

Tenants Organising for Just Renovations – Online Skillshares Factsheet



Introduction

Across Europe, it's not only the temperatures dramatically rising, it's the rents, too. Tenants often live in precarious conditions and spend a significant portion of their incomes on basic needs, such as housing. Many of their homes are in bad shape – due to heat waves, they're almost impossible to live in during summer and winter, on the other hand, means high energy bills for heating. **Decarbonisation of housing is a necessity** in order to mitigate climate crisis and to improve the lives of tenants already living in precarious conditions. The goal is to achieve socially just housing renovations without the costs falling on the shoulders of the vulnerable.

In 2024, four organisations got together and took a step towards strengthening already existing alliances while also creating new ones across housing and climate initiatives. In France, **Locataires Ensemble** has been organising tenants for ten years, focusing on people living in the so-called “energy leaky homes”. In Germany, **Soziale Wärmewende** facilitates interconnections between climate justice and tenants’ movements, developing communication tools to gain support from both sides and organise tenant initiatives with the help of climate activists. In the Czech Republic, the platform **Re-set** explores the possibilities of community energy accessible to low income households and supports the collective Tenants Initiative in its efforts. In Belgium, **Carolocataires Ensemble** gathers tenants to exercise their rights to live in healthy homes free of mould.



In the beginning of 2025, we kicked off our common project with a series of **Tenants Organising for Just Renovations** webinars. The aims of the webinars were to:

- compare various national and local policies in the four European countries;
- inspire each other in different activist approaches towards socially just renovations;
- share our skills, challenges and lessons learned;
- emphasize the connection between climate justice and housing rights movements;
- call for further actions to achieve safe, dignified and affordable living conditions.

By building strong movements, the participating organisations attempt to make these goals a reality. On the following pages you can read about the key take-aways from the webinars, where the organisations involved in the project shared their work and experiences. You can also **listen to the full presentations** on our Youtube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/@resetplatforma>

Locataires Ensemble (Tenants Together)



is a federation of tenants with more than 2,500 members in six areas across France, who have organised, fought and won major **battles for low bills, low rents and low carbon homes**. They started their first local campaign in 2015, focusing on a neighborhood with hundreds of social housing units in bad shape. By 2020, they managed to lead multiple similar campaigns around the country. Later they formed the **Stop Leaky Homes Coalition** with Greenpeace and Climate Action Network to campaign for a law that would make thermal insulation progressively mandatory in rented homes (effective since January 2025) and for a new government decree to get 800,000 homes reclassified as urgent to renovate. After mobilising enough tenants, they managed to get **71,620 homes retrofitted**, as well as to provide extensions of clean energy district heating to **45,000 flats**. According to a 2023 study in Grenoble, **70% of the tenants got their landlords or landladies to renovate or insulate their homes**.

Approach & Methods:

Before starting the campaign, **Locataires Ensemble** conducted research on buildings' energy consumption in order to find areas with energy leaky homes owned by multi-owners. After the area was identified, the door-to-door knocking method ensued:

- They were asked about (1) their housing problems, (2) who they think is responsible for them, (3) if there is someone else facing similar issues, and (4) what could be done about it.

- Afterwards, a house meeting for the neighbours was organised. If successful, an expert, a thermal engineer, was invited. They provided a diagnosis of the house and its conditions. In some cases, this was already enough for the landlord or the landlady to take action towards a house retrofit. If not, direct action followed.

- In this approach, the key is to have more than one action done and to have other tenants (except those directly affected) to support each case. It can be done through writing letters and collecting signatures that are later presented to the landlord or the landlady.
- If the demands are not met, the tenants go to the landlord's office and occupy it until receiving a commitment for a socially just renovation.

These tactics and victories led to increased confidence of the tenants who are now testing a rent strike tactic. Though it should be mentioned that rent strikes only happen in publicly owned buildings.

Locataires Ensemble has also worked on popularising the term **"energy leaky homes"** in the national media. Changing the narrative from the technical discourse of renovations to "sick leaky homes" that must be cured led to a wider usage of the term and a common understanding in France. Another communication strategy of theirs has been to showcase powerful tenant stories and have charismatic spokespeople promote relatable housing cases and get support this way, fostering sympathy in their audience rather than encouraging antipathy. One of the spokespeople was later elected a deputy MP.



