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(Re)politicizing the tenant movement: struggling against the 2023 double rent increase in Malmö

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Course code: SGEM07
Semester/year: Spring/2024

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Abstract

In 2023, seven major property owners in Malmö attempted to raise rents a second time, after annual rents for the city's tenants had already been finalized. In doing so, landlords broke with historical precedent, by coordinating efforts to bypass the rent negotiation process with the powerful Swedish Union of Tenants (SUT). The Swedish rent negotiation model, a product of militant organizing by the SUT in the early 20th century, has faced growing threats from neoliberal policies over the past several decades. As a result, tenant protections have been slowly eroded, and power dynamics between the SUT and property owners gradually transformed. The 2023 double rent increase in Malmö exemplifies a new level of landlord aggression, reflecting broader global trends towards the commodification of housing. In response to the double rent increase, a new wave of tenant organizing emerged in Malmö, led by activists who have been frustrated by the SUT's inability to mobilize tenants at a grassroots level in recent decades. Most existing literature on tenant struggles in the Swedish context has focused on spontaneous or autonomous responses to renovictions—renovations undertaken to increase rents. Considering this, the goal of this thesis is to examine how the response to the 2023 double increase was characterized by tenants acting both autonomously and within the official structures of the SUT. By exploring the 2023 double rent increase in Malmö as a case study, the study sheds light on the shifting dynamics between tenants, the SUT, and landlords. I draw on media accounts, SUT materials, and qualitative interviews with tenant activists to assess how the SUT's legalistic focus has limited its effectiveness. I frame the tenants' double increase campaign as a pivotal shift towards repoliticizing the SUT, and the tenants movement in general. By examining the double increase campaign, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and potentials for tenant movements in Sweden and beyond, advocating for a renewed focus on collective action and solidarity in the fight for housing justice.

Word count: 14,993

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Introduction

In January 2023, rents across Malmö were raised 5.1 percent—the highest rent increase in some tenants’ lifetimes. Then, two months later, seven of the city’s major landlords announced they would raise rents *again*, by an additional 2 percent, starting on July 1. This second increase came as a shock to an already fragile system.

In Malmö, as in all of Sweden, rent is determined once annually through collective bargaining between landlords, public and private, and the Hyresgästföreningen, or Swedish Union of Tenants (SUT), which represents 90 percent of the country’s tenants in the annual rent negotiation process. This unique system, won through decades of militant organizing by the SUT in the early 20th century and partially responsible for the high basic standards of living for which Sweden is known worldwide, now faces significant threats to its existence.

The 2023 double rent increase in Malmö was the latest of these threats. In their attempt to raise the rent a second time in a year, landlords bypassed negotiating this additional increase with the Union, instead directly sending out rent increase notices en masse to thousands of the city’s tenants. The 2023 double increase was far from the first attack on the Swedish housing system, although, as will be discussed further, it represents a new intensification of these assaults.

For the past few decades, encroaching neoliberal policies have already dealt several significant blows to the country’s housing system, starting as early as the 1970s and accelerating in the early 1990s and into the 2000s. In 2021, these attacks came to the forefront of national consciousness, as the issue of rent negotiation threatened to topple the central state. Sweden’s then-Social Democratic Party prime minister Stefan Löfven was ousted through a no-confidence vote in parliament, after the Left Party withdrew its support for his government in protest of Löfven’s plan to weaken the country’s rent negotiation system. The seething political turmoil indicated the extent to which housing has become a key global commodity, one with the power to transform social and political relations even in a country like Sweden, where housing has long been considered and treated as a social good.

As attacks on the negotiation model proliferate, the SUT has been slow to move effectively to protect tenants’ rights. While historically, the SUT was once a powerful force checking landlord power, its evolution into a centralized bureaucratic organization concerned mainly with legalistic issues has hindered its ability to face up to these new threats. In its place, a new wave of tenant organizing is emerging, led by tenants who are frustrated with the SUT’s relative conservatism and eager to reconstitute housing as a terrain of grassroots struggle. Recognizing the failures in the SUT’s legalistic approach, these tenants have drawn on both new and old tactics of grassroots organizing, borrowing at once from their own militant history and from current global tenant movements.

In Malmö’s case, it was this newly organized wave of tenants who led a successful campaign against the double increase (referred to throughout as “the double increase campaign”),

ultimately forcing landlords to drop their position. While landlords were ultimately unsuccessful, that they attempted such a second increase is significant. Although the campaign was celebrated as a victory, both by tenant activists and the SUT—and it *was* an important victory—evidence suggests the fight is far from over. After a long year of unprecedented aggressive moves by landlords, 2024 already threatens to be as equally or more challenging for the nascent tenant movement.

A growing body of research examines neoliberal reforms to the Swedish housing system, which have gradually chipped away at and transformed the country's policies over the past five decades (Bengtsson, 2016; Hedin et al., 2012; Ösgård & Wallstam, 2023; Baheru, 2017). However, there is a need to critically examine how the concurrent institutionalization of the SUT over the past century has led to a present day situation in which both the state and the Union of Tenants have stepped back from meaningfully protecting tenants, even as landlord power grows and market logics threaten to undercut existing protections entirely.

Within literature focusing on new methods of landlord extractivism in the Swedish context, “renovictions”—wherein landlords renovate a property to increase the rent—have been the main, almost singular, focus (Polanska & Richard, 2021; Gustafsson, 2019; Listerborn et al., 2020; Baeten, 2016). The current study builds on this scholarship to frame the double rent increase as a new and more blatant method wielded by landlords in an attempt to raise rents. The double increase also indicates a new and concerted stage of coordination among Malmö's landlords.

Somewhat surprisingly, given its unique position as one of the most powerful tenant unions in the world, there is a lack of research focusing on the SUT (Rolf, 2021). There is a need to investigate how the Union's structure, approach, and history limits its effectiveness, particularly in the context of a diverse immigrant city like Malmö. The present study contributes to research on the SUT, and on tenant mobilizations in a Swedish context in general.

In this thesis, I use the 2023 double increase in Malmö as a case study, exploring the emerging strategies of tenant organizing that were tried and tested over the course of the campaign. Understanding these new modes of mobilization as responding to several interrelated and ongoing shifts within the state of Swedish housing politics, I am interested in the currents of both hope and despair framing these organizing efforts. I situate this campaign within both the local context of neoliberal policy agendas and the commodification of housing on a global scale. I understand the double increase as enabled by and representing a “marching forward” of the logic that has already chipped away at the regulations that once protected Swedish tenants against the precarity that now characterizes tenancy in much of the world (Christophers, 2013, p.907).

I consider multiple types of evidence, including media accounts, SUT materials, and qualitative interviews. I use a critical urban theory lens to assess the logic of the double increase, with attention to how the increase advances precarious housing arrangements.

Prevailing accounts of the Swedish system, both by Swedes and from international observers, portray the country's housing and rent system as a kind of logical end-product of a social democratic welfare model, along the lines of other Nordic countries. In the minds of many leftists globally, Sweden has long been held up as a successful example of a fairer, more egalitarian society for tenants, due to the powerful SUT and a social welfare state undergirded by a belief in a universal rental sector (Baeten et al., 2016; Christophers, 2013; Kenn, 1996). Precisely for this reason, there is a need to critically research the actual conditions of Swedish tenancy.

A large and growing body of work investigates the abysmal state of tenancy in wealthy countries that have failed to uphold the right to adequate housing outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Desmond, 2016; Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Farha, 2019). Such scholarship is important and necessary. But to imagine alternatives to our current housing systems, characterized globally by a predatory and deeply unequal balance of power between landlords and tenants, scholarship must also critically interrogate those systems, such as the Swedish, which are so often touted as a guidepost.

I find that the landlords' move for a double increase was enabled not only by reformist measures of the past decades, but also by the SUT's failure to maintain that element of an engaged grassroots base that paved the way for its existence in the first place. In interviews, tenant activists routinely pointed out that there is a more pressing need than ever for the SUT to step in and defend vulnerable tenants. But as rent negotiations in Malmö reveal even before the double increase, the SUT has struggled to face up to organized landlord power. This inability to collectively respond is an outcome of the shift within the SUT away from grassroots organizing to the organization's current approach, which treats tenant issues as individual legal problems. Consequently, when landlords collectivized to raise rents, there was no already organized collective avenue through which tenants could respond.

The SUT's failure to maintain grassroots engagement is evidenced not only by this tendency to individualize tenant problems, but also by a more general loss of political ideology within the Union. Interviews with tenants reveal the SUT does little to raise political consciousness around the condition of tenancy. Indeed, I argue the current SUT relies on the maintenance of legalistic protections, foreclosing the possibility of reimagining property relations. In doing so, the SUT has alienated some tenants, who see the organization in its current form as a resource for legal services akin to a kind of insurance, or, worse, a body that has betrayed its mandate to protect tenants through an overcommitment to upholding the landlord-tenant relationship.

Nowhere is this attitude more evident than among the immigrant communities making up Malmö. Within my research on Malmö, I look specifically at the immigrant neighborhood of Rosengård to understand how and why this culture of distrust manifests. I find that the SUT's lack of grassroots engagement has led to a failure to account for local context when problem solving, making even the legalistic approach ineffective. Relatedly, in immigrant

communities in particular, the SUT has failed to garner local representation, making engagement even more challenging.

However, while issues of distrust and low engagement are exacerbated within immigrant communities, I ultimately find these are now being played out beyond these communities—as a consequence of growing precarity for *all* Swedish tenants. This gradual spatial-temporal diffusion of the effects of rising rents, landlord neglect, and tenant disempowerment mirrors this trend as it persists across multiple contexts and geographies. The worst of capitalist exploitation tends to concentrate and be felt most acutely by marginalized communities, before gradually spreading to more privileged classes over time. With an awareness of this fact, I highlight the instrumental role of Rosengård’s tenants, who have borne the brunt of exploitative landlord practices for longer than many of their Malmö neighbors, in leading the fight against the double increase.

Aim and research questions

Understanding the double increase campaign in Malmö is important because of what the campaign indicates about shifting landlord-tenant dynamics in the country as a whole. Indeed, the double increase campaign resonates not only with trends in the Swedish context, but globally. As populations of the poor, displaced, and evicted grow, tenancy is the increasingly common condition of 21st century life. This is evident in the resurgence of tenant struggles worldwide: from New York to Berlin to Malmö, people with precarious relationships to their homes are rising up in creative and radical formations against landlord exploitation (Fields, 2017; Martínez & Gil, 2022; Vollmer, 2020).

