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Renter union launches for 'tenant power' across Metro Vancouver

For \$1, city's renters are banding together with launch of Vancouver Tenants Union on Saturday.

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More than 150 renters packed into the inaugural meeting of the Vancouver Tenants Union on Saturday, April 29, 2017 at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Mount Pleasant neighbourhood.

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By: **David P. Ball** Metro Published on Sun Apr 30 2017

“Tenant power” is their slogan; strength in numbers is their plan.

A week ahead of the May 9 provincial election — with **advanced voting opening** over the weekend and resuming Wednesday through Saturday — renters in Vancouver have banded together to fight for their rights.

And according to one organizer behind the Vancouver Tenants Union, which launched Saturday evening in Mount Pleasant, politicians of every stripe will be hearing from them.

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“Our message is very clear: All political parties will have to deal with us,” Lama Mugabo told Metro in a phone interview. “We don’t care who wins, whoever wins will have to contend with us. We want to end this unfair treatment of renters.”

That “unfair” treatment, Mugabo contended, includes growing numbers of “demovictions” — when tenants are evicted en masse, in order to demolish and redevelop their building — renters being priced out of housing, and B.C.’s “fixed-term lease loophole” that allows landlords to skirt the province’s 3.7 per cent limit on annual rent increases.



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Renters currently can appeal landlords' decisions to the Residential Tenancy Branch, shortterm financial help is offered at the city-run Rent Bank, and there exist advocacy non-government organizations (NGOs) such as the Tenant Resource and Advisory Centre — the tenants' union is a much different approach.

Membership costs \$1 and comes with training on tenant rights and how to stand up for those rights collectively. The hope, Mugabo said, is to have at least one tenant representative in every city building — the aim being to better represent the roughly half of Vancouver's population who rent.

"We're not an NGO or a service provider," Mugabo explained. "When you are alone you are vulnerable, and you might not know your rights; so when landlords threaten them, they agree to what the landlord says.

"... We want people to know that this is a union for them; they'll be supported and given all the training they need to continue to advocate, protect each other, support their neighbours and be strong."

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Lama Mugabo, an organizer with the Vancouver Tenants Union, speaks before a crowd of more than 150 at the union's inaugural meeting on Saturday, April 29, 2017 at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Mount Pleasant neighbourhood.

Mugabo, 62, is no stranger himself to renting struggles, though he feels “fortunate” to now be in a BC Housing unit with controlled rents in Vancouver’s West End.

“Several years ago, as a black person, I went through hell trying to find accommodation,” he said. “I would call a landlord and they would say, ‘Come down to look.

“But when I’d get there they’d say it was taken, but white friends would tell me, ‘No it’s still open.’”

Finally finding secure, stable housing for himself has inspired him to broaden those rights to as many other renters as possible, he said — whether in social or market housing, in the suburbs or the Downtown Eastside.

“We're not a homogeneous group,” he explained. “People come from all kinds of classes and incomes.”

The group’s initial demands include stricter rent controls tied to each housing unit, so when a tenant moves out rents cannot rise significantly, as well as close the fixed-term tenancy loophole, and building 10,000 new affordable rental units a year.

For more information on the Vancouver Tenants' Union or how to join or donate, [visit **www.tenantsunion.ca**](http://www.tenantsunion.ca).

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