, landlord intimidation was commonly raised. Landlords were described as targeting anyone publicly involved in organizing. During the rent strike, Metcap issued eviction notices to tenants who hung a banner from their balcony. In another rent striking building, a rent striker and “leading face” of organizers was issued an eviction notice which was widely viewed as retribution (Ngabo, 2018). A CLW in Parkdale described how they “are trying different strategies to see what they can scare” people with.

To fight against fear and landlord intimidation, organizers point out the need to build collective strength. Rather than facing landlords as individuals, tenants will be stronger if they do it together. Organizing also provides the means for community members to inform each other about their rights, their strategy, and their collective power.

3. Lack of Support from Potential Allies

Another limitation facing community organizers often came from an unexpected source – social agencies and other outside actors who would, at first glance, appear to be natural allies for organizers pursuing R2C/R2H goals. Many organizers described how potential allies did not champion their work, and sometimes even actively denounced it.

a. Social Agencies

In Ottawa, many social agencies either failed to support or actively undermined the efforts of HTC organizers. When Timbercreek began evicting residents, HTC's strategy was for tenants to stay in their homes and collectively fight the mass evictions. These efforts were undercut by the Legal Clinic, which countered HTC's message and counselled tenants to move right away. Another social agency remained entirely silent and did not support HTC or condemn the evictions. A third organization frustrated HTC by partnering with Timbercreek to create a social development framework for the redevelopment. HTC members felt this provided free public relations for the landlord, and lent progressive cover to a bald-faced plan to evict lower-income, largely racialized tenants from the community.

In Parkdale, PO members were frustrated that some organizations denounced their actions. Chris explained: "I went to a tenant workshop put on by [another group] and they advocated against withholding rent or any 'direct action' stuff. That bothered me." He suggested a better message would be: "talk to your neighbours and learn about [our] successes." When agencies condemn direct action in this way, they sow confusion and undermine the efforts of organizers. It is also a disempowering message that convinces tenants they have no power to fight. Chris explained: "The takeaway from [advocacy organizations] is basically: 'this is the law, it's vague, and it's a landlord market – so you're [screwed]. Give us a call for legal advice.'" Ironically, this message supports landlords more than it supports tenants, encouraging tenants to not to fight because the system is stacked against them.

Indeed, a key strategy of landlords is to encourage tenants to 'use the law', and resolve disputes through the Landlord and Tenant Board (LTB). A representative of InterRent REIT's comments during the rent strike are typical: "the LTB is the appropriate forum to resolve the dispute," she said, "We have great respect for how that process works." (Moro, 2018 Sept. 4) According to a Parkdale CLW, tenant's rights look good on paper but "what gets enforced is not great, it's not an even playing field for tenants." Indeed, the bulk of the LTB's work involves processing evictions on behalf of landlords, a job that involved at least 73% of the applications

received in 2018-2019.¹ It is in the interests of landlords to deal with tenants *individually* at the LTB rather than collectively and through direct action. When organizations funnel tenants to the LTB, they inadvertently support the landlords' own strategy, while undermining organizer efforts to work around flawed systems.

b. Elected Officials and Political Parties

In Parkdale, Chris's local councillor's office was helpful, but not ultimately supportive tenant activism, stating "we don't have any jurisdiction [over tenant-related matters], we can't do anything." In Ottawa, Maya was frustrated when the Mayor feigned inability to stop the evictions. He told HTC 'I can't do anything about it, but good luck!' – a claim that later seemed hollow when his office intervened to save an historic tree based on 'value' and 'tradition.' For Maya, this revealed the Mayor's views on racialized tenants in Herongate: "500 people literally got evicted last summer" – yet a tree inspired action. As she put it: "we're considered less than human and it's terrible."

Politicians may also use tenant struggles for political gain. In Parkdale, the former NDP MPP used the rent strike to criticize her political opponent. In a Parkdale Villager (2017b) article, she said "Kathleen Wynn is doing nothing about this ... it's the Liberal's lack of action that has driven tenant to such measures to keep a roof over their head." This opportunism was unrelated to the rent strikers, whose messaging did not include an attack on the Liberal leader.

