

# The Swedish Union of Tenants



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## The Swedish Union of Tenants

The Swedish Union of Tenants work to improve housing and living conditions, for fair and reasonable rents, and for influence and participation in decision-making processes.

### Short history

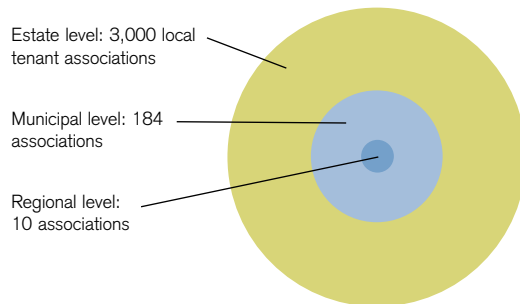
The Swedish Union of Tenants was founded in 1923 but the first known tenants' association in Sweden was already formed in 1899. The oldest tenants' association still in operation was established 1915, in Nynäshamn south of Stockholm.

- In 1923 the tenants' association in Stockholm formed the National Association of Tenants' Savings and Building Societies (now HSB) with the aim of building flats at affordable costs for its members.
- In 1933 the national association adopted its first rent negotiation procedure.
- In 1942 the Swedish Parliament passed the Rent Control Act and a rent-freeze was introduced. This Act survived until 1948.
- In 1958, in connection with deregulation of rents within the municipal housing companies, an agreement was made on a voluntary negotiation procedure between the municipal non-profit housing companies and representatives of the tenants.
- In 1978 the remains of rent control were abolished and the Rent Negotiation Act was introduced, allowing the tenant's associations to negotiate the rents throughout the country.

## Organisation

The Swedish Union of Tenants, SUT, consists of 10 associations at regional level, about 200 associations (sections) at municipal level and around 3,000 local tenant associations at estate level. In December 2006 the union had 535,000 members, of which 16,000 are elected representatives of their local associations.

The national secretariat is situated in Stockholm, with some 55 employees, has the overall responsibility for about 900 local employees. The secretariat is organised in different areas such as; housing policy, legal issues, rent negotiations, environment, information and communication, international affairs, administration and finances.



## Main activities

The Swedish Tenants Union's main goal is to ensure the right to good housing, affordable and fair rents and to guarantee a security of tenure and to provide a sense of community.

- We represent the tenants when annually negotiating the rents for tenants in the municipal housing stock. The results also, by law, become a target and a maximum when the rents are set in the privately owned rental stock. (Read more about rent negotiations on page 6.)
- we rouse public opinion and lobby political policy makers in favour of rights to good housing at affordable rents,
- we support our members in their relations with the landlords,
- we aim at a housing standard, quality and rent in reasonable proportion to each other,
- we inform members on tenants' rights and obligations and train volunteer staff.



## Housing estate activities

The 3,000 local tenant associations provide for a solid base of the tenants' association. These associations covering about 45 % of the total number of housing estates in Sweden, carry out the activities that take place in the housing estates.

The area of activity usually covers one housing estate or block, but may also be an individual building. The members of the tenants' associations elect the board of the local tenant association. The board, through different activities, disseminate knowledge of the objectives and information of the necessity of a tenant association. These activities are primarily for recruiting new members. However their task is also to develop leisure, cultural and social activities within the housing estate. Through arrangements with the housing companies and landlords, the local tenant associations have been able to influence maintenance, shaping of playgrounds, replacement of interior fixtures etc.

The regional and local tenant associations have, to some extent, also been able to influence the level of rent in addition to the general rent setting. There is a growing policy to give the local tenant associations the opportunity of negotiating rents on the estate. Through the board of the local tenant association tenants can influence both services and standards through negotiations.



## Recruiting members

Within the tenant association the membership recruitment is done mainly by professional recruiters at a local level. These recruiters get paid through a commission-based salary. There is an organisation for membership development with paid staff working actively for recruitment for each of the ten regional tenant associations. In order to maintain good performance the recruiters are continuously trained in sales, customers relations and quality work.

Most members are recruited through personal calls from recruiters, by telephone and by various media campaigns, both in newspapers and through television commercials.

## Why becoming a member?

As a member of the tenant association, the household gains access to information from lawyers and other personal advisers, and also through the website together with a personal code. Furthermore, the members benefit from many other offers through the membership.