In this context, my research is animated by a number of concerns related to the normalization of private property relations, the limits of legalistic approaches to the housing question, and the politicization of tenancy as a class position. With these in mind, I set out to answer the following questions:

What does the 2023 double increase campaign reveal about the relationship between tenants and the SUT in relation to grassroots engagement?

What are the limits of legalism as an approach to solving tenants’ problems? How do tenants themselves articulate and strive to move beyond these limits?

How do social movements confront and transform existing systems, while also operating within these systems?

Literature review

A growing body of work documents and analyzes the steady dismantling of the so-called “Swedish model” of housing. This literature tends to fit within the broader scholarship concerned with the financialization of housing. The concept of financialization emerged and entered the mainstream within the discipline of geography after the 2007 global financial crisis (Aalbers, 2017). Financialization broadly refers to the “increasing dominance of financial actors, markets, practices, measurements and narratives at various scales” within the housing sector (Ibid., p.118).

Over the past four decades, the housing landscape for tenants in Sweden has changed dramatically, though as this study finds, the SUT has been slow to come to grips with this new reality. Historically a cornerstone of the state’s far-reaching welfare system, neoliberal policies have turned housing into a battleground for the imposition of market-driven logics—an ongoing struggle in which private property interests have been winning big.

Bo Bengtsson (2016) identifies the pillars of the Swedish housing regime as a “universally-oriented housing policy,” an integrated market with links between rent-setting in private and public spheres, and rent negotiations between landlords and a “strong and influential national tenant movement” (pp.1-2). These pillars have been slowly but surely eroded, with the 2023 double increase representing the most recent blow.

In particular, scholars have identified two key dates as representative of the transition from Keynesian statecraft to neoliberal rollback of the state’s role regulating the housing market: 1991 and 2011. In 1991, Sweden elected a center-right coalition, ushering in the first government to be led by a Conservative prime minister since 1930. The Conservative government initiated significant reforms to the housing system, beginning with dissolving the Department of Housing. This action marked the first in a series of strategic measures aimed at repositioning housing as a commodity (Hedin et al., 2011). State support for public housing was slashed, interest subsidies lowered, and changes to the tax system forced housing companies to increase rents—resulting in a 30 percent increase in rents over the following decade, and an overall increase of 122 percent between 1986 and 2005 (Baeten & Listerborn, 2015; Hedin et al., 2011; Gustafsson, 2019; Kadioglu & Kellecioglu, 2023).

There was little effective mobilization against this shift towards a market approach to housing. The Swedish Social Democrats—the party with which the SUT is most closely affiliated—returned to power in 1994, but failed to turn back the neoliberal tide (Hedin et al., 2011). Indeed, under the Social Democrats, the state continued to withdraw from the housing sector, with devastating consequences for tenants, particularly for those living in municipal housing companies. These public sector housing companies, which had long embodied key elements of the Swedish model, were implicitly forced to behave like profit-driven landlords, treating tenants as customers (Ibid.).

In 2011 this expectation was codified in a new law mandating municipal housing companies to act in a “business-like” manner (Gustafsson, 2019). The 2011 law must be understood in the context of mounting pressure from landlords over the previous two decades to break with the collective bargaining system. Through the Property Owners’ Association, private landlords threatened to bring a legal case against the SUT to the European Commission, arguing the Union’s rent-setting system was in violation of EU competition rules by “[hindering] market growth” (Listerborn et al., 2020, p.126). The 2011 law emerged as a kind of compromise, requiring municipal housing companies to conduct business according to the profit imperative (Elsinga & Lind, 2013).

Crucially, the 2011 law also stripped municipal housing companies of their normative role in the rent-setting process. Previously, negotiations between the SUT and municipal housing companies set the ceiling for rent increases across a region; private landlords would therefore be constrained to rents already negotiated for public housing tenants (Ösgård & Wallstam, 2023). By removing this limiting role, the 2011 law helped enable private landlords to push for higher rents. The consequences of this change are evident: in 2023, rents across Sweden increased by 5.2 percent, a significant jump from a 3 percent increase in 2022 and 2.4 percent in 2021 (Delmendo, 2024).

In Malmö, 2023 rents rose by 5.1 percent, following a 3.5 percent increase in 2022 and a 2.3 percent increase in 2021 (Ibid.). In interviews with tenants, the figure of 5.1 percent came up repeatedly, with multiple participants noting they had been accustomed to rent increases of one or two percent, making 5.1 percent a marked—and for many, prohibitive—increase.

Concurrent with these ongoing moves towards deregulation has been the entry of corporate landlords into the Swedish housing market, a trend persisting globally as the urban private rental market now constitutes one of the most important frontiers for financial actors seeking their next “investment object” (Beswick et al., 2016; Fields, 2017, p.3). Since the 1990s, the state has led mass privatization of public housing stock, which has subsequently been sold off to companies including European property giants Vonovia and Heimstaden.

The presence of these new corporate landlords, and the introduction of significant neoliberal measures over the past decades have combined to utterly transform the Swedish housing system, resulting in a “monstrous hybrid” of piecemeal welfare state regulations and intensifying deregulation (Christophers, 2013, p.887). Today, Sweden’s housing system falls short of realizing the initial promises of equality and justice embedded in the ideology of the “Swedish model.” Instead, it perpetuates and exacerbates the country’s growing class inequalities (Ibid.).

This hybrid situation has enabled landlords to experiment with new methods of rent extraction, seeking to challenge the already stripped-back rent regulation system that still protects tenants against exorbitant market rates. In particular, scholarship in Sweden has proliferated around “renovictions,” a term coined by Vancouver-based activist Heather

Pawsey to describe the process by which landlords strategically undertake renovations to evict tenants and raise the rents (Pull, 2020).

The literature on renovictions in Sweden has taken multiple angles into the issue, with some studies framing renovation as a new kind of housing financialization in the Swedish context (Pull, 2016; Baeten et al., 2017). From this perspective, landlords pursue renovictions not simply to raise rents, but as part of a comprehensive investment strategy that pursues profit at the expense of tenants' right to housing (Gustafsson, 2021a). While Swedish rent regulations dictate increases can generally only take place via negotiations with the SUT, landlords have effectively exploited a legal loophole which allows rents to be increased in the event of a renovation that improves standards of living (Baeten et al., 2017; Westin, 2011). Renovations in this context pave the way for higher market value, increased loan-taking ability, and ultimately greater investment ability and higher potential future returns.

Another important angle in studies on renovictions has been tenant experiences and resistances to this new accumulation strategy (Thörn, 2020; Listerborn et al., 2020; Polanska & Richard, 2018; Gustafsson, 2021a). These works have been critical in providing an entry point for my research, which seeks to contribute to the still understudied field of tenant mobilizations. In particular, I follow Polanska and Richard (2021) in understanding tenants' struggle as occurring on both the individual and collective levels, carried out via everyday action and through organized mobilization. In the same vein, I understand housing financialization as a process always contested by tenants and therefore never wholly complete (Langley, 2008; Fields, 2017). Building on this scholarship, my research is attentive to how resistance is wielded by tenants at multiple scales and often through subtle means.

Against this backdrop of numerous setbacks to the Swedish model over the decades, I interpret the 2023 double increase as the most recent—and perhaps most audacious—of these landlord experiments aimed at maximizing profits at the expense of tenants' livability.

Theoretical framework

I build on several theoretical frameworks to make my analysis. My research is informed by a multidisciplinary body of knowledge, which includes my own experience as a tenant, worker, and organizer. The following are theoretical tools that help me interpret the world of my research:

Critical urban theory

My analysis is guided by critical urban theory, which questions the status quo expressions of capitalism, interrogating the logics that underlie spatial arrangements with the aim of denaturalizing relationships of injustice (Brenner, 2009). By untangling the historical, political, social contingencies that enable dominant conditions of exploitation and precarity, through critique of powerful structures and organizations, critical urban theory “insists that another, more democratic, socially just and sustainable form of urbanization is possible” (Ibid., p.11). This attention to possible alternatives is of particular import to my research, which centers tenants’ efforts to re-politicize and therefore re-imagine their housing situations.

Critical urban theory rejects universalizing claims to knowledge. All knowledge is “endemically contextual,” emerging within historically contingent social formations and mediated through power (Brenner, 2009, p.202). As a consequence of this attentiveness to how knowledge, including theory itself, is constructed, critical theorists are necessarily reflexive: “they want to understand what it is about modern capitalism that enables their own and others’ forms of critical consciousness” (Ibid., p.30).

The underpinnings of this reflexiveness, and foundational to critical urban theory in general, is the work of Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre is concerned with demystifying the logic and functioning of the modern capitalist city, emphasizing the need to continuously critique dominant institutions in pursuit of this goal (Lefebvre, 1970). Militating against the naturalization of the logic of surplus value that has come to structure our everyday lives, Lefebvre anticipates the commodification of the urban fabric that defines life today.

In delineating strategies to denaturalize and therefore resist this logic, Lefebvre is confronted with a question that prevails across left-wing movements and animates my approach here: *how do social movements confront and transform existing systems, while also operating within these systems?* This question is at the heart of the Swedish tenants’ struggle against encroaching market logic. While the SUT has become comfortable operating within and not necessarily against the state, critique—the lifeforce of critical urban movements for Lefebvre—is growing elsewhere. In my analysis, I aim to contribute to this critique, following Lefebvre’s contention that knowledge must continually criticize decisions and institutions (Ibid., 1970).

Without constant and dialectical critique of the way capitalism mediates the production of space, Lefebvre argues, we are left with a reductive modern urbanism, one which limits control over our space and lives. This “urban ideology” reduces urban dwellers to consumers for the realization of surplus value, entrenches top-down planning that fails to account for the everyday routines and complexities of human “habiting,” and prioritizes exchange value at the expense of use value (Lefebvre, 1970, p.81). These consequences are relevant for my thesis, which finds Malmö tenants are challenging the tenets of modern urban ideology by engaging in a bottom-up grassroots campaign that asserts the importance of local lived experience. I understand these new local forms of activism as more closely aligned with Lefebvre’s concept of habiting, which includes the “diversity of ways of living, urban types, patterns, cultural models, and values associated with the modalities and modulations of everyday life” (Ibid.).

