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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# ‘The way to end housing problems’: tenant protest in New Zealand in the 1970s

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## ABSTRACT

Private renters in New Zealand during the 1970s paid high rents relative to their incomes and endured poor quality and insecure housing. Protest groups formed across the country in order to protect and promote tenant interests; a rare occurrence in New Zealand’s history. The groups supported tenants through direct action and legal advice and lobbied for policy change. This paper draws on the archives of tenant groups to investigate why these groups arose at this time, what they achieved, and what challenges they experienced. The groups assisted many tenants, contributed to clarifying tenancy law, and, in some cases, evolved into service providers. However, they were challenged by the systemic policy bias toward homeownership and ultimately failed to create a more equitable housing system.

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## Introduction

The only opening window in the bedroom is rusted off its hinges so it can’t be opened ... The bedroom carpet has rotted away with mould. Woodlice crawl through the house. The ceilings are mouldy. The family’s food turns mouldy, their clothes and shoes are ruined with mould. Even the baby’s mattress is mouldy. (Russell 1974)

The poor conditions reported by a tenant activist group in 1974 were common in rental housing at the time. Some people thought that united tenant action could make a difference. They formed groups in a number of cities in the late 1960s and early 1970s, some of which endured until the early 1980s. This article considers tenant protest in the 1970s: its origins, challenges, achievements and decline.

In organising together, tenants in the 1970s were doing something quite unusual for New Zealand. Tenant protest does not feature in any detail in New Zealand’s history books, even those that focus on housing (Ferguson 1994) or celebrate activism (e.g. Gibson et al. 2019; Hagar 2021). Previous outbursts of tenant activism had occurred during World War I, during the recession of the early 1920s, and the Depression of the 1930s: times when renters outnumbered homeowners in the inner-city and radical political parties were interested in gaining their support, and when war or economic

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crisis encouraged solidarity with renters (Chisholm 2021). The situation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when tenant organisations were founded, was quite different. The political scene was stable. The National government led by Keith Holyoake had been in power since 1960. Due to high commodity prices, New Zealand was at the tail end of an economic boom, with unemployment below 2% in 1971 (Easton 2010). Homeownership rates had been steadily rising since the 1930s; just under 26% of homes were rented in 1971 (Ferguson 1994).

However, as the above quote shows, conditions were tough for many people in the rental sector. Surveys of Wellington in the early 1970s found that 6.7% of the housing stock was in poor condition (Commission of Inquiry 1971), 11% of houses surveyed were overcrowded and 23% did not have at least one basic household amenity (Bradley 1972). The number of Māori and Pacific people living in the cities grew rapidly in this time (Statistics New Zealand 2006). Private tenants, and in particular Pacific and Māori families, struggled to pay rent (Commission of Inquiry 1971). Māori and Pacific people were subject to discrimination by landlords (Lawson 1973; Office of the Race Relations Conciliator 1975). In 1971 a survey showed that 21% of houses rented by Māori or Pacific people had no piped water supply, 17% had no hand basins, and 50% had no food storage or fridge (Mitchell 2003, p. 162).

Tenant protest occurred in order to address these difficult conditions. It also coincided with an upsurge of contentious politics in general. The period spanning the late 1960s to the early 1980s has been labelled ‘the decade of dissent’ (Boraman 2014, p. 38). Since World War II, New Zealand had been characterised by prosperity and conformity; the ‘historic compromise’ between labour and capital muted class conflict in exchange for full employment, rising wages and an expanding welfare state (Bodman 2014). However, a series of crises changed these circumstances. Wool prices dropped in late 1967 and unemployment began to increase. In 1973 New Zealand lost preferential access to the British market. The increase in oil prices following the oil crises of 1973 and 1978 sent further shocks through the economy. By 1976 New Zealand was in recession. Attempts to address the country’s economic woes in the following decade culminated in neoliberal market restructuring in 1984: a radical shift away from the Keynesian policies that had characterised New Zealand (Kelsey 1997).

