To what extent, and how, do social movement strategies change over time? Why are particular strategic options selected by social movement organizations? A wide range of theories bearing on these questions are used to analyze the birth and evolution of the rent strike as used within the tenant movement in New York City. The emergence and diffusion of six key groups of innovations over a 76-year period are examined. The analysis considers the origins of the strategy, the extent of change in it over time, how and why innovations occurred, and how and to what extent they were diffused through the multitude of organizations making up the movement. It also examines the extent, consistency of, and reasons for patterns in variations in the use of strategic forms among the constituent organizations of the movement, the impact of both housing and politics of the various innovations, and the ultimate institutionalization of the strategy.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF A SOCIAL MOVEMENT STRATEGY
The Rent Strike in New York City, 1904-1980

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In 1970, Ralph Turner noted that up until that time, research on social movements had been mainly concerned with the formation and enlargement of movements, so that it had "generally equated success with the acquisition of massive support":

The question of how a movement acts upon the larger society to promote the changes with which it is identified has received scant attention (1970: 146).

In focusing upon movement strategies in this essay, Turner anticipated the directions that the new "resource mobilization" theorists would take during the decade that lay ahead.

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Turner's first concern was to try to classify movement strategies. He suggested three "elemental forms": persuasion, bargaining, and coercion (1970: 158, 147). Meanwhile, William Gamson (1968: 150) had suggested parallel categories: persuasion, inducements, and constraints. In contrast, Gene Sharp's (1973) encyclopedic formulation included 198 "methods of nonviolent action" classified under 6 categories and 37 subcategories. Most recently, Lofland and Fink (1982: 1-6) defined the three "fundamental forms of social struggle" as polite, protest, and violent strategies. Then, modifying Sharp, they subdivided protest struggle into symbolic protests (orderly but ostentatious strategies such as marches or picketing); noncooperation (strikes and boycotts); intervention (strategies disrupting established behavior patterns, such as harassment and sit-ins); and alternate institutions (for example, alternative economic systems or dual sovereignty). This last scheme proves to be most useful for this article's analysis.

Second, Turner (1970: 151-155) raised the question of why a movement (or, more precisely, what would now be called a social movement organization [SMO]) chooses to use one strategy rather than another. He suggests that within the limits imposed by the values of the movement constituency and of potentially cooptable publics and by the relationship between the constituency and the target, choices would be determined by the quantity and kinds of resources available to the movement; its wish, which was dependent on its level of sophistication, to use and display minimum or maximum power; and its anticipations of target response to the strategies available. ¹

Jo Freeman (1979: 172-185) built on Turner in elaborating a resource mobilization approach to strategy selection. The choices made would depend, first, on the resources available, but they would also be constrained by other factors. In addition to those listed by Turner, Freeman added past experiences, reference groups, expectations, and the structure of the SMO and the movement. ²

However, Piven and Cloward (1977), working within a structuralist framework informed by Marxism, presented the factors shaping choices among available strategies in very different terms. Their basic premise was that "the forms of political protest are . . . determined by the institutional context in which people live and work":

People experience deprivation and repression within a concrete setting, not as the end product of large and abstract processes, and it is the concrete experience that molds their discontent into specific grievances against specific targets (1977: 14, 20).
Institutional roles determine the strategic opportunities for defiance: “It is typically by rebelling against the rules and authorities associated with their everyday activities that people protest” (1977: 21). That is, to revert to resource mobilization terms, to the extent that institutions are dependent on the cooperation of aggrieved groups, their noncooperation is a resource that may be mobilized. On the other hand, “people cannot defy institutions to which they have no access, and to which they make no contribution” (1977: 23).

Charles Tilly (1978, 1979, 1980a, 1980b) has recently invoked the metaphor of a repertoire to describe the strategic options available to any group or movement at any given time. He concludes that when compared to the total list of strategic possibilities, such repertoires are "surprisingly limited." Consequently, “collective action usually takes well-defined forms already familiar to the participants” (1978: 151, 143). “The available means of action were (and are) learned, historically specific, rooted in the existing social structure, and seriously constraining” (1980a: 26). Furthermore, strategic repertoires change very gradually.

The latter insight raises a new question that shifts the focus from SMOs’ choosing among available strategies back to the strategies themselves. How do specific strategies originate and evolve? Tilly (1978: 155) hypothesizes that both are part of a learning process, as one group imitates another or improvises itself, seeking a fresh edge to give it a tactical advantage. During this process, the boundaries of a form of action are stretched. Tilly (1979: 134-158; 1980a: 16) also sees changes emerging because of constraints imposed by others, especially of repression and facilitation authorities. But while such evolution is gradual, a strategy may eventually be transformed. For example, the French charivari evolved into a demonstration: By using familiar means to accomplish new ends, and thus “pushing the existing repertoire to its limits, the people of Perpignan and Toulouse were helping to create a new repertoire of collective action” (Tilly, 1980b: 14, 15).

