

Launched in 2015, Renters United (RU) has sought to build a movement to push back against landlordism in New Zealand and secure healthy and affordable homes for all renters. RU organisers Robert Whitaker and Geordie Rogers sit down with Nic Guerrero to discuss the organisational strategy of RU and reflect on what has worked well over the past seven years. They discuss the need to empower renters to speak out, the search for crux issues around which meaningful reform can be built, and, above all, the importance of telling renters' stories.

Germinating Resistance: Organising in the New Zealand Rental Sector

ROBERT WHITAKER & GEORDIE ROGERS with
NIC GUERRERO

NIC GUERRERO – How did Renters United! (RU) form and what prompted you to get the ball rolling?

ROBERT WHITAKER – We launched in 2015, but we technically started in 2014. The kernel of RU was formed in 2011 through the Keep MMP campaign. We were all political activists, but none of us were necessarily aligned with a political party. The Keep MMP campaign was interesting: MMP was something that we wanted to protect, and it was a campaign we were going to win, and it is not often that you campaign on something that you are going to win when you are on the left! It was a fun campaign, but the 2011 election was not very fun at all, and the following one in 2014, featuring Kim Dot Com, was a total nightmare; National cruised to victory again.

It was one of those things where everybody felt pretty shit afterward. Even I, who was not particularly engaged with party politics, felt like the left had hit a real low point. In that context, we started having a bit of a conversation about what next? We had stayed in touch after the Keep MMP campaign, which was fun and successful, so there was an appetite for more. But at the time there were not many left-wing grass-roots organisations, and it was hard to make

change under the National-led government. Around 2015, organisations like AAAP started up, but there were few others. So the idea, the genesis of RU, was that we should have more of those kinds of organisations, ones that focused on the issues that are important to people and in areas that needed it. In both cases, housing felt like an obvious thing to focus on. Housing was a big issue during the 2014 election, but it was entirely about first-home buyers and how middle-class people were struggling to get into the housing market. So housing was a big issue, but renting was not even talked about.

Elinor Chisholm, who was helping us out at the time, had done some research on the history of renters' organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand. She found that a lot of those groups had died off in the 1980s.¹ They were mostly tenants protection associations, and like a lot of other services and organisations at the time, they died away under neoliberalism. I am paraphrasing her work here, but it seemed as though one of the problems had been that because these groups had focused on case work and on helping individual renters with their problems, they didn't have the energy and resources to campaign on the wider issues. And so, while they were doing really important work, they were unable to influence the wider legislative agenda, and renters' rights eroded around them. When we started talking about organising around renting, we really wanted to learn the lessons from this past. The genesis of RU was to fill that gap—to build a wider movement and to give renters a collective voice. We don't help people write letters to their landlord or go to the Tenancy Tribunal with them, but we do try and help people develop consciousness around these issues and to get people involved in trying to change the law and the system more generally.

Early on, we thought about what the overall shape and the long-term ambitions for RU was going to be. We didn't want to spend months formulating a constitution; we wanted to get members first and then decide the next steps democratically. We thought it was important to get

1 See, for example, Elinor Chisholm, ““The Way to End Housing Problems”: Tenant Protest in New Zealand in the 1970s”, *Kōtuitui* (2022): 1-16.

people interested first, and then sort out the organisational components later. We were apprehensive about suddenly declaring ourselves a national organisation, representing every renter in the country. We started in Wellington and in those early days we didn't call ourselves a national organisation—we wouldn't have said that we represented renters in Auckland, for example. One thing we discussed at length was whether we wanted to frame ourselves as representing 'renters' or 'tenants'. From our perspective, tenant was a bit too passive and legalistic.

NIC – To me, 'tenant' obfuscates the economic relationship at play. As a tenant you are merely paying for a service, which makes housing seem as if it's a luxury, when the reality is that you are being expropriated out of your hard-earned money for what is a necessity.

ROBERT – Exactly, money is being extracted from you, and the term 'renter' better reflects that. And we also wanted to build a collective identity around renting and felt that we couldn't really do that with the word 'tenant'. Renter feels more substantive in that sense, while tenant refers simply to the contractual relationship.

Others in the group at the time weren't really that keen on unionism and didn't really think about Marxism or those ways of seeing the world, and I suppose that is where we got the second word, 'united', from. United implies getting together and it implies union without actually saying we are a union. Personally, I believe that you cannot just declare you are a union before you have members, before you have a way of organising yourself, and before you have a programme.

