



“Our stipends are really not sufficient for the cost of living in this town”: The State of Graduate Student-Worker Housing in Kingston, Ontario

Report from the Affordable Housing Working Group (AHWG) presented to the PSAC Local 901 Annual General Meeting

May 20th, 2021





Introduction

At a Special General Meeting in December of 2020, PSAC 901 members voted in favour of a tenant resolution and supported the launch of a working group dedicated to organizing around issues pertaining to our members ability to access affordable housing. The tenant resolution called on local unions to mobilize their membership around issues of housing affordability, interact with community-based groups organizing around similar issues, and advocate for policies that benefit tenants. Because the vast majority of our members are tenants, at the Special General Meeting members saw it fit to support this resolution (see Appendix).

The mandate of the AHWG is to organize around and serve the interests of graduate student workers who struggle with accessing affordable and adequate housing. Accordingly, the AHWG seeks to raise awareness, provide education, conduct research, and participate in direct action and mutual aid work to address our memberships' needs. The AHWG strives to build relations amongst PSAC 901 members around the issue of housing, but will also work and collaborate with other community organizations in the Kingston area as they see fit. The AHWG believes that housing is a human right. Our objectives are to build a housing coalition and organize a movement that is capable of addressing our housing affordability concerns in Kingston. This will require mobilizing 901 membership and interacting with community organizations whose interests align with the proposed mandate and objective of our group. The AHWG plans to continue conducting research, hosting educational events, disseminating information, and participating in direct action and mutual aid to the benefit of our members and our community.

Over the course of the past five months, more than 30 people have expressed interest in or have organized within the AHWG. Over this time, we have developed and conducted a survey that over 400 members participated in, organized and participated in an inter-union housing event with other academic sector workers from across the province, and have developed a social media infrastructure to reach more members in the coming months, and hopefully years. This report is intended to inform members about the ongoing efforts of the AHWG and relay key information stemming from the survey.

AHWG Organizing Efforts

Our AHWG played an instrumental role in organizing and participating in an event on March 29 entitled "Student Workers Will Not Pay for the Housing Crisis" (see program [here](#)). PSAC Local 901 co-hosted this event alongside Carleton's CUPE 4600 and University of Ottawa's CUPE 2626. With more than 85 student workers participating across 10 academic sector local's across the province, participants agreed to mobilize local unions, develop demands at the bargaining table, work in solidarity with grassroots tenant activists and integrate their perspectives into our unions and workplaces, and carry out research related to the rise in unaffordable housing in our communities. In our breakout room discussion which centred around Kingston, we heard from



community organizer from the Katarokwi (Kingston) Union of Tenants Ivan Stoilkovic and 901 members, who discussed how many people are not aware of their rights as tenants and other topics, like the need for a movement around non-market housing. As part of the action plan stemming from this event, participants were given the opportunity to continue organizing under the banner of “The HOUSE” (The Housing Organization of Unionized Student Employees). The HOUSE “The HOUSE” is a unionized student-worker led network for mobilizing, organizing, and relationship-building between the labour movement and housing affordability activism. Over the summer, participants will begin to pursue organizing in anticipation of a day of action in Fall 2021. The AHWG intends to play a positive and strong role in this new organization, and will work in conjunction with grassroots community and labour organizations to organize around other issues related to housing affordability.

AHWG members also took the time over the past few months to build infrastructure on social media to help expand our reach and visibility to 901 members and the broader community. Members are encouraged to join our Grad Students for Affordable Housing PSAC 901 Facebook group (link [here](#)). As we continue to grow, we expect to turn this page into a source of information about upcoming events, ongoing affairs, and share other media (memes, infographics, etc.) that spur on discussion and add to discourse around housing affordability.

In sum, the AHWG made positive steps forward since its inception in December 2020. Moving forward, the AHWG will begin to organize 901 members, participate in community organizing, host educational events, do direct outreach for members in need of support, and more. In the conclusion to this report, the AHWG makes recommendations for how 901 members can continue to support this worthwhile cause.

The Survey

By the Numbers

Who we heard from

We received 426 total responses to our housing survey which provided complete data for approximately 370 respondents. Of the total number of PSAC 901 members who completed it, 47.65% were Masters students while 46.48% were doctoral students. The remaining respondents were postdoctoral students (3.52%) and professional students (2.35%). A majority of respondents (70%) were first and second year graduate students. Although 73% of PSAC 901 members who answered the survey were domestic students, international students represented a significant share of respondents at 27%.