The purpose of this article is to test and expand Tilly’s hypotheses concerning the origins and evolution of social movement strategies. Its vehicle is the rent strike as used within the tenant movement in New York City. The rent strike—the concerted withholding of rents by tenants—which was first introduced in 1904, became the dominant strategy of the tenant movement, and to a large extent set its identity. The origins of the strategy and the emergence and diffusion of six key innovations over a 76 year period are described, and then the patterns found are analyzed.
RESEARCH METHODS

Data concerning the tenant movement in New York City were collected during a large study between 1973 and 1980 funded primarily by NIMH. The study had two foci: historical and current. Citywide, local, and ethnic newspapers; and legislative, housing agency, and, where available, tenant organization files were consulted and oral history interviews carried out concerning the historical period. Participant observation, two surveys—one of citywide federation and neighborhood organization leaders, the other of leaders, members and non-members in organized buildings—and the tenant press and organization files were the main sources of data concerning the 1970s. Because of its significance to the movement, one of the chief concerns of the research was the rent strike strategy, including its origins, variations, evolution, and effectiveness. Because of this concern, and because the research methods used allowed familiarity with a wide range of tenant organizations over time, the data concerning the evolution of the rent strike are excellent.

DATA

THE FIRST RENT STRIKES

For half a century before 1904, legislators had fashioned regulations attempting to remedy the reported evils of New York City’s overcrowded slums. But the tenants, those immediately affected by these conditions and the high prevailing rent levels, had not protested. Early in the new century, as the flow of immigrants reached toward an all-time peak, thus exacerbating the critical housing shortage and fueling a speculative housing market, rent increases became especially frequent. Finally, when in 1904 yet another general increase of 20% to 30% was mooted, the Daily Forward, a Yiddish-language socialist newspaper, urged action against the rapacious landlords. The tenants of the Lower East Side Jewish quarter responded by forming “tenant unions” in their buildings, and collectively withholding their rents. Reports during the next month indicated that 800 tenement houses had struck, and that 2000 tenants were threatened with eviction (Joselit, forthcoming).

Although the law recognized no defense for nonpayment of rent, the rent strikers nevertheless exerted considerable leverage against their
landlords. Court fees and movers’ charges made evictions costly, while the specter of rent losses was raised by the attempts by the lawyer of the new umbrella neighborhood tenant organization to tie up cases in court on technical grounds and by the picketing of buildings to discourage applications from prospective tenants. Consequently, many of the landlords chose to negotiate with their strikers, agreeing to reductions in the proposed increases. Cases were settled rapidly, with the whole strike lasting barely a month.

Similar, much larger and more bitter rent strikes were again triggered by steep rent increases in the winter of 1907-1908, and from 1917 through 1920 (Joselit, forthcoming; Spencer, forthcoming). Because of the size of these actions and the increasing involvement of the Socialist Party, both were interpreted as posing political threats, as well as pressuring landlords individually. So great was the fear generated during the latter period of turmoil, which coincided with the postwar and post-Bolshevik revolution “red scare,” that the state legislature introduced rent controls in 1920 in order to defuse the issue.

THE EVOLVING STRATEGY: SIX INNOVATIONS

The original form of the rent strike evolved through a series of six innovations (see Table 1).

_Innovation I._ The first innovation, introduced in the mid-1930s, sharply altered the scope of the typical rent strike. Whereas the initial strikes had been mass actions involving many buildings simultaneously, these strikes were confined typically to a single building seeking to settle its individual problem.

_Innovation II._ In 1963, strikers began to invoke a law that had in fact been available since 1929, but had only rarely been used (Lipsky, 1970: 137). Recodified routinely as Section 755 of the Real Property Actions and Proceedings Law in 1961, it provided for the placing of rent monies in escrow in court until all violations against a property had been removed.

_Innovation III._ In 1970, the Metropolitan Council on Housing, the dominant tenant federation in New York City (Lawson, 1982), began to promote the “rolling rent strike,” the main purpose of which was to allow tenants to regain control of their withheld rent monies from the courts. Since judges now regularly insisted that rents be
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INNOVATION</th>
<th>DATES</th>
<th>WHO INVOLVED</th>
<th>KEY ISSUES</th>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>ANCILLARY TACTICS</th>
<th>SETTLEMENT MECHANISM</th>
<th>LENGTH OF RENT STRIKE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Original form</td>
<td>1904, 1907-8, 1917-20</td>
<td>Mass strikes, mostly Jewish worker class neighborhoods</td>
<td>rent increases</td>
<td>rent withheld internally</td>
<td>symbolic protests: rallies, picketing</td>
<td>court judgment or direct negotiations. 1917-20: conciliation board also</td>
<td>short (less than a month) sudden death</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mass strikes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>1936-41</td>
<td>Single buildings, working class and black middle income</td>
<td>maintenance services</td>
<td>rent withheld internally</td>
<td>symbolic protests: rallies, picketing</td>
<td>settlements at urging of locally elected judges</td>
<td>short (about a month) sudden death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Buildings</td>
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<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>1963-9</td>
<td>attempted mass black ghetto strike, later broader, single buildings</td>
<td>decay maintenance services</td>
<td>rent placed in escrow pending repairs</td>
<td>expanded symbolic protests</td>
<td>rents released upon repairs or procedural problem</td>
<td>longer, pending repairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 755</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>1970-3</td>
<td>broad range of single buildings</td>
<td>maintenance services, recognition</td>
<td>withholding to retain control of rents</td>
<td>harass landlord: picket home, sit-in office</td>
<td>direct negotiations if landlord willing</td>
<td>longer, depending on stubbornness of parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rolling Strike</td>
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<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>1972-</td>
<td>middle income single buildings</td>
<td>maintenance services</td>
<td>concerted late payment to demonstrate unity</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>landlord alloyed grievances or risked a real strike</td>
<td>two or three months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow-down</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>broad range of single buildings</td>
<td>maintenance services</td>
<td>legalized internal rent withholding</td>
<td>pressure mortgage to press landlord or harass landlord</td>
<td>negotiations in court, settlement recorded by judge</td>
<td>often many months pending settlement and repairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legalized Strike</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>1973-</td>
<td>low income deteriorated and often abandoned single buildings</td>
<td>advanced decay, abandonment</td>
<td>tenancy use accumulated rent for repairs</td>
<td>tenant control- alternate institution</td>
<td>tenants awarded right to control or own building</td>
<td>often invoked after long fruitless strike then usually permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenant Control</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
deposited in court even when tenants did not evoke a 755 defense, strikers strove to postpone court appearances and to negotiate directly with their landlords. They never pleaded a 755 defense, and if nevertheless ordered to place rents in escrow, they chose instead to pay them directly to the landlord in order to avoid losing control of future rents. They then withheld the next month’s rent. The object was to use lengthy court fights and fear of tenants’ skipping with owed rents in their possession to persuade landlords to negotiate.