Meanwhile, industrial unrest increased after the loss of union confidence in the arbitration court system in 1968. The university population increased, enabling more people to gather together to discuss ideas. Young people, influenced by global events through newly accessible media, engaged in a conflict of values with older generations (Carlyon and Morrow 2013). In some cases, they were inspired by similar movements overseas. Protest, and its television coverage, begat protest; conservative commentators called this the ‘contagion of protest’ (King 2003, p. 452). Important protest events in this era included the opposition to the war in Vietnam, an upsurge in industrial action culminating in the general strike of 1979, the radicalisation of student politics, the struggle for Māori land rights, opposition to racism in New Zealand and apartheid in South Africa, protest to preserve natural environments, and the women’s, gay and lesbian liberation movements (Belich 2001, p. 516; Walker 2004; Roper 2011; Boraman 2014). As we shall see, some people involved in these movements were motivated to turn their attention to rental housing conditions.

## ***Tenant protest organisations***

This paper draws on the archives of protest groups that arose in Wellington and Auckland in the early 1970s, which also contain communications with similar groups that existed around the country. Tenant organisations existed nationwide. For example, in 1976 and again in 1979, conferences were held with organisations from Wellington, Auckland, Hamilton/Waikato, Porirua, Christchurch, Tauranga, the Manawatu, Dunedin, and Rotorua (Wellington Tenants' Union 1976b, 1979).<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the tenant activism of the past, where Labour or Communist Party support was important (Chisholm 2021), many in these groups did not identify with existing progressive options (Boraman 2002). In Auckland and Wellington, the Progressive Youth Movement were active on a number of issues from 1965 (Boraman 2002), including high rents, sub-standard conditions and negligent landlords (Bradley and Levett 1975; Wellington PYM n.d.); some PYM members were involved in the founding of the Wellington Tenants' Protection Association (WTPA) in the early 1970s.

Recalling the beginnings of the WTPA a number of years later, one member recalled its founders as 'basically a group of university radicals who were confronted with the glaring excesses of tenant housing in places like Newtown [in Wellington]' (Wellington Tenants' Union [n.d.-c]).<sup>2</sup> The name was changed to Wellington Tenants' Union (WTU) in 1976 because 'we felt that the name Tenants' Protection was a bit misleading; because what we want to do is help tenants fight their own battles, not do the work entirely for them' (WTU 1976a, p. 1). Several organisations worked with Auckland tenants from the early 1970s. The founders of the Auckland Tenants Protection Association (ATPA) included Paul O'Halloran, who was one of the founders of the WTPA, and Betty Wark, a Māori woman from the East Coast politicised by 'slum' clearance in Freeman's Bay in the 1960s (Connor 2006). According to Roger Fowler, one of the founders of the People's Union, activists had become politicised by demonstrations against the Vietnam War, and wanted 'to bring the war back home and deal with issues in our own neighbourhood' (quoted in Carlyon & Morrow, 2008, p. 263). As well as their work on tenant issues, subsequently discussed, they ran a number of community initiatives, some of these in conjunction with the Polynesian Panthers, who also worked closely with tenants (Boraman 2008; Carlyon and Morrow 2008; Anae 2020).

These groups were inspired to address the poor conditions renters faced in the inner-city. Some produced a wealth of documents, including newspapers, flyers, letters, and discussion documents. They saw themselves as collectives, not service organisations, that aimed to help tenants in need and improve conditions for all. For example:

The WTU is an organisation run by and for tenants. Its functions are to defend tenants from landlord ripoffs and harassment, to increase public awareness of housing and tenancy issues, and to fight for the changes necessary to ensure low-cost housing for all. (WTU n.d.-e)

The tenant groups also saw their role as politicising and educating tenants: 'The [Tenant Union] worker can play a big role in getting the tenant angry enough to rent strike by pointing out the extent of the rip-off (e.g.: explaining huge landlord profit from property appreciation etc)' (WTU 1977b).

There was internal debate on how tenant groups should achieve their goals: through casework to support individual tenants through negotiation and legal strategies, through