83% of respondents reported their current residence as Kingston, Ontario while 12.97% currently reside elsewhere. Approximately half of our survey respondents have lived in their current dwelling for less than one year. In total, 92.61% of respondents indicated that they are currently tenants, and only 27% of members report living alone. Of these PSAC 901 members, 45% report renting from an individual landlord while 35% currently hold a lease with a property management company.



Cost of Living

The majority of respondents (58.65%) reported an annual income of under \$25,000 per year, while 38.46% reported an annual income of less than \$20,000 per year (Figure 1). Students reporting less than \$15,000 dollars per year formed the largest group of respondents (n=89), followed by students making between \$20,000 - \$25,000 per year (n=84, figure 1).

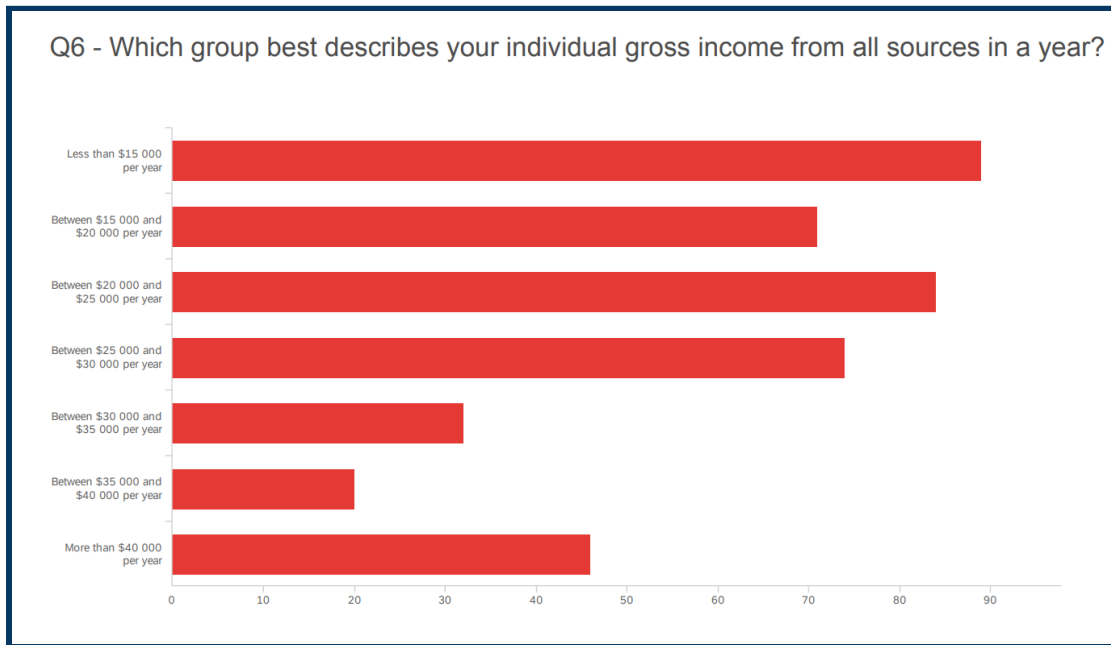


Figure 1: Individual gross income from all sources per year

Most respondents do not live by themselves because doing so is not affordable, and as such pay less than the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Kingston. A total of 72.75% of respondents reported living with at least one or more people, with the plurality (41%) reporting one roommate (Figure 2). The average monthly rent paid was reported as \$854.55, placing an estimated 88.94% of respondents in core housing need.¹

Despite the fact that average rent prices fall short of the average for the City of Kingston, it is worth noting that due to the inadequate amount of income and funding academic sector workers and graduate students receive, many have limited choices in their housing preferences. As the data explains, many live with other people against their wishes, live far from campus, can not leave their unit for more adequate housing options, find it easier to stay in an inadequate housing arrangement than move to something less affordable, go without certain amenities, etc. Members living in Queen's community housing pay less on average than those living in private market housing, and community housing serves to deflate the overall average of monthly rent in the data captured in this survey.

¹ The Canada Mortgage Housing Corporation (CMHC) states that a "household is said to be in core housing need if its housing falls below at least one of the adequacy, affordability or suitability, standards and it would have to spend 30% or more of its total before-tax income to pay the median rent of alternative local housing that is acceptable (meets all three housing standards)" (2018).