In Ottawa, organizers were publicly chastised for not mobilizing to elect an NDP candidate. Maya was shocked, given that that HTC's agenda is to prevent evictions and build power among the predominantly racialized tenants in Herongate. "We're being called hypocrites for not fighting for an elected official?" she asked, incredulously. "For me it was a defining moment with respect to *all* outside organizations that have claimed to try to help us, and then we find that they have their own goal in the end." She added: "People keep trying to get us to be something other than what we are."

¹ In 2018-2019, the LTB received 82,095 applications, with most (73,738 filed by landlords), largely for L1 and L2 evictions (Tribunals Ontario, 2019).

Best Practices for Community Organizing

Organizers emphasize that there is no 'recipe' for organizing, which makes it difficult to create a 'best practices' guide. However, there are core principles that underlie the organizing in Parkdale, and which are relevant to other the sites examined for this report as well. We think these can be valuable to inform people seeking to organize in their own communities.

1. Direct Engagement

Parkdale Organize uses direct engagement to target adversaries whose practices may harm or exploit working class residents. This approach bypasses legal channels for dispute resolution. PO directly confronts landlords in their homes, offices, and communities, and has found success in negotiating directly (and collectively) with landlords, rather than using the LTB.

According to a CLW, "in practice the law is not that useful for tenants, which is why we have this different approach ... It's been way more successful, and that's how we've been winning – by holding landlords accountable." In organizing tenants, they explained how "we talk about what people's rights are, but then we talk about how we actually win."

Emily Power and Bjarke Risager of HTSN explained that "we believe direct action has important potential for tenant organizing" (p. 98). HTSN put pressure on landlords using a range of direct action tactics, including the rent strike but also demonstrating at the landlord's office, at the REIT's corporate headquarters, and at the CEO's home in Ottawa. They occupied the LTB court room to disrupt eviction hearings and forced the LTB adjudicator from the room.

"We talk about what people's rights are, but then we talk about how we actually win." - CLW, Parkdale

2. District-Based Scale

In the groups we learned from in this report, focusing efforts on the *scale* of the local district (or neighborhood) was essential. In Parkdale, years of experience and organizing *in Parkdale* means allows PO to capitalize on the existing connections and energy in the area. There are also advantages of organizing in dense urban environments where high concentrations of people, interactions, and institutions allow a relatively small number of people to have a big impact.

Organizers are often encouraged to 'scale up' their activities, or generalize them to a larger geography, such as a city-wide effort. In Parkdale, there is active resistance to this idea, based on experience with previous efforts to redirect the energy of organized Parkdale residents to

city-wide campaigns. These efforts can dilute attention to Parkdale's struggles, and siphon off the direct energy needed to win achievable, neighborhood-level goals.

Indeed, the value of a locally-oriented focus was at the root of the 2020 decision of the HTSN to disband. In an on-line statement, the organization noted that their goals will be better met "in more localized neighborhood initiatives, rather than a city-wide organization with a superficial scope and programme."²

3. Struggles for Daily Life

PO is an organization for working class power, and recognizes that working class people face struggles around housing, but also work, education, and in other areas as well. PO emphasizes that the group is not a 'tenant union,' but an organization that addresses the 'myriad struggles' facing working people. While housing gets a lot of attention, PO has organized around education issues, and supported Parkdale workers in unionizing at the Ontario Food Terminal.

PO views *organizing* as a foundation for collective struggle, and the goal is for members to develop politics and set their own agendas. This differs from the "single-issue organizing" approach favoured in some circles. PO resists appeals from agencies to promote pre-set agendas or particular branded campaigns.

In order to guide organizing, a CLW suggested the following: "my advice is to literally talk to people. If you live in a dense urban neighborhood, there are apartments where you can knock on 200 doors and find out what is going on, what people are seeing, and what people care about." The next step is to call a meeting so people can share things with each other, and hear from their neighbours who may have similar concerns. "That inspires people to say, okay let's do something about this. There are 10, 20, 30, 50 of us standing in this lobby."