Non-reformist reforms

To frame my research questions around the limits of legalism, I turn to the concept of “non-reformist reforms.” Coined by New Left philosopher André Gorz, the term has since gained purchase in critical legal studies and abolitionist and anti-capitalist social movement literature. Within critical legal studies, NRR scholars argue law is always a site of “domination, exploitation, expropriation, and legitimation” for capitalist relations (Akbar, 2023, p.2508). This understanding is useful for framing the double increase campaign, in which tenants grappled with the tension of working within legal structures while simultaneously pushing and imagining past these constraints.

I understand the double rent increase as revealing the deficiencies of the SUT’s legal approach, and heralding the pressing need to shift away from a strict reliance on the law and towards a grassroots, movement-based approach. NRR literature can help frame Sweden’s rent negotiation system as a reform that has the potential to build democratic power and ultimately function as a tool to shift the balance of power. The concept of non-reformist reforms reveals the SUT has failed to treat the negotiation system as a reform, and has settled for rent negotiation as an end goal in itself. In doing so, the SUT risks cozying up to power rather than encouraging contestation of it from below (Akbar, 2023).

With this analytical framework in mind, I understand the double increase campaign as a potential shift away from this reformist outlook and towards a movement that involved imagining a “horizon beyond legalism” (Akbar, 2023, p.2511). NRR literature calls for attention to *how* and *by whom* political demands are made (Ahmed, 2024). In the case of the Malmö double increase campaign, these questions are key. I am interested in how the double increase campaign embraced antagonism and conflict, moving away from the liberal reformist view of these as problems to diffuse. In doing so, I find that the campaign was significant not simply because of the demands it advanced, but because of how and whose terms it was organized. The campaign hinged on the formation of new relationships and structures, which created possibilities for political imagination beyond the immediate demands of the campaign.

Methodology

Operationalizing theory

This study sets out to uncover how tenants mobilized during the 2023 double increase campaign, and how their mobilizations challenged prevailing norms set by the SUT. To undertake my research, I draw on the critical realist approach to epistemology and ontology.

Critical realism acknowledges reality exists irrespective of knowledge, and our knowledge production is fallible and theory-dependent, rather than theory determined. According to critical realism, reality can be understood in three realms: the real, the actual, and the empirical (Bhaskar, 1998). The real is the non-observable realm of underlying structures and mechanisms, accessible through the effects it produces in the realm of the actual. The empirical is accessed directly, via experience and observation. While the real structures are experienced, therefore, through the empirical, they are not necessarily observable. In the context of housing, for instance, the underlying mechanisms of neoliberalism and financialization are obscured, yet they create actual conditions of precarity which are directly felt by tenants through empirical experiences of disrepair, neglect, and financial anxiety.

From this understanding, critical realists recognize that while there is not one universal or absolute truth, we can and should find generalizable and *more true* knowledge of the world, through identifying the structures at the root of events (Sayer, 2000). The critical realist approach therefore facilitates research that goes beyond empirical data—the lived experiences—to seek causes and explanations at the level of the real.

To operationalize critical realism, I investigate the actual realm through qualitative research methods, by using data collection methods to observe empirical outcomes. Based on this research, the real can be inferred through a process of abductive reasoning, concerned with identifying causal mechanisms behind observations. Given its limited scope, this thesis cannot thoroughly investigate mechanisms underlying the tensions that emerged during the double increase campaign. The methodological aim is therefore to investigate this case using critical realism as a guide to formulate research questions and approaches.

Research design

Situated knowledge

Critical urban theory involves overcoming presupposed separations between “instrumentalist modes of knowledge... [and] their object of investigation,” recognizing “the knower is... embedded within the same practical social context that is being investigated” (Brenner, 2009, p.202). I draw on this understanding in my paper, as well as calls by feminist theorists to abandon the myth of impartiality in research design (England, 2015).

My analysis reflects these scholarly concerns, embracing knowledge as partial, situated, and political. I acknowledge and build from my own positionality as a tenant organizer in New York City. My experience as a tenant who has experienced illegal rent hikes and landlord neglect shapes my commitment to research that takes seriously the political questions and agendas of activists (Derickson & Routledge, 2015). My approach reflects from my own experience with organizing my neighbors and collectively dreaming of alternatives to our predatory housing system.

Case study

My research moves between focusing on the actual emerging effects of the landlord-tenant relationship and the abstract structures and ideologies that underlie the housing system. Much of the work dealing with the Swedish housing regime has focused on the national scale (Gustafsson, 2019). With this in mind, I turn to the local, Malmö in this case, to understand and explain broader political transformation.

Malmö stands out as a unique case due to its notable income and racial inequalities. It is Sweden's third largest city, and the most diverse in Scandinavia. Over 50 percent of residents identify with a foreign background, and residents represent 186 different countries, with one-third being born foreign-born (Malmö stad). Sweden is experiencing rapidly rising income inequality compared to other OECD nations, a trend particularly noticeable in Malmö, where median income is 15 percent lower than the national average (Listerborn, 2021). Immigrants and young people encounter significant obstacles in accessing housing and job opportunities. Given the city's diverse, young population—half of Malmö's population is under the age of 35—these challenges create an urban landscape ripe for political engagement and experimentation, an important backdrop for understanding the trajectory of the double increase campaign (Malmö stad).

The double increase attempted in Malmö marked the first time landlords had organized a concerted attack on the negotiation system in this manner. Activists were well aware of this, pointing out what happens in Malmö sets a precedent for tenants and landlords nationwide. I understand Malmö therefore as a key case study: the dynamics emerging in the city between landlords and tenants are relevant to the national, and even trans-national scales (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Data collection

In fall 2023, I conducted four exploratory interviews with activists and housing scholars. My goal for these interviews was to gain insight into the complex Swedish housing landscape, clarify aspects of the SUT's structure, understand the significance of the double rent increase, and ultimately create an interview guide for future interviews. Interviewees were recruited through personal connections developed through academic and activist networks.

In addition to these exploratory conversations I attended events with tenant activists in Malmö, including a panel at the Nordic Labor Film Festival reflecting on the double increase

campaign. I attended Allt åt alla's annual strategy conference, which took place in Malmö in November 2023 and brought together Swedish housing activists in conversation with tenant organizers from the European Action Coalition, Barcelona en Comú, and Berlin's Deutsche Wohnen & Co. enteignen. In spring 2024 I attended further meetings between Malmö and Germany-based tenant activists, as well as a meeting of the local Möllan tenant network. My observations and informal conversations with participants at these events helped further develop my interview questions.

My analysis draws primarily on 11 in-depth interviews conducted with tenants between November 2023 and March 2024. In total, 10 tenants were interviewed, with one tenant being interviewed twice. Of these, 9 were based in Malmö. One was a tenant activist and scholar based in Stockholm, organizing with Ort till ort. Tenants had multiple organizational affiliations, indicating the overlapping and entangled nature of Malmö's activist networks. Organizations with which interviewees were involved as members, employees, or representatives include the SUT, Allt åt Alla, Ort till Ort, RaFILM, and Rosengård Folkets Hus. Interviewees all held key roles in the Malmö double increase campaign or in the emerging Swedish tenant movement in general. Three interviewees requested to remain anonymous and are therefore identified by pseudonym; all other tenants gave consent to be identified.

The interviews were semi-structured. From initial informal interviews, I created an interview guide (see *Appendix 2*), but conversations tended to flow naturally as participants were eager to share experiences and thoughts. Following feminist methodologies, I approached interviews understanding that "the researched are not passive" (England, 2015, p.288). This engendered a collaborative approach, in which mutual experiences of tenancy and organizing were shared to help overcome perceived power structures that potentially emerged due to my position as an academic researcher within a powerful institution. This allowed me to co-create knowledge with my interlocutors, understanding tenants as possessing expert knowledge in their own experiences.

I collected additional material in the form of official literature created by the SUT, both general membership information and pamphlets specifically about the 2023 double rent increase. These materials were analyzed for themes similarly to interviews, with the goal of contextualizing tenant interviews and providing insight into underlying ideologies guiding the SUT.

Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. To analyze data, I used abductive coding to identify themes and codes in tenant interviews using qualitative data analysis software Dedoose. Coding abductively meant developing a codebook based on initial research and background interviews to identify themes related to experiences with the SUT, perspectives on organizing, and takeaways from the campaign. Then, as I analyzed the data, I created data-driven codes for emerging themes that did not fit initial theories, allowing for

anomalies and surprises to come up during research. This approach allowed me to cycle more freely between my theory, methodology, and data, allowing these to develop in relation to each other.

Presentation of findings

This thesis builds throughout on what I learned through interviews with tenant interlocutors. The following section, “Setting the context,” should therefore be understood as building on and informed by interview data as well as secondary scholarship. In the “Findings and analysis” section, I rely more heavily on primary interview data to accurately relay the experiences and perceptions of tenants throughout the campaign. See *Appendix 2* for a list of interviewees to contextualize the following sections.

Setting the context

The SUT-grassroots split

Radical roots

How have staggering neoliberal reforms been possible in a country with the biggest tenants union in the world? To begin answering this requires understanding how these political reforms have been concurrent with the material and ideological transformation of the SUT's role, from a grassroots movement opposed to landlord interests, to an institutionalized actor tasked with mediating landlord-tenant relations.

Despite significant and undeniable neoliberal shifts towards privatization, the Swedish housing system continues to bear the mark of a century of organized tenant power. The SUT is one of the oldest organizations of its kind in the world, holding unparalleled strength in its institutionalized position (Rolf, 2021). Despite this, it has been unevenly researched, with few dedicated historical accounts of the SUT's shifting role over the past 100 years (Polanksa et al., 2021).

The Union was founded in 1923, formed by an initial group of tenant unions that had emerged during the previous decade in response to conditions issues. The early tenant movement was militant and confrontational, borrowing strategies from the labor movement to carry out rent strikes and boycotts of landlords' properties and businesses (Rolf, 2021). The Union was broadly characterized at this time by two fragments: the Stockholm-based faction, which tended towards reformist measures, and the Gothenburg-based tenant union, which had strong ties to labor and explicit socialist ideological leanings (Ibid.; Caldenby, 2019).

