

# SYNTROPY: RENT STRIKE

The following email was sent on July 25, 2018 by Syntropy's Board Rep.

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Hi [NAME OMITTED],

Thank you for following up about Syntropy's rent strike status. I appreciate your willingness to engage in making MCC a better organization, and I personally look forward to making that happen with you.

I think the confusion about what the rent strike is about can come from the way that the issue has snowballed into many issues. Syntropy initially went on rent strike because of the power disparities and systemic/institutional upholding of systems of oppression that were exposed during the aftermath of the Lothlorien fire. The house stayed on rent strike largely because we knew that if any house was going to be targeted by MCC, it would be Audre Lorde--and they were targeted and evicted. Many current members of MCC are no longer aware of these conflicts, which I personally think highlights why Syntropy does not fit in MCC. People in our house tend to stay for a much longer tenure, so we've seen the cycles of conflict as something that has not been resolved, and not as new conflicts arising.

For us as a smaller house, we structurally cannot participate effectively in MCC. Because there are fewer of us, MCC recognizes that we cannot participate at the same level as other houses, and that is why our house is allowed to proxy into committee meetings. However, this forces Syntropy into the position of having to choose whether to be engaged and burn ourselves out, or to be disengaged, ceding our own power as members of MCC to other members of MCC that live in other houses. Many of these members are either newer to MCC (or people who don't plan to live in MCC/cooperatives long term and are understandably less invested and engaged), who don't have the same historical understanding of events, or they are people who we have ideological differences with about what direction our shared cooperative (MCC) will take. We've seen work around the strike demands follow a similar pattern: we cannot contribute to the dismantling of oppressive systems in MCC in a meaningful way without burning ourselves out. Even if improvements are made, there's no assurance that in times of conflict, they will be adhered to. Therefore, we've decided to pursue independence from MCC so that we can more sustainably operate our own house, and more effectively and meaningfully engage in helping MCC and other cooperatives in Madison.

In the last week, I have heard from different parts of the organization saying that they, too, at least share in part with these concerns. I've heard the representative from Friends say that he's upset that other people have a say in what happens to Friends with regards to their foundation and similar issues. I've seen an idea for reparations for slavery become a stressful suggestion that people would lose their housing within MCC. These conflicts would not arise if we did not collectively have control of each others' houses, despite operating on an informal level as 11 separate coops. To me, this is clear evidence that a coalition of independent coops in Madison which could share in maintenance, membership services, and other services, would serve us all better.

Because of the choice between being burnt out or disengaged, I think Syntropy has been largely ignored by MCC. I've heard someone say that they don't think maintenance is a priority at Syntropy because our house is clean. Our bathroom floor is molding and leaks water into the kitchen below it. Last summer, sewage leaked down from the bathroom into the kitchen. Looking into Syntropy's own house archives, we have reason to believe that this hasn't been thoroughly fixed since it became an issue in 1991. When I first moved in over two years ago, I was told by a maintenance worker at the time that we'd have the peeling lead paint in our pantry remediated in a few months. I moved in almost 2 years ago. We had children living in the house at the time, and we have children membershiping now, and we could have lead dust falling into our food. These are just some of the maintenance concerns that we're aware of, that directly result in danger to human health or violate MCC's part of our lease agreements, and I don't think conditions are much different in other coops in MCC.

When discussing Syntropy becoming independent in dinners open to all of MCC this past winter, it was brought up that if we became independent, we'd be risking two things: 1- the financial security of being in a larger organization with regards to getting maintenance done, and at a cheaper price. Clearly this has not been realized for us. 2- the ability to create and support new coops. However, MCC over the past decade has been time and again too large and cumbersome to be able to create new coops. We hope that by becoming independent, we'd be making the board smaller, and thus easier to make decisions. If we became a coalition, we'd be able to organize the houses that wish to support a new coop to do that, thus becoming much more nimble.

More down to earth, here are the rent strike demands that we consider.

First, I wish to sparkle the current requests from Audre Lorde member, [NAME OMITTED]. I am especially shocked to hear point #7 about Audre being responsible for previous debts. I thought that I voted for previous debts at Audre to be wiped away for new members to not consider. I fully intend on supporting a proposal that would resolve those debts. As for the maintenance concerns, we hear you, and we are with you. I think we ALL need something better, and maintenance in one house should not be at the expense of all others.