Soziale Wärmewende (Social Heating Transition)



is a German campaign launched in 2023 that at the moment has eight local groups active in various German cities. Germany has the highest population of tenants in Europe (52%), while a large part of the housing stock is owned by multinational companies and billionaires. These mega-landlords (like Vonovia, Heimstaden, Deutsche Wohnen) are known for **illegal rent increase practices** and using **retrofits as a grounds for eviction**. With fossil fuel companies profiting from the energy crisis, there is a case of tenants getting **extra energy bills** of up to 10,000 EUR from a heating company in a building block in Berlin. At the same time, the energy company is 51% owned by the landlord (Vonovia) which means that the landlord benefited from the tenants twice and in a very non-transparent way. The same happened in Hamburg, Göttingen and many other German cities, with different landlords and heating contractors. **Since the modernisation levy** can lead to significant and permanent increases in rent, the costs of transformation in the building sector are being passed on to tenants. In this way, **the modernisation levy** prevents flats from being insulated in an affordable manner and holds up emissions savings in the building sector. Retrofitting becomes too expensive for tenants and the rising district heating prices only further threaten their future lives.

Approach & Methods:

In their work, **Soziale Wärmewende** incorporates both tenant organising and climate justice action. They combine the topics of high heating costs, excessive costs caused by the modernisation of energy systems and excessive district heating costs. By recruiting and training climate justice activists to become organisers, the campaign supports tenant initiatives that fight **both against fossil fuel heating companies and unfair rents**. Even though this is still just the beginning of a strong climate-tenant movement, the tenants' role in the fight against increased emissions and climate change is already crucial.

- Climate activists are recruited and receive training in organising methods.
- First, they need to develop narratives that work both in rental housing and decarbonisation contexts. These narratives are then tested via the door-to-door or knocking method, thanks to which the campaign receives feedback from a considerable number of tenants. The narratives then make their way into the national media.
- Tenant initiatives are created to tackle the topics of increased heating costs, excessive costs caused by the modernisation of energy systems and excessive district heating costs by using organising methods such as **canvassing (door-to-door campaigning etc.)**, **leadership development** and **heating bill strikes**.



Challenges:

The modernisation levy brings social and climate struggles into conflict. As long as tenants pay for the transformation themselves, they must remain opponents of modernisation. There are large tenants' associations in Germany which still act mainly as representatives for individual cases in court and rarely bring the full power of collective rent struggles to the streets. The issue of the heating transition has not yet fully arrived in the country. Change is in the air, though.



Re-set: Platform for socio-ecological transformation

re→set

was established in 2020 and focuses on movement support, connecting social and climate issues. The organisation also engages in the issues of just transition in the Czech ex-coal regions, divestment and community energy. Another major topic since 2021 has been **energy poverty** – the skyrocketing gas prices due to the Russian war doubled or even tripled energy bills. Data shows that tenants (which means 23% of the country's population) are disproportionately more at risk of energy poverty than any other demographic group (like for example homeowners).

In 2022, Re-set therefore started their campaign with (1) skillshares on DIY saving methods like window insulations, (2) know-your-rights workshops on tenants' rights, (3) lobbying for legal changes and higher social benefits. They won an increase in housing allowances in 2023 and contributed to a temporary government cap on energy prices. However, tenants are still in a precarious position as:

- on average, they pay **44% of their income for housing**;
- short-term housing contracts prevail (concerns 55% of tenants, while **20% tenants contracts spanning less than 1 year**);
- short-term contracts allow **unlimited rent increase** with every new extension

Approach & Methods:

The **Tenants' Initiative** (Iniciativa nájemníků a nájemnic, INN) was founded by Re-set members in 2022 and grew into an independent member organisation. It has more than 600 paying members in 5 different cities. It provides support to its members with their issues (for example getting back the deposit or the overpayments from energy companies after moving out). Thanks to collective negotiations, more than 16,000 EUR was saved from greedy landlords and landladies last year.



Challenges:

As of yet, there is no campaign for just renovations in the Czech Republic. Public housing is mostly renovated and private rental flats are mostly owned by **small owners** (they usually own 2 to 3 flats and therefore it is impossible to negotiate as organised tenants union against one mega-landlord). The owners usually **cannot decide about the renovation themselves** (as they also have to negotiate with other small owners in the same building) and are not motivated economically to **engage in the building renovation** with other small owners.

On the other hand, tenants face significantly more problems than just energy poverty, the most distinct of them being the super-high costs of housing and insecurity caused by short-term contracts. Tenants mostly organise around urgent matters. The first step to mitigate energy poverty of tenants therefore is to regulate rent increases and short-term contracts.