In Herongate, Lisa found this effective as well: "the first time I went door knocking I was anxious," she explained, "but I was pleasantly surprised that overall people were ready to listen and talk – and lots of people were mad." Even easier, she found it effective to "stand in the lobby" and just talk with people.

4. Independent Organizing

Perhaps the key principle identified by Parkdale Organize was the value of independence from social agencies, politicians, and the state. To build power and pursue their goals, the organizers often go outside the lines of what organizations may be comfortable with. While community organizers need support from agencies, independence in decision-making, agenda setting, and all aspects of organizing are necessary for this work to succeed.

² <https://www.hamiltontenantssolidarity.ca/post/statement-on-the-dissolution-of-htsn>

This principle includes independence to focus on the priorities of the organization, which align with 'transformative' interpretations of R2C/R2H agendas. This means organizers may resist agency initiatives to focus on legal reform or policy change. An HTSN organizer was quoted in *The Hamilton Spectator* explaining that the group was not directing their energy towards regulatory change, include a campaign by other groups in the city to implement landlord licensing. "We're all for groups that want to lobby the government for change, that's fine," said the organizer, "but our key principles are self-organizing, solidarity, and direct action" (Van Dongen, 2017).



Herongate. (Photo by: Martine August)

The Role of Non-Profits and Social Agencies: Supporting community organizing for R2C/R2H

In seeking to evaluate community organizing, we have also turned our attention to socially progressive agencies with similar goals, to evaluate how they support organizers and where there is room for improvement. We argue that community organizing is centrally important for achieving R2C/R2H agendas. For progressive agencies, however, support for radical organizers and their activities is sometimes lacking. In this section we discuss the evolution of non-profits since the 1980s, the value that organizing offers to agencies, and the threats it can pose. We close the section with the argument that other groups should support community organizing if they are serious about R2H/R2C goals, and offer recommendations for how they can do so, while staying true to their own organizational mandates.

Social Agencies and Radical Organizing

Since the 1980s, non-profits and social agencies in North America have increasingly taken on social welfare functions of the retreating state. The rise of neoliberal ideology and policies in the 1980s led to a decline in funding for social services in Canada and the United States. As governments cut services and supports, community organizations – many of which had emerged with radical missions in the 1960s and 1970s – have picked up the slack, and taken on the former functions of the state. Academics have called this a shift from ‘community organizing’ to ‘community development’ (Defilippis et al., 2010). Non-profits have increasingly become, according to Lake and Newman (2002) a ‘shadow state,’ but with fewer resources, precarious operations, and geographically uneven provision of formerly state-funded services and supports.

Along with the institutionalization of non-profits, there has been a shift away from their radical politics and social-justice agendas (Defilippis et al., 2010). Part of this has to do with the rules – in Canada the ‘10% advocacy rule’ (recently struck down) limited the amount of time charities could dedicate to political activity. In addition, however, dependence on funding from government and private foundations can create an ‘advocacy chill’ (Scott, 2003) in which non-profits avoid risky-seeming activist activities that might scare off funders. When organizations depend on mainstream granting agencies for core operations, they may distance themselves from activities that could imperil their funding.

Legal Clinics and Community Organizing

Legal clinics were founded in Ontario in the 1960s based on the recognition that legal services and the law often serve the interests of society’s most privileged. Legal clinics located in communities were meant to provide legal services and promote social justice. Legal issues affecting low-income and marginalized were understood, however, as rooted in systemic causes, and not best addressed on a ‘case by case’ basis (Blazer, 1991). While clinics did

'poverty law' casework, this was seen as a charity-based model. Early clinics championed their role in **systemic advocacy** – legal work striving to address root causes affecting low-income and marginalized people (Dodge and Smyth, 2018). Systemic advocacy pursues 'upstream' change to prevent 'downstream' issues that lead to repetitive poverty law cases. Systemic advocacy includes community development work as well as legal and policy reform (Ibid). Central to systemic advocacy work is the role of Community Legal Workers (CLWs) in the clinic system. CLWs are experienced in community organizing rather than law, and connect with communities in a holistic way, pursuing social change beyond simple litigation and casework (Blazer, 1991).