Secondly, I in no way attribute Audre Lorde no longer being on rent strike due to turnover. I attribute it to the people who wanted their voices heard being evicted. Some of our house members have been here long enough to see the cycles of Audre being re-established and then evicted. I personally do not support the ability for MCC to silence POC by evicting them, and thus their voices matter to me personally. Concretely, I wish to see the following changes suggested by those evicted from Audre Lorde, sent out in the eSparkle on 6/2/17:

**MCC mission statement:**

“Our mission is to improve the Madison community by providing low-cost, not-for-profit cooperative housing for very low to moderate-income and to be inclusive of underrepresented and marginalized groups of the community.”

**Increase autonomy of individual houses, caucuses, and committees.  
Decrease power of MCC board. With a racial justice perspective, change board culture.**

***Remove Roger's Rules as a decisionmaking tool.***

- Hire two racial justice centered consultants to develop and teach a different, simpler, more accessible form of decisionmaking. Consultants should be hired to also facilitate all board meetings for one year. Members of rent striking houses especially those who are QTPOC should be the hiring committee for these consultants (ie have ultimate authority in the hiring decision).
- Rewrite the policy language that embeds Rogers Rules. This work should be spearheaded by hired consultants.
- Use progressive stack in all board and committee meetings beginning immediately.
- ***Focus the board on bigger decisions and policy changes.***
  - *Create a one year plan to become a more governance based board. By the use communities within MCC. outside/independent consultant to follow through with.*
  - Increase decisionmaking capacities of individual committees, caucuses, and houses. Empower non-board groups to make authoritative decisions in following and updating documented procedures. Loosen the Board's reigns on decisions that are better made in smaller, more experienced groups. Examples include empowering personnel committee to make most hiring decisions, empowering maintenance committee to make larger repair decisions. This step encourages more participation

throughout MCC and less centralization of power. Shift budgets as necessary to accomplish this objective.

- ***Establish pathways for all members of MCC to understand and access power and decisionmaking, creating a culture of consent and transparency.***
  - Post harassment/ safer space policy in an accessible place at all houses.
  - Create a more robust and inclusive *mandatory* new member orientation, held monthly . This orientation should include a basic anti oppression training as well as a power mapping of MCC as an organization and a review of harassment/safer space policy. The Member Services Educator (noted below) would be responsible for this as well as simplifying and updating the new member orientation packet . If necessary to get member attendance, Educator should offer orientations at each individual house, for the house.
  - *Hire a part time Member Services Educator to take the lead in this (and other various educational work). Members of rent striking houses especially those who are QTPOC should be the committee given the authority for hiring for this position .*
  - Work with a racial justice outside party in rewriting entire policy. Such as Freedom Inc.
  - Poll MCC members about their valuation of GMMs and SMMs versus referendum ballot. Should there be a majority leaning away from voting via GMMs and SMMs, rewrite policy and bylaws to only allow major votes by referendum.
  - Prioritize racial justice and center those most marginalized in MCC.
  - Stop the expansion of MCC (unless we are talking about expanding on the south side and other areas where the most underrepresented people in Dane county live) and give individual house more autonomy in terms of Maintenance and Education and the money that is budgeted for those things.

***Intentionally change the makeup of the Board. Establish and empower identity based caucuses and our committees.***

- Establish a cap of 20% on white cis male board members. Create a process that shifts responsibility equally among houses to fulfill this metric. Rewrite policy as needed.
  - Allow QTPOC board members to participate on the board via TUPOCC and or a QTPOCC (ie: TUPOCC attendance is the fulfillment of board meeting attendance; and/or board reps can vote by proxy via TUPOCC). Rewrite policy that disallows proxy voting and modify it to allow for TUPOCC.
  - Earmark money in the budget for particular identity based caucuses for educational purposes as well as for ways to make MCC more accessible whether that is physically or structurally. (suggested top two: gender/sexuality and people with disabilities). Create paths for caucuses to have voting power at the board level.
  - Provide votes for identity based caucuses using the same metric that the board uses for houses. If more than x number of people are regularly participating in x caucus, they receive two votes at the board. Rewrite policy as needed.
  - Provide TUPOCC with a solid budget (similar to that of the Education Budget) to spend according to their own determination.
- ***Develop a 2 year plan to increase people of color in MCC by at least 20 percent including house membership, staff, board and committees. Prioritize housing justice work.***
    - Prioritize hiring of queer/trans POC in all MCC staff positions. Codify in affirmative action policy as necessary.
    - Create rent subsidies available to lowest income brackets that are surcharged to highest income brackets. Prioritize people of color to receive these subsidies. Rewrite policy as needed.
    - Commit to recommendations made by Change Team in fall of 2014. Rewrite policy with recommended edits . Allocate x% of MCC's annual budget towards continuing this work to increase racial justice and housing justice in the organization.