direct action such as rent strikes, picketing, and eviction resistance, or through lobbying. There was a clear need for individual tenants to be supported. However, as one organisation put it, this work could only ‘scratch the surface of the problem’; therefore ‘the major aim of the organisation has been to put pressure on the City Council and Government to implement policies which will eliminate the housing shortage and bring about an equitable rental situation’ (ATPA 1972). Similarly, as an activist wrote in his organisation’s newspaper, ‘Direct action can and will solve the immediate problems, but may not stop them happening to another tenant. Only legislative change or revolution can do this’ (Steele 1975a). However, in another activist’s view: ‘to make the law, or law reform, the prime focus of our activities is to cast tenants into the clutches of their greatest opponents, and to ignore the real cause of the problem’ (Waikato Tenants’ Protection Association 1979). Instead direct action should be prioritised. Any action that made being a landlord ‘less lucrative ... [places] pressure on capitalist institutions while at the same time assisting in the politicisation of those people who will eventually take part in the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism’ (WTU n.d.-c); ‘Neither reliance on the politicians, nor just individual arguments with landlords – but rather staunch united tenant action and rent strikes is clearly the way to end housing problems and bring power to the people’ (People’s Union 1973). Another view saw direct action as the path to legislative change; it was ‘the only way the government will be forced to change the rotten tenancy laws’ (WTPA n.d.). As the next section shows, the tenant protest groups carried out each type of activity: lobbying, direct action, and casework.

### ***Lobbying and direct action***

The tenant groups advocated for better regulation and policy to government and city councils through letters, newspapers, meetings, flyers, and drawing the media’s attention to tenancy problems. Their newspapers typically described poor housing conditions and treatment of tenants, summarise recent protest success stories, and outline and criticise the law. The actions of tenant groups were linked to the introduction by the incoming Labour government of rent appeal boards in 1972 (Bradley and Levett, 1973). Drawing on their casework (subsequently discussed), they wrote to government departments and councils to encourage them to investigate specific cases (Russell 1974; WTU 1974) and to share their observations about how existing regulation failed to protect tenants (Gager 1973; WTPA 1973a; Resistance Bookshop and Christchurch Tenants’ Protection Association 1975; Steele 1975b). A petition presented to Parliament called for an enquiry into house and flat letting, a rent freeze, and other improvements to rental housing (ATPA 1972).

Tenant groups organised protests to put their points across. For example, in 1972, the ATPA organised ‘Squatters World’, a weekend tent town on council land that was to be sold, in order to draw attention to the housing shortage and necessary political action (ATPA 1972). In 1974, the People’s Union picketed the foundation meeting of the Landlords’ Association; one tenant activist was arrested for getting into a scuffle with guest, National Party MP, and soon to be Prime Minister Muldoon (Collins 2010). Through squatting in empty government-owned houses, some groups aimed to draw attention to the housing shortage and to settle families that could not find houses or lived in poor quality rental accommodation. Tenant protest groups shared information on the

best and most effective ways to squat and reported on successful squats (Squatting ... n.d.). In one example, the WTPA moved a family living in a substandard rental a vacant Ministry of Works house that they cleaned up; they were subsequently placed in a state house (Kirk ... 1972). One student journalist concluded that ‘The squatters ... have been the only people to produce an immediate solution to the housing shortage all year’ (Franks 1972).

Direct action also served to assist tenants while raising the profile of tenant issues. One strategy was withholding rents until repairs were made or use those funds to make repairs themselves. When landlords threatened to evict tenants, they might occupy the house and negotiate with the landlord. In Freeman’s Bay, Auckland, a household went on rent strike when their washing machine broke until the landlord provided a new machine (People’s Union 1974b). The Polynesian Panthers similarly advised tenants to put aside their rent until the landlord made repairs (Anae 2020, p. 33).

The longest rent strike occurred in Lower Hutt, Wellington, in 1972, and was the first high-profile action of the WTPA. After gathering frequent complaints about the behaviour of a particular landlord, Madhav Rama, WTPA members visited all known Rama flats to collate information. The tenants decided to withhold half of their rents in order to persuade Rama to negotiate on several issues: ‘fair rents; tenancy agreements fair to tenants; receipt for bonds and guarantee of their return; and an end to ‘administration fees’ (The strike ... 1973). Forty-two households participated in the strike; tenants picketed houses that were being rented out in the hope of putting off prospective tenants and invited new tenants to join the strike (Russell 1973). Confrontations between the bailiffs and WTPA included the ‘liberation’ of tenant property that had been seized by Rama, and storage in Victoria University’s student union building (The strike ... 1973; Wood 2008). Eventually, the rent strikers left Rama’s houses, or began paying renegotiated rents. Some may have moved to state houses: WTPA workers claimed the Government was trying ‘to buy tenants off with state houses’ (Franks and Steele 1973). A meeting between tenants, the WTPA, the Landlords’ Association and Rama resulted in the lowering of rents in one block by an average of 20% (An end ... 1973). The WTPA said that many of the flats were re-let at lower rents or redecorated after tenants moved out (WTPA 1973c). Over a year after the rent strike began, only one couple remained, who had set aside their rent payment for the duration of the strike. They settled on a payment for the rent for the strike, a new weekly rent, and agreed to vacate the flat by mid-1975 (Cruickshank 1974). As a result of the rent strike, one activist reflected that ‘a bond has been established which had cut across class and race differences. The TPA is no longer a small group of privileged middle-class Pakehas’ (Russell 1973).