It was Gothenburg tenants who organized and led rental blockades on a mass scale (Rolf, 2021; Rolf, 2018; Baheru, 2017). Although such actions were pursued by Stockholm tenants as well, friction emerged between the two factions over the issue of blockades in particular. While Gothenburg tenants emphasized the need for direct, autonomous actions, Stockholm's union pushed for centralization and a greater reliance on the state as a driver of social and political transformation. The tension between these contending approaches exploded in the 1930s. The Stockholm union, which dominated the national level, successfully pushed for a deal granting tenants significant rent reductions—in exchange for an end to the use of rental blockades in most cases. By the 1940s, the SUT had taken significant steps towards centralization, diminishing the influence of radical factions and assuming a more institutionalized role (Bengtsson, 2016). While militant actions continued on a small scale in Gothenburg, the SUT would generally continue on this trajectory—towards centralized political action and away from grassroots mobilization—over the course of the next century (Rolf, 2023).

The first iteration of the collective bargaining model which governs Swedes today was introduced via the 1942 Act on Rent Control, a wartime provision that entitled tenants to

tenure security and imposed rent controls (Baheru, 2017; Bengtsson, 2016). The 1942 law was significant to the SUT's institutionalization, effectively making the Union representative for tenants nationwide. Tenant unionists shifted focus away from direct action and towards their new roles as political and legal advocates (Rolf, 2021).

The 1978 Tenancy Bargaining Act mandated collective bargaining between the SUT and landlords, institutionalizing the practice already regular on the rental market for decades. The 1978 Act was preceded by the Act of 1968, which established the use-value system—the unique metric used in Sweden to determine rents according not to market value but to “utility value.” The utility value principle means an apartment's rent must be set in a comparison with similar rents in a given area, and factor in characteristics such as location, environment, and quality (Baheru, 2017).

As the SUT won greater legal protections for tenants and moved into a more institutional role, its once militant grassroots character was slowly watered down. The standardization of negotiations relegated organizing tactics to the background and foregrounded the Union's role to maintain the landlord-tenant relationship through this process.

Historian Hannes Rolf has argued present day Swedes suffer from a kind of “collective amnesia” when it comes to their history of militant tenant organizing (Rolf, 2021). While today's SUT bears little resemblance to that of the 1920s and 1930s, the powerful status it holds now was made possible by the early grassroots efforts of tenants in Gothenburg and other cities. The early tensions between Gothenburg and Stockholm-based tenant unionists serve as an important backdrop to tensions that continue today within Swedish housing politics, between autonomous grassroots organizations and the SUT.

Recent tensions over renovation struggles

Today, the SUT is one of the largest civil society organizations in Sweden, with 530,000 members across the country, 10,000 elected tenant representatives and 850 employees across nine regions (Hyresgästföreningen, 2019; Polanska & Richard, 2021). The SUT collectively bargains rent on behalf of the vast majority of Sweden's three million tenants. This process is what continues to set Sweden apart from countries in which housing has been commodified. But in the context of rapid deregulation and privatization, the SUT's goals—protecting tenants' interests while maintaining an institutional relationship with landlords to do so—coexist increasingly uneasily.

While there are few studies exclusively dedicated to the SUT, it is referenced throughout renovations literature (Polanska & Richard, 2021; Gustafsson, 2019; Listerborn et al., 2020; Baeten, 2016). An emerging theme is the friction between the SUT and tenant activists when it comes to resisting renovations. Scholars have found the SUT to be an often “ambivalent” actor in these struggles, with tenants tending to mobilize outside and independently of, rather than in collaboration with, the Union (Thörn & Polanska, 2023). This is a consequence of two main factors: in the first place, there is frustration among tenants due to the perceived failure

of the SUT's negotiation system to safeguard against escalating rents and displacement. In the second, some tenants perceive the SUT as holding contradictory roles, serving both as representative for tenants and as a formal actor in a system increasingly associated with tenant dispossession (Thörn & Polanksa, 2023; Polanksa & Richard, 2021).

In particular, the SUT's role in facilitating some of the neoliberal reforms of the past years through strategic compromise, notably in 2011, has reinforced the idea that the Union has evolved to protect the landlord-tenant system as a whole, rather than tenants' interest in maintaining a strong right to housing (Ösgård & Wallstam, 2023). The SUT's commitments have led it to be bureaucratic and legalistic in its approach, creating red-tape barriers that essentially force tenants who want to organize effectively and with urgency to do so autonomously.

These concurrent issues have led to a split between grassroots activists and the SUT. Since the 1990s, new movements to address tenant problems have emerged, as the SUT takes a backseat to actively engaging with these issues. The need for grassroots action, unfulfilled by the SUT, has led to the rise of autonomous housing activist networks such as Bostadsvrålet (Housing Roar). From the outset, Housing Roar activists emphasized the need for popular grassroots organizations to lead, deliberately limiting SUT involvement in their annual conferences (Listerborn et al., 2020). In Stockholm, the grassroots network Ort till ort (Place to place), founded in 2015, has been instrumental in organizing against evictions, rent increases, and privatization (Kellecioglu, 2021). The national social union Allt åt alla, founded in 2009, has also made housing a central issue to their political strategy (Allt åt alla, n.d.). These groups emphasize principles of solidarity and organizing, using tactics like protests and direct and collective actions (Listerborn et al., 2020). This approach differs significantly from the SUT, which foregrounds political lobbying and legal service representation as guiding organizational strategies (Hyresgästföreningen, 2017).

This pattern persists locally. In many cases of resistance to rent increases and disrepair, tenants may draw on the SUT for legal support when necessary, but ultimately organize not via the SUT but through informal, loose networks of neighbors (Thörn, 2020). In three case studies of activism against deregulation in Stockholm, Malmö, and Uppsala, Gustafsson describes how activists experimented with art projects, open meetings, lectures, and symbolic political actions (Gustafsson, 2019). These actions took place outside the legislative bounds of the SUT framework, responding to the growing need for new, creative tactics to challenge encroaching commodification.

Today, the SUT's primary role outside of negotiating rent is providing legal services to membership. But this legalistic approach limits the Union's ability to effectively act against housing inequality and deregulation (Gustafsson, 2019). The legal arm of the SUT prioritizes cases that the Union can win, sometimes at the expense of tenants whose problems might be better solved through non-legal strategies such as collective organizing (Thörn, 2020). This legalistic approach individualizes tenants' issues, foreclosing collective action—which serves

not only as an important basis for political strategy, but also as an emotional support for tenants who feel isolated and disempowered by their experience (Ibid.).

At the same time, the SUT relies on a legal system that is itself deeply limited in dispensing justice. This is illustrated in the regional Rent Tribunals, which mediate conflicts between tenants and landlords that fail to be resolved through SUT negotiations, usually over contested rent increases and forced renovations. In practice, the Rent Tribunals tend to rule overwhelmingly—in over 90 percent of cases—in favor of landlords. Faced with this “mockery of justice,” many tenants understandably perceive the SUT’s legal approach as having limited power to protect them (Baeten, 2017, p.643; Bengtsson & Bohman, 2012). In a study of Malmö tenants faced with renoviction, Bengtsson and Bohman (2012) found tenants recognized they were able to exercise little power through the formal avenues available to them. As a result, tenants turned to informal strategies such as delay and public criticism. As in cases across the country, it was ultimately their informal organizing efforts that protected them—rather than their legal rights.

While discontent with the constraints of the legal system (and consequently the SUT, which relies on this system) is growing among tenants, particularly among younger demographics, it is important to note that there has long been a divide between ethnic Swedes and migrant communities when it comes to faith in the legal system. This is illustrated in a scholarly article by Hans Lind (2012), investigating the 2008 scandal in Malmö’s Herrgården housing estate, in the immigrant neighborhood of Rosengård. The estate garnered national attention due to rampant neglect: apartments were dangerously overcrowded and overrun with cockroaches. Lind’s central question is why tenants did not pursue the “existing legal possibilities to improve their housing quality” (Ibid., p.12). By failing to contact the SUT for support, Lind implicitly suggests the Herrgården tenants, most of them first or second-generation Swedes, are at least partially responsible for the slum-like conditions caused by landlord neglect.

Lind’s inquiry is worth including because I find that it is indicative of a broader consensus in Swedish society. Indeed, the SUT’s current organizational approach is undergirded by an assumption that tenants will take action when their rights are being violated. But this approach fails to account for the myriad ways the tenant movement has been weakened over the past decades. Somewhat ironically, this attitude relies on the existence of a strong grassroots tenant consciousness—one that no longer exists among Swedes in general, and has never existed in migrant communities, where the SUT has struggled with representation.

In this context, I frame the 2023 double increase as a moment of collision, as globalized local forces, empowered by decades-worth of neoliberal reforms, clashed with a new movement of tenants intent on repoliticizing housing as a terrain of struggle. As a consequence of its institutionalization, the SUT has become depoliticized, leading to a tense, and sometimes antagonistic, relationship with a new wave of grassroots housing struggles. During the 2023 double increase campaign, tenant activists realized earlier and with more urgency than SUT officials the need for a campaign built on grassroots organizing principles. Tenants’

autonomous actions during the double increase campaign, against the backdrop of similar actions springing up across Sweden in the past several years, have pushed the SUT to begin recognizing, albeit slowly, the limits of the legislative regulations it has relied on to protect tenants against dispossession conditions. During the campaign, tenant activists operated at once independently of the SUT to achieve short term goals, while also taking steps to re-politicize the SUT's approach from inside, ultimately working towards strengthening the tenant movement in the long term.

Malmö: emerging housing justice movements

Rosengård: organizing for local needs

The double increase campaign emerged with two central organizational nodes in Malmö: the neighborhoods of Rosengård and Möllan. Rosengård is home to 24,000 residents, of whom over 80 percent are first and second-generation immigrants from countries including Iraq, Syria, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia (Malmö stad). The area has lower income levels than the city average, having been subject to systemic segregation for years. A 2017 report by the Swedish Police identified the neighborhood as an “especially vulnerable area”—a label that gained widespread attention in right-wing media in Sweden, fueling the country's rising tide of xenophobia and Islamophobia.

The area has suffered housing neglect for decades, and residents anticipate future rent increases as the state facilitates access to private companies for development in the neighborhood (Oudin et al., 2016; Derakhti & Baeten, 2020). The news of the double increase was met with acute anxiety by locals. More so than other Malmö residents, a local activist pointed out, Rosengård tenants are “already struggling [to afford] the daily basics,” making even a two percent rent increase burdensome (Interview with Halimo).