After we came up with the name, we produced a programme, which was a series of rights statements. It was a declaration of seven tangible things which we would expect see if we had a good rental system in New Zealand. We think every renter should have the right to:

1. Live in a safe and healthy home.
2. Pay affordable rent.

3. Find and rent a home free from discrimination, intimidation, and harassment.
4. Expect a respectful and responsive relationship with their landlord.
5. Have a rental agreement that grants them long-term security and stability.
6. Have good cooking, laundry, and bathroom facilities.
7. Make their home their own through reasonable changes.

This statement of rights was focused on the material aspects of renting, but it also touches upon what renting could look like, and can look like, as an enjoyable experience.

Then, the first real thing we did was to hold a public meeting. Initially, we booked a venue that held 30 people, but after making the Facebook event we had 500 people saying they would come, so we had to scramble to find a bigger venue. In the end, somewhere between 150–200 people showed up. It was an energising event and we had lots of people keen to get involved. So that was validating; it suggested we were onto something, that there were people out there who wanted to talk about this issue, and, importantly, it wasn't just students who were interested.

A big part of our early kaupapa was to broaden the conversation around renting, to emphasise that it isn't something that people only do in their late teens and early 20s. It is something that people are now doing throughout their whole life. Many renters are students and young people, but many are also older families like my own, and people in retirement.

Another important orientation for us early on was the work of Phillipa Howden-Chapman and her colleagues at the University of Otago. They have taken a public-health angle on housing in Aotearoa New Zealand, and their work has been something of a bedrock for us. And they also see the need for political advocacy, for campaigns on renters' rights and so on, so they have also been very supportive of us.

The first political campaigning we did was the 'people's review of renting', run alongside ActionStation, which was about framing the national conversation around renting, and trying to spark some media

attention. It was a big survey of renters that aimed to capture qualitative data about peoples' experience of renting. ActionStation did a lot of the hard yards in collecting the data and we focused on the political work around it, promoting it and putting it to MPs. It ended up as a published report.²

What is interesting about the campaign for renters' rights is that everyone knows that the rental system in New Zealand is broken—pretty much everyone you talk to understands the problem. I have been involved in lots of other political campaigning in my life and I have never worked on something that's such an easy sell. And to be honest, although we have been going for a while, we still haven't done enough. We haven't moved far enough yet, we haven't taken the opportunity that is there—the fact that renting is widely perceived as problematic. And that largely comes down to capacity—we are all volunteers; we don't have that much money; we do what we can.

NIC – So where do you come in Geordie?

GEORDIE ROGERS – 2020, during the first lockdown. My soon-to-be flatmate had become the co-convener of the Pōneke RU branch. To me, it was an initiative that organised local communities. Aaron Packard, who was the national organiser at the time, asked me to do some data wrangling on membership, and from there the work stepped up to sending emails to members, to trying to figure out how start new branches, and even to thinking about what the general structure of the organisation should be like.

NIC – Do you have specific roles in RU?

ROBERT – We have a central committee, which is called the managing committee. Within that there are seven roles. I am the president, then there is a secretary, a treasurer, a membership secretary (Geordie), a campaigns officer, a media officer, and a partnerships officer.

2 Renters United! and ActionStation, *The People's Review of Renting* (Wellington, 2017).

GEORDIE – The managing committee is the legal entity behind the organisation, and it is responsible for anything that happens to RU. If someone wanted to sue us, we have full liability. Then, on one side of the committee we have the branches: Pōneke and Tāmaki Makaurau, and these are growing steadily. We engage with membership primarily through the branches. On the other side we have the working groups, which are the organisational engines. Some of the working groups we have are in policy, membership growth, campaigns, media, and design. The working groups are not part of our constitution, which means they are impermanent—we build them and decommission them as we need them. And in between all of this are all the people who fight alongside us, who sign our petitions, who come to our rallies, who support our calls for legislative changes. These are the people that stand beside us.

NIC – How did this structure emerge?

ROBERT – We didn't have this structure for quite a while; when we were still a Wellington-based organisation, we just had a central committee. But in 2019 we did a bunch of fundraising and were able to put some money in the bank. And we knew that we needed to take some developmental steps as an organisation, so we used that money to hire a national organiser, Aaron Packard, to figure out the structure that we have today. He proposed this structure, which we adopted after some discussion.