Over the years there has been a tension in legal clinics between the casework and organizing functions, with pressure to prioritize the casework function of clinics (Mossman, 1994). While there are political and ideological motivations behind this, according to Dodge and Smyth, it is also a result of performance evaluation metrics that incentivize clinics to take on a high-volume of low 'cost-per-case' clients. Systemic work, meanwhile, does not have clear-cut outcomes that are easily measured (Ibid.). In addition, the organizing activities of CLWs may put a chill on funders that are less comfortable with efforts to undo the status quo. In Parkdale, PCLS has been unique among Ontario Legal Clinics for retaining a strong community development function, alongside casework, employing lawyers and CLWs to assist people in areas of housing, immigration, labour, social assistance, violence, and health.

The Value of Supporting Community Organizing

For social agencies promoting R2C/R2H agendas, there is value in supporting community organizing that is pushing to achieve those same goals, and driving meaningful social change. According to researchers on organizing, James Defillipis, Robert Shragge, and Eric Fisher (2010): "almost all transformative social change and social justice work historically – the struggles of workers, racial minorities, women, and so forth – is the product of organizing and mobilization of local communities" (p. 2). Participants in this research reiterated the importance of community organizing for moving the dial forward on progressive issues.

In the Legal Clinic context, a former lawyer from PCLS explained that progressive legal reform tends to arise only following social mobilization. As she explained, "law is conservative, judges *follow* social change." For this reason, "if you can create social change, the law will change." In other words, if organizers push an issue to the forefront in society, the courts will follow. The current director agreed, explaining that "to shift the courts – especially on socio-economic rights – we need public, democratic support. And, of course, that comes through organizing."

A former director at PCLS pointed to the need for organizers, explaining that when "people collectively assert their right to affordable, quality housing? That is the *only* way you are going to get systemic change." In non-profits more broadly, a participant in Ottawa quoted Frederick Douglass, to say: "power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." While he didn't necessarily agree with the approaches of community organizers, he felt that social justice wouldn't be achieved without more radical approaches.



Parkdale rent strikers occupy the Landlord and Tenant Board (Photo: parkdaleorganize.ca)

While representatives of social agencies and non-profits may firmly believe that community organizing is needed to achieve the social change their organizations champion, they face challenges in supporting radical activism that may be at odds with their organizational mandates, that may turn-off decision makers and scare away funders.

Agency Challenges in Supporting Community Organizing

This section continues to discuss the relationship between social agencies and community organizers, pointing to four points of tension that cause agencies to shy away from supporting radical organizers and their campaigns.

1. Fear of Upsetting Funders

Fear of upsetting their funders is a chief concern for agencies. In Ottawa, a research participant associated with non-profits explained that big funders would never fund advocacy. "If you are going to make noise," he said, "you aren't getting funding from the mainstream." Agencies fear association with activist groups, "because anyone funded by government does not want to bite the hand that feeds." Organizations do not like protesters, he continued: "nobody likes to occupy offices, nobody likes to make noise – when they are getting their funding from the same city, same council." Indeed, one organization near Herongate that failed to support HTC did so because their board explicitly instructed the Executive Director to "stay out of it."

Fears of destabilizing funding agreements are not unwarranted. According to Defilippis et al. (2010), “the real threat that transformative movements pose to the social order is one reason they are aggressively challenged by the powers that be.” As a case-in-point, Legal Aid Ontario drastically cut funding to legal clinics in 2018, and singled out PCLS for the most draconian cuts (see Gallant, 2019). Clinics cuts were steeper if more resources were put towards “law reform and community organizing,” rather than “direct client services” (Ibid.). This has been interpreted by as punishment for supporting community organizing that directly challenged powerful elites in the province. This experience reveals that supporting organizing can lead to funding cuts and retribution, with significant and damaging consequences. At this same time, this experience points to the serious need to support community organizing, in the face of powerful efforts to maintain *status quo* systems that generate inequality, and (in this case) systematic displacement.