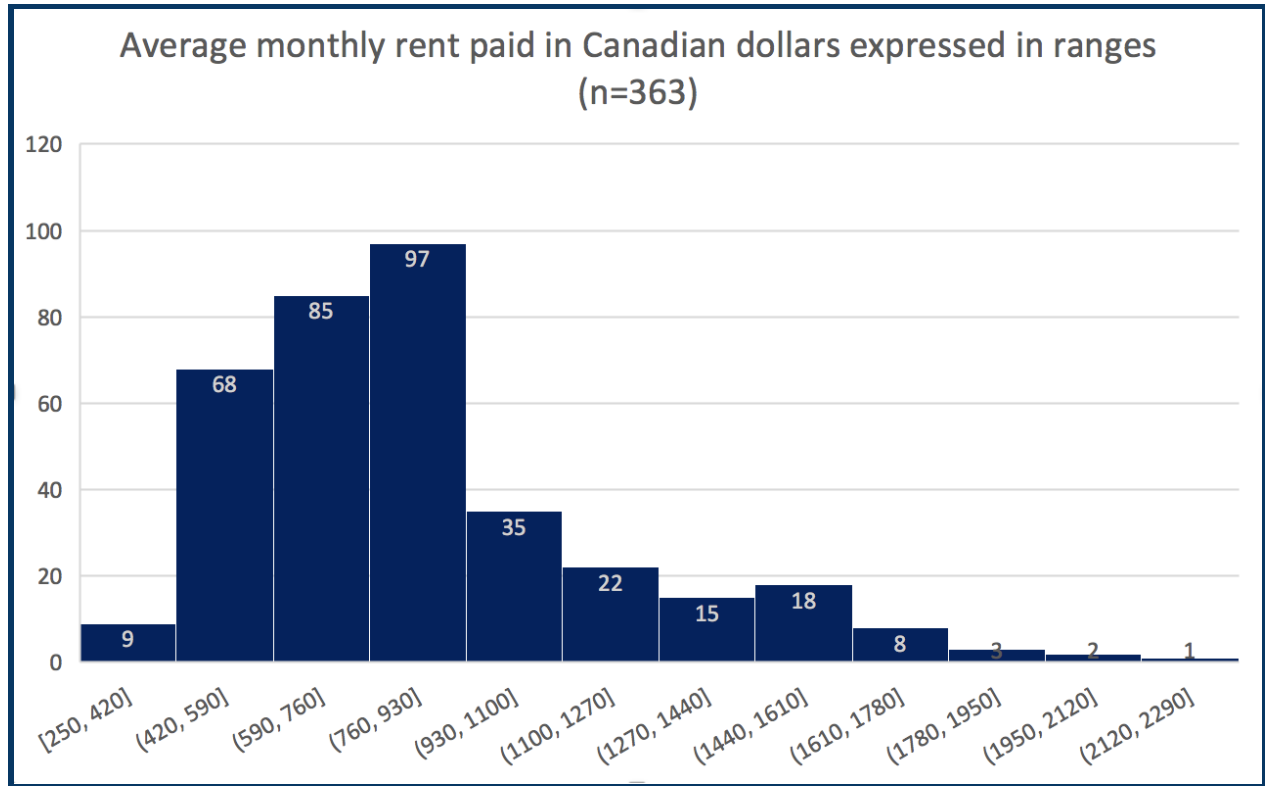


Figure 2: Average monthly rent paid in Canadian dollars expressed in ranges

The average cost of rent for graduate student-workers was noted as contributing to financial distress by a majority of respondents. 28.65% of our surveyed population indicated that they experience financial stress as a result of paying rent often or always (Figure 3). A further 28.11% of respondents occasionally experience financial distress, while 43.24% reported rarely or never experiencing such distress (Figure 3).

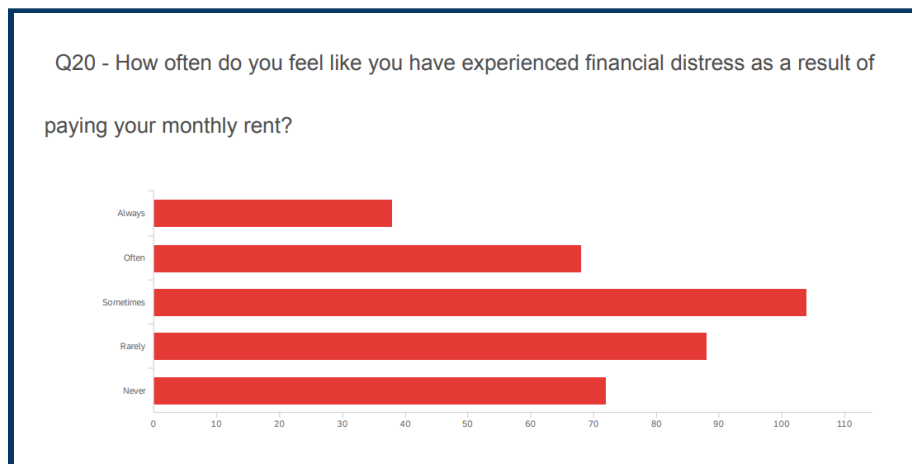


Figure 3: Financial distress related to housing affordability



Access to Student and Community Housing

71.22% of respondents did not apply for a tenancy at a rental property owned by Queen's University or indicated that they were not sure if they applied. A total of 28.79% of people (n=116) indicated that they applied for such a tenancy (Figure 4). Of this group, 61% successfully received a tenancy while the remaining 39% did not (Figure 4).