GEORDIE – One issue with our current structure is that when you join, it can feel very static. Given the precarity of renting, people have little time to spare, so our structure needs to be more fluid to accommodate this. People can come along to a meeting, and in that one meeting they are able to contribute something productively and to take something away. What we are seeing in our campaigns is that there are people who are keen to engage in some campaigns, but not others. For example, some people want to help with the campaign for property-manager regulation but are not so keen to work on the campaign for rent controls.

And this seems to mostly be a capacity thing. Rather than be a member full time, many people would rather help on a specific thing. For example, someone might say that they are good at copywriting and might want to do a single blogpost. That is great; but what I think we need to do is grow leadership in the organisation so that people within RU feel confident enough to take that person with copywriting skills and find them a task and oversee them and move on. That is why I want to focus on building that internal leadership capacity, so that members can play an active role in building the organisation. My fear is that someone might come in and say that they are 100 percent ready to go, but no one feels confident enough or feels like they have the knowledge or ability to say, ‘that’s cool, do this!’

NIC – Does that mean that most of the decisions are being made at the committee level?

ROBERT – The branches have some autonomy. The issue, which Geordie has spoken to, is that people’s capacity ebbs and flows, and most of these working groups have a core group of people who are doing lots of things. If all, or even a significant proportion of them, are busy with other things at any given time then people’s capacity starts to dissipate. Any volunteer organisation will face this issue, but I think it is particularly acute in an organisation built with and by people that experience housing stress and are busy trying to make ends meet.

NIC – What is the process for starting a new branch?

ROBERT – We have a growth organiser whose job is to start or help new branches get going, and that is based on reactive work, where we get people saying, ‘I want to start a branch here’, or ‘I’m interested in joining, but there isn’t a branch near me’. The problem has been that we haven’t had someone who has been dedicated to that job, until very recently. You need a paid person to do this so that one half of that transaction remains stable. Currently, we have Éimhín doing this job. The leads he has been handed

haven't turned into branches yet, but he has done his half. We are confident that eventually these leads will turn into something.

The places where we are hoping to set up branches in the near future are Dunedin and Hamilton. Dunedin is an obvious place we can start a branch and that will be a combined effort with the student's association down there. We have had several leads in Hamilton and eventually there will be a branch there. Hamilton has a really stressed rental market, because it absorbs some of the overflow from Auckland. The same is occurring in the Bay of Plenty, particularly in Tauranga, and I would like us to get something going there.

NIC – Aside from the fact that most people understand the rental system is broken, how does campaigning on renting differ to your previous experience in activism?

ROBERT – One of the problems is the atomisation of renters and also the fact that renters often don't know their landlords, or even who their landlords are. Another problem is that New Zealand renters are incredibly optimistic. They tend to believe that the next place won't be as shit, that the next landlord won't be an asshole—and this is partly because their situation is so precarious; people have to make their situation seem bearable.

In their heart, renters know they are being exploited. When the rent goes up, they know that they are being charged an extra \$50 per week or whatever for the same house, in the same place, and that the landlord's mortgage hasn't necessarily gotten more expensive (if they have a mortgage at all). Landlords know that the rents they can charge are connected to demand. A landlord knows that they can ask for more money because they can easily replace you if you can't afford it. But while, deep down, renters know how disposable they are, they have got to rationalise that to live. Especially because it is about your home, it is about where you live. You've got to find your own kind of way of living with that scenario. And that is what I mean by renters being optimistic in this country. Plus, there is a real risk involved in speaking out and challenging your landlord.

GEORDIE – My own experience of renting led me to RU. Going to the Tenancy Tribunal and being absolutely dehumanised; being told that it was my fault someone I was in a relationship with broke up with me, and it was my fault that I couldn't pay their share of the rent, and that I had locked myself into paying all this money. There was no room for sympathy or humanity. From there, my eyes were opened to how dehumanising the entire experience of renting can be. Landlords make you feel like, 'you're not here to live, this isn't a place for you to feel comfortable, this isn't a place for you to raise children; this is just a place for you to stay for a while'. That whole premise is something that I want to change; renters have a right to feel comfortable and they have a right to have a home. Fundamentally, everyone wants an affordable, stable, safe and healthy home, where they can meaningfully assert their rights. That happens to be the four pillars of our Plan to Fix Renting, and everything revolves around that for me.³

NIC – I understand that RU doesn't handle case work, but outside of RU, who else can renters go to for representation and advocacy?