Tenant groups also supported tenants to resist eviction. When a building was sold and five flats evicted, the WTPA distributed a leaflet encouraging the tenants to ‘sit tight and fight!’ (WTPA ... 1976). On Norfolk Street, Auckland, the Vasau family were evicted after five years when their house was sold. The People’s Union reported that ‘With nowhere to go the Vasau family had no choice but to stay and fight’. After being evicted, the family and their possessions returned to the house, assisted by the People’s Union and their supporters. Following a confrontation with the landlord and the police, the Vasau family were able to stay. Six months later, they were removed with a court order and police assistance (People’s Union 1974a). The Tenants’ Aid Brigade of the Polynesian Panthers similarly advised and supported tenants to resist

eviction (Anae 2020, pp. 33–34). After the tenants of the Blytheswood Flats were given their notice, due to the landlord's wish to refurbish them, the tenants decided to refuse to leave, and advocate for compensation and alternative accommodation. However, as one activist recalled, 'as the time [of eviction] grew nearer, the number of tenants [attending meetings] grew less.' He reflected on why: 'some because they couldn't stand the strain of waiting, others because they felt their careers might be affected by their participation, but most because they found somewhere suitable they could afford, and took it' (WTPA ... 1973e).

The third method of direct action was picketing. Tenant protest groups picketed landlords or land agents' workplaces in an attempt to shame landlords or agents into acceding to their demands. They would gather at their workplace with details of poor treatment of tenants on banners and leaflets 'usually to [the landlord's] extreme embarrassment' (WTU 1976a). One flyer stated, 'One of Wellington's most unpleasant and greedy landlords works here in the IBM building' (WTU n.d.-d). A People's Union activist recalled a successful example of a workplace picked outside a large shoe shop on Queen St where tenants and activists 'set up right out front with all big signs and flyers saying 'would you buy shoes from a bond-snatching landlord?' Within twenty minutes, the tenants had their bond back (Roger Fowler, interview with author, June 2012).

Sometimes tenant protest groups threatened to blacklist certain properties, or the properties of landlords who had treated their tenants badly. The idea was that tenants would not rent a blacklisted dwelling, and the landlord's income would suffer. This threat would mean landlords were 'forced to make the necessary repairs and keep rents to a fair level' (People's Union 1972). The WTU announced one blacklisting with a flag from its roof and a placard next to its front door. The WTU informed the landlord

the ban will remain indefinitely on this flat regardless of whether a scab tenancy is formed or not. The ban will be lifted only when your client notifies the Union in writing that he will in future observe tenants' rights of privacy and rights of proper notice to quit, and makes adequate compensation to [the tenant]. (Thackery 1979)

A journalist who followed some prospective tenants to property observed that the blacklisting seemed to be working: 'the couple ... said they would be 'giving this one a miss' and returned the key to the agency' (Claims ... 1979).

## Casework

The day-to-day activity of the tenant groups was supporting tenants in need. In 1975, the WPTA reported that it received 70–80 calls per week, and worked on preventing up to 50 evictions a week (Wellington evictions ... 1975). Workers met with tenants to advise them or accompanied them to negotiate with the landlord. In some cases, they accompanied the tenant to meet the landlord or called the landlord in order to negotiate. Betty Wark reflected that 'Tenants' Protection worked well when it was able to make peace between a landlord and a tenant' (Connor 2006, pp. 224–225). Tenant groups reported that once the tenant organisation got involved, the tenant was more likely to see positive results: 'when we go to speak to the landlord with the tenants they usually change their tune' (People's Union 1972); 'when the little landlord recognises there is