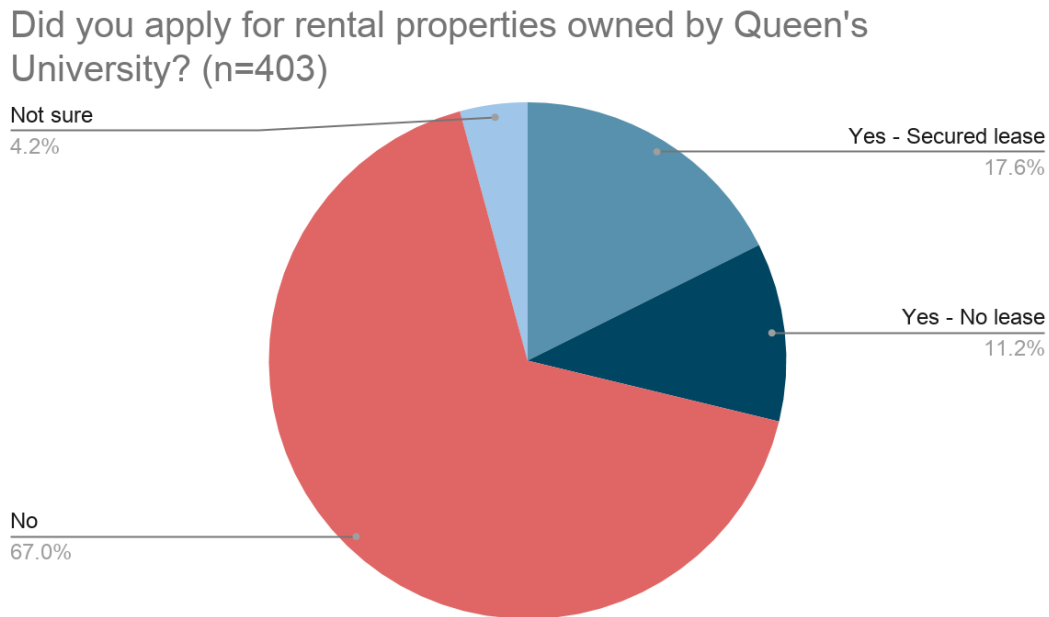


Figure 4: Access to rental properties owned by Queen's University

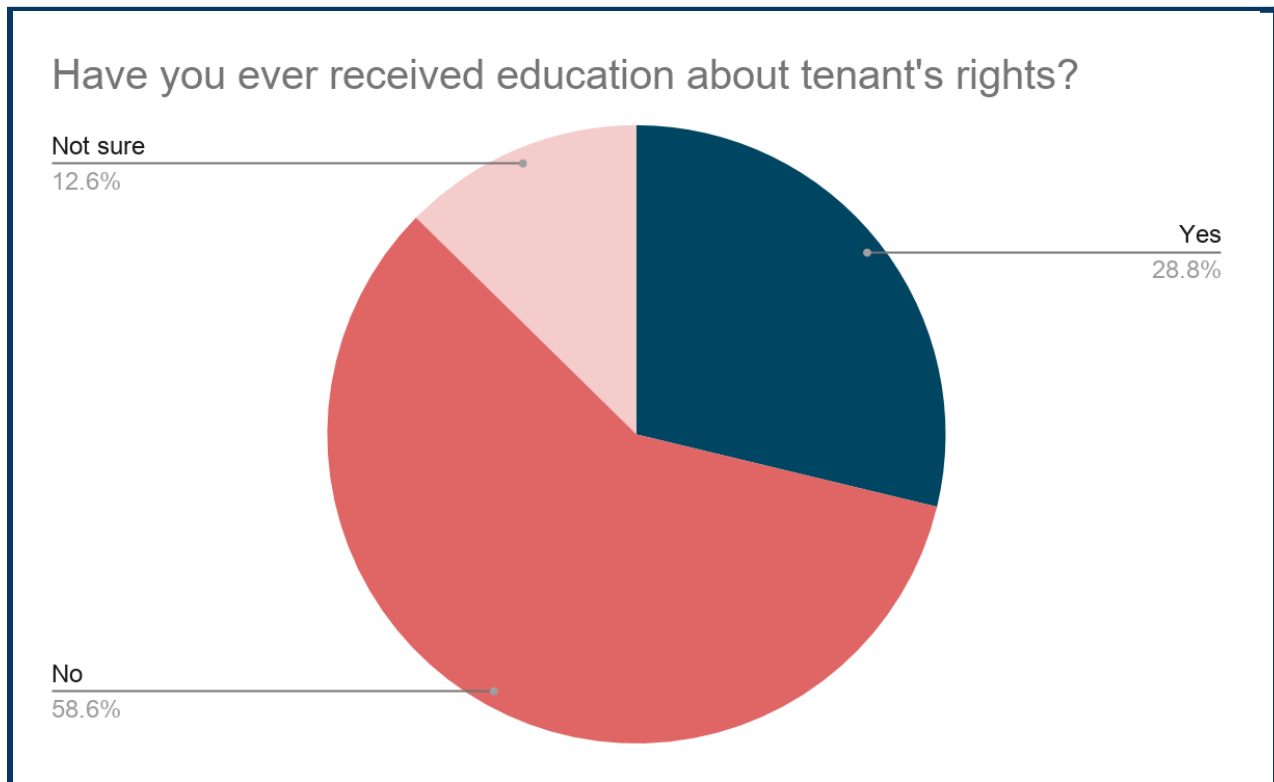
Among students who indicated that they had applied to Queen's Community Housing, such tenancies were highly sought after relative to the private student rental market, as will be discussed in the following section of this report