*Innovation IV.* In the early 1970s, the tenant movement expanded to encompass a broader range of SES groups. However, in spite of real fears of blight and decay encroaching on their neighborhoods, many middle-income tenants regarded the rent strike as too radical a strategy. Consequently, the “rent slowdown” was invented by an organizer working among such tenants. This was not really a strike, but a strategy whereby tenants held back their rents until the middle of the month, when the tenant leader handed them all to the landlord. For a landlord, it was an eloquent demonstration of tenant togetherness, and therefore also a warning. For tenants, it was in fact an organizational and emotional preparation for a strike should the landlord ignore the warning.

*Innovation V.* The rolling rent strike as preempted after 1973, when a firm legal basis for rent withholding under conditions of decay or the absence of services gradually emerged, and judges encouraged tenants and landlords to negotiate settlements under the auspices of the court. Landlord-tenant relations had previously been dominated by a traditional understanding of the lease, which was not seen as a contract in common law where a failure by one party to meet his or her obligations would have voided the obligations of the other party. Instead, most leases required tenants to keep paying rents regardless of how the landlord maintained the property. However, by the early 1970s, Warranty of Habitability legislation, incorporating contractlike elements into the law and allowing for rent abatements when the landlords failed to live up to their obligations, had been enacted by several states. The introduction of negotiations into court in New York City was a practical move toward acceptance of a similar position, and case law also began to recognize an “implied warranty of habitability.” Finally, the state legislature confirmed the new understanding of the lease as contract in an act introduced in 1975 at the behest of a new politically active federation, the New York State Tenants’ Coalition.
**Innovation VI.** With the spread of housing abandonment and the destruction of their neighborhoods, poor tenants began, in the early 1970s, to form tenant organizations to a larger extent than ever before. Since their chief problems were decay and lack of services, they naturally conducted rent strikes. However, the strategy often failed to gain them meaningful repairs. Instead, after several months they found themselves still cold and their buildings in disrepair, but holding large joint bank accounts. Frequently, too, they were facing final abandonment by landlords who had given up any pretense of providing services or keeping promises, and had also ceased trying to collect rents or to con them into allowing raids on their rent kitties. As frustration mounted, a significant strategic innovation took form: the spending of accumulated rent monies on needed services and repairs. Tenants were taking control of their buildings.

The success of this innovation has resulted in the incorporation of tenant control and even plans for tenant ownership in several programs. Funds, too, have been provided to rehabilitate many of the tenant-controlled buildings.

**A TRANSFORMED STRATEGY**

In total, these innovations amounted to a transformation of the rent strike strategy:

1. The size and length of the average strike changed drastically. The first strikes were large (with hundreds of buildings involved concurrently), short (sudden-death strikes culminating in a few days), and infrequent (three waves of activity totaling less than 4 years spread over 16 years, with almost no action between). On the other hand, recent strikes have been localized (normally limited to conflict over a single building), much longer (typically lasting at least several months), and frequent (many actions overlapping one another, but not in a concerted manner).

2. The key issues provoking rent strikes have changed and broadened. Initially, rent increases were the focus. But after rent issues were politicized to the point where they were dealt with mainly in the legislative sphere, the foci of strikes shifted to decay in building condition, absence of services, and the refusal of a landlord to recognize the tenant organization in his building.
(3) The way in which rent monies are used as leverage has passed through several distinct phases. Initially, strikes culminated quickly in court or through direct negotiations. Later, monies were placed in court pending the making of repairs. Then the rolling rent strike had tenants begin the withholding process again and again in order to retain control of their money; the slowdown was not a strike, but a joint delay of payment; and the Warrant of Habitability finally legitimated the use of rent withholding as a bargaining tool, while those for whom no bargain was possible jointly used their rents to purchase needed services and repairs. Today, tenants in many buildings spend their rent or use it in court to bargain for repairs. Some more timid tenants continue to invoke the rent slowdown.

(4) The typical locus of leverage has varied from a decision imposed at a court hearing; to negotiations in court corridors, or arbitrated by a judge, or entirely separate from the courts; to direct assumption of control of buildings.

(5) Ancillary tactics increasing the leverage of the rent strike strategy have developed over time. Initially, they were limited to rallies and picketing, which fell into what Lofland and Fink (1982: 4) define as “symbolic protests,” the lowest of their four subdivisions of protest politics. Later, harassment of landlord targets was added—directly through picketing their homes and distributing leaflets to their neighbors, and indirectly by pressuring the banks holding mortgages on their properties to act on the clause that threatens foreclosure if a building is not properly maintained. This strategy falls within Lofland and Fink’s “interventions,” the third of their categories. Finally, tenant control of their buildings establishes alternate institutions, defined as the highest level of system challenge. This is only true, however, if official sanction is not received.