Despite facing systemic barriers, Rosengård is a vibrant hub of diverse identities, challenging the narrow narratives imposed upon it. Residents identify positively with their neighborhood: diverse cultural norms have created a community with uniquely strong social ties. When asked about reasons to live and stay in Rosengård, residents overwhelmingly described proximity to community, friends, and family, illustrating the enduring sense of belonging and kinship that permeate the fabric of the neighborhood (Derakhti & Baeten, 2020).

In Rosengård, fierce organizing emerged against the 2023 double rent increase. Activists leveraged the neighborhood's immigrant identity and tradition of community organizing, relying on existing networks of religious, cultural, and kinship groups. But the groundwork for the campaign began before 2023. The double increase campaign was led by activists from Rosengård Folkets Hus, a community center and hub for political mobilization and cultural events. Rosengård tenants have been historically underrepresented in the SUT, something that Folkets Hus chairman Halimo Nuur, who was interviewed for this study, already sought to change. Prior to the 2023 campaign, she helped start a local SUT group, in part to seek SUT support with an ongoing rat problem in the area, which had gone unaddressed by landlords.

Nuur characterized the rat issue as part of a recurrent pattern of neglect in the area. Landlords often attribute these problems to tenants, employing racially charged accusations of “behavioral problems” to shift responsibility onto residents (Interview with Halimo).

Another key factor in Rosengård was the presence of a familiar face in the SUT. Zidane Said grew up in Rosengård and works as a SUT Folkrörelseutvecklare, or “people’s movement developer.” Said played a key role in the inception of the latest local SUT group in Rosengård. My interview with Said underscored his role as a gatekeeper. His familiarity with Rosengård proved instrumental in his ability to mobilize the community, strengthening Rosengård’s collective voice in the campaign. Similarly, Nuur’s role as chairman of the new local SUT group established her as another “bond between the system and the people” (Interview with Halimo).

Möllan: revitalizing the grassroots

Like Rosengård, Möllevången (or Möllan) was uniquely primed to confront the double increase challenge. Möllan is a multicultural neighborhood of 10,000 residents, with a strong working class history. For my interviews in Möllan, many interlocutors suggested the Arbetets ära statue in Möllevångstorget square as a meeting point. The statue depicts the history of Malmö’s labor movement, and the square has been the setting for left-wing demonstrations for decades—most recently, those protesting the ongoing genocide in Gaza. The neighborhood’s international makeup, coupled with its reputation as a stronghold for leftist movements, makes possible the adoption of alternative strategies in an activist context (Hansen, 2022).

In Möllan, the success of the double increase campaign stemmed in part from mounting frustration among a younger generation of Swedish tenants. While Rosengård’s immigrant context meant feelings of exclusion from the Swedish system were already somewhat present, among young ethnic Swedes in Möllan, this sense of exclusion is newly emerging. These tenants have inherited familiarity with the SUT from their parents, but without the corresponding stability the SUT’s system once guaranteed (Grander, 2021; Listerborn, 2021).

It was in this context local Möllan activists had been seeking to introduce organizing tactics into the SUT’s repertoire for several years. Efforts were centralized in the creation of a local tenants network in 2019, which brought together tenants who saw the SUT’s stance as too apolitical in the face of rising rents and encroaching privatization. The network served as a space for tenants to wield greater local representation in the SUT, while also experimenting with new grassroots tactics that were not possible or encouraged centrally in the SUT.

The formation of this group followed the election of Joel Nordström to the board of the Tenants union Malmö Västra (Malmö West) in 2018. Nordström, who now serves as chairman of the Tenants union Malmö Västra and vice chairman of the regional board for Southern Skåne, was decades younger than most of the SUT leadership at the time of his initial election. Together with other members of the Möllan network, he sought to bring a

new vocabulary of political organizing to the Union. Nordström's growing role in the SUT, and the growing influence of the local Möllan network, heralded a shifting tide within Malmö's branch of the Union towards a more grassroots approach.

Findings and analysis

A new threat from landlords

In March 2023, after annual rents had already been negotiated and finalized, seven major landlords in Malmö—Heimstaden, Willhem, Trianon, Rosengård fastigheter, Victoriahem, Josefssons fastigheter and Kanslihuset—announced they would raise rents a second time (Hyresgästföreningen, 2023).

This move marked a pivotal moment of eruption in the Swedish housing landscape, representing a new step by landlords to push for greater rent deregulation. Renovictions have become a common tactic, and landlords have been pushing for higher rent increases for several years. But the double increase heralded an aggressive shift away from the existing negotiation system altogether. Both within and outside of the SUT, the 2023 increase was perceived as an effort by landlords to forge “a new kind of way,” by seeking to “bypass” or “test” the SUT system to a more intense degree than before (Interview with Said).

A key finding was the significance of unwritten or informal rules shaping expectations for both landlords and tenants. Legally, landlords are technically allowed to negotiate for a second rent increase within a year—but the decades-long norm has been a once-annual increase. Activists argued that strong faith in such norms was an important part of why the double increase campaign was able to gain popular support, since campaigners argued landlords were “breaking the... informal rules, which are super important [in Sweden]” (Interview with Joel, March 2024).

2023 followed several successful years for landlords in pushing for rents to increase in accordance with interest rates, ignoring cost of living concerns and prioritizing profits over tenant affordability. For Mia, a Möllan tenant and SUT representative, negotiation agreements feel increasingly “based on the landlord’s terms, not the tenants,” an indicator of how far Sweden has departed from the welfare state model the country epitomized, at least in popular imagination, for so long. For landlords to shoulder tenants with their costs out of a single-minded concern with profits felt new and foreign to the Swedish context. As Said put it, “We are becoming like the US... you have to make money.”

Tenants I spoke to understood shifting landlord behavior as a result of concurrent trends, from rising inflation and interest rates to the growing presence of global corporate landlords in the country. One of those who attempted the double increase was Heimstaden, one of the biggest residential property owners in Europe. Heimstaden has been accused of rent gouging and neglect by tenants across its markets—notably in Germany, where a “Stop Heimstaden” campaign emerged in 2020 to organize against the company (Sustr, 2020).

In interviews, Heimstaden emerged as an example of the new landlord class tenants are up against, one difficult to hold accountable using the old methods of the SUT. Whereas previously, smaller landlords might be pushed to action by tenant complaints, bigger

companies like Heimstaden can more easily ignore such demands. Anna, a Malmö tenant and SUT representative who is identified by pseudonym, explained companies like Heimstaden “run by their own rules... if we don’t want to negotiate with them, it’s not necessarily that much of an issue. Because if that one house falls through, that’s one house in a big international pot, it makes very little difference [to them].”

In the context of the steadily growing influence of such mega-landlords, as well as the concurrent rise in interest rates that has left landlords eager to make up losses, some tenants felt the SUT could have been more proactive in acknowledging and addressing shifting power dynamics in the housing sphere. The SUT should have been “more aggressive to landlords” earlier, to ensure when interest rates rose, property owners would not offload their new financial burdens onto tenants (Interview with Mia).

It is not unheard of for landlords to levy additional rent increases on tenants after the official negotiations have already taken place. This *direktaviser*ing (or “direct notification”) is charged directly to tenants in an attempt to yield greater payments. While landlords are technically allowed to try raising rents this way, tenants are not legally bound to pay additional increases outside of SUT-negotiated rent. In these cases, the SUT instructs tenants to view charges as merely a “proposal,” and to seek legal support from the Union before paying (Hem & Hyra 2023). Until 2023, this occurred uncommonly and only on a small scale. But importantly, when tenants do receive unnegotiated rents through these direct notifications, the majority tend to pay (M. Hole, personal communication, October 26, 2023).

The 2023 action was a new kind of *direktaviser*ing, one undertaken at an unprecedented organized and mass scale. As in other *direktaviser*ing cases, most tenants who received the new unnegotiated rents *did* pay. According to the four biggest landlords pursuing the double increase (Heimstaden, Victoriahem, Willhem, and Trianon), between 72 and 90 percent of tenants paid the new rent, although they were not legally bound to do so, and against the SUT’s official guidance (Hem & Hyra, 2023). These tenants will be paid back, due to the success of the campaign against the double increase. But that such a high number paid in the first place indicates how Swedish cultural norms of trust risk complacency in an increasingly unequal landlord-tenant relationship.

Of course, not all tenants paid the new rent. As landlords moved away from old norms, local activists saw the opportunity for the latent tenant movement to do the same. The clear organization of private landlords galvanized activists to take a grassroots approach in their campaign. Recognizing landlords were effectively collectivizing due in part to the fact the tenants movement had been dormant for so long, tenants saw the double increase campaign as an opportunity to exercise “a power against [landlord] power. We had the people’s power. We needed to show our power to [landlords], because they already have power that they are using” (Interview with Halimo).

Landlord attacks on the SUT negotiation model during the 2023 double increase underscore a critical lesson: legal institutions and policies are only as strong as the social movements that

create and sustain them. By mobilizing and building tenant power through the double increase campaign, activists acknowledged that statutory protections, even those as robust as tenant laws in Sweden, are never given but are instead products of hard-fought struggles, perpetually subject to contestation and negotiation.

Perceptions of the Swedish Union of Tenants

Leaving the grassroots behind

To understand how the double increase campaign galvanized grassroots engagement, I sought to investigate how tenants relate to the SUT. I found the SUT is widely seen among tenants as lacking a coherent or effective strategy for grassroots engagement, although there are gradual shifts towards changing this. The sentiment conveyed by tenants suggests the SUT's base is not actively engaged; rather, it is made up of mostly "passive membership" (Interview with Olof).

Currently, the SUT employs localized engagement tactics primarily centered around facilitating social gatherings in areas already well-represented in the Union. According to Orla, who is identified by pseudonym and has been involved in the SUT as head of her local chapter, discourse often revolves around securing funding for communal gatherings like Fika, emphasizing neighborly interactions. However, these social gatherings lack a concurrent emphasis on the political or ideological principles ostensibly integral to the Union's organizational ethos—an absence that emerged as a point of discontent for tenants in the double increase campaign. While Orla acknowledged the significance of these social gatherings in fostering community, she criticized the Union for focusing "[too little] on the political and on how you can actually affect the bigger picture."