Navigating Tenancies in Kingston

Graduate student workers reported diverse experiences navigating Kingston's housing landscape, interacting with landlords and accessing adequate housing. 16.89% of respondents reported experiencing some kind of problem with their current landlord, while the remaining 83.11% indicated that they had not. Additionally, 71.23% of PSAC 901 members surveyed did not report receiving education about their rights and responsibilities as tenants. Prior to signing a lease, only 5% of respondents attempted to access legal advice related to their tenancy. Of those who sought legal advice, only 4 people indicated that they did not receive said advice..



Importantly, the majority (58%) of 901 members have never received education about their rights as a tenant. Around 12 percent of members indicated they were “not sure” if they have received information pertaining to their rights as a tenant (Figure 5).



Student Experiences of Inadequate Housing

Background and Methods

Survey respondents were invited to provide qualitative, open-ended written responses at two primary points throughout the survey. Immediately following question 16, “Have you experienced any problems with your landlord?”, respondents were given the option to explain the nature of these problems. Similarly, question 21 invited participants to “tell us about this survey, about your housing experience, or any housing issue that will provide us with more information so that we can fight to address your needs?”. After reviewing the qualitative survey, a significant majority of the qualitative data from both questions reflected graduate student-worker’s negative experiences with housing quality and affordability in Kingston, including their interactions with landlords. In order to better understand the experiences of survey respondents, qualitative responses from both questions were grouped together and put through a preliminary thematic analysis using QSR’s NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The resulting thematic areas and the quotes that support them represent frequently raised issues and points of consensus among survey respondents that provide important context to the quantitative data in this report.



1) Housing is not affordable

“Rent is very expensive for a single-person household. After subtracting tuition fees paid every month in instalments, most of my monthly pay is used up to pay rent. With mobile and internet plans also being extremely expensive, the remaining amount is spent on groceries and nothing else. It feels like living alone is penalised.”

“I have lived in several student's homes within the Kingston community. Several of which were in terrible condition and landlords refused to address the situations in a timely and efficient manner. It seems the only way to live in a reasonable and safe home in this community is to spend more than you can afford.”

“Kingston housing is not adequate for current students. You are paying so much and receiving so little and the properties are very old, dirty and run down.”

2) Insufficient Funding for Graduate Student-Workers

“Rent in Kingston, relative to the income provided to graduate students through TAs, RAships, grants, and bursaries, are exorbitant, especially in consideration of the excessive tuition fees charged to upper year graduate students, despite their receipt of only a fraction of University services.”



“Our stipends are really not sufficient for the cost of living in this town”

“Graduate student base stipend should be adjusted for inflation. My PhD base rate is the same as my father was paid in 1989.”

“Likewise, I think that the rate at which housing prices are rising needs to be matched in kind with the rate at which we, as grad students, are paid for our work as TAs, RAs, TFs, and in funding packages.”

“My rent, utilities, and internet costs eat up over 70% of my monthly income. Please help us get paid more.”

3) Housing affordability limits life choices

“While yes, I live alone, I am not an 18-22 year old undergrad. I'm a 30 year old adult trying to finish a PhD who likes to work at home and likes peace and quiet. I should not be expected to go get roommates to get by without devoting half my income to rent. Graduate student funding needs to take account of cost of living in this city or Queen's will become a university only for the upper class and moneyed families.”