a power greater than his he will usually step down' (Trouble ... 1973). When three flats in one house in Maarama Crescent, Wellington, had holes in the walls, rats, inadequate hot water, and no fire escapes, the tenants and TPA met the landlord. He agreed to their demands, including reducing the rent. (However, several months later, however, the house was sold and the tenants were evicted) (Tenant told ... 1973). Tenant groups supported tenants through the legal process. In one example, they supported tenants of a leaky Newtown house to appeal their rent when it was raised (WTPA 1973b). The media work of tenant protest groups could also strengthen tenants' cases. For example, after the WTPA told the Truth newspaper about the city housing council chairman whose firm had a client who owned a 'slum house' on Hankey St, fire escapes were promptly installed in the building (WTPA 1973a). After the People's Union reported on a Dickens St house without hot water, it was reconnected (People's Union 1974c).

Tenant protest groups hoped that providing such services would encourage tenants to join their group. As one group explained,

It's best if the tenant can feel that they have sorted the issue out themselves, with us in an advisory role. They learn they can take on landlords and win. They even get a taste for it and join the union roster. (WTU n.d.-b)

However, there were disadvantages to the groups taking on this service role. Assisting tenants with legal remedies was time-consuming and took up much of activists' time: 'Legal remedies absorb the punch and energy of TU workers and angry tenants like a punch bag ... By the time the wheel of bureaucracy has turned, the tenants have lost their enthusiasm (and often moved on) and the TU worker is drowned in paperwork' (WTU 1977b). Supporting people to appeal their rents under the 1972 Rent Appeal Act meant they were forced 'to keep extensive files and records' (WTPA 1975).

Tenant protest groups were overwhelmed by the support work required of them. This exhausted volunteers, absorbing their energy 'like a punch bag' (WTU 1977b). They looked for funds from unions, government and supporters. One letter to a government official states that the organisation was tired of doing what should be the government's work for no money (Steele 1975b). A Wellington volunteer was paid for his work for the tenant group; this ended in controversy because of his concurrent involvement with the gang Black Power (Kirk ... 1974). Tenant protest groups sought funds from unions (WTPA 1975; WTU 1977a); unions occasionally donated (e.g. WTPA 1973d).<sup>3</sup> The newsletters and publications frequently called for people to donate their time or money to the organisation.

Tenant groups observed the problems in existing regulation around rental housing quality and cost. Tenants were unaware that they were able to have their rent assessed for fairness. The WTPA wrote to the chairman of the Rent Appeals Board, 'Today for the ten thousandth time (no exaggeration) the TPA was approached by a person who was being charged an exorbitant rent and who knew nothing about the Rent Appeal Act' (Steele 1975b). They drew attention to the Act's flaws: rents could only be assessed once per tenancy (Gager 1973); rents were raised because house prices had risen or tenants had improved the house (Resistance Bookshop and Christchurch TPA 1975). WTPA described visiting houses 'where there are no fire escapes, no washing facilities, rotten floorboards, walls which are covered with mould, houses which are structurally unsound, houses crowded with too many people'. Although the conditions contravened



city bylaws, the council took no action; getting an inspector in was rare and hindered by red tape. Furthermore, the \$40 fine that a prosecuted landlord would receive was not sufficient to incentivise better landlord behaviour (WTPA 1973a). Even if the authorities did enforce standards, it could lead to negative results for the tenants. Calling in the Health Department, argued one tenant organisation, would mean they ‘will probably condemn the whole flat, and stop you living there’ (Gager 1973). This occurred in at least one case (Russell 1974). Under the Property Law Amendment Act 1975, tenants had the right to take landlords to court if they did not carry out repairs within a month; however, this right was meaningless without tenure security: ‘What tenant is going to go to all the trouble of protracted Court battles, when he knows he can be put on to the street for any reason ...?’ (Gager 1973). One activist reflected that a rent strike was preferable to going to the Rent Board to reduce rent (WTU 1977b).

