

Tenants' New Clout



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By John Atlas
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MEDFORD, Mass. — The Presidential candidates have overlooked an important, increasingly active constituency. Tenants — more than one-third of the nation's households — are the sleeping giant of American politics.

Tenants are just beginning to see themselves as a group with common problems and a common political purpose. In the last three years, tenants have won a variety of state and local laws nationwide to protect and extend their rights. Several dozen localities and states have passed restrictions, or outright bans, on condominium conversions. Tenants are challenging archaic landlord-tenant laws — enacting "warrant of habitability" legislation, revising security deposits, improving inadequate building-code enforcement and maintenance and security, and fighting racial, sexual, and age discrimination. Some groups are concerned with tenant control — taking over abandoned buildings through "sweat equity," forming tenants' unions to bargain with landlords, and using Federal programs to develop private tenant-managed cooperatives or tenant councils in public housing.

What is interesting about the tenants' movement is the alliance it creates between the poor and the middle class. One group may be more concerned about rats and roaches, the other about parking privileges and air-conditioning, but all renters, regardless of income, are concerned about rent increases, security from eviction, safe buildings and neighborhoods. This diversity provides political clout.

The reasons behind the tenants' re-

volt are easy to see. The nationwide rental-vacancy rate is the lowest in the postwar period, and in most cities it is almost nil. Construction is almost at a standstill and some predict a collapse of the private rental industry. This year fewer apartments will be built than abandoned, destroyed, and converted to condominiums. "Redlining" by banks, arson-for-profit schemes, and fuel and maintenance costs that rise faster than tenants' ability to pay have led to widespread abandonment of older buildings, further depleting the rental-housing stock. The escalating number of condominium conversions takes more buildings out of the rental market and out of the reach of most moderate-income tenants. In many cities, "gentrification" is pushing poorer tenants out of inner-city neighborhoods. Because tenants are more reluctant than ever to move, they have more of a stake in the condition of their apartments, and are more willing to fight for tenants' rights.

Tenant militancy used to be confined to the poor, the minorities, and the elderly. But the current generation of middle-class renters grew up expecting to own single-family homes. As the price of homes escalates, many now expect to spend the rest of their lives as tenants. These children of middle-class homeowners are troubled by the sense of powerlessness and insecurity that comes with renting. Their frustrations have triggered this new round of tenant activism — and account for much of its success.

So far, tenants' strength has been primarily at the local level, but earlier this year activists formed the National Tenants Union, which will put pressure on Congress, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Internal Revenue Service and other

agencies for pro-tenant legislation.

A Presidential or Congressional candidate looking to woo the tenant vote might consider advocating a "tenants' bill of rights" that would include:

1. Protection against arbitrary evictions even with "just cause," including evictions for condominium and cooperative conversions.

2. Tax credits for tenants. Current tax law providing deductions for homeowners is regressive and discriminates against renters.

3. Reorienting (and increasing) Federal housing programs so that grants go directly to tenant-controlled low-equity cooperatives and public housing (rather than to private developers) to build and rehabilitate rental housing. This gives tenants more of a say and a stake in their own housing. It also removes a major cause of inflation.

4. Recognition of tenants as a legitimate constituency with their own concerns. H.U.D. should establish an assistant secretary for tenant affairs. Congress should pass a national Landlord-Tenant Relations Act to protect tenant organizations the way the National Labor Relations Act protects labor unions. It would mandate that landlords in large buildings recognize tenant unions if more than half vote to form a group to bargain for them.

Tenants increasingly will be heard in city councils, state legislatures, and Congress. This election year provides an opportunity for candidates to tap the growing political awareness and activism of the nation's 60 million tenants.

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