“I live in residence, losing privacy and freedom because of how unsustainable rent prices are at queens. There was no option for me to continue school without gaining a job as a don. I don't have the same opportunities for funding as those in research masters.”



"I moved into my current space because it was all I could afford within reasonable commute (walking/bus) to Queen's. It's too small to properly accommodate my research. I cannot afford a car, so renting/buying further away is not an option."

4) Unique barriers for international students

"It is very difficult for international students to find an affordable housing. The housing price in Kingston is expensive. Queen's housing is very limited and it is not helpful for international students. Looking for a house prior to my arrival in Kingston was a very stressful experience."

"It is disappointing to have not received support from Queens with regard to housing. As Queens know better than anyone, house rent is too high for an international PDF scholar who lives with their family members. Having a new baby we have to move to a larger place, BUT it is not affordable! This going to jeopardize our mental health."

"Some landlord companies are incredibly predatory (especially on International students)."

5) Illegal actions by private landlords

"During my undergrad at Queen's, I lived in an apartment owned by Foundry. They are the scum of the Earth. They tried illegal rent increases, changing my lease from all-inclusive to utilities not included without my consent, were negligent with completing repairs or emergency services in a timely order, and were incredibly rude to students in general."

"In my previous dwelling, concerns about landlord retaliation kept me from speaking up when our landlord was breaking the law. They were harassing me but I didn't have the time/money to move, and worried that a bad reference from them could prevent me from getting a future place. A resource on dealing with these scenarios would have been useful for me. (Examples: entering our unit outside of allowed hours/without the required notice, removing and donating our personal possessions from the house without asking, removing furnishings they'd provided without notice or replacement, harassing us about 'clutter' in common spaces (ie, any personal belongings that were outside our room)."

"My previous landlord would show up 3 times a week without any announcement and also entered the house that I rented from them."

"While I no longer rent, when I was a renter there were many unethical rental companies I encountered that put illegal clauses in their contracts, or told me that I had to "re-sign" a lease each year."

6) Unsafe housing conditions

"In previous years, during undergrad when money was tighter, I lived in some shitholes. Plumbing would clog weekly, heat to parts of the house would break and never be restored leading to appliances such as fridges freezing/bottles bursting/frozen pipes. I also lived in one place that had knob and tube wiring, no boxes for electrical connections, and no functional smoke detectors. I have had a fire in a house (confined to the oven) which filled the entire house with smoke to the point where we could not stay, but did not ever trigger a smoke alarm. The housing in Kingston is terrible, but I have been able to get away from it by living further away (30 mins) from campus."

"I have a bug infestation in my apartment and when I talked to them about it they brought in some incompetent person and he didn't do anything and didn't listen to what I was saying."



“The unit was full of pests - mice, spiders, house centipedes, silverfish, ants - and was constantly damp and humid due to an exposed-ground basement.”

“There was a leak in the apartment upstairs and part of our ceiling and wall broke, having a direct hole with all the wires in the wall and our upstairs neighbour. It took more than 3 weeks for the landlord to fix the issue”

“We had to wait six month to get a window replaced in our apartment last February. We requested the maintenance in September as the window wouldn't close, but it wasn't replaced until February, after which time we had accrued significant heating costs.”

7) Unpleasant experiences with private landlords

“Shortly after I moved in there were a lot of renovations that were being done and there was a lack of communication for when they would be entering my unit, how long they would be here, and what was being done (e.g., if the water would be turned off). It was very frustrating for me and caused a lot of stress.”

“[The landlord] just stares into the apartment all the time.”

“Generally reticent to spend money on upkeep unless pressured repeatedly to do so.”

8) Development policy and Kingston's housing market



“Rented a unit in a building under construction. Building wasn't ready for September as planned. Was homeless for a month until it was ready. Tough start to a masters.”

“I think heritage restrictions on Kingston properties sometimes deter landlords from repairing or upgrading the houses, and as a result, students are living in dilapidated homes.”

“The properties owned by landlords but on a contract with the university allow landlords to break the ontario Tenant act with clauses in the leases. Especially when it comes to notorious landlords like Daphne Dean. The university doesn't actually care, they just let landlords take advantage of students who are too young and poor to do anything about it.”

“We need more housing to bring prices down.”

“...These are both companies who pressure students to sign new leases so they could bump up the rent more than the Ontario allowable amount, and have both "explained" this under the guise of some Queen's related property thing where they force us to sign these leases in October, months before the May to May lease is up. I don't know why Queen's is affiliated with these companies because a lot of International or even domestic but out of city students look for these affiliations as a guarantee but are misled by this into exploitative contracts.”