***Significantly increase social justice education. Place specific attention and oversight on following through with grievances.***

- Require specific education for individual houses when grievances concerning racial or other discrimination arise. Provide a budget for this type of work.
- Establish a process for marginalized people to call out oppressive behavior on the board, in committees, or with staff without the affected person needing to educate everyone, examples include incident reports members can fill out either anonymous or not that grievance and personnel committee would review. Include potential Member Services Educator in mediation and education process.
- Allocate more funding for more intensive anti oppression education for elected officers, hired staff members, Personnel Committee, and Grievance Committee.
- Clarify and appropriately define harassment in MCC policy. Include microaggressions in this definition. Establish a clear process for recalling board reps.
- Work to empower and educate the grievance committee. Provide a budget if necessary. Review and clarify roles of grievance, individual issues, and personnel committees. Rewrite policy and procedures as needed.

#### **Immediate asks:**

- Use progressive stack in facilitation during all meetings
- Begin rewriting policies to decentralize power/ authority of the board
- Affirm need to hire consultants for two separate yearlong projects; Affirm willingness to budget appropriately to accomplish this.
- Post harassment/ safer space policy in all houses
- Empower members of rent striking houses especially those who are QTPOC to hire facilitation consultants and Member Services Educator
- Establish a cap of 20% on cis male board members
- Allow POC board members to proxy vote via TUPOCC
- Provide votes for identity based caucuses using same metric as houses (12 votes)
- Affirm need to create caucus and committee budgets
- Affirm need to allocate more funding towards intensive anti oppression education for people in specific MCC roles
- Prioritize hiring queer/trans POC in MCC positions
- Empower mediation team to further their work
- Approve budget for more intensive anti oppression work for people in specific MCC roles /Mediation

#### **Team (to board for vote)**

- Hire meeting facilitation consultants / Members of rent striking houses especially those who are QTPOC
- Hire Member Services Educator / Members of rent striking houses especially those who are QTPOC
- Hire policy consultants / Mediation Team
- Approve budget for TUPOCC /TUPOCC & Mediation team (to board for vote)
- Approve budgets for other identity based caucuses /Mediation team (to board for vote)
- Codify in policy any of the abovementioned immediate asks *as needed* (progressive stack, 20% cap, caucus metrics, hiring prioritization, proxy voting...) /Mediation team (to board for final vote)
- Confirm postings of harassment/safer space policy in houses /Mediation team

#### **Grievance Committee and Personnel Committee (Oversight by members of rent striking houses especially those who are QTPOC and TUPPOC)**

- Clarify and appropriately define harassment. Establish clear process for recalling board reps/Mediation team
- Establish a process for marginalized people to call out oppressive behavior on the board, in committees, or with staff without the affected person needing to educate everyone /Mediation team
- New identity based caucuses up and running /Caucus members
- Grievance committee work /Mediation team

- Rent subsidy proposal work for board to vote on for next budget cycle /Mediation team or Finance Committee
- New member orientation and packet updated /Member Services Educator
- Include money in budget for education for specific houses with grievances regarding racial or other discrimination /Mediation team or Finance Committee
- Include money in budget for change team work to further racial and housing justice /Mediation team
- 20% cap metric should be achieved by this point /Mediation team evaluates

I welcome feedback on everything in this email, from house members at Syntropy, current members of MCC, and those that have been silenced by eviction from MCC. I look forward to further conversations about all of this, and I'd be very happy to have you all over for dinner or go to other houses to continue the conversation. Please contact me directly at [syntropyboard@madisoncommunity.coop](mailto:syntropyboard@madisoncommunity.coop) with anything you'd like to share.

In cooperation,  
[NAME OMITTED], one of Syntropy's Board Reps