I find that the SUT has maintained membership without a strong organizing strategy due to reliance on Swedish culture of loyalty, and collective nostalgia that persists among many Swedes. For ethnic Swedes, older generations in particular, joining the SUT may be done out of a commitment to upholding socio-cultural norms, not necessarily out of a desire to be politically active. Anna described her mother's attachment to the organization as illustrative of a generational attitude: "There was definitely a sort of very rose tinted, very proud collective memory of what the Hyresgästföreningen used to be... A lot of people, especially her generation, still have that around Hyresgästföreningen" (Interview with Anna). This sense that older generations are more reliably attached to the SUT through collective memory arose across interviews as representative of a wider disconnect between younger Swedes living with the consequences of neoliberal deregulations, and older generations who benefitted from the heyday of the strong Swedish welfare state.

Trust in the country's political system has been waning for several decades (Holmberg 1999). Although collective nostalgia persists, the Swedish model no longer exists in reality as it does in memory, a fact most immediately evident to immigrant communities and younger Swedes

(Soto 2022). That the double increase campaign emerged in Rosengård and Möllan—two of Malmö’s youngest and most diverse neighborhoods—is therefore not coincidental.

In Rosengård, lack of engagement with and representation within the SUT is particularly acute. First and second-generation immigrants to Sweden do not share in the collective nostalgia for the SUT which drives membership for others. Exacerbating this, Rosengård’s immigrant community is less inclined toward the trust characterizing traditional Swedish attitudes towards the state. For immigrants, the Swedish system is often “not enough... [and] making stuff harder us... which means people do not trust the system” (Interview with Halimo). Because of this, and compounded by a lack of SUT outreach in their neighborhood, Rosengård tenants are unlikely to join the organization without good reason. Consequently, there is a serious lack of immigrant representation in the SUT. And in a place as diverse as Rosengård, representation is the difference between participation and exclusion.

Ali, an activist from Rosengård identified by pseudonym here, described his immigration experience as one defined by struggling to reckon with the dissonance between the idealized portrayal of the Swedish system and its actual implementation. He felt deceived by the pervasive marketing of Sweden as a social and welfare paradise, as he has now witnessed this model being materially dismantled at a high pace (Interview with Ali). This experience indicates the power of collective imagination in upholding a commitment to and trust in the Swedish state, even as the state changes rapidly. While Ali’s positionality as an outsider allowed him to easily perceive the shifts in the system, this is not true for everyone. For many Swedes, “there’s still this trust, [that] the state knows, knows best... that’s the scary part, is that people completely trust the state and the system” (Interview with Ali). For him, this trust plays an important role in eroding progressive institutions, by fostering collective complacency that enables neoliberal and far-right agendas to advance. Conservative changes gain traction without significant resistance when “you lose that spirit of, ‘we have to fight for our own rights’... and you trust the system” (Interview with Ali).

Outside of nostalgia-driven engagement, many tenants join the SUT because it functions as a legal service provider, a role the organization emphasizes in its official literature as a primary reason for membership (Hyresgästföreningen, 2022). Multiple tenants described SUT membership as a kind of “legal insurance,” or a “law line” (Interview with Ali; Interview with Said; Interview with Orla). Tenants articulated multifaceted reservations about this legal service provision being such a key priority in the SUT’s approach. The organization’s centralized structure perpetuates a geographic disconnect between tenants and SUT lawyers, who are not necessarily situated locally and therefore have limited knowledge of local context and needs (Interview with Olof; Interview with Ali). This spatial disjuncture exacerbates perceived disparities between tenants’ lived housing experiences and the opaque bureaucratic mechanisms of the SUT.

Additionally, the reliance on legalistic interventions individualizes housing grievances, depoliticizing systemic issues and undermining collective efforts to address structural injustices. The SUT has become synonymous with this legalistic approach, which has

ultimately come to replace—rather than work in tandem with—a coherent grassroots engagement strategy. SUT tenant representatives underscore how this replacement has led tenants to engage with the SUT more as a service provider and less like a union in which they are active members. Anna said there is a need to shift to recognizing that while the SUT can help tenants organize, it does not organize on their behalf. Currently, the Union suffers from “a fairly common misconception, that Hyresgästföreningen is supposed to sweep in and do things for people and they don't really have to do anything” (Interview with Anna).

It was this misconception organizers leading the double increase campaign had been seeking to change, even before the onset of the campaign. Tenants in the Möllan network who sought greater influence in the SUT expressed frustration over the lack of discussion within the Union about organizing tactics to increase membership, which had previously declined by nearly 100,000 members between 1997 and 2011 (Hem & Hyra, 2014). Instead, SUT employees treated tenants more like legal clients, an approach that diminished meaningful tenant engagement. When tenants call in with issues, employees tend to assess whether their case can be handled legally—and if not, turn them away. Although frustrated callers “are the prime people for organizing,” the SUT was failing to organize them, instead persistently pursuing legal solutions at the expense of grassroots engagement (Interview with Joel, November 2023).

Abandoning antagonism, embracing bureaucracy

The SUT began as a movement to transform the landlord-tenant relationship. Today, its main role is arguably to manage that relationship via the negotiation system—in doing so, contributing to upholding and institutionalizing it. Like many social movements, the SUT’s historical trajectory is marked by the tension between relying on legal rights to strengthen their movements, while aspiring to transform conditions beyond these rights. As rents are now rising and housing precarity becoming more normalized, it is key to assess how SUT has struggled to maintain an ideological horizon that seeks change beyond the boundaries of a rights-based, legislative frame.

The SUT’s approach has resulted in some of the strongest tenant protections globally. That Swedish landlords must collectively bargain rents rather than set them for profit underscores the SUT’s influence and contributes to Sweden’s low eviction rates (von Otter et al., 2017). However, I find that the SUT’s reliance on legislative protections has weakened its ability to react effectively to Sweden’s shifting landscape of power relations between tenants, landlords, and the state, which has become increasingly amenable to the interests of private property capital.

As Alex, an organizer in the Möllan network, pointed out, “the Swedish models have worked as well for quite a long time. But they are not working very [well] anymore.” The SUT is therefore under pressure to “change...or evolve,” in recognition of the fact the negotiation system is not static, but reflects the relative power of involved parties (Interview with Said). The act of interpreting the utility value model is therefore increasingly contested; negotiations have become a battleground where landlords seek to maximize profits, evident in Malmö’s

recent rent hikes. Tenants noted this growing power imbalance between landlords and the SUT as underscoring the need for a strong tenants movement to act as a counterbalance to landlord power.

But some tenants see the SUT's current approach as not actively antagonistic, but defensive, describing the double increase as a consequence of the organization's failure to "do a lot of things earlier" to combat landlord aggression (Interview with Mia). Some feared the organization's approach means it operates to protect its legal apparatus even if that means agreeing to disastrous compromises, out of a fear that "if we push it too far, we'll lose everything" (Interview with Alex). This was expressed in multiple interviews as a sense that "there is a very dominant tradition in the tenants organization [of] maintaining the system," that is, the negotiation model, even "at the expense, definitely of individual tenants, but also sometimes at the expense of tenants overall" (Ibid.).

This sense that the SUT has not been sufficiently antagonistic towards landlords was reinforced by emerging tensions between the two groups making up the SUT: paid staff and elected tenant representatives. In theory, employees are employed to fulfill the goals and demands of the Union's tenant membership—but interviews revealed significant differences between these groups when it comes to envisioning and implementing strategic goals.

Tenants felt that some Union employees "are more concerned about the relation to the property owners than to the tenants, because they want to make sure that [the negotiation] system lives on" (Interview with Orla). In particular, multiple tenants reported conflict with SUT negotiators, who undertake rent negotiations with landlords on behalf of tenants. While these negotiators are ostensibly engaging with and representing the demands of tenants actually living in the buildings for which they are negotiating rents, in practice they often fail to do so. In two cases, interviewees were left out entirely from their own rental negotiation process by SUT's employed negotiators (Interview with Alex; Interview with Orla). Tenants felt they were not taken seriously by employees as equal parties, leading negotiators to make agreements with landlords without including tenant perspectives.

The division between SUT employees and tenants creates a sense of ambiguity regarding class dynamics and political affiliations. This perception of "blurred lines" diminished active involvement among SUT members by fostering the sense that the negotiations are not a "democratically flattened" process, but rather a process characterized by "another bureaucrat deciding for you or instead of you, without you being involved" (Interview with Ali). This division exacerbates feelings of confusion and mistrust among immigrant tenants regarding potential for meaningful participation in the SUT.

This perception is not limited to immigrant communities. Even among tenants who were active in the SUT, the perception that SUT employees do not necessarily feel beholden to members persisted. Orla, in her capacity as head of her building's SUT local, felt employees "find it more convenient to work without the activists," underscoring how tenant activism

happens not just separately from the SUT but at times actively in tension with the Union (Interview with Orla).

Ilhan Kellecioglu, a Stockholm-based organizer with Ort till Ort, pointed out that “[SUT] has been adopted by the politicians, becoming an interest organization and going away from a membership organization,” a transition that required a new fluency in the language of power. While protest and activism were essential to the early tenant movement, the SUT’s institutionalized position in the country’s corridors of power has demanded a different set of skills. To enter such spaces, Said explained, “You have to put on a suit. You have to speak the language. You have to know how to behave, you cannot go there and be a protester.” Moving away from confrontational tactics and towards more bureaucratic strategies like legal representation, data collection, and political lobbying, the SUT has enacted reforms potentially unattainable through traditional activism.

But by abandoning antagonism, the SUT risks “losing itself,” (Interview with Said). Institutionalization in the political sphere “creates a passivity” in the face of threats like the double increase: “when these kind reforms come... you don’t know how to act, you don’t know what to do except for writing articles or writing petitions towards the politicians” (Interview with Ilhan). Tenants in the double increase campaign underscored an urgent desire for meaningful transformation that transcends this bureaucratic inertia many have come to associate with the SUT.

Olof, an organizer with Allt åt Alla active in the double increase campaign, expressed nervousness about joining the SUT because he perceived strict rules and bureaucratic processes to follow. He recounted one episode in which a tenant was reprimanded by SUT higher-ups for posting photos of mold and disrepair in her apartment on Facebook. Despite wanting to potentially become a representative for his housing area, Olof ultimately felt prevented from doing so due to the bureaucratic constraints he associated with the SUT (Interview with Olof).