However, far from achieving a success and ‘joining the roster’ as hoped, tenants supported by the TPA usually did not become activists. One reflected that ‘Tenants are not becoming united, nor politicised, landlords are not withering under our assault, and we are for most purposes, not more effective than we were a year ago’ (WTU n.d.-a). The WTU noted that its own organisation had at times been kept going by one individual to a great extent (WTU 1976b, p. 1). As one group noted, ‘it is difficult to run an organisation with so little feedback from those whose rights we are trying to protect’ (‘Christchurch report,’ 1975). Activists speculated that there was a key problem in mobilising tenants: ‘Because of his temporary status of being a tenant he has never been particularly interested in trying to improve his conditions’ (WTU 1978). One internal document in 1978 argued it was time to accept that, that despite its radical origins and its history as a pressure group, ‘WTU’s practical role has in fact predominantly been that of consumer protection’ (WTU 1978). The People’s Union came to an end, announcing in its newspapers that the initiatives it had established were able to stand on their own (People’s Union 1979). The organisations that remained were no longer characterised by direct action or radical change. The Christchurch TPA, for example, by 1982 described just two functions: one to advise tenants, sometimes also providing advocacy, and the other to inform and educate tenants on their rights (Alston 1982, p. 237); funding was obtained for a number of employees (Horton 2006). The professionalisation of protest groups, and the shift in function towards service provision, is part of a broader pattern of changing state-civil society relations (Larner and Craig 2005). This is an experience they shared with tenant protest groups in other times and places, from Birmingham in the 1920s to New York City in the 1970s (Chisholm 2016, pp. 84–86).

### ***The end of an era: Residential Tenancies Act 1986***

The passing of the Residential Tenancies Act (RTA) 1986 is an appropriate moment to end this case study. The tenant organisations contributed to the legislation (Property Law and Equity Reform Committee 1985). This improved the law somewhat around rent rises, repairs, and dispute resolution, and set up a scheme whereby bonds were lodged with the government rather than the landlord (Ferguson 1994). While they supported the legislation, the organisations’ experience working with tenants taught them that the RTA would not resolve the problems they encountered daily. A few years earlier, aware of the arrival of the legislation, some tenant groups agreed that ‘the creation of

a bond trust and of more small claims courts were not worthwhile goals of the movement nor would they solve the problems that tenants face' (Waikato TPA 1979). As the WTU put it on viewing the draft bill, 'the problems connected with all legal proceedings will remain in that it is unlikely that low-income Pacific families, those who really need protection, would use the service' (WTU 1985). Certainly, the issues that tenant protest groups lobbied government on in the 1970s – failure to enforce regulation, and insecure occupancy which meant reporting issues endangered tenants' homes – continued and continue up to this day (Chisholm et al. 2017).

Over the 1970s, the tenant groups had applied for government funding to form a national organisation in order to extend tenant protection activities (O'Halloran 1972) and to lend support to smaller and groups and 'increase our bargaining power' (O'Dea 1979). However, funding remained insecure. With the passing of the RTA, they saw a potential solution. Under the RTA, the interest from tenants' bonds went towards the administration of the new legislation (Ferguson 1994). Tenant organisations were 'strongly critical of the setting up of a public utility that is funded by one sector of the community' (Chamberlain 1987a). Instead, they argued that, as in Australia, the interest earned from the new bond scheme should be used to support tenants' advocacy, education, research and compensation (Porirua Community Law Centre 1983). On introducing that Bill to Parliament, Housing Minister Phil Goff said that once the bond scheme was established, 'further consideration will be given to the return of any profit to tenants' (Goff 1986, p. 6897). Reporting on a meeting with the Housing Corporation's Ron Kelly, the WTPA told the ATPA that

he gave us an assurance that when Tenancy Bond is financial, he estimates in about two years, that it was his intention and the intention of the current minister to hand over money to use, in the way that Australia does. (Chamberlain 1987b)

They hoped, therefore, that the RTA would be 'a revitalising influence to shift us into more effective areas of action-education, research and lobbying rather than being bogged down in casework' (WTU 1986). This, however, did not come to be; the tenant organisations continue to call for access to unclaimed bond money or the interest from bonds to fund their work (Gibson 2008; Cann 2018).

## Discussion

Tenant protest groups in the 1970s raised the profile of tenant issues, contributed to the achievement of legislation, drew attention to the flaws in the legislation and assisted tenants to achieve greater security, more affordable rents and better quality housing through casework and direct action. Yet their aims were higher: for the mobilisation of many more renters to their cause and the transformation of the housing system. While tenant groups raised the profile of tenant issues, the legislation proffered by political elites failed to address tenants' problems. Tenant groups had resources of energy and time, especially at first, but they suffered from a lack of funds; they became overwhelmed with casework and reliant on only a couple of volunteers. The attempts to gain sustained funding from unions and government were unsuccessful. Against their expectations, they were unable to recruit the people they assisted: given the housing conditions described, it can be assumed that many of their clients had low incomes and

family responsibilities that would make it difficult to devote resources to the development of a tenant movement.

