

# The Strike That's Coming

“Who gave you the right to be a landlord?”

David Rovics

2020

In so many ways, the fault lines in the U.S. and other countries are being violently exposed by the pandemic, and especially by the economic fallout in the many parts of the world where life was precarious for most people before Covid-19 struck. This includes a large and growing swath of the population of the U.S.

How bad things are in this country varies greatly depending on the usual factors of class, race, gender, citizenship status, and type of occupation. Also region—whether your state or city has, for instance, suspended evictions, and for how long.

Whether your state has a functional bureaucracy capable of issuing unemployment checks to unemployed people.

Regardless of your individual situation, however, it is evident that a new Great Depression could very well be approaching. How it unfolds will depend on many factors, including the impacts of the virus, climate change, government policies, and social movements.

On a weekday livestream broadcast I host, I recently spoke with Jeremy Brecher, author of the labor history book, *Strike!*, on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its publication. He pointed out that in the Great Depression of the 1930s, it wasn't initially organized labor that forced the hand of the state to substantially increase the role of the federal government in social programs.

The birth of the welfare state, to the small extent that the government ever appears to be interested in the welfare of the population, rather than the profits of the corporate elite, was a reaction to the formation of unemployed workers councils that took to the streets regularly in their tens of thousands, preventing evictions and un-evicting tenants. There was so much of this activity in the city of Chicago that forced evictions were banned as a result.

The same kind of organizing was taking place on Midwestern farms, as well. Going back long before the 1930s when loosely organized networks of people with common goals and common strategies for achieving them have made major achievements when the economic conditions around them are sufficiently dire.

A powerful example is the Rent Strike Wars of the 1840s in upstate New York. On July 4, 1839—the date picked was not accidental—tenant farmers living under the yoke of massively wealthy landowners, such as the Rennsalaer family, launched a rent strike, when the latest heir to the Rennsalaer estate decided to raise the rent. For nine years, large numbers of tenant farmers on the million acre Rensselaerswyck estate, refused to pay the lord of the land what he demanded.

When a farm was raided by the authorities seeking to collect rent by seizing animals and other means, a tin horn was blown as an alarm, and soon, the mutual aid would arrive in the form of hundreds of armed tenant farmers on horseback, wearing costumes and masks to hide their identities. Unable to overcome the community resistance, the posses sent in by the landlords and local authorities were forced to leave. In the end, they didn't get to keep their farms outright, but were able to buy the land they had been renting for generations. History is full of many other successful rent strikes. If most of the conditions necessary for organizing an effective rent strike involve some combination of huge numbers of unemployed people with a lot of time on their hands, millions who could

barely afford the rent before who suddenly can't afford it at all, and a capitalist class of banker-landlords who long ago captured the state, and are incapable of adapting to new circumstances, then it seems we're about there right now.

What's needed at this point is much more organizing, and a lot more optimism.

There is much to be optimistic about despite the many ways the current circumstances are extremely challenging, but also because of these circumstances. There are serious rifts developing within the ruling class that can be boiled down to a conflict between advocates of repression and advocates of concession.

Even in a captured state, there are politicians intelligent enough to know when it's time to make major concessions in order to preserve their beloved capitalist empire (see Franklin Delano Roosevelt for more information). And, it is when we're standing on such a precipice that a leap in one direction or another will take us the furthest.

The coming waves of evictions will begin at different times in different regions, but the business press is predicting between 30 and 40 million evictions could take place across the U.S. in the months to come. In some parts of the country, they're happening now, often in judicial proceedings by Zoom.

It's apparently not safe enough to re-open physical courts, but it's safe to evict tenants by holding court online. Thus, making a strategy of shutting down the courts, such as occurred during Shays' Rebellion in western Massachusetts in 1786 more challenging.

In Oregon, the suspension on evictions that was set to expire in early July was extended until the end of September. In places like Oregon, there is more of a window of opportunity for some serious organizing to take place between now and until the moratorium expires.

Whether the situation will get as bad as it appears, in terms of mass evictions, deeper divisions, more desperate poverty, police brutality, racist killings, and so on, there is no question that a large-scale mass movement can change the course of history.

In my city, Portland Tenants United is working on various campaigns, one of which successfully lobbied legislators to extend the suspension on evictions. New networks are being formed weekly, such as Portland Emergency Eviction Response (PEER), building a movement in the streets made up of people ready to respond to the coming evictions, whenever they arrive.

Eventually, we will have to examine the larger question posed in my song, "Landlord:"

"Who gave you the right to be a landlord?"

In other words, how did a small class of owners gain control of the land and buildings, and charge the rest of us to occupy them?

Maybe an even greater one is, how much longer will we allow it?

David Rovics is an unemployed singer/songwriter turned organizer living in Portland, Oregon. He is a founder of Artists for Rent Control, and launched the Portland Emergency Eviction Response project.

Since the pandemic hit, he hosts livestream broadcasts every weekday, parents small children, and is learning to cook.

Every Tuesday, David hosts Fifth Estate Live, which, along with his other broadcasts, can be viewed at 10 am Pacific Time on various platforms, or heard afterwards in podcast form. More info at [davidrovics.com](http://davidrovics.com) and [fifthe-tate.org](http://fifthe-tate.org).

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