9) Queen's community housing



“If I may suggest any plans, we desperately need more buildings like John Orr tower and An Clachan to accommodate the students in comfortable housing at a reasonable price. For me, I am already settled in a decent place that I like but my suggestion is for future students and students still looking for a good place to live. I don't want anyone to go through what I went through. Thank you for listening.”

“I was really lucky to have gotten a spot in John Orr - I was on the waiting list, and signed a lease with a pretty predatory housing company at first. With that company, I was able to get back half of my first month's rent because they were able to find someone else. I feel very fortunate to be in John Orr, and feel strongly that we should have more community housing available for graduate students.”

“Outside of university housing, I haven't found any affordable housing in town.”

“One of the more affordable options is the queens housing, but you're not guaranteed a spot as a grad student and they're far away so...not necessarily great options all around.”

“I lived in a different apartment before this September, which had rent that was ~1300 because previously I had been unable to get a spot with Queen's housing.”

“John Orr tower Parking should be free and not over \$100 a month. This added cost is unfair when the parking lot is always empty and the other community housing building does not have to pay for parking.”

“It is appalling that at John Orr Tower I have to pay an additional \$110 a month approximately for parking when An Clachan gets free parking. I didn't have a choice what housing complex I went into, I was assigned John Orr Tower.”



10) Accessible supports and actionable rights for renters

“It is important that we know what are our rights and duties as tenants. Sometimes we don't know what we can or can't do in the apartment or who is responsible if something needs repair, etc. The system in our home country is probably different than the system here in Canada.”

“I don't think much change is going to happen if tenant rights are nor (or can not) be enforced. And it's hard to punish landlords that abuse their tenants when most of the demand in Kingston comes from students that don't know better.”

“I think education on tenant rights and how to advocate for those rights would be very beneficial.”

“I found myself needing to seek legal advice from the university along with the Landlord Tenant Board on how to get appropriate repairs, temporary relocation, and reimbursement of electricity costs (that were a direct result of the repair). The rental company was thankfully quick due to my persistence.”



Conclusions and Recommendations

In light of these survey findings, the PSAC 901 Affordable Housing Working Group therefore recommends the following:

1) Support the ongoing efforts of AHWG - including the proposed changes to the budget

In recognizing that the vast majority of our membership has identified in the housing survey that they are not aware of their rights as tenants, it is proposed that we pay two members to participate in a tenants-rights education course. These two trained members would then host monthly office hours for two hours to address questions from members and would be able to connect them with Queen's Legal Aid, Kingston Community Legal Clinic, and grassroots housing / community groups. Further, these members would help coordinate and host an event on tenants rights in Fall 2021.

As identified as a need in the March 29 housing event, the AHWG should be involved in research projects on issues that impact 901 tenants and the Kingston community in general. As such, it is proposed that the AHWG is given funds for two 15-hour contracts for the purpose of researching important housing issues. The AHWG would like to be able to select the proposals through a democratic vote in an AHWG general meeting. The produced research document would be able to help us clearly advocate for positions favourable to our membership and could be used to build educational events, etc.

Finally, in order to ensure that the AHWG stays accountable and active, it is proposed that PSAC 901's budget include funds for a coordinator who would be paid for 8 hours of work monthly. This would roughly break down as follows: 2 hours per month to chair and prepare a monthly meeting, complete with reports; 2 hours per month dedicated to planning events (at least one event per term); 2 hours per month coordinating and distributing material on campus (AHWG material, tenants-rights material, etc)*; 2 hours a month doing community activity (such as poster in graduate student worker neighbourhoods for upcoming events, actions, etc., coordinating with The HOUSE, or whatever else).

This proposal is reasonable for a few reasons. For one, we are attempting to address issues raised in the AHWG housing survey. Second, we are following suggestions and ideas that were raised at the March 29 housing event. Third, we are moving away from charity- and bursary-based models of trade unionism towards activism and organizing, which is important if we want to mobilize and engage with membership on an issue that is clearly important to them.

2) PSAC 901 members should continue to support both community-based tenant organizations like the Katarokwi (Kingston) Union of Tenants and academic sector, labour-led housing organizations like The HOUSE.



Building and participating in an active and well organized movement that provides political education and allows people to get involved in different ways—while doing everything we can to address problems ourselves—will do more to improve our collective position than any standalone petition, discussion with a politician, or government promise ever could. Organization and actual struggle against employers, the state, and the moneyed interests which benefit from the status quo are the best methods of problem solving. Through these experiences, we will all better understand the obstacles in front of us, and the path toward improving our position will be made more clear. Complacency, inaction, and placing our faith in the same parties and politicians who have created this crisis only serves to benefit the same classes and groups of people who benefit from the housing crisis in the first place.