This perception of the SUT as operating within predefined rules and boundaries in their approach to (non)confrontations with landlords, emerged as a focal point during the double increase campaign. Tenants in the campaign challenged these contours of permissible action, which have restricted their agency when it comes to challenging power. Alex underscored how the campaign served as a space for tenants to exercise autonomous actions without the shackles of formal approval and bureaucratic constraints: “We also always have to have ways of acting and not having to ask for permission to act... Having these non-formal ways of doing stuff gives us that possibility.”

Across interviews, even when “rules” within the SUT did not come up explicitly, the issue of bureaucracy was a consistent theme. Ultimately, bureaucratic mechanics operated in tandem with, or sometimes indistinguishably from, perceived “silence rules” that limited tenants’ agency (Interview with Mia). As with other representational barriers to participation in the SUT, bureaucratic norms posed a particular problem for immigrant communities. For those

not raised with Swedish cultural norms, these unwritten rules are difficult, if not impossible, to navigate (Ibid.). This was reflected in Halimo's experience starting a SUT local in Rosengård. A seasoned organizer, she still found joining the SUT uniquely challenging, due to its hierarchical structure and bureaucratic procedures, which made it difficult to "work effectively as an activist" (Interview with Halimo).

This convergence underscores how bureaucratic procedures serve not just as administrative processes, but also wield normative power. The SUT's bureaucratic apparatus is therefore not just cumbersome to navigate, but functions as an influential silent arbiter, shaping how and in what ways tenants may act.

For many, the double increase illustrated a need to move away from bureaucracy and revitalize the radical origins of the SUT to guarantee the organization's longevity: "If Hyresgästföreningen is going to be here for 100 more years, then we really need to think about people, and not bureaucracy" (Interview with Halimo). The double rent campaign was contextualized by this growing awareness among tenants that the time during which Swedish tenants could take their strong position for granted had been over for some time. For a long time, "[We] could settle, because you know you have the power, and you don't have to do anything more" (Interview with Mia). But the double increase marked a new recognition of the need to actively fight to enforce tenant rights.

A different kind of campaign: new strategies and approaches

In Rosengård

The campaign in Rosengård targeted Rosengårds fastigheter (Rosengård Properties), which owns 1,600 apartments in the neighborhood and sought to levy the double increase along with the other major Malmö landlords (Hyresgästföreningen 2023). Exemplifying the public-private ownership that has come to define much of the Swedish housing stock in the wake of new privatization laws, Rosengårds fastigheter is owned in equal parts (25 percent each) by three private companies and MKB, the municipal housing company.

It was in Rosengård where tenants gained their first success when Rosengård fastigheter became the first major property owner to back down from the double increase in June 2023. In contrast, the other four major landlords continued to press the double increase until September 2023. I find that the success of the Rosengård campaign stemmed from tenants experimenting with organizing strategies attentive to the local and lived complexities of their neighborhood. From the beginning, organizers based at Rosengård Folkets Hus recognized the "official campaign"—the efforts spearheaded by the SUT against the double increase—would be "slow, and [would not] be adapted to local needs" (Interview with Ali).

With this understanding, the Rosengård campaign mobilized over 70 political, cultural, religious, and other community organizations in their fight against Rosengårds fastigheter. The tactics used in Rosengård were deeply attentive to the local context of the area. In a

striking demonstration of the extensive reach of these creative tactics, organizers collaborated with local mosques to disseminate information during Friday prayers. This approach was mindful of the predominantly immigrant population in Rosengård, many of whom are Muslim.

Likewise, organizers utilized Whatsapp channels to disseminate their messages, capitalizing on the widespread use of the messaging app within immigrant communities. Campaigners created a video conveying their message, recognizing the diversity of languages spoken in Rosengård, and that not everyone in the community could read and write. In general, the issue of translation posed a major challenge—while the SUT created several fliers for dissemination with information about tenants’ rights in regards to the second increase, these were written in Swedish. For many tenants in Rosengård, where common first languages include Arabic, Somali, Turkish, and Serbo-Croatian, the Swedish only information was inaccessible.

Rosengård activists lobbied the SUT to create translated versions of the informational fliers, “making a lot of noise” in an attempt to push the Union to be more quickly responsive to “what people are asking for” (Interview with Halimo). In the end however, the official translation process was so delayed that Folkets Hus organizers ended up doing many of the initial translations themselves—“the anarchistic way”—to ensure Rosengård residents would not be behind the rest of Malmö when it came to knowing their rights (Ibid.).

In contrast to the phone outreach used in Möllan, organizers highlighted the necessity of in-person and face-to-face organizing for the Rosengård campaign, recognizing that tenants were unlikely to solely rely on messaging from the SUT due to lack of familiarity and trust in the organization. Halimo explained, “We needed to see people face to face. They needed to understand who was calling... They need a face, they need to understand what Hyrestgasforeningen is, and so on. So [phone calls] didn't work for us” (Interview with Halimo).

The in-person engagement allowed Rosengård organizers to distinguish themselves from the at-times corporatist approach of the SUT. Folkets Hus and Allt åt Alla organizers led with the message that, “We are here for you, we don’t care about [SUT] membership... what matters for us is that you don’t get extra rent, when it's already difficult” (Interview with Ali). The emphasis here on support regardless of SUT membership was in reaction and contrast to the SUT’s policy to provide legal assistance exclusively to its members, which was a source of tension during the double increase campaign. In Rosengård, because of preexisting representation issues, many tenants saw no reason to become members, indicating a divide between how the SUT understands itself and how tenants actually relate to it.

Halimo described local tenants as resistant to joining an organization in which they were not represented. When talking to local tenants about the SUT, she continually came up against the same questions: “Why should I be a member, if my subjects are not included? If I'm not included, if my problems are not part of the work, if my area is not being lifted, if my

landlords are not held accountable of what they're doing?... If I don't have a voice that talks for me and represents me, then I'm not part of it" (Interview with Halimo).

As a result of campaigning by tenants in Rosengård and Möllan, and acknowledging the extraordinary circumstances of the double rent increase, the SUT ultimately agreed to implement a temporary three-months free membership option, extending representation to tenants whose legal issues predated membership. Nevertheless, the membership-focused approach of the SUT was frequently cited by interviewees as reflecting a broader divergence in approach between the Union and activists. Rosengård activists argued, "The membership parts, the recruitment, should be put aside. It's the campaigning parts at first. Because otherwise it creates too many contradicting messages" (Interview with Ali).

At times, this tension in approaches materially impacted campaign efforts. Once their initial landlord target, Rosengård fastigheter, backed down from the second increase, Folkets Hus organizers expanded efforts to campaigning against Victoriahem, another property owner attempting the double increase in the area. But when Rosengård organizers began in-person outreach to Victoriahem tenants, they found SUT employees had already knocked on doors to warn tenants of the increase—but in a manner that "destroyed... the whole campaign spirit" Rosengård-based organizers had been working hard to get across. When SUT recruiters knocked doors, tenants "perceived [it as], 'You're asking for membership first—you're not really here for my concerns'" (Interview with Ali).

The SUT's approach to Victoriahem tenants in Rosengård created a high degree of skepticism and confusion among residents about the degree to which their housing concerns would be prioritized by Union employees. I find that this tension over messaging reflects a broader challenge of organizing a coherent campaign that involves both a major institutional actor, the SUT, and diverse grassroots stakeholders. In explicitly making it a part of their strategy to not center membership, Rosengård organizers sought to create a tenant movement that transcended traditional boundaries and strived for inclusivity. Their aim was not just to recruit members, but to spark a collective movement, in which individual tenants could feel connected and involved.

While instances of friction between grassroots activists and the SUT emerged, what ultimately emerged was a dual trajectory: activists critiqued the Union's shortcomings while making concerted efforts to reshape its direction. Both the Rosengård and Möllan campaigns, despite their occasional clashes with the SUT, shared a common goal of revitalizing and reimagining the Union. Activists openly described the limitations of the Union but also strategically leveraged its influence and resources—for instance, urging tenants to capitalize on the free months of membership to gain legal protections, and using the Union's official logo on translated fliers as a means to establish credibility. Tenants' simultaneous skepticism and recognition of the Union's logo as a symbol of legitimacy underscored the complex attitudes towards the Union that shaped the Rosengård campaign.

Simultaneously, I observe a discernible shift within the SUT, marked by a growing acknowledgment of the need for grassroots engagement and empowerment. In an informational panel about the double increase campaign at the November 2023 Nordic Labor Film Festival, activists from Rosengård were given a central platform to discuss their organizing tactics. This signals a notable transformation within the Union, reflective of a broader recognition of the efficacy and necessity of political mobilization in effecting change within the landlord-tenant landscape.

Ultimately, I find that Rosengård led the citywide campaign against the double increase precisely because of their grassroots engagement, which they were uniquely positioned to undertake. Relatedly, I also find the narrativization of the campaign was of almost equal import to local activists as the win itself, given the history of exclusion and stigmatization faced by Rosengård tenants. The political logic of the grassroots strategy in Rosengård centered the agency and autonomy of marginalized citizens, who have not always been included in the institutions like the SUT, that undergird the Swedish welfare state.

At the same time, the Rosengård narrative centers on how the campaign's success stemmed from using tactics that exemplified residents pushing for strategies attentive to the complexities of their lives. My interlocutors were keen to emphasize that their win resulted from the strength of community networks specific to the neighborhood and active independently of the SUT: "It was not any more on Hyresgästföreningen that was doing [the campaign]. It was a network that was doing this. We could not win without this network" (Interview with Halimo). Likewise, activists were careful to point out that, "us winning in Rosengård made it possible for the whole of Malmö to understand that this is actually possible to win" (Ibid.). The success of the Rosengård campaign underscored the power of grassroots organizing and paved the way for continued mobilization across Malmö.

In Möllan

In February 2023, many of the tenants in the Möllan network took "Organizing for Power," an online training course hosted jointly by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and U.S. labor organizer Jane McAlevey. The six-week intensive course is aimed at equipping organizers worldwide with the concrete skills to "build disciplined majorities capable of winning measurable victories through well-planned campaigns" (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, n.d.).

In interviews with tenants from the Möllan network, this training came up multiple times as a key example of the work that was already underway to lay the groundwork for a campaign with new and revitalized grassroots tactics. The double increase then, was not a wake up call for Möllan tenants. Rather, it represented an escalation from landlords for which they had been preparing for some time. When the network learned of landlords' plan for a second increase, tenants saw it as an opportunity to exercise their newly developed organizing skills and experiment with a new kind of campaign. The Möllan campaign was therefore characterized by new and concerted strategies of organization—departing from previous

tenants' resistance to landlord tactics like renoviction and neglect, which had been characterized by spontaneity (Listerborn et al., 2020).