(6) Over time, the rent strike was transformed from what was perceived as a revolutionary threat to a mechanism for redress of grievances recognized in law and official programs. Its practice was routinized through the adoption of standard formats (such as those detailed in organizing manuals), and as it acquired its own jurisprudence (both laws and bureaucracies). Moreover, its participants eventually included representatives of the entire SES spectrum of the tenant population. During this period, the rent strike “lost much of its expressive function, its festive air, its revolutionary potential”; but it also became “a much more widely accessible, less risky way of making demands”
(Tilly, 1978: 147). As such, its progress parallels that of the earlier French labor strike. Its symbolic meaning had been transformed.

ANALYSIS

CLASSIFYING THE RENT STRIKE STRATEGY

In his detailed system, Sharp (1973: 226) classifies rent withholding under the general heading of "methods of economic noncooperation," subheading "economic boycotts," subsection "action by consumers." Here it is listed with various forms of consumer boycott. However, while the typical boycott involves a decision not to purchase, rent strikers withhold payment for housing they are already inhabiting. Subjectively, New York rent strikers have not thought of themselves as akin to consumer boycotters—their analogy is much more likely to be the labor strike. Lofland and Fink's (1982) more general system places them in such company within "noncooperation," the second of their four categories. But again there is a key difference between the two strategies: While typical striking workers withdraw their labor from the workplace and lose their wages, rent strikers continue to live in their dwellings while withholding payment for them. They accumulate bargaining leverage with the landlord in the rent owed, while at the same time there is an implied threat that they could skip without paying, and so escape housing costs for the period of the strike.

Thus the rent strike overlaps Turner's (1970) elemental categories both sequentially and concurrently. A sequence may begin with attempts at persuasion, as tenants perhaps send letters to their landlord asking attention to their grievances. When there is no effective response, they may add coercion in the form of the threat of a rent strike. An actual strike contains both the bargaining and coercive elements outlined above.

WHY WAS THIS STRATEGY SELECTED?

There is no evidence that New York tenants, as such, joined together in protest prior to 1904 (Joselit, forthcoming; Heskin, 1981). Consequently, they had no strategic repertoire of their own, although many strategies were in use around them and were no doubt being used by the tenants themselves in other roles. When they finally acted, why did
tenants create a new strategy rather than select one of those in use around them? What are the roots of the rent strike?

Piven and Cloward’s (1977: 14) explanation of how strategies are chosen from the array available—that choices are “determined by the institutional context in which people live and work”—fits this situation excellently. (The fit of the theory may not be as good when intervention strategies such as sit-ins are employed, but it has high explanatory power for strategies of noncooperation.) Tenants were experiencing exploitation, in the form of sharp rent increases, in their homes, and this focused discontent on the rapacious landlords, whom they saw as profiteering from their distress. As tenants, they were aggregated in buildings where they had opportunities to get to know one another, to discuss their antipathies toward their common landlord, and to develop common identities as the tenants of their building (Lawson and Barton, 1980: 238-239). And since the main duty expected of them in their role of tenant was to pay rent, this became the obvious focal point for defiance.

Although there had been bitter rent strikes by farmers in the Hudson River Valley a half century earlier (Heskin, 1981: 186), there is no sign that these urban tenants were aware of this precedent. But they were very familiar with labor unions, and had often, as members of the United Hebrew Trades, engaged in labor strikes. This was the strategy that they borrowed. Their self-consciousness in this is illustrated by the name they gave the organizations they formed in their buildings: “tenant unions.” These organizations naturally became the basic unit of their movement (Lawson, 1982).

The rent strike spread rapidly from building to building within the Jewish quarter because many tenants were confronted with large rent increases concurrently, and because of the preexisting social structures within that community (Morris, 1981: 746). These included synagogues and other Jewish institutions, the Socialist Party and its Yiddish press, and labor unions such as the United Hebrew Trades.

EXPLAINING THE EVOLUTION OF THE STRATEGY

Why did the rent strike evolve in the manner recounted above? An examination of Table 2 suggests that complex forces were at work.