3) Pressure our employer to build more non-market, graduate student worker housing that meets our needs

The feedback we received from the survey made it clear that survey participants desire more non-market housing, and that the private market means living beyond their means. The solution to this is to pressure our employer to build housing that is accessible and affordable to graduate students and academic sector workers. Currently, graduate students and academic sector workers can only access limited non-market housing options, and the private rental market is out of control. Queen's Community Housing includes John Orr tower (124 apartments, 123 1 bedrooms and 1 2 bedroom), Ann Clachan Complex (216 units, 19 buildings, 431 bedrooms), and 62 properties containing 101 units and 315 bedrooms in the University District. More non-market housing alternatives should be made available through Queen's Community Housing Units. We should pursue Queen's University and pressure them to purchase and renovate / bring up to standard the bottom rung of substandard student housing in and around the university district. Graduate students and postdocs, including those with families, could be prioritized for this new part of the community housing stock. This serves two functions; It creates more non-market housing for PSAC 901 members and removes a significant part of the worst offending privately owned housing from the market entirely for the foreseeable future.

4) Finally, we recommend that more people get involved in the AHWG!

Like the union itself, we are made stronger by a more active membership. If housing is an issue that concerns you, we recommend that you get involved. Through more active support, we can grow our capacity, carry out more actions and activities, do better research, and more! We will meet once over the summer and will hit the ground running in the fall. If you are interested in participating, join our Facebook group and email yvpc@psac901.org. From there, you will be added to the list of other graduate students and academic sector workers that have worked with us since our inception a few short months ago. There is plenty of work for us to do!



Appendix

December 11, 2020

The Labour Movement Must Fight Evictions and Demand Housing for All

The membership of Public Service Alliance of Canada Local 901 will:

Take action to mobilize local unions and their members to prevent the evictions of disproportionately low-income and racialized tenants, many of whom are union members, due to the implementation of Bill 184 by the Ford government, the impact of the current economic crisis, and decades of austerity across every level of government.

Welcome tenant groups and perspectives in PSAC Local 901. Most tenants are working class people and Council could deepen its understandings of how the local labour market impacts people's housing situation.

Support those groups that are organizing with tenants, such as Legal Clinics, Katarokwi (Kingston) Union of Tenants, Mutual Aid Katarokwi, other tenant organizations, as well as supportive housing and local anti-poverty coalitions through organizing actions with their tenant members against landlords and different levels of government.

Demand that the government of Ontario repeal Bill 184, introduce a ban on COVID evictions, place all units, including vacant ones, under rent control to eliminate the two-tier system, eliminate "renoviction" loopholes, and implement a system of rent-rollbacks so that tenants pay only 20% of their household income on rent. Demand that the government reverse policy on vacancy decontrol, which incentivizes landlords to kick out tenants and hike up rent prices.

Demand that the municipal, provincial and federal governments immediately implement a comprehensive plan to fund and build permanent rent-gear-to-income social and public housing (where rent is based on 20% of household income) to meet the needs of underhoused and homeless populations of Eastern Ontario.

Urge the Ontario Federation of Labour to support this resolution.



Because:

- Bill 184 weakens tenants' rights and over six thousand eviction applications began to be processed as of August 1, when the Landlord and Tenant Board was re-opened and the emergency freeze on evictions was lifted
- New provisions in Bill 184 overwhelmingly favour landlords in the eviction process, including new provisions that require tenants to be legally savvy or have legal representation. Less than 3% of tenants at LTB hearings have representation compared to nearly 80% of landlords who attend.
- The pandemic has led to a doubling of the unemployment rate in Ontario. According to StatsCan, racialized workers had an unemployment rate more than 50% higher than that of white workers across Canada in July.
- While Canada has acknowledged that housing is a human right, governments, at all levels, have failed to provide adequate permanent social housing. They have instead developed market-based solutions to increase the housing stock which tend to only incentivize developers to set aside "affordable" housing at 80% of average market rent which is unaffordable for most working families.
- Tenant organizing is essential and needs to be done in multiple languages and across the city. Tenants associations need to be created and organized. Tenants need to understand their legal rights and how to seek legal supports from their legal aid clinics. The labour movement has a wealth of resources in terms of organizing with members, financial, supporting coalitions, assisting with mobilization actions and supporting translation needs.
- The pandemic, and its disproportionately negative repercussions on low income tenants, racialized members and the homeless, is far from over.