GEORDIE – The government continues to reiterate that renters can go to Tenancy Services to get advice, but it is likely that the advice they will get is not all that relevant to their situation and certainly not helpful. Alternatively, they can go to an underfunded case-work organisation like Tenants Protection Association (TPA) or Manawatu Tenants Union (MTU); however, because of resource limitations, their case may never get handled.

ROBERT – One of the great ironies of the system is that the Tenancy Tribunal and other tenancy services are paid for by renters. We all pay our bonds into a big government fund and the interest on that account is what pays for Tenancy Services. This is about \$25–30 million a year of renter's money being used to pay for an enforcement system that doesn't work for us.

³ See: <https://www.rentersunited.org.nz/plan/>

GEORDIE – What’s even more ironic is that in a meeting I had yesterday with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and a combination of the Property Investors Federation and some property management firms, they were talking openly about how landlords were contacting lawyers at Tenancy Services for advice!

NIC – What are some of RU’s goals right now? And could you tell us a bit about what you are currently working on?

ROBERT – Since we started, there has been some movement on those four pillars that Geordie mentioned. One of those is healthy and safe housing. The government has made some headway there, although they haven’t gone far enough. Government has also moved to address the second pillar, which is security of tenure. However, affordability is totally screwed. So that is our focus right now, and our main campaign is for rent controls.

The long-term solution to affordability, of course, is more supply—we need way more high-quality housing. However, that is something that will only make housing more affordable in the long run. So for us, the only solution is to regulate price. There are lots of ways to do that and lots of models that the government could adopt. However, our first goal has been to simply make rent controls something that is talked about, because it’s treated as such a dirty word.

But in the last year, we have managed to change that. The first lockdown helped to change the discourse, because the government temporarily froze rents and the sun still rose the next day—the housing market didn’t disappear off a cliff. When the freeze came off, though, landlords just continued to ratchet the rent up, because they know that demand outstrips supply.

GEORDIE – I remember the campaigns conversation we had prior to the rent-control campaign. We said to ourselves that if we were going to do this, we were going to have to work out what language to use.

ROBERT – Yes, it was about trying to talk about rent controls without talking about rent controls!

GEORDIE – Within RU there was debate over whether we would continue to use ‘fair rent’ or whether we would just come out with rent controls. We campaigned for a year on the former and then decided that we just needed to say the dirty words.

ROBERT – And the media started to talk about it and to ask about it. It was such a taboo to the neoliberals—especially to the economists at the New Zealand Initiative—that they didn’t even have an argument prepared for why rent controls are bad. However, rent controls are not on the horizon—Grant Robertson has put his foot down and Ardern has too. But we feel like we managed to open Pandora’s box just a crack. Although maybe Pandora’s box is not the best analogy here! A better way to put it would be to say that the Overton Window has shifted slightly.

GEORDIE – On 11 February 2021 some changes came in that increased security of tenure and allowed renters to make their rental a home, which were all awesome shifts in what it means to be a renter in Aotearoa New Zealand. But when Poto Williams officially announced that she was considering rent controls I made a physical movement in celebration, and that feeling is one that continues to stick with me. There have been other moments of success, but this was the first time I felt like we collectively achieved something that we previously thought to be impossible.

ROBERT – In most comparable countries, even if they do not have real rent controls, they have something that means a landlord must supply a justification for an increase in rent. That justification cannot just be ‘the market is going up’. Unfortunately, in New Zealand, we don’t have anything like this. And so as a renter in this country, you kind of just hope your landlord forgets you exist so that they forget they can put the rent up every year. The system is so unfair that if you are remembered you might

be exploited even more. A lot of people live with that low-level anxiety—or high-level anxiety, depending on the landlord. Even if you are the most secure tenant in the world, the reality is that you could always have that security pulled out from underneath you.

GEORDIE – Another thing that has been working well, especially during these pandemic times, are the webinars that we have run parallel to our campaigning. These often revolve around helping renters advocate for their own rights. Usually, we partner with MTU and the TPA, and they give us legal advice to then pass on to renters. We try to combine this advice with education on the how broader system functions, and how we want to change it. Renters will come and watch the webinar and then join the mailing list and continue to get updates on what we are campaigning on. And that is one way that we have of letting people know that while it may be shit now, there are people fighting for you, and when you are ready and able to help, you can.

NIC – How do you go about evaluating which campaigns and goals to pursue?