Changin Issues. The evolution of the strategy was linked to changes in the issues to which the strikes were responding. This was because the various forms of strike did not match different goals equally. The first
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INNOVATION</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>KEY ISSUES</th>
<th>ECONOMIC/ POLITICAL CONTEXT</th>
<th>ATTITUDES OF JUDGES, AUTHORITIES</th>
<th>LEGAL ENVIRONMENT</th>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>SOURCE AND LOCATION OF INNOVATION</th>
<th>DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Original Form</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>rent increases</td>
<td>severe housing shortage from immigration &amp; then world war</td>
<td>1904: judicial, press sympathy 1907: antagonism 1917: fear, hysteria</td>
<td>court hearing necessary for eviction; only technical defenses</td>
<td>rent withheld internally; mass strikes</td>
<td>tenants in individual buildings</td>
<td>communal word of mouth; Socialist press and networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass Strike I</td>
<td>1936</td>
<td>maintenance, services</td>
<td>Great Depression: high vacancy rate</td>
<td>locally elected judges supportive of strikers</td>
<td>evictions quashed upon last minute rent payment</td>
<td>rent withheld internally; strikes in single buildings</td>
<td>individual building organizations</td>
<td>organizers in neighborhood organizations &amp; federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Buildings</td>
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<tr>
<td>II Section 755</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>decay: maintenance, services</td>
<td>Civil Rights Movement; abandonment problems begin</td>
<td>judges enforce letter of law; housing decay causing concern</td>
<td>755 allows constructive eviction defence for non-payment</td>
<td>rent placed in escrow pending repairs</td>
<td>movement lawyers in neighborhood organization</td>
<td>plugged-in organizers and federation publications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rolling Strike</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>maintenance, services, recognition</td>
<td>growing abandonment; mass movements contracting</td>
<td>growing concern for repairing decay</td>
<td>Section 755 assumed normal for rent strikes</td>
<td>repeated withholding to control rent &amp; avoid escrow</td>
<td>movement lawyers attached to federation</td>
<td>promoted by federation; workshops, in its press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent Slow-down</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>maintenance, services: early problems</td>
<td>middle income tenants fear spreading blight</td>
<td>not yet their concern</td>
<td>(not relevant)</td>
<td>joint late rent payments</td>
<td>leader of neighborhood tenant organization</td>
<td>not publicized: organizers using it not plugged in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V Legalized Rent Strike</td>
<td>1973-5</td>
<td>maintenance, services</td>
<td>abandonment ravaging many neighborhoods</td>
<td>high priority to preserving viable housing</td>
<td>courts clogged strike legalized other states</td>
<td>negotiations in court after strike legalization</td>
<td>lawyers, judges, then federation</td>
<td>tenant lawyers, plugged-in organizers, movement press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI Tenant Control</td>
<td>1973-8</td>
<td>advanced decay, abandonment</td>
<td>City government bled by responsibility for managing abandoned buildings</td>
<td>programs fund tenant control and repair of abandoned housing</td>
<td>tenant control of neglected buildings allowed</td>
<td>tenants use rent for repairs; join in rehabilitation and management programs</td>
<td>individual building organizations then tenant advocates &amp; leaders, city</td>
<td>organizers, advocates with local contacts; one federation, agencies, major media</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
strikes responded to across-the-board rent increases, which invited mass action. But after 1920 the main direct tenant-landlord confrontations shifted to service and maintenance crises, which were normally building-specific. Still later, tenants had to cope with advanced decay and abandonment. These concerns were matched, respectively, by the mass strike, the various forms of single building strikes, and the taking control of rent money expenditure.

 

Changes in the Economic and Political Context. When the Great Depression caused a rapid rise in the vacancy rate, it gave rent strikes greater leverage because landlords realized that it could be difficult to replace evicted tenants. The Depression also made the locally elected judges more sympathetic to the complaints of tenants. This period was therefore an opportune time to introduce the single building strike, which clearly lacked the political impact of the earlier mass strikes. Similarly, the background of the burgeoning civil rights movement in 1963 not only allowed Jesse Gray to find response to his organizing among Harlem’s tenants (he had been working with them with little success for 10 years prior to that), but it also prepared third parties to enter as “conscience constituents” (Monti, 1979; Lipsky, 1970: 172). However, the most significant change in the economic and political context was the growing crisis over housing abandonment after 1965, which in 15 years destroyed over 200,000 apartments in New York City (Lowry, 1970: 3; Salins, 1980: 1). This crisis created shared concern between the tenant movement and the city government, which was eager to preserve the housing stock from further decay. These shared interests prepared the way for the acceptance of innovations that allowed strikers to win repairs, such as the various forms of putting rent monies into court pending repair, the acceptance of the legitimacy of rent withholding as a bargaining mechanism when seeking repairs, the spending of rent monies directly on repairs, and the espousal of tenant control and ownership in management and rehabilitation programs with large budgets.

Changes in the Legal/Judicial Context. When the first strike broke out in 1904, New York law already required landlords to go to court in order to evict tenants. Since the strikers also saw themselves as emulating the labor movement, it is not surprising that as the rent strike evolved, it became closely related to legal machinery, litigation, and legislation. The legal environment included being able to quash a war-
rant of eviction for nonpayment of rent at any time preceding its execution, an important protection for strikers, especially those in single building actions; the rules for proper service of an eviction notice; the protection of tenant activists from retaliatory eviction after 1943 under the provisions of New York's various rent regulations; and the various defenses for nonpayment, beginning with jurisdictional questions and evolving over a 50-year period from the transformation of constructive eviction in 1929 to the Warranty of Habitability decisions and legislation in the 1970s. Changes in the attitudes of judges also impinged on the effectiveness of various strike forms. For example, after the reorganization of the courts abolished local court districts in 1962, judges became much more concerned with enforcing the letter of the law, and focused hearings on the question of whether or not rents had been paid. This left the tenant lawyers in 1963-1964 with few legal alternatives to the defense of Section 755, which placed rents in escrow pending repairs. In the 1930s, however, the locally elected judges often used their influence to persuade landlords to compromise with strikers; and judges in the new Housing Court after 1973, rather than finding for one party, often sent both sides into the corridors to negotiate and then recorded the settlements arrived at.