### **Becoming a member has several advantages:**

- Free help and advice on all issues concerning housing
- Free legal assistance in the event of a dispute with the landlord
- Inspection of the apartment on arrival and on departure
- Having professionals negotiating the rent
- Moderation of rent increases
- Local information on matters concerning housing
- Pressure on decision-makers, i.e. mobilisation of public opinion. Fair housing policy.
- Influence in the members' housing situation
- Educational, study and leisure activities
- The magazine Hem & Hyra (Home & Rent) – see "Publications"
- Offers to leisure activities and discounts from various companies



## Negotiations

Sweden has some 1,5 million rental dwellings. About 830,000 are owned by municipal housing companies with the aim of operating without interest of profit. Private landlords, who may be private individuals or legal entities, own another 710,000 dwellings.

### Rental agreements

The basic for tenancy is the rental agreement made by the tenant and the landlord. The rental agreement is a contract governed by civil law, regulating the size of the rent and other terms of the lease. No down payments, key-money or bonds are made in in connection with right of tenancy and contract signing in Sweden. Such payments are considered illegal by law. .

### Negotiations and negotiation procedure

About 90 % of all housing rents in Sweden are established following negotiations between tenants' association and the landlord. A property owners' association often represents a private landlord.

The right to negotiate is based on a negotiation procedure, with rules on the implementation of negotiations. The parties in a negotiation procedure are the Tenants' Association and the landlord. Most flats are covered by the negotiation procedure as the rental agreement usually contains a clause, which stipulates this procedure.

Both employed negotiators and elected representatives from the tenants' association participate in negotiations.

The negotiation clause includes a provision, indicating the tenant's consent to the parties in the negotiation procedure, that agreements can be made on the actual rent and

other rental conditions. However, the individual tenant is entitled to opt out of the negotiation procedure and instead make an agreement directly with the landlord concerning the rent setting and other conditions.

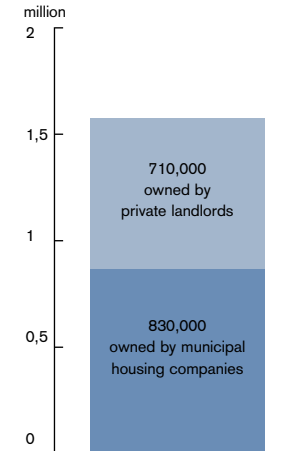
### Two different ways of rent setting

The rent setting in the municipal housing companies is based on a prime cost principle. The rents on the private market are set with reference to the rents of equivalent dwellings in the neighbourhood, owned and managed by a municipal housing company.

### Negotiation payment

As the Swedish Union of Tenants also negotiate for tenants who are not members, the Rent Negotiation Act includes a facility for the tenant associations to obtain a negotiation fee from the tenants.

This negotiation fee amounts to about 10 SEK, in 2006 (1,1 EURO) per month and flat, which may be compared to the membership fee, about 70 SEK (7,5 EURO) a month.





## Political work

The Swedish Union of Tenants has a tenant programme, which is discussed at the general meeting, every second year. The programme expresses the tenant associations' fundamental views.

On the basis of this programme, the SUT can then state, in greater detail, proposal on how to finance new and existing housing, how to improve building regulations and the city environment, etc.

The SUT tries to obtain support for its demands by lobbying politicians both formally and informally. The Swedish Government often sends political motions to the SUT and other organisations for consideration. We also keep in contact with politicians and decision makers to keep them informed of our current views and work in progress, e.g. in terms of negotiations and other forms of tenant participation.

In 2005/2006 the SUT became actively involved in the work of the EU Commission. The Swedish rental system is seriously threatened by EU rules on state aid and competition. Will Sweden be able to retain public housing, which is open to all, irrespective of income? Will the present rent setting system be retained, according to the prime cost principle and rent negotiations?

## The legal aspects

The Swedish Union of Tenants aims at achieving changes in legislation with the objective of strengthening the position of tenants and their security of tenure. Our full-time employed lawyers assist our members in disputes.

The lawyers may relate to collective negotiations or to individual rent disputes. Initially assistance is aimed at trying to reach voluntarily agreements with the landlord by means of negotiations. If this is not successful, it is possible to resort to legal means to settle the dispute, i.e. go to court. In court, SUT's lawyers represent the members in the same way as solicitors represent their clients.

The lawyers within the tenants' association usually have much better knowledge of rent legislation than many solicitors have. Our individual members, through their membership, are offered legal assistance, and they have the right to be represented in court by lawyers from the tenants' association at no extra charges.

A Swedish tenant, municipal or private rental, has the full right to, with the acceptance from the landlord, to exchange his/her flat for another flat, anywhere in Sweden – municipal or private.

## Study and educational activities

The tenant associations arrange local training seminars for about 10,000 members annually. These seminars can deal with issues such as economics, legal matters and tenants' rights, environment issues, consumer issues, quality etc.