Möllan organizers knew that the SUT already had a method for mobilizing in areas where there were existing elected tenant representatives. But the double increase campaign served as a chance to experiment with methods to increase grassroots engagement, including in areas where the Union had no existing membership or engagement. Over the course of the double increase campaign, Möllan tenants built up a structure to mobilize tenants in a new way. Because of the political work that tenants had already been doing, such as through the Organizing for Power course, “all of the tools and the methods were in a lot of [their] heads” before the campaign had even begun (Interview with Joel, November 2023).

Concretely, these tools looked like new strategies—many of them imported from elsewhere, notably the American labor movement—to organize and activate new members. Activists developed the concept of a “stairwell organizer,” or “Trappkontakt” in Swedish, who would serve as the main organizer for a single house or apartment building, in which all tenants share the same stairwell. The idea was to make signing up to be involved in the campaign seem like a relatively small effort on tenants' part, to make involvement more accessible and therefore widespread. The stairwell organizer concept also acknowledged the importance of organizing at a local level, recognizing that local organizers would be “better at spreading the message so that people receive it [and] at least know their face” (Ibid.).

The familiarity of this group of organizers with the grammar of organizing diverged from the SUT's traditional approach to door knocking, which tended to rely on paid recruiters whose main goal is to sell SUT memberships. Some of these recruiters from the SUT were also active in the double increase campaign, but “their job was not campaigning... they mainly still just sold memberships” (Ibid.). By contrast, and reflecting the tensions also felt in Rosengård between the official SUT campaign and local efforts, the Möllan network tenants knocking doors and canvassing were having “totally different [discussions] from the sellers” (Ibid.).

The campaign was unlike any previous campaign that the SUT had been involved in in Malmö. Campaigning had come to mean a top-down process wherein the SUT's employed communication staff would decide on a campaign plan, design posters, and then disseminate the plan among elected tenant representatives to carry out. To a new degree, the double increase campaign in Möllan embraced the messiness and tensions that came with building a grassroots campaign; organizers found that in a movement-building context, “we don't need to agree with everything in all instances. It's good for us to think differently about different stuff” (Interview with Alex).

In Möllan too, the slow pace of the Union often led tenants to bypass official channels to accomplish tasks. Activists operated “both in structures but also outside structures,” which ultimately benefited the campaign as a whole (Ibid.). The double increase campaign was marked by a convergence of various strategies, diverging from the Union's formal hierarchy. Instead, there was a free flow of information and directives in multiple directions, with

tenants taking initiative inspired by the campaign, and acting autonomously. For organizers like Alex, this indicated the success of their grassroots approach: “From a movement perspective, it was so great to see how people, even those who we had not had contact with, were talking to their neighbors, doing this kind of work... this is the place you want to get to right? People are active and now find ways of how they can become part of a movement.”

Nordström and other more activist members of the SUT understood the campaign as an opportunity for SUT officials to relinquish some control, to allow more tenants to be active participants. This open approach paid off; activists credit the campaign with contributing to the uptick in local SUT chapters across Malmö. Part of this approach also meant embracing antagonism by seeking to harness the frustration that many tenants felt, whether towards the SUT or about the double increase situation in general. This required a shift in reacting to such tenants, who “might be angry at [the SUT] when [they] call in” (Interview with Joel, November 2023). Rather than immobilizing these feelings by turning tenants towards legal solutions or ignoring them altogether, campaigners understood this anger as “a good sign... of engagement,” and tried to channel these tenants into newly developed channels for organizing (Ibid.).

Conclusion

This thesis investigates the 2023 double increase campaign in Malmö, examining how tenants are experimenting with innovative tactics to imagine and demand new possibilities for housing justice. That the campaign occurred so recently shapes the scope of this study; during interviews, many tenants remarked it was their first opportunity to deeply reflect on the strategies and principles they had developed. While I hope this thesis contributes to such reflections, further research is necessary to understand how the campaign will influence the future trajectory of Malmö's tenant movement and how the SUT will integrate organizing approaches.

2024 has already presented new challenges for Swedish tenants. In Malmö, and nationwide, annual negotiations were protracted and turbulent, with landlords demanding record high rents and, in some cases, abandoning the negotiation table altogether to force an agreement via the Rent Tribunal (Hem & Hyra, 2024). Consequently, 64,000 tenants in Malmö have had their rent raised 5.7 percent, even higher than last year's record increase (Hem & Hyra, 2024).

The 2023 double increase was not an anomaly, but a harbinger of a grim new reality where Swedish tenants are increasingly vulnerable to aggressive landlord tactics to drive up rents. However, the tenants' successful campaign against the double increase also heralds the emergence of a new wave of organized resistance to the conditions of rentier capitalism.

Lefebvre describes urbanization as a process of transformation, one occurring at an increasingly planetary scale. This "planetary urbanization" highlights the pervasive dominance of urban processes over life at multiple scales and across geographical space (Brenner & Schmid, 2014). The encroachment of capitalist forces, particularly real estate capital, has imploded territorial boundaries, fostering a global awareness among social movements. In Malmö, the double increase campaign reflected this. Tenants were attentive to the particularities of the Swedish context, while also seeking to shake up the decades-old institutional processes of the SUT using strategies imported from elsewhere, whether immigrant community networks or American labor organizing tactics.

By experimenting with tactics both local and non-local, operating inside and outside of institutional structures as necessary, I understand Rosengård and Möllan tenants as engaged in the kind of "critique of everyday life" Lefebvre finds essential to overcoming the "controlled passivity" that conditions urban citizens under capitalism (Lefebvre, 1970, p.140). The campaign's emphasis on "territorial organizing," which acknowledges that "the context of the neighborhood will determine the content of the organizing," further underscores this point (Webber & Doherty, 2021, p.242).

The double increase campaign highlights the potential for movements to disrupt entrenched institutional processes and assert grassroots demands. As Malmö tenants continue to navigate the complex and changing Swedish housing landscape, their efforts offer insights into the

power of collective action and the importance of adaptable, innovative strategies in the struggle against the commodification of urban life. This thesis, while a starting point, underscores the need for ongoing research and solidarity with tenant movements striving for a more just future.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Codebook

Theme	Code	Definition/ examples
Double increase campaign	New campaign strategies	New grassroots engagement tactics used during campaign, e.g. door-knocking, trappkontakt
	Rosengård-specific	Tactics specifically used in Rosengård campaign
	Möllan-specific	Tactics specifically used in Möllan campaign
	Using the SUT strategically	Working both “in and outside” the SUT structure, using SUT resources as necessary
	Double increase as a “test”	Perceptions of double increase as a pivotal shift or test from landlords
	SUT-grassroots tensions	Moments of conflict between activists and official campaign approach
Sweden/ Malmö context	Pre-campaign context	Ways tenants were getting organized before the 2023 campaign
	General tenant organizing	Tenant struggles and resistance emerging across Sweden, often independent of SUT
	Trust in Swedish system	Norms of loyalty, trust, generational divides, nostalgia and idealized versions of the “Swedish model”
	Neoliberal shifts	Awareness of neoliberal encroachments over past decades; sense that these are intensifying

	Malmö as a test case	Malmö as a space for experimentation with new landlord tactics <i>and</i> new activist tactics
Tenant perceptions of the SUT	Historic shifts	Awareness of the SUT's changing historical trajectory
	Compromise	Perception that the SUT has evolved to protect negotiation system
	Legal insurance	SUT as a law line or insurance; consequences include individualization and disconnection
	Lack of grassroots engagement	Including issues with outreach, representation, lack of local connection
	Bureaucratic obstacles	Perceptions of bureaucracy and rules to follow, challenges of navigation

Appendix 2. List of interviewees.¹

Interviewee	Affiliation(s)	Notes
Joel Nördstrom	SUT; Möllan tenants network	Chairman of Tenants Union Malmö Västra and vice-chairman of the regional board for Southern Skåne
Mia Göranson	SUT; Möllan tenants network	“Husombud” or “housing agent” in the SUT representing her area in Möllan
Anna (pseudonym)	SUT; Möllan tenants network	Has served on the national board of the SUT
Alex Veitch	RaFILM; Möllan tenants network	Co-founded RaFILM and the Nordic Labor Film Festival in Malmö
Halimo Nuur	SUT; Rosengård Folkets Hus	Chairman of Rosengård Folkets Hus and chairman of local SUT group “Cactus”
Ali (pseudonym)	Rosengård Folkets Hus	Active in the Rosengård campaign
Orla (pseudonym)	SUT; Möllan tenants network	Has served as chairman of her local SUT group in Möllan
Olof Wallengren	Allt åt Alla	Active in the Rosengård campaign
Ilhan Kellecioglu	Ort till Ort	Active in 2020 campaign in Husby against Hembla (now Victoriahem)
Zidane Said	SUT	Employed as Folk rörelseutvecklare, or “people’s movement developer” in the SUT

¹ Three interviews wished to remain anonymous and are therefore identified by pseudonym.

Appendix 3. Interview guide

- I. Introduction**
 - A. Presentation of interview and my background as a researcher/organizer
 - B. Their role(s) and affiliations
 - 1. Identification versus anonymity
- II. Background to the 2023 double increase**
 - A. Experiences as a tenant in Malmö
 - B. Reactions to the double increase
 - C. What kinds of organizing or activism were you already involved in, prior to this campaign?
 - D. How do you understand the landlord-tenant relationship in the Swedish context?
 - 1. Experiences with and perceptions of the so-called “Swedish model”
- III. Perceptions of and experience with the Swedish Union of Tenants**
 - A. Are you a member of the SUT?
 - B. Understandings of the SUT’s role (now and historically) and function of membership
 - C. Contact and perceptions of the SUT prior to 2023 campaign
 - 1. How do individual tenants relate to the SUT?
 - 2. How does the SUT reach and engage tenants locally?
- IV. Reflections on the double increase campaign**
 - A. What was new about the 2023 campaign? Why did it succeed?
 - 1. In terms of specific strategies used?
 - 2. In terms of organizing ideologies and principles?
 - B. How did you understand the relationship between activists in Rosengård/Möllan and the SUT?
 - C. What do you anticipate will change in the future as a result of the double increase campaign?
- V. Additional comments**
 - A. Other people I should connect with

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