*Previous Forms No Longer Adequate.* Innovations were often introduced after previous strike forms ceased to be effective. One example was just mentioned: Strikers invoked Section 755 when judges no longer worked for compromise in court. But 755 also proved to have disadvantages: It reduced the leverage of the strikers, since there was no longer danger that they would skip with the withheld rents; oftentimes only token repairs were made; and landlords received all the money of tenants who moved or paid late, even when no repairs had been done. Eventually the Metropolitan Council, the federation that had originally helped to promote Section 755, declared such provisions "strikebreakers to avoid," and devised the rolling rent strike in its place (Shliom, 1971: 39). But landlords then proved unwilling to recognize tenant organizations and negotiate with them out of court (which was the object of the new strategic form), and the courts became clogged at a time when action was desperately needed to stem housing deterioration. Consequently, tenant lawyers and judges cooperated to facilitate negotiations in court by recognizing an implied Warranty of Habitability, which had the effects of securing recognition for building organizations and legalizing the rent strike. This innovation in turn, quickly proved inadequate
for tenants facing abandonment. The tenants then innovated once more, directing the expenditure of their rents toward mitigating their problems.

The rent strike strategy, though originally borrowed by analogy from the labor movement, evolved thereafter within the tenant movement, independent of its source. Its evolution occurred in response to changes in the issues facing the tenant movement and as forms of the strategy in use proved inadequate. Shifts in the economic, political, judicial, and legal environment also helped shape the strategy, partly by undermining the forms in use. And some of the latter changes, such as the decisions that contributed toward the legalization of the strategy and so undermined the rolling strike, were in part a feedback mechanism, themselves responding to the implementation of the strategy.

**Mechanisms of Innovation.** The first mechanism of innovation was improvisation. This sometimes grew out of the experience of some building on the periphery of the movement (as with the introduction of the single-building strike and of the spending of rent money); and was sometimes thought out by strategists (often “movement lawyers”) in one part of the movement, such as a federation (the rolling rent strike, the push for Warranty of Habitability legislation) or a neighborhood organization (the rent slowdown, decisions to utilize procedures that placed rent monies in court escrow). The multilevel pyramidal organization of the movement, with at least several organizations at each of three levels, was important in providing opportunities for experimentation without the danger of committing the whole movement to a mistaken strategy (Lawson, 1982).

**The Diffusion of Innovations.** The communications networks radiating from each of the federations were vital to the spread of successful innovations, which was via imitation (see Table 2). Some strategic innovations (the rolling rent strike, for example) were consciously promoted by federations in their newspapers, handbooks, and workshops. Others (notably, rent spending) were spread primarily by word of mouth among organizers plugged into federation networks. Lawyers, too, publicized the legal forms by using them (implied Warranty of Habitability, Section 755). On the other hand, although the slowdown continued to be used by organizations where it had evolved, it was not publicized because of the isolation of these organizations and because the main federations did not promote it.
Initially, the rise and fall of strategic forms (the mass strike, then the options for individual buildings in the 1930s) were tied to the waxing and waning of the particular issues to which they were addressed. Later, however, as the strategic options available multiplied, conscious promotion helped certain forms become established (the rolling rent strike, for example), or helped others phase out (755). On the other hand, some forms that at first were not deliberately promoted (rent spending, in-court negotiations), took hold as word of their results and favor among participating tenants became known. Again, although the slowdown failed to spread owing to lack of either planned or word-of-mouth publicity, its success maintained it as a viable strategy among those who knew of it. That is, for a strategic innovation to diffuse throughout the movement, it was important that it receive publicity. However, its effectiveness and the response to it by tenants involved with it were more important than whether it was consciously promoted—so long as its users were tied strongly into movement networks.

Variations in the Use of Strategic Forms. To what extent did the use of strategic forms by the many SMOs within the tenant movement vary? There was considerable uniformity among those using the strike before World War II because of the time gaps between the fading of one form and the emergence of another, and the hegemony of a single federation or of the Socialist Party, an equivalent during the early years. Even in the 1960s, when several possible forms were available, considerable uniformity remained: 755 was generally accepted because of the publicity given the Harlem strike. The only standouts were the lawyers experimenting with other legal forms as they became available, or pressing for direct negotiations. Later, when 755 was replaced by the rolling strike, the Metropolitan Council’s influence was such that the only initial nonconformists were lawyers continuing to promote the legal forms.

However, the situation changed with the growing diversity of the movement in the 1970s, when multiple federations emerged, representing tenants from different parts of the SES spectrum and often addressing different issues (Lawson, 1982). For the first time, different forms of the rent strike coexisted: middle income, conservative tenants conducted slowdowns, those who were more aggressive organized strikes that were designed to culminate in negotiations with their landlords in court, while those tenants with missing or unresponsive landlords provided themselves with services and repairs by taking control either unofficially or officially.
Contrary to the expectations of Tilly (1978: 155), competition or maneuvering among tenant organizations has not been central to innovations in the rent strike strategy. The structure of the movement is such that this competition is minimized: Building organizations have their own discrete territories (their particular buildings), as do most neighborhood organizations, and when the latter do overlap they tend to deal with different constituencies, such as tenants with and without landlords, because of issue specialization. It is only when there are multiple federations or when segments of the movement are tied closely to opposed political parties that there is likely to be strong competition for the symbolic leadership of the movement. Thus, organizations identified with the mainstream parties rejected rent strikes between 1917 and 1920 because they were being organized by socialists (Spencer, forthcoming). A certain amount of competition did surface in the 1960s, but between rival tenant lawyers rather than tenant organizations. It was with the emergence of multiple major federations after 1973 that competition increased. While the rolling strike was widely adopted in 1970 because of the hegemony of the Metropolitan Council, strategic diversification developed in the mid-1970s because this hegemony collapsed.