## Publications

All members receive the monthly magazine Hem & Hyra (Home & Rent) with an edition of 540,000 copies. The magazine contains 68 pages of which eight pages are produced locally in the ten regional chapters. Hem & Hyra is a family magazine focusing on investigative housing reports, together with Q's and A's (questions and answers) on housing, and news and stories about tenants' lives.



Also, the magazine contains articles on home decoration and reports from the kitchen with recipes.

The magazine is independent of the owner, Swedish Union of Tenants, and the Chief Editor has a twice fold mandate; to both represent and to scrutinize the owners.

Everyone active within the tenants' association receives Hyresgästen (The Tenant), with an edition of 17,000 copies. This is the organ of the management and at the same time an important source of information for the elected representatives of the SUT as well as for the internal staff.

Local tenant associations also publish their own magazines or newsletters at local, municipal or regional level.

## Environment and housing development

The Swedish Union of Tenants works to improve the internal environment in existing dwellings and also the external environment in the housing estates. The SUT also work to develop methods for bringing in healthy building materials in newly constructed or converted/renovated houses.

### Environmental "audits"

One way to improve the indoor climate is to negotiate with the landlords to have them doing regularly check-ups on basic aspects, such as air quality, damp and mould, noise, temperature and light. This is carried out by environmental "audits", on a voluntary basis, of areas that are considered to have major impact on peoples' health.

There are many different methods for auditing and examining the environmental status of properties. The method used by the tenants' association is the only one based on tenant's experiences. Therefore, the tenants are asked to cooperate during this "audit".

The environmental inventory, MIBB, a method to map whether the internal environment is acceptable, or whether there are problems and deficiencies that need to be attended to. The MIBB has been developed jointly by the Swedish Union of Tenants, Swedish Association of Municipal Housing Companies (SABO) and the Swedish Property Federation.

### Urban development and recycling

The tenant's association is also planning for sustainable urban development. This entails the physical planning that determine the environment – the outdoor and indoor climate, transports, public services, security, comfort and well being on the housing estates. This should also secure the air and water quality of today and in the future.

The SUT also works to improve the handling of waste products, and to improve and facilitate recycling of glass, card board, newspaper, metal and plastics.

### Measuring indoor radon

Radon is a natural gas, found in the ground, in building material and in water. A high level of radon is a serious health hazard. Unfortunately, radon is colourless and has no smell. The only way to ascertain the presence of radon is by measuring. The SUT offers its members, for a reduced fee, to buy radon-meters and have a professional evaluation of the indoor climate.

## International activities

The Swedish Union of Tenants is a member of the International Union of Tenants, IUT, and has also been appointed by the IUT Congress to host the IUT Secretariat. Today the IUT has got 54 national and regional tenant organisations in 45 countries. The main purpose of the IUT is to promote rental housing and to safeguard the interests of tenants, throughout the world.

The IUT is in consultative status with the United Nations Economical and Social Council, UN-ECOSOC, and in participating status with the Council of Europe. The IUT is also member of the UN ECE Committee on Housing and Land Management and of the European Housing Forum, a network of European organisations working in the fields of residential housing, homelessness, housing construction and financing and in other fields related to housing and urban issues.

### *International Union of Tenants*

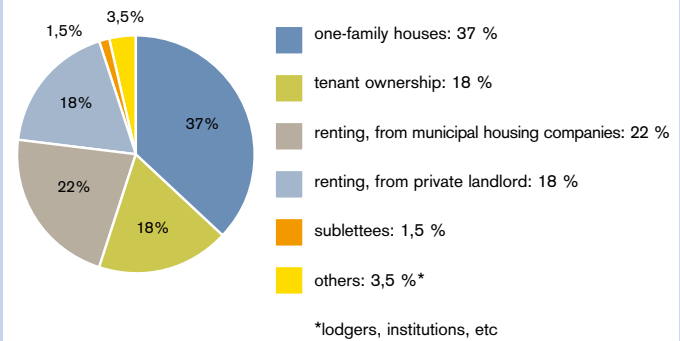
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You can also visit the Swedish Union of Tenants on [www.hyresgastforeningen.se](http://www.hyresgastforeningen.se)

## Facts, 2006

- **Number of members:** 535,000 households
- **Number of elected representatives:** 16,400
- **Number of estate representatives:** 2,000
- **Number of employees:** 880
- **Local tenants associations:** 3,000
- **Associations at municipal level:** 184
- **Associations at regional level:** 10
- 54% of the members live in non-profit housing utilities
- 46% of the members live in dwellings owned by private companies
- **Distribution of members according to age:**  
 0–40 years: 43%  
 > 41 years: 57%
- **Distribution of members according to sex:**  
 55% are women  
 45% are men

### Distribution of households, 2005



[www.hyresgastforeningen.se](http://www.hyresgastforeningen.se)

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