Collectively owned sources of renewable energy are another way out of the dependence on expensive fossil fuel energy. So far, community energy works for well-off people who own their homes and can install PV panels on their roofs. Tenants can potentially benefit from the extra energy produced by homeowners. Re-set currently organises a community of home-owners and tenants as a pilot project in the town of Decín. They also continue to support the Tenants' Initiative in its efforts to become a sustainable organisation.

Carolocataires Ensemble (Tenants of Charleroi Together)



started in 2023 as a response to a call for projects in the Wallonian region to support innovative approaches in retrofits. They received funding until 2026 to experiment with an ecological city planning approach and community organising inspired by the Zero Leaky Homes Territory from France. 27% of the Wallonian population are tenants, with half of them living in big cities. Charleroi Métropole brings together 30 municipalities with nearly 600,000 inhabitants. It is one of the poorest areas in Belgium, with an unemployment rate of 15%. **Nearly 1 in 3 tenants there suffers from energy poverty.** In April, they started building a tenants' union focused on house retrofits in the city of Charleroi. Today there are more than forty members of the syndicate who are trained in negotiations.

Approach & Methods:

Since there is **no data on the general condition of buildings** in Belgium, **Carolocataires Ensemble** had to conduct fieldwork data collection. They found out that many tenants live in **extremely precarious conditions**, with no contract and even facing violence from the landlords. When they complain or reach out to the municipality to report unsanitary conditions, they are often **threatened with eviction** (or evicted straight away). Many of them face problems with **heavily unsanitary conditions** and **a lack of response from their landlords**.

The organisation conducts **investigations on the landlords**, sometimes in cooperation with investigative journalists. The results show that the landlords are usually rich people who bought cheap houses in Charleroi just to obtain rental income. Part of the organisation's activities is also **networking with organisations** offering social services that can help with various problems.

Carolocataires Ensemble also published **an advice brochure** for tenants. It is a response to a brochure produced by the municipality which, among other things, advises people to get more fresh air when their walls are mouldy. They inserted their own texts suggesting that **people should rather join the union and organise against the landlords**. Members support each other when facing problems – offering social support when someone is threatened with eviction or helping to put together letters to landlords. To start a negotiation, it usually helps when the logo of the organisation is included.

Challenges:

Tenants in the area find themselves in a very precarious position: when they fight for their rights, it often backfires. The aim of the organisation is to balance individual victories and learn from them how to create structural change on a municipal level. Their core group has approximately six members, it is difficult though to engage people in the long-term (mainly due to sickness or personal issues). The syndicate is considering introducing a membership fee to become more financially sustainable. But many of their members live in poverty and paying just another fee might be very difficult for them. Some are calling at least for a symbolic fee that any member could afford. Although establishing a legal entity would possibly bring more administrative work.



Conclusions

Despite the different national contexts, all the organisations face the same issue: **precarious conditions of the tenants** who live in energy-wasting homes on one hand, and **landlords and landladies** in a position of strength **unwilling** to carry out the necessary retrofits on the other hand. With the European directive to make all existing buildings zero-emission by 2050, the issue of socially just renovations is going to become even more urgent.

In order to overcome the threat of **renovictions**, excessive rent increases due to renovations and non-transparent conditions, **we need to continue developing solidarity-based structures of organised people**. These structures (such as tenants' initiatives) can help dealing with the day-to-day problems tenants have and empower people to assert their rights.

By inspiring each other through various activist approaches towards socially just renovations, sharing different skills, challenges and lessons learned, we have already created an important starting point.

www.re-set.cz
www.iniciativanajemniku.cz

www.locatairesensemble.org

www.themovementhub.org
www.soziale-waermewende-jetzt.de

www.rwdh.be
www.wuune.be
www.facebook.com/people/Carolocataires-Ensemble/61567334588697/

www.livingrent.org

Next Steps

By **collecting data** on buildings' energy consumption and the living conditions of the tenants in these buildings, we can push for further and stronger policies on just renovations. **The door-to-door method** is also a vital constituent of tenants' organising and connecting with people in need. **Building a clear and sustainable structure** that brings tenants together and offers them a framework for their actions is a must.

Disseminating the knowledge of **organising** methods and leadership-building empowers the tenants and gives them confidence needed for further action. It is also necessary to develop clear and understandable **narratives** that work both for rental housing and climate issues, especially in contexts with strong public narratives of "irresponsible tenants who don't pay rent".

We have to be prepared for backlashes from the landlord lobby and the far right, however, with strong housing and climate movements we might be able to assert our power and **mobilise people for structural changes**.

Join your local tenants' initiative!



This report is based on the series of online skillshares delivered in the spring of 2025, compiled by Veronika Dombrovská, Barbora Jelínková and Barbora Adamková.

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