



1989, NJTO rallying in Washington D.C.

The **NJTO** Still Fighting After All These Years

The New Jersey Tenants Organization (NJTO), founded in 1969, is the oldest statewide tenants' organization in the United States. By Mitchell Kahn, NJTO

At the time of NJTO's founding, New Jersey tenants faced severe hardships. Hundreds of thousands of apartments were in substandard condition in the state's urban areas and there was widespread rent gouging. These problems were compounded by the lack of laws protecting tenants, and a political establishment heavily influenced by the real estate industry. Yet, radical change was in the air. Urban riots in many New Jersey cities raised public consciousness about poor housing conditions. Local tenant organizing increased rapidly in the heavily tenant populated central and northern parts of the state. Activists involved in these local battles joined together to form the NJTO. The organization's initial set of goals included winning necessary protective tenant legislation, gaining and enforcing strong housing codes at the municipal level, and winning local rent control laws. An essential first step was the building of a disciplined, militant statewide organization.

From the streets to the negotiation rooms

Initially, the NJTO relied almost exclusively on rent strikes, rallies, and demonstrations. During its first year of operation the NJTO organized 43 local rent strikes involving 20 000 tenants. Direct actions were effective in mobilizing large numbers of tenants, winning local victories that helped sustain local organizations, and keeping tenant issues alive in

the media and public arena. However, The NJTO leadership soon realized that this strategy alone was not going to be effective in achieving major structural changes in state landlord-tenant law, or in winning the enactment of rent controls. They decided to get actively involved in electoral politics, and conducted a major statewide voter registration. The organization soon became involved in state legislative district elections. Local affiliates also concentrated their efforts on municipal elections, and by the mid-1970's, tenants had become a significant force in New Jersey politics.

During the 1970's the NJTO won passage of the strongest landlord-tenant law code in the United States, and also won passage of rent control laws in 125 cities and towns.

Weakened rent control in the 1980's

The political climate grew more conservative in the 1980's and the state landlord association began a major counter-attack. Landlords filed massive tax appeals in an attempt to galvanize public opposition to rent control. They also pushed for local referendums to defeat rent control laws. While tenants won most of these battles, landlords were often successful in getting municipal governments to weaken rent control through the imposition of *vacancy decontrol* measures which allowed landlords to raise rents significantly when tenants moved out. This has had the long-term impact of making rent-controlled apartments less affordable for future tenants.