Nevertheless, in spite of this pattern, the variation in strategies tended to break down as certain approaches became visibly successful and were adopted by other groups because their usefulness had become apparent. Thus, the Metropolitan Council, which worked mainly with buildings with landlords, reluctantly dropped the rolling strike and became identified with negotiations in court because its constituency wanted settlements. But as decay and abandonment spread, the council eventually began to allow its tenants to buy fuel with their rent monies when they were cold—a strategy that had been developed among neighborhood organizations belonging to two other federations whose constituencies had originally been drawn from more decayed areas of the city.

**EVOLUTION AND EFFECTIVENESS**

The data concerning the effectiveness of the various innovations are summarized in Table 3. Two levels of effectiveness are considered: direct impact on buildings, and political impact.

The early rent strikes frequently induced third parties—the press, politicians, judges—to intervene out of sympathy, self-interest, or fear with target landlords on behalf of strikers. However, leverage with third
<table>
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<th>INNOVATION</th>
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<th>LEVERAGE WITH THIRD PARTIES</th>
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<td>Original form</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>court/eviction costs and rent losses</td>
<td>judicial, press sympathy</td>
<td>many negotiated settlements</td>
<td>many tenants evicted</td>
<td>Red scare</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mass Strikes</td>
<td>1907-8</td>
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<tr>
<td>I Single Buildings</td>
<td>1936-41</td>
<td>costs; fear vacancy losses; judges locally elected, urge compromise</td>
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<tr>
<td>II Section 755</td>
<td>1936-4</td>
<td>costs (not losses because escrow)</td>
<td>media coverage</td>
<td>token repairs</td>
<td>evictions</td>
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<tr>
<td>III Rolling Strike</td>
<td>1970-3</td>
<td>costs; fear of tenants skipping</td>
<td>occasional media coverage</td>
<td>negotiated repairs</td>
<td>costs to tenants’ time and nerves</td>
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<td>(failure of attempted mass strike)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>IV Slow-down</td>
<td>1972-</td>
<td>threat of strike</td>
<td></td>
<td>negotiations, settlements</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V Legalized Strike</td>
<td>1973-</td>
<td>abatements, costs, feared losses</td>
<td>occasional media coverage</td>
<td>legal negotiated settlements</td>
<td>organizers became functionaries slow</td>
<td>severe abandonment</td>
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<tr>
<td>VI Tenant Control</td>
<td>1973-</td>
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<td></td>
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parties declined as the strategy became familiar to the point of almost being taken for granted, and as the system of electing judges locally was abandoned. Today, only an occasional human interest story receives media publicity. Consequently, the main leverage the strike brings to bear on landlords is not indirect, as Lipsky argued (1970: 172), but direct.

This leverage includes court costs, the fear of losses from tenants’ skipping without paying owed rents or from vacancies following evictions, and the problem of a disrupted cash flow that may leave landlords unable to meet their own financial obligations such as mortgage and tax payments. To these may be added the emotional costs of the various ancillary tactics described above. Under Section 755 the fear of tenants’ skipping was eliminated by placing rents in escrow. On the other hand, Warranty of Habitability legislation has added the possibility of rent abatements as a sanction against landlords. The frequency with which slowdowns now result in negotiations is evidence that many landlords have learned to take the rent strike strategy seriously.

Early strikes often had evictions as negative consequences. But this problem was overcome first as organizers learned to school tenants to be prepared to take advantage of the legal protection of being able to quash an eviction by paying the money owed at the last minute, and then as a strike for cause was legalized. Negotiated settlements became the norm, especially once the arbitrariness of the courts was reduced by the desire to reverse housing decay. Nevertheless, meaningful repairs are still dependent on tenant persistence and are limited by landlords’ resources and commitment to their buildings. Results are more certain when tenants take control of rents, although they are still limited by the needs of the building (which are often severe in these cases), and the income of the tenants and their willingness to increase rents. This strategy almost always results in tenants paying more for their housing than previously.

Generally speaking, rent strikes are only politically relevant when they occur as mass actions that are perceived as a threat to the public order. This is possible only when many tenants who are tied together in cooptable networks are confronted simultaneously with a serious housing problem. These conditions were realized during the strikes among predominantly Jewish tenants in 1904, 1907-1908, and 1917-1920. The political impact of the last of these was greatest because, in addition to its being the largest and most prolonged of the strikes, it occurred against the background of the post-Bolshevik revolution red scare.
Rent strikes since 1920 have been localized, and therefore without political impact. The one exception was the attempt in 1963-1964 to organize a mass rent strike protesting ghetto decay against the background of the swelling civil rights movement. When compared with the 1917-1920 strike, however, the resulting action was quite limited: The decay issue had affected the tenants more gradually than the earlier rent increases, their networks were weaker, and effort was concentrated upon showmanship (speeches and press releases aimed at the media) rather than organizing (Lipsky, 1970; Schwartz and Schwartz, forthcoming).\(^5\) Nevertheless, although perceptions of the background threat were not yet so severe as they had been following World War I, they were sufficient to attract third-party attention. As a result, additional legal means of diverting rent monies to repairs were designed, although the bureaucratic skills and efforts required to use them were so great that they were seldom invoked. Still, they did represent a step toward the tenants’ right to withhold rent.

Another “citywide” strike was called by the Metropolitan Council in 1970 when the rent control law was amended against tenant interests. But although most tenants were affected, networks among them were too thin and the organizing task was thus far beyond the resources of the federation.

By the mid-1970s the abandonment crisis was so severe that it, rather than any mass tenant action, provided the leverage that persuaded the city authorities to try to coopt tenant strategies as one means of relief from the responsibility for managing unwanted buildings.