2. Agency Obligations to Follow Rules and Regulations

Social agencies and non-profits are also bound by different rules than are radical community organizers. At PCLS, for example, a former director explained that “our obligation is to work within the legal framework in which we exist, in which we receive our money, and which our legal staff operate on.” This are issues for management to consider, but as he put it: “Parkdale Organize couldn’t care less about that, it’s of no interest to them!” The tension arises, he explained, “because even though we both say we have the same goals, one of us is inhibited by the rules and regulations.”

During the rent strike, this tension emerged when PCLS would not agree to set up a trust to hold on to tenants’ monthly rents. PO wanted the Clinic to support them and ensure tenants could securely save their unpaid rent during the strike. PCLS interpreted this as a risk, in that it could lead to problems for their lawyers with the Law Society.

3. Fear that Community Organizing will Fail

Social agencies may opt against supporting organizing because they fear it will fail. One participant was worried about raising tenants’ expectations, given the unlikely odds of success. A former director at PCLS also got push-back from politicians who didn’t believe in the rent strikers. He was told: “there’s going to be mass evictions and you’ll have to answer to for pushing a strategy on these people that resulted in families losing their homes.” A former lawyer echoed these concerns, “it’s nerve wracking when low-income tenants go on rent strike because they could be evicted ... the worst-case scenario is you have people becoming homeless as a result of an action you are taking as community organizers.”

From the perspective of organizers, these are understandable concerns but can feel patronizing. Organizers are quite capable of evaluating risks, making decisions, and evaluating the likelihood of success. As described above, Anthony in Herongate did not have illusions that

their struggle would be easy, but felt – alongside his neighbours – that there was no choice not to fight. Our findings suggest that organizers like Anthony need support, not judgment on their potential success. Even if well-meaning, it's not up to agencies to decide if organizers deserve support based on concerns about their likelihood of success or to manage expectations.

Different Theories of Change

Actors external to community organizing may not support 'direct action' approaches. Board members, managers, and staff at social agencies may believe that community organizers should not protest at landlord's homes, should not occupy a landlord's offices, and should not go on rent strike. This disagreement over how to pursue social change can lead non-profits and agencies to withdraw support from organizers or even publicly condemn their actions.

Ways Forward: Recommendations for Agencies to Support Organizing

The following recommendations derive from the principles of community organizers, and from the findings of this report. We hope that agencies and non-profits are empowered by these recommendations to support community organizing going forward, in line with a broader pursuit of R2C/R2H goals. In general, our suggestion is for agencies and other groups external to organizers is to respect their principles, and to support their work (materially and otherwise).

1. Respecting Direct Engagement Approaches

Drawing on the principle of direct engagement for community organizing, a recommendation for non-profits is to respect direct engagement, and refrain from promoting a different approach to organizing – even if an agency’s ideology and theories of change differ from those of organizers.

Giving space to organizers in paramount. Rather than inserting an agency’s own priorities into organizing spaces, it’s critical to respect the process of independent organization. Organizers need time to engage with their constituencies and develop common interests apart from the agendas of outside groups. Especially in the early stages of an organizing initiative, interference can siphon away organizers’ energy and initiative. Typically, it is at the point of organizers “going public”, when they begin to confront adversaries, that the support and presence of outside groups becomes very valuable. Even at this point, it is important for outside groups to take a back seat to organizers.

When independent organizations begin to confront adversaries, they often face retaliation. Outside groups may assist in defending organizers from retaliatory action from adversaries. Agencies ought to support organizers against retaliation, but should resist any temptation to interject with their own agendas or demands. Organizers suggest that they should only participate in defending organizers if they are prepared to support organizers’ demands.