The fact that people who worked on tenant protest were closely connected with other social movements at the time emphasises the importance of a more general commitment to progressive causes expressed in an ‘activist identity’ which brought people together (Flacks 1990). The activists saw themselves as mobilising people around their identity as tenants: making them aware of injustice and their capacity to challenge it. Yet as the tenant groups observed, the high mobility of tenants made it simpler to move house than to engage in a rent strike.

By the 1980s, some tenant groups thought it was time to admit that they were now service providers rather than activist groups. The early 1980s saw the decline of mass protest in general, in part due to the onset of recession, the wage-freeze and radical economic restructuring (Boraman 2014). This period saw the ‘narrowing of the political interest of the labour and anti-poverty movements’: advancing individuals rather than broad structural change (Taylor and Grey 2014, p. 84). Added to this, the importance of the student protestors of the early 1970s to tenant groups may have meant that tenant protest suffered when their cohort moved into a different stage of life – careers, family, homeownership (Flacks 1990, p. 289; Chisholm 2016, pp. 176–177). The exit of individuals from the rental market into homeownership in this way may have contributed to the quieting of voice (Hirschman 1970; Chisholm et al. 2016).

More broadly, tenant protest suffers due to the fact that homeownership has long been promoted by governments through subsidies and tax advantages (Ferguson 1994). This works to reinforce both the logic of, and the ideological importance of, owning, rather than renting (Chisholm et al. 2016). As Marcuse (1999, p. 70) wrote, ‘the pursuit of home ownership as a means of solving housing problems on an individual basis ... often weaken[s] more collectively-oriented efforts at housing change’. Only a tenure-neutral housing policy – where no tenure is favoured at the expense of another (for example, through subsidies and tax advantages) – offers a way to combat this problem (Bengtsson 2001; Bergensträhle 2015).

Subsequent to the tenant protest groups of the 1970s, it has been state tenants, rather than private renters, organising to improve their conditions and rights: in 1976, against racism in state housing allocation (Hubbard 1976; Borrie 1978); against graded rents in 1987 (Ferguson 1994, p. 249), against market rents and the sale of state housing in the 1990s (Murphy 2004), and in the early 2010s, against the redevelopment of their communities, the privatisation of state housing, and reviewable tenancies (Cole 2015; Chisholm 2016; Gordon et al. 2019). Recently, private tenants have become organised. Renters United was founded in Wellington in 2015, stating that ‘by organising together, we can make renting better for everyone’ (Renters United 2015). Its organising model contrasts with the existing social service organisations – including some that were founded during the 1970s – that primarily advocate for individual tenants.

Renters United has quickly become an important voice for renters. In December 2020, they announced that they had established two new branches and had two more on the horizon: ‘we’re laying the foundations for 2021 to be a year that we mobilise en masse, putting a movement to tackle the housing and rental crisis onto the streets’ (Renters United 2020). New Zealand joins a number of countries experiencing increased protest action by tenants as their numbers increase alongside house prices, and due

the high rents, high eviction rates and poor quality housing in the private rental sector (Gray 2018; Conlin 2021, p. xix; Kasakove 2019); this is described by one observer as ‘the re-emergence of the renter as a political subject’ (Wilde 2019, p. 64). The re-emergence of the renter as a political subject during the 1970s made a difference to many renters, but failed to transform the housing system. This time may be different.

## Notes

1. In addition to these organisations, the archives chronicle the Hampshire Street Tenants’ Union, in Porirua, which raised the issue of racism in the allocation of state houses and treatment of state tenants (Borrie, 1978; Hubbard, 1976).
2. In a discussion about other 1970s social movements that had significant student participation, Brian Roper (2011, p. 21) argues that these “were not movements outside the working class, even if this was how some participants viewed them”.
3. Tenant protest in Britain and Ireland has also been characterised by a lack of substantive support by the trade union movement (Gray 2018, p. xxv).

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