ROBERT – When we started, we focused on healthy housing because that was the main story around housing. At the time there were a bunch of horrible stories of babies dying of rheumatic fever in Auckland. Housing quality became our initial focus, and while we worked on that, we started thinking about future campaigns.

For me, it is about having smart goals—make specific goals and know exactly what you want to achieve; but it's really hard to apply that framework to the housing problem in New Zealand, because the entire system is so interrelated. For example, you are not going to secure better enforcement of renters' rights if you don't secure better security of tenure—people are unlikely to go to the Tenancy Tribunal if it means they are going to get evicted for doing so. But to address security of tenure, you must tackle the cost of rent, because security of tenure doesn't mean much if your

landlord can just force you out by hiking the rent.

So you end up in this circular conversation about all those problems. We realised that we needed to provide answers for *everything*. If we whack a mole here—say, healthy housing—how can we whack the mole that pops up over there? After the healthy homes standards were passed, we found that we could focus on security of tenure, which we think is a crux issue: we believe that if we can improve security of tenure then all the other things start to become more feasible.

GEORDIE – Personally, I started to feel far more secure as soon as our landlord, without knowing it, offered us periodic tenancies. As soon as that was signed, we were able to ask for money back for scaffolding that was up for three weeks, then we started going hard on them. That is when I started getting media around the rental property that I live in. The periodic tenancy gives my flat mates and I the ability to say how shitty something might be, and if they try and kick us out, we can go to the Tenancy Tribunal and show them that we are being kicked out for this reason.

NIC – You’ve named several organisations that you work alongside; is there a collective that RU is part of that organises nationally?

GEORDIE – Yes, there is a government-funded network called the Tenants Advocacy Network (TAN). When we started RU, we started reaching out to existing groups, including the NZ Council of Christian Social Services and the Salvation Army. We started having some meetings and networking with these organisations and because they were clued up as to how NGOs can get money from government, they suggested that we tell the government that we are bringing people together on housing issues. TAN is a talking shop for the officials to come in and ask questions of the different groups in this space. We are a member of TAN, as are all the students’ associations, the Citizens Advice Bureau, MTU, TPA, the Salvation Army, Community Law, and a few others. Unfortunately, it hasn’t been run very efficiently.

GEORDIE – The most helpful thing that has come out of it is that every single person is copied into the email we get. This means we get a really good mailing list for RU campaigns. We also get invited to speak with the housing minister, which is useful.

ROBERT – Yes, this means that we get the opportunity to give the minister ideas on how to address housing issues. And this is while she is surrounded by officials who she can say to, ‘investigate this, investigate that, go look into that, I need a paper on that’. These opportunities to speak with the minister have not driven any specific change so far, but I do think that the comments we and others have made have broadened her perspective and made her challenge her officials more. Whether that results in real change is down to her influence within cabinet and the external pressure we can exert through our campaigning activity.

NIC – Are there any examples of movements overseas that you are looking at and drawing inspiration from?

ROBERT – I do pay attention to the renters’ organisations in other countries. Other countries have proper tenants’ unions and there is a path in which RU grows into something like that in the future. However, it’s important to recognize that other countries have very different housing markets and legal structures to our own; you can’t just transplant something that works overseas here, without considering the context. It would be awesome if we were like Sweden and every renter was a part of a tenants’ union, but we don’t have municipal-housing authorities that control huge quantities of housing with whom tenants’ unions can negotiate collective agreements. Likewise, tenants’ unions in the US are big, but they are fighting against large-scale corporate landlords of the kind we don’t have here, at least not yet.

NIC – Looking back at your campaigns so far, what has worked and what hasn’t?

ROBERT – We have worked well in the media; as I said before, in no

other campaign that I've worked on has it been so easy to get people to understand the issue. That aspect of it has been great, the fact that we have helped to make renting and the problems with renting in this country more widely talked about. There have also been a bunch of reforms such as the insulation standards passed by the National-led government in 2016, the banning of letting fees in 2018, the Healthy Homes Standards in 2019, and changes to tenure in the Residential Tenancies Amendment Act 2020. Of course, these reforms have not gone as far as we have wanted, but they have materially improved some aspects of renting in this country. Unfortunately, though, the economic situation has worsened, and so the gains we have made around security of tenure and healthy homes have been undermined by rising rents.