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2. Respect for District-Based Scale and Organizer Priorities

A recommendation for non-profits is to respect not only the approaches of organizers (as above), but their autonomy in determining what scale to organize at, and which issues to focus on. PO, for example, addresses working-class people’s struggles holistically, and encourages agencies not to redirect organizing efforts towards a ‘single-issue’ approach.

In terms of scale, there is a strong temptation by outside groups to encourage community-based organizers to 'scale up' organizing to broader geographies, or to transplant efforts to other areas.

This locally-oriented focus of organizers can be hard to accept, especially given that theorists of organizing emphasize that local efforts should be linked with city, national, or global alliances. Defilippis et al. (2010), for example, point to the limitations of a *local* focus, as "necessary but not sufficient" for the task of changing society to be more equitable and just (Ibid.).

To impose ideas like these on groups like Parkdale Organize, however, does not respect the group's rights to make their own decisions about the scale and goals of their efforts. Their goals may differ from the goals of theorists or ideologies espoused by advocacy groups. In addition, the experience in Parkdale reveals that targeted, 'district-based' organizing bears fruit, while attempts to work at different scales can siphon away energy that was built in Parkdale.

3. Independent Organizing

A recommendation for agencies is to respect the independence of organizing. This is in the interests not only of organizers, but of state-funded agencies as well. Agencies do not have the same freedom to use extra-legal direct-action approaches, and will be protected by having formalized distance from independent organizers.

PCLS identified this as a best practice, pointing to their formal distance from Parkdale Organize. Even though PCLS directly employed CLWs that support community development, both management and CLWs were clear that the activities PO were not related to the work of PCLS employees. One CLW clarified their relationship, explaining: "I'm part of Parkdale Organize outside of my paid gig." Management identified this separation as valuable to the Legal Clinic, not only for giving the organizers freedom from the Clinic's rules, regulations, and concerns over radical approaches, but that it protects the Clinic from responsibility for PO's actions.

To truly respect this independence also means refraining from directing the behaviour of organizers, second-guessing their approaches, and denouncing their activities. Individuals within an agency may disagree with certain tactics, but it is crucial to support independent organizing based on higher principles, without interference.

It may be difficult to conceive of how to both support and distance an agency from organizing. After the rent strike, a former PCLS director suggested that agencies would be well-advised to craft a formalized process for how to support independent organizing. He suggested committing to supporting – and not condemning – the actions of organizers, no matter what actions they take. This is an approach taken by Greenpeace, which has chosen never to condemn the more radical (and sometimes violent) actions of allied organizations, even if they go beyond what Greenpeace itself would do. Their reasoning is that those organizations are working towards the same higher-level goals that Greenpeace is pursuing.

Committing to support organizing *in advance* is crucial, as it can save agencies from making tough decisions in the heat of a potentially controversial moment, and will provide clear-cut guidelines on how to proceed. We recommend unconditional support for community organizing that is pursuing transformative change, in line with an agency's higher principles.

4. Direct Material Support for Community Organizing

It is good not to condemn organizing, and even better to vocally support it. Better still is material support. Agencies can provide meeting rooms, supplies (printing, photocopying), food for meetings, honoraria for organizers, research support, training opportunities and workshops, and services (such as legal advice and support). Community organizers encourage agencies to even redirect support from other initiatives towards community organizing activities, as these are playing a crucially important role in promoting R2C/R2H goals for social change.

Directly employing people to support community organizing is a recommended strategy, and has been crucial to the success of organizing in Parkdale. In Parkdale, the support of paid CLWs by PCLS has been crucial to the community organizing wins in that area. A former PCLS lawyer explained: "I don't know how far the rent strike would have gone without their input. They had an organization with the resources, they had time, they could do a lot of the communications. With other people they could do a lot of door knocking, a lot of flyering – it was critical."

For Legal Clinics, support for community development work is included in the definition of clinic services, under Section 14(1) of the *Legal Services Act*, and Section 3(f) in the Memorandum of Understanding guiding Legal Clinic's work (OPPICO, n.d.). While that requirement is specific to legal clinics, non-profits more broadly would also benefit from supporting the work of community organizers working towards systemic change.



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