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE RENT STRIKE

A superficial glance could indicate that rent strikes have become more radical with time: they are longer, large sums are accumulated, and tenants are taking control of buildings. But in fact the strategy has become more building-specific, thus losing its political overtones, the only buildings tenants control are those no one else wants, and authorities are increasingly comfortable with the strategy.

This interpretation accords with that of Monti (1980) who, while finding a long history of disorderly politics in New York City, concludes that goals have normally been conservative and actions have contributed to “normal politics.” Boyer (1978: 284-294), too, found that the coercive responses of authorities to what they perceived as threats of disorder
were replaced by acceptance when the SES of participants broadened and it was realized that goals were limited and strategies nontreating.

Indeed, such has been the sharing of interests between city authorities and strikers since the ballooning of the abandonment crisis that the process of accommodation has progressed to the point where the rent strike has been institutionalized. It has been recognized in law, it has its own legal specialists, and special Housing Court records settlements. De facto tenant control, when tenants boldly started to spend accumulated rents on repairs and services, has been recognized, incorporated into programs, funded, and regulated.

The benefits of institutionalization have been recounted already: Striking tenants no longer fear evictions, and the settling of disputes under court auspices is the norm, especially if it is anticipated that such an action will result in repairs to buildings. But the role of tenant movement leaders has been drastically transformed at the same time: Once organizers who helped mobilize the tenant constituency, they have now been trapped in the Housing Court maze as stand-ins for lawyers and coopted as salaried functionaries in the management/rehabilitation system. The movement has been drawn, to a large extent, into administrative functions on the periphery of the system where its opportunity to produce change is severely limited: Gamson (1975: 84), for example, found that as strategies become less unruly, they are also less successful.

Is improvisation exhausted because the strategy has been legalized, normalized, funded, institutionalized? Has this transformed the tenant movement into an interest group? In order for it to be a movement, must it again innovate strategically? A consideration of the use of the rent strike in other parts of the United States is perhaps instructive at this point. Most other states also have Warranty of Habitability legislation, so that the rent strike has been legalized and is usually settled by negotiations under court auspices. Thirty states have also adopted legislation legalizing (and therefore regulating) joint expenditure of rent monies on necessary repairs and services. So, although other states do not have the same history of tenant activism nor the same tenant presence as New York City, the rent strike has been institutionalized to a large extent there also. Nevertheless, from time to time the strategy is used innovatively, with political impact, as in Santa Monica, CA, recently, when networks were galvanized once again around the issue of sharply rising rents.
CONCLUSION

Piven and Cloward (1977: 14, 21) have argued that "the forms of political protest are . . . determined by the institutional context in which people live and work," and that "it is typically by rebelling against the rules and authorities associated with their everyday activities that people protest". Charles Tilly (1978) has suggested that collective actors choose their strategies from a repertoire with which they are familiar. This study shows that the rent strike was the logical form of rebellion by tenants within their institution, and that it was borrowed from the labor strike, with which the tenants concerned were very familiar.

This study also confirms Tilly's finding that gradual change can, over time, transform a strategy. It also confirms his hunches that the mechanisms through which strategies evolve are improvisation and imitation, and that changes are often in response to the repression and/or facilitation of authorities and other actors making up the movement's external environment (especially the changing legal environment which is in part a response to the implementation of the rent strike). The chief reasons for the evolution of the rent strike were the changing interests of the strikers and the realization of the disadvantages of previously favored forms.

The article also considered how innovations were diffused through the movement, and found that publicity via word of mouth was as significant as conscious promotion in publicizing successful innovations as long as the innovators and users were well plugged into movement networks.

An examination of variations in the use of strategic forms by the organizations within the tenant movement found that there was considerable uniformity in practice until the 1970s, when multiple strategic forms coexisted. Since multiple federations emerged at the time, the competition among them began to include the strike strategies employed. However, the patterned variations began to break down once certain strategic innovations became visibly more successful, for organizations switched to the forms most suitable to their needs.

Finally, it was argued that the prime impact of the strike was direct rather than via third parties. Political effectiveness depended on mass
strikes, which virtually disappeared after 1920. The impact at the building level was strengthened, however, as the strategy developed and was eventually legalized. It was concluded that the rent strike has become so accepted and involved with government programs that it is now institutionalized.

NOTES

1. Gamson (1968: 146-147) again paralleled Turner in his anticipation of the later concern for available resources: "The greater the total amount of resources controlled by a solidarity group . . . (and) the more liquid and uncommitted (they are) . . . the higher the probability of its attempting influence."

2. Freeman confuses the structure of the movement and the SMO, treating them as one. Both constrain the choice of strategies, but in different ways.

3. A charivari (American "shivaree") was a mock serenade with kettles, horns and so on, celebrating newlyweds or expressing disapproval when an older widower chose a young woman from the age-grade of the serenaders for his wife.

4. In practice, abatements have usually been small because judges agree with the city that in the midst of widespread decay, it is preferable to channel all available funds into building repairs.

5. On the basis of his observation of the 1963-1964 strike, Lipsky (1970) concluded that rent strike strategies were primarily "showmanship," designed to gain the support of potentially sympathetic third parties. In fact, he was misled by the strike he happened to observe: Such showmanship has been rare throughout the history of the rent strike in New York, especially in recent years. In general, the focus of the strategy has been direct—locally upon landlords, but sometimes, when large, on a broader political level.

REFERENCES


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