I would say that we have failed to grow a broader housing campaign; we are not part of broader organisation or coalition that is arguing for a new, fundamentally different housing system. This is partly because we made the strategic decision not to talk about the housing system in general and to focus instead on renters and renters' rights. I don't necessarily consider that to be a failure *per se*, because I think there are sound reasons for taking the approach that we have. But the reality is that the housing system in this country has gotten worse.

We haven't built our relationships well enough with the union movement and with other like-minded organisations. We have TAN and some other relationships around tenancy issues. But we should have memorandums of understanding with every union. When unions have surveyed their members, housing is always in the top few issues affecting them. For the teachers' and the nurses' unions, for example, housing is a big source of concern for their members. We need to build those relationships. Our other weakness here is that colonisation is a significant dynamic that underpins our broken housing system, and we have not yet figured out how to build our relationship with tangata whenua effectively.

We also haven't found the organisational growth strategy that works for us yet. We have grown, we have got more people involved, and we are more stable now than in the early years of the organisation. But we haven't

really found the right way to step up and become a real force. Our public perception and campaign communications can at times outstrip our actual capacity and member engagement. This can have a negative impact on our organising efforts—for example, we have heard that some people have been hesitant to engage with us because they feel they don't know enough about housing or renting or are too inexperienced to contribute. We need to find the right way, as Geordie mentioned, to bring people in so that they can get involved. I'm not sure if that is a failure exactly, but it is a problem that we have not yet addressed.

NIC – I am sure many other organisations can speak to that last point; it's an obstacle that many grass-roots organisations come up against.

GEORDIE – I think it is also a reflection of the climate that we live in, where the only people that are taken seriously, and this comes across quite a lot in radio debates, are the people who have offices, who have full-time employment, or have some sort of academic background that gives them permission to talk about these things. There is this sentiment that you can only talk about the housing crisis if you are an economist or a big landlord. If we want to be involved in those conversations, we need to look like a professional organisation that represents renters. We need to look very official; we must respond quickly and have our own domain name and website and all the other bells and whistles. If we present ourselves as a few people who have a big mailing list, we won't be taken seriously.

Conversely, it's also important that we remain accessible to other renters, and that we continue to challenge the perception of what it means to be an 'expert' on renting. I always reflect on this whenever the media refers to us as experts, while referring to other renters as people we're advocating for. A lot of our policy and positions aren't that complex, they're something that a lot of renters would read and think 'of course, that makes sense', and so I want to try and push the media and, by extension, the wider public, to see renters as the experts on renting, not just RU or Housing and Urban Development policy officials, but the people that are currently renting.

For me, I know where I want to get to with the organisation, but in terms of how we get there, the task seems so massive; and so it's necessary to try and break the work down into achievable chunks. I try and give 8 hours a week to RU, but I feel like even if you gave all your time to the organisation there will always be more to do. It's about finding ways to contribute to RU efficiently and, in my role, discovering how I can help other volunteers contribute efficiently.

ROBERT – Although we have talked a lot about engaging with parliament and with politicians, I do think that the only way to really change things is to take bigger leaps and to change people's minds, to change the dominant narratives that we have about housing in this country. And any gains we make for renters helps to create an environment in which further gains can be argued for. For example, if people start to feel more stable in their tenures, they become more willing to challenge the cost of their rent.

GEORDIE – Before I was involved in activism, I had always looked to politicians as leaders. But my perspective on what politicians do has changed. Rather than propose ideas that are going to lead the country forward, politicians in this country opt for whatever they think will appease the public. And this is why we need to campaign *with* renters. Renters are starting to become one the biggest voting blocs in the country, so we need to start invigorating them as well as those who are sympathetic to renters' rights.

ROBERT – Things like our *Renting in Lockdown* report and other quantitative reports like it are important aspects of this kind of work, as they provide useful data on the housing situation.⁴ But it is stories that have the real power. Stories are what the media and politicians grab onto and are what the public respond to. Telling people's stories of how they have been screwed over by their landlord in lockdown, many of which got airtime in the media, made a significant impact and were more important

4 Renters United!, *Renting Under Lockdown: Renters' Experiences Survey Report* (Wellington, 2020).

than any of the quantitative data on the housing situation that we fed to the media during that time. It is the human part of all this that we need to keep focusing on. As Geordie said earlier, it's about the human experience of renting: everybody who rents has felt that pang of humiliation that comes with the exploitative experience of renting. We have got to find ways to turn those feelings into action.



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